

Literature Circle Guide to  
*The Young Man and the Sea* by Rodman Philbrick

**Book Summary**

Twelve-year-old Skiff Beaman is a determined boy from a small Maine town. Skiff's mom died recently, and his fisherman dad won't get off the couch to do anything but get another beer, so these days Skiff has to take care of everything himself. When their boat sinks, Skiff discovers it will cost thousands to buy her a new engine. Skiff's lobster traps won't earn him enough, but there are bigger fish in the sea--bluefin tuna. If he can catch one, he just might save the boat--and get his family back on its feet again.

**Author Information**

Rodman Philbrick grew up on the New England coast, where he worked as a longshoreman and boatbuilder. For many years he wrote mysteries and detective novels. The Private Eye Writers of America nominated two of his T.D.Stash series as best detective novel and then selected Philbrick's *Brothers & Sinners* as Best Novel in 1993. Inspired by the life of a boy who lived a few blocks away, he wrote *Freak The Mighty*, the award-winning young-adult novel, which has been translated into numerous languages and is now read in schools throughout the world. Philbrick, a screenwriter as well as a novelist, is the author of a number of novels for young readers, including *The Fire Pony*, *Max the Mighty*, *REM World*, *The Last Book In The Universe* and *The Journal of Douglas Allen Deeds*. He and his wife divide their time between Maine and the Florida Keys.

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. At the beginning of the story, Skiff says, "Right away I see that what had I been afraid of these past few months has finally happened." Briefly explain what has happened.  
**Skiff returns home on the last day of school and sees that his father's boat, the *Mary Rose*, has sunk.**
2. Describe one fact you learned about bluefin tuna in the story.  
**One passage relating facts about bluefin tuna begins on page 101. Other facts follow later in the story. For example, on page 155, Skiff describes "sounding" - the name given to the first dive a bluefin takes after it has been hooked.**
3. List two objects Skiff forgets to bring with him on his trip to the shelf. Why are these objects important to have in a boat?  
**Skiff forgets to bring a foghorn and a watch. The foghorn is important because it allows small boats to signal to larger boats in the fog. The watch is important because it is the only means for telling time when the sun is not visible.**
4. In chapter 18, Skiff recalls how Devlin Murphy once towed his father home when the *Mary Rose* lost power in heavy seas. According to the text, why doesn't Skiff's father pay Devlin back, even though both boats were damaged?

**On page 129, Skiff says, “When I asked dad about if he had to pay Dev back, he said that’s not how it works. Fish and you fish alone, every man for himself. But when one man gets in trouble at sea, we’re all in trouble. We’re in it together, so you lend a hand and don’t think about what it costs, because the next time it might be you with a busted motor or a sinking boat and the waves crashing all around.”**

5. Describe the relationship between Skiff and Mr. Woodwell. How is this relationship different from Skiff’s relationship with his father?

**The relationship between Skiff and Mr. Woodwell might be characterized as a grandfather-grandson relationship. Mr. Woodwell helps Skiff with the *Mary Rose* and counsels him on other everyday life issues. In contrast, Skiff is the caretaker in his relationship with Big Skiff. He prepares meals and cleans the house, while Big Skiff lies on the couch. Big Skiff is minimally interested in his son’s life but seems incapable of lending meaningful support or assistance. That changes at the very end, when he comes to Skiff’s rescue in Jack Croft’s boat.**

6. Authors often use personification to make objects in their stories seem human. In this story, the author frequently personifies the *Mary Rose*. Choose one passage from the text and explain how that passage is an example of personification.

**There are several applicable passages in the book. On page 10: “It breaks my heart to see her so pitiful, with just the top of her cabin showing, and a shine of oil spreading like blood on the water.” On page 26: “...and the top of the *Mary Rose* white as the moon, raised up from the bottom, come back to life, just waiting on me to fix her.” On page 28: “What with the dark and the deep shadows, you can’t tell how hurt she is, or how the engine is probably ruined.” On page 37: “The *Mary Rose* is waiting for me with her bad side turned up, like a dog holding up a hurt paw.” On page 111: “But sometimes it seems like the *Mary Rose* knows me almost as good as I know her.” In addition to these references, readers might also mention Skiff’s habit of speaking to the *Mary Rose* as though she were a patient, as on page 37.**

7. Describe one way in which another character in the story helps Skiff. Next, imagine you and Skiff are friends. Choose one event from the story and explain how you would help Skiff in his effort to raise money for repairs to the *Mary Rose*.

**Several characters help Skiff in the story. Mr. Woodwell advises Skiff on how to repair the *Mary Rose*; Devlin Murphy extends Skiff credit to buy fuel and bait; and Big Skiff and Jack Croft rescue Skiff at the end of the story. Readers could also contend that Skiff’s mother helps him by “speaking” to him as he is heading out to Jeffrey’s Ledge.**

8. Imagine you are Jack Croft and you have just learned that your son, Tyler, has been cutting Skiff’s lobster traps. What do you think the consequences should be for Tyler’s actions?

**At the end of the book, we learn that Jack Croft punished Tyler by suspending his use of the Whaler for one year. Readers should demonstrate an understanding of the seriousness of Tyler’s actions, which likely carry a potential penalty of jail time.**

**Readers who feel the punishment Jack Croft chose is appropriate should defend Jack's choice. Those who feel it was light or too severe should propose alternative consequences.**

9. On page 91, Skiff says, "Can't fight him no more than you can fight the wind or the tide?" In your own words, explain what is meant by this statement.

**Skiff is referring to Tyler Croft, who he has just caught cutting his lobster traps. However, Skiff has no proof and realizes it is his word against Tyler's. Hence he feels helpless to stop Tyler. Readers should see the connection between this and the wind or the tide, which are also impossible to stop or change.**

10. On page 46, Mr. Woodwell shows Skiff the harpoon made by Big Skiff and refers to it as a memento. According to the text, what does the harpoon symbolize? Briefly describe one memento you have and explain why it is important to you.

**Mr. Woodwell refers to the harpoon as a token of friendship. Readers may add that Skiff's use of the harpoon later in the book symbolizes him becoming more like his father.**

11. Now that you have finished the book, think about Tyler's relationship with his father. Describe one way in which this relationship is different at the end of the book from how it was at the beginning of the book. Who do you think has changed more? Be sure to use examples from the story in your answer.

**Early on, Skiff is hopeful that raising the *Mary Rose* will lead to some signs of life in his father. As the story progresses, Skiff is increasingly frustrated with his father's laziness and self pity. He is tired of being the caretaker and of being the only one who cares about the *Mary Rose*. By the time Skiff leaves for Jeffrey's Ledge, he has compared his feelings about his father to his feelings about Tyler Croft. At the end of the book, Big Skiff has rescued Skiff at sea, purchased a vacuum cleaner, and is addressing his alcoholism. Furthermore, he has punished Skiff for stealing the harpoon, thereby restoring order to the father-son relationship. Readers who think Big Skiff has changed more should point to those examples. Readers who think Skiff has changed more might point to what Skiff accomplished: repairing the *Mary Rose*, earning money trapping lobsters, and catching a record bluefin, leading to a more confident, capable young man who has learned valuable lessons about thinking smart, speaking true, and never giving up.**

12. What are Skiff's mother's three rules? Describe one way in which Skiff breaks one of these rules and one way in which Skiff follows one of these rules. Which rule do you think is most important in your life?

**On page 121, Skiff lists his mother's three rules. "Rule Number One, think smart. Rule Number Two, speak true. Rule Number Three, never give up." Notable examples of Skiff following and breaking the above rules include his decision to go thirty miles out to sea in a small rowboat, his habit of lying to others when they ask about his father, and his perseverance with the fish at the end of the story.**

13. Re-read the passage on page 170 in which Skiff finally catches the tuna. Based on what you've read, how would you describe Skiff's feelings about catching this fish? How does this differ from other fish he has caught?

**On page 170, Skiff says, "I caught lots of small fish, mackerel and pollock and cod and flounder, and cleaned 'em, too. Never bothered me, once I got used to it. But this is different. This time I feel sorry for the fish. Could have drowned me but it didn't and now it's dying and I'm the one killed it. Big beautiful creature so alive, it seemed like it could never die. But I know better. I knew it when I threw the harpoon." Readers should show some understanding that Skiff's struggle to catch the fish, a struggle that caused him to fall into the ocean, leaves him more sympathetic and more aware of his own mortality. Skiff expresses respect for the fish and the fight it put up to stay alive. His feelings about catching the fish are therefore mixed. On the one hand, he has won the battle and is much closer to earning the money to pay for repairs to the *Mary Rose*. On the other hand, he is left with a sense of regret that the fish had to die and perhaps feels guilty for his role in that death. In contrast, Skiff admits he never gave much thought to the smaller fish he had caught and killed in the past.**

14. In chapter 13, Skiff goes to Mr. Woodwell's boat shed and takes the harpoon. As Skiff is taking the harpoon, he wonders whether what he is doing is stealing. In your opinion, is Skiff stealing? Use details from the text to support your argument.

**On page 116, Skiff says, "Try to tell myself what I got in mind ain't stealing exactly. But if it ain't stealing, what is it?" Readers can formulate a valid argument either way. On the one hand, the harpoon belongs to Mr. Woodwell and is being taken without his permission. Furthermore, it is not clear that Mr. Woodwell would have lent the harpoon to Skiff if Skiff had asked. In that sense, Skiff is stealing the harpoon. On the other hand, the harpoon was a gift from Skiff's father. Moreover, Skiff might rationalize that he is simply borrowing the harpoon and that Mr. Woodwell would want him to use it. After all, Mr. Woodwell did give Skiff a pile of lumber for free, even after Skiff volunteered to pay for it. Passages later in the book suggest that Skiff's action was effectively stealing. He admits as much to his mother and is punished by his father. Still, there is enough room for ambiguity to permit arguments both ways.**

15. As Skiff is making his way to Jeffrey's Ledge, he is having a conversation with another character even though he is alone in the boat. To whom is he talking? Why do you think the author chose to write this dialogue?

**On page 121, Skiff begins a dialogue with his mother. The dialogue continues on pages 126 and then again on page 129. The second part of the question is largely subjective; readers might speculate that the author wrote the dialogue as a way to show Skiff's thoughts during his trip to sea or to show that Skiff was still struggling in his mind with some of his actions, principally, his decision to take the harpoon from Mr. Woodwell's boat shed. Another valid rationale would be that the author wanted to make Skiff's mother an important part of the story's climax. Skiff's mission to catch the fish and repair the *Mary Rose* was in many ways his way of**

**dealing with his mother's death. It stands to reason that the author would want Skiff's mother to be a presence in the story, even though she is not alive.**

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge 1-2; Comprehension: 3-5; Application: 6-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15*

### **Activities**

1. Using colored markers or pencils, draw a picture of a bluefin tuna based on what you read in the story. When you are finished, compare your drawing to your classmates' drawings. How are the drawings different? How are they similar? You may also want to look for a picture of a bluefin in a reference book.

**Some of the physical details of the bluefin given in the text include blue hue, large tail and folding dorsal fins. The 410 lb bluefin Skiff sees on the dock was seven feet in length; the fish Skiff eventually catches is said to weigh 900 lbs.**

2. Draw a map of Skiff's town and the surrounding area. Begin with any geographic features you remember including the creek, the harbor, Little Sister Rock, and Jeffrey's Ledge. Then, fill in your map with symbols showing different events and places from the story. For example, you may want to draw a lobster where you think Skiff set his traps or a yacht where you think Mr. Croft may have anchored his boat, *The Fin Chaser*. Be sure to include a legend on your map to show what the symbols mean.

**The author is not very specific about each site's location relative to the other sites. Therefore, the activity is fairly open-ended, as long as readers show some sense of scale. Jeffrey's Ledge is thirty miles off shore, whereas Little Sister Rock is much closer. Also, readers should remember that Skiff must pass *The Fin Chaser* on his way to the harbor and that Mr. Woodwell lives at a bend in the creek.**

3. At the end of the story, you read a newspaper about Skiff and the fish he caught. Think of something you or someone you know has accomplished in the past and write an article like the one in the book. If you prefer to write about an imaginary event or something you have always dreamed of doing, that's fine, too.

**The newspaper article appears on page 189.**

### **Other Books by This Author**

*Freak the Mighty*

*Max the Mighty*

*The Fire Pony*

*REM World*

*The Last Book in the Universe*