

# The Freedom Merchants

## Author: Sherryl Jordan

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### Synopsis

The year is 1615. Pirate ships from the Barbary Coast of Northern Africa prowl the coasts of England and Ireland, raiding villages for slaves. When a pirate ship wrecks on the rocks outside Liam's village Ballykilmara, the alarm bell sounds and the men of the village decide to kill the pirates before they have a chance to kill them. What they don't know is that one has escaped and has taken refuge in a cave up in the hills. Liam finds the injured pirate, and seeing that he is not much older than himself, decides to help him. The pirate, Iskandar, eventually becomes a member of the village and a trusted and loyal friend to Liam and his family. But soon disaster strikes. Iskandar is accused of a crime he didn't commit and is taken away under the orders of the King of England to be executed.

Liam never forgets his lost friend, but there are more serious issues to worry about. Ballykilmara has been raided by pirates and many members of the village are kidnapped, among them Liam's brother Conleth. Determined to find him, Liam approaches the local monks, hoping that they can contact fellow monks whom he has heard sometimes risk their own lives and liberty to ransom the Christian Slaves back to their families.

To Liam's delight the local monks agree to help him and together they set off on a perilous voyage. Not only do they have to battle storms and high seas but other, more dangerous hazards, such as pirates. Heartbreakingly, before Liam has a chance to find his brother and the others, he too is captured by pirates. The gold he has brought with him to pay the ransom is stolen. Taken to the slave market Liam is appalled by the squalid conditions in which the slaves are forced to live. There is little food, the slaves have no room to move and lie in their own filth. They are forced to drag heavy chains around with them. However, this may not seem so bad if Liam is sold to be a galley slave. Galley slaves are treated terribly and forced to row for hours on end, often dying from fatigue and malnourishment.

The future looks hopeless for Liam and the monks until a familiar face from the past steps in to help. Iskandar is still alive and determined to pay back the kindness that Liam showed to him. Maybe Liam's plan to rescue his brother and the other villagers hasn't failed after all?

### Text Type

*The Freedom Merchants* is the latest novel written by renowned New Zealand author Sherryl Jordan. While the novel is fictional, it deals with historically accurate information about the Muslim Barbary pirates and the Christian slaves they used to capture. Jordan draws closely on details from actual accounts written by slaves to create realistic description of conditions in the pirate ships, the slave market and the terrible cruelty that slaves were subjected to. The monks in the novel are also based on real figures in history that used to go on long dangerous journeys to redeem the Christian slaves and set them free.

The novel is fast-paced and will appeal to both boys and girls aged 12+ who are interested in history. It is vividly graphic in its descriptions of the violence and danger surrounding pirates and the slave trade. Jordan has developed credible and likeable characters. Liam is a courageous and kind protagonist whose kind-heart and determination endears him to us. Iskandar is a loyal friend whose integrity and generosity shows us that underneath, it doesn't matter what colour your skin is or what your religion is, a man should be judged on his actions and character. The selfless monks illustrate the idea that in the middle of conflict and chaos, religious wars and racial intolerance, love can still exist and the human spirit can triumph.

## Sharing the Novel

*The Freedom Merchants* has named chapters and has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 9–28), Chapters 2–8 (pp. 29–147), Chapters 9–15 (148–280) and Chapters 16–23 (pp. 281–426).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas presented in the novel. It would be a good idea for students to research the history of the Barbary slave trade, as well as the English invasion of Ireland in the early 1600's so that students understand the context of the novel. (NB: Books and websites used in the author's research are listed at the end of the book.) Encourage students to make inferences and predictions. Have them track the development of the main characters, identify themes and develop an understanding of how events in history can affect people's attitudes, behaviour and motivation in the present.

## Introducing the Novel

Study the illustration on the cover of the book and read the blurb.

- When and where is the story set?
- Who is the main character in the story?
- What connotations does the word "pirate" hold for you?
- What kind of novel do you think this will be?
- What is religious persecution?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 9–28) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

## Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 9–28)

- What does the bell signify?
- Describe the weather. Why does the ship run aground?
- What do the men in the village do to try and help the survivors?

- Where do the pirates come from? Why is everyone so terrified of them? Who journeys to far off lands to try and rescue the slaves?
- Why is Liam excited at the prospect of a shipwreck?
- What does Liam notice about the men from the shipwreck when he goes down to the beach? Why won't the villagers help them?
- Why do the villagers kill the pirates? Are their actions justified? Why/why not? How do they dispose of the bodies?
- What does Liam think will be on the ship? Why does Liam's father refuse to retrieve it?
- Who does Liam find hiding in the cave?

### Discussion

- What do we learn about Liam and his family in this chapter?
- How is Liam's life in the 1600's different to yours today?
- What specific role is each family member expected to play in the household?
- What do you think Liam will do about the pirate he finds in the cave?

Students read Chapters 2–8 (pp. 29–147) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 2–8 (pp. 29–147)

- Describe Liam's first encounter with the pirate. What are the man's injuries? Why does Liam admire him?
- Why does Liam decide to help the pirate? What does this suggest about his character?
- What is the pirate's name? What does Liam do to try and help him? Why is Liam so disturbed by the pirate's scars?
- Why does Liam begin to think that he has made a huge mistake? Why does he confess to his father?
- How does Liam's father react when he reveals his secret? Why do you think he reacts like this?
- Why is Patrick determined to treat the pirate with respect?
- How does Iskandar react when Liam brings his father and brother to the cave?
- Why does Iskandar's appearance in her home upset Kaitlin so much?

- Who does Patrick seek counsel from about Iskandar? What is their opinion about the pirate? How does Patrick react when Lord Bainbridge's name is mentioned? Why does he react like this?
- Why is the idea of turning Iskandar over to Lord Bainbridge vetoed? What do they decide to do instead?
- What is the general feeling of the villagers towards Iskandar? How does Patrick convince the villagers to save Iskandar's life? What emotions does he play on? What alternative does he present to them?
- How long does Iskandar have to remain a slave for? What will happen to him after this time? Who is responsible for him during his enslavement?
- How does Iskandar earn the trust of the villagers? Why are the village girls enamoured with him? Who in the village is still wary of him?
- Why does Davin have such hatred for the English?
- Why is Liam wary of Father Tarlach's questions about Iskandar? What is the priest annoyed about? Why does he call Iskandar an infidel?
- What does Iskandar reveal to Liam and Conleth about how he came to be a pirate? Why is Liam heartened by this story?
- How does Iskandar react when Liam calls him Christian? Why does he react this way? What is his religion?
- Why does Iskandar punch Big Branduff? How does Patrick react when Liam tells him that Iskandar knocked big Branduff down?
- Who is discovered dead in their bed? Who announces the death as murder? Who is the obvious suspect?
- What does Father Tarlach ask Iskandar to do to prove his innocence? Why does Iskandar refuse? Who declares Iskandar innocent of murder?
- Who arrives at the village to take Iskandar away? How do they ensure that no one stops them from taking him? What will happen if Iskandar resists?
- What does Liam think Iskandar's fate will be? How does Conleth make Liam feel better about rescuing Iskandar?
- Where is Liam when the pirate attack occurs? Describe what Liam sees when he looks down on the beach. Who is kidnapped from his family? What has happened to his father?
- How many people have been captured from the village? Why does Kaitlin think she has been blessed?
- What does Liam remember the bards told him about the monks?

## Discussion

- In what ways is the pirate different to Liam? What similarities do they share?
- How have the actions of the gentle village men affected everyone in the village? Do you agree with Liam's father when he says "'Tis one thing to kill a man when he coming, armed and dangerous, to murder those you love, but quite another to kill a man when he is wounded and unarmed"? Why/why not?
- Why does Patrick believe that the English have no right to judge his affairs? Do you agree with him? Why/why not?
- Patrick says that "none of us are wholly good, or wholly evil. We're a mixture. We do what we have to do..." Do you agree with him? Why/why not?
- What do you think is going to happen next in the story?

Students read Chapters 9–15 (pp. 148–280) independently before the next shared session.

## Comprehension Chapters 9–15 (pp. 148–280)

- What does Liam mean when he says he wants to do something that "counts"?
- Who does he plan to approach about ransoming the village people who have been kidnapped?
- Who are the designated speakers for the village?
- Who is the abbot of the monastery? What do the men of the village reveal to the Father in the church? Why do you think they look as though a weight has been lifted from them when they return to the abbot's office?
- What is the process for redeeming slaves from the Barbary Coast? Where does Father Artigan suggest that the villagers get the ransom gold from? How will the monks travel to the Barbary Coast?
- Who is Brother Ninian? How does he react when he learns that people from Liam's village have been kidnapped? Why do you think he reacts like this?
- What do the divers find on the pirate ship? Why are they so excited?
- What does Father Artigan think is "the Almighty's little joke"?
- What has Father Artigan done since their last meeting? What is his good news? What is his bad news?
- Why is it decided that Liam must accompany the monks on their journey?
- Which monks volunteer to make the journey? What reasons do they offer for volunteering?

- Whose boat will the monks and Liam take on their journey? What are the advantages of taking a small boat?
- Why does Kaitlin think that Iskandar came to their village for a reason?
- Who is Murphy? What is the name of his boat? What is significant about the date the travellers set sail on?
- How does Liam feel when he says goodbye to his family?
- Why is it important that all the passengers on the boat know how to sail?
- What is the first ship that the travellers see? How does Liam feel when he sees the ship?
- Why does Liam enjoy his first days at sea so much? What happens to make his journey less pleasant? How does Liam keep focused during the hard times?
- Why is everyone worried about Aindrias?
- Describe the storm that the men encounter.
- How do the travellers celebrate Christmas?
- How does Liam feel when he realises the pirate galleon is chasing them? What are the holes beneath the oars for?
- How are Liam, Ninian and Fintan treated when they go ashore in Morocco to buy supplies? Why do they think they are treated like this?
- What does Liam notice about the slaves that he sees?
- Describe what happens when the Barbary galleon catches up with the Orla. How are the captives treated by the pirates? Why do you think they make them strip naked? What do the captives see when they are taken below decks?
- Why does Liam renounce God while he is held on the pirate ship?
- What do the slaves give the new captives?
- Why does Fintan warn Liam not to let the pirates know that he speaks their language?
- What does Liam notice about the captives as they all stand around on the deck? What will happen to the wealthy prisoners?
- Describe the selection process. Who is the first person who gets to select his slaves? Why doesn't Liam want to be chosen by the pasha? When does the realisation hit Liam that he is truly a slave?
- Describe the baglo in which the slaves are expected to live and sleep. What other facilities are housed there?

- How does the slave who offers the captives water react when he realises they are Irish? Why does he react like this? How does he help them?
- Why do the slaves have to pay their masters?
- What happens to a slave who tries to escape?
- Describe the baglo hospital. How does Ninian react to the men he finds there? Who else helps the sick and dying?

### Discussion

- What dangers do the monks face who journey long distances over seas to ransom the slaves? Why do you think they risk their own freedom and lives to save the lives of people they have never met? What does this suggest about their characters?
- Kaitlin believes that Iskandar was sent to the village so that Liam could learn his language and be in a position to rescue his brother. Do you believe in fate or divine intervention? Why/why not?
- What qualities and characteristics do the men on board the Orla share?
- What conflicting emotions does Liam feel during his voyage?
- Why does Liam think that it must have been hard for Iskandar to live in Ballykilmara? In what ways is the quiet village different from the Algiers?
- Describe the treatment of the slaves by the pirates. Why do you think they are treated like this? What might the effects of this treatment be physically and psychologically?
- Predict what will happen next in the story.

Students read Chapters 16–23 (pp. 281–426) independently before the next shared session.

### Comprehension Chapters 16–23 (pp. 281–426)

- Why does Liam find the master's inspection so humiliating? Why does the man think that Liam will be a good slave for the galley?
- How does the man looking for Irish slaves treat them? Why is Liam suspicious of the man's motives?
- Why does Aindrias decide to stay at the hospital? What does this suggest about his character?
- Describe the house that the slaves master leads them to. What is the first thing that he takes them to do when they arrive?

- What is the name of the man who bought them? What do they find out about him that is surprising?
- How does Liam feel when he sees Iskandar?
- How long is Liam ill for?
- How did Iskandar escape from his captors?
- How does Iskandar know that Conleth is not in Algiers?
- Where does Iskandar plan to look for Conleth and the others? What does he think might have happened to the girls? Who is to go with him? Why must Liam remain behind? How long does Iskandar think they will be gone for?
- Why does Liam insult Iskandar by talking about money?
- Why can't Nusair return to his parents now that he is free? Why wouldn't he convert back to his previous religion? What does he plan to do?
- Why is Liam afraid to leave the house? How does Aindrias convince him that he is safe?
- How has Aindrias transformed the hospital? Where does the food, medicine and other supplies come from?
- Why is Liam treated like a hero by the patients in the hospital?
- How many slaves attend the Mass during Easter? In what ways do you think worshipping helps them?
- Who is Imaad? What news does he bring from Iskandar?
- How does Aindrias persuade Liam to help him in the hospital? What do Liam's experiences with the patients teach him?
- How does Liam help Marco? Why does Imaad suggest that he speak to the slave owner himself?
- Why does Liam have to be polite and deferential to the slave owner despite his anger? Why is Obataiye so impressed with his negotiation?
- Which other slaves does Liam redeem? What do you think would have happened to them without his generosity?
- Describe Liam's reunion with Conleth and the others from Ballykilmarra. Why is Conleth "much changed"? How did Iskandar find Conleth? Who didn't return with Iskandar?
- Why was Conleth beaten by his master? What are his injuries?
- What does Iskandar explain to Liam about the Muslims and the Christians? To what extent does this explain the hatred between the different races and religions?

- What does Iskandar reveal about himself and his past to Liam?
- What is Liam given by Iskandar and his father?
- Where does Liam want to go before they sail home to Ireland?
- What does Liam give Aindrias as a leaving gift? Why is this gift so special?
- How is travelling on the Unity different from the Orla?
- Why is the Unity so good at evading pirate ships?
- What flag does Liam decide to fly when they reach Irish waters?
- Why does Davin find it difficult travelling with the British men? What does Liam argue about with him?
- Who is Richard? Why does he decide to return to Ballykilmara with Liam?
- How does Liam feel when he finally arrives home? Describe his reunion with his parents. How does the village celebrate the homecoming?
- How is the Liam who returns different from the one who left?
- What does Liam decide to use the Unity for?
- Who leaves with Iskandar? What does Liam do when they leave?

### Discussion

- Describe some examples in the novel when love and humanity are more important than colour and religion.
- How has Liam's experiences changed him? What do you think he has learnt?
- What does this novel teach us about prejudice?
- What is significant about the name Unity?

### Activities

**Monologue** – Create a monologue for Liam in an important part of the novel. What is he thinking and feeling in that moment? Why?

**Movie Pitch** – Write a one page “pitch” to a producer explaining why the story would make a great movie.

**Static Image** – Design a static image that illustrates a theme from the novel. Remember to combine verbal and visual features to convey your idea.

**Book Review** – Write a book review for *The Freedom Merchants*. Include a brief plot summary, describe the setting and explain why it is important. Describe the characters and explain how they develop and change as the story progresses. Identify major themes and ideas in the story. Remember to give your personal opinion about the book.

**Character** – Imagine that you are Liam and have been asked to give a speech about your experiences to the villagers. Write the speech and present it to the class in role.

**Writing** – Write a letter to Sherryl Jordan explaining what you liked about the novel.

**Drama** – Choose an important event from the story. Write a script that depicts the event. Remember to include a cast of characters and stage directions in your script. Practise your play and present it to the class.

**Plot** – Design a story board that illustrates 10 important events from the novel in the order that they occur. Under each picture write a brief summary of what is happening.

**Plot** – Choose an important event from the story and explain how this event affected the outcome of the story. If this event hadn't happened, how would things have turned out differently?

**Research** – Conduct a research assignment on the pirates of the Barbary Coast. Formulate focussing questions to guide your research. Use a range of verbal, visual and oral sources to gather your information. Present your findings as an essay or on a poster.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd.