

Castaway – The diary of Samuel Abraham Clark, Disappointment Island, 1907 (My Story)

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Synopsis

Samuel Clark is 13 years-old. His parents both recently died in a house fire and the only family that he has left is his 21 year-old brother Joseph. Joseph is a seaman who is based in England. Mr Harrington, a close family friend, took Samuel in after his parents' deaths. He paid for Samuel to travel from Dunedin to Sydney where he is to board the *Dundonald* and work as a cabin boy to pay for his passage to England, where he will reunite with Joseph.

Life aboard the *Dundonald* is a real eye-opener for Samuel. It takes him some time to find his sea-legs, the hours are long and Mr Smith, the ship's steward, takes an instant dislike to him. Samuel soon adapts however and is eager to learn from the more experienced crew members and listen as they regale him with tales of their adventures at sea.

The passage that the *Dundonald* is taking is a perilous one. The ship heads through the Southern Ocean which is known for its freezing temperatures and rough seas. *Dundonald* is hit by several ferocious storms and after a few days of fog, loses her bearings. Unbeknownst to the Captain and crew the *Dundonald* has sailed close to Disappointment Island. The *Dundonald* hits a sunken reef. The ship slams into the sheer rock cliffs that span the Island. The men are forced to abandon ship and many lose their lives in the process. Samuel is one of only 15 survivors who make it on to Disappointment Island.

The shipwreck survivors face great challenges on Disappointment Island. Food is scarce and, initially, all there is to eat are raw Mollymawks, a kind of Albatross. But they are an extremely resourceful group and soon they have made fire, learned how to hunt seals for food and clothing and have built grass huts – a necessity for keeping out the cold and rain as the extremely harsh winter approaches. As the months drag on the spirits of the castaways begin to dampen. The men know that if there is any chance of surviving another winter or being rescued they must travel to Auckland Island, which is 6 km's away. Will they be able to find the resources necessary to build a sea worthy vessel on bleak, unforgiving Disappointment Island or will the harsh elements slowly take their lives one by one, as they have taken the lives of their friends before them?

Text Type

Castaway, The diary of Samuel Abraham Clark, Disappointment Island, 1907 is the astonishing story of a young boy who is shipwrecked on a desolate Island. Told in diary form, the story gives the reader a fascinating insight into how Samuel and the other men manage to survive the Island, and Samuel's thoughts and feelings about his predicament. The story is based on factual events and students will find the information provided in the Historical Notes and the photographs at the end of the novel not only interesting, but also helpful as they provide the context in which the remarkable story of survival takes place.

Samuel is a likeable hero who shows bravery and resilience. He is only 13 years-old when he loses both of his parents. It is only months later when the *Dundonald* smashes into Disappointment Island and Samuel must adapt and learn new skills in order to be able to survive in this harsh environment. Despite his young age, Samuel doesn't complain. He learns to hunt, make clothes and build huts. He endures the physical pain of badly cut feet and intense cold and becomes an integral part of the group – contributing and pulling his weight around camp, just like the older men.

Castaway is a classic survival story. Students will be impressed by the ingenuity and fortitude shown by the men stranded on Disappointment Island. Themes include survival, courage, teamwork, the destructive forces of nature and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

Sharing the Novel

The novel has been divided up as follows: Historical Note (pp. 195-207) and Chapter 1 (pp. 11-25), Chapters 2-4 (pp. 29-94), Chapters 5-6 (pp. 97-152) and Chapters 7-9 (pp. 155-192).

During the shared sessions encourage students to ask questions to clarify their understanding of words and ideas raised in the novel. Have them read the Historical Note and study the photographs and maps so that they have a clear understanding about the context in which the story is set. Encourage students to discuss the characters in the story and identify the qualities and characteristics they possess that allow them to survive despite the unforgiving conditions. Have them make predictions about what is going to happen in the novel. Students should make inferences and think critically about the events that occur. Wherever possible, have students relate the story to their own experiences and broader knowledge.

Introducing the Novel

Study the front cover of the novel and read the blurb.

- The story is a diary. What do you expect from a novel set out in diary form?
- Who does the diary belong to?

- When and where is the story set?
- What event did the author base the story on?
- What is the name of the ship that the main character is travelling on?
- Where is the main character heading when his ship is wrecked?
- Where do the survivors of the shipwreck end up?
- What challenges do you think they will face?

Students read the Historical Note and study the photographs at the end of the novel (pp. 195-207).

- Where are the Auckland Islands situated? Who was the first European to discover the Islands?
- What are the roaring forties and the furious fifties?
- Why did so many ships wreck on the Auckland Islands?
- Why did the group of settlers led by Charles Enderby soon leave the Islands? What was left behind by the Enderby settlement?
- How did the Government try and help the survivors of shipwrecks?
- Where is Disappointment Island located? Describe the Island. What animals live there?
- Why was the *Dundonald* considered an unlucky ship?
- How many *Dundonald* crew died when she hit Disappointment Island? How many survived?

Teacher reads Chapter 1 (pp. 11-25) aloud to the class. Students follow along in their books.

Comprehension Chapter 1 (pp. 11-25)

- What is the name of the ship that Samuel is travelling on? Where is he going? Where is he travelling from?
- How old is Samuel?
- Who gave Sam the diary? What is special about the oilskin pouch that the diary came in?
- In what ways has Harrington helped Sam?
- Why is Sam travelling to England?
- Why didn't Sam enjoy his school days?
- What did Sam's dad do for a job?
- What did Sam's mother hope that he would do when he left school?
- How old is Joseph? What has he been doing since he left school?
- What happened to Sam's parents?
- In what ways is Priscilla's life different to Sam's?
- How long did Sam live with the Harrington's for after his parents died? Why did he feel like he couldn't stay there any longer?
- Why did Sam have mixed emotions about working on the boat?
- Describe the *Dundonald*. Why is she considered a "doomed" ship?
- Where does Sam sleep on the ship? Describe the conditions aboard the *Dundonald*.

Discussion

- Describe Sam. What information have we learned about him so far?
- How did Sam learn the news about his parents' deaths? In what ways has the death of his parents changed his life? How would you feel if you were in his position? Do you think Sam has made the right decision by leaving the Harrington's? Why/why not?
- The story is set in 1907. How would Sam's situation be different if this calamity happened today? Do you think a 13 year-old would be allowed to work and travel alone today? Why/why not?
- Predict what is going to happen in the story next.

Students read Chapters 2-4 (pp. 29-94) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 2-4 (pp. 29-94)

- What is Samuel's first job on the ship? What hours does he have to work?
- Explain the hierarchy on the ship.
- Why does Sam believe that he will find it hard to get used to the changing of the watch?
- Who is Mr Smith? Why doesn't Sam think that he likes him?
- Who is Jakko Anderson? How old is he? Where is he from? How does Sam know that he is a good sailor?
- What does Anderson tell Sam about the Southern Ocean?
- What is it about the sailor's life that appeals to Sam?
- Describe the food situation aboard the *Dundonald*. What is becoming scarce?
- Explain how the sailors capture the shark. Why does Charlie Eyre nail the shark's tail to the jib boom?
- What dangers do the men who climb the rigging to furl the sails face?
- Describe Sam's experiences during his first storm at sea.
- Why do the men aboard the *Dundonald* sleep in their clothes when the seas are rough?
- What new skill does Sam learn from George Ivimey?
- What is "dead reckoning"? Why does the Captain have to use it to figure out the position of the ship?
- How does the Captain react when he sees land on the weather bow? What does the *Dundonald* crash into? How does the ship become trapped? Why does the Captain give the order to "clear the boats"? How does Anderson display bravery during the disaster? What happened to most of the sailors who rushed to the bow of the ship? Describe how Sam and the others manage to escape the sinking ship.
- How many men died when the *Dundonald* struck the cliffs? How did they lose their lives?

- Where does Mr Peters believe that the survivors are? Why does this make the group feel optimistic? Which Island has the group actually shipwrecked on? Why is this such bad news?
- What three things does the group desperately need if they are to survive on the Island?
- Why does Mr Peters assume the role of leader of the group?
- Why is Mr Peters' health failing?
- How do the men manage to light a fire? Why are they so excited about this? How will the fire make life more comfortable on the Island?
- What do the men manage to salvage from the wreck?
- What do the men kill for food? How does Sam feel about this?
- Why does Mr Peters order the men to explore the northern side of the Island?
- What do the group find on March 18th, 1907?
- Why does Sam have so much trouble walking?
- How does Mr Peters die? What do the rescue team remove from him? Who becomes boss when Peters dies?
- Who are the men that Sam is shipwrecked with? Why do they quarrel frequently?
- Describe a typical day in Sam's life on the Island. What challenges do he and the other men face? Why is it so important that they keep the fire going? How do the men achieve this without using all of their precious firewood?
- What is discussed at the meeting? How does Michael Pul come to the rescue?

Discussion

- Describe life aboard the *Dundonald*. What new experiences does Sam have aboard the ship? What qualities do you need to have to be a good sailor? Why do you think so many sailors are superstitious? What challenges and problems do the crew members of the *Dundonald* face before their ship is wrecked? How do they deal with them?
- Sam endures an horrific experience when the *Dundonald* smashes into the cliffs of Disappointment Island. How do you think he feels when he realises that many of his friends have lost their lives? What do you think he means when he says "where there's life, there's hope"? Do you think Sam could survive if left alone on Disappointment Island? Why/why not? What aspects of life on the Island do you think you would find the hardest and why?
- Describe the conditions on Disappointment Island. What elements of nature threaten the survival of the men? Despite the harsh conditions the group manage to live quite successfully. Why do you think this is? What qualities and attributes do the men possess that allow them to survive on the Island?
- Is Mr McLaughlin a good leader? Why/why not?
- What further problems do you think the impending winter will bring?

Students read Chapters 5-6 (pp. 97-152) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 5-6 (pp. 97-152)

- What does Sam bring back from the wreckage to help dig the ground for the huts? Who is in Sam's hut building team? Why doesn't Sam like cutting sticks for the roof? Explain how the huts are constructed. Why does building the huts help boost the men's morale?
- Who is brave enough to risk his life on the treacherous cliff to hunt the seals? How does he kill the seal? Why are the men so excited by the discovery that there are seals on the Island?
- What does Michael show the men how to make out of the sealskin? What do the men use for needles and thread?
- Why does Mr McLaughlin suggest that the men change their living arrangements? Who does Sam end up sharing his hut with?
- What caused the fire in Mr McLaughlin's hut? Why do the other men enjoy teasing Harry about the fire incident?
- What makes the shrieking noise outside the men's huts? Why haven't the castaways seen signs of them before?
- What does Herman discover about the muttonbirds? What new garments does he sew for the group? Why are the muttonbirds so hard to catch?
- How has the group's method of cooking improved since they first came to the Island?
- How does the seal help Sam and Albert discover a safer route to the sea?
- How does the group discover that they can smoke mollymawks? Why is this discovery so important? What do the men build to help with the smoking process? What problems do they encounter when they first try to smoke the birds?
- Why do the men believe that their only chance of survival is to reach Auckland Island? Why do they decide to build a canvas covered boat instead of a raft? What does Santiago Marino find that greatly excites the men? How does Sam contribute to the building of the boat? What are the oars made out of?
- Which three men volunteer to paddle the boat to Auckland Island? Why does Mr McLaughlin ask them to light a fire when they arrive?
- Describe the ordeal that the three men went through on Auckland Island.
- What do the castaways do to try and attract the attention of the passing ship? How do the men feel when they realise that the ship has failed to spot them?
- Why doesn't Sam tell anyone that it is his birthday?
- How does Sam hurt his leg? How do the other men look after Sam when he is injured?

Discussion



- The shipwrecked men have only limited resources on the Island. In what ways do they show ingenuity? How does their “innovativeness” improve their quality of life?
- Come up with activities that the men on the Island could do to help alleviate the inevitable boredom.
- The longer the men spend on Disappointment Island, the lower their morale gets. Why is this? What event occurs that leaves the men feeling hopeless and depressed? Why do you think keeping busy by building things and hunting helps improve the spirits of the men?
- What would you miss the most about home if you were stranded on an Island?
- Do you believe that the men are making the right decision in risking their lives to reach Auckland Island? Why/why not? Explain your answer.

Students read Chapters 7-9 (pp. 155-192) independently before the next shared session.

Comprehension Chapters 7-9 (pp. 155-192)

- Why does Sam think that the men “look like savages” after seven months?
- What announcement does Mr McLauchlin make on September 30th? What happens to the first boat the men launch?
- Why does Mr McLauchlin decide to remain behind on the Island rather than travel on the boat?
- Why does Mr Knudson choose Sam to be one of his crew? Why is it so important that this mission be successful?
- Describe the groups’ journey to Auckland Island. Why are the men so uncomfortable? What happens to the boat when they first arrive?
- Why is it vital that the men find the depot? Why do they decide to climb the steep hills rather than follow the coastline?
- Why is the journey through the bush to the depot so difficult for the men? Why does Sam feel like giving up?
- What does Mickey Gratten spy across the creek? Why does his discovery give the rest of the group an energy boost?
- What provisions and supplies do the men find at the depot? How do they know that a government ship will be arriving soon? What do the men find in the third shed?
- Why do the men on Disappointment Island have trouble recognising their fellow castaways when they come back for them?
- Why does Mr Knudson insist that the first group of men to reach Auckland Island wade ashore? How will these men get to the depot? Why do the other men find it hard going reaching the depot?

- What simple things are the men able to do at the depot that provide them with pleasure?
- What sources of food do the men find on neighbouring Islands? Why do you think “being safe feels somehow strange” to Sam?
- What does Mr McLauchlin suggest that the men build? Why is it important that the men remain busy? How do the men keep their spirits up?
- How do the stranded men react when they see the steamer? Why doesn't the *Hinemoa* pick the men up right away? How does Sam feel when he says his final goodbye to Disappointment Island? What does he gather from the camp to take with him?
- Where do the men bury Mr Peters? What does George Ivimey make Peters' cross out of?
- How do the people of Bluff treat the castaways when they return home? How does Sam feel when he has to say goodbye to the men that he has lived in such close quarters with for over eight months? Why does Sam feel like he owes Mr McLauchlin his life?
- Describe Sam's reunion with Joseph. What plans do the pair make for the future?

Discussion

- How do you think Sam's experiences on Disappointment Island will change him as a person? What new skills has he learnt? In what ways did Sam contribute to the groups' survival on the Island? What will Sam's life be like now that he has survived this ordeal?
- What first reactions do you think the crew members of the *Hinemoa* would have had towards the castaways? What questions do you think they asked the survivors? What aspects of their camp would they have found the most interesting and why? What would have been going through their heads when they saw the raggedy men in their sealskin clothes?
- How do you think Sam and the other men feel when they know that they are going to be rescued? What do you think the first things the men will do when they get back to civilisation will be? What would you do and why?
- Identify an important theme and explain how it is developed in the novel.
- Considering the stressful situation that the men are in there is surprisingly little conflict between them. Why do you think this is?

Activities

Plot – Complete a storyboard that shows 15 important events that occur in *Castaway*. Under each illustration write a brief summary about the event that is being depicted.

Research – Conduct a research assignment on the *Dundonald* and the ship wreck that occurred on Disappointment Island. Formulate 4 open-ended focussing questions and brainstorm possible sources of information. Record your research process in a log. Present your information on a poster, as a report, or as an oral presentation.

Advertisement – Design a poster for the library advertising *Castaway*. Your poster should include a brief plot summary of the story and combine verbal and visual features to convey ideas. Remember that the purpose of your poster is to encourage people to read the book.

Writing – Imagine that you are Samuel. Write a diary entry for him dated 1 year after his last entry. In it explain what has happened to you in the past year, what you are doing now and how the shipwreck ordeal has affected your life.

Writing – Write a poem about Disappointment Island. Try and incorporate descriptive and figurative language into your poem to create imagery.

Writing – You are a news reporter. Write an article about the rescue of Sam and his fellow castaways. Think carefully about the important aspects of Sam’s adventure that should be included in the article. Include quotes from people involved.

Survival Guide – Using information gathered from the novel complete a survival guide for shipwreck survivors that will provide them with suggestions and tips on things such as building a fire, shelter and finding food.

Character – Complete a character profile for Mr McLauchlin. Describe the attributes and qualities that he possesses that make him an effective leader.

Setting – Using the information contained in the novel design a map of Disappointment Island that shows all of the important locations.

Setting – Using the information from the novel, design and build a diorama to depict the castaways’ “home” on Disappointment Island. You may choose to focus on the huts, or a broader area. Use the description in the book to add detail to your diorama – how many huts were there? What was in the huts? What kept them warm? What cooking “utensils” did they have? What did their environment look like? What animals and plants were there?