



Little Island

## *THE WORDSMITH* BY PATRICIA FORDE

### About the book

On the death of her master, Letta is suddenly promoted from apprentice to wordsmith, charged with collecting and archiving words in post-apocalyptic, neo-medieval Ark. When she uncovers a sinister plan to suppress language and rob the people of Ark of the power of speech, she realises that she has to save not only words, but the culture itself.

### About the author

Patricia Forde lives in Galway, in the west of Ireland. She has published five books for children, and written two plays, as well as several television drama series for children and teenagers. She has worked as a writer on both English and Irish language soap operas. In another life, she was a primary school teacher and the artistic director of Galway Arts Festival.

### BEFORE YOU READ ...

#### Check out the cover

Do you like the cover? Does it make you want to read the book? Why? What kind of book do you think this might be?

If you look carefully you can see lots of sea motifs including fish and seashells on the front cover. Can you see anything else?

Check inside the book and see if you can find out who designed the cover. He is a well-known illustrator living in Ireland. If you like his cover for this book, you might want to check out his other work online. ([www.stevesimpson.com](http://www.stevesimpson.com))

Now, have a look at the back cover. The blurb is laid out on the sail of a boat. What does that say to you? (After you've read the book, come back to this question and see if you can make the link.)

Do you know what a barcode is? Every book has to have one of these. So where is it on this book? Do you like the way it has been designed?



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## Open up!

Have you heard of the author before? There is a bit of information about her in the book. See if you can find out any more about her.

### *Activity*

Now have a look at the end pages (first and last pages of the book). These show the wordsmith's word cards. You'll see more of these as you read the book.

The definitions on the cards are extremely sparse. It's hard to guess why that is, but after you've read some of the book, you might be able to work it out.

Have a go at writing very simple definitions yourself. Use only short, everyday words to define:

Elephant

Nutmeg

Tree

Anger

House

Microphone

Selfie



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## READ THE BOOK!

### Beginning

The opening of the book introduces Letta, the protagonist, as she goes about her work as the wordsmith's apprentice.

#### *Write*

From this brief introduction make a list of adjectives that you think would best describe Letta's character.

#### *Compare and discuss*

When you finish reading the novel, check back on this list and see if it still matches your idea of Letta's character. You should know the character better by now, but has your view of her changed? Would you add or take away any words from the list? Discuss this with your classmates.

#### *Activity*

The wordsmith is preparing a list of 500 words. These are now the only legal linguistic currency in Ark.

Make your own list or your class could make a list together. Start with fifty words and add more as you need them. Choose carefully and then see how long you could sustain communication with only those words.

#### *Think*

The gavver is an ominous presence in the first chapter. The word 'gavver' is a Romany word for police. What do you think of the word itself? Say it out loud. Is it a rough or a smooth sound?

What do you think about the character of the gavver in the story? Choose one detail that you feel sums this man up; a clue to his personality.

#### *Think and Discuss*

On page 14 we hear that the houses were built before the Melting. What do you think the Melting was? When do you imagine it happened?

#### *Research*

Find out what the expression 'to keep a tally' means.

The children in Ark wear a tally stick to record breaches of the language rules. Irish children were forced to wear tally sticks in the 19th century as a means of eradicating the Irish language. Do some research into that period of Irish history and see if the tally stick was effective or not.



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### *Write*

On page 21 Letta imagines what it must have been like to be swallowed by the sea. Try to write a paragraph in the first person where you are someone in that situation. You might start like this:

*I turned and faced the tide. The water was bearing down, a grey-green wall of utter devastation ...*

### *Think and Write*

In chapter 3 the gavver breaks open Letta's memory box. She has put things into the box that are precious for sentimental reasons. What would you put in a memory box? Make a list.

Think of a character that you love from another book and imagine what she or he might put in such a box. Make a list.

### *Activity*

Letta spends her time making word boxes. Make your own word box for an apprentice hairdresser or rock star. Write the words and the definitions. Confine the list to ten words, particular to the occupation in question. What would the most important ones be?

After you've made your word box, compare your words with the ones chosen by your classmates.

### *Write*

On page 55 we learn a little about the Goddess. The Goddess came to warn people that the end was nigh. Some believe she was the first human clone. Imagine that a newspaper interviewed her at the time. Write the interview.



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## Middle

On page 103 we hear about the Wordless and the mythology that grew up around them. Mythological stories were often used to explain things that people couldn't understand.

### *Write*

Write your own myth or fairy tale that would explain where the Wordless came from. Use a traditional form. A witch that cast a spell? A fairy takes revenge? You could start like this:

*Once upon a time in a far distant land there lived ...*

### *Think and Write*

John Noa has very definite ideas about humans. He describes them as parasites. Make a list of terrible things humans have done to planet Earth. Now make a list of wonderful things humans have done on planet Earth.

### *Debate*

Stage a debate between Noa and Finn arguing the merits and demerits of the arts. Why are the arts important? How can they be a force for good? Can they ever be a force for evil?

### *Activity*

Ark is a neo-medieval place and lots of trades are mentioned in the story, including a shoemaker and a healer. Can you think of other potential trades? Could you design a word box for them?

### *Think and Discuss*

Noa banned all abstract words; words like 'hope' and 'faith'. Why do you think Noa believed that these words were particularly dangerous?

If you could ban words in our society, what words would you ban? Why? Is it ever right to ban a word? If so, why and when? Think about hurtful racist words or homophobic words.

Have a class discussion on freedom of speech.

### *Imagine and Write*

On page 132 we hear about a speech made by the Prime Minister of England, Ireland and Wales. What do you imagine happened to Scotland? Write a piece to be included in a history book about how Ireland joined this union and Scotland left.



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### *Read*

On page 135 Letta wants John Noa to add the word 'hope' to the words already on the List. Here is a poem by Emily Dickenson that you might enjoy:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.

### *Write*

Write a speech for a debate in which you champion the value of the idea of hope.

### *Listen*

One of the big themes of this novel is the notion of our environment as a fragile thing. Noa says that 'extinction' is the saddest word of all.

If you want to hear more about extinction have a listen to Stewart Brand's Ted Talk. You can find it at [http://www.ted.com/talks/stewart\\_brand](http://www.ted.com/talks/stewart_brand)



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## The Ending

On page 177 Edgware says, 'I still have a small store of beeswax since before the wild bees became extinct.'

Listen to Marla Spivak's Ted Talk, where she talks about the danger of bees becoming extinct.

You can find it at

[http://www.ted.com/talks/marla\\_spivak\\_why\\_bees\\_are\\_disappearing?](http://www.ted.com/talks/marla_spivak_why_bees_are_disappearing?)

### *Think and Write*

Ark only has the fruits that the people can grow themselves.

Make a list of all of the fruits available to us. Where do they come from? What (if any) impact does it have on the environment to import fruit from far away?

### *Activity*

Prior to the production of pens, ink was made at home from items found in nature. Natural ink was kept in an ink well and used for writing with a quill. You can still make ink from berries or, like Letta, from beetroot. Try making your own ink. You will find lots of recipes on the Internet.

A drinking straw with the end cut at an angle makes a good pen in an emergency!

### *Write*

On page 174, we meet the black woman of the woods (Edgware). Write an article for a newspaper where you meet her and interview her about her life and her beliefs.

### *Think and Write*

Can you think of a time in your own life when you changed your mind about something? Eating meat? Loving a particular band or celebrity? Change often happens slowly. Can you remember the journey you took from believing to not believing? Try to write a poem or short story inspired by that experience.

### *Imagine and Write*

On page 201, Letta sees all the souvenirs that the artists have placed on a shelf in the warehouse. Try to imagine who owned them and why they valued them so much. Take one of these objects and write a short story about who owned it and why it is treasured.

### *Think and Write*

As the novel closes, it looks like Letta will go and live with the Desecrators.



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Write an entry in her diary. How does she find life there? What does she enjoy? What does she find difficult? How do the Desecrators use the arts to improve their quality of life? In her diary entry talk about a demonstration that is planned. Which art form will they use? Where and when will the protest happen?





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## MORE ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a map of Ark. Put in Tintown, Central Kitchen, the Round House, the Goddess, the Water Tower, etc.
2. On page 223, Leyla sings when Noa is trying to get her to betray her friends:  
*Down in the valley*  
*The stream flows on*  
*In the heather morning*  
*Quiet as a swan.*  
Could you write another verse? Or put music to this one? What kind of song do you think this is? Classical? Traditional? A ballad? Try beating out the rhythm while saying the words.
3. In Ark all music is banned. Discuss why Noa might have banned music. What would our lives be like without music? Imagine hearing music for the very first time. What would that be like?
4. In the novel Letta goes on a personal journey from total belief in Noa and his vision to becoming one of the disaffected. The change in her happens slowly, moving from doubt to disbelief to finding the courage to change the world she lives in. Could you draw a timeline for her journey? Put in the pivotal scenes or moments along the way.
5. On pages 151–2 we learn that Noa is re-cycling the word cards to make paper. Try to make your own paper. You'll find all you need to know on the Internet. Examine your home-made paper. How does it differ from factory-made paper? What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing on such paper?
6. On page 176 Edgware puts a salve on Benjamin's hands. She lists the herbs she used to make the cream and what each one does. Design a contemporary advertisement or design a poster to help promote this cream. Can you think of a good name for it?