

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

by
Avi

Book Information

Avi, The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

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Book Level: 5.3

Interest Level: MG

As the lone "young lady" on a transatlantic voyage in 1832, Charlotte learns that the captain is murderous and the crew rebellious.

Award: Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors;
Golden Kite Award/Honor Book; Judy Lopez
Memorial Award for Children's Literatur;
Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Adventure, Travel; Mysteries, Murder;
Natural Environments, Oceans; Power
Lessons AR, Grade 5; READNOW - Demco
Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media -
Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended
Reading, California Recommended Lit.,
English, 6-8

Main Characters

Captain Jaggery the heartless and immoral
captain of the <I>Seahawk</I>

Charlotte Doyle a thirteen-year-old girl from a
wealthy American family; the principal character of
the book

Cranick a stowaway aboard the <I>Seahawk</I>;
an ex-crew member and a man who despises
Jaggery

Dillingham, Grimes, Morgan, Barlow, Foley, Ewing,
Fisk, Johnson other crew members of the
<I>Seahawk</I>

Mr. Doyle Charlotte's father, whose firm owns and
operates the <I>Seahawk</I>

Mr. Hollybrass the first mate eventually murdered
by Captain Jaggery

Mr. Keetch the nervous and untrustworthy second
mate

Zachariah a black crew member who befriends
Charlotte

Vocabulary

censure expression of disapproval or
condemnation

complicity partnership in wrongdoing or crime

punctilious very precise in conduct; paying
careful attention to details of dress, speech, or
manners

reticule a woman's drawstring bag

sardonic bitter; mocking

Synopsis

Thirteen-year-old Charlotte Doyle has lived with her family in England since the age of six. When her father, an agent for an American cotton business, receives an advancement, he returns home to Providence, Rhode Island, along with his wife and youngest children. Meanwhile, Charlotte remains in England to finish her school term. Her father arranges for her summer return to America on the merchant ship, *Seahawk*.

When Charlotte's departure day for America arrives on June 16, 1832, she feels confident that her voyage to Providence will be safe and pleasant. However, even before the *Seahawk* departs from the Liverpool dock, her confidence is shaken. When she learns that the two families she has depended on for companionship are unable to make the trip, she realizes she will be traveling alone with an all-male crew and is mortified. She pleads with Mr. Grummage, her father's business associate, to reschedule another voyage, but he insists she stay aboard. Her reluctance to travel on the *Seahawk* increases when a sailor, Mr. Barlow, advises her to leave the ship, implying that the journey will be dangerous. Her anxiety magnifies when a black crew member, Zachariah, gives her a knife and insists she keep it with her for protection. When Charlotte finally decides to disembark and stay in England, she learns too late that the ship is at sea. There is no turning back. The two-month voyage to America is underway.

At first, Charlotte is uncomfortable around the ship's

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mangy crew members and finds solace in the company of Captain Jaggery. The captain charms her with his fine manners and dress. She enjoys his company and becomes loyal to him. Fearing mutiny, the captain asks Charlotte to be his "eyes and ears" on ship, and she eagerly agrees. When she discovers a forbidden pistol in a sailor's chest and a "round robin," a sailors' signed pact for mutiny, Charlotte informs the captain. What follows is a gruesome scene in which the captain, angered by his rebellious crew, murders a stowaway and orders that Zachariah receive fifty unmerciful lashes. Revolted by the captain's unjust and cruel actions, Charlotte grabs the whip from the captain and slashes his face with it. Infuriated with Charlotte, Captain Jaggery withdraws his protection of her.

Having lost the captain's friendship and being seen by the sailors as an informer, Charlotte is alone. Ultimately, she comes to despise the captain and decides to join the crew. Because they are more than reluctant to accept her, Charlotte climbs 130 feet up the main mast to prove her loyalty to them. After her successful climb, Charlotte dons sailor's clothing and works side-by-side with the crew.

Captain Jaggery is furious with Charlotte for taking on the role of a sailor and deliberately makes her work both difficult and dangerous. Knowing that Charlotte's father is an officer in the company that owns the *Seahawk*, Captain Jaggery concludes that Charlotte will, at her first opportunity, condemn him. Fearing she'll ruin his career, he plots her death, eventually framing her for the murder of first mate, Mr. Hollybrass. In an unjust trial, he finds her guilty and sentences her to hang. The drama heightens when Zachariah and Charlotte realize that the captain himself has killed the first mate. In a climactic scene, she announces the captain's crime to the ship's crew as Jaggery attempts to shoot her. In a struggle between the girl and the captain, Jaggery falls overboard, and Charlotte is saved. The crew names her the captain of the *Seahawk*.

Eventually, the ship reaches Providence, and Charlotte returns to her wealthy family and lavish home. She finds her home life repressive and

restricting. On the day the *Seahawk* is scheduled to leave Providence, Charlotte escapes through her bedroom window and rejoins the *Seahawk* crew for yet another voyage.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Near the end of the story, Charlotte and Zachariah have a private conversation, and Zachariah says, "I am unique everywhere." What does he mean by that statement? How do you think Zachariah feels about his uniqueness?

Although Zachariah has never been a slave, he is a native of Africa and is black. In 1832, blacks experienced much prejudice. He feels alienated and sad.

Literary Analysis

When Charlotte settles in her Providence home, why does her father avoid speaking about the *Seahawk* voyage?

He is a serious businessman who has run his life according to order and rules. Charlotte's experience is difficult for him to relate to. He doesn't want to take the time to listen to his daughter. He wants her life and his to be normal and predictable.

Inferential Comprehension

In the beginning of the book, Charlotte mentions that her ambition before the *Seahawk* voyage was to be a lady. What do you think her ambition is at the end of the voyage?

At the end of the story, Charlotte chooses a life on the high seas to one in high society. She wants to live freely, unrestricted by strict social codes.

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Constructing Meaning

When the *Seahawk* approaches Providence, why is Charlotte melancholy?

Even though Charlotte has had many horrifying experiences on the ship, she has developed a strong sense of self. She has become confident and strong. She knows that when she returns to Providence, she will be forced to conform. Also, she has developed strong bonds with the crew members, and she knows she will miss them.

living in Providence for only a short period, decides to return to life at sea. In a class discussion, ask students if they think they would have made the same choice as Charlotte. Ask them to support their answers.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Before the *Seahawk* even departs from England, there are signs that the voyage will be an unpleasant one. For example, Charlotte and Mr. Grummage have a difficult time getting a porter to take Charlotte's chest to Jaggery's ship. When porters hear Jaggery's name, they run in the opposite direction. Review the meaning of foreshadowing. Divide the class into small groups and ask the students to scan the book and find examples of the literary device of foreshadowing. Later, compare lists.

Making Predictions Charlotte's father has a domineering personality, and his life is orderly and regulated. For instance, to keep his family life orderly, he prefers not to discuss Charlotte's *Seahawk* ordeal. He wants to continue life as normal, without complications. Generate a discussion based on what students predict Charlotte's father will do when he discovers his daughter is missing.

Recognizing Feelings In the beginning of the book, Charlotte mentions that her journal entries recorded during her *Seahawk* voyage enable her to recall her experiences in detail. Ask students to imagine themselves as Charlotte. Assign them to write three journal entries as they think Charlotte may have written them. Allow them to choose any of Charlotte's experiences to write about. Ask them to describe events and emotions in detail.

Responding to Literature Despite her terrifying journey aboard the *Seahawk*, Charlotte, after