

Literature Circle Guide to *The Missing Manatee* by Cynthia DeFelice

Book Summary

Skeet Waters is exploring the ocean inlets around his home in Florida when he discovers a dead manatee with what appears to be a bullet hole in its head. Knowing that manatees are an endangered species protected by law, Skeet is shocked by his discovery. He can't imagine who would shoot a manatee, and he resolves to bring the killer to justice. Skeet reports the crime to the sheriff's office, but when he returns to the place where he found the manatee, the body is missing. That same week, Skeet is thrilled to have the opportunity to go tarpon fishing with a renowned fisherman known as Dirty Dan. Through the experiences of that day he begins to see his former hero in a whole new light. When Skeet discovers several clues that point toward Dirty Dan as the manatee's killer, he confronts Dirty Dan. Through this confrontation, Skeet learns that the manatee's killer is actually Dan's mentally handicapped son, Blink. Skeet's experiences help him learn to be more understanding and less quick to judge the people around him.

Author Information

Cynthia DeFelice was born in 1951 and grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with three siblings. DeFelice's mother was a former English teacher who read to her children every night, and to this DeFelice attributes her lifelong love of books and stories. DeFelice began writing at the age of 36, after a career as a professional storyteller and children's librarian. Twenty-three books later, she lives in Geneva, New York, with her dentist husband. She has two grown children.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. In the first chapter, what do we learn about the consequences of harming a manatee?
Since manatees are an endangered species, the penalties for harming them are steep. The consequence for bothering or chasing a manatee is a fine; for harming or killing a manatee, a person would face a large fine and possibly jail time.
2. Why doesn't Skeet's mom want her son to grow up to be a fisherman?
Skeet's mom doesn't want her son to grow up to be like his father, whom she sees as irresponsible. Skeet's mom doesn't think it is safe for her son to handle his own boat alone in the coves along the coast. She wants Skeet to grow up to have a "respectable" professional job. The lifestyle of a fisherman is a "deviant" one, according to Skeet's mom, since most fishermen drink too much and don't have time to be good husbands and fathers.
3. What happens when Skeet brings Deputy Sheriff Earl Wells back to the place where he first found the dead manatee?

When Skeet returns with the deputy sheriff, the manatee is missing.

4. What is unusual about the behavior of Blink, Dirty Dan's son?
Blink is 30 years old, but according to Skeet, he is like a five- or six-year-old child in his speech and behavior. Blink has an unusual habit of opening and shutting his eyes tightly. Blink loves children's games, especially flipping quarters with Skeet. More than anything he loves his mangy dog, Blinky.
5. Skeet says that he will never forget a single thing about the day he caught his first tarpon with Dirty Dan. Explain what happened to make that day so frustrating, shocking, and thrilling for him.
Skeet is thrilled to be fishing with Dirty Dan, whom he has long idolized, and he is excited to learn everything he possibly can from his hero. He is shocked, however, to witness Dirty Dan drinking from a bottle of whiskey all day long. He is also surprised—and disappointed—that Dirty Dan has not thought to bring any water or food for the day-long expedition. The trip is long and exhausting for Skeet, but to his great delight he catches his first tarpon with Dirty Dan's help.
6. When Skeet discovers the dead manatee for the second time in chapter 12, what does he find that implicates Dirty Dan as the killer?
Skeet finds the manatee with blue fishing line tied around its neck—line just like what he had seen in a huge spool at the bottom of Dan's boat. He also recalls the yellow tennis ball in the water when he first discovered the manatee, and remembers how Dirty Dan's son always has a yellow tennis ball for his dog to catch.
7. Mac and Skeet's mom have serious disagreements about how to raise their son. Compare their differing attitudes toward Skeet.
Skeet's mom wants her son to get the college education that she didn't have, and she hopes that he will choose a professional career that will give him many opportunities in the future. She tends to be somewhat controlling, and she is quick to criticize her son when she does not approve of his choices. Mac, Skeet's father, has a more relaxed approach to child-rearing and would be pleased to have his son follow in his footsteps and become a fisherman. He is happy to let Skeet have the freedom to roam wherever he wishes in his skiff.
8. Skeet is fascinated by the large scar on Dirty Dan's face, and near the end of the book, he finally learns how Dirty Dan got his scar. Why is this story so surprising to Skeet?
Skeet learns that Dirty Dan got his scar from coming to rescue Memaw, Skeet's grandma, from a mean-talking young man who was harassing her. Memaw and Dirty Dan were high school students together, and Dan was trying to protect Memaw. Skeet is surprised by this story because it makes

him realize that Memaw and Dan have histories, and that Dan risked his own life to rescue Memaw from harm.

9. Skeet recalls the story of the time Dirty Dan fought a hammerhead shark for a tarpon. (p. 35) What does this episode show about Dirty Dan's personality?
Dirty Dan was ready to risk his life by fighting the hammerhead shark. He stood in the water and whacked the shark with a stick until the shark finally swam away. His willingness to fight a shark for a tarpon shows great determination and courage—as well as foolhardiness.
10. When we first meet Memaw, Skeet's grandmother, she is getting ready to sing in a karaoke contest. What is Memaw like, and what role does she play in Skeet's life?
Skeet's grandmother is eccentric and flamboyant, a woman who loves to perform and tell stories. She always seems to have time to talk with Skeet, and often acts as Skeet's confidante and advisor in the midst of his parents' marriage problems. Through Memaw, Skeet learns to understand and accept his parents' situation.
11. Skeet reflects: "I was always making everybody into heroes or bad guys, but most people—even parents—were muddling around somewhere in the middle." (p. 166) Explain Skeet's thoughts in your own words.
Through the course of the story, Skeet begins to understand the adults around him in more complex, nuanced ways. For example, he begins to understand his parents' marriage difficulties and the reasons for their many conflicts. As a result, he is less prone to judge his parents for choosing to separate. Also, at the beginning of the story, he reveres Dirty Dan, but as the days pass, he begins to see Dirty Dan as a man both deeply flawed in his addiction to alcohol, and also deeply committed to his disabled son. Skeet realizes that people are often more complicated than they first appear, and that many people are shaped by difficult past experiences.
12. After discovering the manatee, Skeet is determined to find out who killed it and hid the body: "Whoever it was ought to be caught and punished, plain and simple." (p. 17) How do his ideas about this change through the course of the book?
When Skeet learns that Blink accidentally killed the manatee, he feels differently about justice for the manatee's killer. He recognizes that Dirty Dan covered up the crime to protect his son, acting out of loyalty and love. Through conversations with Memaw, he also begins to understand Dirty Dan's troubled past and to feel empathy for him.
13. What life lessons does Skeet learn through his experiences with Dirty Dan and Blink, the dead manatee, and his parents' separation? List four lessons that Skeet learns during spring break.

Skeet learns that the adults in his life—Memaw, Mac, his mother, and Dirty Dan—are real people, with complicated pasts and problems of their own. He learns to be careful about judging others, since people are often more complicated than they first appear. Skeet also learns that “justice” is not a black-and-white concept. He learns to look beneath the surface when trying to understand people, especially as he begins to understand Dirty Dan, a man he once idealized.

14. Skeet’s mom keeps promising him that after Mac returns from his fishing trip, the three of them will talk about their family situation. What do you imagine Skeet’s mom and dad plan to say to their son? How do you predict Skeet will respond to his parents?

Throughout the book, Skeet feels sadness about his parents’ separation, while he recognizes that they are incompatible in many ways. Skeet’s dad seems sad about his wife’s decision to live apart, while Skeet’s mom often expresses frustration with her life in a small coastal town, married to a fisherman. There are no indications that Skeet’s parents are considering reconciliation, though near the end of the book, Skeet has gained more understanding about the reasons for his parents’ conflicts.

15. At the end of the book, Deputy Sheriff Earl Wells decides not to pursue justice for the killer of the manatee. He says to Skeet, “I’ve been asking myself, what good would it do to follow the letter of the law in this case?” (p. 176) Is Earl’s decision a good one? Explain your answer.

Students’ answers will vary, though many students will probably reach the same conclusion as Skeet himself: Bringing Blink to justice for his crime would likely cause more harm than good to the disabled man and his father.

Note: These Literature Circle questions are keyed to Bloom’s Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

Activities

1. After rereading Skeet’s description of the dead manatee, (p. 4) find a photo of a manatee on the Internet or in an encyclopedia. (You might visit <http://www.savethemanatee.org/>). Using your source, write a one-page description of the manatee’s appearance, habitat, and behavior, and be ready to share what you learned with your class.
By completing a brief study of the manatee, students will be better able to visualize the manatee and understand Skeet’s alarm at finding the dead animal.
2. You’ve been assigned to write your own essay on the topic of “Methods of Growing Yourself Up.” With Skeet’s essay as a model, write your own creative piece. Try to come up with a central metaphor for your essay, just like Skeet does.

Skeet's metaphor, for example, is the menu at the Golden Moon Chinese restaurant.

This assignment reinforces the concept of metaphor and gives students practice in inventing a metaphor to describe themselves. Students could be asked to follow Skeet's model in identifying influential people who have shaped their lives over time.

3. Skeet's spring break included many personal highs and lows. Create a line graph depicting Skeet's spring break week, from the day he found the dead manatee to the day he learned the truth behind the manatee's death. Be sure to label all of the high and low points on the graph. When you are finished, compare your graph with a classmate's and discuss.

With this assignment, students will review the events of the novel and create a graph to help depict these events. Students could compare their graphs in groups, discussing the choices they made in creating their graphs.

Other Books by Cynthia DeFelice

Death at Devil's Bridge

The Ghost of Cutler Creek

The Ghost of Fossil Glen

The Ghost and Mrs. Hobbs

Nowhere to Call Home

Under the Same Sky