

The Last Summoner

Author: Sherryl Jordan

Synopsis

Ari longs to be a dragon summoner like her famous grandfather Poppy Loddo, but it is forbidden. According to the ancient laws only boys are allowed to summon dragons. But there is something special about Ari - the secret song of the dragon summoners came to her in a dream and it seems that she has an important destiny. Ari is able to discover this destiny when the new King Valguard commands Poppy Loddo to summon the dragons from the swamp. The Kingdom's long-time enemies from the Kingdom of Dalenia are advancing and King Valguard needs the dragons to fight with his men. Poppy is given no choice but to obey the new King; because he is blind, Ari must accompany him on his journey. Ari is overcome with excitement and views the journey as a great adventure. What Ari can't know is how important this journey will be for her personally - her great destiny is about to be revealed and she is given the chance to rewrite history.

Text Type

The Last Summoner is a fast-paced and action-packed fantasy novel written by well-known and renowned New Zealand author Sherryl Jordan. The novel has broad appeal and enough adventure to keep even the most reluctant reader engaged. Set in ancient times, *The Last Summoner* tells the story of Ari, a girl who longs to be a boy so that she can summon dragons from the swamp like her famous grandfather Poppy Loddo. Ari is discontent with her life and longs for adventure and the opportunity to prove her abilities. This opportunity arises when she is chosen to guide Poppy Loddo to the swamps to summon the dragons. The quest is a perilous one and Ari's quick-thinking actions save both her own life and that of Poppy Loddo on more than one occasion. During her adventure Ari learns some valuable lessons about life, justice and morality. She is clever and canny and devises some extremely well-thought out plans that allow her to change the course of history.

Each chapter in the novel is illustrated with beautiful pencil sketches that further encourage the reader to enter a world where dragons and monsters exist. Themes include duty, following and challenging traditions, the importance of following your destiny, the role of women, good versus evil, and courage.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 5-22), Chapters 2-5 (pp. 23-96) and Chapters 6-11 (pp. 97-187).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify words and ideas. Have students make predictions about what they think will happen next. Encourage them to suspend disbelief and enter a magical world of quests, dragons and monsters. Have them explain how the author creates this world. Student need to have an understanding of the fantasy genre and be able to identify the elements that are typical to a story that involves a quest. Students should analyse the characters in the novel and how they are developed by the author. Students should be able to describe Ari's motivations, qualities and characteristics in addition to tracking how her character develops and changes as the story progresses. Have students identify the main themes and ideas in the novel and explain why these are important.

Introducing the Novel

Have students study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- What kind of novel do you think this is? What do you expect from novels of this genre?
- Who are the main characters in the story?
- What does Ari long to be?
- What does "forbidden" mean?
- What does "destiny" refer to? What do you think Ari's destiny might be?
- Where do you think the dragons are summoned from? Why might they be called upon?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 5-22) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 5-22)

- Describe Ari's dream. How does Ari feel when she wakes up? Why do you think she feels like this?
- Who lives with Ari in the cottage? Where did all of the furniture in the cottage come from?

- Why does Ari wish that she was a boy? Why is she always getting onto trouble in the village?
- Why is Ari forbidden to be a dragon summoner?
- Who used to rule the Kingdom? What did his men steal from Dalenia? Why did he summon the dragons? What does Poppy Loddoo tell Ari about her father during his story?
- Why won't Poppy tell Ari about how the dragons ended up in Bodenroth swamp?
- What is significant about the song that Ari sings by the fire?

Discussion

- What do we learn about Ari in the first chapter?
- Describe Ari's dad. What qualities and characteristics did he possess? How do you think not having him around has affected Ari?
- Make a prediction about what will happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 2-5 (pp. 23-96) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2-5 (pp. 23-96)

- Why does Ari need to be so careful in the forest?
- How does Ari know that the men on horses are not traders? Who are the men looking for?
- Why is Poppy shouting when Ari arrives home? How do the guards convince him to summon the dragons? Why does Ari have to accompany him?
- Why do all the men and boys have to leave the village of Emmerik?
- How do Poppy and Ari prepare for their journey? How does Ari feel about going on the journey?
- What does Poppy ask Ari to retrieve before they leave? How long will it take Poppy and Ari to reach Bodenroth swamp? What places do they need to pass through on the way? Where will they go when they leave the swamp?
- What will Poppy's role be while he is staying at the King's castle?
- Why do you think Poppy gets so angry at Ari when she keeps asking questions?
- Why is Grimkel unnaturally silent when they arrive there?
- Why does Ari think that "war must be a glorious thing"?
- Who offers Ari and Poppy soup and shelter? How did Osmail get injured? How does his appearance make Ari feel? Why does Ari change her mind?

about war being glorious when she leaves? What promise does she make the man?

- What does the innkeeper tell Poppy and Ari about the enemy army?
- What does Ari learn about the fate of the dragons while she is listening to the people talking at the inn? How does this make her feel?
- Why does it take Poppy and Ari so long to cross the Greyfell Hills?
- Why is Ari awestruck when she looks at the swamp? At what time do the dragons need to be summoned?
- Why does Poppy tell Ari to have her bow ready?
- What parts of Ari's journey into the swamp does she remember from her dream?
- What kind of creature rises up out of the mud? How does the creature try and kill Poppy and Ari?
- Why does Poppy tell Ari to look for a pool?
- What does Poppy make Ari promise before he summons the dragons? Why is Poppy so worried about breaking the ancient tradition? What condition does Ari put upon her promise?
- Why is Ari concerned that Poppy might not be able to summon the dragons? Why does he have difficulty?
- Why does Poppy warn Ari not to look directly into the mirror?
- How does Ari feel when Poppy asks her to summon the dragons? What does he tell her about the mirror?
- How many times does Ari sing the song? How does she feel when she realises that the dragons will not come to her?
- Why does Poppy tell Ari that she is extremely brave?
- What is Poppy's dream?
- How does Ari help Poppy summon the dragons? How does Ari feel when the dragons come out of the swamp? What strange ritual do the dragons do? How many dragons does Poppy summon?
- How does Poppy propose to get to the King's castle?
- Which dragon does Poppy decide to ride?
- What surprises Ari about the dragon when she mounts him?

Discussion

- Describe the setting of the story. How does the time and place of the story affect the action?
- How do the realities of war differ from Ari's perception of it?
- According to culture and tradition, Ari is not allowed to follow in her grandfather's footsteps because she is a girl. Can you think of other examples in history where girls are forbidden to do certain things? How has the role of women developed and changed over time?

- Does the situation that Poppy finds himself in - ie not being able to summon the dragons - justify his decision to break the ancient tradition and allow Ari to do the summoning? Why/why not?
- Describe Ari's character. What qualities and characteristics does she possess?
- Predict what will happen in the story next. What do you think Ari's plan is?

Students read Chapters 6-11 (pp. 97-187) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 6-11 (pp. 97-187)

- What preparations does the king make for the dragons?
- Why does king Valguard decide to keep a dragon after the battle?
- What does Ari notice as she flies into the courtyard? What is the significance of this object?
- Why does Poppy want Ari to keep up the pretence that she is a boy?
- How do the armed soldiers treat the dragons? How does Ari feel when she watches this treatment? Why is Poppy powerless to stop the soldiers? Why does Poppy warn Ari not to address the king?
- How does Ari know that the king is a cruel man?
- Where does the king insist that the dragons be housed? What command does Poppy give the dragons?
- What are the conditions like in the dungeons? How does Ari feel about leaving the dragons there?
- Why doesn't Poppy order the dragons to fly back to the swamp?
- What does Poppy tell Ari about how her father died? What do Ari's father's actions suggest about his character?
- Why did Poppy swear to King Theol that he would never summon again?
- What realisation does Ari come to about the dragon's original home?
- Why does Poppy finally decide to tell Ari the full story about the dragons? What does he reveal to her about the Bodenroth dragons? What was the curse placed upon the dragons by the magician?
- Why does Poppy believe that the dragons can read his thoughts?
- What does Poppy tell the king that he has to train the dragons to do before he can teach the men dragon flight? Why does Poppy insist that Ari accompany him?

- What instruction does Poppy give the dragons once they are in the air? What does Poppy do instead of following the king's command to return to the courtyard?
- What does the king threaten to do to Poppy and Ari when he realises that they have stolen his war trophy?
- Where does the captain of the king's army think that Poppy and Ari are going to take the sword? Why are the king's men pleased by the theft?
- Why does Poppy tell Orion to fly down to the Dalenian army in circles? How does Ari feel when she presents the sword to the Dalenian king?
- Describe Ari's meeting with the enemy. What does she notice about the king's face? How does the king's army react when they see that the sword has been returned? Why does the Dalenian king think that King Valguard is a fool?
- What does King Emund offer Ari and Poppy in return for the sword? Why is this offer so important?
- Why does Poppy want the dragons to remain with them for the night?
- Who is old Didrik?
- What realisation do you think Ari comes to when Poppy repeats the curse to her?
- Why does Ari insist that Poppy summon all of the dragons out of the swamp? How many dragons does he summon?
- Why do the dragons sing to the moon?
- What does Ari say to the dragons when she gathers them all together? Why does she give Orion the mirror? What loophole does Ari discover in the curse? How do the dragons display their appreciation to Ari?
- What startling discovery does Ari make after most of the dragons fly away to their real home?
- Describe what Ari's dad looks like. Why do you think his dragon refuses to leave his side?
- How did Ari's dad survive King Theol's punishment? Why did he decide not to return home?
- How does Ari's family react when Dad returns home?
- How is Ari's family able to escape from their village so quickly? What does the army captain find out about the family's fate? How does he react to this news?
- What sort of life has Ari forged for herself during her two years in Dalenia? What does the fact that Prince Anakol calls her Arianwen suggest? In what ways has Ari challenged the tradition role of women in Dalenia? What is Ari's goal for the future? What does Anakol predict she will do? In what ways does Anakol's prediction come true?

Discussion

- Describe King Valguard. What does his treatment of the dragons suggest about his character?
- Identify the climax of the story. Why is this event important?
- What lessons do you think Ari has learnt from her experiences? In what way does being a female work to her advantage at the end of the story?
- Identify a main theme in the novel and explain how it is developed by the author.
- Is Poppy right when he says that "sometimes we write our own ending"?

Activities

Setting - Design a map that shows all of the important places in the story.

Plot - Design a storyboard that shows 10 important events from the story in the order that they occur. Under each illustration write a brief description about what is happening.

Oral Book Report - Write a review for *The Last Summoner* and present it to your class orally. In your review include information such as what type of book it is, a brief story outline, an analysis of the setting and characters and your personal opinion about the book.

Static Image - Design a static image that depicts one of the important themes presented in the story. You may wish to do a collage, use the computer or design a poster. Use words and images from the story to convey your idea.

Character - Describe Ari's actions and behaviour in a particular situation that occurs in the story. Justify or criticise her motives in this situation.

Questions - Write 10 discussion questions for the novel.

Drama - Choose an exciting event from the story and write a script for it. Include a list of characters and stage directions. Practise your play and present it to your class.

Soundtrack - Imagine that this novel is being made into a film. Choose 5 songs for the soundtrack. Explain why you chose the songs and where in the film they will go.

Character - Complete a character report for a main character in the story. Include information about their attributes, important decisions that they make and how they develop and change as the story develops. Include 5 important quotes from the novel that back up your ideas.

Board game - Design a board game based on the novel. For every positive event that occurs, reward the player. For every negative one, penalise the player. Decorate the board with images and scenes from the story.

Writing - Explain how the novel would have been different if a certain event occurred.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd