



***Act of Faith***  
By Kelly Gardiner

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**Teachers' Notes by Michelle Prawer**

**Synopsis**

Isabella is a feisty, intelligent and fearless young lady who grows up in seventeenth century Cambridge in a home that values freedom of thought, freedom of religion and the liberal dissemination of ideas. But the political mood of the time does not encourage such freedom and Isabella and her father, Professor Hawkins, must escape to Amsterdam where it is still acceptable to articulate challenging ideas. Though the professor never makes it to the new city, it is not long till the mood there also begins to shift and Isabella finds herself once again involved in the world of ideas but having to engage in subterfuge to protect these ideas from being crushed by religious tyrants. Working for Master de Aquila at his printing press, she encounters intrigue and adventure, spies and secrets all emanating from the desire to disseminate information and ideas freely. Tension mounts, and Isabella, Master de Aquila and his assistant Willem, confront the atrocities of the Spanish Inquisition, and endure great sacrifices to safeguard their freedom of thought and their belief in the sanctity of knowledge.

**About the Author**

Kelly Gardiner is the author of the *Swashbuckler* series for younger readers and has also published a picture book. Her poetry has been published in journals including *Going Down Swinging* and *Southerly*, and she has also worked on [ninemsn.com.au](http://ninemsn.com.au), and in magazines and newspapers.

Kelly is currently combining working at the State Library of Victoria with doing a PhD.

## **Author's comments on style and inspiration:**

### **Style**

*'I very much wanted people to hear Isabella's own voice, as if she was talking to us, through her words and through the centuries.*

*'So I chose to write in the first person, and I made her voice match (I hope!) her character. She's smart, articulate and quick-thinking, but there are times – such as her first few months in Amsterdam - when her emotions leave her less observant and less able to describe what's going on around her. She's well-read, but I hope she wears that lightly – her work and her love of books are simply a part of her.*

*'It's not an action book as such, but there are times when the tempo steps up and the pace quickens; there are also quiet times when she's in reflection mode, and many debates with her father and friends that are based in dialogue. So I hope readers experience a range of writing styles to match the different stages in the narrative.'*

### **Inspiration**

*'Most of the time, over the past decade, my professional life has been spent online, either in media or managing websites for organizations. So I'm very conscious of the enormous explosion in access to information taking place right now, and it seemed to me to parallel those decades in Europe after the initial shock of the Reformation, when the printing presses were thumping out millions of pages — for the first time in history — and the authorities reacted to this in many different ways. Some of them used propaganda very well, some banned books and pamphlets they didn't like, some hunted down authors and printers and treated them as criminals —some authorities did all of those things. It was a very confusing and dangerous time for those involved in publishing.*

*'Thankfully, in most countries now, authors and bloggers, readers and book buyers, publishers and printers are not persecuted, but it still goes on in far too many parts of the world to this day.*

*'I also wanted to create a character who was remarkable for her time but not unique. We often read books about young women in history who are like ourselves, who are out of time — like modern young women stuck in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The reality is that the vast majority of women had little education and few options in life, but there were many who worked for a living in all sorts of industries and some who were extremely well-educated and accomplished.'*

## **Questions and Activities**

## Chapters 1 - 5

Read chapters 1-5 and consider the following:

1. *'The world is changing, Isabella. Our books, our ideas are making it anew.'*(p.81)

Carefully examine the descriptions of Europe (p.3-4) in which ideas are described as 'stirring' and in which the world is seen to be waking from a period of darkness as it explores ideas of freedom and faith. Explain the irony then in:

- Cromwell's banning of *Discourse on Liberty*
- The Puritan belief 'that religious liberty can be imposed by force.' (p.9)

2. Isabella reflects on her father's belief, *'that his words might reform the very nature of men.'* What was the nature of the change which he hoped to effect? How did he hope to achieve this?
3. Discuss the role of women in the 1600's using examples from these early chapters. Use the text to demonstrate that Isabella's father was contemptuous of the prevailing attitude to women.

What does Professor Hawkins mean when he refers to Isabella as, *'... my greatest experiment.'* (p.40)

4. Isabella's father forces Justinian to define tyranny. Examine his questions and his prodding (p.5-6) as well as his exchange with Captain Jonson (p.17) and then define 'tyranny' as Professor Hawkins would have done.
5. Examine the ideas which Isabella and her father expounded in their pamphlets (p.7) and design a pamphlet to reflect these 17<sup>th</sup> century concerns.

Now, design a pamphlet which examines the primary concerns of Australians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Compare the two.

6. When Professor Hawkins is arrested he declares, *'My only loyalty is to freedom.'* (p.17) Debate the concept 'That freedom should be defended at all costs?'
7. Critically analyse the way in which the author Kelly Gardiner engineers Professor Hawkins' escape from prison and later, removes him from the story. Justify your response. Are you convinced by Isabella's actions in this part of the story? What light do you think is shed on her character?
8. *'So my father was now in the past tense.'*(p.35)

Write an obituary for Professor Hawkins to be printed in the Cambridge broadsheet of the time.

9. Gardiner uses the technique of foreshadowing in the early chapters: Willem raises doubts about the integrity of Fra Clement (p.57-58) and Isabella reflects that the Bible being designed by Master de Aquila '*... could only ever be destroyed by men, or by flames ...*' (p 60) Comment on the way this foreshadowing plays out later in the novel.
10. Metaphor and simile are used to enrich images and clarify them for the reader. Look at the following examples and comment on their effectiveness:  
'*The wind needled my face.*' (p.63)  
'*- the pope's guard dogs ... crawled over Europe like black-cloaked spiders ...*' (p.82)  
Examine the way in which Gardiner uses metaphor to describe the growing closeness between Master de Aquila and Isabella '*... we had grown into one another like a tree and a sapling ...*' (p53) Explain the image.
11. Master de Aquila is a Jew who, while committed to his own faith, does not really practice it. (p. 54) Why do you think the author takes pains to describe his lack of practice? Link this to his treatment in the ghetto and also his treatment at the end of the book.
12. Amsterdam is described as '*... the Venice of the north.*'(p.63) and Isabella refers to '*The Golden Age*' (p.64) Research Amsterdam of the 1640's and 1650's and assume the role of Isabella to write a creative piece set in the market place of this city.
13. '*Those precious raisins came from Siena ... on a shelf in Amsterdam ... served to an Italian monk and a Spanish Jew by an English orphan and a Dutch widow.*' (p.64). Surely this is an example of globalization to which we refer so often in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why then is Isabella so impressed by this connection between countries? Consider carefully the world of the 17th century in your answer.
14. From the outset, Willem does not trust Fra Clement. Use Chapter 5 to trace Fra Clement's unorthodox behaviour. Pay particular attention to the verbs and adverbs used to describe his actions.
15. Master de Aquila writes that '*... the ideas of men do not question God but pay homage to Him. Only by His grace do we possess the faculty of thought and the ability to question.*' (p.68) Is dissent always dangerous? Can debate within a religion or an organisation be seen as a productive process or is it a threat? Debate this in small groups and then present your discussion to the class.

16. 'It's not logical ... for anyone to assume that he knows God's will.'(p69) says Isabella, and yet religious leaders of all varieties continue to claim exactly this knowledge. Why do you believe they do this? What is the danger inherent in this philosophy?

**Extension work:**

- Research the phenomenon of book banning and book burning in history. Present your findings to the class and argue why it is that the banning of books has remained a popular strategy for the control of ideas, individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup>
- 'Where they burn books, they will ultimately also burn people.' Heinrich Heine (1821). Discuss this quote in groups and find evidence from your research to justify or negate its claim. Discuss this in relation to the closing chapters of the book.
- Read *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and present the key ideas to the class. Alternatively, watch the movie of the same title directed by François Truffaut and discuss the key concerns which it raises.
- Organise an Oxford debate<sup>2</sup> on the topic:

'That banning books is never acceptable'.

- Research the Puritans and their philosophy.
- Research the printing press with its moveable type. Clarify the meaning of these terms referred to in the text: watermark, typeface, colophon, printer's mark and printer's imprint.
- Research the history of Jewry in Spain and Portugal during the time of the 'Inquisition'. Investigate the phenomenon of the 'auto da fe.'
- See if a museum or library near you – perhaps the state library or a university – has any manuscripts or early printed books in its collection that you can view. Research local artisan print workshops, book binders or scribes who produce Jewish texts like the Torah or modern illuminated manuscripts – you may be able to visit their workshops, or ask them to visit you to discuss the process of making books by hand.
- Some of the fonts we use today on our computers were designed long ago, or are named after a great printer or typographer of the past. Research some fonts or typefaces and see what you can discover about their history.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/exhibitions/bannedbooks/>  
<http://galusaustralis.com/2010/11/3708/book-censorship-at-mount-scopus-college/>

<sup>2</sup> An Oxford Debate is an impromptu debate which involves the entire class. A proposition is put forward and students stand to the left of the classroom if they disagree with it and to the right if they support it. Comments pass across the room as students attempt to persuade others to cross the floor.

## Chapters 6 – 10

Read chapters 6-10 and consider the following:

1. Master de Aquila is committed to free thinking and the spread of ideas and so embarks on his journey to take prohibited books to far flung countries. Why is the spread of ideas such a burning need for men like Master de Aquila and Professor Hawkins? Why do you think they are prepared to sacrifice their lives for an idea?
2. This book is not without humour. Comment on the playful banter which develops between Isabella and Willem as they journey together.
3. When the traveling party arrives in Cologne, Isabella sews a circular yellow badge onto Master de Aquila's cloak. '*here, in the German cities, Jews had to wear it at all times.*'(p.93) In Venice, Master de Aquila must wear a soft red cap. '*It is like the yellow wheel I wore in the German cities.*' (p.113) Why were Jews singled out at this time? Find more recent examples of Jews being singled out by a defining symbol sewn to their clothing. What is your view of this type of discrimination?

Later, on arrival in Italy, Master de Aquila experiences further discrimination when he must reside in a ghetto, a walled city for Jews '*The rulers of Venice have decreed that all Jews must live in one area — they call it a ghetto*' (p.111) Why do you believe that people in positions of power need to control others in this way?

4. Isabella relishes the thrill of the printed page, the smell of the ink and '*the impact of the words on my mind. I loved the idea that the words left our ink-stained world and went out into the streets and shops ...*' Consider the power of the written word to effect change in the world. Consider the pace and effectiveness of the spread of ideas prior to the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg. Debate the idea that the printing press was one of the greatest inventions of mankind.
5. When Isabella discovers *The Sum of all Knowledge* she is horrified that the Master has collected the '*mysteries, ideas and images*' (p.103) of many faiths and many times together in one volume. For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this collection of knowledge is taken for granted as we plug into the internet and access ideas from all ages and all countries in all languages, so why was the idea horrifying and frightening in the 17<sup>th</sup> century? Why is access to ideas so threatening? Consider why it is that China limits community access to the internet. Use the example of the recent uprisings in Tunisia, Iraq and Egypt when considering your response.
6. '*But how can religions live together in one book?*'(p105)

Isabella questions the advisability of having the theologies of varying religions gathered together in *The Sum of all Knowledge*. But Master de Aquila's response is pithy. 'We live together in one world.' (p.105) Why do you think that it has proven so hard for communities of difference to co-exist? Consider this in the light of Master de Aquila's comment that, 'Maybe the truth doesn't suit them.' (p.119)

7. Master de Aquila refers to the Talmud as a Jewish source which records arguments and differing views claiming 'that only through argument do we strengthen our understanding.' (p.105) Do you agree that argument leads to the strengthening of views? Justify your response.
8. 'To understand the universe; to express our innate creativity; to ponder the momentous questions of our time; to reflect upon the past and cast a light into the dim future; to wholly engage our hearts and our minds supplied by God in His wisdom: these must be the objects of every man and woman on earth.' (p.106) Do you agree with this model as the purpose of our existence on earth?
9. Write an imaginative story which reflects Master de Aquila's idea that, 'Ideas are like butterflies. Once they are hatched, you can never force them back into the cocoon.' (p.108)
10. Willem does not believe in Romans or elephants or tigers. (p.116-117) Use this as evidence to argue that information must be readily accessible to all. In contrast, Willem later declares that there are advantages to not knowing things (p.176) implying that there is a level of peace in ignorance. Do you agree? Comment on the contrast in these views.
11. On p.129, Isabella revels in the ambiance of Venice and finds it a healing influence. She comments on the smells and sights, the vibrancy and the life style of this city. Write 3 paragraphs in which you use your five senses to describe the essence of your own city.
12. A guest at Signora Contarini's party informs her, 'The Pope has issued a new Index of Forbidden Books' (p.136) Research this index and refer also to the website: <http://www.booksatoz.com/censorship/banned.htm> to see other books which have been banned over the ages. Consider when, if ever it is right to ban a book or an idea.
13. Isabella tells Master de Aquila that she and her father attended the execution of their friend William Ward in order '... to bear witness.' (p.139) Explain this concept. Why is it important?

14. Why do you suppose that the Vatican was so opposed to the Bible being available in translation? Isabella suggests that maybe '*... there will be no need for priests.*' (p.147) Might there be truth in this claim? Justify your position.
15. Master de Aquila foreshadows that Isabella will regain her feisty passion one day. '*You have and will again one day.*'(p.106) Refer directly to Chapter 10 to demonstrate that this is so.

### **Extension work:**

- Research a man or woman in history who died for an idea, and consider what was gained, if anything, from their sacrifice. Present this to the class. (consider Master de Aquila's printing of pamphlets denouncing the Inquisition which ultimately lead to his arrest, torture and death p.205-6)
- Divide into groups and research the history of anti-semitism in Europe over the past decades. Comment on your findings. Search the internet to find examples of anti-semitism evident in your community in the past decade. Explore what you as a class can do to stop the spread of prejudice and discrimination.
- Read Orwell's *1984*. What is Orwell's thesis about the need to ensure ready and easy access to information? What is sacrificed when information is controlled by others?
- Research the ancient art of map making. Visit your state library and examine the maps available from past centuries. Consider map making as an art form.
- In Venice, women '*... are printers and scholars and painters.*' (p.126) Examine the way in which the status of women in society, reflects its level of enlightenment.

### **Chapters 11 – 15**

Read Chapters 11-15 and consider the following:

1. Willem is surprised by Isabella's suggestion that Signorina Contarini may be able to help them in their quest to find the Master. '*A woman ... what can she do?*' (p.151) he asks. Clearly, women are strong characters in this book and prove to be resourceful and brave in spite of '*... being a girl in the world of men.*' (p.162) Write a character study of Isabella or Signorina Contarini focusing on the way in which they challenge the role of women in their time.
2. Isabella is trying to understand the Master's disappearance. '*Perhaps he has been taken away for the crime of being Jewish.*'(p.154) Is this a crime? Has it ever been one? Find evidence to demonstrate that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are still countries in which it is unsafe to declare your religion.



3. Consider the details of the Auto de fe procession discussed on p.184-5. Explain the irony in the terminology auto de fe/Act of Faith. Explain the irony in the declaration made by the priests at this time- '*Jusitia et misericordia.*' (p.192)
4. When Isabella understands that Fra Clement had been an enemy all along, she exclaims, '*I felt as if I had learned a new language in a moment, as if all its vocabulary and meaning had taken shape in my mind at once.*' (p.186) What language has she learned?
5. Fra Clement declares that, '*God cannot love any man, or woman, who rejects His teachings.*'(p.187) Do you agree with this view? Justify your response. Further, Fra Clement justifies his treachery and deceit, the burning of the workshop and stealing Master de Aquila's books by claiming it was all '*... in the service of God.*'(p.188) Can any action be validated if it is 'in the service of God? Explain your answer. Find examples from the 21<sup>st</sup> century to demonstrate that this attitude can indeed be a deadly one.
6. Isabella is consumed by the irony of seeing '*... a man executed for being Catholic in England,*' and the current circumstance of execution '*... for not being Catholic.*' (p.196) What does this reveal about the nature of Man?
7. The imminent disaster is averted and the Master as well as Al-Qasim are saved but the reality of the Inquisition in historical terms meant that all who challenged the authority of the pope met a hideous death by being burned at the stake. Does this sort of story serve to diminish the enormity of the historical event? Debate the issue:  
  
'That writers are justified in modifying history when creating fiction.'
8. Signora Contarini greets the party of survivors and immediately discusses printing '*The Sum of all Knowledge,*' a book which will surely be banned by Rome. What motivates this dance with death?

**Extension work:**

- Choose from one of the following fiction titles which deal with Jewish experience during the Inquisition and present the book to the class. Consider carefully the form in which you make the presentation so that you both engage your audience and convey the essence of the ideas explored in your book.

*Freedom Beyond the Sea* Lewin Waldtraut

*The Cross by Day, the Mezuzah by Night* Deborah Spector Siegel

*Secrets in the House of Delgado* Gloria D. Miklowitz

- Research the witch trials of Salem Massachusetts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and explain the similarity in the way in which the trials were carried out and the way that religion was invoked to enact atrocities. Write a newspaper report as an eye witness either to a witch trial or to an auto de fe.
- You have been asked to sell this book to a group of English teachers who are looking for a new title to put onto the English curriculum for the upcoming academic year. Prepare a speech for this presentation in which you 'sell' the book exploring its salient features.