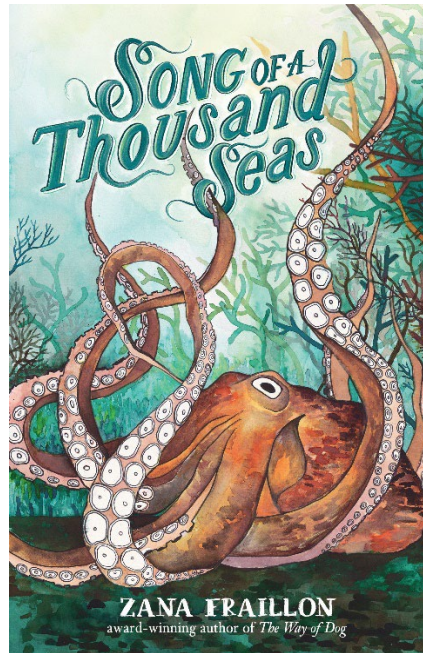


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# SONG OF A THOUSAND SEAS

## Zana Fraillon



### Teachers' Notes

Prepared by Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian  
with a background in the Australian curriculum (English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

With her nine brains, eight arms, three hearts and thousands of suckers, Houdini is as clever as she is cunning, always planning the next escape from her tank or trick to play on the aquarium's keeper, Paul. But mostly, she is yearning to return to the Sea, its song and her memories of home beckoning her like never before.

Tired of visitors banging on her tank and the boredom of her artificial environment, Houdini tries desperately to make it all the way to the drain in the washroom, where the Sea entices her to risk everything. How she longs for Winds that are fierce, a Sun that burns bright and Stars that fall from the sky.

Then she meets Paul's daughter, Juno, and for the first time in her life, Houdini feels a true sense of connection. This young girl thinks differently from the other children who visit the aquarium and Houdini can sense that Juno thinks outside the box – just like an octopus. And in meeting Houdini, Juno finally feels seen and understood.

Highly original and beautifully told, *Song of a Thousand Seas* is a lyrical verse novel that is an engaging and evocative story of friendship, empathy and the importance of home.

**THEMES**

- Friendship
- Empathy
- Curiosity
- Creative Thinking
- Connection
- Hope
- Home
- Octopuses

**WRITING STYLE**

A striking and unique story, *Song of a Thousand Seas* is a powerful verse novel told from the first-person perspective of Houdini, an intelligent and at times frustrated day octopus. Seeing the world through Houdini's eyes – who refers to herself as *we* (due to the fact octopuses have nine brains) – provides readers with a unique insight into the plight of an animal who longs for the wild. Her antics with Paul, the aquarium's keeper, are entertaining and cheeky, yet her longing for home and the rare friendship she develops with Paul's daughter, Juno, gives the story tenderness and depth. Beautiful and original figurative language throughout results in a quality lyrical text that is highly engaging, gently told and filled with empathy, hope and connection. It is suitable as both a read-loud and independent text for readers aged 9–12.

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## STUDY NOTES

- *Song of a Thousand Seas* is a verse novel. Discuss the features of this text type, including the 'space' on each page for readers to infer, make connections and consider what has *not* been said. Remind students that when reading verse novels to use the punctuation to guide phrasing and pauses. Also consider the author's deliberate use of line breaks to emphasise ideas.
- On p. 1, readers are greeted with an introduction of facts about Houdini, the day octopus. As you read *Song of a Thousand Seas*, add to these facts. What else do we learn about Houdini not shared in these facts?
- Discuss the first-person narration of Houdini. How would the story be different if it was told in third-person, or from a human's point of view? What makes this text so unique?
- Why does Houdini refer to herself as 'we'? How does this give *Song of a Thousand Seas* a point of difference from other texts?
- After reading the first verse of *Song of a Thousand Seas*, 'Not welcome' (p. 2), make predictions about the themes of this story. Give reasoning to support your thinking.
- Why does Paul call Houdini a 'grumpy old thing' (p. 2)? Do you agree? Why?
- Why do you think that when Paul comes in each morning, Houdini turns herself 'to Stone and [doesn't] / ever say good morning back' (p. 2)? What does this share about both their natures and circumstances?
- Houdini describes her den as a place to 'think. To stash. To hide. / To watch. To ponder. To plan' (p. 3). What is she thinking, hiding, watching, pondering and planning? Share in a mind map.
- How would Houdini define the word 'patient' (see p. 4)? How does this differ from your definition?
- Describe Spike. What role does she play in *Song of a Thousand Seas*? How important is she to Houdini?
- Discuss the use of repetition in the following lines: 'she is wanting to / come creeping come crawling come blooming / come bursting out with us' (p. 4). Find other examples of repetition in the text. How does it contribute to the sense of tedium, urgency and angst that Houdini feels?
- What does Spike mean when she says, 'Once [...] the whole world was Sea' (p. 4)? How must it feel for Houdini and Spike's version of the sea to be inside the glass walls of their tank?
- What games does Houdini play with Paul? Why does he get cross about these? Describe the relationship between these two characters. How does it change as the text progresses?
- In pairs, re-enact 'People are' on page 7. How would Houdini feel to hear children calling her 'boring' (p. 7)? What would you say to such people about Houdini?

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- Reread 'People aquariums' on page 8. Discuss the power of the first-person perspective of Houdini in making readers consider her point of view. How does this make you reconsider aquariums?
- Why, when Houdini asks, 'Why are people?' does Spike say nothing (p. 8)?
- How are people and sea creatures alike? How are they different? Share in a graphic organiser.
- How is Paul's sea different from the real sea (see 'Dreaming' on p. 10)?
- What must it feel like for Houdini to 'feel so trapped' in the aquarium? Why does she say 'our brains are too buzzed like our skin is too / small like we are all too empty' (p. 10)?
- In the role of Houdini, write a series of journal entries expanding on the idea that 'Days are for watching listening playing planning but / nights are for adventure' (p. 12).
- Why does Houdini say, 'People [...] are very easy to train' (p. 12)? What evidence is there of this in the text?
- Discuss the use of imagery to help readers visualise the following:  
A gap just big enough to squeeze an arm through.  
Another arm. A head. Three hearts. 3,154 suckers and  
six more arms. Our exit. (p. 13)  
Why is visualising an important reading skill?
- Why does Houdini describe Joe as a 'delight of the night' (p. 14)?
- Why does Joe say to Houdini 'I know what it's like to be caged' (p. 18). Speculate on Joe's backstory.
- What is it about Juno that Houdini is immediately drawn to? What do they have in common?
- Houdini shows her personality through her narration and actions, such as in the following excerpt when Paul wonders where his keys and the flounder have gone: 'he doesn't see / our skin rippling with tingling bubbles of glee' (p. 20). What other examples of her nature and character can you find?
- Reread the verse 'Pft.' on p. 22. In your own words, explain the point that Houdini is making about there being more to life than 'being safe'. Write a reflection responding to Houdini's statement that 'to be happy is to be free' (p. 22).
- Discuss how the language features in 'Once' (p. 23) share the wonder of life in the sea with readers. Compare this with Houdini's descriptions of life in the tank.
- What does Houdini mean when she says, 'Lots of humans are far / more Octopus than they may think' (p. 24)? How are you like an octopus? Share with a friend.
- Why does Houdini wonder at the way Juno's 'mind ripples like / Waves that wash at the Sand' (p. 24)? Why does she feel a pull towards her? How are Juno and Houdini alike? Who do you feel a special connection with? Why is

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this important to you? In a reflection, discuss the importance of friendship and connection.

- Why might Houdini say that Juno 'tastes / like / the / Stars' (p. 28)?
- Why doesn't Houdini argue with Joe when he tells her to go back in the tank?
- What does Joe mean when he says, 'Sometimes [...] hearts are difficult to argue with' (p. 31)? How does this sentiment resurface later in the text?
- In the role of Joe, record a radio segment or podcast about Houdini.
- How important is Joe to Houdini? How do we know?
- What does Houdini mean when she says, 'we could lift Paul / [...] We could / drag him back to Juno' (p. 36)? Does she succeed in doing this? Discuss.
- Discuss how the formatting of 'Every day it gets stronger' adds meaning to this verse (p. 37).
- Why, now that she is yearning so much for the sea, does Houdini find the 'nights are not full of adventure' any longer (p. 37)?
- Why, in 'Maybe one day', does Houdini say, 'slow and heavy we drift back to our Den' (p. 39)?
- In 'Rain' (p. 40), explain how Houdini uses her imagination to survive.
- Why might Juno also be 'aching [...] shaking [...] breaking too' (p. 42)?
- Discuss the language features in 'Planning' on p. 43. How do these further engage readers?
- Make a sketch of Juno's idea of a 'new kind of tank' for Houdini (see p. 43).
- What does Houdini mean when she says Joe 'sees Juno's plan on the floor. Gentlies it up. / Whispers it open' (p. 45)?
- How is *Song of a Thousand Seas* a story about thinking 'outside the box' (p. 45)?
- Houdini says: 'What is the use of nine brains if / they are all saying the same thing / the same way every day over and / over again' (p. 46). Reflect on how you can apply this realisation to yourself.
- How is decision-making an important part of this story (see p. 47)?
- Why does Juno give Houdini the stone from her necklace (p. 49)? How does Houdini respond to this?
- Why will Houdini miss Paul when she leaves?
- How do you think Spike feels about Houdini's leaving? In the role of Spike, retell this story.
- What is the importance of Houdini's 'wild-fierce remembering' in *Song of a Thousand Seas* (p. 52)?
- What does 'Home' mean to Houdini? What does home mean to you? Share in a reflection.
- How does meeting one another help both Houdini and Juno?
- What is the role of Joe in *Song of a Thousand Seas*? How would the story be different without him?

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- When given the stone by Juno, what does Houdini mean when she says, 'It is a / knowing that we will carry her Sea deep inside us / always' (p. 60)?
- Compare the verse 'This.' on page 64 with 'Dreaming' and 'Momentary fun' on page 10? Show your thinking in a visual way.
- In what ways can you think like an octopus (p. 69)?
- Discuss the formatting and language features in the text's final verse, 'Song of a Thousand Seas' (p. 66). How did you feel during the reading of this verse? Share in a reflection.
- The verses in *Song of a Thousand Seas* are each eight lines in length – one for each of Houdini's arms. Towards the end they change, however – notice that they change in layout. How does this change in form reflect Houdini's emotions and situation at this point of the story?
- Choose a verse from earlier in the story. Change the layout of this verse to convey Houdini's emotions in a visual way. With a partner, share your newly formatted verses. Discuss which emotions are being represented in these new versions. Give evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- Create a story map to share the main characters, settings and events of *Song of a Thousand Seas*.
- Using Juno's facts on pages 71–75, as well as your own research (see websites below), create a Zine or infographic about octopuses.
  - <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/octopus/276161>
  - <https://www.natgeokids.com/au/discover/animals/sea-life/octopus-facts/>
- In the Author's Note, Zana Fraillon speaks about dreaming of being an octopus. Have you ever felt inspired to write a story after dreaming? Share with a friend.
- The Author's Note also mentions the escape of Inky from the National Aquarium of New Zealand. Find out more about Inky's escape at the link below. Write a news report about such an escape.
  - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/13/the-great-escape-inky-the-octopus-legs-it-to-freedom-from-new-zealand-aquarium>
- Create a picture book that retells the story of Houdini and Juno.
- Retell *Song of a Thousand Seas* with puppets or through an animation.
- Using coding software such as Scratch, program Houdini's escape from the aquarium.
- View the following YouTube clip in which Zana Fraillon speaks more about Houdini and her inspiration for writing *Song of a Thousand Seas*:
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEdj8JLrjGc&t=96s>
- In the role of Houdini, write a postcard or letter to Juno from the wild Sea.
- Create an artwork that reflects the main themes and concepts in *Song of a Thousand Seas*.



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- Explore the role of aquariums and wildlife conservation centres. As a companion text to *Song of a Thousand Seas*, read *Odder: An Otter's Story* by Katherine Applegate and Charles Santoso (UQP).
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language to the text. Examples include:
  - Waves of people (p. 2)
  - Keys jingle-jangling / footstomps thundering / flicking the lights at their switch – one, two, three (p. 2)
  - Waves and Tides that whoosh under their skin – / we hear the water feel the water smell / the water carried within (p. 9)
  - we like / to play our games and squirt water at the lights so / they fizz-spark and turn dark (p. 12)
  - There is a heavy hush that falls when the halls are / all empty and Paul shuts the door behind him. / When the lights are all flicked and the locks / are all clicked. We wait with every sucker buzzing / every brain brimming blood bursting skin dancing / with what is to come. (p. 13)
  - Joe is a delight of the night and the taste / in the air whenever he is there is / the taste of / song and of happiness. (p. 14)
  - the sight of them swimming [...] as / we crawl across the floor through the door and up and into / their tank thrills us and fills us with unbound delight (p. 15)
  - the Sea / she ripples through our skin like Sunshine. / Like the music Joe plays when he dances, his smile lit up / like the memory of morning. (p. 15)
  - The Sea she is singing she is howling so strong she is / calling us. Drifting her voice up up through the Waves / twirling and whirling up up (p. 17)
  - we need to explore just a little bit more (p. 17)
  - we are going too / s l o w (p. 18)
  - And then there's the beat of Joe's feet on the floor / and we pour ourselves into his hands – so soft so sure / and he tastes of a thousand Sunrises (p. 18)
  - Paul growls, his / voice gravel-dark, eyes hard like Rocks (p. 19)
  - Paul is usually so bright even when we give him a fright / or squirt his shirt (p. 19)
  - his eyes are cloudy-grey the / water running inside him is churning-wild and stormed (p. 19)
  - The young one nods. Blinks. Folds herself small. (p. 19)
  - something in the darting / of her eyes in the swingswingswinging of her legs the / spinspacepinning of the Rock that she wears at her / neck makes us just a little bit curious / Like / she is the Wind trapped in skin like / she is remembering a song playing inside her too. (p. 20)
  - Paul is still thundering grumbling / stormy-mad (p. 20)

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- her voice is tight and burning (p. 21)
- her mind ripples like / Waves that wash at the Sand (p. 24)
- small driplets of Sea leak from her eyes and / ripple down her face.  
We gentle-drift from our Den / so her words can sink deeper into our skin (p. 25)
- We can feel her brain buzzing her / skin fuzzing with so many thoughts like Lightning her / fingers her feet her thinking too wild to settle and be (p. 25)
- We drift, bloom, pulse and press ourselves to the glass (p. 25)
- her / fear of being caught would be fought and / squashed down small (p. 26)
- her one human heart / thump pump thwumping so loud it is / footstomps in our brains (p. 27)
- as if she is asking / as if she is hoping as if she is / calling our name (p. 27)
- We whisper to white and watch / and wait while our nine brains muse and / confuse each other with all of our tumbling wondering (p. 27)
- why do we feel ourselves falling to her calling? / Why do we ridge our skin gather bumps on our arms / and relax ourselves into her hand like there is / a knowing glowing inside her (p. 28)
- the shadow / blooming / looming (p. 29)
- every part of us is straining / to feel it taste it twirl it whirl it swirl it / inside our body (p. 33)
- pain is creeping across our skin seeping weeping / burning and pulling and scraping us to / nothing. We shrink shuffle shrivel up tight and wait / for Joe to find us (p. 34)
- the Sea fills our brains / with memories that are meant to be / quiet now. Silent now. Gone now. (p. 34)
- Keys jingle-jangling footstomps thundering (p. 35)
- his scooping looping net (p. 38)
- she / is a Wave carrying us lifting us drifting us closer (p. 40)
- Paul and Juno come in all footstomps / whispering voices whispering eyes / searching and quiet (p. 41)
- flapping and splashing but gentle and soft as if / she is asking as if she is hoping as if she is / calling our name (p. 41)
- all we want is to feel the Sea / taste the Sea smell the Sea twist ourselves to Sea (p. 42)
- Juno blossoms. / Juno swells. / Juno blooms herself tall and bright and / brimming with happy (p. 44)
- the Tides surging / inside them both beat in time together (p. 44)
- she turns, tears the page from her book / scrunches it small and lets it fall. All her / happy / sunk deep into the shadows (p. 45)



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- We feel an idea surging a / plan emerging and our skin is / tingling wild with maybes (p. 47)
- all of our brains burn bright and buzz (p. 49)
- that's when we swoop from our Den / with the roar of the Sea / gushing rushing blushing through our skin (p. 51)
- to / light his way to steady the / spray that's flooding the floor / we pour from our tank (p. 52)
- right through the door / to the far washroom floor and / we hear the whisper of Wind of / Rain and of midnight Moons / edging closer (p. 54)
- We can taste Juno's joy like Waves / that crash from her skin into the Air and rain down / in drips all around us. And she is buzzing she / is bustling she is all over tingling with excitement. (p. 55)
- not knowing we are going (p. 56)
- Her smile ripples her cheeks lighting her up from the / inside (p. 58)
- Her rippling light turns to white to grey to empty shell (p. 59)
- Juno reaches her arms towards us / the Sea inside her churning / her heart yearning and we watch Juno shrink. / Juno shuffle. Juno shrivel up tight. (p. 60)
- Our skin is alive now is rippling is swirling is / twirling with the singing of the Sea (p. 66)

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

Ideas for books come from all sorts of odd places. This one came to me in a dream. In the dream, I was an octopus. I saw through octopus eyes and felt my way with octopus arms. I tasted with my skin and swam towards the gentle light filtering through the water from the sun. This dream was unlike any dream I had had before and unlike any I have had since. The very next morning I sent a message to my publisher and told her this was the book I had to write. I wish I could have that dream again. I wish I could be an octopus again. This book is my attempt to get as close to that dream as possible, both for myself and for you readers.

In trying to understand the world from the point of view of an octopus, I had to do a lot of research. I knew very little about octopuses before that dream and had a lot to learn. Entering the world of the octopus has been a wonderful, eye-opening journey. I have discovered how very little we humans know about the sea and her myriad life forms, and how magical and breathtaking the facts that we do know are. I have learnt how deeply we humans impact the sea and how far reaching those impacts are. I have been awestruck time and time again by recounts and videos of octopus encounters and escapades – each one confirming just how remarkable and intelligent octopuses are. This story is based loosely on one of the most famous escapes of all – the escape of Inky

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from the National Aquarium of New Zealand. In fact, all of Houdini's antics in this book are based on real-life octopus hijinks. But best of all, my research gave me the opportunity to meet and fall in love with an octopus.

After contacting SEA LIFE Sydney Aquarium, I was invited to meet the real Houdini and her amazing keeper, Chelsea. Chelsea showed me all the workings of the aquarium, took me to the food preparation areas, showed me where they keep Houdini's toys and told me all about what it is like to care for octopuses. And then I was taken to meet Houdini. Nothing could have prepared me for the experience.

Houdini was cheeky and curious and so, so smart. She distracted me with six of her arms while simultaneously sneaking up behind me to startle me with her other two arms. She tried multiple times to crawl from her tank and seemed as keen to get to know me as I was to get to know her. The most wonderful moment came when I rubbed the spot between her eyes, the way I do with my dogs at home. I hadn't meant to do it. I was transfixed and it was almost as if we were having a conversation. As soon as I began rubbing, Houdini stilled. She had been a bundle of activity before then, but in that moment, it felt as though she was listening. She then reached around to hold my arm as if in reply.

Houdini died a few months after my visit, but her voice remained very firmly in my head throughout the writing of this book. Being an author is always an imperfect act of translation. I hope I have done Houdini's incredible mind justice.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Zana Fraillon (she/they) is an internationally acclaimed, multi-award-winning author of books for children and young adults. Her work has been published in over fifteen countries and is in development for both stage and screen. She has a doctorate in creative writing, and degrees in history and teaching. Zana's passion for empowering young people to find their voice is a feature of both her books and her work with writers of all ages.