

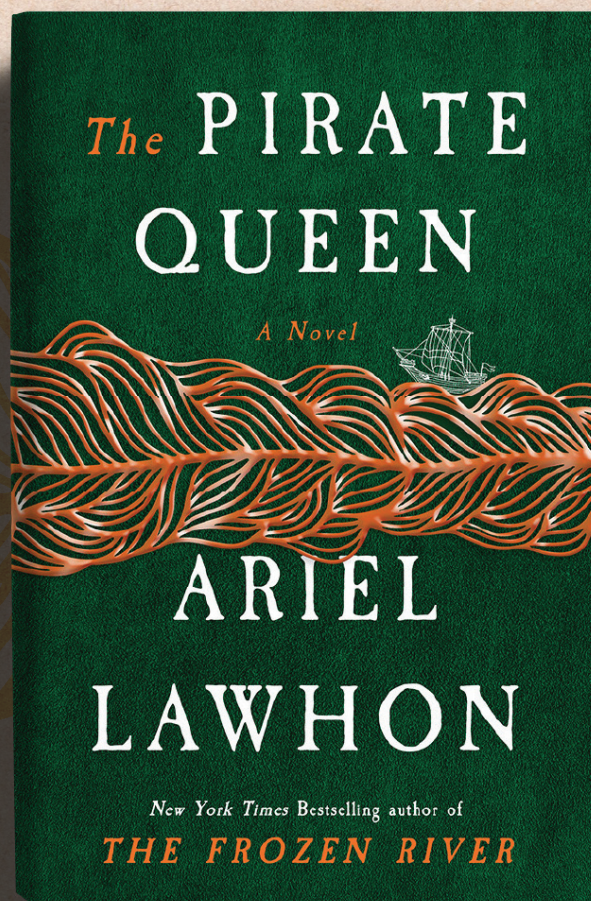
The PIRATE QUEEN

A Novel

By ARIEL LAWHON

New York Times bestselling author of *The Frozen River*

READING GROUP GUIDE



LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

People often ask me where I find the ideas for my novels, and the answer is quite simple: I don't. The ideas find *me*. There I am, minding my own business, going about my life, when inspiration strikes. It's happened while reading the news and while waiting for my doctor. Other novels have come in the form of a dare and an afternoon spent procrastinating. I'm never sure how it happens, but when it does, all the little hairs stand up on the back of my neck, and I just *know* that I've found my next novel. It's a bit like falling in love, I think.

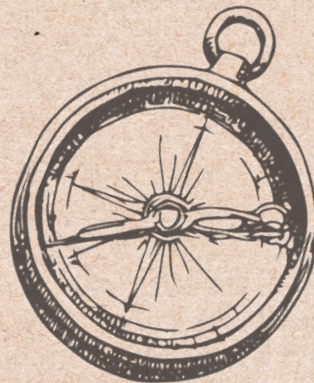
The idea for *The Pirate Queen* found me in the middle of the night while I was reading a book of essays. The first contributor mentioned that she wished she could have dinner with Queen Elizabeth I and her archnemesis Grace O'Malley, the pirate queen of Ireland. I gasped. I'd never heard of this pirate queen! That's all it took to send me down the rabbit hole of history.

Here we are four years later, and that bit of inspiration is now a finished book. I am humbled and delighted that this novel is about to be published, that my pirate queen has found her way into your hands. I hope you enjoy reading the story of this wild Irish girl. I hope you fall in love with her the way that I did. But mostly, I hope you are amazed by Grace, by her courage and intellect and, yes—even her savagery. May this novel inspire you to see your own life as one great adventure.

I will be forever grateful that this story found me.

Happy reading!

Ariel



INTRODUCTION

Bringing to life a fiercely courageous Irish folk heroine who risked everything to defend her people, bestselling author Ariel Lawhon invites us to embark on a thrilling adventure in *The Pirate Queen*. Inspired by the legendary real-life sea captain Grace O'Malley, this action-packed page-turner captures the triumphs of a brilliant leader who was destined from girlhood to conquer the high seas. Weathering constant threats unleashed by Queen Elizabeth I, Grace grows only more resolute as her battles are waged ashore. Forced to marry a volatile chieftain who sees her only as a pawn in his grand plan, Grace appears to place duty before desire. But she never forgets the beloved man she cannot have—Richard in Iron, who has pledged to wait for her forever.

From the breathtakingly beautiful Irish coastline to ancient fortresses where fools attempt to keep Grace confined, *The Pirate Queen* delivers a captivating voyage and thought-provoking topics to discuss in every chapter. The questions that follow are designed to enrich your book club's discussion of *The Pirate Queen*. We hope they will enhance your experience of this unforgettable saga.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. As you watched five-year-old Grace sacrifice her hair in the opening scene, what did you discover about her ability to overcome anything that stands in her way? What does the braid represent to her in the novel's final scene?
2. On page 285, in the Maiden, 1543 chapter, at The MacWilliam's feast we learn that Grace's mother Maeve is secretly relieved to have no sons: "Having a daughter is the real power. Men grasp for sons and often lose them as quickly as they can raise them. But daughters give a man his legacy." How does this play out when Grace herself becomes a mother? What are the other sources of power for the women in the novel?
3. What does Richard Bourke teach Grace beyond knife skills? Does the long-simmering love between Richard and Grace make them vulnerable, or does it give them strength?
4. How did the oscillating timeline stoke the suspense? Which threads are continuously woven into all three arcs of Grace's lifespan? If you were to think of your life as a Trinity Knot, what would the three strands of your identity be?
5. Despite their very different temperaments, Grace and her older brother, Donal O'Malley, are each other's anchors and protectors throughout their lifetimes. How does their relationship evolve over time? What enables them to thrive, even though their innate talents don't match the social expectations for a brother and sister?

6. How do Finola's strategies compare with Grace's? As the mother of three children by the abusive Donal O'Flaherty—Young Eóin, Margaret, and Merrick—what determined whether Grace could counteract their father's destructive influence?
7. While you read about Eóin O'Malley's calculated plans for his daughter's marriage (Walter Bourke versus Donal O'Flaherty), did you see any wisdom in the chieftain system, or was it entirely oppressive? Would you have enjoyed living under Brehon Law and testing the waters with a trial marriage?
8. How did you react to the dramatic storm-born circumstances of Tibbot's arrival? In what way is *Niamh*, along with the sea itself, his mother's true home?
9. The chapter 'Mother, 1577' concludes with Grace requiring a promise from Sir Christopher St. Lawrence that includes "that you always keep an empty chair and an extra plate at your table for those who might appear at your doorstep hungry or tired" (p. 412). How does Grace's good heart enhance her leverage throughout her life, winning loyal followers such as Guty and her son-in-law, Hook? Does it put her at a disadvantage against the likes of bloodthirsty opponents such as Sir Richard Bingham?
10. In her audience with Queen Elizabeth I, Grace observes that she and the monarch both know how to survive. What common traits do they share that enable them to overcome more than sixty years of danger? What might both women have achieved if they had been born in our time?
11. How much did you know previously about the Tudor reconquest of Ireland and the world of pirates and privateers during the sixteenth century? What makes fiction an effective way to understand historical facts? What are the ancestral legends in your family story?
12. How does *The Pirate Queen* expand your experience of other novels by Ariel Lawhon that you have read? What is unique about her ability to imagine the lives of extraordinary figures from the past?



Suggested Further Reading

The Irish Princess by Elizabeth Chadwick

The Pretender by Jo Harkin

The Spirit Keeper by K. B. Laugheed

Queen of Camelot by Nancy McKenzie

The Country Girls: Three Novels and an Epilogue by Edna O'Brien

Land by Maggie O'Farrell

Heresy by S. J. Parris

The Princes of Ireland and The Rebels of Ireland by Edward Rutherfurd

Dreaming the Eagle by Manda Scott

The Heather Blazing by Colm Tóibín

THE GRACE O'MALLEY COCKTAIL

This Irish whiskey–coffee liqueur–orgeat cocktail pays tribute to the sixteenth-century Irish pirate queen.

Ingredients

1½ ounces Irish whiskey

1 ounce coffee liqueur

¾ ounce orgeat syrup

½ ounce fresh lemon juice

½ ounce simple syrup

Instructions

In an ice-filled shaker, combine the whiskey, liqueur, orgeat, lemon juice, and simple syrup.

Shake well for 10 to 15 seconds.

Strain into a highball glass filled with crushed ice.

Garnish with a dehydrated lime wheel.

