



# The Mosquito Coast

Paul Theroux



## About the author

Paul Theroux grew up in a large middle-class family near Boston in the United States. After university, in 1963, he began a life of travelling. He taught in Italy, as a Peace Corps teacher at a school in Malawi, as a university lecturer in Uganda, and then for three years in Singapore. All this time, he was also writing and publishing short stories, articles and novels. In the early 1970s Theroux and his family settled in Britain, where they stayed for seventeen years. Theroux continued to travel widely around the world from his base in Britain. During this time he wrote many of his famous and very successful travel books. Finally he returned to America where he now lives.

Theroux says that his stories complete him as a person. He lives in every sentence he writes. He does not enjoy literary fame – he prefers to be anonymous. He likes to be in remote places with people who have no need of books and do not know what he does. He writes in secret and delivers his finished novels in brown paper parcels. He says he is the shadow and his fiction is the reality.

## About the film

*The Mosquito Coast* film was filmed in 1986 on location in an area of unexplored jungle in Belize in Central America. Star Harrison Ford wanted to make the film because he sympathized with Allie Fox, found the character a welcome challenge after his more conventional heroic roles, such as Han Solo in *Star Wars* and Indiana Jones, and he found himself agreeing with many of Allie Fox's opinions. The director, Peter Weir, loved the strangeness of the story and the tremendous range of emotions from optimism, to humour, to fear, to tragedy. During filming, the crew made an unexpected archaeological discovery: a Mayan temple.

## Summary

*The Mosquito Coast* begins in contemporary suburban America. Allie Fox is brilliantly clever with his hands and his head is full of ideas. But he hates the modern world. His children have no television or toys, they wear old clothes and they don't go to school. He hates his boss, Mr Polski, who, Allie thinks, is only interested in making money and doesn't care about the future.

One day Allie decides to get out. He puts his wife and children in his van and drives them away from their old life. They travel by ship to Honduras. At La Ceiba, on the Honduran coast, his bewildered family watches as he buys a place called Jeronimo, a small town on a river in the jungle.

When they get to Jeronimo they find nothing more than a broken-down house in a clearing. Mother and the children are horrified, but Allie is delighted with it. Here he can be king. He controls his family and the Indians who work for them. Together they create a new life from nothing. However, there are elements he cannot control and soon things start to go wrong.

**Chapters 1–2:** Allie Fox and his son Charlie are on a shopping trip in the United States. Allie, who is an inventor, hates both his boss, Mr Polski and America. Charlie does not go to school. Allie decides to leave America with his wife and four children and they take little with them.

**Chapters 3–4:** They arrive at Baltimore's docks and take a ship bound for Honduras. On the journey they meet a missionary family, the Spellgoods. They land at La Ceiba and Allie buys a town called Jeronimo on the Mosquito Coast.

**Chapters 5–6:** Mr Haddy takes Allie and the family on his boat. On arrival at Jeronimo, they just find a broken-down house. They meet the Maywits, the local Indians. Allie is very happy.

**Chapters 7–8:** Jeronimo starts taking shape, but it is very hard work for everyone all the time. Allie is like a little god and wants people to see him like this. He starts building a machine called 'Fat Boy'.

**Chapters 9–10:** Fat Boy is an ice-making machine. Allie decides to take ice to the Indians in the mountain village of Seville. Father forces the Zambus, Charlie and Jerry up the mountain in very hot and difficult conditions.



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**Chapters 11–12:** By the time they reach the village, the ice has melted, although Allie pretends it hasn't. They find three white men living with the Indians and think they must be prisoners. When they get back to Jeronimo, they find that Mr Struss, has frightened the Maywits into leaving. Later, the three white men arrive and Allie realizes they will just live off the family, so he persuades them to sleep in the ice machine. In the night, he turns it on, in order to kill them. The machine explodes and the family has to flee.

**Chapter 13:** The family survives the explosions and go up the coast where they live like scavengers. They use old rubbish and live in an old boat.

**Chapters 14–15:** Mr Haddy tries to help the family, but Allie refuses. Then the floods come and the boat floats. Eventually they come to Guampu and find a church. Charlie meets Emily and realizes his father has lied to him and America has not been destroyed. Suddenly, there is an explosion. Allie has set fire to the church. They escape to the boat but Allie is shot.

**Chapter 16:** Allie is paralysed from the neck down. When they come to land, Allie pulls himself to a little hill where he is eaten by vultures. Mr Haddy then helps the family to return to the United States.

### Background and themes

**Travelling:** Paul Theroux is a traveller. The nature of travelling means that you move on. Moving on, leaving things behind and looking for new experiences, is an important theme in *The Mosquito Coast*. Allie Fox doesn't like what he sees in America. His solution is not to stay and try to change it, but to walk away. When things don't work out at various places in Honduras, he makes his family move on and start again.

**Obsession:** *The Mosquito Coast* is a character study of a man who develops a paranoid obsession – of a man who thinks the whole world is against him and only he can save the world. He lives in a state of high tension, never resting in his attacks on America and western civilization. He fights against the current of modern life. He thinks he is the last real man in the world.

**Control:** In Allie's attempts to create a new world in the jungle, he tries to control everyone and everything around him. He makes everyone see things his way. When he feels threatened, he reacts aggressively and violently.

**Father/son relationship:** The novel also examines the relationship between father and son. Theroux elicits warm feeling towards Allie by telling the story through the eyes of his loyal son, Charlie Fox. We feel sorry for Charlie as he comes to understand his father's failings and to lose his belief in him.

**The natural world versus the modern world:** Theroux sets up an interesting paradox as the basis of the novel. All the time that Allie is searching for a simple paradise, he is planning how to change it and tame it. In fact it is the children who learn better to live with nature – eating wild plants, protecting themselves against insects with leaf juices, building a simple shelter from materials in the jungle. Allie, meanwhile, plants western crops in neat rows, puts up elaborate mosquito nets and builds an ice-making machine.

### Discussion activities

#### Chapter 1

##### Before reading

- Discuss:** Have students work in small groups and ask them to discuss the title of Chapter 1. *Who do you think the Great Allie Fox is? Is this a person, an animal or something else?* Have students write down their ideas.

##### After reading

- Check:** Have students discuss their predictions about who or what the Great Allie Fox is. *Were you correct in your predictions?*
- Discuss:** Put students into small groups and ask them to answer the following questions. *What characters do you meet in this chapter? How old is the narrator? What is his name? What do we find out about him and the rest of the family? What is the father like?*
- Write:** Have students think about Charlie's life. Have them draw up two lists, one marked 'Charlie's life' and one marked 'My life' and have them compare Charlie's life to their own. Ask them to see how many similarities or differences they can find.

#### Chapter 2

##### After reading

- Discuss:** Put students into small groups and have them discuss the following questions. *Where does the family go shopping? What does Charlie's father think of the United States? What happens at the end of this chapter?*



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- 6 Role play:** Student A: *You are Charlie's father, Mr Fox. You are at the market and are buying some vegetables. You think the price is too high and complain about the price and quality of the vegetables in order to try to get a reduction.* Student B: *You are selling your produce at the market. You cannot lower your prices by much, but you do want to make a sale. You try to persuade Mr Fox to pay the full price.* Students role play the conversation.

### Chapter 3

#### Before reading

- 7 Pair work:** Have students work in pairs and discuss what this chapter is about? *What do you think 'free at last' means? Who is free? What are they free from?*

#### After reading

- 8 Discuss:** Have students think about Charlie's conversation with Emily. *What is different about Emily's life? How does Charlie feel about what she says? Does he feel he is missing something in his life? How does this conversation make Charlie feel about his father?*
- 9 Discuss:** Have the students discuss the Captain's description of the Mosquito Coast; 'Imagine a zoo – except that the animals are outside and the white men are inside, ... they're free and you're not.' *What do you think the captain means by this? How would this make you feel if you were heading to the Mosquito Coast to live? Would you be frightened? Do you think the captain is lying?*

### Chapter 4

#### After reading

- 10 Artwork:** Have the students do a collage of the scene at the beach at La Ceiba. Use different materials to illustrate the rubbish on the beach. Then have students think how they could describe this scene. Have them write down some adjectives to describe it.

### Chapter 5

#### After reading

- 11 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and have them discuss the following questions. *Why does Allie think the people are savages? Do you agree with him or not? Give your reasons to the group. Why do you think Allie has left America? Do you think this is the right thing to do? Is Allie thinking about his family or just about himself?*

### Chapter 6

#### Before reading

- 12 Predict:** Have students predict what Jeronimo will be like. Have them write down their ideas.

#### After reading

- 13 Check:** Have students discuss their predictions. *Was Jeronimo what you expected? Was it better or worse than you expected?*

### Chapter 7

- 14 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and have them discuss the following questions. *Why does Allie become impatient with the Maywits when they talk about their gods? What does he think about God or the gods of the Indians? In the book, the missionaries tell the Indians about the Christian God. Do you think this is a good idea? Should missionaries go to other countries and tell people what they believe?*

### Chapter 10

#### After reading

- 15 Discuss:** Put the students into small groups and have them discuss Allie's character. *What do you think about Charlie's father? How does he treat his children? Is he a kind father? What words could you use to describe him?*

### Chapter 12

#### After reading

- 16 Pair work:** Have the students work in pairs and discuss this chapter. *Who were the white men who came with guns? What did Allie do to them? What did Charlie have to do? Do you think this was the right way to treat them? What was Allie afraid of?*

### Chapter 13

#### Before reading

- 17 Predict:** Have students work in pairs and predict what this chapter is about. *What do you think the title of this chapter means? Who are the real savages? Why?*

#### After reading

- 18 Check:** Have students work in pairs and discuss their predictions. *Were your predictions correct? Who are the real savages?*

### Chapter 14

#### After reading

- 19 Discuss:** Have students work in small groups and discuss what happens in this chapter. *What happens at Guampu? Why does Allie set the church on fire? Do you think he is right to do this? Is he mad?*

### Chapter 16

#### After reading

- 20 Discuss:** Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss the ending of the book. *How does Allie die? Was this his choice? Do you think he wanted to continue living? Do you think he had gone mad? How do you feel about the end of this book? Do you feel sorry for Allie or for Charlie and the family?*

### Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).