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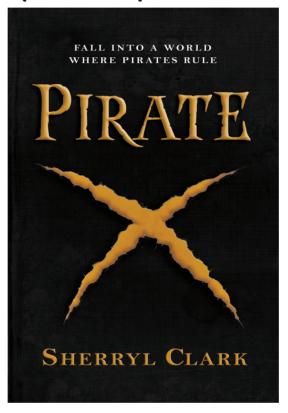
PIRATE X
by Sherryl Clark

FALL INTO A WORLD
WHERE PIRATES RULE

PIRATE
X

SHERRYL CLARK

Teachers' Notes

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SYNOPSIS:

Pirate X explores the treacherous life of pirates during the Golden Age of piracy. More than that, it is the personal journey of fifteen-year-old Will, who after a knock to the head finds himself in the year 1717. Waking up in New Providence, the unlikely pirate Major Stede Bonnet takes Will under his wing, finding him work aboard the vessel *Revenge* under the captaincy of Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach.

Will is faced with many difficult decisions as a result of life at sea. He learns to resist being bullied and to be a better judge of character. He also has to accept the fate of his ship's crew once caught by the authorities.

Historically based and sparing little of the gruesome details of this era, Sherryl Clark cleverly interweaves fact with fiction to engage readers on Will's journey of self-discovery.

THEMES:

Relationships:

- Will has a destructive relationship with his step-father, Clive.

- Will forges a close bond with the pirate Robert. He also shares a special relationship with Major Bonnet.

- Will's father is dead.

- Will is betrayed by pirate Peter.

Self Esteem/Self Belief:

- Many of Will's insecurities are caused by his lack of self-esteem, brought about by his mistreatment by his step-father.

- Through Will's journey, he gains self-belief and courage.

Pirates:

- Piracy was dangerous and brutal.

- The weapons and strategies of this era are entrenched in the text.

- The misdeeds and characteristics of infamous pirates such as Blackbeard are detailed.

- Pirate ships have their own rules and systems of captaincy.

- Crime and punishment – pirates faced hanging once caught.

Bullying:

- Will is bullied by his step-father.

- Will is bullied by Jeremiah.

Guilt

- Will feels guilty about some of the decisions he is forced to make.

WRITING STYLE:

Pirate X is written in first person, past tense. The narration expresses Will's anguish at being mysteriously transported from 2011 to 1717 and his sense of helplessness when this experience seems destined to continue. Sherryl Clark has researched and incorporated the pirating years of Blackbeard and those with whom he worked such as Bonnet to create a gripping and realistic text.

STUDY NOTES:

- Before reading, complete the first 2 columns of a KWL chart about pirates. Complete the third column during and after reading the text. Discuss which elements of piracy in the charts are fact and which might be fiction.

- Use Lane Smith's picture book *It's a Book* to introduce the thrill of reading.

- Read extracts of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Does Long John Silver fit the mould of pirates as depicted in *Pirate X*? Discuss.

- Sherryl Clark has used excellent descriptions and wonderful figurative language throughout the text. Keep a record of sentences that you particularly like, taking time to appreciate and discuss the quality of writing. These could also be used to analyse language conventions such as sentence structure, nouns groups, verb groups, adverbial groups and so on. Allow students to identify and add to this list. Some examples include:

  o The old man's jacket stank of river mud and mould p1

  o The wind had turned, bringing sleet that angled into the doorway p1

  o My feet slapped through a huge puddle p3

  o A spatter of icy rain hit me p5

  o Snakes of panic curled in my stomach p16

  o I crawled into the corner and curled into a shivering ball on the damp planks, misery seeping through me p176

  o The Spanish sailor was a horrible stain I'd never cleanse from my life p235

- Why did Will find it impossible to shoot the Frenchman who shot Jeremiah?

- What are the similarities between Clive and Jeremiah?

- Discuss how Will's resilience to bullying slowly develops throughout the text.

- Why do you think that Major Bonnet has turned to a life of piracy? What clues do we get about his life before becoming a pirate? Why do you think he is such an ineffective pirate?

- Choose one of the minor characters such as Robert, Peter or Jeremiah. Complete a series of diary entries that show your understanding of their character and their role in *Pirate X*.

- How does Will's character change and develop during the course of the novel? Give examples to support your answer.

- Will struggles with the image of the Spaniard as he is thrown overboard to drown. Why is this so difficult for Will to deal with?

- In small groups, select a scene from *Pirate X* to dramatise.

- Sketch one of the ports that the pirates visit such as Bath or Charles Town, using details from the text to help with this visual representation. Compare with images of these places today.

- How important is trust and friendship to Will? Why is it that he feels he can trust Robert and to some extent, Major Stede? Why is he sceptical of Peter?

- Keep a vocabulary log in which you record words that you don't know. Use a dictionary to define these words. Such words could form your personal spelling list.

- Will learns that feeling sorry for himself is not going to help him. Have you ever had a similar realisation? Write a recount of such a time.

- What does Will mean we he says, 'that gold was weighing me down in more ways than one'? (p236)

- What famous pirates do you know of? Which of these pirates really did exist and which are fictional characters?

- The Golden Age of Piracy took place from1650 to 1730. Research this period in history. What was society like? Why would people turn to a life of piracy?

- What was the life of a pirate like? Use examples from *Pirate X* and historical research to support your answer.

- Research privateers. Why did many privateers become pirates?

- How did conditions for naval sailors lead to many becoming pirates?

- Investigate the ways in which pirate ships were run. How were captains chosen? What rules were in place on board many pirate ships? What examples of such rules are evident in *Pirate X*?

- There are many examples of poor hygiene, primitive forms of medicine and poor nutrition throughout *Pirate X*. Create a table that compares and contrasts these areas in the present day with the early eighteenth century.

- Create a map that shows the places mentioned in the text. Do these places still exist today? Have their names changed?

- Compare a scene from the book in which the pirates attack another ship with a scene from a film such as *The Pirates of the Caribbean*.

- Pirates are often romanticised and the subject of young children's games. How are your early memories of pirate games different from/similar to the description of a pirate's life in *Pirate X*? Discuss examples.

- Sherryl Clark explicitly details the various components of the pirate ships. Keep a list of the different parts of the ships in the text. Sketch a pirate ship, labelling its different parts.

- There are many different roles on board a pirate ship. Create a glossary of such jobs such as quartermaster, powder monkey, ship's boy etc. Students can be given a role and in groups set a task for their own pirate ship.

- Write a newspaper article about piracy suitable for publication in a paper of that era. Your article could be about a pirate of your choice or an editorial that expresses your views on issues such as government corruption, capital punishment etc.

- Explore piracy in our lifetime. Where does it occur? What can governments do about modern-day piracy?

- There are many famous pirates including Blackbeard, William Kidd, Bartholomew Roberts, Mary Read and Anne Bonny. Choose one on which to research and present an information report or wanted poster.

- Choose one of these famous pirates and write a chapter suitable for inclusion into *Pirate X* that includes this pirate.

- Research Blackbeard and compare your findings with Sherryl Clark's depiction of him. What similarities and differences can you find?

- With older students, read extracts of Daniel Defoe's *The General History of Pyrates*, written in 1724. These extracts could be used for comprehension activities or used to cross reference information found in books and on websites.

- Visit Rochedale State School's website on pirates. There are many excellent links and activities to complete. www.rochedalss.eq.edu.au/pirates/pirate2.htm

- Create your own pirates website.

- With younger students, create a treasure map. Introduce map co-ordinates.

- Take part in the annual Talk Like a Pirate Day which occurs on September 19 each year. There are many websites that help you to talk like a pirate such as

  o   http://www.chiff.com/home_life/holiday/talk-like-pirate-day.htm

  o   http://www.wikihow.com/Talk-Like-a-Pirate

- Below are two images from *The General History of Pyrates*. On the left is Major Stede Bonnet, on the right, Edward 'Blackbeard' Teach. Is this how you pictured these characters? Re-read Sherryl Clark's descriptions of these men in *Pirate X*. Compare their biographies found on the Pirates! Fact and Legend website http://www.piratesinfo.com/History_of_Piracy.asp with these artworks.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_General_History_of_the_Pyrates

- At the conclusion of the unit of work hold a class party with pirates as the theme. Students can create their own costumes and brainstorm theme-related food to bring.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION:

I first came across the story of Stede Bonnet about 11 years ago. The idea of writing about someone who was a failure as a pirate really appealed to me, and I did a lot more research before starting to think of a story. The first decision was - whose story is it? I didn't think young readers would be interested in Bonnet's story so I invented a fictional character, Will Shepherd. Originally Will lived in 1717 and was a cabin boy on Bonnet's ship. In later drafts, the story became a timeslip and Will begins as a runaway in 2011.

I also rewrote the story in first person - as a contemporary character, his voice and thoughts didn't have to be constrained by the language and idiom of the time. One part of the research I enjoyed most was finding old words in the *Greater Oxford Dictionary* for the other characters of that time. Other people in the story, such as Blackbeard and his lieutenant Richards, were real pirates, and there was plenty of material about them (not all accurate) but not so much about Bonnet. He still interests me - why would someone give up a wealthy lifestyle to become a pirate, and why would you keep at it when you were failing so badly? Pride? Later research led me to believe that Bonnet had a mental illness, perhaps brought on by the death of his son, and this helped me strengthen the connection between him and Will.

On Will's side, though, the true bonding is with Robert, his shipmate, who becomes both friend and father-figure. I felt that to bring the historical material alive, I needed strong characters and a sense of both action and mystery. Will may never get home again, but if he does, what did it all mean?