



## BOOK CLUB NEWS

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### *Treasure Island*

by Robert Louis Stevenson

This Month's Discussion Leader: Mary Marks



#### PIRATE STORY

*Three of us afloat in the meadow by the swing,  
Three of us aboard in the basket on the lea.  
Winds are in the air, they are blowing in the spring,  
And waves are on the meadow like the waves there are at sea.  
Where shall we adventure, to-day that we're afloat,  
Wary of the weather and steering by a star?  
Shall it be to Africa, a-steering of the boat,  
To Providence, or Babylon, or off to Malabar?  
Hi! but here's a squadron a-rowing on the sea,  
Cattle on the meadow a-charging with a roar!  
Quick, and we'll escape them, they're as mad as they can be,*

*The wicket is the harbor and the garden is the shore.*

- Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885)

Mary began our discussion by reading to us the above verse, sharing that her mother always read poems to her from Stevenson's "garden." Born 1850 in Edinburgh, Scotland, Stevenson studied engineering to follow in the footsteps of his engineer father and grandfather but soon tired of it, preferring his own imagination, a familiar refuge. He was not the adventurer he wrote about; rather, he was frail and sickly for much of his life, completing some of his best writings while bedridden. In 1880, he married Fanny Vandergrift Osbourne, an American, who became his editor and collaborator. During this period, within ten years, he wrote *Treasure Island*, *Prince Otto*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Kidnapped*, *The Black Arrow*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, and *David Balfour*. He died in Samoa 1894 at the age of 44.

Our discussion began with several readers reminiscing about their parents reading to them as children from the "garden of verse." Others reported reading to their children or grandchildren. What is the main theme of *Treasure Island* that makes it a classic? Can you identify other classics that tell the folktale of quest? Is this purely a tale of adventure? Discuss the themes of greed and death. Was there too much violence? Stevenson created an archetypal character in Long John Silver; discuss. What is your opinion of Long John Silver's character? What is the relationship between Jim and Long John Silver? Why was Jim not afraid of him? Identify some modern characters who've reached iconic status like Long John Silver. Stevenson wrote the colloquial language that his characters would have spoken. How did you find reading the speech of the time (mid 1700's), of sailors of the high seas and of pirates? How old was Jim Hawkins? How is this a coming of age story? Did Jim indeed come of age? Explain. Jim Hawkins is the main narrator. What effect does this have on the story? What does this reveal about Jim's character? How many women appear in the story? Who? What is their significance? Discuss the importance of Jim's father's death and Jim's love for his mother? What is Jim's motivation for joining this quest for treasure?

*"Fifteen men on the dead man's chest –  
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!  
Drink and the devil had done for the rest –  
Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum!"*

Mary explained that rum, a by-product of sugar refining, was very popular when this story took place mid-eighteenth century. It was used as currency. It

was drunk while at sea when water was unsafe. Piracy was prevalent at the time. With shipping the only way to cross the seas and pirates as unpredictable as the weather, travel was dangerous. Even governments engaged pirates to intercept enemy ships.

Many readers appreciated this book choice because it was one they wouldn't have read outside of the Book Club. Some found the language challenging; others enjoyed it. As the go-around proceeded, readers continued to express how their parents read *Treasure Island* to them as a child. Many claimed the book to be delightful. Discussion took us back to childhood, to the eighteenth century on a ship manned by pirates posing as honest men. *Treasure Island* is unique in its appeal to young and old alike.

Thank you, Mary, for your leadership through an adventurous discussion, and **especially** for the rum cake served on black, white and red plates presented on a themed black tablecloth decorated with skulls and bones!



Join us in May for a discussion of *You or Someone Like You*, by Chandler Burr led by Michael Rothschild.