



Treasure Island

Robert Louis Stevenson



About the author

Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1850. His father was a successful lighthouse engineer, and his mother was the daughter of a church minister. Hoping that his son would follow in the family business, his father sent Stevenson to university to study engineering, but Stevenson soon changed to law and qualified as a lawyer in 1875. In the same year, he met W. E. Henley, the publisher of *London Magazine*. Henley immediately recognised Stevenson's literary potential and encouraged him to become a writer by offering to publish his short stories in the magazine. Rather than work as a lawyer, Stevenson set off on a series of journeys around Europe and began publishing accounts of his travels. In 1876, he met Fanny Osborne, an American woman ten years his senior. She was married with two children, but she and Stevenson fell in love, and she obtained a divorce in 1879. Stevenson travelled to California to marry her in 1880, and afterward, they returned to live in England.

In 1881, Stevenson took his new wife and stepchildren on holiday to Braemar in Scotland. The weather was appalling and they were forced to stay indoors. To pass the time, Stevenson and his twelve-year-old stepson, Lloyd, began drawing maps of imaginary islands. To amuse the children, Stevenson used the idea of a secret map as the basis of a story about hidden treasure. Taking inspiration from his travels to America and his childhood visiting lighthouses with his father, and basing the character of Long John Silver on his friend W. E. Henley (who had only one leg), he sat down and wrote the adventure that eventually became *Treasure Island*. In the years following the publication of the book, Stevenson wrote a series of best-selling novels, including *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Kidnapped*, which remain popular to

this day. In 1888, Stevenson chartered a yacht to travel around the South Pacific. Suffering from tuberculosis, he decided to buy an estate on Samoa, where he could retire in a warm climate. He never returned to Scotland, but he continued to publish novels, poems and short stories until his death in 1894.

Summary

Treasure Island is one of the most famous adventure stories in English literature. The lasting appeal of the story is supported by the fact that there are more film versions of *Treasure Island* than almost any other classic novel.

The story, set in the mid-eighteenth century, is mainly narrated by a young boy named Jim Hawkins. An old sailor comes to stay at the seaside inn owned by Jim's parents. When the sailor dies, Jim searches his belongings and finds a map revealing the location of an island with treasure buried on it. Jim's friend, Mr Trelawney, buys a ship to search for the treasure.

During the voyage, Jim discovers that there are many pirates among the crew, and that they are led by Long John Silver. When the ship reaches the island, a battle begins between the pirates and Mr Trelawney's men. Jim befriends an old pirate who lives alone on the island and has already found the treasure. After many adventures, Jim and his friends defeat the pirates and sail back to England with the treasure.

Background and themes

Cliffhangers: Stevenson first published *Treasure Island* as a serial in a children's magazine. In the late nineteenth century, it was common practice for novels to be published in weekly magazines. The need to encourage readers to buy the next issue of the magazine led authors to develop dramatic plots punctuated with 'cliffhangers' (very exciting moments) at the end of each episode. *Treasure Island* follows this pattern, containing a plot that has many twists and turns, making the novel very exciting to read.

First-person perspective: Most of *Treasure Island* is written in the first-person, and the story is narrated by the young hero, Jim Hawkins. Telling the story in the first-person encourages the reader to identify with the main character, inviting him or her to share Hawkins' fear, excitement and tension as the story unfolds.

Hidden treasure: *Treasure Island* draws on a theme that can be traced back to the Middle Ages and beyond – the myth of hidden treasure. Stevenson gives this traditional



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plot a realistic basis by setting his story in the eighteenth century, which was a time when pirates were still active in the West Indies, often hiding their stolen treasures away in remote places. Pirates were a source of great fascination in late nineteenth-century England, and they featured in much of the music and literature being produced at the time. They had the attraction of being both dangerous and romantic.

Pirates: Stevenson's great creation, the one-legged Long John Silver, is one of the most memorable characters in English literature. A few years after *Treasure Island* was published, J. M. Barrie created a similar figure in his play *Peter Pan* – Captain Hook, who had only one hand (instead of having only one leg). In any adventure story, it is essential to have the 'good guys' struggling against the 'bad guys'. Pirates were extremely suitable for the role of bad guys, as they went against the rules of society and lived outside the law. Unlike ghosts and monsters, which were also popular in the stories of the nineteenth century, pirates really existed, and therefore, they were much more effective figures of fear and horror for children – even older ones.

Escape: One of *Treasure Island*'s most important themes is the idea of escaping – escaping from poverty by finding treasure and escaping from one's own country by travelling to exotic locations. Many popular novels feed on this need for escapism, and *Treasure Island* combines both aspects. Travel was much more difficult in the nineteenth century, and Jim's experience of sailing to the Caribbean is in itself an exciting adventure. By combining this theme with violent pirates and the search for hidden treasure, Stevenson successfully sends the reader on an exciting and satisfying journey of the imagination.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1, pages 1–6

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What can you see? Where do you think the story takes place? What do you think happens in the story?*
- Discuss:** Ask students if they have ever seen a film version of *Treasure Island*. *Did you like the film? Why or why not? Do you remember any of the characters in the story?* List the characters the students mention on the board, and then ask them to find pictures of the characters in the book.
- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and ask them to look at the pictures in the book. Each pair chooses

one picture and then writes a short paragraph about it on a piece of paper. Pairs swap pieces of paper and try to guess which pictures are being described.

After reading

- Artwork:** Get students to draw a picture of the old captain (Billy Bones). Direct them to focus on the first paragraph on page 1. When they have finished, they should show their pictures to the rest of the class.
- Discuss:** Get students to talk about what life was like in the mid-eighteenth century. *What kind of clothing did people wear? What kind of jobs did they have? Did they have telephones, TVs, cars, etc? Did they travel regularly? Did they go on vacations to other countries? Was travelling easy or hard?*

Chapter 1, pages 7–12

Before reading

- Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Jim and his mother after they hide behind the trees. *Will they escape from the pirates? Will the pirates find them? What will they do with the envelope? What will be inside the envelope?*
- Discuss:** *Look at the picture on page 9. What can you see on the map? When was the map made? Why was it made?*

After reading

- Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen to Jim and his mother after they hide behind the trees. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- Role play:** Ask students to work in groups and role play the scene in which Jim goes to Mr Trelawney's house and talks to Mr Trelawney and Dr Livesey (page 8).
- Role play:** Ask students to work in groups and role play the scene in which Jim hides in the barrel of fruit and hears Long John Silver talking about Captain Flint and his men (page 12).

Chapter 1, pages 13–17

Before reading

- Write:** Get students to look at the picture on page 17 and write a short paragraph describing Ben Gunn's appearance. You can start the activity by asking students the following questions:
*How big is Ben Gunn?
How long is his hair?
What does he have on his face?
What kind of clothes is he wearing?
Is he wearing shoes?
Does he look friendly or mean?*

After reading

- Artwork:** Get students to draw a picture to explain how Long John Silver lost his leg. When they have finished, they should show their pictures to the rest of the class.



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13 Role play: Divide the class into groups. Ask students to look at this sentence on page 16: 'I'm Ben Gunn,' he said. 'I live here. The pirates left me on the island three years ago.' Each group should do a role play to answer one of the following questions:

How was Ben Gunn left on the island?

Why was Ben Gunn left on the island?

How did Ben Gunn live on the island for three years by himself?

Chapter 2

Before reading

14 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 2 is called 'Dr Livesey's Story'. *Does Jim tell this part of the story? If not, who tells it?*

After reading

15 Pair work: Get students to work in pairs. One student is Dr Livesey, and the other student is Captain Smollett. Dr Livesey is back on the *Hispaniola*. He tells Captain Smollett about the house on the island. He says that the house is a good place to stay in. However, the captain doesn't agree. The men talk about where they should stay on the island.

Chapter 3, pages 22–27

Before reading

16 Guess: Get students to predict what will happen to Jim, Mr Trelawney, Dr Livesey and Captain Smollett after they go into the house. *Will the pirates come? Will they fight with the pirates? What will happen to Ben Gunn? What will happen to Long John Silver? What will happen to the map? What will happen to the hidden treasure?*

After reading

17 Discuss: Get students to look at the picture on page 27. *How do you think Jim is feeling? How do you know this? How do you think Israel Hands is feeling? How do you know this?*

Chapter 3, pages 28–33

Before reading

18 Write: Get students to look at the picture on page 32 and write a short paragraph explaining who is sitting around the table and what they are doing.

After reading

19 Discuss: At the end of the book, Jim says that he never wants to go back to the island. Ask students if they believe this – take a vote – and then get them to say why they think Jim is being truthful or not.

20 Discuss: *What does Jim do with the treasure in England?* Get students to work in small groups and think of answers to this question. Make it a competition. Ask each group to report back with its ideas. When the groups have reported back, take a vote to find out which idea the students like best. The group that came up with the idea wins the competition.

Vocabulary activities

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