

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Over Sea, Under Stone

by

Susan Cooper

Book Information

Susan Cooper, Over Sea, Under Stone
Quiz Number: 129
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965
ISBN 0-15-670542-7; LCCN
252 Pages
Book Level: 5.4
Interest Level: MG

Three children on a holiday in Cornwall find an ancient manuscript which sends them on a dangerous quest for a grail that would reveal the true story of King Arthur. Book #1

Award: Margaret A. Edwards Award

Topics: Countries/Regions, England;
Fantasy/Imagination, Fantasy; Mysteries,
Treasures; Series, Dark Is Rising

Main Characters

Barney the youngest child of the Drew children
Bill Hoover the Witherses' "right-hand man"
Father Mr Drew, a doctor
Great-Uncle Merry Merriman Lyon, not really Ellen Drew's uncle, but rather a friend of her father's
Jane the middle child in the Drew family
Mother Ellen Drew, an artist
Mr Hastings the evil leader of the group trying to find the grail
Mr Palk the Drews' household helper who is in league with the evil Mr Hastings
Mr Penhallow an old fisherman, on the side of good
Norman Withers owner of the yacht who is also under Hastings's influence
Polly Withers young woman who works for Mr Hastings
Simon the oldest child of the Drew children

Vocabulary

dinghy a light rowboat
grail a drinking vessel such as a cup or chalice
pilchard a herringlike food fish

quay a stretch of paved bank or a solid artificial landing place beside navigable water, for convenience in loading and unloading ships
swizz probably the slang equivalent of "neat" or "cool"

Synopsis

The Drew children (Simon, Jane, and Barney) arrive with their parents to spend four weeks in a house in Cornwall that their Great-Uncle Merry has rented for them all. On their first full day in the house it rains, and they decide to explore the house. They find a hidden door that leads to an attic where Barney finds an old map and manuscript.

That evening Norman and Polly Withers from the yacht in the harbor arrive unexpectedly and invite the family to spend the next day aboard the yacht. Jane and Mrs Drew decide not to go. On that day Jane finds an old guide book and realizes that the old map they found is of Kemare Head, (basically where they are staying), but that the shoreline in the book doesn't match the one in the map. She goes to what she thinks is the vicarage to ask about the map in the book, but the man there, Mr Hastings, presses her about the map and makes her uneasy. The next day the Drew family awakens to find that their house has been robbed of all its maps. The children decide to confide in Great-Uncle Merry and ask for his help. He reads the manuscript aloud, and they learn it contains clues that will lead them to a grail. They figure out that the map is a picture. The first clue points them to some standing rocks. From the standing rocks the second clue points them to some rocks at the tip of Kemare Head. They explore the headland and find a rock covering a hole that goes down to the sea. They figure out that the grail must be hidden in a cave that they can get to from the sea.

Throughout the story they are followed and threatened by the forces of evil wearing the faces of Mr Hastings, the Witherses, Bill Hoover, and Mrs Palk. At last they find the grail, but they are trapped on the rocks as the tide rises. Great-Uncle Merry arrives in the nick of time, and Simon successfully

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Over Sea, Under Stone by Susan Cooper

throws him the grail, but as he is trying to throw him the case containing a second, very important manuscript, Mr Withers deflects it and it falls into the sea.

The grail is given to a museum to be put on display. The children tell Great-Uncle Merry they know where the case containing the second manuscript must be, but that Mr Hastings does not know. The story ends with the supposition that they will return to try to find the second manuscript.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How did the children figure out the location of the grail?

The first clue used the sun shining on a standing rock. Its shadow pointed to another standing rock in a group. The second clue, from the vantage of the second rock, used the light of the full moon to point at the Kemare Head headland. Once the children were on the headland, Rufus located a rock that moved. They found a hole under it and surmised that the grail must be down the hole in a cave they could reach from the sea. They explored the shoreline and found a cave they knew must lead to the grail. They were only able to reach the grail because the tide was particularly low right then.

Literary Analysis

What was the author's purpose in writing this book?

The author wanted to teach that the fight between good and evil continues forever, with good winning sometimes, and evil winning other times. Also, she may have wanted to show that the innocence of children will overcome evil.

Inferential Comprehension

What are some of the hints the author gives us (before we know by their actions) that the Witherses and Mr Hastings are evil?

When Jane sees Great-Uncle Merry looking at the Witherses' yacht, he is as near to frightened she has ever seen him. The boy, Bill, who is so rude to the Drew children, is going out to the Witherses' yacht. As for Mr Hastings, when Jane goes to the old vicarage, he presses her about a map until she feels uneasy. Then, the next day, all the maps in the Grey House are stolen.

Constructing Meaning

When Mr Hastings is confronting the children on the rocks, Jane thinks, "It was as if something monstrous blazed behind Mr Hastings's eyes, something not human, that filled her with a horror more vast and dreadful than anything she had felt before." What can we the reader conclude from this?

Something has possessed Mr Hastings or that Hastings is just the human image the evil one is projecting.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The Drew children use a map/manuscript to find a treasure, the grail. Have the students create a treasure map. It can be a picture, like the one in the story, or a map, viewed from above with clues marked on it.

Understanding Hist/Cultural Factors This book refers often to King Arthur. Have the students read another book or do some research on King Arthur and Merlin. Was he ever in Cornwall? Is there reference to the grail the children found? Is Merlin supposed to be able to live forever?

Understanding the Author's Craft Have the students tell the story, or some part of it, from the point of view of Mr Hastings. It would be particularly interesting to explore whether he knows he is evil, or thinks he is good and Merriman Lyon is evil. Has he been possessed by

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Over Sea, Under Stone by Susan Cooper

evil, much as he bewitched Barney, or is he actually evil?

Making Predictions Have the students keep a journal as they are reading the book and keep track of when they first recognized which characters were good and which were bad. What clued them in?

Responding to Literature This book is about the fight between good and evil. Have the students think about their lives and describe any times they have had to make a difficult choice. Do they think they made the right choice? How do they feel about the choice they made?