

## Literature Circle Guide to *Black Duck* by Janet Taylor Lisle

### Summary

Like everyone in town, Ruben Hart has heard about the *Black Duck*. It's 1929. Prohibition is in full swing. The outlaw rum-running boat is half phantom, known up and down the Rhode Island coast for its daring exploits, yet rarely glimpsed by ordinary folk. The skipper is too smart and the crew too skilled. Then Ruben catches the speedster landing an illegal load of liquor late one night on an abandoned dock. Soon after, a dead body in an evening suit washes up on the beach. Ruben and his friend Jeddy are drawn into a dark world of subterfuge. It's a place where conventional rules of right and wrong no longer apply, as loyalty turns into betrayal, and betrayal becomes a way of upholding the law.

### Author Information

Janet Taylor Lisle is well known for her imaginative and award-winning novels for young people. The recipient of both the Newberry Honor Medal for *Afternoon of the Elves* and the prestigious Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction for *The Art of Keeping Cool*, Ms. Lisle is also the author of *The Lost Flower Children*, *How I Became a Writer and Oggie Learned to Drive*, and *Forest*, among others.

A graduate of Smith College, Ms. Lisle's first career was in journalism, but she found she enjoyed the freedom of writing fiction, and has since gone on to publish fifteen books for young readers. She lives with her family close to the Rhode Island shores that, like the beaches in *Black Duck*, were once secret entries for rumrunners.

### Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. When Ruben and Jeddy discover the body of a dead man at Coulter's Point, they search his pockets. What items does Ruben find? **A pipe and a satchel of tobacco (p. 18).**
2. What does Ruben see on his way back from delivering Mrs. LeWitt's medicine? **The *Black Duck* making a delivery (p. 51).**
3. Who do the boys visit to find out what happened to the body? What do they learn? **The boys visit Tom Morrison. He tells them that a plane flew in, carrying men with machine guns. The men shot at the dead body, loaded it onto the plane, and flew off (p. 71).**
4. Ruben says Tom Morrison was "a man who'd had big dreams once, but who'd been beaten down to the point where he wasn't asking for anything anymore" (p. 84). Summarize the events in Tom's life that left him so defeated. **One day while fishing, a wave swept Tom's first mate overboard. He sank and disappeared before Tom could reach him. A few years later, Tom's boat was smashed into the rocks by a storm. He couldn't afford to replace his boat, so he took a job as a crewman**

on another boat. While working, a boat hook caught his eye and tore his face so badly he had to quit working. These unfortunate experiences inspired a bad mood in Tom. People began to believe he brought bad luck on board a boat, so no one would hire him. His wife left him for another man, and he had to sell his house. So he retreated far out on the Point, where he lived alone in a shack that once housed hens (p. 67).

5. Describe the *Black Duck*'s reputation. What did local families think about the vessel and its crew? What did the coast guard think? **The local families thought the *Black Duck* was a formidable boat—fast, solid, and intriguing—and that the crew were heroes of a sort since they successfully outwitted the law so often. There were rumors that the crew would give some of the *Black Duck*'s profits to local families in need, so they supported the *Black Duck*'s illegal deliveries of alcohol. In contrast, the coast guard thought the *Black Duck* and its crew were criminals and needed to be stopped (pp. 54–55).**
6. Ruben thinks Marina is beautiful, but he also admires her for other reasons. In your own words, describe some of the other qualities that Ruben notices and appreciates. **Marina didn't gab like the other girls Ruben knew, but she was able to speak up, even to her intimidating father, when she wanted to. She didn't take life too seriously, and she always made Ruben feel at home when he visited the McKenzies' house (pp. 23–27).**
7. Fog is mentioned over and over in the story. (Ruben Hart calls it “murk.”) Using examples from the book, show how the author uses this coastal phenomenon to symbolize something besides the weather. **In the story, the author uses “murky weather” to symbolize dark, confusing times that lead to trouble. For example, Ruben explains that Marina could “keep her head in murky weather,” which was a good quality about her because “murk is what was heading for us. Jeddy and I couldn't see it yet, but the fog was out there, sifting and swirling, already beginning to close in around the McKenzies' house” (p. 35).**
8. Fathers and sons, and the complicated relationships between them, play a central role in this book. Ruben, Jeddy, and David have different feelings about “the family business.” Choose one of these characters and examine how he feels about following in his father's footsteps. Use specific details from the text to support your analysis. **David feels pressured to join his father's business, Peterson's Landscaping and Garden Design. He was hoping that his interviews with Ruben Hart would amount to a story that he could sell to a newspaper so that he could become a journalist instead of working for the family business. Because his father “measures industry by what he can see: gardens plowed, hedges**

pruned, lawns seeded,” he tries to write down Ruben’s stories on a notepad so that his father can see the tangible outcome of the time he spends interviewing Ruben, but he never manages to get much down on paper (pp. 40–41).

9. Compare the Prohibition-era rumrunners in the book with today’s drug smugglers. Examine the similarities and differences from the point of view of (a) the government, (b) the general law-abiding public, (c) the smugglers themselves, and (d) the people who buy the smuggled goods. **(a) The government today and during rum-running times believe that smuggling alcohol and/or drugs into the United States is illegal and deserves severe punishment. (b) The general law-abiding public during rum-running times found the *Black Duck* mysterious and exciting, and they believed that some of the profits were given to local families in need. In addition, wealthy people enjoyed getting their hands on the illegal alcohol so that they could throw extravagant parties. Therefore, the general law-abiding public supported rum-running activities, for the most part. In contrast, today’s general law-abiding public detests drug smugglers. They do not support their activities, and they feel that drug addiction is a serious problem that destroys people’s lives and must be stopped. (c) In rum-running times, the drug smugglers are hungry to make a profit. They do not care who they hurt or what it takes to make a successful delivery. In today’s times, drug smugglers feel the same way. They will do anything it takes to make a successful delivery, not caring about who they hurt or what it takes. (d) In both rum-running times and today, the people who buy smuggled goods are thankful for the drug smugglers’ efforts. They want their drugs, and they are happy someone is willing to bring it to them, no matter who gets hurt or why.**
10. Would you categorize this novel as mystery, thriller, adventure, or historical fiction? Why? Do you think novels should be labeled like this? **I think this novel is a mystery, a thriller, an adventure, and a work of historical fiction, because the novel contains all of these elements. I think that novels should not be labeled like this, because it confines the reader into thinking that a novel is structured in just one way when it could be structured in many ways.**
11. At the end of the book, David is struggling to figure out how he will write his newspaper article. Put yourself in David’s shoes. How would you begin writing about Ruben’s adventures? Compose a headline and the first three paragraphs of an imaginary article for the local newspaper.

**BLAST FROM THE PAST: EX-RUMRUNNER RUBEN HART  
FINALLY REVEALS THE STORY OF THE INFAMOUS *BLACK  
DUCK VESSEL***

**Ruben Hart was just a young boy when the *Black Duck* was making illegal rum-running deliveries to the city of Newport. But what he saw and experienced reveals that the rum-running business was so pervasive in Newport that even young people were unable to escape involvement in it.**

**Over a series of interviews, journalist David Peterson spoke with the now-aged Ruben Hart about his experiences, but it wasn't an easy interview to achieve. For most of Hart's life, what he saw and how his life became entangled in the rum-running business were a secret he never planned to tell anyone. After all, it almost took his life once.**

**It all began one innocent afternoon when Ruben and his friend Jeddy were walking along the water's edge. Suddenly, they came upon a dead body. Curious about the deceased's identity, Ruben sifted through his pockets and found a pipe and a satchel of tobacco. On a whim, Ruben secretly took the items with him. But that one innocent decision began his involvement in rum-running, and he was never the same person again.**

12. Around the time Mr. Riley goes to jail, Ruben's father stops talking to his son and avoids being with him. For the most part, he leaves Ruben alone to sort out the complicated situation they are all in. In a short paragraph, imagine how the story might have changed if Ruben's father had talked to his son instead of ignoring him and their growing problems. **If Ruben's father had talked to his son instead of ignoring him and their growing problems, he could have helped Ruben make better decisions. He could have told Ruben to trust him and tell him everything he had seen and experienced. Perhaps he would have convinced Ruben to give the pipe and satchel to the authorities, and he would have escaped being kidnapped. The rum-running problem would have continued, since some of the people in law enforcement were corrupt, but Ruben would have been taken out of the situation and would have escaped harm.**
  
13. Ruben says that talking about what was happening around them might have given the boys "a larger frame to put around things, a frame that took in a few fog banks and murky nights, not just the sharp daylight of right and wrong, which was the kind of childish picture we've been living in up to then" (p. 112). Does anyone in this story do the "right" thing? Rate the morality of the following characters: Jeddy, Ruben, Chief McKenzie, Carl Hart, and Billy Brady. How would they be seen in the "sharp daylight of right and wrong"? **Jeddy always did the right thing by reporting what he saw to the authorities, even if those well-intended actions ended up indirectly contributing to rum-running activity. Ruben wanted to do the right thing, but he began lying at an early stage, when he didn't**

confess he had the deceased's pipe and tobacco satchel, and that began his trouble. Chief McKenzie was a deeply saddened man who missed his deceased wife dearly. As a result, he could not see things clearly and eventually was deeply engaged in illegal activities himself. Carl Hart was forced into complying with the rum-running business. Therefore, although he was involved, it was out of force and not of his own volition. Billy Brady tried to get into the rum-running business himself, so he was no better than the others. But he did free Ruben from his kidnappers, and he was loyal to his friends.

14. Readers learn what happened on the night of the shooting from Ruben Hart, and even he isn't sure whether the coast guard gave "fair warning" before firing on the *Black Duck*. Imagine that you were a member of the coast guard crew that night. How would you defend your actions? Argue that the shooting was justified. **Rum-running is an illegal activity no matter which way you look at it. As a member of the coast guard, I carry weapons to protect myself from criminals, who are armed as well and have every intent on harming me if I were to get in the way of their goals. Sure, it would be better if we could always give forewarning before violence erupts, but I have my own life to look out for, too. If I had waited to shoot and given warning to the rum-running criminals, I may have lost my life—all because they feel they need warning from me? It's like giving them an open door to commit their crimes and possibly even destroy my life and those of my fellow members of the coast guard. I couldn't take that risk.**

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1–3; Comprehension: 4–6; Application: 7–8; Analysis: 9–10; Synthesis: 11–12; Evaluation: 13–14.*

## Activities

1. Think of a scene from *Black Duck* that is very vivid in your mind. It could be a scene you thought was important or that was particularly exciting. Think of what characters were there, how you imagine they looked, where the scene took place, what the setting looked like, and what action or conflict was taking place. Now draw a picture of this scene using the descriptions given in the novel. Last, create a title for the drawing that explains the scene you have drawn. **Ask students to reread the part of the novel that describes the scene they intend to drawing. Encourage them to be as descriptive and specific as possible in their draw. For example, ask them to think about how each of the characters were feeling and how that feeling might be expressed on the characters' faces in the drawing.**

2. In *Black Duck*, readers see a lot of the events from Ruben Hart's point of view, but don't learn very much about Jeddy McKenzie's perspective on things. Reread the conflict that takes place between Ruben and Jeddy on p. 83. Now write a journal entry from Jeddy's point of view describing the day's events. **Students might answer: "Fall, 1929. Ruben and I got into a fight today. Ruben is my best friend and I hate to disagree with him, but he doesn't understand what it is like to have a father as a police chief. In a way, that makes you part of the police force, too. When something goes wrong, you can't just play kid detective. You have to alert the authorities and let the adults straighten it out. Ruben's father might be mad at him for skipping school, but what is more important, getting in trouble for skipping school or solving the case of the dead man's body we found? And what about Tom's poor dog, Viola? More deaths are occurring because of this dead body, and I've got to help put a stop to it."**
3. Write a short story that depicts what happens to David after *Black Duck* ends. Begin the short story where the novel concludes: David has just heard Ruben's entire story and Marina has come back home. Use your imagination and describe what happens next. Your short story could focus on the next few hours of David's life, the next few years of his life, or the rest of his life. Does David Peterson become a reporter or not? Does he continue to be friends with the Harts or not? How does the experience of hearing about the rumrunners affect him? **Encourage students to use colorful, descriptive, and precise words so that the short story is vivid and alive. Also encourage students to entertain the reader by using suspense, foreshadowing, metaphors, and other literary techniques.**

For more information about the author, go to: <http://www.janettaylorlisle.com>

#### **Other Books by this Author**

*The Crying Rocks, How I Became a Writer & Oggie Learned to Drive, The Art of Keeping Cool, The Great Dimpole Oak, The Lost Flower Children, Afternoon of the Elves, Forest, The Lampfish of Twill, Sirens and Spies, The Dancing Cats of Applesap,* and the Investigators of the Unknown series