

The Cay Study Guide

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For the novel by Theodore Taylor



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Progeny Press

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Synopsis

The Cay, by Theodore Taylor, follows the story of Phillip Enright, an 11-year-old American boy living in Curaçao with his parents during the start of the Second World War. When German submarines begin torpedoing oil transport ships near the island, Phillip's mother decides she and Phillip will sail back to America to be safe.

Unfortunately, their boat is torpedoed before it leaves the Caribbean, and Phillip is stranded on a raft with a black deckhand named Timothy. Before long, Phillip goes blind from an injury suffered during the shipwreck and must rely on Timothy, a man Phillip has been taught to distrust because he is black.

When the pair finds a small island to wait out their rescue, Phillip learns that what is on a man's inside is much more important than the color of his skin.

Chapters 18 & 19

Vocabulary:

Part One:

Use the context clues in the following sentences to determine the meanings of the underlined words. Compare your definitions with the dictionary definitions.

1. I knew how the breeze sounded when it crossed the sea grape. It fluttered the small leaves.

Meaning:

Dictionary Definition:

2. The smoke would rise from the cay in a fat, black column to lead the planes up the Devil's Mouth.

Meaning:

Dictionary Definition:

3. It began to pop and crackle as the flames got to the natural oil in the branches.

Meaning:

Dictionary Definition:

4. Worse, I knew that the smoke might have blotted out the lines of rocks that spelled help.

Meaning:

Dictionary Definition:

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10. badgering

Definition:

Sentence:

11. priority

Definition:

Sentence:

Questions:

1. How has Phillip learned to compensate for his blindness?
2. What happens the first time Phillip hears an airplane in these chapters?
3. Why do you think Phillip says he feels “no shame” in sobbing in Chapter 18?
4. What does Phillip figure out about the signal smoke and how does he fix the problem?
5. List three things about Phillip that surprise the rescuers.

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6. Why do you think the rescuers want Phillip to see a doctor? Why is Phillip surprised that they want him to see a doctor?

7. How is life different for Phillip when he returns to Willemstad—how have his relationships with the people changed?

8. Phillip says he will someday charter a boat to find the island. Why do you think he wants to do this?

Thinking About the Story:

9. When Phillip is first rescued, he tells the captain of the ship his story. Why does Phillip think the Captain does not fully believe his story?

10. In Chapter 19, Phillip tries to tell his story to his parents:

I tried to tell them all about Timothy and the cay. But it was very difficult. They listened, of course, but I had the feeling that neither of them really understood what had happened on our cay.

Do you think it is the events that had happened to him that Phillip's parents do not understand or the changes that have occurred inside of him? Why might they not understand?

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11. How has Phillip's mother changed since he saw her last?

Dig Deeper:

12. In Chapter 18, after each airplane leaves, Phillip seems to despair. Read 1 Kings 19:1–10. In two or three sentences, explain what has happened to Elijah and what he is feeling. How are Phillip's feelings similar to Elijah's feelings?
13. Read 1 Kings 19:10–18. What does God tell Elijah about himself, other people, and Elijah's role in these verses?
14. How is Phillip's experience after the second plane leaves similar to Elijah's?

Answer Key

Chapters 1 & 2

Vocabulary:

Part One:

1. eager to learn or know about something; 2. agitated or stirred; 3. uneasy or fearful; 4. lacking courage; 5. trembled, shaken with a slight rapid motion

Part Two:

6. c; 7. e; 8. d; 9. a; 10. b

Questions:

1. German submarines bombed Aruba, Curaçao's sister island.
2. No. He is too excited and wants to see the enemy U-boats and can't imagine a torpedo could pick him to hit out of everything else on the island.
3. No, he thinks it will be up to the United States to protect them because the Germans had defeated the Netherlands and her navy was scattered.
4. Phillip's father was an expert in refineries and gasoline production, and he was helping to run the refinery in Willemstad.
5. Any of the following are acceptable: She was homesick for Virginia; she missed her nice yard and home in Virginia; she didn't feel safe in Curaçao; she hated the smell of oil and gas; she didn't like living so close to so many black people.
6. That even though he says he is not afraid, he is beginning to understand the seriousness of the war and is beginning to feel some fear about his situation.
7. They were afraid they would get torpedoed by the Germans. They demanded a naval escort.
8. He calls his mother a coward, but she doesn't change her mind. He thinks he might hide, but realizes the island is too small and that it would just cause his father more trouble. He tries to speak to his father, but refuses to go against his mother.

Thinking About the Story:

9. The first sentence of the book reads, "Like silent, hungry sharks that swim in the darkness of the sea, the German submarines arrived in the middle of the night." The author is comparing German submarines to "silent, hungry sharks." Answers may vary. The imagery is very striking and vivid. Immediately we sense the danger and potential danger hidden in the book. Already it is exciting.
10. Phillip Enright is the narrator of *The Cay*. He is a first-person narrator.
11. Answers will vary. Advantages: We get to learn more about how Phillip feels. We get to know exactly what he is thinking. It keeps the story exciting because we learn things as Phillip does and it can make us feel a part of the story. We can identify with the narrator. Disadvantages: We have to decide whether Phillip is telling us the truth about everything, especially his feelings. We have to decide if he understands what is going on or what he is telling us. We only know what Phillip knows and see what he sees.
12. *The Cay* is set in 1942, during World War II, in the Caribbean.
13. Answers will vary. Mr. Enright: patient—he answers all of Phillip's questions, even when he is tired after a long day of work; he is patient with Phillip's mother as she tries to get them all to leave together; calm—he is not anxious about the ships not moving in and out of the island, even when the fresh supplies were getting low; he is willing to work on the ships; does not want to leave; honest—tells Phillip the truth; understanding—he understands why people are afraid and why sailors will not go with the ships. Mrs. Enright: fearful—she often worries about Phillip's safety; she wants to leave the island as soon as possible when the Germans are close; she is afraid to fly; angry—similar to fearful in some of the examples, she gets angry when she is afraid; impatient—she doesn't want Phillip to ask questions; bigoted or racist—she doesn't like being around black people; manipulative—when Phillip or his father talk about staying on Curaçao, she says they don't love her.
14. Phillip's opinion of the war changes when he sees the Germans blow up the *Empire Tern* right after he and his father had watched it refuel and leave. Answers may vary, but should have an awareness that Phillip had just been on the ship with all its men, so he was very aware of the fact that people were killed and who those people were. Death became real to him, not abstract.