

Ransomwood

Author: Sherryl Jordan

Synopsis

When Gwenifer gets half-wit Harry to take Jeffery's ox home so she can sneak into the woods with her lover, she has no idea the chain of events that she is setting in motion. The ox escapes and tramples Gwenifer's cousin Tilly nearly to death.

The people of Grimblebury want someone to pay for the calamity and Harry is an easy target. Luckily for him the town magistrate Shem Wakeman is a wise man, and seeing that what happened was simply an unfortunate accident he decides to send Harry on a long journey to Ransomwood. The purpose of this journey is to gather the tears of a statue which are renowned for their healing power. These will then be brought back to Grimblebury in the hope that Tilly will be cured.

As travelling to Ransomwood is an attractive alternative to hanging, Harry is happy to go. When Shem orders that Gwenifer also make the pilgrimage she feels relief. Ever since the accident, her life is falling apart. Jeffery has spurned her affections, her reputation around Grimblebury has been tarnished and her horrible uncle is threatening to marry her off to his awful widowed brother.

Shem also has an ulterior motive for sending the pair to Ransomwood. His own mother Dorit is blind and since Shem's master Lord Roderick is travelling his lands, Shem is unable to take her to the weeping statue himself. Harry and Gwenifer will be able to ensure that Dorit arrives in Ransomwood safely.

The three embark on a perilous journey and uncover a shocking secret, one that people will kill to keep from being revealed.

Text Type

Ransomwood is an adventure love story written by award-winning New Zealand author Sherryl Jordan. The story is fast-paced and contains enough action to keep even the most reluctant reader engaged. With broad appeal for both boys and girls the novel is suitable for readers aged 10+.

Set in ancient times in a small English village the action in the novel takes place when the law is inextricably linked with religion and capital punishment is common. Laws are strict and social codes are extremely important. As a young girl having an untarnished reputation is paramount so that you can be married to a nice young man. People in the village are quick to judge and many are prejudiced against anyone who is different.

This social climate makes life difficult for Gwenifer and Harry. Both are different and have trouble fitting in. Both have little say over their own lives and are under the control of others. When they embark on their journey they discover that they actually have a lot in common.

Themes in the novel include prejudice, deception, choosing your own path in life, loyalty and love.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Chapter 1 (pp. 7–14), Chapters 2–6 (pp. 15–93), Chapters 7–11 (pp. 94–167) and Chapters 12–17 (pp. 168–268).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas in the novel. Have them study the setting and the way the social climate affects the action in the story. Students should make predictions and inferences. Encourage students to study the characters of Harry and Gwenifer and how they develop and change as the novel progresses. Students should identify important themes and issues raised in the novel and explain how these are developed by the author.

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 based on the blurb and the cover illustration? What do you expect from a novel of this genre?
- Why is Gwenifer almost relieved to be sent to Ransomwood? Why is she going there? Who are her travelling companions?
- What is Harry escaping from?
- What kinds of dangers do you think the group might face on their journey?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 7–14) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 7–14)

- What happens to Tilly? Who gets the blame?
- Where does Harry live? Who does he live with? Describe his living conditions.
- What does Harry tell his mother about the accident? How does he feel about Gwenifer? How does Harry's mother feel about Gwenifer? What did Gwenifer give Harry to ensure that he kept her secret? What didn't she want anyone to know?

Discussion

- Why is Harry called "Halfwit Harry?" How do you think this name might make him feel?
- Describe Harry's relationship with his mother.
- What do we find out about Gwenifer in this Chapter?
- What do we learn about Grimblebury in Chapter one?

- Predict what will happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 2–6 (pp. 15–93) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2–6 (pp. 15–93)

- Why is Gwenifer caught between “secret satisfactions and a troublesome guilt?”
- Who does Gwenifer live with? How is she treated by her family?
- What news does Gwenifer hear that shocks her so much that she cuts her finger?
- What happens when Gwenifer goes to see Jeffery? How has he deceived her?
- Describe Gwenifer’s uncle Caleb. What evidence is there in the text to suggest that he behaves inappropriately towards his niece?
- What important matter does Caleb discuss with his family at supper? What does Caleb’s focus on the oxen rather than his daughter suggest about his character?
- Who does Caleb suggest that Gwenifer sees about her finger? Why do people believe that this woman is a witch?
- Why does Dorit want to go to Ransomwood? How far away is Ransomwood? Why won’t Clem take her there?
- Why does Gwenifer have to attend the court case?
- What does Caleb ask Shem for by way of compensation? What is Shem’s judgement? Why is his idea so clever?
- Why are Gwenifer and Harry required to go on the pilgrimage?
- How does Caleb end up worse off than he was before going to court?
- Who disagrees with Shem’s judgement? What does Shem add to his judgement to placate the people who oppose it?
- Why is Gwenifer so angry with Harry? Is her anger justified? Why/why not?
- How does Caleb feel about Shem’s judgement?
- Why is Gwenifer so unhappy in Grimblebury? Who does she hate most of all?
- What does Caleb tell Gwenifer he is going to do with her once she is back from the pilgrimage? What does Gwenifer threaten to do?
- What potential dangers do Gwenifer, Dorit and Harry face during their journey? Why does Dusty call them “the devil’s crew”?

- Who is the only person to speak to Harry before the group leaves? What is given to him for protection?
- What does Shem say to Gwenifer before they go that offers her hope? What advice does he offer her about how to stay safe?
- Why does Harry's mother tell him not to come back to Grimblebury?
- Why is Harry reluctant to approach Gwenifer and ask her how she is feeling? What is wrong with her?
- Why is Gwenifer afraid of Dorit? How does Dorit convince Gwenifer to let her treat her finger?
- What does Dorit reveal to Gwenifer about who named her in court?
- Why does Harry go ahead of Dorit and Gwenifer into the woods? How long is he gone for?
- Who approaches the group while they are in the woods? What do they want? How does Harry deal with the men? How does Gwenifer's attitude towards Harry change after this incident?
- Why doesn't Dorit approve of the apothecary? What does the apothecary try and sell? How does Dorit scare off his customers? Why is Gwenifer annoyed by Dorit's behaviour?
- Why does Gwenifer dread having to return to Grimblebury? Why is she scared to run away?

Discussion

- How is Gwenifer's social position and home life different to Harry's?
- How does Gwenifer feel when she finds out that Jeffery has been toying with her? How has her relationship with Jeffery tarnished her reputation? Why was a girl's reputation so important at this time?
- Why does Gwenifer think that she is unlovable?
- What does Gwenifer learn about her travelling companions during the pilgrimage? How does what she learns about Harry and Dorit differ from her perceptions of them?
- Predict what will happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 7–11 (pp. 94–167) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 7–11 (pp. 94–167)

- What surprising admission does Dorit make to Gwenifer about her past? Why do her words offer Gwenifer some hope?
- Why does Dorit insist on going into the inn with Harry?

- How does Harry feel when he sees the hanged man?
- Why is Dorit worried about going across Darkon Moor?
- Why is Gwenifer envious of Dorit?
- Why does Gwenifer get so angry at Harry? What does Harry say to Gwenifer that surprises her? How does Harry's outburst alter the way that Gwenifer views him?
- What skills does Dorit believe that Gwenifer has? What job does she suggest that Gwenifer would be ideal for? How does Gwenifer feel after talking to Dorit?
- Why does Dorit want Gwenifer to stay with Harry and her until they have been to Ransomwood?
- Describe what happens when Gwenifer, Harry and Dorit encounter the five youths. Why doesn't Gwenifer help Harry? How does she feel about her inaction later?
- What does Gwenifer say to Harry about the bantam that comforts him?
- Why does Gwenifer think that the pilgrimage is going to be the turning point in her life? What gift does she hope to receive from the Weeping Lady?
- What are the Bathag Stones?
- Where does Gwenifer decide to go after Ransomwood?
- What is the history of Ransomwood?
- Describe the feelings of each of the travellers as they near Ransomwood. Why does Dorit insist on walking into Ransomwood?
- Describe the church. What does the statue look like? Why does Gwenifer begin sobbing when she sees the statue? What realisation does she come to about her mother? What epiphany does she have about her life?
- How does Harry discover that the statue is a hoax? How does the priest react when he realises that his trickery has been discovered? Why does Harry punch him?
- How does Harry explain the miracles that have occurred in Ransomwood? Do you agree with his explanation? Why/why not?
- Why does Gwenifer think that the good lord was kind to take Dorit when he did?
- Describe Dorit's funeral. Why is Father Zechariah surprised when he finds out who Dorit's son is?

Discussion

- Describe Harry. What are his strengths and weaknesses? What are his attributes? How do we know that he has a good heart? Why does he decide that he doesn't want the Almighty

to change him when he reaches Ransomwood? Why is it important to never judge a book by its cover?

- Describe Dorit. The villagers in Grimblebury talk about her a lot but what is she really like? Why does Gwenifer admire her? What does Dorit mean when she says “what brawn can’t accomplish, brains often can?”
- Harry is judged by others and teased because they think he is slow. Why do you think some people like to pick on others who are different?
- What do you think is going to happen in the story next?

Students read Chapters 12–17 (pp. 168–268) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 12–17 (pp. 168–268)

- How does Harry react when Gwenifer tells him that she isn’t going home to Grimblebury? Why does Harry want to stay in Hepple’s Hill with her? How does Gwenifer convince him that he has to return home?
- What does Harry pull out from his shirt to show Gwenifer?
- How does Gwenifer react when Harry professes his love for her?
- Who does Gwenifer work for when she arrives in Hepple’s Hill? How does Gwenifer feel about her new life?
- Why is Harry terrified when he hears the approaching horsemen? How does he convince the woman to help him hide? What does Harry do with the piece of statue?
- Why do the men apprehend Harry? What are the men looking for? Why do they beat him up?
- What aspects of her new life does Gwenifer particularly enjoy?
- What sorry news does the apothecary bring from Ransomwood?
- What does Gwenifer learn about the priest? Why is he after Gwenifer? What message does Harry want the apothecary to pass on to Gwenifer? How does Gwenifer react when she learns that Harry no longer has the piece of statue?
- Why does the apothecary insist that Gwenifer flee from Hepple’s Hill? Where does he say he will take her?
- How does Gwenifer feel about her decision not to help Harry?
- What does Maggie tell Gwenifer about Harry? What realisation does Gwenifer come to about the little stones?

- What advice do Gervase and Maggie give Gwenifer? Why doesn't Gwenifer listen to them? What does Gwenifer suddenly realise about her feelings for Harry after she makes the decision to go and speak up for him?
- Who does Gwenifer confide in about her predicament? What does she need them to help her with?
- How do the ruffians try and get Harry to talk? What does the fact that he remains silent suggest about his character?
- What information does Gwenifer learn about Harry's fate from the priest?
- Where does Gwenifer hide the statue's face?
- How many people turn up to watch the hanging? Why do you think such an event would be so popular?
- How does Gwenifer feel when she sees how injured Harry is?
- How does the crowd react when the priest climbs onto the wagon?
- What crimes is Harry charged with? How does the priest make Harry look guilty in front of the crowd?
- What happens to Gwenifer's bundle as she is helped onto the wagon? How does the priest react when he recognises Gwenifer? How does he try and discredit her? Why are the crowd so easily convinced that Gwenifer should hang?
- Describe Gwenifer's feelings as she waits for Harry to die.
- Who slices the rope from Harry's neck? How does his presence calm the crowd?
- Who listens to Gwenifer's story? How do they know she is telling the truth?
- How do the townspeople react to the priest's deception? In whose hands does Lord Roderick leave the priest's fate?
- How does the crowd react when Lord Roderick declares that Gwenifer and Harry are free? Why do they react like this?
- How did Lord Roderick know that Harry and Gwenifer were in danger?
- What injuries did Harry sustain during his torture? What does the fact that he didn't give the men any information about Gwenifer suggest about her character?
- What happens to the priest in Ransomwood?
- Why is Harry reluctant to return home?
- Who speaks for Harry and Gwenifer upon their return to Grimblebury?
- What two "miracles" come out of Ransomwood for Gwenifer and Harry?

- Why does Harry's mum still disapprove of Gwenifer?
- How is Gwenifer's life different after she returns to Grimblebury?
- Why does Harry's mum think that he is making a fool of himself? Do you believe that Gwenifer's feelings for Harry are genuine? Why/why not?
- What happened to Tilly?
- Who does Harry end up working for?
- How does Harry set about wooing Gwenifer?

Discussion

- Where does courage come from?
- What do Harry, Dorit and Gwenifer each learn from their time in Ransomwood?
- Find examples in the story when Gwenifer behaves selfishly. How does she redeem herself at the end of the story?
- Identify the climax in the story. Why is this event important?
- Identify an important theme in the story. How is this theme developed by the author?

Activities

Writing – Imagine that there is a sequel to this book. Write the first chapter for the next book in the series.

Character – Complete a character profile for a main character in the novel. Include information about their name, age and role in the story. Explain the challenges that they face during the story and how they overcome them. Discuss how this character develops and changes throughout the course of the story. Use adjectives to describe what qualities and characteristics they possess. Include important quotes that reveal important aspects of the character.

Writing – Write a news article about an important event that occurs in the story. Include a catchy headline to grab the attention of the reader. Remember to use the inverted pyramid style of writing and include the 5 W's and H in the first two paragraphs of your article. In the rest of your article develop your ideas more fully and include quotes from people involved in the event.

Static Image – Design a static image that depicts an important theme from the novel. You may wish to do a collage that uses important words and images from the story or you could design a web page.

Writing – Write a letter to a friend explaining to them why they should read Ransomwood.

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 didn't happen how would things have turned out differently?

Setting – Copy the map included at the beginning of the book. Write on the map where 5 important events occurred.

Notes written by Vicki Ladd

