
THE LOST SAILORS

by Jean-Claude Izzo

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“Izzo is exceptional at describing the melancholy, aching atmospheres in which these characters find themselves; he tenderly evokes their desperation, and via their misadventures portrays the cruelty of a world where men are sold for scrap like abandoned ships.”

—*La Republica*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

“From Marseilles to Rouen, many freighters are trapped in port, even now. The crews, often foreigners, live on board in very difficult conditions, in spite of the unfailing support shown them. My concern in this book has been to salute their courage and their patience.”

—Jean-Claude Izzo

The *Aldebaran*, a commercial freighter, is impounded in the port of Marseilles when its owners declare bankruptcy. The crew accepts their fate, receives a small compensation and abandons ship, leaving the *Aldebaran* to rust. For reasons unknown, even to themselves, Captain Abdul Aziz and his first mate Diamantis choose to remain with the ship, making daily ventures into the sweltering maze of Marseilles. Without the distraction of the sea, these two men are forced to face problems they have long avoided. Aziz is struggling with the consequence of the life he has chosen: losing the only woman he has truly loved. Diamantis is searching for a lost lover, one he believes is still living in Marseilles. When Nedim, a former crewmember, returns to the ship seeking refuge all three are plunged into the debauched culture of Marseilles. The three men’s lives begin to tangle in a series of coincidences that ultimately lead to bloodshed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Between Aziz and Diamantis there is a clearly defined power dynamic established by the rules of command; Aziz is the captain, Diamantis is the first mate. How does this relationship change throughout the book? 2. Why do you believe Aziz and Diamantis stay onboard after all hope that the *Aldebaran* will be employed has passed?

3. Sailing seems to have chosen Aziz and Diamantis as much as they have chosen sailing. What are other professions that people insist they do because there is an intrinsic compulsion governing them?
4. Aziz declares that Marseilles is “the only city in the world where you didn’t feel like a foreigner.” Stateless-ness and feeling foreign are recurring ideas in the novel. To whom or what does each man pledge his allegiance to? To a country? To the sea? An idea?
5. Why do you think the three men, Aziz, Diamantis and Nedim, treat women as they do?
6. Diamantis declares, “. . . We need a personal reason to sail the Mediterranean.” What is each man’s reason? How does it drive the narrative?
7. Does the Marseilles Izzo depicts remind you of any cities you have visited? In what way?
8. Do you think Amina is a good mother, considering the life she provides for Lalla? Did she have a choice? Should she have tried to escape the grasp of the crime-boss Ricardo? Would she have been able to?
9. What is the unifying theme that governs the novel? The quest, a la Homer’s Odyssey? Men’s relationship with women? Man’s relationship to an idea? Does Izzo’s novel realize the theme?
10. What do you believe happens to Diamantis, Mariette and Cephia at the close of the novel?

BIOGRAPHY



Jean-Claude Izzo was born in Marseilles, France, in 1945. His father was an Italian immigrant and his maternal grandfather was a Spanish immigrant. His “immigrant” status forced him into a technical school where he was taught how to operate a lathe. At 19 he was called up for military duty and stationed in both Toulon and Djibouti. During this time he worked as a photographer and journalist for the military newspaper. He achieved fame in the mid-1990s following the publication of *Total Chaos*, *Chourmo* and *Solea*, commonly known as the Marseilles Trilogy. In addition to the trilogy, Izzo wrote two additional novels (*A Sun for the Dying*, *The Lost Sailors*) and a collection of short stories. Jean-Claude Izzo died in 2000.