

Carry On, Mr. Bowditch Short Guide

Carry On, Mr. Bowditch by Jean Lee Latham

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Overview

A fictionalized biography of a great American navigator and astronomer, *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* authentically portrays the life of a unique individual.

Latham depicts the boyhood and young adult life of Nathaniel Bowditch, who lived from 1773-1838. The account ends with his fifth voyage, which takes place when Nat is in his early thirties.

Brilliant in mathematics, Bowditch wanted to study at Harvard, but his family could not afford the cost. At the age of twelve, he was indentured for nine years to a firm of ship chandlers in Salem, Massachusetts, so he diligently studied on his own, pursuing astronomy, mathematics, algebra, navigation, Latin, French, and Spanish. Men of the town encouraged him and gave him privileges in private libraries. While in his early twenties, Bowditch went to sea as ship's clerk and second mate. On board, he continued to study and also taught navigation to the common sailors. Astonished by Bowditch's teaching, his captain remarked, "Carry on, Mr. Bowditch," granting approval to the undertaking. Ultimately, Bowditch wrote his own book of modern navigational practices, which included completely revised navigation tables. This volume, *New American Practical Navigation*, was published only after Bowditch corrected some eight thousand errors in the previous "bible of navigation."

Bowditch's book remains the "seaman's bible," and it is used to this day.

About the Author

Jean Lee Latham was born on April 19, 1902, in Buckhannon, West Virginia. After earning degrees at West Virginia Wesleyan College and Ithaca College, Latham went on to complete a master's degree in 1930 at Cornell University, where her primary interests were writing and producing plays.

During the early 1930s, she was editor-in-chief of the Dramatic Publishing Company in Chicago, but she also wrote many original plays and radio dramas in this decade, some published under her own name and some under the pen names Julian Lee and Janice Gard.

During World War II Latham worked for the Army Signal Corps in various capacities. After the war, she moved to Florida, where she still makes her home, and began writing biographies for young adults.

Her better known junior biographical subjects include Eli Whitney, Samuel F. B. Morse, Sam Houston, David Glasgow Farragut, Rachel Carson, and Elizabeth Blackwell. Her biography of Nathaniel Bowditch, *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*, won the Newbery Award in 1956.

Latham's interest in the theater, combined with her ability to do excellent historical research, results in dramatic biographical novels of significant people who have helped shape the contemporary world. In addition to her writings for young adults, she has written picture-storybooks, some with Bee Lewi, and retold a number of fairy tales that she has illustrated and published individually. Several of these tales have been translated into Spanish. She has published an English translation of ballads from the Ashanti region of Africa, *Wa O' Ka* (1969), and original verse in *Who Lives Here?* (1972).

Setting

The novel's principal locale is Salem, Massachusetts, from the Revolutionary War to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Beginning when Nat is six years old and following him into adulthood, the narrative draws the reader into early American times and illustrates the importance of shipping to the new nation. Raised in a community where life revolves around sailing, Nat learns about ships and becomes interested in improving navigational practices. Bowditch sails to various ports, commenting on cities ranging from Cadiz, Spain, to Manila in the Philippines.

Social Sensitivity

Today's social and business conventions differ greatly from those of the post-American Revolutionary era, and teachers and parents may wish to put some of the attitudes depicted in *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*, in historical context.

Early American society operated on a system of apprentice and master; young people often sacrificed their freedom by entering into several years of unpaid service to masters who agreed to teach them a trade. While this system often resulted in what would be considered grave injustices today, it was one of the few ways a young person could gain experience in the late eighteenth century. Understanding this system gives the reader a greater appreciation of Nathaniel Bowditch's achievements.

In the story, Nat at age twelve agrees to the apprentice-master arrangement by signing nine-year articles of indenture. For their part, Ropes and Hodges agree to teach him the business of providing material for ships. Because of Nat's industry on the job and his attempt to teach himself at home, he gains a practical education that, coupled with his sea-going experience, enables him to write a book still used by mariners today.

Parents and teachers might also want to point out that gaining a formal education in the early years of the United States was difficult, a situation that led to the emphasis on biblical knowledge portrayed in *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*.

Those who could not afford the luxury of a formal education gleaned some education through reading the Bible daily.

Reading that was not deemed to be "spiritually enlightening" was discouraged; in fact, novels were almost unknown in America. Thus, Nat uses the Bible and foreign language dictionaries to teach himself new languages.



Literary Qualities

Latham writes such natural, lively dialogue that *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* reads like a novel, and readers may forget that it has a firm basis in fact. She gives her characters distinctive speech patterns and favorite phrases that effectively convey their attitudes and personalities. For instance, Ben Meeker always talks about his being "becalmed," a seaman's phrase for going nowhere. In Zack Selby's conversations, he frequently belittles "sailing by the book." The reader thus gets to know each character through the use of dialogue that establishes his or her frame of reference and individuality. The dialogue stresses character, but it also faithfully re-creates ways of speaking that characterized the age of sailing ships in America.

Latham does not rely on excellent dialogue alone to give her biographical novel a realistic flavor and place its events in historical context. For instance, the novel reproduces certain written documents, such as Nat's indenture and the letter awarding him an honorary degree from Harvard. Also, the narrative frequently refers to Nat passing a house with seven gables in Salem.

This alludes to the famous house that fascinated Nathaniel Hawthorne and inspired him to write *The House of Seven Gables* (1851).

Latham incorporates into her story a good deal of accurate information about sea-faring. Readers learn along with Nat, as his conversations with others often serve to explain nautical concepts.

Many details about navigation are revealed while Nat is at sea, where such knowledge is a matter of life and death.

The author's enthusiastic tone ensures that this information is interesting to the reader.

Although the novel provides explanations of many nautical techniques, readers unfamiliar with nautical terms will have to make an effort to discover what "halyards" are, where the "forecastle" (pronounced fok'cel) is, and why "rudders" are necessary to ships. Even those with some knowledge of such terms will find that the text includes some nineteenth-century phrases not frequently used today, so a dictionary can be helpful.



Themes and Characters

Born into a large family, Nathaniel Bowditch has six brothers and sisters: Hab, William, Sammy, Mary, Lizza, and Lois. He is brought up by his parents and his paternal grandmother. His father has suffered severe reverses in his shipping business and spends too much time "splicing the main brace," that is, drinking in the local taverns. To improve the family's financial situation, twelve-year-old Nat becomes an indentured servant to the firm of Ropes and Hodges, a ship chandlery that sells nautical equipment and supplies to merchant ships. Delighted at the prospect of having "one less mouth to feed," the family sends Nat to live with Mr. Hodges. Instead of receiving the formal education he desires, Nat must learn by working at the chandlery. Despite discouraging comments from Ben Meeker, an occasional visitor to the shop, Nat teaches himself after working hours by reading and then writing information into notebooks. He keeps separate notebooks for various subjects, where he records information that he gleans from others and from his own experiments. This methodical practice of writing down what he may need to know serves Nat well later in life.

"I can do it" Nat roared, "I'm doing it now! If I can teach Lupe to take a lunar, I can do anything!" He stopped... Captain Prince stared at him for a count of ten. "Carry on, Mr. Bowditch."

Several characters influence Nat's development, particularly his efforts to educate himself. Mr. Ropes allows him the use of an encyclopedia, and Dr.

Bentley, a local clergyman, the use of a private library. Nathan Reed encourages him in scientific experiments, and Sam Smith teaches him about sailing. Nautical connections are important to Nat when he goes to sea after his nine years at the chandlery. The owner of several Salem ships, Captain John Derby hires Nat to serve under Captain Henry Prince. On his voyages Nat meets many sailors, and as he teaches them navigation, several become important figures in his life, such as Lem Harvey, Zack Selby, and Lupe. Other significant characters include Elizabeth Boardman, whom Nat eventually marries, and her cousin Mary Ingersoll, called Polly.

Nat confronts the deaths of family members and friends many times during his early life. His mother and grandmother die when he is twelve, which leads to Nat's becoming indentured to Ropes and Hodges. Even before this, his seaman friend Tom Perry dies fighting the British. After the accidental death of Nat's favorite sister Lizza, most of the deaths take place at sea: Captain Boardman, Nat's brother Sammy, and his brother-in-law David Martin, who dies along with his entire crew. Lem Harvey is thought dead, but he survives the sinking of his ship, and Nat's other brothers Hab and William are lost at sea.

These deaths at sea make it more urgent that Nat complete his book on practical navigation, which may save lives at sea. In addition, the many deaths mean that Nat must grow up faster and confront personal problems at a young age.



Persistence, particularly the willingness to make the most of a bad situation, is a predominant theme in the book. Nat has a natural ability with numbers and works hard at teaching himself about astronomy, mathematics, sailing, and languages. Creativity and resourcefulness are important elements of Nat's persistence. For example, he learns foreign languages by using a dictionary and a Bible to translate from English into other languages.

Although others often assure him that things will get better, Nat does not just wait for this to happen. He works hard at his various tasks—assigned and unassigned. The narrative contrasts other characters' wishful thinking with Nat's active attempts to improve a situation in which he appears to be stalled. Even Carry On, Mr. Bowditch though this work offers no immediate payoff, he continues to learn information because it may be useful later.

A strong secondary theme is Nat's teaching. Once he has mastered a subject, he desires to teach others, and again he records successful methods of explaining navigation to the seamen with whom he sails. Nat's teaching techniques demonstrate the importance of simple and understandable explanations coupled with infinite patience.



Topics for Discussion

1. Although Carry On, Mr. Bowditch is fictionalized biography, Latham accurately portrays the events of Nathaniel Bowditch's life. How is she able to make Bowditch come to life, while at the same time maintaining factual accuracy?
2. Bowditch is of course the principal character in this book. Are there any other fully realized characters? Who are they? If you find only two-dimensional characters surrounding Bowditch, explain why.
3. Discuss Nat's relationship with his father. Why isn't Mr. Bowditch mentioned after chapter 5?
4. Does the biography treat its subject sympathetically? Too sentimentally? If so, cite examples.
5. What does the biography reveal about the process of education? What qualities do successful students possess? Successful teachers?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research Bowditch's life and compare the factual information with what Latham has written.
2. What else was happening in America during Bowditch's life (1773-1838) that might be relevant to the events described in the biography? What happened in his later life, after this book ends?
3. Observe Latham's methods of writing about the young Nat. What materials from your own life would you choose to chronicle? Why?
4. Incidents in Nat's early life shape him as an adult. Can you point out incidents in his formative years that foreshadow the person he becomes at the end of the book? Consider, for example, how he later uses what he learns at Ropes and Hodges.
5. Small details help a historical figure come to life for contemporary readers.

What are some such details about Nathaniel Bowditch and what do they reveal about his character?



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Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1972.

Contains some biographical facts on Latham.

Fuller, Muriel, ed. *More Junior Authors*.

New York: H. W. Wilson, 1963. Includes autobiographical remarks by Latham.

Fulton, Ellen. "Jean Lee Latham." *Horn Book* 32 (August 1956): 293-299.

Biographical information on Latham.

This issue also contains Latham's Newbery acceptance speech, in which she comments about the writing of *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*. Both articles are reprinted in *Horn Book's* Newbery and Caldecott Medal Books, 1956-1965.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's, 1983. Contains a detailed bibliography of Latham's writings, plus a brief critical commentary.

Related Titles

People who followed the sea have been the subject of other biographies by Latham. *Trait Blazer of the Seas* tells the story of Matthew Maury, who helped to found the U.S. Naval Academy. Latham's accounts of other sea-faring men are *Drake: The Man They Called a Pirate*, about Sir Francis Drake, the sixteenth-century English explorer; *Man of the "Monitor": The Story of John Ericsson*, about the builder of the Civil War ship the *Monitor*; *Far Voyager: The Story of James Cook*, about the eighteenth-century English captain who explored the South Seas; and *Anchor's Aweigh: The Story of David Glasgow Farragut*, about the Civil War naval hero.



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