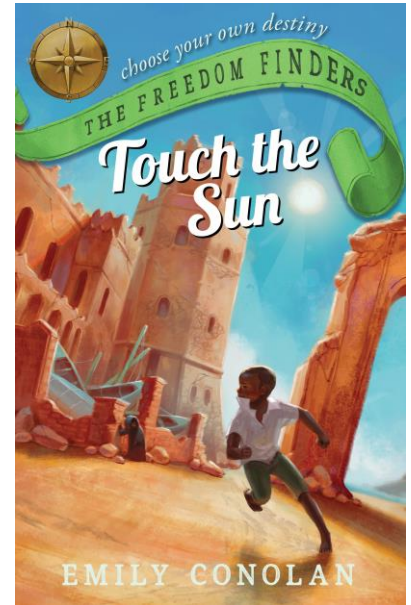


Touch the Sun: the Freedom Finders

By Emily Conolan

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Recommended for 9–13+ year olds



Summary

It is 2011 and you are thirteen years old, living with your little sister, Jamilah, and your journalist aunt, Rahama, in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. The city is a little safer as the troops of the African Union patrol the streets, keeping the fighters of al-Shabaab at bay. But they are never far away and, in pursuing a story, you and Rahama run afoul of them and are separated when her workplace is bombed.

This is the beginning of your life on the run. Your first duty is to protect Jamilah. Your second is to protect the hidden memory stick your aunt has given you. It contains her interview with Zayd, a defector from al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab are after you and will not hesitate to kill you and Jamilah. The only way to survive is to get out of Somalia.

Do Auntie Rahama and Zayd survive? Can you evade al-Shabaab in the refugee camps? Will you trust your life to people smugglers? Can you keep your little sister alive and also bring the truth to light? Will you ever achieve your dream of being a journalist like Rahama?

At every turn, the choice is yours. How far will you go for freedom?

About the Freedom Finders series

In this exciting interactive series, readers step into the shoes of inspirational kids navigating their way to their new home, Australia.

When you read the Freedom Finders books, you are the main character, and you make the choices that direct the plot.

At the end of many scenes, you will face life-or-death choices. Turn to the page directed by your choice, and keep reading. Some of these decisions may not work out well for you, but there is a happy ending...somewhere.

If you reach a dead end, turn back to the last choice you made and find a way through. It is your quest to find freedom through the choices you make.

Series themes

- World history
- Australian settlement
- migration
- war
- resilience
- asylum seekers
- displacement
- courage
- refugees

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Use in the curriculum

The series

This series takes the excitement and adventure of interactive fiction and adds it to the emotional depth and relevance of real migration journeys. This provides many educational opportunities:

- Students can all take different journeys and reflect and compare how their choices affected their outcomes.
- Exploring these journeys across many different choices and pathways adds nuance to polarized debates between 'right' and 'wrong'. Multiple dimensions are contained in the one book.
- The interactive plot structure breaks down barriers of passivity and indifference.
- Each book is a perfect springboard to discuss not only history and politics, but philosophical notions of choice, consequence, agency and free will.
- In this context, abstract concepts such as human rights and international laws are made relevant to the lives of ordinary people.
- Students will be inspired to inquire into their own family histories and look for examples of 'local heroes' in their communities.
- Positive representations of marginalised people and cultures build respect and value within students' communities.
- Fact files and interviews are included in each book, and there is a complementary website <https://www.emilyconolan.com.au/>.

Touch the Sun

The plot of *Touch the Sun* involves the refugee journey from Somalia to Australia in 2011. Fact files and interviews found at the end of the book, and linked to throughout the story, provide useful information on topics such as Somalia; journalists at risk; religious extremism; refugees, asylum seekers and crossing borders 'illegally'; great inventions that improve ordinary peoples' lives; people smugglers; and Australia's immigration policy.

The content best addresses English and HASS Year 6 but this book can also contribute to English, Ethics or Philosophy classes and HASS or History classes from Year 4 to Year 8.

In the English classroom, the book prompts learning about genre, stylistic choices and persuasive writing:

- The 'choose your own destiny' format comes alive through the use of the rare 2nd person narrative voice.
- The story is told in the present tense—excitement guaranteed!
- Fiction is mixed with such attributes of non-fiction as fact files and interviews.

Themes of *Touch the Sun*

- | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| • family | • resilience | • courage |
| • compassion | • inspiration | • ingenuity |
| • freedom of the press | • people smugglers | • civil war |

Discussion questions and activities

1) Before reading *Touch the Sun: The Freedom Finders*, discuss the images on its cover.

- Who do you think is the main character of this story?
- Can you guess when and where the story may be set?
- Do you think the book will be an adventure story? Why?
- Does this seem like a book you will enjoy? Why or why not?

Answers should be shared with others in the class, and predictions can be revisited as students begin to read the novel.

2) Following on from this, draw an enlarged outline of the boy on the front cover. Put words that describe him inside the outline.

- As you read, add more words to describe the character.

3) The novel opens with the warning 'YOU MIGHT DIE WHILE READING THIS BOOK'. How did you feel when you read this – excited or wary? Why do you think the author might have wanted you to feel that way?

4) *Touch the Sun: The Freedom Finders* features an unusual narrative style that is not often used in books – the second-person or 'you' narrative. Many of the books you have read might use the first-person or 'I' narrative ('I squeal with delight') or the third-person or 'he/she/they' narrative ('She squealed with delight').

- Why do you think the author chose to write the story like this? Might the fact that the story is told as a 'choose your own destiny' tale have something to do with this?
- How did you feel as you progressed through the novel? Would you have preferred a more conventional narrative?

5) On page 20, you had to make your first decision about your destiny: whether to stay hidden with Rahama or jump out of your hiding place and try to save Zayd.

- How did you make that decision?
- Was it what you thought was the right thing to do, or was it because you thought it was the safe thing to do?
- As you progress through the story, do you always get to make the choice, or do circumstances force you to do things you mightn't want to do?

6) Return to your 'character outline' of the main character.

- How many words do you have describing his physical appearance? His behaviour? Qualities you believe he possesses?
- What does his behaviour *imply* about him?
- Can you prove, using the text of the novel, that he really does possess these qualities?

7) Adapt a well-known fairy tale into an interactive format with different choices and alternative endings. What might have happened if Goldilocks hadn't decided to eat the porridge or if Snow White hadn't eaten the poisoned apple?

8) The Refugee Council of Australia's website features many real-life stories about Freedom Finders who have come to Australia. [Matur's story](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getfacts/international/journeys/stories/maturs-story/) is one of these.

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- Read this story, and discuss the sorts of difficult decisions Matur needed to make to find his way to freedom.

9) What do people mean when they talk about 'own voice' in literature?

- Emily Conolan includes an interview with a real Somalian refugee, Hani, as well as quoting a number of Hani's real poems throughout the story. Why do you think that she chose to do this? (You may need to revisit the Author's Note at the beginning of the book.)

10) **Game:** <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/activity-great-escape>

In *Touch the Sun*, 'you' make most of your decisions on your own. To see what it would be like to have to make decisions as a group, play Amnesty International's 'Great Escape' board game. (A unit of work accompanies the downloadable board and game cards.)

Inspiration for the series

'When I was a teacher, I had a student called Mohammed from Sierra Leone. He was doing a simple spoken English test where he had to use three different verbs in the past tense. He could have passed the test by simply saying, "Last Saturday, I went to the shops, played soccer, and watched a movie with a friend." Instead, as I turned the tape recorder on, Mohammed leaned forward and said, "I would like to tell you the saddest story of my life."

'The minutes melted away, and I forgot all about the test as Mohammed's story poured out of him. Mohammed had been in my class for months, and I knew him as a cheerful, dedicated student with a cheeky smile. I didn't usually ask my students about their personal histories, because they were there to learn English and move on with their lives, not rake over their past traumas – and besides, I don't have counselling training. But sometimes, like with Mohammed, the stories just came out. I still have Mohammed's tape. His was an extraordinary tale of terror and persecution – but he looked just like an ordinary boy in my class.

'Over the years, as a teacher and refugee advocate, I heard many more inspirational, sometimes heartbreaking, stories. The people I met and stories I heard showed me that the journeys we humans take to find freedom may be common, but they are certainly not ordinary.'

—Emily Conolan

The author

Emily Conolan is a writer and teacher, who is also known for her humanitarian work. For her role in establishing a volunteer support network for asylum seekers in Tasmania, she has been awarded Tasmanian of the Year, Hobart Citizen of the Year, and the Tasmanian Human Rights Award. The stories of courage and resilience she has heard in the course of her work with refugees, combined with tales from her own family history, inspired her to write the Freedom Finders series. Emily has never escaped from terrorists or risked her life on a leaky boat, but she has been inside immigration detention and does own a pen with a secret compartment inside.

