

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Waterman's Boy/Trouble at Marsh Harbor

by
Susan Sharpe

Book Information

Susan Sharpe, Waterman's Boy/Trouble at Marsh Harbor

Quiz Number: 6017

Macmillan, 1990

ISBN 0-02-782351-2; LCCN

170 Pages

Book Level: 4.6

Interest Level: MG

Ten-year-old Ben helps a scientist find out who is contaminating the bay. This title is also published as "Trouble at Marsh Harbor."

Topics: U.S. States/Regions, Maryland

Main Characters

Ben Warren the hero of the story; a sincere ten-year-old whose love for the waters of Chesapeake Bay makes him dream of a life as a waterman

David Watchman a government scientist who grew up nearby and now studies the health of the marshes of Chesapeake Bay; later, a mentor and role model for Ben

Duke Warren Ben's father, a veteran waterman whose way of life is threatened by growth and pollution

Mary Warren Ben's mother, an energetic and resourceful waterman's wife, whose bed-and-breakfast operation has benefited from the influx of tourists

Matt Ben's friend and companion on many enterprises both onshore and on the water

Vocabulary

copepod a small crustacean living in either salty or fresh water

culler a person working on a fishing boat to reject unacceptable or illegal crabs

gaffing hook a large, strong hook on a pole used to pull in crab pots

plankton microscopic plant or animal life floating in the ocean, which is used as food by fish

point-source pollution pollution that is traceable to a single source or location

salinity a measure of the concentration of salts in a liquid

scow a large, flat-bottomed boat with square ends

Synopsis

The story opens as ten-year-old Ben Warren hears his father departing at dawn for a day of crabbing on Chesapeake Bay. Though he longs to go with him, he is tied down to helping his mother run their in-house bed-and-breakfast. It is here that he meets an intriguing guest, scientist David Watchman, who is in Marsh Harbor to study some disturbing trends in the health of the local waters. The two have an instant affinity for each other, as Watchman understands both Ben's love for the life of a waterman and Duke Warren's desire to steer him toward college.

Ben and his friend Matt join Watchman as he collects samples of the bay waters and looks for indications as to why conditions appear to be deteriorating for both the bay and the fishing industry. Samples at one location show droplets of oil, which present a great concern for the scientist. During the town's clam festival the next day, Watchman has a chance to speak to a group of watermen gathered there decrying the decline in their way of life. He warns them that the bay is in trouble and that they need to work together to do something about it. Later, Ben and Matt head out to find clams in the marsh at the end of Main Street. They find an abandoned boat and begin to pole it down a gut and away from the marsh. Later in the day, they stumble upon a foul, stinking area of dumped oil, barrels, and other debris. After Ben tells David Watchman what he's seen, the scientist tells him the situation is very serious and warns him to stay away.

Nevertheless, Ben and Matt return that night to "stake out" the dump site. Hiding behind an oak tree, they observe a truck in the act of dumping a barrel, and Ben wills himself to remember the license plate number. Ben reports what he's seen to David Watchman and sets into motion a police investigation that identifies the owners of the new

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gas station as the dumpers.

Meanwhile, the tourist issue in Marsh Harbor is coming to a head with an ordinance that would effectively stop growth in the town. At a town meeting called to discuss the proposal, the benefits of growth and problems of tourism are discussed by townspeople on both sides of the issue. As Ben listens to the discussion, he has a sudden revelation and stands up to declare to the people, "It's the bay that matters!" The people echo agreement, and after additional discussion, the mayor appoints a citizens committee to carefully evaluate growth in Marsh Harbor from all points of view.

After the meeting, Duke Warren lets Ben know he himself will serve on the committee. Although Duke surprises them all when he declares, "I want my son to be a waterman on the Chesapeake Bay," Ben turns the tables when he tells them he might want to be a scientist instead.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What is the connection between the idea of growth in general and the oil dump in particular?

It is made clear that the owners of the "new" gas station are responsible for the dumping. Given that the new station is seen as a sign of the unwanted outgrowth of tourism in the town, the dump becomes a symbol for all that is negative about growth and tourism in Marsh Harbor.

Literary Analysis

How does the author use the Dari Dreme as a symbol for the old way of life in Marsh Harbor?

The Dari Dreme is often mentioned in passing as a fixture in the town. At the town meeting, someone suggests that the Dari Dreme could be torn down to make room for a parking lot, but in the end, the people agree to a more careful approach in planning their town's future. To reiterate the idea that the old way of life endures, Ben is described riding past the Dari Dreme in the final sentence of the book.

Inferential Comprehension

After the long town meeting, Duke Warren says to Ben, "I think it's just beginning." What did he mean?

This comment signifies a significant change in Duke Warren's attitude toward scientists and government regulations. It is also the beginning of a new era of concern and cooperation for the town and the marsh. This idea is borne out later when Duke reveals he has become a part of the mayor's committee to study growth in Marsh Harbor.

Constructing Meaning

People at the Marsh Harbor town meeting have very different opinions about what should happen in their town. Each side gives persuasive arguments to support these opinions. Can you identify the basic reason(s) most people feel the way they do?

For most people, it is a matter of money. Opponents to growth fear new taxes, while others talk about how new businesses will bring new jobs and prosperity. Opponents to growth also decry the loss of a way of life, and oppose change.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting This story takes place in a unique setting on the shores of Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. A story often becomes more meaningful when the setting is better understood. To facilitate an understanding of the unique cultural and geographic setting of the Chesapeake Bay, distribute atlas maps of the

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state of Maryland to the class. As a group, study the characteristics of Chesapeake Bay. Locate the state capital at Annapolis. Then, based on the physical characteristics described in the book, locate a likely spot for the imaginary town of Marsh Harbor. Ask students to show "their" Marsh Harbor, and ask them why they chose that location.

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told in the third person by an all-knowing narrator. This technique is often useful because it affords the opportunity to reveal the internal thoughts and emotions of several characters throughout the book. As an exercise in understanding point of view as a literary technique, ask students to rewrite the Town Meeting scene from the point of view of David Watchman, Ben Warren, or Duke Warren. The intended result of this writing assignment is to demonstrate how use of the first-person may allow greater revelation or more in-depth understanding of the narrator-character.

Extending Meaning One interesting aspect of this story is the idea that people's names may say something about their characters, their backgrounds, or the things they are meant to accomplish in life. David Watchman, the scientist, sees his role as "watcher" of the bay. With Watchman's help, Ben Warren discovers the meaning in his own name, and realizes that he may have an important role in "warning" people about the threats to their environment. During a class discussion, ask students to consider this idea with respect to their own lives or the lives of famous people. Can they name any people whose lives or characters seem reflected in their names?

Identifying Persuasive Language The town of Marsh Harbor experiences growing pains as a result of increased tourism and a decline in the fishing industry. The townspeople seem to polarize around the issue of the new sewer ordinance, and the Town Meeting provides an opportunity for the author to present the arguments of each side. Students are likely aware of a controversial issue in their own school, town, or state: a historical building slated for

destruction, a new mine trying to gain a permit, a proposal for tax increases. As an exercise in understanding the art of debate, the use of persuasive language, and the importance of expressing views in a public forum, stage your own "Classroom Meeting" to discuss something of importance in your classroom, school, or town. Assign students to one of four categories: pro, con, "devil's advocate," and neutral. After the debate, ask students whether their own opinions have changed, stayed the same, or were otherwise affected by their own "Classroom Meeting."