

Literature Circle Guide to *Blood on the River* by Elisa Carbone

Book Summary

Samuel Collier, a rough-and-tumble young orphan, becomes Captain John Smith's page on his journey to the New World. Brought up in poor conditions, Samuel is street-smart but also quick-tempered. He has to learn to control his anger and to use his head instead of his fists. During the journey on the ship the *Susan Constant*, Samuel begins to learn how to determine right from wrong. Through his interactions with other boys his age and with key figures such as Captain John Smith, Reverend Hunt, and Master Wingfield, Samuel discovers ways to avoid conflict. His first encounters with the native peoples in the Caribbean and in the New World further teach Samuel about different perspectives and about the value of culture. Survival in the new colony tests Samuel as he evaluates these life lessons and learns to make good choices using his heart and his head.

Author Information

Elisa Carbone was raised in Arlington, Virginia. She composed her first book before she even learned to write, by having her father take down what she said to him every night. Although she didn't write her second book until she was in her early thirties, she had many adventures in the meantime, including getting married, having children, living in Italy, and teaching music and dance. Once her children were older, she attended college at the University of Maryland. She also received two master's degrees from the University of Maryland, one in speech communication and the other in education. She now makes her living as a writer. She lives part of the time in the Washington, D.C., area and part of the time in the mountains of West Virginia.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. At the beginning of the novel, why doesn't the magistrate send Samuel to the gallows for stealing the locket from the pawnshop?
The magistrate takes pity on Samuel because he has a son of the same age. He pulls Samuel out of the jail cell after two days and brings him to the orphanage. (p. 6)
2. Both Captain Smith and Reverend Hunt teach Samuel very valuable lessons. What is the biggest lesson that Reverend Hunt teaches Samuel? What is the biggest lesson that Captain Smith teaches Samuel?
Reverend Hunt teaches Samuel to be kind. Captain Smith teaches Samuel to channel his anger. (p. 74, p. 122)
3. List the names of the three ships that sail from England to the New World. Which of the ships is the smallest? Which ship does Samuel take?
Susan Constant
Godspeed
Discovery

The smallest ship is the *Discovery*. (p. 9)

Samuel takes the *Susan Constant* to the New World. (p. 13)

4. Reverend Hunt believes that the settlers get ill in the summer because of the mosquitoes that bite them. What do the natives use to keep from getting bitten by mosquitoes?

They use bear grease mixed with a powder of red puccoon root. (p. 183)

5. Place the following in order, from those who have the least say at the settlement to those who have the most say at the settlement:

Gentleman

Servant

President

Laborer

Council member

Servant

Laborer

Gentleman

Council member

President

This information is not located on any one page. Readers should understand the hierarchy of the settlement after reading the entire novel.

6. After Reverend Hunt introduces Samuel to Captain Smith, he points to the men to whom Samuel and Richard must show respect. What does Samuel do so that he will remember each of the men?

Samuel thinks of things that sound like the men's names in order to remember them. For example, with Sir Edward Maria Wingfield, Samuel thinks of wings and imagines him with bright tail feathers and wings so he won't forget him. (pp. 11-12)

7. As Captain Smith's page, Samuel both serves Captain Smith and learns from him. Think of a time when you acted like a page by both helping a person and learning from that person. Describe who this person was, how you helped him or her, and what you learned from him or her.

Students may describe acting like a page with a teacher. Perhaps the teacher taught them how to cooperate with others and perhaps they helped the teacher by passing out papers or cleaning an area of the classroom. Students may also discuss a parent or other relative, a neighbor, or a friend, and describe how they both helped and learned from this person.

8. The Virginia Company's contract with the settlers sometimes gets in the way of the settlers' ability to survive in Virginia. Explain how this happens.

This happens because The Virginia Company and the settlers want different things. For example, The Virginia Company wants the settlers to make them a profit by digging for gold in the New World. However, the settlers' time would be put to better use by securing shelter and food. Another example is that The Virginia Company wants the settlers to claim the land at James Town as their own. The settlers, on the other hand, would rather make peace with the natives who were there before they arrived. The settlers know that the natives are shrewd fighters who are better equipped for war and more knowledgeable about the land. Therefore, the settlers wish to avoid starting a war with the natives by claiming the land as the Virginia Company wants them to do. (p. 59, 166)

9. At the end of the novel, Samuel says that Ann, John, and Virginia Laydon are like family to him. Explain why it is so important to Samuel to feel like he has family.
At the beginning of the novel, Samuel is an orphan with no family. By the end of the novel, Samuel feels like Ann, John, and Virginia Laydon are his new family. This makes him happy because he feels like he belongs somewhere again and that people love him. (p. 217)

10. On page 98, we learn that Master Wingfield is no longer president because he hid food from the settlers, and that Captain Ratcliffe is now president. Captain Smith tells Samuel that they “have gone from the frying pan into the fire.” Explain what Captain Smith means by this.
Captain Smith thinks that Captain Ratcliffe will be a worse leader than Master Wingfield was. The troubles for the settlers will increase with the change in leadership. The frying pan above the fire is hot, but the fire itself is even hotter. (p. 98)

11. The author begins each chapter with a quotation. The quotations come from the writings of the real men who settled in the New World. What does each quotation have to do with what happens during each chapter?
The quotations describe the main event(s) that happen(s) in each chapter.

12. When Samuel says that his “circle has become bigger” on page 136, what does he mean?
Samuel means that he is not alone any more. He used to be a loner on the streets of London, but now he has learned to depend on, stand together with, and cooperate with other people. These people are his “circle,” which, compared to his days in London, has become much bigger. (p. 136)

13. Why do you think the author titled this novel *Blood on the River*?
The author probably titled this novel *Blood on the River* because a lot of fighting takes place on the Powhatan River (James River). Many people are killed by fighting or die through illness and starvation.

14. If the settlers had abandoned James Town and gone back to England with Sir Thomas Gates in the spring of 1610, what do you think would have happened to European settlement of the New World?

European settlement of the New World probably wouldn't have occurred. People would have learned of the hardships of living in James Town and would have decided to stay in England where it was less dangerous and where food and shelter were more readily available.

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-5; Application: 6-7; Analysis: 8-9; Synthesis: 10-12; Evaluation: 13-14.

Activities

1. The settlers were not allowed to write letters saying anything bad about what it was like living in the New World. Yet, as we know from reading this historical novel, the settlers had many problems trying to start a new life in James Town. Imagine that you are a settler and your brother has sent word that he is coming to join you in James Town. Write him a truthful letter about your experiences in the New World and convince him to stay in England.

Encourage students to cite actual problems that occurred in James Town. For example, students can write about how they have to build a fortress around their settlement because the natives threaten their safety. Or they can write about how they lack the know-how and proper weaponry for hunting, and therefore are concerned about food, or about how fire destroys their houses and storehouse.

2. Because the settlers and the natives speak different languages, they often use body language to communicate with one another. For example, on page 71, Samuel uses body language to tell the native he is hungry, and the native uses body language to tell Samuel that he can eat some of their bread. Pair up with a classmate and try to communicate using body language. You can start off by communicating something simple, such as "I am sleepy" or "I am strong," and then move on to something more difficult, such as "I would like to trade my pencil for your notebook."

Keep a log of your experiences communicating with body language. To do this, first write down what it is you would like to communicate to your classmate. Then, after you use body language to communicate it, write down what body language you used and whether or not your classmate was able to understand you. Once you have tried to use body language to communicate a few times, allow your classmate to do the same.

Encourage students to be creative with the body language they use to communicate. When their partners aren't able to understand their body

language, encourage them to try other body language to get their point across. When students have completed the activity, ask them to review their log and make observations about which efforts to communicate worked best.

3. Samuel Collier had a difficult life. But his life also included some good experiences and some people who helped him become a better person. Make a list of the pros (the good experiences and the good people) and the cons (the bad experiences and the bad people) of Samuel's life. For example, one pro is that his mother taught him to read, and one con is that his father beat him. Create your list by writing "Pros" on one side of your paper and "Cons" on the other side. Under "Pros," list all of the positive events of Samuel's life. Under "Cons," list all of the negative aspects of Samuel's life. Then count the number of pros you listed and the number of cons you listed. Which is greater, the number of pros in Samuel's life or the number of cons in Samuel's life?

Ask students to use the whole novel when assembling their pros and cons. Following is a sample of possible pros and cons the students might write:

PROS

- **Samuel's mother taught him how to read.**
- **Samuel is released from the gallows by the judge.**
- **Samuel meets Reverend Hunt, who takes care of him and teaches him how to be kind to others.**
- **Samuel learns how to channel his anger.**
- **Samuel becomes friends with the natives and learns a lot about surviving at James Town.**
- **Samuel becomes the page of Captain Smith after he is made President.**
- **The Laydons become like family to Samuel.**

CONS

- **Samuel's father beat him.**
- **Samuel lost both of his parents.**
- **Samuel is sent to an orphanage.**
- **Samuel goes on a difficult voyage to the New World.**
- **Samuel endures many losses while at James Town, including a fire that destroys some of the settlers' shelters and their food supply.**
- **Reverend Hunt dies.**
- **Captain Smith is badly wounded and must sail back to England.**