



THE FREE STATE OF JAX

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

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By Jennifer A. Nielsen

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The Story

Jaxon Averett has had some terrifically bad luck. Because only the worst luck in the world can account for the fact that he has to live with his Uncle Clive Grimmitz, Aunt Helga, and their six kids in dead-end Walkonby, Kansas. Life with Jax's cousins isn't easy—they're bullies, and his aunt and uncle can't even remember his name.

Which is why, on the night before his twelfth birthday, Jax sneaks over to the neighboring property, floats a raft out into the middle of the hot springs lake, and drops anchor. Jax is now the president and sole citizen of his own micronation, the Free State of Jax.

With the help of new friends, a local lawyer, and the property owner Owen O'Keefe, Jax's micronation begins to flourish. But the Grimmitzes will do anything to get him back and they are not above sabotage. On top of that, Jax is quickly embroiled in the mystery of Owen's missing brother—and a lost windfall of the town's money.

Investigating puts everything Jax has built at risk, and when long-buried family secrets are unearthed, he must find the courage to do what's right, even if it means losing his only chance at freedom.

Reading Group Questions

1. Who was your favorite character, and why?
2. Throughout the story, Jax struggles to accept help when it's offered. Why do you think this is? Can you point to at least one instance where this causes challenges for Jax?
3. At the end of the book, Jax chooses to forgive his family instead of holding a grudge. Do you think the Grimmitzes earned his forgiveness? Why or why not?
4. We get a glimpse of how complicated legal issues like custody can be, and Jax is often frustrated when he feels that the adults in his life aren't listening to him. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? How did you eventually get others to understand you and your wishes?
5. If you founded your own micronation and could name it anything you wanted, what would it be?

About the Author



Photo © Jeff Nielsen

Jennifer A. Nielsen is the acclaimed author of the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling Ascendance Series. She also wrote the *New York Times* bestseller *The Traitor's Game* and its sequels; the *New York Times* bestselling Mark of the Thief trilogy; *The Scourge*; and the critically acclaimed historical thrillers *A Night Divided*, *Resistance*, *Words on Fire*, *Rescue*, *Lines of Courage*, *Iceberg*, *Uprising*, *One Wrong Step*, and *The Free State of Jax*. Jennifer collects old books, loves good theater, and thinks that a quiet afternoon in the mountains makes for a nearly perfect moment. She lives in northern Utah with her family, and is probably sneaking in a bite of dark chocolate right now. You can visit her online at jennielson.com or follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @nielsenwriter.

Author Q&A

The story of Jax is a departure from your recent widely acclaimed historical thrillers. What made you want to write this story? Were there any people or experiences that particularly influenced you as you wrote this book?

Story origins are always a peculiar thing, and unique for every book. I believe Jax's story began when I happened to read a news story about someone who'd started a micronation, and who was now the king of their own country. Population: 1. My mind began turning about a kid who wants his own micronation, with all the questions that would naturally follow: Why would he want that? Who wants to stop him? What kinds of problems will he encounter along the way? I'm a big believer in using random facts as the starting points for a story and this is a classic example of that.

I think one of the great influences for me in writing this story was Roald Dahl, the author of so many amazing books, including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *Matilda*. I was studying his life and background—which is fascinating, by the way—and connecting some of those experiences with his stories. They are over the top, with exaggerated characters and situations that are fun to read, but at their core, carry so much heart and sincerity.

What were some challenges you faced while crafting and writing this story?

Perhaps the biggest challenge in writing this story is the simple fact that I'd never written a story quite like this one before. Writing a contemporary novel is a new genre for me. I love the challenge of diving into a type of story I've never done before—that keeps me creatively alive, which is wonderful. But I'm also fully aware when I write that I am trying something that might not work. I have to be okay with that in order to continue writing.

Did anything that happened to Jax in the book surprise you?

So much of this book was a surprise to me. I began with the intention of writing something that can be laugh-out-loud funny, and I do believe there are some great comedy moments in this book. What I didn't expect was the thread beneath all of that where suddenly, the reader realizes they are feeling something profound for Jax. I discovered that for myself in the scene when Mrs. Baylor has returned from the hearing with Judge Sandowski and tells Jax what happened there. Even as I was typing, I found my eyes welling with tears, and I realized I wasn't just laughing along with Jax. I had truly come to care for this character who was trying so hard to get what he wants.

Of all the supporting characters, who was your favorite to write, and why?

Despite how awful they are—or maybe because of it—I loved writing the Grimmitz kids. Each sibling is slightly different, but with only one exception, they all present a problem for Jax. However, my favorite of them all has to be Delilah, who uses ink to dye her hair and repurposes her dolls to be as creepy as possible. That specific detail was inspired by my older brothers who used to steal my younger sisters' dolls and did that very thing to all of them. My sisters were outraged, but the dolls were actually pretty cool.

Author Q&A (continued)

While you were writing, was there anything you did to “get to know” your characters?

I'm a big believer in taking the characters out of the context of the story and bringing them into my life as a way of getting to know them. If I keep them within the story, then they always feel flat to me, little more than some adjectives on a paper. But if I invite them into my life, then I can ask them questions, such as which songs on my playlist are favorites for them, or which of my friends they might get along with best. Now they start to come alive in my imagination and then I can write them as characters I know, not just characters I created.

What would you love for a reader to understand more after reading this book?

I trust readers to pull the meaning from the book that they need at the time. That's how we find ourselves in the story—we identify with a certain character and then go on that journey with them. As they learn, we learn too. However, one of the themes that's most important to me is the idea that every one of us has the right to have our voice heard. This is especially true for young people. What you say, and what you want and need does matter, because YOU matter.

And that perhaps is the reason I continue writing and continue to challenge myself. Because all young people matter so very much. What could be better than to share my stories with them?