



Listen!

Frances Itani

Reading Level: 2

Interest Level: Adult

Book Summary

Roma has always felt alone and different. As a child, she had to “listen and tell.” Roma became the listener because her mother could not hear. Roma’s sister, Liz, invites Roma and two friends to dinner. The four women have something important in common: they are hearing daughters of deaf parents. Each woman brings an old family picture to the table. Each tells a story about her picture.

But by the end of the evening, Roma knows she is not alone. She and the other women learn that growing up with deaf parents has given them rare and special gifts.

Author Biography

Frances Itani is the author of fifteen books. Among her best-selling novels are *Deafening*, *Remembering the Bones* and *Requiem*.

Frances taught and practised nursing for eight years. She began to write while studying at university when her children were young. She has worked as a volunteer all her life. Frances lives in Ottawa.

Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

Book Cover and Title

- (a) Have students read the title and describe what they see on the front cover.
Ask students to share their feelings and thoughts as they look at the cover.
Ask students, “What do you think the woman is reading? How is the woman responding to what she is reading?”
- (b) Read the description of the book on the back cover. Ask students, “Why do you think the author called the book *Listen!?*”

Building Bridges between the Deaf and Hearing Worlds

Many organizations work toward breaking down barriers and building bridges between the deaf and hearing worlds. They advocate for acceptance, respect, and understanding of the different needs, language, behaviour, and values of people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Open a discussion about building bridges between the two worlds by asking the students the following questions:

- (a) What barriers might people who are deaf and hard of hearing face in the world of work? School? Family and relationships? Community?
- (b) In what ways has society moved forward in building bridges between the hearing world and the world of people who are deaf and hard of hearing?
- (c) Some people have the opportunity to live in both the world of the hearing and the world of the deaf and hard of hearing. Which world do you live in primarily? Describe experiences that have allowed you to look into or enter the other world.

Storytelling and Building Community

In *Listen!*, four women learn about their common experiences through telling their stories. Have the students explore the relationship between storytelling and building community by discussing the following questions:

- (a) What does the word *community* mean to you?
- (b) Communities can form based on, for example, location, religion, language, political beliefs, and personal interests. What communities are you familiar with? What communities do you belong to? What makes a person feel that they are part of a community?
- (c) Think about a time you shared a personal story with someone. Why did you share that specific story with that specific person? What did you gain from sharing your story? What do you think the other person gained?
- (d) Do you think that sharing stories with others is a way of building or strengthening community? Explain why or why not.
- (e) What are other ways of building or strengthening community?

WORKING WITH THE BOOK

Characters

Tell students that readers can learn about the characters in a novel in three ways—from (1) what the writer tells us, (2) what the characters say, do, and think, and (3) what others think and say about the characters.

As students read the novel, have them note a few examples from each chapter, where applicable, of how the writer develops the character of Mam. Encourage students to make inferences about the character, where possible. Then put the students in small groups and have them share their examples.

How do we make inferences?

Active readers use their experience and knowledge to make educated guesses about characters and their motives. Readers who make inferences use clues in the text together with their own experiences to help them figure out the author's meaning.

What the writer tells us about Mam

Inference

What Mam says, does, and thinks

Inference

What other characters think and say
about Mam

Inference

Setting

Explain to the students that the setting provides details of when and where events take place. These details can add to the story in different ways (e.g., underline a theme, invoke thoughts and feelings, or move a plot forward.)

Explain that the opening chapters of the novel take place on a train, where Roma has sixteen hours to reflect. After students have read Chapters 1, 3, and 4, have them discuss the following questions:

- (a) Imagine you are Roma on the long train ride in the night. How do you feel about being on the train? Why do you have so much time to think and reflect? What do you think about mostly? Why? What is your mood, in general? Explain why.
- (b) Describe three memories that Roma had during her train trip. How do you think Roma felt as each of these memories came to mind? Give a reason for your answers.
- (c) Did any of Roma's memories have a special meaning for you, create a feeling, or spark a memory of your own? Describe how and why you connected with the memory.
- (d) Do you think it is important to find time to think and reflect? Explain why or why not.

Theme

One theme in the book is the desire to fit in and appear "normal." As the students read the stories told by Roma, Jessie, Eve, and Liz (Chapters 5 to 8), have them fill in the chart on the following page with examples and quotes that illustrate how each woman (a) was similar to others her age and (b) felt different from others her age.

After reading the entire book, have students look at their notes, share examples, and then discuss the following questions:

1. Think back to your childhood and young adult years. In what ways were you similar to the four women? In what ways were you different?
2. Do you think fitting in is always a positive thing? Do you think being different is always a negative thing? Use examples from the chart to support your answers.
- 3a. Most people have a desire to "fit in." Why do you think people want to fit in? How do people try to fit in?
- 3b. Did you feel a need to fit in to your age group when you were younger? Why? How about now? Has the need to fit in become stronger? Less strong? Stayed the same? Explain why.

	How was she similar to others her age?	How did she feel different from others her age?
Roma (4 years old)		
Jessie (teenager in high school)		
Eve (13 years old)		
Liz (16 years old)		

TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. “At seven, at four, even at two years of age, Roma had to be responsible.”
(page 9)
 - (a) Why did Roma have to be responsible at such a young age? What was her main responsibility? What were her other responsibilities?
 - (b) How did “being responsible” affect Roma as a child and as an adult?
 - (c) Roma had to grow up quickly because her mother was deaf. What other circumstances might force children to grow up quickly? What are the advantages of having to grow up quickly? What are the disadvantages?
 - (d) In general, children grow up too quickly these days. Do you agree with this statement? Explain why or why not.

2. “Mam had always stayed silent during train trips. She feared that she would speak too loudly.” (page 12)
 - (a) Why was Mam afraid of speaking too loudly?
 - (b) For what other reasons do people stay silent?
 - (c) At what times is it better to stay silent? At what times is it better to have a voice?
 - (d) Do you ever stay silent? When? Why? How do you feel at these times? Explain why.
 - (e) Did Mam have a voice on the train? Explain how. At times when you feel silenced, do you find a voice in other ways? Explain how.

3. “Roma couldn’t remember her parents taking pictures.” (page 14)
 - (a) Why do you think Roma’s parents didn’t take many pictures?
 - (b) Do you think it is important to take family pictures? Explain why or why not.
 - (c) What kinds of things do family pictures tell about a family? Do you think family pictures tell a balanced story about a family? Explain why or why not?

4. “Would we have changed our lives if we’d had the chance? Probably not.”
(page 24)
 - (a) Who is “we”? What part of their lives are they talking about?

- (b) Why do you think Liz says they would probably not have changed their lives, given the chance?
- (c) There is always a positive result when people go through challenging times in life. Do you agree with this statement? Explain why or why not. Describe specific examples to support your opinion.
5. “[Mam] received language through her eyes.” (page 26)
- (a) Explain the above quote in your own words. Describe specific examples of how Mam received language through her eyes. In what other ways did Mam receive language?
- (b) Everyone receives language through their eyes. For example, if a mom sees her toddler push an offered spoonful of food away, mom knows the toddler is saying, “I don’t want that.” Share examples of receiving language with your eyes.
- (c) Describe specific examples of when people may not be aware of the visible language they are creating with their gestures or body movements.
6. “The world is full of people who can’t forgive themselves. What good does guilt do?” (page 42)
- (a) Who is feeling guilty? About what? Do you think she should feel guilty? Explain why or why not.
- (b) Describe situations in which a person might feel guilty. Does guilt do any good in those situations? If yes, explain how. If no, explain why not.
- (c) Forgive and forget. When is it easy to forgive and forget? When is it difficult? Should people always try to forgive and forget? Explain why or why not.
- (d) Why do you think some people find it difficult to forgive themselves for things they have said or done? Do you think it is easier to forgive others or to forgive oneself? Give reasons for your answer.
7. “By then I was old enough to understand that she was probably really lonely.” (page 65)
- (a) Who is “I”? Who is “she”?
- (b) Why do you think Mam would be lonely? What is the difference between being lonely and alone? Describe situations in which it is possible to (i) be alone but not feel lonely and (ii) be with others and still feel lonely.

(c) How old was Liz when she realized Mam was probably lonely? What does Liz's realization about Mam tell you about how Liz and how she saw her mother?

(d) Think about your parents or primary caregivers. When did you start to see them as people, rather than just as parents or caregivers? Did your feelings and attitudes toward them begin to change at this point? Explain how and why.

8. "The four of us are in helping professions." (page 70)

(a) Who are "the four of us"? What helping professions are they in? Why did they choose those professions?

(b) What else did Roma discover she had in common with the other women?

(c) The story started with Roma alone on a train. In what ways was Roma not alone by the end of the story?

(d) Think about your family. Did you ever feel that your family was different in some way from other families? Did those feelings about your family change as you became older? If yes, explain how and why?

9. "We wanted what we couldn't have." (page 70)

(a) Who is "we"? What did they want? Why couldn't they have it? Do they have it now? What do they realize about it now that they have it?

(b) In your opinion, do you think most people finally become satisfied with what they have in life, or do most people continue to want something more? Give reasons and provide examples to support your opinion.

(c) People with enough money can buy the things they want in life. What are some things that people often want that they cannot buy? How do people go about getting these things?

10. Reread Mam's letter (pages 72-73) to Roma.

(a) What does the letter reveal about Mam's character?

(b) Roma can't believe the pin was hidden for so long. What else was hidden from Roma "all those years"?

(c) Do you think after finding the wishbone pin in Mam's sewing basket that Roma still believes the pin wasn't the most important part of her story? Explain why or why not.

(d) What do you think Roma will wish for? Give a reason for your answer.

WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Choose a character or event from the novel that you connected with in some way. For example, did the character or event remind you of something in your life? Cause an emotional reaction in you? Teach you something? Describe how and why in a paragraph.
2. Reread Chapter Five. As you read, imagine you are the thimble man. Write a journal entry about what you see and hear that day at Roma's house. Include your thoughts and feelings. Begin with the following:

There was a lot of excitement today at Mam's. When I got there, she was standing outside brushing her hair.

3. Bring an object or photograph to class. Share, in writing, the story behind the object or photograph.
4. Imagine yourself in a specific setting (e.g., sitting on a bench downtown, waiting in a clinic, riding a bus, supervising kids at a public swimming pool). Create a poem by using your senses and completing these sentences:

Here I am...

I feel...

I smell...

I see...

I hear...

I wish...

After writing your poem, give it a title. Here is an example:

Miles Away

Here I am in bed.

I feel the scratchy blanket.

I smell dust trapped in the window screen.

I see a yellow glow from the neon sign across the alley.

I hear a train from miles away.

I wish I could go there.

5. Think about something you did (or did not do) in the past that you still feel guilty about. Write a letter to yourself explaining what you did, why, and what you have learned from the experience. Make apologies to yourself. Forgive yourself.

Dear Me
I still feel guilty about...

6. Have trains touched your life in any way? For example, have you ever taken a train trip? Did you grow up near a railway? How does a distant train whistle make you feel? Do train tracks cut across your city or town? Write a paragraph about trains in your life.

PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

1. Learn about the Hand Alphabet

The hand alphabet is used in signed communication, mostly for proper names and concepts for which a sign has not yet been developed.

Direct students to the following web page: [http://asl.ms/\(\)/fingerspellingchart.htm](http://asl.ms/()/fingerspellingchart.htm). The web page shows a photographed hand signing all the letters of the alphabet. Have students find and form the letters of their names. Tell them they have 15 minutes to memorize how to sign their name. After 15 minutes, ask the students to try and sign their names without looking at the web page. Follow up with the following questions:

What did you find easy about signing the letters of your name?

What did you find more challenging?

What strategies did you use to help you memorize how to sign your name?

What might be some effective ways to practise and learn sign language?

Do you know other languages? What are they? How did you learn them?

Think about something you know how to do that required a long time to learn.

What kinds of things did you do to help yourself learn? What kept you going?

What advice would you give someone who wanted to learn the same thing?

2. Create a Scrapbook

Mam's scrapbook contained cards and pictures that revealed information about who she was—her family, her stories, things she found beautiful, and her hopes and dreams. Support the students in creating a scrapbook that reveals who they are. Encourage them to include photos, pieces of writing, cards, drawings, images from magazines, etc. Creating your own scrapbook along with the students will encourage sharing and openness in the group.

3. Be an Interviewer

Roma wished she had asked Mam more questions about her family and family history. Have students think of a family or community member they would like to interview. Brainstorm possible interview questions (e.g., Where did you get your name from? What is your favourite memory from your childhood? What was your first job? What was the most important thing you ever did? What dreams did you have growing up? Who was the love of your life?) Have students conduct their interviews and share (a) what they learn about the person they interviewed, (b) any surprises the interview revealed, and (c) whether they would like to have a job as an interviewer, and why or why not.

4. Research CODA: Children of Deaf Adults

CODA is an organization established for the purpose of promoting family awareness and individual growth in hearing children of deaf parents. This purpose is accomplished through providing educational opportunities, promoting self-help, organizing advocacy efforts, and acting as a resource for the membership and various communities. Many cities and towns across Canada have local CODA groups who hold regular meetings. Have students brainstorm a list of questions they would like answered about CODA (e.g., history, goals, community projects, challenges faced by hearing children of deaf adults). Then contact a local CODA group and ask a representative to come and speak with the students.

FURTHER READING available from Grass Roots Press

If students liked this book, they might also enjoy:

Missing, Frances Itani, Good Reads, Grass Roots Press

In From the Cold, Deborah Ellis, Good Reads, Grass Roots Press

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The Buckle, Kate Ferris and Don Sawyer, Novels for Adult Learners

The Story of Joe Brown, Rose Doyle, Open Door Series

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