Kidnapped

Robert Louis Stevenson

About the author

Robert Louis Stevenson was a poet, a travel writer and a novelist. Though he started training as an engineer and then as a lawyer, he was always interested in writing and at the age of twenty-five, began to devote his life to literature. He was a sickly child who had to spend most of the winters in bed and his longing for adventure and travel may be partly accounted for by his search for a cure for his illness. At various times in his life, he lived in France, the United States and in the South Seas, where he became known as ‘The Teller of Stories’. This was a fitting title for the person who gave the world the children’s classic Treasure Island (1883) and the horror story, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886). Stevenson died, aged only 44, in 1894 in Samoa.

Summary

David Balfour knows little about the politics of Scotland when he sets out from his Lowland home with a letter from his late father to his uncle, Ebenezer. But he is quickly drawn into a web of intrigue that involves rebels and the forces of repression in the Highlands. His uncle, afraid that David has come to claim his birthright as the child of the eldest son, arranges for David to be kidnapped and taken aboard a ship. He thinks he has seen the last of his nephew and at first, as David is carried around the north of Scotland, his plan appears to be working. But near the western island of Mull, fate intervenes. David’s ship strikes a boat and a man from the boat is taken on board. He is a rebel Scot, Alan Stewart, also known as Breck, who has been forced to live in France with the chieftain of his clan following the defeat of the Scots at the hands of the English on the field of Culloden.

Alan gives David a shiny button and tells David he can use it anywhere in the Highlands to get help. Then a further disaster strikes. The ship runs aground and David is lucky to survive. He gets to the island of Mull alone and sets out to find Alan Breck, who has also managed to reach the island. The pair finally meet up again after the murder of the Red Fox, the king’s man in the lands of Appen. They travel together across the Highlands, pursued by soldiers who think they are responsible for the Red Fox’s murder. Eventually, David gets home and he finds his uncle’s lawyer, Mr Rankeillor, who helps to trap David’s uncle for his misdeeds. Having admitting his part in David’s kidnapping, he is forced to sign over the house of Shaws to his nephew.

Chapters 1–4: After his father’s death, David Balfour leaves his home with a letter from his father to his uncle, Ebenezer. On the way, he is warned to stay away from the house and when he arrives he finds out that his uncle is a strange man who doesn’t want any lights in the house. Although David’s uncle sometimes speaks kindly to him, David suspects that he is trying to kill him. On a trip to town, he arranges for David to be kidnapped and taken aboard a ship bound for the Carolinas in the United States. David is tricked into going aboard the ship. There he becomes sick but a sailor helps him and he gets better. When the ship’s first officer, Shuan, hits the ship’s boy, Ransome, too hard, David is taken to work in the roundhouse.

Chapters 5–9: In the roundhouse, David has to wait on the captain and his men, and he hears that Ransome is dead. One night, the ship hits a boat, which sinks. Only one man survives and he is taken on board the ship. He is a rebel Scot called Alan Stewart, who is trying to get to France. Alan tells David he has a king’s name, but people usually call him Alan Breck. Alan returns to Scotland regularly to collect money from his people for the exiled chieftain. The captain of the ship decides to kill Alan, but David decides to help him because he knows that the captain and his men are murderers. Together they beat off the attack. Alan gives David a button from his French coat and tells David he can use it anywhere in the Highlands to get help. He also tells David about The Red Fox, a member of the Campbell family and an enemy of the Scots. Then the ship hits some rocks and David is thrown overboard. Although he isn’t a good swimmer he manages to get to shore. On the island of Mull, he discovers that the other men from the ship are also on the island, and
he goes in search of Alan. The button helps on several occasions

Chapters 10–14: During his search, David meets the Red Fox and a lawyer. While he is talking to them, the Red Fox is shot and dies. David runs up a hill after the murderer and the lawyer believes him to be an accomplice and sends the soldiers after him. David then sees Alan Breck in the trees and at first thinks that he is the murderer, but Alan assures David that he didn’t kill the Red Fox. Alan offers to take David back to Stirling, and a long and dangerous journey begins for the pair as they try to cross the country, hiding from the soldiers who believe they are murderers. Eventually, David gets back to Stirling and he finds his uncle’s lawyer, Mr Rankeillor, who no longer works for Ebenezer Balfour. Mr Rankeillor decides to trick David’s uncle into admitting that he paid Hoseason to kidnap David, and Ebenezer finally has to sign documents transferring ownership of the house of Shaws into David’s hands.

Background and themes

Scottish history: Kidnapped is set in Scotland in 1751. This was a turbulent time in Scottish history. Just five years previously, the rebellion of the Scots against the English had been put down decisively at the bloody battle of Culloden. This brought to an end the attempt by Charles Edward Stuart, otherwise known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, to oust George II and become King of Great Britain. Problems between England and Scotland were age-old, but most recently they had been caused by the political union of 1707, which created the kingdom of Great Britain and which was an attempt to prevent the Scots from objecting to the accession of George I, following the death of the last Stuart, Anne. At Culloden, the Scots had hoped to surprise the English redcoats but were heavily defeated by the Duke of Cumberland, who was George II’s son. Following the defeat, Bonnie Prince Charlie fled to France, smuggled out of the Highlands by his many supporters.

Stevenson shows the two aspects of the Scot at that time. On the one hand, there were the Lowlanders, represented by David Balfour, who might have been in favour of the political union of England and Scotland in 1707. On the other, there were the Highlanders, represented by Alan Breck, who felt oppressed, were forbidden to wear their tartan costumes and unable to speak English, the language of the newly created Great Britain.

Loyalty and friendship: The central theme of Kidnapped is the friendship between Alan and David, which flourishes despite their differences.

Ethics: Stevenson shows how some people stick to what they believe to be ethical behaviour, while others change it to suit their needs and wishes.

Rite of passage/Loss of innocence: This novel shows a boy going through a rite of passage into adulthood. After David’s father dies, he strikes out on his own into the world at large. He will have to overcome many obstacles on his path to maturity. Facing challenges and finding solutions to problems are symbolic of a young adult’s progress toward an adult understanding.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–4
Before reading

1 Discuss: Write ‘kidnapped’ on the board and check the students understand it. Then put them in small groups to discuss the following questions: Who kidnaps a person? Are they good people or bad people? Why does somebody kidnap another person? How do they usually do this? What do they usually do after they kidnapped the person? Do you know any real life stories of kidnappings? What happened?

2 Find and guess: Write the following words on the board and get students to find them in the illustrations in the book: button, gun, hill, horse, knife, sword, table, letter, ship, soldier. Now ask students to guess what is going to happen in the story, basing their ideas on the illustrations they have looked at.

3 Research: Ask students to find out information about Scotland using the Internet and books. Get feedback in class.

While reading (At the end of p. 2)

4 Guess: Ask students to discuss in small groups why they think the man told David to stay away from the house.

5 Role play (At the end of Chapter 2): Brainstorm what questions David might want to ask his uncle. Write the questions on the board and then put students in pairs to role play the conversation. Ebenezer can invent the answers.

After reading

6 Read carefully: Ask students to read Chapter 1 again and get information about David. They can record the information on a web like this one.
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7 **Guess:** Remind students that Ebenezer was a bad old man, but when he was young, he was nice. Why did he change? Ask students to think of different possible reasons. Get feedback from the class.

8 **Discuss and write:** Ask students to discuss what they think is in the letter from David’s father to his uncle. Get feedback and then ask the students to write the letter individually.

9 **Guess:** Ask students to discuss how the story is going to develop. Tell them to think about three different developments.

10 **Role play:** Put students in pairs to role play the conversation at the hotel between Captain Hoseason and Ebenezer (p. 9).

**Chapters 5–9**

**Before reading**

11 **Guess:** Ask students to imagine what kind of work David is going to do in the roundhouse.

**While reading** *(At the end of p. 17)*

12 **Discuss and write:** Ask students to discuss the details of the story that David told Alan. Then get them to write the story individually.

13 **Discuss** *(p. 19, after ’And now he has to live in a French town.’)*: Put students in small groups to discuss the following questions: *Why did he have to live in a French town? Why do people these days have to go and live in places far from their homes? What problems can they have because of this?*

**After reading**

14 **Read carefully:** Ask students to read the section again and get information about Alan. They can start another web.

15 **Pair work:** Ask students to imagine this situation: *You’re on a ship and it crashes into a rock. You get into a boat to go to an island with no people or houses? What are you going to take with you? You can only take ten things.* Get feedback from the class, encouraging students to give their reasons for choosing the things. Write the things on the board and then have a class vote to see which ten things they think are the most useful.

16 **Write and ask:** Write ’How many buttons did Alan give David?’ on the board and elicit the answer (One). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapters 5–9. Check their work as they do this. Now have students stand up and mingle, asking and answering each other’s questions.

**Chapters 10–14**

**Before reading**

17 **Guess:** Ask students to read the title of Chapter 10 and to guess what is going to happen.

**While reading** *(p. 31, after ’I got other clothes from James’s son.’)*

18 **Discuss:** Explain that nobody knows who David is but that everybody knows who Alan is. Get students to discuss what they think David should do now: *Is it a good idea for David to stay with Alan? Why/why not?*

19 **Role play** *(p. 33, after ’Do you have any uncles …?’)*: Brainstorm more questions that Mr Rankeillor might ask and then put students in pairs to role play the situation.

**After reading**

20 **Discuss:** Put students in small groups to discuss things about the ending that we don’t know: *What happens to Ebenezer and Alan? Will David always live in the house? Will he work? Will what happen to Hoseason and the other men on the boat? Will David and Alan stay friends?*

21 **Game:** Divide students into groups. Each group has to make 5 questions about the story. Each group should then ask the questions to the rest. The first group to answer correctly scores a point.

22 **Discuss:** Put students in groups to discuss the following: *David and Alan are good friends but they are very different. How are they different? Who are your friends? In what ways are you the same and in what ways are you different? Is it important for friends to be the same?*

23 **Research:** Divide the class into two groups, A and B. Have one group do research using the Internet to find out about Treasure Island and the other group about The strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. In class, pair a student from group A with a student from group B and get them to tell each other about the story and decide which book they would like to read most.

24 **Write and guess:** Ask students to choose a short part of the book and rewrite it making five changes to the text. Students then read out their passages in small groups and the other students have to identify the mistakes.

**Vocabulary activities**

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.