

***Sovay* by Celia Rees**

Set at the end of the eighteenth century where the idea of freedom and liberty has already underscored revolutions in America and France, England has its share of royalists and revolutionaries. This story is set in such a time, where neighbours spy upon neighbours, where unscrupulous men spy and gather evidence to their greater glory, adding to their land holdings and power.

So we have *Sovay*, the daughter of a nobleman who is under suspicion of fomenting revolutionary ideas and is away when the magistrate, a friend of the landholder next door, calls with a warrant. But *Sovay* has taken measures to ensure the warrant does not reach her father, well, not yet. She has dressed up as a highwayman and held up the stagecoach, stealing the papers from the man designated to serve them.

In London, she meets the spymaster, Dysart, and knows instinctively to keep every emotion guarded, lest he realise the extent of her family's disarray. Finding her father to be in France, following her capricious brother when he went to join the revolutionaries, *Sovay* leaves London to try and find him. Dysart has her reported as a spy, and his machinations follow her to the depths of The Terror, a time when Robespierre has lost control, and people are carted off to the guillotine on any pretext. Its exciting stuff, as *Sovay* is placed in prison, her turn in La Place de la Concord in the morning.

Decidedly pink, this story will appeal to girls in middle school, with its historic setting, a heroine with twentieth century sensibilities, and young men who seem always to stop and help even at dire risk to their own safety. *Sovay* is charming and adventurous, bold and willful, everything a young reader would want in her heroine, doing things girls could not do either now or in the eighteenth century. But it is so well written, and carries so much good humour and weight of story, that readers will read through to the end, eagerly following the layers and complexities of the tale. They will want to see what happens to this engaging main character, enjoying every minute of the account. For those people who enjoy historical novels, adventure and pink stories, this is a must read.

Fran Knight, SA

Written by award-winning author Celia Rees, *Sovay* follows the adventures of the title character, a strong and determined female who becomes a highway robber to protect her father and brother. The story, set in England in 1794, during the time of the French Revolution, is a tale full of intrigue, adventure and one very willful girl. *Sovay* is a story that will definitely appeal to girls aged between 15-19.

Prior to reading this with a class, research into the historical context would be a valuable class activity. It would also be worthwhile visiting Celia Rees' website <http://www.celiarees.com>. It contains articles, reviews, interview transcripts and a BBC Radio podcast where Rees discusses her latest book. While on the net, students could also conduct some research on famous female outlaws such as Belle Starr, Pearl Hart and Cattle Annie. Additional research on historical women, during the French Revolution, may also be an interesting project.

Celia Rees based *Sovay* on a traditional ballad, as she explained in an interview, "I find ballads very redolent, very powerful, because they give you a snapshot of the time. They're the stories of the people." Students could choose a ballad and use it as stimulus for composing their own creative piece. Other text types could also be explored while reading *Sovay*. Students could compose character diary entries and newspaper reports that detail major plot events.

Lauren Sims, NSW

Sovay, based on a traditional ballad but with the story developed further, is set in late eighteenth century England when highwaymen made travelling difficult and when many people were beginning to question the freedoms that people in France and America through their revolutions

were trying to achieve. But *Sovay* followed both these ideas and as heroine, is not an average seventeen year old but very much a thoroughly modern-thinking young lady, breaking normal societal mores by wearing men's clothing and shows herself an astute observer of people. *Sovay's* many adventures for this reader were, at times, unbelievable but the book was mostly well written and researched though some characters were 2-D and/or stereotyped. I was annoyed at the mention of socks though!

The young men who support *Sovay* were surprisingly accommodating of her adventures. When she falls foul of Dysart, the political spymaster, (the 'baddie' who wears black and lives in a gothic-style castle) *Sovay* has to use all her skills to escape, resulting in some rollicking adventures on the way to France.

It's an entertaining read, which should make some readers want to find out more about the French revolution, particularly its bloody Reign of Terror, as well as perhaps the concept of dashing highwaymen. The likely readers for this book are young girls whose concept of romance is starry-eyed, and their ideals will not be disappointed by *Sovay*. Using the introductory ballad as a starting point, it could be an entry into a poetry unit, though, at just over 400 pages, it would be a long read for many students.

Maureen Mann, TAS

Sovay is the adventure packed story of the life of a young, well to do English girl in 1794. A high spirited girl, *Sovay* decides to test the love of her fiancé by posing as a highway robber and demanding his love token. When she reveals his cowardice, he tells her he has come to break the engagement as he will not be tainted by association with sedition.

Circumstances contrive to force *Sovay* into the highwayman role when she receives warning that a warrant is on its way from London for her father's arrest. After holding up the coach and getting both the warrant and many other papers and in the absence of her father, she seeks her brother at Oxford only to find that he was "sent down" many months ago and his whereabouts is unknown.

Both her father and brother, Hugh, sympathize with the ideals of the recent and ongoing revolution in France of equality, liberty and fraternity. It appears that Hugh has been in France assisting the revolution and their father has followed him, placing them both in extreme danger. Meanwhile *Sovay* finds that there is much danger in England too from the evil, spymaster, Sir Robert Dysart. Forced to flee England, *Sovay* is smuggled into France and the hotbed of the revolution where no-one is safe especially one who is both English and moneyed.

Sovay is unlike any other book that I have experienced set in the 1700s. Celia Rees, the author, has a history degree and has fleshed out a tumultuous time in history, both in England and France. She has created a strong minded and independent young woman rarely seen in novels portraying this era. This novel could be used to compare gender roles used in fiction. I would recommend it to senior students and also staff members.

Joanne Pearson, Mitchelton State High School, QLD

The ballad-based *Sovay* does hold merit as a great read based on exciting, historical events. It encompasses revolutionary ideas and events across three nations at the end of the 18th century. Its interest, educationally, could be based on this aspect alone. A more intensive analysis of its depiction of socio-economic classes and gender roles might see it put to better use within Australian English and History syllabi. Gabriel's urgency in expressing his desire 'to live in equality' represents the reality of the lower classes. He does not 'aspire to be' of *Sovay's* class, he just wants to enjoy the benefits of a home and franchise. Whilst placing *Sovay* within this elevated privileged class he needs reminding by *Sovay* that 'such basic liberties are denied...all of my gender'. (pg188). Both these areas are fully explored in a multitude of English programmes and in Stage 5 History studies of Aboriginals and Women thus *Sovay*, or extracts of, sit as resource material. Page 204 illustrates an interesting analogy between prostitution and the

'marrying off' of young girls to rich men, 'It was all about money, just like the street...Girls on the look out for rich husbands'. This is explored in the poem 'Fallen' by Chambers whereby the juxtaposition of a woman struggling to support herself through prostitution and a well-to-do matron being supported financially by her husband is overturned. The similarities are challenging and allow rather emotive discussions within a class of Year 11s. Overall *Sovay* is a challenging book for its analysis of social and economic circumstances with a backdrop of significant historical times.

Sally Spurr, OLSH Kensington, NSW

Ree's protagonist, Sovay, is a seventeen year old girl raised in the English countryside. Set during the French Revolution, arguably the most far reaching series of events in modern European history, Sovay goes on a quest to find her missing father and brother. We discover that her relatives have been condemned for supporting the revolution.

Sovay finds herself in London and Paris in constant danger. She becomes a thief, socialite and spy in order to find information about the whereabouts of her loved ones. Readers familiar with history will enjoy the detailed descriptions of period costume and architecture. More astute historians will note Rees' insights into the changes in life post the storming of the Bastille.

Sovay is a brilliant novel that holds the attention of the reader throughout. I would recommend this novel to any young adults from 15 years and over.

Anthony Collier, Mountain District Christian School, VIC

This is a book for dedicated, capable readers, who like period dramas which encompass love, war and the struggle for equality and survival. It also forms an excellent basis for the exploration of the French Revolution. The blurb gives very little insight into the intense, action based intrigue that lies between the cover.

Basic classroom activities around the novel could include creating a timeline of events in Sovay's life, vocabulary activities, summarising the novel in 66 words, creating a character sketch, rewriting the novel 'afterward', telling the story from the perspective of another character, researching the history of famous highwaymen or bushrangers in Australia, maybe examining the vigilante approach to justice. The role of women through history is also a basic theme throughout the book and a class could readily compare the role of women during this time period and the role of women today both locally and across different cultures.

The French Revolution forms an excellent background to explore the democratic values within Australia and perhaps the Republic debate. How have the processes of political change altered? If we were to become a republic how would we do this? Why has Australia held onto its Monarchy and connections to the Commonwealth? Students could research the French Revolution in comparison with other countries who have overthrown their monarchies throughout history. The battle for Irish independence is intertwined with the French Revolution in the novel and this fight has changed and continued for centuries, students could examine the cost of this fight to both the freedom and unification of the Irish people.

Capable students could examine the structure of society in pre-revolutionary France and discuss the similarities and difference in Modern French or Australian Society. Is equality something which rings true for every citizen in France today? Would change have occurred without the revolution?

Jill Richardson, Wynyard High School, TAS