

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Wreckers

by

### Iain Lawrence

### Book Information

Iain Lawrence, The Wreckers

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Shipwrecked after a vicious storm, John attempts to save his father and himself while also dealing with an evil secret about the English coastal town where they are stranded.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; BCCB Blue Ribbon Book; Booklist Editors' Choice; Edgar Award/Honor Book; Geoffrey Bilson Award/Honor; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; Red Maple Award/Nominee; SLJ Best Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); Countries/Regions, England; Disasters, Shipwrecks; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, Canadian Children's Book Centre's Our Choice; Recommended Reading, Elementary School Library Collection; Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant YA; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

### Main Characters

Caleb Stratton one of the wreckers; he wants to kill John shortly after the shipwreck

Eli Mawgan Simon's brother, who had his tongue removed; he tries to help John

Jeremy Haines one of the wreckers; he is killed by a fire that John starts

John Spencer a brave fourteen-year-old boy who helps put an end to the wrecking near Pendennis

Mary Mawgan Simon's niece, who helps free John's father

Mr. Spencer John's father, whom Stumps holds captive

Parson Tweed the parson of Pendennis; he is the "puppet master" of the wreckers

Simon Mawgan Mary's uncle, who is discovered to be the source of the corpse lights

Stumps the man with no legs, who holds John's father captive

the Widow Simon's mother, who has gone insane from the loss of her family

### Vocabulary

**brig** a boat with two masts

**flagon** a large wine container

**hull** the body of a ship

**jib** a triangular sail of a ship

**kelp** large, brown seaweed

**league** a distance of about three miles

**moor** high, open land that has poor drainage

**phosphorus** a non metallic element that is used in making matches

**pilchard** a small marine fish related to a herring

**starboard** the right-hand side of a ship

**tarpaulin** a waterproof sheet used to cover things

### Synopsis

John Spencer and his father, who is the owner of the British ship "Isle of Skye," are returning to London from a trading voyage in Europe in 1799 when they are hit by a fierce storm while approaching the coast of England. The captain is unsure of the ship's location, but urgently seeks the safety of a port. John spots several lights on the coast and believes the lights are guiding them to safety. The crew, however, is hesitant to draw closer to land there, as they do not recognize the lights or harbor. Mr. Spencer is worried about the safety of his ship and cargo, though, and commands the ship be sailed toward the lights. The ship runs aground and sinks after the crew realizes too late that they are nearly on top of a formation of treacherous rocks known as "the Tombstones."

John floats ashore, and when he awakes, he

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watches three local men approach an exhausted sailor farther down the beach. After John witnesses one of the men, Caleb Stratton, deliberately drowning a shipmate, he realizes that the men lured the ship to its destruction to get its cargo. He escapes to an abandoned building in the nearby village of Pendennis. There he encounters Stumps, a man with no legs, who tells John that his father is alive but is being held captive by him because he believes John's father knows the location of a large amount of gold. Soon, the men from the beach arrive and prepare to kill John. Just then, Simon Mawgan, a wealthy landowner, appears at the door to rescue John and claim rightful ownership of the wrecked ship. He takes John home to Galilee, his home on the moor nearby.

John sees objects from many shipwrecks at Mawgan's home and is quickly convinced that he is one of the "wreckers," the men who lure the ships onto the rocky shore. Since John does not trust Mawgan, he implies that his father died in the shipwreck. Shortly after, John meets Mary, Simon's niece, and she befriends him. At dinner, Mawgan forces John to tell him about the barrels on board his father's ship. John tells him how they acquired the barrels, and Mawgan accuses John's father of having been a smuggler.

The next morning John confides in Mary, telling her that his father is still alive but is being held hostage. Several days later, they hear two gunshots, which signifies a boat is in the bay. The townspeople gather on the shore to watch the ship approach the rocks and eagerly await another shipwreck. While the town is vacant, the two search for John's father. They find him chained in a drainpipe of an old brewery. They have no tools to break his chains, so they plan to return and free him when Stumps comes to unchain him the next night. When they reach the top of the stairs they see Parson Tweed holding a lantern. Not trusting anyone but Mary, John tells the parson that he has not yet found his father. Shortly after, Stumps spots John and chases him, but Parson Tweed appears and fires a shot that kills Stumps.

Mary and John return to Mawgan's home and make plans for another rescue attempt. John sneaks out of the house that night, finds some tools to break the chains, and sets off toward the village on horseback. He loses most of his tools on the way, so he is unable to free his father until Mary brings Parson Tweed. The three work together and are able to set John's father free from his chains. But Parson Tweed immediately reveals his sinister intentions when he demands the gold that John's father is believed to have smuggled. After Parson Tweed admits that he is the "puppet master" of all the wreckers, he and John struggle. The parson fires one of his pistols, but John falls into the ocean unharmed. Then John's father kills the parson with an iron spike. John and his father discuss the cargo of the ship, and John learns that his father is an honest businessman and did not smuggle any gold.

As John and his father head toward a neighboring town to escape on a ship headed for London, they hear the signal indicating that another ship has been spotted in the bay. They turn back to do what they can to prevent another shipwreck. On the way they spot Mawgan holding a lamp, and they immediately conclude he is there to lure the ship onto the rocks. After a confrontation, however, they discover that he secretly appears with the mysterious blue "corpse lights" whenever the wreckers are at work in order to frighten them away. The three work together to foil the wreckers, and the ship escapes unharmed. John's father promises to make John an apprentice seaman and eventually the captain of one of his ships.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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#### Initial Understanding

When John asks Mary about Simon's reasons for hitting Eli, she explains that Simon has a lot of anger inside him. Why is Simon so angry? What caused this anger?

*Simon is angry because he knows it is his own fault that his wife, son, and brother are dead. When Mary was younger, Simon lured the "Rose of Sharon" to shore and caused the shipwreck that killed his family. Now Simon lives in fear that Mary will discover the truth and hate him for it.*

#### Literary Analysis

The Widow is apparently insane, because she claims to see the spirits of dead sailors, including her son. Why did the woman go insane?

*According to Simon, his mother was driven insane from grief after much of her family died in a shipwreck when Simon lured the "Rose of Sharon" to its tragic fate.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

What qualities does Parson Tweed have that make him especially effective as a "puppet master"?

*As a parson, he would be above suspicion and, therefore, can conduct his business more easily than others. Also, he is trained to lead others. This would put him in a position to efficiently direct the efforts of his followers. Finally, he likely knows confidential information about people that he could use to blackmail them to keep them under his control.*

#### Constructing Meaning

John begins to believe Mawgan's assertions that his father is a smuggler. The evidence Mawgan presents is quite convincing, but John eventually learns that his father is innocent. Relate an instance in your own life in which you incorrectly judged someone based on an inaccurate accusation made by someone else. How did you feel when you found out you were wrong? What did you do when you found out?

*Students will give various personal examples of misjudging someone. They will likely say they felt guilty or foolish for not checking facts before forming an opinion. Some students may have apologized and confronted their source with the error.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Comparing and Contrasting** Before the shipwreck of the "Isle of Skye," John notices that the barometer is rising. Bring a barometer to class. Then, explain to the students how the barometer works. For the next week, ask your students to keep a log of the barometer and compare their findings to the weather that occurs each day.

**Responding to Literature** In chapter six, Mary shows John her memory garden. Read that section of the story to your class again. Then start your own class garden either in your school yard or in a corner of your room. Each student should be in charge of one plant or flower. Ask the students to keep a gardening journal of their plants. The journal entry should include care for the plant and notes about its growth.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** In the beginning of the novel, the author describes a fictitious shipwreck. Ask your students to research shipwrecks. Each should choose one wreck, such as that of the Edmund Fitzgerald, and write a short report to share with the class.

**Recognizing Setting** The first chapter of this novel takes place on a boat. Ask your students to read the chapter again. Based on the descriptions given, ask your students to create a

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drawing of their impression of the "Isle of Skye" before the shipwreck. Their drawings could be displayed on a bulletin board for viewing and discussion by the class.