

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Captains Courageous by Rudyard Kipling

## Book Information

Rudyard Kipling, Captains Courageous

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169 Pages

Book Level: 8.0

Interest Level: UG

An American son of a millionaire is saved from drowning by a New England fishing schooner and forced to prove his worth to the captain and crew.

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Classics, Classics (All); Family Life, Growing Up; Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

## Main Characters

Dan Troop Disko's son, who becomes Harvey's friend and mentor

Disko Troop the firm, but fair captain and owner of the fishing boat "We're Here"

Harvey Cheyne the main character, the spoiled son of the wealthy Cheynes

Long Jack an experienced fisherman

Manuel the Portuguese fisherman who rescues Harvey after he falls overboard from the liner

Mr. Cheyne Harvey's father; a successful businessman but, through neglect, fails in raising his own son

Mrs. Cheyne Harvey's mother; a high-strung woman who caters to her son

Penn (Jacob Boller) a crewman Uncle Salters had befriended; a minister suffering from amnesia caused by the shock of the loss of his family in the Johnstown flood

the Cook a Negro from Cape Breton who has premonitions and later becomes Harvey's servant; usually goes by the moniker "the doctor"

Tom Platt a crewman who had once been a sailor on the U.S. Navy ship "Ohio"

Uncle Salters Disko Troop's brother, a farmer by trade, but who has been fishing with Disko on and off for many years

## Vocabulary

**dory** a rowboat

**Grand Bank** an extensive fishing ground southeast of Newfoundland

**hog-yoke** an instrument used for navigation

**Jonah** anything that brings bad luck

**kelleg** a stone used as an anchor

**muckle** a club used to stun a fish

**quintal** a hundred pounds

## Synopsis

Harvey Cheyne is the spoiled son of a railroad tycoon and a neurotic mother who has no control over him. Set in the 1890s, the story opens with the mother and son traveling from New York to Europe in first-class luxury on an ocean liner. The boy steps outside the cabin to hide his seasickness from fellow passengers and is swept overboard.

He is rescued by Manuel, a Portuguese fisherman from the ship "We're Here." Harvey meets the captain, Disko Troop, and his son, Dan. Harvey insists that his father will reward Disko generously for quickly returning him to New York. Disko thinks Harvey is telling wild stories about his family's wealth and refuses to go back and lose a season of fishing.

Disko expects Harvey to do his share of the work on the ship, but when Harvey refuses, Disko gives him a bloody nose. Harvey's attitude changes instantly, and he begins to learn the work and routine of the ship. His perspective of the men changes as he begins to see the value and dignity of "menial work." Harvey's remarkable change becomes evident when he is horrified at witnessing an ocean liner run down and sink a nearby fishing boat, killing most of its crew; while on the liner, he had made a callous comment about it being "fun to watch a liner crush a fishing boat."

After the crew fills the boat with cod, they head back to Gloucester, where Harvey telegraphs a message to his parents. His parents are delighted at the news of his survival, and his father coordinates their

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speedy San Diego-to-Boston railroad trip to meet him. The crew of the ship is astounded at the Cheyne's wealth, and Disko is stunned that his judgment about Harvey's stories had been so wrong. Harvey decides to continue his education in preparation for taking over his father's fleet of ocean liners. In gratitude to Disko, Cheyne offers Dan a job on one of his ocean liners.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

How does Harvey's father feel about Harvey's experience at sea? How does his father reveal his feelings about the change in his son?

*Harvey's father is pleased to see that Harvey had matured considerably. His father finally is able to share his own story with Harvey because Harvey is finally mature enough to be able to appreciate and relate to the hardships his father endured.*

### Literary Analysis

Some people might consider Disko's punching of Harvey as a case of "child abuse." Was it? This may be an opportunity for further classroom discussion of the controversial topics of corporal punishment, child abuse, discipline, respect, appropriate social behavior, self-restraint, etc.

*Certainly from the perspective of the author and his times, Disko would not be considered a child abuser. Disko probably should not be accused of child abuse if all the factors involved are considered. Harvey is unreasonably stubborn, refuses to listen to reason, and would have created a burden on the rest of the crew. Disko shows considerable self-restraint and sincerely wants to help Harvey. Cultural standards do change over time, however, and contemporary readers are much less likely to condone Disko's slap, no matter how well-intentioned.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Disko emphasizes the importance of his "judgment" throughout the book. Should Disko have believed Harvey, or does he make the right decision based on the evidence that was available to him at the time? Present evidence from the book to support your answer.

*Disko probably made the right decision. Harvey's actions are not those of a person who would be deemed reliable. Without proof of Harvey's statements, Disko could not risk the livelihood of eight men.*

### Constructing Meaning

Why is Disko concerned about "not keeping things separate"?

*He wants to use the story as illustration of the danger of not using discretion. Nick Counahan had not used discretion when he drank excessively while piloting his ship. As a result, he and his crew unexpectedly arrive off the coast of Ireland instead of the Grand Bank and lose an entire season of fishing.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The crew of the "We're Here" covered thousands of miles sailing in the North Atlantic. Draw a chart showing the Eastern seaboard and Atlantic Ocean and indicate the locations of some of the areas mentioned in the book (Gloucester, Boston, New York, Queereau, Cape Cod, Marblehead, Newfoundland, Grand Bank, etc.) Label the areas and draw a line representing each leg of the journey, as well as the approximate distance of each leg.

**Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors** Harvey learns the complicated system of sails and rigging needed to sail a ship. Research sailing ships to learn how this complicated system is used. Draw a picture or build a model and label the main parts. Give an oral presentation to the class to explain how the sails are used.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Hollywood

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has been kind, if not particularly faithful, to Rudyard Kipling. Many films based on his writings are widely available on video, including Victor Fleming's 1937 version of *Captains Courageous*. Starring Spencer Tracy as Manuel, this film makes many major changes in the plot to enhance the dramatic effects. It offers a great case study for comparing an author's choices in structuring his work to a set of fully realized alternatives. In the film, Harvey's transition from spoiled child to crew member is much more gradual. His most important bond is shifted from his peer, Dan, to a surrogate father figure, Manuel. Where Manuel meets a semi-tragic end at sea in the film, Kipling had no use for such a melodramatic twist. Both in specific detail and overall effect, the changes can be justified or criticized with equal conviction. Essay assignments that ask students to identify the changes and explain why they prefer one version over the other are likely to produce a wide range of strong responses.

**Responding to Literature** Many people unsuccessfully attempt to escape hardships only to realize after the hardship has passed that they have gained a great deal from their difficulty. Think of characters from other books who have grown as a result of their hardship. Robinson Crusoe might be one example. Describe a hardship you have faced and explain what you learned from it.