



Go Saddle the Sea

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Felix Brooke, the orphaned son of an English soldier and an aristocratic Spanish mother, has been raised in the strict, loveless household of his grandfather in Villaverde, Spain. When Felix gains possession of a letter that contains a clue to the whereabouts of his father's family, he gladly runs away from home to pursue the trail. His journey from Spain to far-off England begins the adventure of a lifetime.

Go Saddle the Sea Details

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Chris says

Twelve-year-old Felix Brooke, ill-treated at home in Northwest Spain, resolves to travel to England to find out the truth about his father. Thus begins a young adult novel, set after the Peninsular Wars in the early 19th century, that is enjoyable both on its own merits but also for its many references, influences and intricacies. Joan Aiken wrote this after field trips to Galicia and her careful research and attention to detail add weight to the seeming authenticity of the story told by its young hero, whom one implicitly believes is a thoroughly reliable narrator.

Initially Felix recalls Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island* in that there is a document (a letter from his father in place of the map of Stevenson's novel) which initiates a quest from home to a port and thence by sea to the sought destination. But Felix (whose father's middle names are, significantly, Robert Lewis) though no less resourceful is a more reflective character than Stevenson's Jim. There are also aspects which remind one of Dickens' rags-to-riches tales of young men, such as *Oliver Twist* or Pip in *Great Expectations*. There is even a school setting that could have been partly inspired by Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* by way of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, but which could just have easily reflected the experiences of the 12-year-old Joan at Wychwood Boarding School in Oxford in 1936; a similar scenario is depicted in Aiken's *The Shadow Guests*.

However, the text that may have most influenced the plot of *Go Saddle the Sea* is arguably *Northanger Abbey*, by the author who shared the same initials as Joan Aiken. Aiken proposes that the first draft of this novel, originally titled *Susan*, was – unbeknown to Austen – actually published, a treasured copy finding its way to Spain via his Felix's father. Both novels start from the protagonist's fictional home, Fullerton in Wiltshire for the tomboy Catherine and Villaverde in Galicia for Felix. Both youngsters travel across country, Catherine across southern English counties and Felix across northern Spain, largely traceable on the map. Both arrive in the Somerset spa town of Bath, where extant roads and buildings supply verisimilitude to the two tales. The second volume of Austen's novel then takes us to the fictional Gloucestershire residence of Northanger Abbey where Catherine's expectations are finally overturned, not least by the boorish behaviour of General Tilney and her enforced return to Fullerton. At the end of *Go Saddle the Sea* Felix is no less disappointed by his reception by the Duke of Wells and Taunton at the fictional Asshe House, setting the scene for a planned return to Galicia in the sequel.

Still, despite the fiction, Aiken manages to introduce further real places, albeit under different names. Asshe, where Felix's English grandfather lives, is probably a compound of several genuine localities. First, the stables are based on Arno's Castle in the Bristol suburb of Brislington; this is a Gothic-style folly built from copper-slag giving it its more familiar name of the Black Castle (the author of *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole, called it "the Devil's Cathedral"). There was even a tunnel linking it to the nearby Arno's Court Mansion, which may thus be the model for Asshe; or it may be the more imposing Ashton Court further west, the name of which is at least suggestive. (There is also, as Aiken will have known, a village called Ashe, the neighbour of Steventon where Austen revised *Northanger Abbey*.) Of course modern Bristol also encompasses Blaise – Austen's Blaize – Castle, the folly that Austen mentions early on in her novel though planned visits there never materialise, and so her concept of Asshe may be another way of referencing the earlier novel by choosing a similar setting.

The sending-up of Gothic romances in *Northanger Abbey* is however reversed in Aiken's novel. Where Catherine's fears are mostly self-generated, Felix's are real. Law and order can't be taken for granted in a

Europe suffering from the aftermath of the Napoleonic conflicts. The individual may fall prey to brigands, conniving relatives, corrupt officials or even kidnappers of the most sinister kind: as described by Victor Hugo, the Comprachicos were in the habit, using surgery and potions, of deforming children who fell into their clutches. This evil practice is apparently referred to in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* when a character is told *Get you gone, dwarf; / You minimus, of hindering knot-grass made*. This is Gothic horror indeed. So many villains stalk the pages that Felix, lucky by name and nature, is fortunate to fall in with decent human beings in almost equal measure.

Go Saddle the Sea is full of Aiken trademarks in her use of tropes and themes. In her fiction, especially in *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* sequence, villains often meet their downfall by drowning, villainesses are much in evidence as is folklore in the form of songs, instrumental music, doggerel and traditional proverbs, and storms at sea and wolves running free are ever a danger. (Other animals though get a mention here including a cat, horse, pig, mule, ox, parrot and, obliquely, a ring-dove.) Aiken also introduces potential McGuffins: like the slip of paper in the closet of Catherine's bedroom in the Abbey which turns out to not reveal a secret, we wonder if the treasured letter from Felix's father is a false lead; another possible red herring is the gold of General Moore's army lost in the Spanish hills, the goal it seems of every adventurer and opportunist in North Spain whose path Felix happens to cross.

Joan Aiken is a delightful writer, offering us a yarn which is neither parody nor pastiche but instead a homage to nineteenth century adventure stories, with their wrongdoers, derring-do and cliffhangers. But she is also more subtle than that: with her use of authentic language and convincing recreation of period and place you can relax and enjoy the unfolding chronicle without fear of anachronism. And while Victorian authors often serialised their novels in instalments before publication in book form, the chapter headings here retain an older descriptive style, such as Chapter 2 "In which I encounter dangers from swamp, fire and wolves; & am enabled by God's help to foil some Assassins", or the final "In which I am sent to School, and come to a Decision".

And as always, the more you examine what she writes the more you are rewarded. For example, Felix's Spanish grandfather rules with a tight rein. You won't be surprised then to learn that Cabezada, the family name, is Spanish for 'bridle'; and that the next novel in the sequence is *Bridle the Wind*.

<http://wp.me/s2oNj1-saddle>

rosamund says

A picaresque novel for children, packed with incident and daring deeds. Though some of the luck and kindness the main character encounters may seem unlikely to the reader, as well as the unlikelihood of his various schemes, this is still a very enjoyable and exciting novel that I would recommend to anyone who likes adventure. Aiken's understanding of the individual and the details she uses to evoke 19th century Spain help to elevate this beyond the level of a Boy's Own type of story into a compelling and clever narrative.

Maria says

3 1/2 stars. I read every Joan Aiken book I could find when I was 10-12 years old. 'The Wolves of Willoughby Chase' had me hooked and looking for more. I can't say I remember much beyond that first book

(it has been over 30 years), so when this one was in a box of books, I grabbed it. Felix runs into quite a bit of trouble and adventure, but when you are on a road trip with low funds that is not too inconceivable. He is extraordinarily lucky though. Even though it is geared towards children (at least aged 10yrs) it was still enjoyable to me. I have to credit Joan Aiken with contributing to my expansive vocabulary (that I mostly only use for reading). It may be difficult for some to read, but it is a good way to learn (figuring out a word by its context). This book is the first of three books centered on Felix. It is a grand adventure and I hope my grandchildren read this series and the wolf series.

Nigel says

Felix sets out from his unhappy home in northern Spain to travel to England in search of his father's family with nothing more than a handful of words deciphered from his Father's unreadable letter. With only a stubborn mule for company he crosses the mountains and has one adventure after another, with only his wits and ingenuity and a talent for music to win him through. From feuding villages to trapped oxen to a forbidden duel, from jail to a strange mountain village to danger on the sea, this is a thrilling and exciting tale filled with unexpected encounters and marvelous characters.

Jill says

This is a great adventure book for middle-grade kids . . . and for me. I really enjoyed it :-) Felix is a headstrong boy who runs away from his grandfather's home, has many hair-raising adventures, and learns important lessons along the way.

I wouldn't call this story realistic, but it is well researched and a lot of fun!

Caroline says

Go Saddle the Sea is standard Joan Aiken. It features a plucky young hero who journeys about righting wrongs, encountering bumbling adults, making friends etc. Felix Brooke is half-English, half-Spanish 11-year-old, living with his hateful relations in Spain. Deciding to chuck it all, he runs away, hoping to find his father's family in England. Along the way he encounters bumbling adults, makes friends, rights wrongs, etc. In the end, family secrets are revealed and Felix begins a new, better life.

In other words, standard Joan Aiken.

Rosemary says

This author has a mastery of authentic nineteenth century language reminiscent of Georgette Heyer. And in fact the author's sister Jane Aiken Hodge wrote a biography of Heyer. Good pace, a rather unlikely ending, must read the next two in the series.

Judy says

This was completely different from what I'd expected. A fabulous adventure, and the main character (a Spanish-reared lad of 12) was really rather an unusual hero, being such a fabulous mix of vulnerable, fearless and resourceful, quite unlike anything English, Australian or American we have come to expect. The story-telling voice was of the time, so only confident tweens would get into it. (I'm not sure my kids of 10 and 11 would manage it, being more drawn to a contemporary voice.) Once into it, they would be gripped until the main part of the adventure was complete. After that, not sure if they'd hang on for the really rather poetic resolution of the story. The ending was so right, and lovely.

Some seriously gruesome themes there.

Margaret says

This is the first book of an excellent YA historical fiction (with a touch of fantasy) trilogy, just as exciting and fast-paced as I expected from Aiken. The orphaned son of an English soldier and a Spanish noblewoman, Felix has been raised in his grandfather's stern household in Spain, the only love he has known given him by the cook, Bernardina. On her deathbed, she gives him some of his father's possessions, including a mysterious letter which sets him off on a quest to find his heritage; along the way, there are gypsies, shipwrecks, intrigues, murders, and other excitements galore. The historical background (post-Napoleonic Spain) is excellently done, and Felix himself is a vivid, engaging character; Aiken handles his development (the three books cover six years or so of his life) beautifully and provides a host of other colorful characters as well.

Charlotte says

Terrific book. Exciting from start to finish. I'm going to read it again because I enjoyed it so much. Felix runs away from home and his strict grandfather, grandmother, and tutor. He knows his father's side of the family is from England so he plans to travel across Spain to get on a ship that will take him to England. Not everything goes as planned and he almost dies at the beginning of his journey from a foolish mistake. Along the way he meets people and helps them. There is also a plot against his life which we find out later. This is book one in a trilogy.

Jill says

The story itself isn't too bad, although there's a lot of "and then this miraculous happened, because I was nice to so and so" or "this person died right in front of my eyes and I remember it forever. Did God really want that to happen?" and a whole lot of "grass is greener" and "maybe most of these people weren't as bad as I thought. Maybe it was just me?"

Probably a younger reader would enjoy it more.

Leah says

I actually could give this a 5- maybe I'll change it...Such a great adventure book, and no science fiction (not that I'm a hater, the field is just SO saturated with non-reality right now and I've kind-of lost interest). It's not the easiest kids read, but I thoroughly enjoyed it- have already read the 2nd book as well and am waiting for the last one to be available at the library.

Just changed it to a 5. I was looking at the books I rated 4, and realized I liked it more than most of those.

whalesister says

The first in a series of three: Bridle the Wind come next, and The Teeth of the Gale concludes the series. I especially loved the main character in this first book--so delightfully naughty. I love the way Aiken never backs away from throwing her characters in the very worst possible circumstances, and then gets them out of trouble in the most creative ways, usually by putting them in even worse situations than before, which sometimes hardly seems possible. The only reason I didn't give this five stars was because of the ending--it just stops, rather strangely, with no feeling of conclusion. Good thing it's not over; two more books to read before you're done.

Noodles says

This book was OK. Boy goes off on a journey, has a little adventure in each place he stops along the way. I wanted to like it more than I did, not sure what put me off it. Maybe just the style, or the unrealism of the situations and solutions? It's not just me, I gave the book to my mum and she didn't finish it. There are some good characters, and the sea journey towards the end was very exciting. But overall I found myself stubbornly reading on to see what happened in the end rather than for the enjoyment of it. I was glad to finish it.

Emily says

So I read this series 100% out of order and finished up with the first book. WOW! It is thoroughly delightful, just like the second book, BRIDLE THE WIND.

Felix jumps off the page as a likable, authentic kid dealing with crazy family dynamics and dangerous plot twists. He's not a saint, but he's full of heart and very good with his instincts. I love that the book portrays traveling in such an interesting but not sugarcoated way. There are complex morality lessons which are presented in a very accessible manner.

This book does get dark--on the cover it says it's meant for readers over 12--but it's not a depressing read. If

you have a sensitive reader in mind, you might want to preview pages 249-250. To me, that was the most hardcore part in the book.

This is Joan Aiken at her finest. This series is just great for tween readers and I loved it at age 32. While the third book in the series isn't as thrilling/awesomely good, just get all three--they should be together.
