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WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS STORY?

QUESTIONS

This was the Chevron Readers’ Cup quiz from the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature 2012

1. When did the “Big Dive” start?
2. What is the Nakhuda?
3. Why was the relationship between the diver and his hauler an important one?
4. What dangers faced the pearl divers?
5. What did the divers put on to protect themselves before diving?
6. How do pearls form inside oysters?
7. What jobs did Saeed do on the boat?
8. What helped the men work together when they were opening the oysters?
9. What were the pearls collected from the crew?
10. What happened to Saeed’s family while the boats were away?
11. Why were they lucky to have that particular Nakhuda?
12. When the boat had to shelter from the storm and they couldn’t dive, what work was there for the crew to do?
13. How did the tawwash, or merchant, decide which pearls he wanted to buy, and how did he agree a price with the Nakhuda?
14. How did Abdullah escape from the shark?
15. Abdullah was very lucky to be given the first pearl from the tabreh. The pearl divers were poor but could make a reasonable living provided they found plenty of pearls. However, the way they were paid made life very difficult for them if they did not have a good season. Why was that?

ANSWERS

1. Middle of May (p.8)
2. The captain of the sambuq or ship.
3. The diver depended on him to pull him from the sea as fast as possible when he tugged on the rope to let him know he was ready to surface. His life could depend on him (p. 11)

4. Devilfish (jellyfish) which “wrapped their burning arms around you”. sharks, barracudas, pirates in the old days, drowning because they surfaced too slowly, disease, dehydration, shamals (p. 14)

5. Beeswax in their ears and a goat horn clip on their noses. Leather sheaths on fingers and big toes to protect them from rocks and shells and sea urchins.

6. An oyster made its pearl around an intruder, a tiny worm or a speck of grit (p. 23)

7. Made coffee, emptied the big domed wire fish traps which had been put down the night before, cooked fish for the men’s supper (p. 25) and swept the deck after a shamal (p. 37)

8. They worked to the rhythm of the nahhaam, or singer (p. 29)

9. They placed the pearls between their toes and the Nakhuda collected them and wrapped them in a red cloth and locked them in a wooden chest on the deck for safe keeping (p. 30)

10. His mother took them back to her parents’ home in the oasis where it was less humid. A Bedouin brought camels for their journey and they travelled with other women and children and old men in a caravan. They returned to the coast at the end of the pearling season (p. 33)

11. He had the reputation for being a religious man, had many years’ experience, was fair and just, did not take unnecessary risks (p. 14), could read the sea for signs without the need for a map or compass. He knew the shamal was coming so took shelter, unlike the other sambuq which lost men in the storm (p. 39)

12. Sails and fish traps to repair and barnacles to scrape off the underside of the boat (p. 37)

13. He had little copper sieves, 24 of them, with holes of different sizes to grade the pearls. Then he weighed them in tiny scales against agate weights if they were sizeable, against thin metal weights if small. If he liked the look of any, they would bargain then reach an agreement through a special secret sign language by touching fingers under cover of the red cloth (p. 45)

14. Tried sinking to the seabed and lying on the bottom to show he was no threat, prayed to Allah that he had enough breath not to drown. But when it attacked again he plunged his hands into its gills so that it could not breathe and it rose to the surface, taking him with it (p. 52)

15. The Nakhuda paid them advances against their earnings, so they started the trip owing him money. They could only repay him if they had a good season and profits were good. If they were not, by the next season they would be given another advance and owe him even more money, making it difficult to ever get out of debt (p. 30)
THE AUTHOR’S AIMS

What do you think my aims might have been in writing this story?

When you finished reading the story did you have any questions?

What else would you like to know?

Make a list.

Where might you go for the answers? Who could you ask?

REMINISCENCE GROUPS

Most Arabian Gulf families have some connection with pearl diving.

Invite some elderly local grandparents into school.

Before they arrive have your students think about and write down questions they would like to ask them to find out about their childhoods.

The grandparents will undoubtedly know stories about the sea, about pearl diving too, which may have been told to them by their own grandparents.

How many pearl diving-related stories can you gather?

REVIEW

Write a review of The Pearl Diver and describe the parts you liked best.

THE READER AS DETECTIVE

The little boy in the story is called Saeed, and he is 6 years old.

What else do you know about him?

How do you know these things?

Make a list of words to describe Saeed.

SEQUENCING

Imagine you are Saeed and retell the events of the story as they happened.

Ships often have a log which is like a diary. Imagine you are Saeed, and describe a typical day on the sambuq as if you are writing in the ship’s log.

Now write the log as if you are Abdullah/Ahmed/the Nakhuda.

THEMES IN THE STORY

TREASURE

Treasure is one of the themes in the story. But what do we mean by ‘treasure’?

Of course the obvious treasure is the pearls contained in the oysters which the divers collect.

READ the extract with your students.

“Saeed looked down into the water’s green depths and thought of the treasures waiting there to be discovered. The men on board were excited: the day before the diving began was full of expectation. Would this year’s catch be better than last year’s? Would the pearls fetch a higher price?”

DISCUSSION

Have pearls always been prized?

Who wears pearls? Look at pictures of historical figures who wore pearls – for instance, Queen Elizabeth 1st of England. The present Queen (Elizabeth 2nd) also has a crown set with Gulf pearls. Indian maharajahs love pearls. Seed pearls are still frequently used for adornments in Hindu weddings.

What do you think makes a pearl valuable? Are pearls still valued today?

Mother-of-Pearl is also precious – look at some pictures of articles made from Mother-of-Pearl, knife handles for instance, and inlaid boxes, buttons as well.

The Japanese introduced cultured pearls in the 1930s. Find out how this affected the Gulf pearl trade.

Fortunately a few years later another source of wealth was discovered under the sea – oil!

NAMES

Lulu is the Arabic word for pearl. A Dana is a particularly magnificent pearl. Both these words are used as girls’ names. Think of other names which reflect our fascination with jewels. Why do you think we name girls after jewels?

One of the finest pearls on record was found in 1867 and sold in Paris for 8,000 pounds. I wonder how much it would be worth today! Eventually it was taken to India to become the eye of an idol!

IMAGINING + WRITING

Ask your students to imagine they are walking along the beach one day when they find an oyster. When they prise it open they discover a magnificent pearl inside! Think of all the different things you might do with it – make a list – and choose the idea you like best round which to build a story.
Contact:

Shelly McDonald for UAE & Middle East
+ 971 50 952 8351 / smcdonald@medinapublishing

Kristina Hill for UK & other
+ 442 08 399 7736 / krissi@medinapublishing.com