

Freedom

An enslaved Jamaican boy is separated from his family and taken to work in England. His owners, the Barratts, treat him cruelly but he is determined to escape and earn the money needed to buy his family's freedom. While in London, he attends the *Zong* slave ship's court hearing and learns about the horrors that took place on board.

Author

Catherine Johnson was born in London and has Jamaican and Welsh heritage. When she was a child, she loved reading historical stories but could never find many stories with black characters in them. So, she decided to write some herself. She has written over 20 novels, winning the Young Quills Award for best historical fiction for 12-year-olds and over. She has also written for TV and radio and has mentored writers for the British Council.

Historical context

The novel takes place in 1783, and although the main character is fictional, real historical figures and events are included. One such event is the *Zong* trial, where the shipping company sued their insurers for failing to compensate them for the 132 enslaved people who were thrown overboard. The *Zong* was suffering from a water shortage and sickness was spreading. Insurance could not be claimed for people who died on board the ship, so the captain threw many of the enslaved overboard. The real historical figures in the book include Olaudah Equiano, Granville Sharp and Shadrack Furman. Olaudah Equiano was enslaved then bought his freedom and wrote a book about his life. He joined the Sons of Africa, who were a group fighting for the abolition of slavery. Granville Sharp was one of the first white English men who campaigned to abolish slavery and Shadrack Furman was one of the first black pensioners who was paid for his service in the British Army during the American War of Independence.

Characters

Nathaniel

Nathaniel is a 12-year-old enslaved boy from Jamaica. He is separated from his mother and sister and sent to work in England. He is a very determined boy who is always looking for a way to escape and earn the money required to buy his family's freedom. He recalls his mother's words about standing tall and being proud, hiding his tears so his owners do not have the satisfaction of seeing how much they hurt him.

Mistress Barratt

Mistress Barratt owns Nathaniel; she is cruel and mistreats him. She is very close to her parrot, Mr Bird, who is vicious and acts as a guard dog.

Henry Hughes

Henry is a lively 14-year-old cabin boy from London. He befriends Nathaniel and they become like brothers. He treats Nathaniel as an equal.

Shadrack Furman

Shadrack used to be enslaved but was freed for his service during the American War of Independence. He lives in London and dances for money. He is part of the Sons of Africa group, who are fighting for the abolition of slavery.

Settings

Barratt Estate, Jamaica

The Barratt Estate is a sugar plantation in Jamaica, with fields, a grand house and exotic gardens *'the hibiscus blooms carpeted the path in every shade of blue and purple...'*



The Brave Venture

The Brave Venture is a ship that transports people and goods across the Atlantic Ocean. The crew and servants sleep in hammocks and the wealthy sleep in cabins. Many people on board become sick during the crossing.



London

London was the capital of the British Empire. It had the world's largest port and was the centre of international trade. *'The city was filthy... the streets were crowded, the like of which I had never seen: animals, men and women, and running between the crowds what seemed like an army of children, unshod and clothed in rags.'*



Themes

- family
- friendship
- resistance
- freedom
- relationships
- slavery



Story timeline

These are some of the key chapters in the novel. When you read the chapters, use the questions as starting points for discussion.

Chapters 1 and 2

Nathaniel is working in the gardens on the Barratts' sugar plantation. His mother and sister are sent to work elsewhere and the mistress of the estate mistreats him. He struggles to contain his emotions and turns to Old Thomas, an enslaved gardener, for advice. What are your first impressions of Nathaniel?

Chapter 4

Nathaniel embarks on a long voyage to London with the Barratts. He sails on a ship called *The Brave Venture*, where he makes friends with an English cabin boy called Henry Hughes. He also meets Mr Kelsall, the ship's mate, who is traumatised by his experience on a slave ship called the *Zong*. What things surprise Nathaniel on this journey?

Chapter 5

Nathaniel arrives in London and meets the servants in the Barratts' townhouse. The Barratts decide to give him to a duke and duchess as a present, but he runs away. Do you think Nathaniel was wise to run away?

Chapter 6

Nathaniel meets Shadrack Furman. Shadrack used to be enslaved but was freed after fighting for the British in the American War of Independence. He gives Nathaniel a place to stay. How is Shadrack Furman a figure of hope in the novel?

Chapter 11

Nathaniel finds himself living in Hackney and reflects on his life. Do you think he is content?

Structure

The book takes place in two locations: the first chapters are set in Jamaica then the story moves to London. The first person narrator allows the reader to know the main character intimately. We sense the world through the character's senses and understand his thoughts and feelings in detail. For example, *'My head hit the floor with a loud smack and the world went dark.'* Nathaniel's use of similes, such as *'shaking a mat Mamma had made from rushes and tossing it aside like it was a piece of dirt'* brings his emotions to life.

Imagery

The novel uses vivid imagery to convey the strength of the characters' feelings. For example, the opening line *'I swept the paths in the flower garden as if I was the devil cutting down every sinner in hell'* shows the stark contrast between Nathaniel's cheerful surroundings and his depressed state of mind. Another example is Old Thomas taking a cutting from a tree *'holding the branch so tenderly it might have been a baby'* to show how he treats the plants as if they were his family. Imagery is also used to bring the horror of the slave trade into sharp focus: *'People tossed overboard. The bodies in the water, all those sharks thrashing beneath, turning the sea red.'*

Voice

The author introduces dialect and slang terms to add authenticity to her characters' interactions. She portrays dialect by the way she spells words or puts sentences together. For example, when Old Thomas says *'Yess'm, Missis'* and Betsy says *'I'm not going 'til that noise stop, not for nobody.'* Some of the slang terms she uses are the English word *'landlubber'*, which means someone who resides on land as opposed to at sea, and the Caribbean word *'pickney'*, which is a derogatory term for a child.

Literary terms

dialect

A form of language spoken in a particular area.

first person narrator

The first person narrator tells a story from their perspective using words, such as I, me, we and us.

imagery

Imagery is the term given to descriptions that create pictures in your mind. For example, *'I thought any prince wearing that would look as if something had been sick all over them.'*

simile

A simile compares one thing to another using like or as. For example, *'It came like a bolt of lightning.'*

slang

Slang consists of informal words.

