

Carry On, Mr. Bowditch Study Guide

by Carole Peltari

For the novel by Jean Lee Latham



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Synopsis

As a small boy Nathaniel Bowditch loves to work with numbers. School is Nat's favorite time. But Nat gives up his dream to go to Harvard when he must quit school to work for his father. Later, he becomes an indentured servant, working in a ship's chandlery. In spite of his situation, Nat continues his education by teaching himself. He works all day in the chandlery and in the evenings fills his notebooks with everything he wants to learn.

Nat's diligence pays off. When Nat's nine-year indenture is through, he is given the opportunity to go to sea where the things he has learned are put to use. Sailing is dangerous, not only because of enemies on the high seas, but because, as Nat discovers, many of the books and tables sailors use for navigation have errors—errors that cost lives. With the same diligence he used to teach himself, Nat begins to compile information for a new book to correct the errors of the old tables and give every sailor knowledge of navigation.

Carry On, Mr. Bowditch is the biography of a man who, although unable to attend school, educated himself so thoroughly that sailors still use the book he wrote almost 200 years ago.

Chapters 21 & 22

Vocabulary:

Read the sentence from the book, noticing the use of the underlined word. In the blank space after each sentence, write the letter of the definition that comes closest in meaning to the underlined word.

1. “You know where the rookeries of the seals are and you know the season they gather there.” ____
 - a. rocky places
 - b. shallow places in the sea
 - c. breeding places
 - d. coastal waters

2. “Polly,” he said, “you’ve married a capitalist!” ____
 - a. someone whose name starts with a capital letter
 - b. one who invests in business enterprises
 - c. one who plays tricks on others
 - d. one who writes books

3. Zack sidled to the door before he fired his parting shot. ____
 - a. ran
 - b. hopped
 - c. walked backwards
 - d. walked sideways

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Questions:

1. What was Polly's reaction when Nat told her he was writing a book on navigation? How did Polly convince Mrs. Boardman that Nat's book was a good idea?
2. Who did Nat ask to judge his book? Why did he choose those men?
3. What happened to the *John*, the ship of which Nat was part owner? What happened to the men on board?
4. Nat didn't think the English would pay attention to his book because it was written by an American. How was he proved wrong?
5. What did Nat feel was the final step in convincing people around the world that his book was absolutely reliable?

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What opportunity did he have to take that final step? Write the sentence that tells you Polly gave Nat her approval to take that step.

Thinking About the Story:

6. Why did Nat work so hard to write his book?
7. Why could Nat not talk to most people in Salem about the book he was writing?
8. What made Nat sad when he finally was able to attend Harvard's graduation ceremony? What ended up making that the proudest day of his life?
9. Why were the people of Salem surprised at the appearance of Lem Harvey?

Dig Deeper:

10. Read Mark 6:1–6. Dr. Holyoke joked with Nat that his book would be accepted everywhere in America except Salem. “A prophet is without honor in his own country, you know,” he told Nat. Dr. Holyoke’s words are a paraphrase of Jesus’ words as recorded in Mark 6:4: “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”

Why was it harder for people in Nazareth to believe Jesus could do miracles? Why was it harder for people in Salem to believe that Nat had written the most important book in the world on navigation?

11. Do you find it hard to convince your family of the importance of your accomplishments or your goals?

What is the most important thing you have done or hope to do? What can you do to help others realize the importance of this thing? What will you do if your family and others close to you don’t realize the importance of what you have done?

Answer Key

Note: Most of the questions in Progeny Press study guides deal with students' understanding and interpretation of issues in the novel; therefore, most answers will be individual to the student. Progeny Press answer keys are designed to be as inclusive as possible for the teacher and/or parent, giving enough background and information to judge whether the student has grasped the essence of the issue and the question. We try to point out some directions students' answers might take, which directions might be best, and some errors that may appear. Students are not expected to answer as completely as the answers provided in the Answer Key.

Chapters 1–3

Vocabulary:

1. shilling; 2. towhead; 3. spectacles; 4. gables; 5. pindling; 6. kindling, bellows; 7. privateer; 8. cargo; 9. wharf; 10. ballast; 11. apothecary; 12. currency.

Characterization:

1. Mary, 13; Hab, 11; Lizza, 8; William, 3; Sammy, baby (age not given).
2. Nat, c; Hab, g; Mary, b; Lizza, e; Granny, f; Father, d; Mother, a.
3. Granny exclaimed that the privateers were just pirates. She warned Nat's father to stay out of taverns or he might find himself on a privateer when he woke up. Granny has a negative attitude toward sailing. She does not think sailing is safe, and she does not want Nat's father to go back to sea.
4. Nat's father tells the sailor that he's bad luck. Then he tells the sailor that it's better for him to be a barrel-maker. Throughout his protesting he stares across the water, and "he shook his head quickly, as though trying to forget something." Nat's father seems to be trying to convince himself that being a barrel-maker is better. Although he says it's better, he does not appear to be happy doing his trade.

Questions:

1. To keep himself awake, six-year-old Nat was subtracting to find his brothers' and sisters' ages four years before (or when they had moved away from Salem).
2. The family's new home was a weather-beaten little cottage in a weed-grown yard.
3. Nat's father lost his ship when it went aground on the Anguilla Reef. Nat's father was going to be a cooper—a barrel maker—in Salem.

Thinking About the Story:

4. The story begins during the American Revolution.
5. Privateers captured British ships, took the men prisoner, and sold the ship and cargo. Answers will vary.
6. Answers will vary. After having been at sea, he seems unhappy simply making barrels. While trying to convince the sailor that he's not interested in signing on a privateer he seems to be trying to convince himself as well. "He makes barrels." [Father] stared out across the water again; his smile faded. 'Barrels . . . ' He sighed."
7. Master Watson thought Nat was too young to learn anything. He did not believe Nat had worked the problem himself.
8. Master Watson apologized to Nat for not believing he could do the problem. He stood over Nat watching him work the problem.