

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Carry on, Mr. Bowditch

by

Jean Lee Latham

Book Information

Jean Lee Latham, Carry on, Mr. Bowditch

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This fictionalized biography tells the story of the mathematician and astronomer who realized his childhood desire to become a ship's captain.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 4-6; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Science, Astronomy; Science, Mathematics

Main Characters

Ben Meeker Nat's cynical co-worker who keeps telling Nat that he has no future

Captain Gibaut the captain who talks Nat into considering a career as a sailor

Captain Henry Prince the stern captain under whom Nat sails until he becomes a captain himself; Prince encourages Nat to "carry on" with his scholarly endeavors

Elizabeth Boardman the intelligent and lively girl who marries Nat; she dies soon after they are married

Habakkuk Bowditch, Jr. Nat's older brother who becomes a sailor as an adult

Habakkuk Bowditch, Sr. Nat's father, who is unable to support his family as a cooper; he was a ship's captain and never got over losing his ship on a reef

Jonathan Hodges the man who contracts Nat as an indentured servant; he is sympathetic to Nat's desire to educate himself

Lem Harvey a sailor who changes from sullen and angry to hopeful and ambitious after Nat teaches him how to be a navigator

Lizza Bowditch Nat's sympathetic and playful sister who dies suddenly at a young age

Lupe Sanchez a sailor who learns navigation from Nat even though he has a limited knowledge of mathematics; Nat chooses him as second mate when Nat becomes a captain

Mary Ingersoll (Polly) the intelligent and understanding woman who becomes Nat's second wife; she ensures that Nat has the time to finish writing his book on navigation

Mary Martin nee Bowditch Nat's older sister; she marries a sailor who later dies at sea

Master Watson Nat's severe schoolteacher, who is impressed when Nat is finally able to prove his arithmetic skills to him

Nathaniel Bowditch the intelligent young man who educates himself even though he is forced to leave school and become an indentured servant; he publishes a book on navigation after finding many errors in the text usually used by sailors

Samuel Ward the man who buys Hodge's store and Nat's indenture just when Nat thinks he is going to be released so that he can go to Harvard

Vocabulary

almanac a book that predicts the weather and lists the significant astronomical events of the year

bellow to yell

blubber to cry

lightering unloading a boat

sextant an instrument used to measure angles to determine latitude for navigation purposes

slate a writing surface made from hard-grained rock

Synopsis

One of the many children of a failed ship captain, Nathaniel Bowditch tries to help his family by buying an expectation, or percentage of a sailor's share of captured cargo. Unfortunately, the sailor he bought the expectation from dies at sea, and Nat loses his money.

Although Nat is good with figures, he has trouble with his teacher until his brother Hab persuades the teacher to observe Nat's talent. Nat's mother has

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hopes that he will be able to attend Harvard someday. However, despite his intelligence, Nat has to leave school at age eleven to help in his father's cooper shop. Nat hopes to return to school, but after his mother dies, his father indentures him to a chandlery when he is twelve.

For five years Nat works at the chandlery, studying the Chambers *Cyclopaedia* in his spare time. When Nat learns that the chandlery's owner, Mr. Hodges, has sold the business, Nat hopes he will be freed and allowed to attend Harvard. Instead, his indenture is sold to the new owner. Nat continues studying at night, learning Latin, French, astronomy, algebra, and every aspect of ship construction and operation.

One day Nat's beloved sister Lizza comes to visit him with a young girl named Elizabeth, whom Lizza is very fond of. When Lizza dies suddenly, Nat is upset when Elizabeth comes to the store because he thinks she wants to discuss Lizza. Instead, she gives him a Latin book to study, knowing he needs to get his mind off his grief.

By the time Nat completes his indenture, he has given himself a broad education. He immediately gets a job surveying and then hires on as a clerk on a ship. The captain of the ship also names Nat as second mate, and Nat spends a great deal of time perfecting his navigation skills. When the cabin boy expresses interest in Nat's sextant, Nat begins teaching the crew navigation as well. Nat is particularly enraged when he finds errors that could cause shipwrecks in Moore's *Navigator*, the major guide for seamen. He also discovers an easier way to determine the longitude than the old system, which uses the moon as the only guide.

When Nat returns home, he finds out his brother-in-law died at sea. Nat is upset, but his spirits are lifted when Elizabeth kisses him just before he leaves for his second voyage.

On this journey, Nat once again teaches the crew to navigate, an activity the captain appreciates because it leads to happier crews on the ship. One

of the sailors who goes through a dramatic improvement in attitude is Lem Harvey.

Nat also spends a lot of time thinking about Elizabeth. When his ship returns to Salem, Nat overcomes his fear that Elizabeth is being romanced by another man, and he asks her to marry him. She accepts.

In August, Nat sails for the Mediterranean. He decides to devote a considerable amount of his time on this voyage to checking the figures in Moore's book. As the ship is returning home, Nat learns that Elizabeth has died. When he arrives in Salem, Elizabeth's mother insists he continue living in the family home. There he becomes better acquainted with Elizabeth's cousin, Polly.

Before Nat sails again, he promises to check the new edition of Moore's for the book's publisher. When he finds eight thousand errors, he gives up in disgust and decides to write his own book. He returns home to find out Lem's ship was wrecked because of an error in Moore's. He starts to work on his own book. When Polly finds out about Nat's work, she is very supportive. Nat realizes he is in love with her and asks to marry her.

One day Nat decides to go watch the commencement at Harvard. Afterwards, an old friend congratulates him on his degree, and Nat finds out that Harvard has acknowledged his studies in mathematics and astronomy by awarding him a Master of Arts degree.

Soon afterward, Nat is pleasantly surprised by a visit from Lem, who had managed to survive the shipwreck. When Nat is appointed captain of the *Putnam*, Lem plans to accompany him to Sumatra, but because he breaks his leg, Lem cannot go.

After a tense voyage, Nat tries to hurry home to Polly. Bad weather delays the ship, but Nat's knowledge of navigation allows him to bring the ship into the harbor on Christmas day despite a dense fog.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Zack gloat when the *John* sinks?

Like many sailors of his time, Zack feels a great deal of animosity towards "book-sailing," or the use of a navigation book to determine the ship's location. He is jealous when his brother-in-law Lem Harvey manages to obtain a better position because Nat taught him book-sailing. When Lem's ship is lost at sea because of an error in the navigation book, Zack feels that his resentment of book-sailing is justified. When the John sinks, Zack feels that Nat has been personally punished for promoting book-sailing.

Literary Analysis

What does it mean for Nat to be an indentured servant?

As an indentured servant, Nat's freedom is severely restricted. He is obligated to stay with his master until he has served the full time of his contract, which is nine years. During that time he cannot go anywhere without his master's permission, and he does not receive wages for the work he does, although he does receive food, clothing, and shelter. He also is not allowed to marry during his indenture. According to the law, if Nat leaves his master before the nine years are up, Nat could be hunted down and forcibly returned to his master. His master also has the power to sell Nat's contract to another person, as happens in this story.

Inferential Comprehension

How does Nat's family history with the sea help shape his life?

Nat comes from a long line of sea captains. All of his brothers become sailors, and all of them are either lost at sea or die of some disease at sea. It is his family's history that helps to drive Nat towards one of his biggest accomplishments: the writing of a book on navigation that will help prevent ships from being lost at sea. But the sea has another effect on Nat's life. Because he is a small man, his family does not expect him to become a sailor and never realizes he dreams of being captain of his own ship. His father's loss of a ship when Nat was two years old shapes Nat's entire life. The family's life of poverty keeps Nat from staying in school and going to Harvard and becoming a scholar. Instead, Nat has to educate himself while he works as an indentured servant. Although he is still able to accomplish great things, the course of his life would have been quite different if his father had not lost everything when the ship was wrecked. Because he has educated himself so well, he is able to be a successful ship's captain when the opportunity finally comes his way.

Constructing Meaning

What does Lizza mean when she says Elizabeth has "eyes in the back of her heart"?

Lizza means that Elizabeth is very intuitive about other people. She seems to have a knack for understanding not only how Nat feels, but also how to communicate with him. When Lizza dies, Elizabeth does not come to talk with him. Instead she brings him a Latin book so he can use his studies to take his mind off his grief. When Nat is impatient with her, she compares his frustration with the ignorance of others to a man who kicks a chair because he stumbled over it. When Nat has difficulty explaining an idea to someone, he remembers Elizabeth's proverb and tries to be patient with his student. When Nat is having difficulty expressing his love for her, Elizabeth helps him say what he needs to and makes him feel that his lack of eloquence is an asset.

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Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events Nat has several exciting adventures while he is sailing. Have the students form small groups and practice telling one of the adventures with as many details and as much animation as possible. Also, have them prepare visual aids by drawing pictures of the event. After rehearsing in small groups, have students present their stories to the entire class.

Comparing and Contrasting Nat's lifestyle goes through many changes throughout the course of the story. Have the students write an essay comparing his life as a young boy to his life by the end of the book.

Understanding Characterization Nat is highly respected by several members of the community who find his desire to learn impressive. Have the students write Nat a letter of recommendation for either a job or for entrance into Harvard. Have them focus on what they believe to be Nat's best qualities as a person.

Recognizing Feelings Nat and Elizabeth have very strong feelings for one another, and while Nat is sailing he writes several letters home. Have the students write a series of letters from Nat to Elizabeth and from Elizabeth to Nat. As a class have students brainstorm topics for the letters such as mutual interests, their plans for the future, their feelings for each other, routine matters as well as special events that take place while they are apart, etc.