



STORYLAB

PRESENTS

THEODORE TAYLOR'S

THE CAY

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*



In *The Cay*, Phillip and Timothy, two strangers, survive a ship explosion by floating on a raft to a small island.

In 1942, Phillip Enright is a 12-year-old American boy living a comfortable life with his family in the Caribbean. Then, World War II starts, and German submarines are attacking ships. Phillip's mother decides they need to escape to safety in the United States.

But a torpedo hits their vessel on their return to Virginia. Phillip wakes up on a life raft in the middle of the ocean, and he can no longer see. He has gone blind from a head injury from the explosion. Fortunately, Phillip is not alone. He

shares the raft with Timothy, an older Caribbean man, and a cat called Stew Cat.

At first, Phillip dislikes Timothy. He feels that he, a white boy, is superior to Timothy, a black man. But those prejudices quickly fade as Timothy becomes Phillip's guide and protector.

Eventually, Phillip, Timothy, and Stew Cat wash up on a small cay. It is a tiny, flat island with sand, some palm trees, and not much else. Timothy shares his knowledge of the sea and weather and tries to teach Phillip how to survive. Phillip learns how to find food, make fire, build shelter, and navigate without sight. The two form a friendship as they wait and hope for rescue.

Then a massive hurricane threatens to destroy everything they have built. Timothy ties them both to a palm tree with rope to survive the storm. But Timothy dies, having used his body as a human shield to save Phillip's life.

Phillip is left alone on the cay, blind and grieving. He must use everything Timothy taught him to stay alive.

When rescue finally comes, Phillip has truly grown as a person. He started his journey full of prejudice and ignorance. Now he understands that courage, kindness, and friendship matter more than the color of anyone's skin.

AN EXCERPT FROM *THE CAY*

The sea was beginning to reach for our hilltop, climbing the forty feet with raging white-caps. Timothy dragged me toward the palm. I held Stew Cat against my chest.

Standing with his back to the storm, Timothy put my arms through the loops of rope, and then roped himself, behind me, to the tree.

Soon, I felt water around my ankles. Then it washed to my knees. It would go back and then crash against us again. Timothy was taking the full blows of the storm, sheltering me with his body. When the water receded, it would tug at us, and Timothy's strength would fight against it. I could feel the steel in his arms as the water tried to suck us away.

Even in front of him, crushed against the trunk of the palm, I could feel the rain, which was now jabbing into me like the punches of a nail. It was not falling toward earth but being driven straight ahead by the wind.

We must have been against the palm for almost an hour when suddenly the wind died down and the rain became gentle. Timothy panted, "D'eye! We can relax a bit till d'odder side o' d'tempis' hit us."

I remembered that hurricanes, which are great circling storms, have a calm eye in the center.



"Even in front of him, crushed against the trunk of the palm, I could feel the rain, which was now jabbing into me like the punches of a nail."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theodore Taylor

Theodore Taylor lived the kind of life that would make a great book. At 17, Taylor dropped out of high school and started working as a newspaper writer. Then, World War II broke out. Taylor decided to join the merchant marines, which are commercial, not military, ships.

During the war, the merchant ships carried supplies to troops. They were consistently under attack by German submarines. By the end of the war, Taylor had become a naval officer serving in the Pacific.

After the war, Taylor returned to writing. When he sat down to write *The Cay*, it took him only three weeks to write



Theodore Taylor

the story. He said that he had been thinking about the story for over a decade.

Taylor claimed his inspiration came from reading about an 11-year-old Dutch boy who drifted away on a life raft when his ship was torpedoed in 1942. There are no historical records of this specific incident, but it might have been something Taylor heard during his naval service.

Taylor knew about other incredible survival tales as well. He understood what it really meant to be stranded at sea. For example, Taylor most likely knew about the real-life story of Poon Lim. Lim was a Chinese sailor who survived 133 days at sea. It was the most famous maritime survival story of World War II.

Taylor wrote more than 50 books, many based on his or other's real experiences. When he described Phillip's survival techniques, Timothy's knowledge of the ocean, or the terror of being alone on a tiny island, he was drawing from real survival stories. He participated in the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in 1946, which inspired another one of his novels. So while *The Cay* might be fiction, it was written by someone who knew about life at sea.

BUILD BACKGROUND

What Is a Cay?



A cay is a tiny, flat island that sits barely above sea level.

A cay is a tiny, flat island that sits barely above sea level. The word cay comes from the Spanish word cayo, which means a small island or reef. Cay is pronounced “KEY”—not “KAY”—just like a house key.

How Cays Are Formed

Cays form in tropical waters. They grow from coral reefs over thousands of years. As coral animals die, their skeletons pile up, creating underwater platforms. Over time, waves

and currents dump sand, broken shells, and pieces of coral on top of these platforms. When enough material builds up to break the surface of the water, a cay is formed.

What They're Actually Like

Most cays are so low that if you stood in the middle of one, you could probably see the ocean in every direction. Cays are often tiny; some are smaller than a football field. They are covered with sand. Some cays have scrubby plants that can survive in salt air and sandy soil. Some have palm trees that grew from coconuts that floated ashore. Fresh water is almost impossible to find because rainwater just soaks into the sand.

Cays are scattered throughout warm, shallow seas like the Caribbean Sea. For those who have been lost at sea, a cay can be both a good thing and a bad thing. It is land, which means you won't drown. But a cay is also isolated with limited resources. There is no way to signal for help except hoping someone passes by.

The author Theodore Taylor strands Phillip and Timothy on an island that is imagined but typical of cays. It is small, sandy, with few plants and trees, and surrounded by coral reefs. It has no streams, hills, nor caves to hide in. Understanding what a cay is helps explain why Timothy's and Phillip's survival is so challenging—and so remarkable.

TEXT CONNECTION

Poon Lim: 133 Days Alone at Sea

The story of Phillip's survival on the cay was made up, but there are stories of real shipwreck survivors. One story similar to *The Cay* is the real-life story of 24-year-old Chinese sailor Poon Lim.

Like Phillip, Poon Lim was at sea at the start of World War II. He was working on the SS Benlomond, a British cargo ship, when a German submarine fired two torpedoes at it. The ship sank in just two minutes.

Of the 54 men on board, Poon Lim was the only one who survived. He grabbed a life jacket and jumped into the water. After swimming for two hours through oil and wreckage, he found a wooden raft only eight feet square. This tiny platform would become his home.

The raft had some basic supplies: water, hardtack biscuits, chocolate, sugar cubes, and a few flares. But Poon Lim knew these wouldn't last long. When the food ran out, he became a master inventor. He pulled wire from a flashlight to make fishhooks. He braided rope to make fishing line. He used crushed biscuits as bait to catch small fish, then used those fish to catch bigger ones. When it rained, he collected every precious drop of water using his life jacket as a funnel.

Several ships passed by but didn't stop to help. Some thought he might be a Japanese soldier and, therefore, an



Poon Lim (right) shows British Rear Admiral Julius Furer (left) how he took the spring out of an electric light and made a fish hook while he was adrift in the ocean.

enemy during the war. Others worried it was a German trap.

After 133 days drifting about 750 miles across the Atlantic Ocean, three Brazilian fishermen finally rescued him near the coast of Brazil. He had lost 20 pounds but was alive.

British King George VI gave him a medal for his incredible courage. The British Royal Navy even rewrote their survival manuals based on his techniques. Poon Lim had faced the ocean—and won.

What Is Historic Fiction? Theodore Taylor's *The Cay* is considered historical fiction. Historical fiction consists of:

- a made-up story but set in the real world;
- a conflict that might have happened in the past; and
- convincing and believable characters, plot, and setting.

Keep Reading: Want to read more of *The Cay*?

- [Read online at the Internet Archive](#)
- **If you like *The Cay***, then you might also like to read these historical fiction texts:
 - *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry
 - *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell
 - *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen

Start Writing: Inspired to write your own historical fiction?

Consider this prompt to get started:

- “The sky was too quiet, the ocean too still. It was like the world was holding its breath. That’s when I knew something was wrong . . . ”

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