

Bold Journey Short Guide

Bold Journey by Charles Bohner

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Overview

Bold Journey, subtitled "West with Lewis and Clark," is the story of the small band of explorers commissioned by President Jefferson in 1804 to explore America's great northwest, areas never before visited by white men. As told by Hugh McNeal, an eighteen-year-old army private, however, it becomes much more than a story of adventure and exploration. It is the story, also, of a young man's coming of age—learning about himself, his fellow human beings, and the world he lives in. The lessons Hugh learns are thus important to any young person growing up in a world of adults, developing his own character, personality, and values for a lifetime.

Hugh's experiences not only mature him, they make him into a more sensitive and open-minded human being than he was at the outset of the journey. Thrown in with a bunch of strange men, including seasoned army veterans, French Canadian trappers, Indian scouts, and others, he learns to handle himself amidst hard-living, sometimes disreputable members of the group without losing either his individuality or his sense of loyalty—to himself, to the Corps of Discovery (as Lewis and Clark's expeditionary force was called), or to his country. He emerges from the two-year ordeal—for much of it was an ordeal of the most gruelling type—a tough-minded but not hard-hearted young man ready and able to take his place in the growing society of America in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

About the Author

Charles Bohner was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on November 23, 1927, the son of a Presbyterian minister who died while Charles was still young. He grew up in Wilmington and attended public schools there, graduating from P. S. Dupont High School in 1944. He matriculated at Syracuse University, but his undergraduate years were interrupted by wartime service in the U.S. Army.

Upon returning to Syracuse, he majored in English and received his bachelor's degree in 1950, along with many other veterans in the largest class in that university's history.

Bohner went on to do graduate work in English and American literature at the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned an M.A. in 1952.

He became an instructor at Syracuse University (1952-1954) while continuing his studies in American literature.

In 1955 he returned to his native state to teach in the English Department of the University of Delaware. In 1957 he received his Ph.D. in American literature from the University of Pennsylvania.

At the University of Delaware, where he still teaches, he has served in many capacities: as director of the American Studies Program, chair of the English Department, and a member of the Winterthur program in early American culture. Among his publications are books on Robert Penn Warren and anthologies of short stories used at many colleges and universities. He has written several novels, but *Bold Journey* is the first one for young adults. It was inspired by his reading of the Lewis and Clark journals, in which he came across the name of Hugh McNeal, the youngest and least known member of the expedition. The novel is Bohner's imaginative rendering of the journey as seen through the eyes of this young man.

Setting

The story begins at Fort Massac on the Ohio River, where young Hugh is a recent army recruit. Having been brought up on the river (his father is a boat-builder), he knows a good deal about boats and boating, and for this reason he is selected by Captains William Clark and Meriwether Lewis to join their Corps of Discovery. Sent by President Jefferson to discover what lay within the newly acquired territories westward of what only recently had become the United States of America, and to find an overland route through that territory to the Pacific Ocean, Lewis and Clark choose the best men they can find for this important, difficult, and dangerous job. Men of various abilities and experiences are selected to start the journey down the Ohio River (the easy part) and then up the Mississippi to where it meets the mighty Missouri River. Since that part of the journey is all upstream, the way becomes more arduous, as the men can no longer sail down the river but must row against the current.

As the weeks turn into months and their progress is not as rapid as the leaders could wish, some dissension occurs in the ranks, and one of the men even tries to desert. Later, another man is court martialed for insubordination. Both are drummed out of the Corps of Discovery and eventually sent back in disgrace to Fort Massac. After spending a winter near the headwaters of the Missouri River, the group pushes on over the Rocky Mountains until they find the Columbia River and make their way at last to the Pacific Ocean. Throughout their journey, which takes them through places of sometimes indescribable beauty and awesome majesty, they come in contact with Native Americans of various tribes—Sioux, Blackfeet, Mandans, Shoshone—all of whom have their own ways and their own attitudes toward the white men traveling across their land. Not all of the Indians (as the white men call them) are hostile, but all must be treated with care and some deference.

The explorers bring gifts, depending upon these original settlers for supplies, horses, and guides. Luckily for the expedition, they get the kinds of help they need when most they need it.



Social Sensitivity

Although the time of the narrative is the first decade of the last century, when social concerns were quite different from those of today, *Bold Journey* reveals a remarkable sensitivity to people and events. This is particularly true in the episodes involving Native Americans. Without becoming sentimentalized or historically misrepresented, they appear as human as anyone else. The episode involving a 2848 *Bold Journey* squaw's reunion with her brother, a Shoshone chieftain, is especially moving, as is the greeting between the white men and the Indians noted above. Frictions among the soldiers and the others in the Corps of Discovery also reveal social concerns, as in Jack Newman's feelings about slavery and his position as a soldier under the command of two slave-owners. Nothing is made of America's "manifest destiny," its conquest of all the land between the Atlantic and the Pacific—rightly so, as the doctrine was developed much later. While the Lewis and Clark expedition may have contributed something to the concept, the men involved in this journey of exploration have no other awareness than that they are discovering what their continent is and looks like. In this sense, they retain their innocence, while becoming educated in other ways.

Bohner's characters also show a sensitivity to animals, which should appeal to those concerned about animal rights. While horses had to be sacrificed to save the group from starving as they crossed the Rockies, they were not indiscriminantly slaughtered or ever mistreated. When one of the group suggests killing and eating a dog that has been with the expedition from the beginning, he is rebuffed. Hugh McNeal's relationship with the packmare Dolly, with whom he endures deprivation and hardship for many days and whom he saves on one occasion, provides some of the most tender moments in the book.



Literary Qualities

Bold Journey is a fast-moving, clearly told tale that at once grips the reader's imagination and holds it.

Each chapter has its own descriptive title, and each one builds to an impressive climax regarding the episode involved. Bohner's metaphors and similes are not only appropriate to the teller of the tale or to the other characters in it, they help to develop the personality of the characters. They usually carry with them a homey kind of wit and colorfulness, as when Hugh describes Captain Lewis becoming angry and upset at the slow progress the expedition was making: "He was like a corked kettle with the fire blazing and the steam rising." Or when Drewyer and another man are trying to discover some tracks, they "trudged ahead like oxen pulling a plow, searching the ground for a trail."

Touches of humor enliven the text, too: it is not all hard work and struggle to cross the continent. For example, when the expedition finally makes it to the headwaters of the Missouri River, Hugh runs on ahead as Captain Lewis calls after him, "Where are you going, Hugh?" McNeal doesn't answer. He keeps running, turns around, and putting one foot solidly on each bank of the stream, which is at that point about three feet wide, he shouts with his hand in the air: "Thanks be to God! I have lived to bestride the mighty Missouri!" At that even stolid Captain Lewis laughs until tears roll down his cheeks. Or later on, when the expedition at last meets up with the Shoshone, Hugh discovers to his amazement the exuberance of those people, who hug the white men tightly, their greasy war paint soaking into the soldiers' clothes in a hearty welcome such as they had never experienced. Hugh is glad when at last everyone could pull off their moccasins and settle down to smoke a peace pipe. "Making peace with those Indians," he comments, "was only a mite less trying than making war."

Bohner is adept at varying his tale and building moments of great tension, as in Hugh's story of the sudden encounter with an eight-foot high grizzly bear, or the unexpected appearance of sixty braves, decorated in war paint and mounted on horseback.

Surprises of a different kind occur also, as when the river becomes too shallow for the keelboat and the specially constructed iron framework, Captain Lewis's great "Experiment," is put together to make a shallow draft boat instead. Everything seems to be going fine, as the pieces easily fit together and elk and buffalo skins are used as covering. But the normally astute Captain Lewis had forgotten to bring—along with the rest of the cumbersome cargo that contained his "Experiment"—any tar or pitch for caulking. Never mind; a mixture composed of buffalo tallow, charcoal, and beeswax would serve. It would have to. And it did—until the next morning, when the boat is found up to the gunwales in river water and buried a foot deep in Missouri mud.



Themes and Characters

The most important character in the novel is the narrator, Hugh McNeal.

All the events are told as he experiences them, or rather as the author imagines he might have experienced them. He is a keen observer and an able soldier but one not above making mistakes, as when he hurts his hand badly and then becomes much less useful to the Corps. Brought up with a knowledge of boats and rivers by his father, whose wisdom in such matters he often recalls, he advises the leaders on handling the keelboat that Captain Lewis had specially built (not very well, as it turns out) for the expedition. Like any young man, he is attracted by the idea of exploring a vast, unknown territory, but being prudent, too, he does not at first jump at the opportunity. Nevertheless, when he is tapped for the job by the captains, he can hardly resist the offer to go with them to find the great Northwest Passage. His voyage of exploration then becomes much more than simply two years of boating, portage, and camping. It is also a journey into himself.

One of Hugh's first friends on the journey is a fellow soldier from Fort Massac, Jack Newman, a Philadelphian with apparently a good deal more education than the rest of the enlisted men. But Jack is too proud and independent-minded to make a good soldier. He resents the fact that Captain Lewis is a slave-owner and feels the captain has taken an instant dislike to him. Jack is probably wrong about the dislike, but he lets his feelings prey upon him until eventually he becomes intolerably insubordinate and is court-martialled by a tribunal of his peers. A complainer, ill-suited to army life or the expedition and its goals, he stands in direct contrast to Hugh McNeal.

Moses Reed is another soldier who contrasts with Hugh. A man who loves his drink, he tries during the voyage to get Hugh to go along with him and some others to buy homemade liquor from a farmer. When he refuses—a dollar is a whole week's pay, and that's what his share would cost—Hugh gets on the wrong side of Moses Reed. As the expedition makes its way westward, Reed becomes more and more dissatisfied and finally decides to desert. He is caught soon afterwards, but instead of being shot, he is punished by being made to run the gauntlet four times; that is, he must run through two lines of the men who whip him with the ramrods of their rifles. No longer a member of the Corps, he is treated as a prisoner until he is finally sent back with Jack Newman, who by that time has also been court-martialled, in disgrace.

The captains, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, also present interesting contrasting characters. Clark is the more amiable and humane of the two, ready with a soft word or a joke when the occasion demands. Lewis is far more distant and superior. But both share a dedication to the work in hand, and both show immense courage under stress. For example, as the expedition struggles over the Rockies in blizzard conditions and food is running out, Lewis surreptitiously returns his ration of food so that the other men, many of whom are weak with starvation, may have more to eat. Nevertheless, his fury blazes out when his men make costly errors, and he clearly does not suffer fools easily.



Probably a deeply insecure man, he dies a few years after the journey is completed, some say by his own hand, whereas Clark goes on to become a general in the army and finally governor of the Missouri Territory.

Among the other vivid characters who people this novel of courage and endurance are George Drewyer, the French Canadian hunter and guide, upon whom the Corps of Discovery depends for food and tracking through the wilderness. Since he is not a soldier, he does not have to wear a uniform or follow army protocol, and he sometimes laughs at such procedures. But he is wily and clever, and he can find a trail when others see nothing at all. He has lived among Indians and knows their ways; hence, he is for that reason, too, an invaluable member of the group.

Disasters hit the expedition from time to time but do not permanently halt its forward progress. For instance, when Charley Floyd (a sergeant popular with his men) falls ill, he is carried along in the keelboat; but when he dies, he is buried in a simple ceremony along the banks of the Missouri, and the expedition carries on.

His death affects everyone, not only his friend Hugh, but even the raucous Frenchmen, who typically sing and shout as they pull on their oars, though not on the day of Charley Floyd's death. Another emotional moment occurs when the little packmare that Hugh leads over the Rocky Mountains loaded down with supplies slips, falls, and rolls down the slope to her death. Hugh has become very fond of the mare, who has struggled valiantly along with him and the others on this most difficult part of the journey, but her death cannot be mourned long. The journey must push forward, and it does.



Topics for Discussion

1. Explain Hugh McNeal's initial hesitation and then acceptance of the offer to join the Lewis and Clark expedition. What kind of young man is he? Can you relate to him?
2. Why does Jack Newman become so discontented? Is he a chronic complainer? What is his effect upon Hugh? Upon other members of the expedition?
3. Early in the novel, the French Canadian Drewyer shows Hugh something that turns out to be an Indian scalp. What is the point of this episode? How does it affect Hugh?
4. Later in the novel, Hugh and Drewyer go on a hunt together to get food for the others. How does Hugh comport himself, especially when they sight the grizzly bear? Is this incident also part of his growing maturity?

Explain how.

5. Not all of the men in the expedition share the same attitude toward the Native Americans encountered on the way. Compare and contrast these attitudes, and if you can, explain how they have been formed.
6. Why do Lewis and Clark decide to take along the feeble Frenchman, Charbonneau, his sixteen-year-old wife, Sacagawea, and their little papoose? Is their knowledge of the Shoshone language the only reason? Do Lewis and Clark make the right decision?
7. Describe the character of Captain Meriwether Lewis in detail. Hugh says at one point, "He was a hard man to serve, but he was smart." Is he right about him?
8. By contrast to Lewis, the character of William Clark seems pale. Do you agree? If so, is this difference important?
9. Show how Hugh's observations become more acute and perceptive as the novel goes on, for example, in the way he contrasts the characters of John Shields and Reuben Field.
10. The last two chapters bring the novel to a rapid conclusion. Are they too hurried, or have the main points of the novel been sufficiently developed by then? Explain.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Bold Journey contains a map of the Lewis and Clark expedition in simple detail. Fill in the names of the states, cities, and other places, and compare what they must have been like at the time of the expedition and the way they are now.
2. Write a short biography of Captain Meriwether Lewis or of Captain William Clark. How were these men chosen for the expedition? What were their later accomplishments, and how do they relate to their experiences on the expedition?
3. How important was the Lewis and Clark expedition historically, and how was it reported at the time? Can you find any contemporary accounts of their discoveries? How closely does the novel follow actual events, as recorded in the Lewis and Clark journals?
4. Describe the nature and civilization of one of the native American people that Lewis and Clark met on their expedition. Is the description of them in Bold Journey accurate? Can you fill in more details?
5. Write a short biography of one of the two non-white people who were on the expedition with Lewis and Clark, only one of whom is mentioned in the novel (Sacagawea). How were they important to the success of the mission?
6. The expedition uses a keelboat, pirogues, and canoes at different times. Describe what each type of craft is like and what their advantages and disadvantages are for a journey of exploration. If you can, find or draw pictures of each type.



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