

# The Slave Dancer

Recommended for Grades 5-8

---

## **Book Summary: The Slave Dancer**

Thirteen year old Jessie lives with his mother and sister in New Orleans. One night, he is walking home when someone kidnaps him. He finds himself on his way to a slave ship where he will be expected to play his life for the slaves. The slaves are forced to periodically move so they won't be too weak when they arrive. On the way to Africa, Jessie struggles to learn his way around the ship with a captain who seems to be mad, a cruel first mate, and sailors who are all there to make money off slavery.

When they arrive in Africa and get the slaves, Jessie is horrified. They are packed so tightly in the hold that they have to sit on one another. If a slave falls sick, they are immediately tossed overboard, to try to keep the illness from spreading. Many of them are thrown overboard alive, in the middle of the ocean, to either drown or be eaten by sharks. Jessie hates it, but all he can do is try to survive and get home to his own family.

[SPOILER] When they approach Cuba, a ship approaches and the captain fears who it is. They start throwing the chains overboard and then they start tossing the slaves into the ocean. If they are caught with slaves, they will be severely punished. Jessie is frozen watching the slaves be tossed to their deaths. Even the smallest children are thrown over. Jessie manages to lead a boy about his own age back to the slave hold. He and the boy hide there as the ship flees the other ship and sails into a horrible storm. Days later, Jessie and the boy leave the hold to find the ship slowly sinking. The crew is either dead or missing. Jessie and the boy throw a part of the mast over, and they use that to float as they try to swim back to shore.

They find themselves in Mississippi. An escaped slave finds them on shore and helps the boy escape to the north. Jessie walks back to New Orleans and is reunited with his family. When he is older, they move north and he starts his own family.

## **Author Biography: Paula Fox**

Paula Fox was born in New York, New York on April 22, 1923. Paula's parents had a difficult relationship. Her mother rejected her at birth and left her in an orphanage. Her grandmother rescued her, and Paula was sent to live with a reverend who raised her until she was seven. Then her grandmother came back and Paula shuttled between New York and Cuba.

At fifteen, Paula moved to Hollywood. She worked in a dress shop, painted and did a variety of other jobs. At seventeen, she married Howard Bird, a seaman and part-time actor. Soon after, he ran off with another girl and Paula divorced him months later.

Her time in Hollywood ended when she gave birth to a child at twenty. She gave that child up for adoption because she didn't feel like she had anything to offer a baby. She later went to Columbia University and married Richard Sigerson. They had two sons. Paul and Richard divorced about eight years later. Paula then married Martin Greenberg. For many years she worked with troubled children.

It wasn't until Paula was in her 40s that her first novel was published. She has now written over thirty books, some for children and some for adults. Her children's books have won many awards, including the Newbery award for her book, "The Slave Dancer." Many of her adult books went out of print, but are still praised for their excellence.

---



Oswego Campus  
32 W Jefferson Street  
Oswego, IL 60543  
[www.oswego.lib.il.us](http://www.oswego.lib.il.us)

Montgomery Campus  
1111 Reading Drive  
Montgomery, IL 60538  
(630) 978-1272

# The Slave Dancer

Recommended for Grades 5-8

---

## Discussion Questions: The Slave Dancer

1. Before the story begins we are told the name of a ship, the names of her crew, and when she shipwrecked, and how many people survived. Did knowing this information affect how you read the story? How?
2. Jessie is pressed, or forced to sail, on the slave ship. Do things like that still happen today? Can you give any examples?
3. At the time they are sailing, slavery has been outlawed by most countries. Why do you think these men are so determined not to give up the slave trade? Does slavery still exist today?
4. When the men's food and water rations are cut down, we see one of the crew sneak to the captain's quarters and steal an egg. Do you think people are more likely to commit crimes when they are not getting necessities to live? Is this true today? Can you give an example?
5. The captain has Purvis whipped for stealing the egg. Why doesn't Purvis tell him that he wasn't the one who did it? Would you take a punishment for something you didn't do? Why or why not?
6. When the slaves start to get sick, they are tossed over the side of the boat, whether they are dead or alive. Jessie is upset and runs off and the captain whips him for it. There are many other examples of brutality in this book. What struck you as the worst of all of them? Why?
7. What is the point of making the slaves dress up in fancy clothes and dance at the end of the voyage? Why does the captain make them do this?
8. Only Jessie and Ras survive the storm. After Ras is sent north to escape slavery, we never know what happens to him. Why do you think the author chooses to leave his future a mystery when she tells us what happens to Jessie when he grows up?
9. The N-word is used repeatedly throughout this book. Do you think this is appropriate? Why or why not?
10. This book has been banned because of its 'too graphic' description of the slave trade. Do you think it was too graphic? Why or why not?



Oswego Campus  
32 W Jefferson Street  
Oswego, IL 60543  
[www.oswego.lib.il.us](http://www.oswego.lib.il.us)

Montgomery Campus  
1111 Reading Drive  
Montgomery, IL 60538  
(630) 978-1272