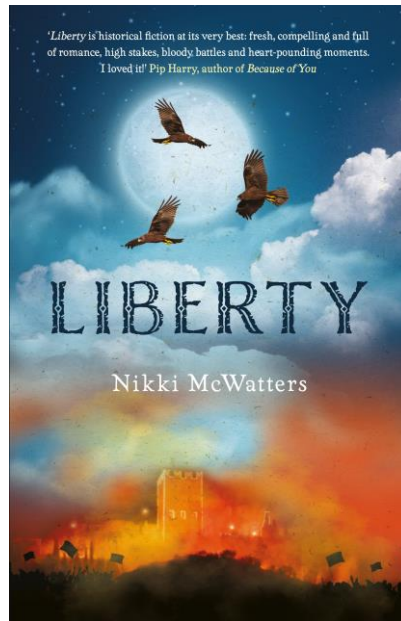


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LIBERTY

Nikki McWatters



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian
in context with the Australian curriculum
(English)

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SYNOPSIS

Liberty shares the stories of three girls from different historical and social contexts who each find the courage to confront bullies, challenge discrimination and instigate change.

In 1472, Jeanne's beloved hometown of Beauvais is besieged by Charles the Bold. Determined to protect her ailing father and the town she loves, Jeanne bravely gathers an army of women to help resist the invasion.

Together with her brother George and friend, Will, Betsy Gray joins a group of passionate loyalists determined to lead an Irish uprising to rebel against English rule.

As Australian troops are drawn into the Vietnam War, shy and naïve Fiona moves to Brisbane to study law. Once at university, she finds her voice and quickly learns the importance of perspectives and action.

Inextricably linked through a book called *Systir Saga*, each of these women find strength and resilience from the steely bloodline that links the females of their families – past, present and future.

THEMES

- Courage
- Women
- Mothers
- Hope
- Love
- Equality
- Risk-taking
- Freedom
- Action
- Perspective
- Bullying

WRITING STYLE

The three narratives in *Liberty* are told from the first-person points of view of Jeanne, Betsy and Fiona. Each story reflects examples of where gender discrimination restricted the roles of women. However, these are stories of

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courage and rebellion: boundaries are pushed, and risks are taken in order to enable change. The writing is literary and descriptive, employing figurative and lyrical language to provide detail and evoke empathy. The text is suitable for secondary students of all ages.

STUDY NOTES**Jeanne – Beauvais, France, 1472**

- Discuss the author's use of setting and voice in the opening paragraphs to position the reader within Jeanne's narrative. How has Nikki McWatters drawn the audience into the text so effectively?
- Reread the passage on p. 2 describing the connection that Jeanne feels with her mother when she's in the woods. Discuss the language used by the author to capture this sentiment.
- Jeanne loves the forest grove, but also the townscape of Beauvais. Create a visual representation that contrasts these two settings. Include short excerpts from the text to support your ideas.
- What can we tell about the relationship between Jeanne and Colin when we first meet him? How is their love similar to that shared by Jeanne's parents? Why, later in the text, does Colin refuse to elope with Jeanne? What does this reveal about his character?
- Acting in the role of Jeanne, write a diary entry after discovering you are betrothed to Lieutenant Lagoy.
- In what ways does class affect Jeanne's life?
- What role do Giselle and Cousin Aimee play in Jeanne's story? Why are they such important supporting characters?
- Charles the Bold is a bully. How does he represent the nature of oppression against women over the ages?
- How is Jeanne like her mother? Use quotes from the text to support your thinking.
- Reread the passage on p. 107 in which Jeanne likens patriotism and community to weapons. How do the people of Beauvais support one another in the face of adversity?
- How are Jeanne's father and Colin similar to one another?
- Why does Jeanne decide to 'rally [her] own army of Beauvaisi women' (p. 147)? Why is this a courageous move given the historical context of her story?

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- How is the theme of love explored in Jeanne's narrative?
- Discuss Colin's assertion that 'if everyone disobeyed the laws and did whatever they wanted, everything would descend into chaos' (p. 260). How does this sit against the backdrop of Betsy's and Fiona's narratives, in which rebellion features? How does *Liberty* reflect society's growing rejection of unpopular laws?
- Jeanne says: 'I let myself bathe in the glorious names of the women who were the threads that were sewn together with stitches of time and blood to make up the garment that was me' (p. 299). How does Jeanne gain strength from her maternal forebearers?
- In her dream, Jeanne's mother tells her 'we are with you always. We are you' (p. 268). What message is the author portraying through this passage?
- Select a passage from Jeanne's story to annotate, demonstrating your understanding of figurative devices and the author's ability to 'show not tell'.
- Discuss Lagoy's character as captured by the following sentence: 'Lagoy held my life in his hands like a fragile duckling in the jaws of a fox' (p. 54).
- What is life like for the women of Beauvais? How do class structure and birth rights affect this? What concerns you about life for women during this era?
- On p. 328 why does King Louis XI tell Jeanne that sometimes it can be a good thing to be disobedient?

Betsy – County Down, Ireland, 1797–98

- Discuss the author's use of imagery on p. 16. How does this writing 'show' rather than 'tell'? Why is this important in storytelling?
- Reread the passage on p. 25. How has the author portrayed the hatred between the Redcoats and the Irish?
- Why do Betsy, George and Will hide their rebel status from Betsy's father? Why is he loyal to England?
- As you read her narrative, create a character profile of Betsy.
- What is the difference between a rebel and a revolutionary?
- Respond to the following statement: 'Connor says that education is dangerous for women' (p. 57). What does this statement reveal about the attitudes at the time?

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- Why has the author included a character like Cousin Mary?
- Why would Da and Mary 'rather not stick their heads up to make trouble' (p. 61) while others in the family are prepared to die for the cause? What would you do if you were living in Ireland during this time? Discuss.
- Discuss the similarities between Betsy and her great aunt, Kat Campbell. Why does Cousin Mary describe Kat as tempestuous?
- Why is Brigit's narrative an important inclusion in the story? How does she help broaden readers' perspectives?
- Why does Betsy say that 'the room was strung with invisible piano wire, tight and taut' (p. 88)?
- Why does the fate of Annie O'Neal spur Betsy on in her rebellion?
- Why is Betsy's horse named Finn McCool? Why is it so difficult for Betsy to let her horse go later in the story?
- What is the significance of Betsy showing baby Isabella the portraits of the women in their family?
- Reread p. 113. What value does Betsy give the education that her father afforded her? Why? How is Betsy's upbringing different from that of Jeanne?
- How does finding the *Systir Saga* (pp. 151–4) among her mother's belongings further inspire Betsy?
- What does her mother's wedding ring symbolise for Betsy (p. 182)?
- Why does it take so long for Da to finally accept the need for his children to rebel?
- Discuss the author's description of the tension between the English and Irish: 'When English stubbornness came up against Irish pride, you had two stags with antlers locked' (pp. 271–2).
- Discuss Betsy's comment that so many Irish were 'all for booting the English from our shores but few were ready to risk their lives and those of their families for the cause' (p. 273). What does this reveal about the courage of those willing to make sacrifices for change? How would you react in a situation like this?
- Write a reflection about the life and death of Betsy.

Fiona – Darling Downs and Brisbane, Australia, 1968

- Fiona is the first woman in her family to 'set foot on university soil' (p. 33). In what way does Fiona's story emphasise the importance of education in the evolving status of women?

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- Why did Fiona's mother sometimes call her 'the little arrow to her bow' (p. 34)?
- What is Fiona's dad's attitude towards university? Why does he see it as a 'place-holder' until Fiona finds a husband?
- In what ways does Fiona represent feminist attitudes? Given that her story takes place in the late 1960s, how do her attitudes reflect contemporary thinking about the role of women?
- How is Fiona's university life different from her life in Bandaroo Flats?
- What restricted her mother's access to education? How have laws changed over time to encourage equality? What still needs to occur?
- How is Fiona's story similar to and different from those of Jeanne and Betsy?
- How does the drafting of Walter, Luke and Murray change Fiona's attitude towards conscription?
- Hold a class discussion about conscription and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. What were arguments for and against conscription? What would you have done in Luke's position?
- How does Fiona cope with the death of her mother? In what ways is her mother an integral part of Fiona's life at university?
- What does Fiona learn from characters such as Barton? Why does she dislike him so much at first?
- Why does Fiona say that her mother was 'a woman in the wrong era' (p. 101)?
- Why does Barton 'represent everything that my father was afraid of for me and everything I wanted for myself' (p. 101)?
- At the Foco Club, Barton refers to the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior and the 'I Have a Dream' speech. Research Martin Luther King Junior's life and civil rights campaigns. How have these influenced Barton?
- Why does Fiona's father send the *Systir Saga* book earlier than her wedding day? Why does this excite Fiona?
- What messages are evident in Fiona's story about the virtues of risk-taking?
- How does *Liberty* emphasise the importance of freedom of speech?
- Discuss Fiona's realisation that issues need to be analysed from different perspectives. Discuss a range of issues in *Liberty* from differing viewpoints.

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- Why does Fiona get frustrated with Agnes when she considers leaving uni to go to Sydney with Jeff? Why does she say 'we're only here on the shoulders of the women who couldn't be' (p. 247)?
- Fiona says that Barton's 'sincerity and social conscience did not sit quietly, but roared' (p. 250). How does this influence Fiona's own thinking?
- Why does getting arrested and 'swimming upstream' make Fiona feel 'a bit taller, a bit stronger' (p. 258)?
- How does going to university change Fiona? Why does she say that uni allowed her to 'think for myself, to use my own voice and to make sense of my place in the world' (p. 323)?
- On p. 356, why does Fiona describe Bob Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind' as the anthem for her generation? How do the lyrics reflect the historical context of her story? What is the anthem for your generation? Discuss.
- Discuss the significance of the final line of *Liberty*: 'I see a girl who might just change the world' (p. 358).

General Notes

- As you read, discuss the author's use of figurative language and its contribution to the text. Examples include:
 - 'I walked through the carpet of leaves' p. 1
 - 'The taste of berries bursting against my tongue' p. 2
 - 'I ... felt the tickle of a spider's web on my face' p. 2
 - 'The smells hung like an oily fog in the back of my throat' p. 2
 - 'The birds were my musicians, chirping in tune like feathered lute-players' p. 4
 - 'It was like the beat of a funeral drum' p. 4
 - 'All of my father's warnings ... came rushing at me like wild flood water' p. 4
 - 'He made me feel like a trapped animal' p. 12
 - 'Empty boulders, squatting there like sheep turned to stone' p. 16
 - 'His greying rust-coloured hair sticking up and around his face like dirty fox fur' p. 30
 - 'My legs shook like a newborn foal's' p. 33
 - 'Catching the sun like flames' p. 37
 - 'She seemed ethereal, like a thistle about to be blown away on the breeze' p. 37

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- 'Lagoy was leering at me as if I was some small cake he would certainly devour' p. 52
- 'The ceiling fan stirred the humid air like a spoon in tea' p. 64
- 'I wanted to burrow into my slippers like a snail' p. 68
- 'Soldiers ... were circling Annie O'Neal like cats around a mouse' p. 82
- 'The paint was beginning to peel and flake like the scales of a fish' p. 114
- 'The thrill of it all washed over me like a wave of forest fire' p. 118
- 'The clouds folded over the undulating yellow fields' p. 188
- 'Death hung like a storm cloud over Beauvais' p. 205
- 'My words sifted away into the darkness like smoke evaporating into the night' p. 263
- 'My face prickling as if it was overrun with ants' p. 302
- 'The moon reached high like a skull in the night sky' p. 307
- 'The sound of clashing metal and screams of pain filled the air' p. 312
- 'The moon was dusted with bruises and looked angry' p. 337
- 'I felt as fragile as blown glass that was beginning to crack' p. 339
- Why has Nikki McWatters deliberately written about female characters who have each lost their mothers? How have these women shaped the lives of their daughters?
- What role do the fathers play in each story? Why, although they are trying to protect their daughters, are they hindering their development?
- Discuss the way in which collective action from like-minded people is championed in *Liberty*.
- What is the significance of the title *Liberty* in relation to each of the stories?
- What emphasis is placed on education as a means of improving rights?
- Create your own *Systir Saga* book tracing the maternal lineage in your own family.
- How are Jeanne, Betsy and Fiona similar to Joan of Arc?
- Discuss the role of women in *Liberty*. How are the female characters exemplar role models for modern day women?
- How are Jeanne, Betsy and Fiona similar to and different from one another? Compare their characters by using a graphic organiser.

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- Discuss the threads and clues that bring these three women's narratives together through the *Systir Saga* book.
- Analyse the way in which Nikki McWatters has successfully created three unique voices throughout *Liberty*.
- Based around the foundations of the 'Me Too' campaign, write a newspaper article that addresses the issue of gender inequality.
- In the role of one of the characters, write and perform a monologue showing your understanding of the themes of the novel.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

I have a teenage daughter and I am concerned about the world she is inheriting. In the years since I was a teenager I have seen some momentous and encouraging changes towards gender equality and the realisation of the unshakeable truth that girls are every bit as important, as powerful, as passionate and as filled with potential as boys.

But women are still fighting to have their voices heard, believed and respected. We still seek liberty in so many areas of life, from the corporate to the domestic. The movement, led by teenagers in the US fighting for changes to gun laws in the wake of yet another school shooting, heartened me because these young people rallied themselves and their outraged voices into vocal, peaceful weapons for change. They are the role models I want for my own teens. They were the type of characters I wanted in my book!

I dug about and discovered two real women from history who, despite their youth, managed to summon amazing reserves of courage to fight the patriarchy and oppression of their day. I felt excited and honoured to fashion their stories into my novel. Fiona, the modern girl's story, ties together elements of the struggles of her female forebears into a narrative that discusses when there should be a time for war, a time for peace, a time to submit and a time to rebel. Revolution can be the way to clear a path for the new. We are always evolving politically and socially.

I hope that the characters in *Liberty* can serve to be role models for young readers. They are saying: 'Your voices are important so use them. Speak your truth and be heard.'

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikki McWatters was shortlisted for a Queensland Premier's Literary Award (2010) and has published a memoir and two young adult novels. She won the Irish Moth Award (2016) and has written for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the UK *Huffington Post* and *The Big Issue*. She is currently the spokesperson for the annual Vinnie's CEO Sleepout. Nikki also has a law degree in her bottom drawer somewhere.

<https://nikkimcwatters.wordpress.com>