

# **Downright Dencey Study Guide**

**Downright Dencey by Caroline Dale Snedeker**

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# Contents

[Downright Dencey Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 3](#)

[Book I, Chapters 1-3..... 5](#)

[Book I, Chapters 4-6..... 7](#)

[Book II, Chapters 7-10..... 9](#)

[Book II, Chapters 11-13..... 12](#)

[Book III, Chapters 14-19..... 14](#)

[Book III, Chapters 20-26..... 17](#)

[Book III, Chapters 27-38..... 20](#)

[Book III, Chapters 39-49..... 24](#)

[Characters..... 27](#)

[Objects/Places..... 30](#)

[Themes..... 32](#)

[Style..... 34](#)

[Quotes..... 37](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 39](#)



# Plot Summary

Downright Dencey by Caroline Dale Snedeker is a book of fiction written for young adult audiences. The book won the Newberry Honor Book award, which is a highly prestigious award in the young adult genre. It is considered to be one of the best books for young adults. Its popularity since the publishing date of 1927 proves the book's longevity and quality.

The book tells the story of Dionis "Dencey" Coffyn, a young Quaker girl living in Nantucket in the early 1800s. In the story, Dencey must learn to come to terms with her faith, her place in the world, and her own emotions and desires.

In chapter one, the reader meets Dionis "Dencey" Coffyn and her cousin and best friend Hopestill. Hopestill is a devout Quaker girl with strong roots in her faith and belief in God. Dencey, a tomboy, has problems with her faith and is not sure why it is so important. As a Quaker girl, Dencey is required to behave as her parents tell her, which means not disobeying any of the laws of the house or church. Dencey does not believe fully in the tenets of the Church and often acts not out of piety, but out of respect and fear of judgment and punishment.

Dencey's family situation is a common one for the residents of Nantucket. Dencey's father, Captain Tom Coffyn, is a captain of a whaling ship and is gone for the majority of the time. In Nantucket, it is not uncommon for the whalers to be gone for years at a time. On one trip, Captain Tom was gone for four years, traveling around the world, searching for whales. Meanwhile, Lydia stays at home with the children and manages the house and family. It is expected behavior of a devout Quaker wife and mother.

Dencey's dilemma begins when she throws a rock at Sammie Jetsam, an outcast often ridiculed by everyone in town. Dencey feels overcome by guilt and wickedness and is devastated when Sammie will not accept her apology. Dencey is determined to make it up to Sammie. One thing leads to another, and Dencey finds herself agreeing to teach Sammie to read in exchange for forgiveness.

Dencey must lie and break the rules in order to keep her promise to Sammie. Dencey is found out and is punished by her mother. Nothing will make Dencey change her mind about helping Sammie and maintaining their friendship. Dencey continues to get into trouble. Lydia cannot understand the sudden and drastic change in Dencey. Dencey's devotion becomes clear when she sneaks out in the night to prevent Sammie from sailing away with the horrible Professor Snubshoe, a man who Dencey is convinced will ruin Sammie's soul. Dencey gets lost and nearly dies. Sammie saves Dencey and gains respect from the Coffyns.

Sammie stays on at the Coffyns even after he is well enough to return to Injun Jill's cottage. Sammie begins to understand and adopt the ways of the Coffyns. Sammie finally begins to understand the family when he becomes a Quaker.

It is decided that Sammie will go out to sea like a proper young man. Shortly before Sammie leaves, he finally professes his love for Dencey and asks her to wait for him.



# Book I, Chapters 1-3

## Book I, Chapters 1-3 Summary

Chapter one begins with the Quaker children delighting in the arrival of spring. The boys play leapfrog while the girls are proper young ladies that enjoy the smell of pure water on the air. The girls walk along the street, enjoying the sights and sounds of the town. Dionis brushes up against a cask and marks her dress, something that would certainly earn her a punishment from her mother. Dionis tells Hopestill about the ivy and the power of the little plant that has the ability to split open a stone wall. Hopestill thinks the idea is ludicrous and intends to ask her father. Dionis' father is on the West Coast, so the girl must rely on what she has been told.

The girls encounter the boys from the Fragment Society School, also known as "Fragmenters". The boys taunt the girls, calling Dencey a tomboy. Dencey is able to ignore the taunts until the boys start to pick on Hopestill. Hopestill implores Dencey to ignore the boys and is horrified when Dencey picks up a stone to throw. Dencey gives in to Hopestill's pleas and drops the stone. Soon the boys turn their attentions to Sammie Jetsam, an outcast. The boys make fun of Jetsam's social status. Jetsam turns his attentions to Dencey, calling her a "darkie" and "Portugee Girl". Dencey hates her swarthy complexion and wants to run away. Dencey chases Jetsam and picks up another stone which she throws. The stone hits Jetsam on the shoulder and the boys drops his basket of eggs, breaking them and causing a huge mess. Back on Fair Street, Hopestill stands wringing her hands, worried for her friend.

Jetsam is hurt and bleeding. The Fragmenters gather round to assess the damage. Dencey screams at the boys and tells them to get away, that Jetsam is hurt. The Fragmenters point out that it was Dencey's rock that hit Jetsam. Dencey says she will tell on all of them, including herself. Dencey attempts to help Jetsam and is rewarded with a string of harsh words, kicks and scratches.

Dencey runs away. Dencey is disheveled and dirty. There is no way Dencey can go to school now. Quakers are particular about their appearances and it would not do for Dencey to be seen this way. Dencey runs and manages to stay out of sight until she finds a place to skirt around the main part of the town and make her way back home.

In chapter three, Dencey goes to her room, a sparse dormered space, where she can contemplate what she has done. Dencey does not feel the Spirit but knows that the thing she has done is wicked. Dencey sits on her stool and tries to figure out what to do. She is scared. It is early afternoon when Dencey's mother, Lydia Coffyn, comes home to find her daughter in a sorry state. It takes some effort, but Lydia manages to get Dencey to tell her what has happened.

Dencey tells her mother that she does not need God to forgive her. Sammie Jetsam must forgive her. Lydia tells Dencey that she must make it right with God as well as



Sammie. Dencey is argumentative. Lydia worries about Dencey's religious issues and is envious of her niece Hopestill's devotion. Lydia tells Dencey that she will go with her to speak with Sammie Jetsam. As the mother and daughter are preparing to leave, the maid tells Lydia that the brig Rachel has arrived half-mast.

## Book I, Chapters 1-3 Analysis

In chapter one the reader meets Dionis "Dencey" Coffyn and her cousin and best friend Hopestill. Hopestill is a devout Quaker girl with strong roots in her faith and belief in God. Dencey, a tomboy, has problems with her faith and is not sure why it is so important. Hopestill tries to help Dencey, but Dencey does not seem to be ready to hear the truth.

There is a clearly defined class system in place in Nantucket. The Fragmenters are looked down upon as poor ragamuffins and rowdy characters. The North Water Street Children are seen as high society. Dencey, whose last name is spelled Coffyn instead of Coffin, seems to have a taint on her family name. Dencey loses her temper when the Fragmenters make fun of her dark skin. Dencey is unable to control her rage when the boys begin to pick on Hopestill.

Sammie Jetsam seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Fragmenters turn their attention to tormenting Jetsam. Jetsam seems to think Dencey is in on the torment and so he focuses on her. Dencey finally loses her temper, much to Hopestill's dismay.

Dencey immediately realizes what she has done. Hopestill frets and knows that there will be serious consequences for Dencey's actions. Dencey attempts to make it right with Jetsam and receives kicks and curses as a reward. Dencey pleads with the boy to forgive her, but Jetsam will hear none of it.

The gravity of her actions becomes even clearer when Dencey realizes she cannot go to school. Going to school in her disheveled condition would only make the situation worse. Dencey has no choice but to find a way to get home without being seen. The route Dencey chooses takes her to a part of town that is forbidden, although it is unclear why except that the ships and people of many backgrounds gather there, including strange men. Dencey makes it home yet there is little relief in her soul.

In chapter three, Lydia Coffyn is more concerned than anything when she sees Dencey in her room. After learning that Dencey is not sick, Lydia manages to find out what happened on the street. Lydia continues to be concerned with Dencey's lack of faith and reverence for the ways of God. Dencey seems not to care about anything beyond her reach. Dencey feels better when Lydia suggests going to speak with Sammie Jetsam. Lydia is distressed at the news of the arrival of the brig Rachel and is even more distressed when Dencey seems to care more about her current predicament than the possibility that one of their neighbors and friends is dead.



# Book I, Chapters 4-6

## Book I, Chapters 4-6 Summary

In chapter four, Lydia's fear is realized when she learns that it is Captain Henry White who has died from fever. Martha, Lydia's friend, is inconsolable. Lydia stays with Martha every possible minute, helping in any way she can. Martha and Henry's baby falls ill and dies shortly after the father. Martha, too, falls ill and is nursed by Lydia.

During this time, Dencey develops a plan to beg for Jetsam's forgiveness. Dencey decides to write a letter to Jetsam and to present him with a token of atonement. Dencey will have to sneak to Injun Jill's cottage to give Jetsam the items. Dencey knows it is forbidden but finds it necessary to go.

In chapter five, Dencey speeds along the lanes and toward the Commons, where she hopes to find Jetsam. The beauty of the day overtakes Dencey, and soon she forgets where she is going. Along the way, Dencey realizes what she is doing and remembers that she is afraid of Injun Jill. All of the local children are afraid of Injun Jill.

Dencey is spared from Injun Jill when she finds Jetsam outside chopping wood. Jetsam's should be fine if the wood chopping gives any indication of his well-being. Jetsam's dog sees Dencey first and jumps on her. Jetsam is rude and wants to know why Dencey has come to Injun Jill's cottage. Dencey explains but gets little encouragement and no forgiveness from Jetsam even after she feeds the dog, shares a pie, and offers the ammonite as a token of her remorse. Jetsam mocks Dencey and breaks the carved piece of ammonite. In the end, the token of Dencey's sorrow is her cherished copy of Pilgrim's Progress. Dencey goes away, dejected.

In chapter six, Dencey walks home crying over the loss of her beloved book. Dencey realizes that the light is growing dim and it is possible that she could get lost on the way home. The attempt to make things right with Jetsam had soured and left Dencey with a terrible feeling. "She had a deep sense of the ugliness she had seen, a strange intimation, such as sometimes comes to children, of the cruelty of the world which is yet all unknown, all to be lived through" (Book I, Chap. 6, p. 33).

Dencey hears a noise and begins to run. It is not long before she realizes Jetsam is following her. Jetsam approaches Dencey and thrusts the book toward her, saying that he does not want it. The children argue. Finally, Jetsam asks Dencey to read it to him to prove that she can read. Jetsam confesses that he cannot read. A deal is struck between the two - Jetsam will forgive Dencey if Dencey will teach Jetsam how to read.

## Book I, Chapters 4-6 Analysis

In chapter four, Dencey's age shows when she can only focus on her own troubles and give no regard to Martha White's situation. Nothing matters to Dencey except the



predicament with Sammie Jetsam and her evil act. Lydia is distraught by her daughter's selfishness but has more pressing matters at hand. If not for Lydia, Martha White would surely die, just like her husband and child.

Dencey devises a plan to get Jetsam to forgive her. Dencey will have to disobey her mother once more, but the act of forgiveness is so important to Dencey that she is willing to risk the wrath of Lydia and her grandfather, who would surely whip her if he knew her plan.

In chapter five, Dencey is excited and scared to make the trip to Injun Jill's cottage. Dencey already feels guilty about the act she has yet to commit. Peggy surely suspects Dencey's plan and fills the girl's basket to the brim with food.

Dencey's attention wanders as a young girl's might as she makes her way to see Jetsam. Dencey is relieved to see that Jetsam is not maimed or dead, but rather chopping wood in the yard. Jetsam is not at all happy to see Dencey. It is clear that Jetsam's home life is very hard, with little to no food and a caretaker who is typically drunk and foul.

Jetsam mocks Dencey mercilessly, and although he takes the food, he throws the prized ammonite against a tree. This shows that Jetsam has no compassion for Dencey or her cherished possessions. When Jetsam takes the copy of Pilgrim's Progress, Dencey is upset but will make the sacrifice if only she can be awarded forgiveness.

In chapter six, Dencey is confused by the treatment she received from Jetsam. Dencey is unfamiliar with Jetsam's world - the harshness of it and the cruel reality of not having someone to care for him. This is a step in the maturation process for Dencey as she is experiencing something outside her comfort zone for the first time.

Jetsam shows a little of his vulnerability and inner self when he confesses to Dencey that he cannot read. The reader can predict the friendship that is sure to bloom between Dencey and Jetsam, perhaps leading to a forbidden romance.

Although Dencey knows it is wrong to sneak off to meet Jetsam, she plans to do it. It would not matter to Lydia or Dencey's grandfather if her motives are pure. Dencey will need to make a plan.





# Book II, Chapters 7-10

## Book II, Chapters 7-10 Summary

In chapter seven, the chapter begins with a description of Nantucket, an eighteen-mile stretch of sandy ground off the coast of Massachusetts. The island has a character all its own, and so do the people. While others on the mainland made a living off the land, the people on Nantucket relied on the sea. The residents from Nantucket are different from other New Englanders. "Here were the New England character and hardi-hood, it's God-fearing and mental eagerness, yet all sensitively changed, individualized, so that they became Nantucket and no other." (Book II, Chap. 7, p. 41).

Tom Coffyn returns after four years at sea. Once on dry land, Tom attends a Quaker meeting with Caleb Severance, a crew mate. The meeting house is gray, as are its people. The people are solemn, obedient, quiet, and faithful. No one speaks. Instead, the worshipers are meant to take the time to feel the love of Spirit and to let it speak to them. Tom is distracted by a beautiful young woman he has never seen before. Being at sea for four years has faded Tom's memory of women and their beauty. Tom is caught staring and is ashamed.

Lydia Severance stands up and speaks for the first time. Lydia speaks in a chanting tone, talking about the Spirit and the gratitude for the return of the White Wave. Tom is mesmerized by Lydia Severance. Caleb Severance is Lydia's brother. Tom introduces himself to Lydia and walks her home. From that day forward, Tom attends many Quaker meetings, a fact which comes as a shock to the Congregationalists. Tom also spends as much time as possible with Lydia; so much so that Lydia's mother complains. Lydia knows that she must obey her mother, even if it breaks her heart. Lydia begins to avoid Tom.

Lydia decides to stay home on the night of Cousin William's party. Tom arrives at the Severance house to check on Lydia. Tom is upset that Lydia stayed at home but prefers to see her in private. Lydia tells Tom she cannot marry him. To marry outside the Meeting is to cast oneself out, almost into damnation. Although Lydia continues to protest, she ends up in Tom's arms.

In chapter eight, Lydia and Tom discuss their future. Lydia says she will marry Tom despite her parents' wishes and the rules of the Meeting House. Tom says he is going to become a Quaker. Lydia objects and says that her original decision was made out of pride, not love. Lydia tells Tom that she loves him and will marry him regardless. Tom insists on becoming a Friend.

In chapter nine, Tom Coffyn converts to his new faith. The conversion creates an uproar in the community and causes a rift between Tom and his father. "Tom Coffyn's change of religion was a nine-day wonder in Nantucket. Old Elias Coffyn said he'd rather have buried Thomas" (Book II, Chap. 9, p. 54). Tom knows that he will have to suffer through



a great deal of drubbing from his friends, family, and neighbors. Tom does not care. Tom only cares about Lydia.

Tom must go through a series of interviews with the "old gray heads" at the Meeting House. The men question virtually every aspect of Tom's life to the point of embarrassment. In the end, Tom is permitted to join the congregation. Tom and Lydia are married.

In chapter ten, months and years passed. It seems to Dencey that everything was being saved for Tom Coffyn's return. Many things happened during that time, including the death of Lydia's sister-in-law, her brother Stephen's wife. Like Tom, Stephen is out to sea and is not expected to return for a long time. Lydia steps in immediately to take care of Stephen's twelve children, including the hour-old baby Hannah and "Crippled Rosie", a girl the same age as Dencey. Lydia takes on the responsibility without a second thought, stating that it is important for Stephen to come home to find his family intact. These twelve children are in addition to Dencey and Peggy Runnel, a ten-year-old girl taken in by Lydia and Tom.

Visitors come to the Coffyn house to regale the group with tales from the sea, including the islands and the Sea of Japan. The stories are fantastic, filled with tales including whales, cannibals, and exotic flowers and animals. Following the Quaker tradition, there is nothing in addition to the storytelling, as Quakers forbid playing cards, dancing or listening to music.

Dencey regards the arrival of Preacher William Williams as being a high point of that time. Lydia favors old Selah Wetherstone, a salty sailor with many stories to tell.

## **Book II, Chapters 7-10 Analysis**

Snedeker gives the backstory of Tom and Lydia Coffyn in chapters seven through nine. Tom's devotion to Lydia becomes clear when he is willing to convert to the Quaker faith so that they can marry. Tom must withstand the anger from his family and the doubts held by the old gray heads at the meeting house.

Lydia knows what type of life she will get with Tom Coffyn, a sailor who will be away for most of their married life, leaving her to take care of the home and raise the family. This is not unusual in Nantucket.

Lydia's religious leanings tell her that she must offer service at every opportunity. However, taking on twelve children is extremely difficult, even more so when one is an infant and another is handicapped. The Coffyn home becomes like a home for wayward and orphaned children. Lydia does receive help from others but bears most of the burden on her shoulders. There are times when Lydia seems like she may begin to crack around the edges or suffer from exhaustion, but the woman has no choice but to carry on.



In chapter ten, things begin to change drastically at this point. There are many visitors and happy times in the big old house. Lovesta worries that the grandfather may be a negative influence on Dencey, filling her head with lies believed by the Congregationalists. The visits from the sailors and others bring laughter and joy into the house, temporarily softening the fact that Tom Coffyn is still out to sea.



## Book II, Chapters 11-13

### Book II, Chapters 11-13 Summary

In chapter eleven, Lydia receives a letter from Tom stating that many of the locations they have chosen for the whale hunts are killed out and there are no whales to be found. As a result, Tom and his crew will go to the Sea of Japan to find more whales. Instead of coming home in a few weeks, Tom expects to be gone for another year. Dencey thinks that her father's homecoming is almost a mythical thing by now; it seems as if she has lost faith in Tom's return even though Lydia assures the girl that he will come back to Nantucket.

Lydia becomes edgy and loses focus on her daily tasks.

Two months after receiving the letter, Dencey hears someone throwing pebbles against her mother's window. It is Tom. The whole family is stunned to see Captain Tom considering the news from his last letter. Tom tells Lydia that shortly after sending the letter, the ship came upon a huge school of whales and managed to kill enough to fill the entire ship. There was no time to write a second letter.

There is a great deal of rejoicing and excitement in the house. Although it is 4:00 AM when Tom arrives, the family stays up and makes breakfast. Tom receives a shock when he learns that Lydia has taken in Stephen's twelve children.

In chapter twelve, Tom unpacks his gear and begins to distribute presents. Tom feels bad because he had not known about the twelve children and therefore did not bring presents for them. Instead he promises the children food from the ship. Dencey is thrilled with her gifts of sea shells and a hand carved pink cameo. Tom also brings jars from the Orient, a swift for Lydia's spinning work, yards of silk, and an ivory button for the newel post.

Dencey falls in love with the jars and kneels down to inspect them. Lydia chastises Dencey for kneeling. Dencey bursts into tears and runs upstairs to her room.

In chapter thirteen, this time Tom is home for eight weeks. Out of those eight weeks, Tom spends a great deal of time with Dencey. Tom speaks to Dencey as an adult, which thrills the young girl. Father and daughter go on expeditions, during which Tom teaches Dencey about various types of plants and flowers. It is not long before Tom must return to sea.

The family makes a big change when they move into Tom's father's house on North Water Street. The house is huge and the room is welcome to the large Coffyn/Severance family.

Tom's father, Elias, takes on the role of patriarch of the family, meting out discipline and teaching the children the ways of the Congregationalist church. This does not please



Lydia or Lovesta. For the first time Dencey listens to her grandfather and his tales about the horrors of hell for those that disobey God. For the first time, Dencey is afraid.

Lydia and Tom have a baby boy, whose name is Ariel.

Snedeker flashes back to the meeting between Dencey and Sammie Jetsam.

## **Book II, Chapters 11-13 Analysis**

In chapter eleven, Tom's surprise appearance at the house on Fair Street is the shot in the arm the entire family needed. Lydia is tired and lonely, her condition bordering on despair after she received the letter from Tom. Although the couple has not seen each other for a long period of time, the greeting between them is very reserved and formal.

In chapter twelve, Dencey is delighted at the gifts Tom brought home for her and Lydia, particularly the hand carved cameo and sea shells from a newly discovered island.

The scene between Dencey and Lydia is blown out of proportion by Dencey because it takes place in front of her father and cousins. Dencey is immediately angry at Lydia for accusing her of false worship when that is not at all what Dencey was trying to do. Dencey reacts positively to Tom's presence and the incident blows over.

In chapter thirteen, Tom realizes that Dencey is growing up fast. Spending time with Dencey is as important for Tom as it is his daughter. Dencey is fascinated by Tom's knowledge of plants and flowers, although if the man was interested in some distasteful hobby, Dencey would surely be interested in it because it was related to her father.

The move into the house on North Water Street brings about great changes. Dencey is thrilled to have her own room and to be living next door to Hopestill.



## Book III, Chapters 14-19

### Book III, Chapters 14-19 Summary

In chapter fourteen, the meeting between Dencey and Sammie when Dencey throws a stone and hits the boy is recounted.

Dencey and Sammie meet at their spot to begin the reading lesson. It is raining and windy making the lesson almost impossible. Sammie suggests going to Brown's barn, an abandoned shelter that will protect them from the elements. Upon arrival Sammie is struck with the fact that he has no idea how to act around the proper young Dencey. "He was shy, resentful, ashamed and immeasurably stupid. He had no defense except the small boy's - trying to be funny" (Chap. 14, p. 88).

Sammie acts out until it is clear that Dencey means business. Sammie begins to learn letters and words. Dencey is impressed with Sammie's progress. At times, Sammie becomes frustrated and wants to give up. However, Dencey feels responsible for her actions and intends to keep her promise to teach Sammie how to read. "Responsibility - the heavy pressing sense of it was upon Dencey - setting the long, long task. It was bred into her by her pioneer ancestry, Quaker ancestry. She could no more resist responsibility than she could the color of her eyes and hair" (Chap. 4, p. 90).

The hour grows late and Dencey realizes it is time to go. Sammie has learned seven words in one day, an impressive feat. The pair agrees to meet the day after tomorrow, although Sammie is doubtful.

In chapter fifteen, the next trip to Brown's barn is much different than the first, in that the weather is nice. Dencey presents Sammie with a chart she made, which includes the alphabet and a picture next to each letter. Sammie doubts that Dencey has enough talent to make something so nice. Dencey thinks about how she had lied to Lydia about its purpose.

Instead of being appreciative of Dencey's efforts and gift, Sammie becomes combative. "Jetsam never spoke a tentative statement. It was always flat, fight-provoking argument" (Chap. 15, p. 92). Finally, the children sit down and get to work.

Sammie tells Dencey about a fight he'd had with Injun Jill. Jill is angry because Sammie is learning to read. Injun Jill does not want Sammie to know how to read because then he will be better than she is; a thought that scares and enrages her at the same time.

When Sammie becomes frustrated and begins to curse like a sailor, Dencey tells him that taking the Lord's name in vain is a terrible thing and that people who do such things will be punished. Sammie becomes scared.

In chapter sixteen, almost every day Dencey goes to visit Aunt Lovesta. Lovesta is a preacher who often travels to do God's work. She is awe inspiring to Dencey who



believes that Lovesta can do no wrong. "Aunt Lovesta was the soul of truthfulness" (Chap. 16, p. 98). Dencey aspires to be like Lovesta but does not think she has the ability or the right connection with God. Even though Lovesta is a good influence on Dencey, Lydia often seems to be jealous of Dencey's admiration for Lovesta.

In chapter seventeen, Stephen receives a new coat and decides to discard his old coat with the frayed hems and hole on the back. There is a discussion about being wasteful, but Stephen argues that it makes no sense to keep an old ragged coat when he has three newer ones in much better condition. Dencey keeps thinking that Stephen's coat would be perfect for Sammie even if it would be too large for the boy. After much deliberation, Dencey goes into the kitchen to find the coat rolled up into a ball and shoved behind the wood box. Dencey takes the coat up to her room, unsure what she will do.

In chapter eighteen, Dencey finally decides to give the coat to Sammie. Dencey must convince Sammie to take it. Dencey comes downstairs to find the house in a tizzy. It has been noticed that Stephen's coat is gone. Even discarded clothes can be resurrected in a Quaker house, and Lydia planned to use the good parts of the coat to make items for the small children. Dencey runs out without telling what she has done.

Dencey visits Lovesta and asks about repentance. Lovesta explains that true repentance means being sorry and promising not to do it again. Dencey does not repent for her sins because she knows she will continue to steal food for Sammie. Dencey has taken Sammie on as a responsibility, as if it is her duty to save him from a horrible fate. "Dencey knew with an intensity that equaled its vagueness that if she let go of Jetsam, he would tumble back into an abyss" (Book III, Chap. 18, p. 106).

In chapter nineteen, Sammie tells the story of a confrontation with Injun Jill. Injun Jill is determined to take away Sammie's book so that he cannot learn to read. Hiding the book from Injun Jill becomes a mission. After a long discussion, Dencey and Sammie decide to hide the book in an old wrecked ship at the harbor.

## **Book III, Chapters 14-19 Analysis**

Chapter fourteen shows that in many ways Sammie Jetsam is an ordinary prepubescent boy. Sammie is suddenly nervous around Dencey and is not yet comfortable showing any type of vulnerability. Dencey, on the other hand, is all business, which further confuses Sammie. Sammie finally settles in and shows Dencey that he is serious about the task at hand.

Chapter fifteen begins the meetings between Sammie and Dencey in Brown's barn. Sammie is still confused how to act around Dencey. Sammie tries to impress Dencey with his reading skills. Dencey tests Sammie and finds that he is learning much faster than she had expected.

In chapter sixteen, the reader is given more insight into the life of Aunt Lovesta. It is clear that Dencey admires Lovesta and sees her as a potential saint. The influence on



Dencey is good overall and will most likely have more of an affect than the teachings from Dencey's parents.

In chapters seventeen and eighteen, Dencey struggles with the theft of Stephen's coat. In Dencey's eyes, it makes perfect sense to give the coat to Sammie. After all, Stephen has three coats and Sammie has none. Dencey is truly torn over the decision because she knows stealing is wrong. Dencey is able to rationalize the theft until the next morning when the argument ensues regarding the coat. This new development puts Dencey at war with herself and her faith in a whole new way.

In chapter nineteen, Dencey is horrified by Sammie's story about Injun Jill and the book. Sammie explains that Injun Jill looks down on him because he is only half Indian. Injun Jill's anger is fueled by many things, most of which have nothing to do with Sammie or the book.

Dencey is determined to continue with Sammie's lessons and to protect the book. The pair ventures to yet another forbidden place to hide the book.





## Book III, Chapters 20-26

### Book III, Chapters 20-26 Summary

In chapter twenty, a silent war is going on between Sammie and Injun Jill. "The looks which Injun Jill was casting over toward Sammie Jetsam were effectually killing any tenderness or trust which might be in the boy's character" (Chap. 20, p. 113). Injun Jill is still angry that Sammie is hiding the book from her. It has become a quest for Injun Jill to find and steal the book.

Injun Jill tells Sammie that it does not matter where he goes, Injun Jill can find him and the book. Injun Jill is intent on keeping Sammie down and also has fear because she can see Sammie is changing in many ways. "Awful smard hidin' fro' Indion Jeel," she murmured in the Nantucket Indian jargon he knew so well. 'Go many blaces but Indion Jeel knoweth all blaces - she knowth all times.'" (Book III, Chap. 20, p. 113).

Every time Sammie does not do as Injun Jill wishes, the woman brings up Sammie's heritage, saying that he is trash just like his white daddy. Sammie is devastated and hurt. Injun Jill also says she knows that Sammie has been spending all of his time with Dencey Coffyn.

In chapter twenty-one, Dencey meets Sammie at their usual place for the reading lesson. Sammie tells Dencey about Injun Jill and how they must not study together any more. Dencey is afraid and finally agrees to go away. As Dencey is walking away, she realizes that she cannot leave Sammie that way. There is an argument but eventually the two stay together despite Injun Jill's threats.

In chapter twenty-two, the next meeting between Sammie and Dencey is filled with worry that they would be discovered by Injun Jill. Dencey brings a copy of her Uncle Hubert's sermon so that Sammie would have something new to read. Part way through the lesson, Injun Jill arrives. Dencey and Sammie take off running. It is clear to Dencey that Injun Jill intends to whip her. Sammie pushes Dencey away and runs toward Injun Jill so that Dencey can get away and Sammie will take the punishment.

In chapter twenty-three, Lydia confronts Dencey about meeting with Sammie at Brown's barn. Dencey confesses and is stunned that Injun Jill would go to her mother. Dencey would be branded a bad little girl. Worse, the Committee on Sufferings would publicly chastise Lydia for not being a better mother. Dencey is more heartbroken over that than anything else.

Dencey tells Lydia the entire story. Lydia is surprised to learn that Dencey has been teaching Sammie to read, nothing else. There is an argument about Jetsam owning Pilgrim's Progress. In the end, Lydia says she will try to get Sammie into the Fragment Society School and give the book back to Jetsam. Dencey says she must be the one to



return the book. Dencey also says she will not promise to stay away from Sammie. Dencey will be punished, but the girl is determined to see Sammie again.

In chapter twenty-four, Lydia goes to see the headmaster of the Fragment Society to ask for Sammie to be enrolled in the school. The headmaster is stunned that Lydia would make such a request. The headmaster says that Sammie is lawless and caused a great deal of trouble when he attended the school for one week. Try as she might, Lydia is not able to change the headmaster's mind.

Dencey still refuses to make the promise. Lydia keeps her word and returns to the book to Sammie.

In chapter twenty-five, Dencey does not suffer the first day of her confinement. Three times a day, Lydia brings bread and water to Dencey's room. After a day or two, Rosie's bed is removed so that Dencey can be alone to think about what she has done.

After a couple of days, Dencey becomes inconsolable from loneliness. She watches the members of the family outside, smells Lydia's delicious popovers and hears the conversation from downstairs. Still Dencey refuses to promise and Lydia refuses to give in to her temperamental daughter.

In chapter twenty-six, the day of the sheep shearing arrives. It is the main event of the season on Nantucket, and everyone gathers together for fellowship, feasting, and watching the sheep as they are sheared. It is much more of an excuse to celebrate rather than to watch the sheep being sheared.

Dencey is grieving because she is unable to attend the event. Sammie comes to Dencey's window and asks her to come down and go on a picnic. Dencey starts to go but then returns to her room. Sammie offers to leave the food for Dencey.

## **Book III, Chapters 20-26 Analysis**

Chapters twenty through twenty-three detail Injun Jill's rampage regarding Sammie's reading lessons. It is unclear why Injun Jill is so angry, but there are hidden reasons behind her rage. Injun Jill often talks about Sammie's father, and there may be some unresolved issues with the white man.

Injun Jill is also negatively affected by her alcoholism. The erratic behavior makes her seem even more unstable and savage. Injun Jill threatens to go to Lydia. No one believes Injun Jill, but the woman does tell Dencey's mother about the meetings with Sammie.

Lydia is devastated and stunned at Dencey's behavior. Lydia never would have thought that Dencey would disobey her or lie. Dencey makes a full confession. Lydia is relieved that the reason for the meetings between Dencey and Sammie are not romantic in nature.



In chapters twenty-three through twenty-six, Dencey must pay for her misdeeds. Lydia has no choice but to confine Dencey to her room after Dencey refuses to make the promise to never see Sammie again. The defiance in Dencey's eyes alarms Lydia, who seems to do her best but wishes she had guidance to know how to handle the issue.



## Book III, Chapters 27-38

### Book III, Chapters 27-38 Summary

Chapter twenty-seven shows how Dencey is bored beyond all measure. Suddenly, Dencey has an idea. While it would be wicked to go downstairs, Dencey feels it is perfectly acceptable to go upstairs into the attic. Dencey spends time going through different trunks and boxes, looking at things she has seen a million times before. Dencey digs through a barrel and comes across a book. Dencey removes the book and reads the title. It is "The Arabian Nights Entertainments". Dencey is thrilled. Dencey spends a long time reading the book and imagining herself in Arabia, immersed in the story. Lydia comes into the attic and scolds Dencey for reading a book that her grandfather claims is wicked. Lydia takes the book from Dencey and says she will burn it. Dencey fights for the book and takes it away from her mother. Lydia promises a whipping from Dencey's grandfather.

Dencey is afraid of the whipping to come. Dencey hears footsteps and braces herself. It is not her grandfather, however, it is Aunt Lovesta. Dencey cries to Aunt Lovesta. Aunt Lovesta soothes Dencey and explains why she deserves to be punished. Lovesta also tells Dencey that she could make the promise in parts. Dencey may promise to be kind to Sammie, to take food and other things to the boy, take him to Aunt Lovesta's house and visit in the Commons. The thing Dencey must promise is to not return to Injun Jill's or Brown's barn.

In chapter twenty-eight, a calm summer followed the turbulent spring. It does Dencey good to be confined to the house. Lovesta tries to convince Lydia that Dencey does possess the seed of Light, that it just needs to be cultivated.

The summer is filled with exciting new experiences for Dencey, Hopestill and their friends. The girls are inseparable. One day Dencey sees Sammie Jetsam in the lane. Sammie looks utterly miserable and lost. People taunt Dencey and Sammie. Dencey goes to Sammie and says she will not shun him. Dencey proves it by announcing to the Clerk that they are friends.

In chapter twenty-nine, Lydia holds a large veal feast. Dencey helps serve the friends and relatives, which is a pleasant task and an opportunity to visit with people not often seen.

Dencey spots a poster tacked to a tree. The poster announces the arrival of Professor Snubshoe and his act. The poster fascinates Dencey. Jetsam also sees the poster and declares that he will go to Washington Hall that evening to see the show. Dencey says that the show is surely wicked and Sammie should not go. After some discussion, Sammie talks Dencey into joining him for the performance.



In chapter thirty, Aunt Susanna Severance runs into Dencey and Sammie as they are studying the poster. The feared Aunt Susanna is appalled that Dencey would waste her time reading about a stage play. Professor Snubshoe comes on the scene and tries to captivate the group. Snubshoe and Susanna get into a heated argument.

Susanna manages to get the show moved to an alternate location. Jetsam attends. The next day Sammie tells Dencey about the performance. Dencey frets over Sammie's soul while Sammie tries to tell Dencey about the great experience. Sammie also tells Dencey that he plans to go to the Continent with Professor Snubshoe as a hired hand. Dencey is devastated.

In chapter thirty-one, Dencey returns to her room mourning over Sammie's lost soul. "Jetsam was lost - utterly lost. All the horrors of hell its fleshly burning and inward soul agony which her grandfather had so aptly described came back to her" (Chap. 31, p. 168). Dencey is convinced that it is her fault that Sammie is going to lose his soul. Dencey does the unthinkable and decides to go after Sammie even though it means going down to the dock - an act that is strictly forbidden.

Dencey goes to the dock and learns that Sammie is at Injun Jill's. Dencey makes a man promise not to let him go with Professor Snubshoe. Dencey is ridden with guilt over breaking her promise to Lovesta.

In chapter thirty-two, it is eight o'clock in the morning and Sammie is getting ready to leave with Professor Snubshoe. There are sounds from the fire alarm and a frenzy takes place on the streets. Sammie learns that there is no fire; Dencey is lost. Sammie rushes to the Coffyn's house to learn that Dencey went out looking for him and got lost along the way. Lydia blames Sammie for the predicament as Dencey was under concern for Sammie's welfare. Sammie joins the search for Dencey.

In chapter thirty-three, Sammie runs out to the Commons to look for Dencey. The snow is falling hard and the drifts continue to get deeper. Sammie begins to become frantic, knowing that Dencey could easily die in the cold and windy night. Sammie gets Wash to help him look for Dencey. Wash is able to track Dencey to Hummock Pond. Sammie finds Dencey, huddled and freezing. Sammie does his best to get Dencey to wake up. Sammie gets Dencey to a sheep shelter, builds a fire and then returns to the Coffyn house to get help.

In chapter thirty-four, Dencey returns to the house and is nursed by Lydia and Lovesta. Sammie, on the other hand, is extremely ill, wracked with fever. Dencey worries that Sammie may not live. The situation has changed the townspeople's opinion on Dencey, saying that she is a good girl for trying to save a boy's soul.

In chapter thirty-five, Sammie Jetsam might have run away if he had been introduced to the Coffyns in a general way. As it is, Sammie fades in and out of consciousness. Sammie has no idea where he is at first. When Sammie realizes he is being cared for by Lydia Coffyn, he is afraid.



Sammie just begins to get used to being in the Coffyn house when Tom comes home from sea. Sammie is amazed at the love and joy in the Coffyn house, both of which are completely foreign to the boy. Sammie begins to realize that there is something missing in his life.

In chapter thirty-six, Sammie begins to notice other things about the Coffyn house, including their mental pursuits. Sammie had always been hungry for many things but had never realized how much he craves mental stimulation.

Sammie is almost completely recovered the day Injun Jill arrives to take him home. Sammie runs to Lydia, terrified. Lydia argues with Injun Jill and sends her away. Sammie learns that he is welcome to stay at the Coffyn house as long as he earns his keep. Sammie is overjoyed.

In chapter thirty-seven, The Committee on Sufferings comes to the Coffyn house, Aunt Susanna in the lead. It is the job of The Committee on Sufferings to visit people's houses if there is a suspicion that there may be wicked worldly goods present. The Committee searches the Coffyn house. They destroy a chair with a rose carved into the wood. The Committee also wants to take away Lydia's crimson rug, but Lydia steadfastly refuses.

In chapter thirty-eight, Lydia had worried that The Committee on Sufferings would retaliate by punishing Lovesta in some way. Lovesta comes to the Coffyn house to tell Lydia that the Committee members, with Susana in the lead, have banned her from speaking in church because she has gone before her guide, meaning that Lovesta was inspired by something other than Jesus and spoke out regardless. Lydia and Lovesta are devastated at this turn of events.

## **Book III, Chapters 27-38 Analysis**

Chapter twenty-seven shows how Dencey does not believe that she has done anything wrong by going into the attic. Dencey does shock Lydia, however, when she fights for the book. Lydia is convinced that Dencey has been taught wickedness through the book. Dencey is afraid to receive a whipping. Dencey is relieved when Lovesta comes to her aid.

In chapter twenty-eight, Dencey takes a stand against the people in town that would dare to make fun of Sammie. Sammie had given up hope on maintaining Dencey's friendship and is surprised when the girl announces their friendship in public.

Chapters twenty-nine through thirty-four detail the arrival of Professor Snubshoe. Jetsam, curious about the world around him, is instantly drawn by the idea of seeing Professor Snubshoe's performance. Dencey struggles with her desire to go to the show and to obey her parents and ways of the church.

When Sammie tells Dencey that he intends to sail off with Professor Snubshoe, he expects Dencey to beg him to stay. Dencey does try to stop Sammie from going, but



she claims it will ruin his soul. Sammie wants Dencey to want him to stay because of their friendship. In other words, Dencey calls Sammie's bluff.

Dencey is upset about Sammie's decision and blames herself for his certain demise. Dencey is so wracked with guilt that she takes off in the snow to stop Sammie from leaving Nantucket. The tables turn when Dencey gets lost. Sammie is the one to find Dencey and ultimately saves the girl's life. For the first time, people begin to see Sammie with different eyes.

Chapters thirty-five and thirty-six detail Sammie's integration into the Coffyn household. Sammie is not used to anything like what the Coffyn's have, and eventually Sammie realizes that he never wants to go back to the way he lived with Injun Jill.

Chapters thirty-seven and thirty-eight show how The Committee on Sufferings seems intent on abusing their power. It is shocking that Lydia would defy their orders to get rid of the carpet. However, Lydia's reasoning is perfectly legitimate in the Committee's eyes so that there is nothing that can be done.



## Book III, Chapters 39-49

### Book III, Chapters 39-49 Summary

In chapter twenty-nine, Lovesta is banned from preaching for twenty-five years. The woman falls silent and is not to speak in the church or to do any of her previous work. However, Lovesta wakes one night with a message from God. A woman is hungry - starving, actually - and Lovesta must save her.

In chapter forty, Dencey becomes confused by the new Sammie Jetsam. Sammie acts as Dencey's beau even though she objects.

Lydia intervenes once more with the Fragment Society to get Sammie a place in the classroom. Sammie is thrilled to be going to school, but balks when he learns it is the Fragment School and not the Coffin School. In the end, Sammie gets a job cleaning at the Coffin School and is able to learn while staying in the back of the class.

In chapter forty-one, Dencey and Hopestill are fifteen, the age when a girl is supposed to have a beau. Hopestill brags that she has one first. Several boys vie for Dencey's attention, but none so insistently as Sammie Jetsam.

In chapter forty-two, the annual husking came around and as usual, there is a big celebration. Part of the fun for the young men and women is the corn husking contest. The winner of the contest could kiss the prettiest girl. Sammie works like lightning to shuck the largest number of ears so that he may kiss Dencey. Sammie wins but decides that to kiss Dencey in front of everybody would be wrong.

In chapter forty-three, Sammie is devastated at the turn of events. Although Dencey may have allowed him to kiss her, Sammie knew it was wrong. After all, Sammie was ill-born and could never be good enough for a girl like Dencey Coffyn. Sammie thinks about running away.

Chapter forty-four shows how Sammie becomes withdrawn, and Dencey is saddened by the loss of her friend. The only time Sammie will talk is if Dencey asks for help with her ciphers. More and more Sammie is like a stranger. Sammie encounters Injun Jill one afternoon. Injun Jill tries to tell Sammie that he belongs to her. After an argument, during which Sammie slaps Jill, he realizes that Jill is his mother.

In chapter forty-five, Sammie goes down to the docks to Dicky Dicks' place. Sammie and Dicky Dick talk about Injun Jill and Sammie's real father. Dicky Dick tells Sammie that Jill is not his mother, that Bill, Jill's old boyfriend, took Sammie to her in the middle of the night. Sammie stays to spend time with his friends down at the docks. Something has changed, however. Sammie used to laugh at the coarse language and salty jokes. Now, those things offend him enough that he has to leave.





In chapter forty-six, in Nantucket, the spring often brought about "Revivals". The revivals were different in those days. The people came together and worshipped, but there were no pre-planned events or invited preachers. The whole thing simply happened. This year, Sammie is saved during the Revival. Sammie finally realizes what has been missing in his life all of these years.

In chapter forty-seven, Sammie tells the Coffyns about his epiphany. The Coffyns are thrilled with Sammie's new commitment to God and understand fully when he says he must go to take care of Injun Jill. After much discussion, Lydia and Tom say that to live with Jill is not appropriate for a newly anointed friend. Sammie should go out to sea. Lydia asks Tom for assurance that Sammie will have a good master to sail with, and Tom agrees.

In chapter forty-eight, Sammie continues to lament that he is beneath Dencey and therefore is not fit to tie her shoe laces. Still, Sammie loves Dencey and tries hard to show the girl how he feels. Sammie buys a present for Dencey - a Chinese bird cage with two beautiful birds. Dencey is thrilled. Sammie talks about wishing he had a good name instead of Jetsam. Sammie lets Dencey know that he wants her to have his name. Dencey is shocked.

In chapter forty-nine, the time comes when Sammie has the chance to go to sea. Lydia's brother Caleb is preparing to go to sea and asks Sammie to be a cabin boy aboard the Sextant. Dencey is confused by the feelings that come over her. She takes a walk and is gone for quite a while, when Sammie finds her. Sammie wants to know if Dencey would let him go without saying goodbye. Sammie tells Dencey that he loves her and wants her to wait for him to return from sea. Sammie kisses Dencey for the first time. Dencey runs away, filled with conflicting emotions.

## **Book III, Chapters 39-49 Analysis**

In chapter thirty-nine, Lovesta continues to serve God, even though she has been banned by the church from speaking. It takes twenty-five years for the church to forgive Lovesta. However, it is said that when Lovesta is allowed to speak again, she is filled with the spirit in a whole new way.

Chapters forty through forty-five cement the changes in Sammie. Sammie no longer feels like a complete outcast, even though he is still unsure of his place in the world. Sammie is in love with Dencey but is afraid that he could never be good enough for her. The others in town have gained respect for Sammie while others wonder if Sammie has risen above those he once called friends.

Sammie is relieved to know that although Injun Jill raised him, she is not his biological mother.

This is also the time during which Dencey turns from a girl into a young woman and with that change comes a sense of confusion about Sammie.



Chapters forty-six through forty-nine bring the story to its close. Sammie finally becomes a Quaker, much to the surprise and joy of the Coffyns. Sammie works hard to save Injun Jill, and this new kindness has a good effect on the old, hardened woman. It is decided however, that Sammie must go out to sea.

Sammie's voyage is arranged. Sammie finally professes his love for Dencey and kisses her, something that he never would have dared to do before. Although Dencey runs away from Sammie, it is clear that she will wait for him just like every other Nantucket woman waits for her man to return home.



# Characters

## Dionis Dencey Coffyn

Dionis "Dencey" Coffyn is a young Quaker girl living in Nantucket in the early 1800s. The behaviors and traditions of the time are clearly reflected in Dencey's demeanor and actions.

As a Quaker girl, Dencey is required to behave as her parents tell her, which means not disobeying any of the laws of the house or church. Dencey does not believe fully in the tenets of the Church and often acts not out of piety, but out of respect and fear of judgment and punishment.

Dencey begins to war with her faith even more after meeting Sammie Jetsam. Sammie is an outcast, a half Indian that lives with an alcoholic known as Injun Jill. It is not clear what the relationship is between Sammie and Jill - if they are related or if Injun Jill took Sammie in because he was orphaned. Dencey truly notices Jetsam for the first time after she hits him with a rock. Dencey tries to apologize profusely, but Sammie will not accept the apology. As a means of penance, Dencey offers to teach Sammie to read. A friendship begins.

Dencey has many responsibilities at home, particularly after her Uncle Stephen's twelve children move into the family home. Dencey is a great help to Lydia. Dencey also spends a lot of time at Aunt Lovesta's house. It is Dencey's relationship with Lovesta that makes her realize how important faith truly is her in life.

Dencey bears a lot of guilt for her actions even if the intention is good.

Over time, Dencey falls in love with Jetsam. Dencey is forced to grow up and must learn how to handle the loss when Jetsam goes out to sea.

## Sammie Jetsam

Sammie Jetsam is a boy that lives on Injun Hill. Sammie is looked down on by the Fragmenters because his family had to be rescued from a shipwreck. Jetsam is the victim in Dencey's rock throwing incident.

Sammie Jetsam is an easy target. Jetsam is more or less orphaned and ridiculed because of his mixed heritage. Additionally, Sammie Jetsam is extremely poor. As a result of these things, Sammie has developed a hard thick shell to protect himself from the outside world. When Dencey hits Jetsam with a rock, it seems to penetrate his wall just for a minute before the rough and tough Sammie takes over.

Sammie is a person that likes to think he needs no one. His coarse language and demeanor are designed to push people away. Dencey is shocked by Sammie's



language, although she eventually comes to understand why Sammie behaves in this way.

Sammie lives with Injun Jill, an alcoholic wild woman who scares the townsfolk. Sammie often takes care of Jill instead of the other way around. Sammie has confrontations with Jill when he begins to learn to read.

It takes Sammie a while to let down his guard with Dencey. Sammie is often embarrassed at his situation and also must battle with raging hormones. Not only is it inappropriate to have a relationship with a girl from town, it is unforgivable for Sammie to have a relationship with Dencey.

Like Dencey, Sammie grows up in this story. Once a "heathen", Sammie becomes saved. Sammie learns about responsibility and following one's heart, even when it means sacrificing some one or something he loves.

## **Tom Coffyn**

Tom Coffyn is Lydia Coffyn's husband and Dencey Coffyn's father. Tom is a captain of a whaling ship. It is not uncommon for Tom to be gone for years at a time while out on voyages making money to support the family.

## **Hopestill**

Hopestill is Dencey's best friend. Hopestill constantly worried about Dencey because Dencey does not carry the Spirit in the same way Hopestill does, or as the girls are being taught to do through their Quaker faith.

## **North Water Street Children**

North Water Street Children are the children that attend the new Coffin School for privileged children.

## **Fragmenters**

Fragmenters are the nicknames of the boys that attend the Fragment Society School.

## **Lydia Coffyn**

Lydia Coffyn is Dionis Coffyn's mother. Lydia has the task of taking care of her family in the absence of her husband, who is out on the West Coast looking for whales.



## **Injun Jill**

Injun Jill is a woman that lives on the edge of town. Injun Jill has taken in Sammie Jetsam, although it seems Sammie takes care of her rather than vice versa. Jill is also an alcoholic.

## **Quakers**

The Quakers are the main religious leaders in the story. The majority of the people in Nantucket are either Quakers or Congregationalists. The Quakers are known for being pious and God-fearing. No one should ever speak out of turn or act in any way that might offend God or their fellow worshipers, also known as "Friends". The Quakers are extremely strict. One good example of this is the interrogation Tom Coffyn goes through before converting so that he could marry Lydia.

## **Stephen**

Stephen is Lydia's younger brother. Stephen's wife dies while he is out to sea, leaving behind twelve children. Lydia takes in the children until Stephen is able to return from sea. Lydia and Stephen are close and get along well.

## **Lovesta Coffyn**

Lovesta Coffyn is Dencey's aunt. Lovesta is a preacher, and Dencey views her as the purest woman she knows, one that has spoken to God.



# Objects/Places

## Nantucket

Nantucket is an island off the coast of Massachusetts. It is an eighteen-mile long stretch of sandy island that caters to seafarers and their families. It is said that Nantucket was formed when a spark from a white hot fire flew from Massachusetts out into the ocean. The author describes Nantucket: "Here were the New England character and hardihood, it's God-fearing and mental eagerness, yet all sensitively changed, individualized, so that they became Nantucket and no other" (Book II, Chap. 7, p. 41).

Unlike the other New Englanders, those living on Nantucket could not rely on the stony fields, land that would consistently produce a means for living. The people on Nantucket relied on the sea for their livelihood. Nantucket was an industrious area, supplying the continent and majority of the world with whale oil.

Nantucket is a real place. The author has taken the basic structure of the island and its industry and incorporated it into the story. Many things have changed, including the renaming of State Street to Main Street, but overall, the mystery and uniqueness of the island remains.

## The Sea

The main occupation of the people living on Nantucket at this time is the whaling business.

This is a departure from the people living on mainland Massachusetts, where the majority of the people are farmers. As a result, the conditions and atmosphere on Nantucket is completely different and geared toward seafarers and their families. The sea turned Nantucket into an industrious area, supplying the continent and majority of the world with whale oil.

The whaling business was a difficult one, particularly when the ocean was "killed out"; meaning that there were no more whales to be found in a specific area. It was common for the men to travel to other areas like the South Pacific, the Horn, and the Sea of Japan. The trips were long and grueling. It was no uncommon for the whalers to be gone for years at a time. In the case of Captain Tom Coffyn, his ship would be gone on average of four years at a time. There were times when the ship would come across a particularly abundant area of the ocean and the trip could be cut short, allowing the sailors time at home with their families. However, those stints at home tended to be relatively short. Some sailors were eager to get back out onto the ocean to make a living while others had the sea in their blood.



## **Coffin School**

Coffin School is the school founded for the ancestors of the Coffin family. The North Water Street children who attended the school were enemies of the children that attended the Fragment Society School.

## **State Street**

State Street is the former name of Main Street in Nantucket.

## **Fragment Society School**

Fragment Society School is a charity school for the poorest families in Nantucket.

## **Injun Jill's Cottage**

Injun Jill's cottage is the first place Dencey visits without permission. Dencey wants desperately to apologize to Sammie Jetsam, who lives with Injun Jill. The place is little more than a shack, with only Sammie keeping it together since Injun Jill is an alcoholic.

## **Pilgrim's Progress**

Pilgrim's Progress is a book written by John Bunyan. The book, a Christian allegory, is Dencey's favorite book and most prized possession. Dencey gives the book to Sammie Jetsam. Later, Sammie gives the book back because he cannot read. Dencey will use Pilgrim's Progress as a teaching tool to help Sammie.



# Themes

## The Quaker Religion

The Coffyns and a great number of the people living on Nantucket are Quakers. The majority of the people in Nantucket are divided into two main groups. A person is either a Quaker or Congregationalist. Therefore, one of the main themes in the story is religion.

The Coffyns are devout Quakers as are many of the townspeople. The Quakers are known for being pious and God-fearing. The people of the Quaker faith are taught to be obedient and to do God's will, whatever that may be. The Quakers are extremely strict.

A person's behavior is strictly guided by the leaders of the faith and by the rules of the Meeting House. It is clear that no one should ever speak out of turn or act in any way that might offend God or their fellow worshipers, also known as "Friends". One example of inappropriate behavior is pointed out when Dencey goes swimming. It is unheard of for a girl to go swimming. Another set of rules regards entertainment. A Quaker shall never dance, drink, play cards or listen to music.

One of the most grievous sins for a Quaker would be to marry out of Meeting. Quakers must marry Quakers, without exception. One may convert however, after undergoing a grueling process. One good example of this is the interrogation Tom Coffyn goes through before converting so that he could marry Lydia.

## Class Separation

Class separation is a very large part of the story and therefore one of its main themes. There are noticeable differences in the lives of the Quakers versus the lives of the Congregationalists; the Coffin School kids versus the Fragmenters; the townspeople versus the sailors and the outsiders like Sammie. Snedeker makes it abundantly clear that the classes are not supposed to mix. The upper classes look down upon the lesser classes like the Fragmenters and outsiders. Even when the individual does not feel any different than the other person, even if the other person is basically on the same level, it is a strict code that the classes should never mix.

The Fragmenters torment the Coffin School kids because of their superiority. The irony is that most of the Coffin School kids are not upper crust and do not see themselves in that light. Still, it is the Quaker way to obey one's parents and church. Those entities say that the classes should never mix, so the children obey.

Likewise, Dencey knows it would be a huge scandal for her family and the people at the Meeting House to learn about her relationship with Sammie, no matter how innocent. Dencey's sense of responsibility supersedes her devotion to her parents, a fact that causes a great deal of guilt in the girl.





## Devotion

Devotion is a main theme in the story, particularly when it involves the relationships between the seafarers and their families.

It is not uncommon for the whalers to be gone for years at a time. Captain Tom Coffyn was gone for four years, traveling around the world searching for whales. Meanwhile, Lydia stays at home with the children, tending to everything on her own, including those women that do not have ample capabilities to take care of their homes and families while their husbands are at sea.

A good example of Lydia's friendship and devotion to her friends and neighbors can be seen in the case of Martha White. Martha becomes a widow and shortly thereafter loses their infant child. Lydia stays with the woman day and night, attempting to nurse her back to health.

Dencey becomes devoted to Sammie, first through the reading lessons, then friendship, and then love.

All of the Quakers are devoutly devoted to the Meeting House. Each person obeys the rules of the faith and must carry out deeds as instructed by the church. These include helping one's neighbor in the time of need.

Perhaps the biggest and best example of devotion takes place between Lydia and her brother. Lydia takes on raising Stephen's twelve children after his wife dies. Lydia feels it is her duty to protect and raise her brother's children, at least until he returns from sea.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view used in *Downright Dencey* by Caroline Dale Snedeker is third person omniscient. This is particularly accurate when setting and religious views and discourse are of great importance to the story. Third person allows Snedeker to give the reader great insight into the sights and sounds encountered on the journey into adulthood and to develop a sense of personality and vision regarding each character.

Since many of the facts in the book are historically accurate, it is even more important to impart them as such, even if they are woven into the story. Snedeker's descriptions of Nantucket, its people and the living conditions of the area, are expressed well and allow the reader to see and understand the vast difference in the classes, religious values and varied personalities in the story. For example, a first person point of view could not equally represent Dencey and Sammie Jetsam as their backgrounds are worlds apart and often completely foreign to each other.

Additionally, it allows the reader to get insight into things that may not have been seen and heard by Dencey, to learn about the story through a more mature set of eyes and to experience the journeys of the characters like Dencey, Lydia, Sammie, Tom, Hopestill, Lovesta and others.

## Setting

Nantucket is an island off the coast of Massachusetts. It is an eighteen-mile long stretch of sandy island that caters to seafarers and their families. It is said that Nantucket was formed when a spark from a white hot fire flew from Massachusetts out into the ocean. From that, Nantucket was formed. The author describes Nantucket: "Here were the New England character and hardi-hood, it's God-fearing and mental eagerness, yet all sensitively changed, individualized, so that they became Nantucket and no other" (Book II, Chap. 7, p. 41).

Unlike the other New Englanders, those living on Nantucket could not rely on the stony fields, land that would consistently produce a means for living. The people on Nantucket relied on the sea for their livelihood. Nantucket was an industrious area, supplying the continent and majority of the world with whale oil.

Nantucket is a real place. The author has taken the basic structure of the island and its industry and incorporated it into the story. Many things have changed, including the renaming of State Street to Main Street, but overall, the mystery and uniqueness of the island remains.

Other settings include the sea, the Commons, the Coffyn house, and Brown's barn.



## Language and Meaning

The language used in *Downright Dencey* by Caroline Dale Snedeker is broad and varied. The main part of the story takes place shortly before the War of 1812 in Nantucket. The language used reflects the time period and can often be somewhat difficult for the reader to focus on the story and/or meaning because of the differences in language.

For example, Dencey tends to speak in a proper manner as do the members of her family. The seafarers tend to use more slang and phonetics, which are often garbled and slurred. The most noticeable difference may be in Sammie Jetsam who is entirely uneducated and has picked up the majority of his language and habits from Injun Jill.

In one scene Sammie hides his copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* from Injun Jill. The woman is jealous that Sammie is learning to read and fears that the boy will rise above his current station in life, leaving her behind. "Awful smard hidin' fro' Indion Jeel," she murmured in the Nantucket Indian jargon he knew so well. "Go many blaces but Indion Jeel knoweth all blaces - she knowth all times" (Chap. 20, p. 113).

The Quakers on the other hand tend to be formal in their use of language. When Tom Coffyn comes home from sea, he addresses Dencey. "I gathered these for thee on little lonely islands where foot of man had never trod" (Chap. 12, p. 76).

## Structure

*Downright Dencey* by Caroline Dale Snedeker is a book of fiction written for young adult audiences. The book is a Newberry Honor Book award winner, a highly prestigious award in the young adult genre. It is considered to be one of the best books for young adults. The book is 268 pages, plus an additional five pages of author's notes and a one page Preface in which Snedeker explains certain facts about Nantucket and the liberties she took when writing the story.

The book is separated into three sections. There are illustrations included at the beginning of each chapter.

Book 1 is comprised of forty pages and six chapters. The shortest chapter is four pages in length; the longest chapter is eight pages in length. The average length of the chapters is six pages.

Book 2 is comprised of forty-three pages and seven chapters. The shortest chapter is five pages in length; the longest chapter is nine pages in length. The average length of the chapters is six pages.

Book 3 is comprised of 187 pages and thirty-five chapters. The shortest chapter is three pages in length; the longest chapter is ten pages in length. The average length of the chapters is five pages.

The average length of the three sections is ninety pages.

The book is chronological in order except for chapters seven, eight and nine, which tell the story of the meeting and marriage of Tom and Lydia Coffyn.



## Quotes

"Suddenly, bursting like a dam, Dencey's long-held self-control gave way. Mob Spirit seized her."

Book I, Chap. 1, p. 6

"She had been wicked before, often, but never this wicked."

Book I, Chap. 3, p. 14

"She had come out to ask for forgiveness, but Jetsam had only broker her ammonite, and had now snatched from her her precious Pilgrim's Progress."

Book I, Chap. 5, p. 32

"She had a deep sense of the ugliness she had seen, a strange intimation, such as sometimes comes to children, of the cruelty of the world which is yet all unknown, all to be lived through."

Book I, Chap. 6, p. 33

"Here were the New England character and hardi-hood, it's God-fearing and mental eagerness, yet all sensitively changed, individualized, so that they became Nantucket and no other."

Book II, Chap. 7, p. 41

"Tom Coffyn's change of religion was a nine-day wonder in Nantucket. Old Elias Coffyn said he'd rather have buried Thomas."

Book II, Chap. 9, p. 54

"He was shy, resentful, ashamed and immeasurably stupid. He had no defense except the small boy's - trying to be funny."

Book III, Chap. 14, p. 88

"Responsibility - the heavy pressing sense of it was upon Dencey - setting the long, long task. It was bred into her by her pioneer ancestry, Quaker ancestry. She could no more resist responsibility than she could the color of her eyes and hair."

Book III, Chap. 14, p. 90

"Jetsam never spoke a tentative statement. It was always flat, fight-provoking argument."

Book III, Chap. 15, p. 92



"Aunt Lovesta was the soul of truthfulness."  
Book III, Chap. 16, p. 98

"Dencey knew with an intensity that equaled its vagueness that if she let go of Jetsam, he would tumble back into an abyss."  
Book III, Chap. 18, p. 106

"The looks which Injun Jill was casting over toward Sammie Jetsam were effectually killing any tenderness or trust which might be in the boy's character."  
Book III, Chap. 20, p. 113

"Jetsam was lost - utterly lost. All the horrors of hell its fleshly burning and inward soul agony which her grandfather had so aptly described came back to her."  
Book III, Chap. 31, p. 168



## Topics for Discussion

Who is Injun Jill? Where does she live? How far is it from the Commons to Injun Hill? Why are the townspeople afraid of Injun Jill? Why does Dencey go to Injun Hill if she is afraid of the woman? Who lives with Injun Jill? Why? What does Dencey learn during her first visit to the house?

Tom Coffyn falls in love with Lydia Severance at first sight. Discuss the courtship between Tom and Lydia. Why was it impossible for Lydia to marry Tom out of Meeting? What is Tom's reply? Why does Lydia continue to refuse? What great lengths does Tom go to so that he might be able to marry Lydia? How does Tom's decision affect his family? Explain.

Examine the relationship between Sammie and Dencey. How does it begin? What is the general atmosphere of their first planned meeting? What happens to change their relationship? Who expresses romantic feelings first? Why does Dencey consistently betray Lydia to meet with Sammie? Is Dencey devoted out of defiance, pride, responsibility or something else?

From the onset of the book Dencey's dedication to her faith is in question. The person that seems to question it the most is Hopestill. Why is Hopestill so concerned with Dencey's behavior and beliefs? What is the relationship between Hopestill and Dencey? How does the relationship change throughout the story? Do you think Aunt Lovesta's influence on Hopestill makes a difference in her belief system? How does Aunt Lovesta affect Dencey's faith? Compare and contrast Dencey and Hopestill regarding their faith and devotion to the Meeting.

Caroline Dale Snedeker portrays Nantucket in the early 1800s. Snedeker admits to altering some of the details to make the story more interesting and/or appropriate to the characters. One example is that the date of the Coffin School is incorrect by seven years but it was important for the school to be new at the time to depict class separation. Also the names of some of the streets have changed. Compare Snedeker's Nantucket to Nantucket today. What are the main differences? Are there any other facts in the story that are not historically accurate? Explain.

Class separation is a very large part of the story. There are noticeable differences in the lives of the Quakers versus the lives of the Congregationalists; the Coffin School kids versus the Fragmenters; the townspeople versus the sailors and the outsiders like Sammie. Examine the use of class separation in the story. Why is it important for Snedeker to show the extremes in the classes? How does it affect the story? Give examples.

One of the main themes in the story is religion. The Coffyns are devout Quakers, as are many of the townspeople. Examine the Quaker faith. Also examine the faith and

practices of the Congregationalists. Compare and contrast the two religious entities to better understand the conflict between the churches. Use examples from Aunt Lovesta to make your point. Also discuss Tom's conversion from one to the other.