

# Castaways of the Flying Dutchman Short Guide

## Castaways of the Flying Dutchman by Brian Jacques

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Castaways of the Flying Dutchman Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles/Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>



## Overview

In *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*, Brian Jacques uses the legend of the Flying Dutchman, a ghost ship condemned to sail the seas eternally, as the starting point for a novel that is part high seas adventure, part parable, and part mystery. The novel begins in 1620 in Copenhagen as the ill-fated Flying Dutchman sets sail under the command of the crazed and sinister Captain Vanderdecken. Neb, a mute stowaway, and Den, a black Labrador that he has saved from drowning, are put to work by the surly and villainous captain and crew and are witnesses to mutiny, murder, and a host of other malicious acts. When the mad captain forces the crew to sail around Cape Horn in a terrible storm, an angel appears and condemns the ship and its inhabitants to an eternity of ghostly sailing as punishment. Because Neb and his dog have pure hearts, the angel saves them and gives them the gift of eternal life, the ability to read one another's thoughts, and the duty to roam the world and help others in need. After a brief stay in Tierra del Fuego, Neb and Den, whose names have now changed to Ben (Neb) and Ned (Den), next turn up in the English village of Chapelvale in 1896. The quaint rural village is threatened with industrialization and ruled by a gang of juvenile delinquents, but Ben and Ned save the day as they solve the mystery that will save Chapelvale from its grim fate.

## About the Author

In an interview given just after the publication of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*, Brian Jacques described himself as an "entertainer"—a description that understates the rich and varied life experiences he brings to his writing. Brian Jacques was born June 15, 1939 in Liverpool, England.

His truck driver father had a healthy appreciation for literature and made sure that his son learned to love books. As a child, Jacques's favorite authors were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. He wrote his first story at the age of ten about a crocodile and a bird who cleaned the crocodile's teeth, but his teacher rejected the story because she thought it was too well written for a ten year old. Like most working class youth in Liverpool, Jacques left school at fifteen and over the years worked in numerous occupations including seaman, railway fireman, longshoreman, long-distance truck driver, docks representative, logger, bus driver, boxer, policeman, postmaster, stand-up comic, and member of folk singing group before settling into his current career as author and freelance radio broadcaster. In the early 2000s, he produced a weekly radio broadcast on opera, "Jakestown", and wrote stories that he said are designed to transport children away from the angst of the modern world to the world of "once upon a time, long, long ago, and far away."

Since 1987, Jacques has written and published over twenty books, including thirteen novels and two picture books in his extremely popular Redwall series. This series of stories features a wide-ranging cast of anthropomorphized animals, heroes, and heroines that can be counted on to be brave and true as they battle wicked and depraved villains. Jacques says that he uses mice as his heroes "because, like children, mice are little and have to learn to be courageous and use their wits" and because children can identify with animals and recognize good and evil and virtues and vices more easily in animal stories. Several of the Redwall novels have been honored with Carnegie Medal nominations as well as appearing on recommended reading lists suggested by both young readers and librarians, and each new addition to the series becomes an instant bestseller. Redwall fans are so enthusiastic that they have created a Redwall role-playing game on the Internet, as well as several active fan clubs and Web sites.

In 2001, Jacques turned his attention to a new kind of story with *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*. Like his Redwall stories, *Castaways* tells a story of good versus evil, but in this story Jacques turns his attention to the human world. Growing up in Liverpool, Jacques was always fascinated by the sea and by the legends of the seafaring life.

Jacques says that, "most of me life's been spent around the sea. It's always held a great fascination for me, especially the legends—and all the great stories from Homer's 'wine dark sea' to Robert Louis Stevenson." He turned to this new setting to expand his imagination to another world with other characters and to explore his signature theme of good versus evil with human characters.

# Setting

Castaways of the Flying Dutchman is told in three distinct sections, each with a different setting, and each setting signals the reader to expect a particular kind of story.

The story begins as a sea adventure and ghost story as promised by the cover illustration and front matter. This introduction is followed by a castaway survivor tale set on Tierra del Fuego with a Robinson Crusoe-type shepherd who is also a scavenger along the sea, scratching out a living with his sheep. The largest section of the story turns to old-fashioned sleuthing set in an English country village in the tradition of Enid Blyton and other English children's mysteries.

Although the transitions between sections are not seamless, with this switch of setting Jacques provides Ben and Ned with different learning experience so that they may gain in the wit and wisdom required to carry on their eternal mission.

The story begins as the Flying Dutchman sets sail from Denmark in 1620, and the first section of the novel takes place on board ship and at sea. In the first section, titled "The Ship," Jacques uses the shipboard setting to tell a story of high seas adventure in which a murderous and mutinous captain and crew are at the mercy of the ocean and the weather. Captain Vanderdecken has assembled a diverse crew of seamen from disparate nations and questionable backgrounds, and as the stresses of the voyage increase, the crew plots to overthrow the captain in order to steal the emeralds for themselves. Neb is caught between the crew and the captain, all of whom treat him badly, and he learns a great deal about the depths of man's maleficence from his experiences on board ship. The turbulent sea and its violent weather sets up the images that repeat throughout the novel and remind Ben and the reader of the dangers in the world.

The second section of the novel, titled "The Shepherd," is set on the barren coast of Tierra del Fuego where Neb (Ben) and his black Labrador wash ashore. At this windswept and lonely end of the world, the boy and dog spend over three years with a kindly shepherd, Luis, and his flock of sheep, healing, growing stronger, and learning about their new powers of communication, both with each other and with the old man.

The companionship and assistance that they provide Luis eases the discomforts of his old age and allow him to die a happy and peaceful death. At the same time, through their relationship with Luis, Neb (Ben) and Den (Ned) experience a compassion and kindness that is completely new to them and prepares them for their eternal mission of helping, caring, and bringing comfort to those in need. At the end of this section, the angel appears to them again and commissions them to go forth into the world and battle evil with their purity of heart.

The third section of the novel, titled "The Village," takes place in the rural English village of Chapelvale in 1896. As the story begins, the railroad has recently been extended to the village, connecting it with the rest of England and opening it for further development



and industrialization. The village, snuggled in a valley between two hills, is inhabited by a cast of colorful characters—the villains who want to destroy the village by turning it into a limestone quarry and a cement factory and the heroes who want to preserve their way of life in the face of industrialization. Just as Jacques used the storytelling formats of high sea adventure and the kindly shepherd to launch the boy and his dog on their mission, he also employs the format of the mystery story set in a cozy English village for them to work out new understandings of human behavior, relationships, and community. Jacques sets this part of the story in a quiet simple time when virtue always triumphs and the values of the community prevail over the interests of individuals.

Ben and Ned (their new names for a new historical period) must help the villagers settle their differences, solve their problems, and learn to become more confident and self-sufficient.



## Social Sensitivity

Although neither a didactic nor a political novel, *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman* does present at least two issues with social consequences that might be used to provoke discussion in the classroom. Jacques's portrayal of villains, whether they are depraved seamen or schoolyard bullies, raises the issue of bullying and its consequences for victims and perpetrators. Ben's refusal to fight and his clever handling of the Grange gang suggest a method of addressing this pressing problem. He helps Alexander, the youngest and smallest boy who is constantly picked on and made fun of, gain the confidence to outwit and defeat the bullies without giving in to physical violence. The bullies who rely on teasing and fighting come to a bad end and learn that fighting is not the way to achieve their goals.

The second area of social sensitivity explores the problems caused when the interests of business and development compete with the needs of the local community and ordinary people. This aspect of the story echoes some current discussion about the globalization of the world economy. Jacques portrays the forces of progress and modernization as completely evil. Although this may be a too simple formulation of the current debate, this story could be used to define and explore some of the issues of globalization.



# Literary Qualities

Jacques is a masterful storyteller who makes use of descriptive language, humor, symbolism, and poetry to tell his suspenseful tale. Adopting the frame of the Flying Dutchman legend, the story is told by an omniscient third- person narrator who adopts the stance of a storyteller entertaining an audience.

Strong descriptive language is used throughout the novel to create the story's setting and an atmosphere of suspense and adventure. Vivid description of the ocean and the weather at sea bring the reader on board the Flying Dutchman as Jacques describes the ocean spray, the drizzling rain, the thrashing ship, and the howling winds.

The cozy village of Chapelvale, snug in a valley among picture-book farms beckons to the reader, pulling them further into the story. Jacques's descriptions of food and drink throughout the book lend an air of realism to his story.

Throughout the novel, but particularly in the village section, Jacques uses wit and humor to tell his story. Ned's clever observations about the state of humanity and comments on the stupidity and silliness of Horatio, the black cat, provide comic relief when the story becomes too serious to let the reader know that this is not such a scary place to be after all. Many characters in the Chapelvale section are charmingly comic as well, particularly the befuddled librarian who helps with the more scholarly aspects of the puzzle. The final episode of the novel, when the thugs sent from London to terrorize the village get lost while driving their brand new motor car, is pure slapstick that will delight younger readers.

Jacques employs at least two major symbols to provide continuity to his story: the Flying Dutchman and the tolling bell. Ben's experience on the Flying Dutchman, particularly as represented by the tossing waves and the haunted faces of Vanderdecken and the crew, recur throughout the story whenever Ben is reminded of his fate. This vision returns to him both when he encounters something that reminds him of the dangers in the world and in his dreams when the angel forces him to recall his mission. Just when Ben and the reader become a bit comfortable in Chapelvale, the Flying Dutchman returns in his dreams to signal the theme of good versus evil. The tolling bell calls Ben and Ned to move on to their next adventure and to continue their mission in the world. They first learn of the meaning of the bell from the angel when they are on Tierra del Fuego and the bellwether sheep that is responsible for leading the flock sounds the bell that the angel warns them to listen for. In Chapelvale, there does not appear to be a bell, as no church bell has tolled for over three hundred years. However, when the final mystery is solved, the villagers discover a bell on top of the almshouse, and when it tolls it signals that Ben and Ned must be on their way because their work is done.

Finally, Jacques uses poetry to connect the sections of the novel and to summarize and advance the story. Ballads are placed at the end of the first two sections of the novel to reinforce the story and to beckon the reader to continue the journey. Lines from the



poems are then used as echoes throughout the story to connect the seemingly disparate sections.

## Themes and Characters

The primary theme of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman* is the eternal battle of good versus evil. Jacques develops this theme through the characters of Ben and Ned and the adventures they have on their wanderings. Neb and Den begin the story as bedraggled, oppressed, and forgotten creatures who have been rejected by the rest of humanity and do not even have names of their own. Orphaned and left for dead by his brothers, Neb stows away on the Flying Dutchman only to be enslaved by Petros, the mean Greek cook and given the unpronounceable name of Nebuchadnezzar. The captain and the other crewmen are equally unsavory, and as the voyage unfolds Neb is exposed to cruelty, dishonesty, depravity, and mania. The black Labrador brings the first loyalty, affection, and goodness Neb has experienced, which provide an important contrast to his life's experiences so far, and they form a bond that helps them survive the evil on board the Flying Dutchman.

When the entire crew is lost in a violent storm and is condemned by a being not of this earth to sail the waters of the world for eternity, Neb and Den are washed overboard and saved by an angel. She grants them boundless youth, understanding, and speech so that they may roam the world and bring confidence and sympathy, help others to change their fate, and offer truth and hope.

Before Neb and Den can accomplish this lofty mission, they need to experience some good in the world to balance their past experiences, so they spend several years with an old shepherd at Tierra del Fuego.

During their sojourn with Luis, they learn to communicate with the skills and speech granted to them by the angel, but, more important, they learn about the nature of a truly good person. They also learn to give aid to another in need as they bring companionship and cheer to his final years and as they help him to an easeful death after he suffers a fatal fall. The angel returns to Neb and Den, instructs them in their mission to roam the world in search of others in need, and tells them that they must move on their way when they hear a bell tolling.

By the time Neb and Den get to Chapelvale, they have become much wiser and have changed their names to Ben and Ned.

Although the story involves a larger and more complex set of characters, their mission to help, care, bring comfort, and learn more has not. At first glance, the village looks sleepy and benign, but within their first hour they have encountered unpleasant people who wish the village ill, first Obadiah Smithers who threatens to destroy Ned and then Will Smithers and his Grange Gang who are tormenting one of the village's oldest citizens. A cast of colorful characters also inhabits the village, and Ben and Ned quickly turn their attention to working with them to solve the mystery of the missing land deeds that must be found if the village's way of life is to be saved.



Although the story does not reveal much about Ben and Ned's previous adventures, their sojourn in Chapelvale apparently introduces them to a new level of connection with other human beings. They solve the mystery, and they experience the virtues of true friendship and the joy of membership in a strong and caring community. Their Chapelvale friends are as good and wholesome as the Flying Dutchman crewmembers that haunt Ben's nightmares are evil and depraved. Unhappily, as the angel reminds them, Ben and Ned must leave Chapelvale when the church bell tolls (which, incidentally, has been silent for over three hundred years). Because of their own immortality, they cannot stay and watch their new friends age and die one by one; they must go. The knowledge and understanding they gain in Chapelvale tinges their fate with a poignant sadness as the boy and his dog journey off across the village square.

While it is true that Jacques's characters do not challenge the expectations of readers, he has created interesting and comfortable characters who tell his story well. His villains, whether depraved seamen, greedy industrialists, or schoolyard bullies, are dastardly and stupid, but their defeat as representatives of evil is unambiguous. The heroes and the ordinary people whom they empower are kind, generous, and virtuous in all ways, and they are rewarded with the comfortable closure of a happy ending. Only Ben and Ned face an uncertain future, perhaps one haunted by nightmares, but certainly one filled with fulfilling adventures.

While skeptical adults and older young adults may find these characters one-dimensional, younger adolescents will enjoy the assurance and predictability they bring to the story, and they will certainly jeer at the villains and cheer for the heroes as the story unfolds.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Jacques uses figurative language to create the setting in this story. Find examples of figurative language devices, including simile, metaphor, and personification, and explain how they are used in the text and to what effect.
2. Jacques says that to him words are like an artist's brushes, pens, and colors that he uses to create "word pictures."

Find the "word pictures" that Jacques uses to create the setting in this novel.

3. What are the major conflicts that take place in this book? Which conflicts are the most difficult for Ben and Neb to overcome? Why? Community and the connections among people are important concepts in this novel. What does Ben learn about the importance of these connections from his experience in Chapelvale?
4. How does Ben's character change through the course of the story? How do you think he will continue to change as he journeys on through time?
5. Throughout the novel, Ben experiences nightmares about the Flying Dutchman.

What role do these nightmares play in the development of the plot?

6. Some reviewers have complained that the three sections of this novel are too disconnected. Do you agree or disagree with this criticism? Why?
7. Why do you think that Jacques chose to tell the story of Ben and Ned's adventures in Chapelvale rather than one of their earlier adventures that they mention, such as the Battle of Trafalgar or the American Civil War?

Both the crew of the Flying Dutchman and Ben and Ned are given immortality by the angel. For the crew it is a curse, but for Ben and Ned it is a gift.

Do you agree that immortality is a good gift for Ben and Ned, or is it also a curse? Explain your opinion based on evidence given in the book.



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Create a map of the travels of Ben (Neb) and Ned (Den) including the voyage of the Flying Dutchman, their stay on Tierra del Fuego, and their adventures in Chapelvale.
2. The legend of the Flying Dutchman has inspired many other writers, artists, and musicians. Find out about other artistic representations of the Flying Dutchman, including plays, operas, and paintings.
3. Chapelvale is a fictitious village, but there were many real English villages that were threatened by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century.

Find out more about the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain in the nineteenth century and its impact on rural England.

4. Write a letter to the editor of the local Chapelvale newspaper protesting the plans to turn the town into a limestone quarry and cement factory.
5. Write a story about the adventures of Ben and Ned in the American Civil War or the Battle of Trafalgar.
6. As the novel ends, Ben and Ned are summoned by the bell to leave Chapelvale and move on to their next adventure.

Write a story about their next adventure.

7. Ben and Jon Preston share a love of the sea and a knowledge of sea shanties that they sing together. Research the lyrics to real sea shanties and create a collection of songs that Ben might be able to sing on his travels.
8. The legend of the Flying Dutchman is only one of many stories about ghost ships and their crew. Find out about some of the other ghost ships and their stories.
9. Critics have said that, although it has human characters and more realistic settings, *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman* follows those same formulas as Jacques's *Redwall* novels. Read one of the *Redwall* novels and write a comparison.

## For Further Reference

"Brian Jacques." In Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2001. This brief biographical article includes a listing of awards and honors as well as a detailed discussion of Jacques's Redwall series.

Bush, Elizabeth. Review of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (March 2001): 266. This reviewer calls the novel "old fashioned sleuthing with a touch of fantasy" that will disappoint those readers hoping for a tale of the Dutchman's doomed crew.

Campbell, Janis. *Authors by Request: An Inside Look at Your Favorite Authors*. Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing Company, 2002. This source provides information on the life and work of Brian Jacques written for children and young adults.

DeCandido, Grace Anne. Review of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*. *Booklist* (March 1, 2001): 1271. This reviewer admires the swashbuckling language and the luscious culinary descriptions used in the novel.

Frederick, Heather. "Charting a New Course."

*Publishers Weekly* (March 26, 2001): 34-35.

This review presents an interview with Jacques on the publication of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*.

Loer, Stephanie. "An Interview with Brian Jacques." *Writer* (April 2000): 15. This article presents an interview with Jacques about his thoughts on writing for children.

Mitnik, Eva. Review of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*. *School Library Journal* (March 2001): 250. This reviewer criticizes the novel for its split personality and its claustrophobic atmosphere.

Sawyer, Andy. "Jacques, Brian." In *St. James Guide to Fantasy Writers*. Detroit: St. James Press, 1996. This entry offers a critical discussion of Jacques as an adult fantasy author.

Spaniol, Susan. Review of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*. *Book Report* (September/October 2001): 62. This reviewer predicts that Jacques's fans will enjoy the novel in spite of its slow plotting.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Castaways of the Flying Dutchman is the first of a projected series about the adventures of Ben and Ned. Throughout the novel, Jacques includes numerous hints about stories that precede this one, like their adventures at the Battle of Trafalgar and in the American Civil War, and of adventures yet to come that will no doubt provide fruitful fodder for storytelling. The second book in the series is scheduled for publication in 2003 and is titled *The Angel's Command: A Tale From Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*.

Jacques has also produced an audio version of *Castaways of the Flying Dutchman*, narrated by Jacques himself with a cast of British actors.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996