

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Cay

by

### Theodore Taylor

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### Book Information

Theodore Taylor, The Cay  
Quiz Number: 108  
Avon Books, 1970  
ISBN 0-380-01003-8; LCCN  
144 Pages  
Book Level: 5.3  
Interest Level: MG

After the freighter on which Phillip and his mother were traveling from wartime Curacao to the U.S. is torpedoed, the boy finds himself dependent on an old West Indian for survival.

**Award:** Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Community Life, Prejudice; Disabilities, Vision Impaired/Blind; Power Lessons AR, Grade 7; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Wars, World War II

### Main Characters

Henrik van Boven a Dutch friend of Phillip's, who also lives on Curacao

Mr. Enright Phillip's father, who has moved to the Dutch island of Curacao to "help the war effort"

Mrs. Enright Phillip's mother, who decides to take Phillip back to the United States when the war hits their island

Phillip Enright the principal character in the story, an eleven-year-old boy who is shipwrecked on a deserted island with a strange but wise old man

Stew Cat a cat that survives the shipwreck and becomes a companion to both Phillip and Timothy during their bleak stay on the island

Timothy a West Indian who saves Phillip after the shipwreck and teaches Phillip how to survive on the island

### Vocabulary

**cay** a low island or reef of sand or coral

**tempest** a violent wind accompanied by rain, hail or snow

**veerboot** ferryboats that shuttle cars and people across a body of water

**voodoo** a religion involving spells and rituals similar to witchcraft

### Synopsis

Phillip Enright is a young boy living with his parents on the Dutch island of Curacao during World War II. His father has recently moved the family to the island from Virginia to lend his oil refinery and gasoline production skills to the war effort. When German submarines begin bombing the islands, Phillip's mother decides to take him back to the United States, where she feels safe.

En route to the United States, the freighter ship on which Phillip and his mother are traveling is torpedoed. In the confusion, Phillip is hit in the head and passes out for several hours. When he awakens, he discovers he is adrift on the sea with a large black man and a cat. Phillip has learned to view dark-skinned people as "different," and, at first, he dislikes his companion.

Eventually, they end up washing ashore upon a tiny Caribbean cay surrounded by coral reefs. Phillip realizes that his head injury has left him blind. But Timothy does not allow him to feel sorry for himself and immediately sets out to teach him survival skills on their barren island. Through their combined efforts, Phillip, Timothy, and Stew Cat endure many trials. Phillip begins to understand and love Timothy, breaking down all traces of prejudice he once felt.

Timothy dies after a violent hurricane hits the tiny island, leaving Phillip and Stew Cat to fend for themselves. Phillip keeps busy restoring the island and making use of Timothy's many "gifts" of wisdom. One day, a plane flies overhead. Phillip discovers that burning sea grape vines produces thick, black smoke for a signal fire. He is soon rescued and reunited with his parents.

After three operations, Phillip is able to see again. He spends many hours remembering his remarkable

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friend and their adventure at sea, vowing to return to the cay to visit Timothy's grave one day.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

Give some examples of the "evidence" that Phillip uses to prove his mother is right when she says, "They are not the same as you, Phillip."

*Timothy eats raw fish; he does not smell like Phillip's mother or father; he does not know how to spell; he is ugly with a flat nose and wiry hair.*

#### Literary Analysis

Explain Timothy's "legacy" to Phillip.

*While he is alive, Timothy does many things to ensure Phillip can survive on his own. The vine rope, the coconuts, the weaving skills, and the fishing poles are all examples of Timothy's "legacy" of independence to Phillip.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

In a way, Phillip's blindness helps him to overcome prejudice. How does it also help "protect him from fear"?

*He is better able to cope after the storm since he does not become overwhelmed by the sights of destruction. He is able to handle the situation one thing at a time, bringing order and structure to the chaos.*

#### Constructing Meaning

Why does Timothy say, "She started dis terrible wahr, eh, young bahss?"

*He wants Phillip to see that his situation is not really his mother's fault, but the war's fault.*

#### Constructing Meaning

What does Phillip mean when he asks, "Timothy, are you still black"?

*This shows that Phillip no longer sees the racial differences between himself and Timothy. He is feeling completely comfortable with his new friend and the color of his skin does not matter.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors:** The incident with Timothy and Stew Cat introduces a cultural or religious difference between Christianity and the West Indies' religion, voodoo. The students might find it interesting to research other religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, or even Voodooism. They can then give a presentation to the rest of the class based on their research.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors:** This story takes place during World War II, and the war even finds its way to Phillip's seemingly peaceful island of Curacao. As depicted in the book, German submarines struck fear and even awe in the rest of the world when Germany unleashed its advanced war machines in the waters. As a research and writing assignment, have the students study some of the weapons and machinery used during World War II and compare/contrast it with technology used in modern warfare, such as Desert Storm.

**Understanding the Author's Craft:** The author's use of Timothy's distinctive West Indian dialect adds depth and really brings the character to life for the reader. Have the students practice writing dialogue to capture a particular dialect or slang. Examples of dialects can be found in movies, television or radio. They can also practice "translating" examples of Timothy's words from the book into their own terms.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning:** Timothy had to be Phillip's eyes after the accident. Have the students work in pairs, taking turns being "the eyes." First, hand out vocabulary sheets with

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definitions and examples of figurative language terms such as personification, simile, metaphor, etc. The students should sit back-to-back; one student can select an item out of a bag and try to describe it to the blindfolded partner using figurative language. The items can either be small enough to fit in the bag, or simply be pictures of the item.