

# Shipwreck

Maureen Jennings

**Reading Level: 5–6**

**Interest Level: Adult**

## Book Summary

Just before he is to retire, Bill Murdoch suffers the sudden loss of Julie, his beloved wife of over 30 years, and withdraws from friends and family. When Bill is encouraged by the leader of his grief support group to write down memories of Julie, he eventually finds himself writing a story about his great-grandfather, William Murdoch. The story involves a shipwreck, a mystery, faith, and the coming together of a community. Through sharing the story with his daughter and granddaughter, Bill learns that he has a lot to live for.

## Author Biography

Maureen Jennings is the author of the Detective Murdoch mysteries. These mysteries are set in Toronto, during the 1890s. The award-winning *Murdoch Mysteries* TV series is based on Maureen's novels. Maureen was born in England and immigrated to Canada in 1956. She lives in Toronto, Ontario, with her husband, two dogs, and two cats.

*Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.*

## THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

### Book Cover and Title

Ask students to look at the book's cover and title.

- (a) Ask students to predict what kind of book this will be (e.g., adventure, mystery, thriller).
- (b) Talk to students about other shipwreck stories they know (e.g., that of the Titanic). Ask students to describe how people are usually rescued from shipwrecks.

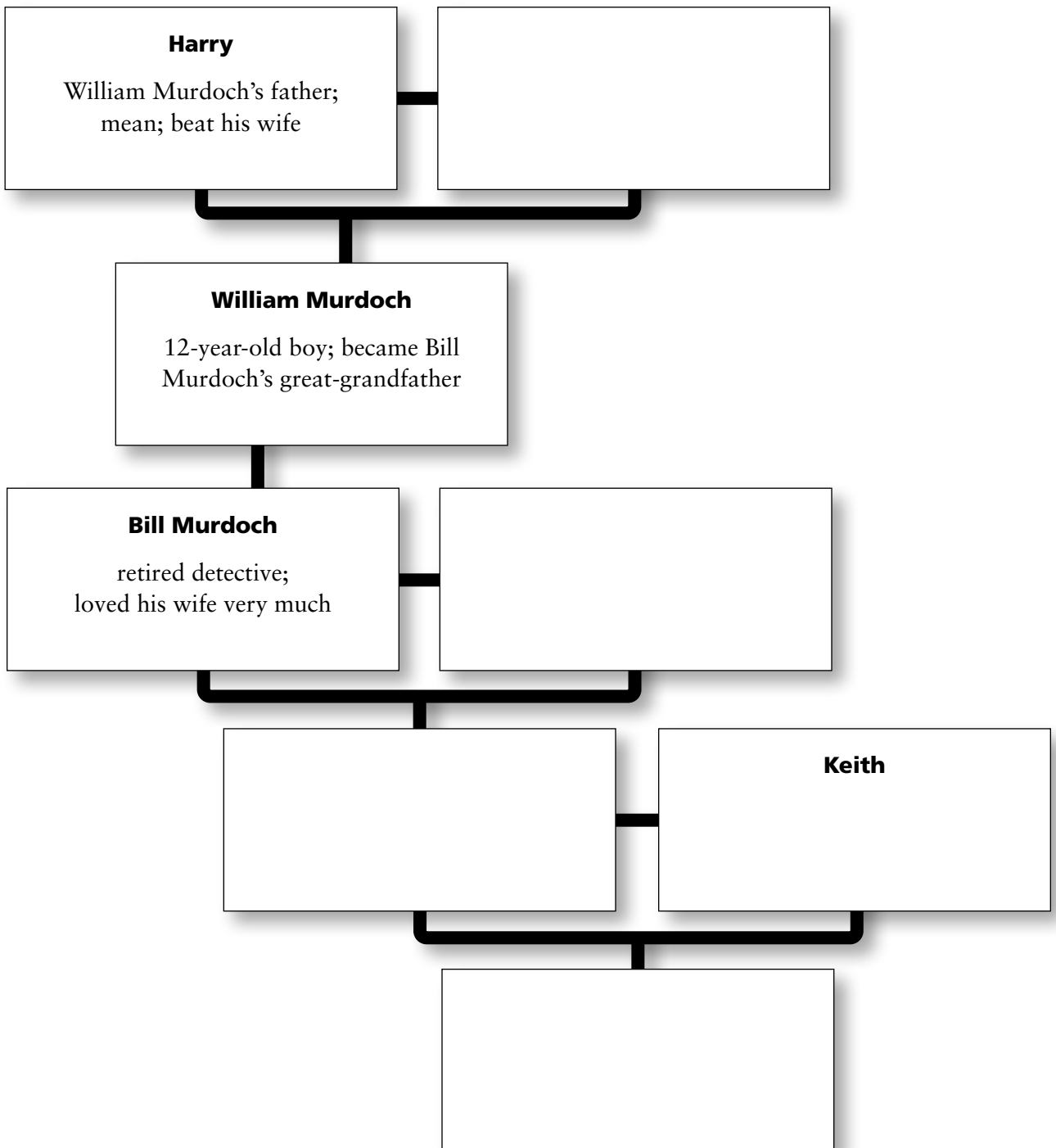
### Community

- (a) Tell students that *Shipwreck* takes place in a small community in the year 1873. Have students discuss the different meanings of community (e.g., group of people who live in the same place or who have a common interest). Ask students what communities they belong to.
- (b) People in a community often come together in times of trouble. Have students share examples of their community coming together to solve a problem or help someone.
- (c) Tell students that one of the main characters in *Shipwreck* is Father Keegan. He is the priest in a small town in the late 1800s. Ask students if they think a priest's role and purpose were different in the past.
- (d) Have students describe their places of worship and ways of worshipping (e.g., rituals, special ceremonies and events, religious icons). As the students share their descriptions, keep a record of religious terms (e.g., Mass, sermon, pews). After students have talked about their places of worship, review the list of terms and have students explain the terms they know. Finally, tell students the following terms appear in the book: parish, Mass, the Host, Last Rites, the Canon, and communion. Explain any terms that have not already been covered.

**WORKING WITH THE BOOK**

Characters: Bill Murdoch’s family

- (a) Have students add to the family tree below as they read the book. Have them write in the characters’ names and a few phrases that describe them.
- (b) After reading the book, ask students to summarize what Bill Murdoch found out about his ancestors.



**Characters: Father Keegan**

Tell students that readers can learn about the characters in a novel in three ways—from (1) what the writer tells us, (2) what the characters say, do, and think, and (3) what others say about the characters. As they read the book, have students note examples of how the writer develops the character of Father Keegan. Encourage students to make inferences where possible.

**How do we make inferences?**

Active readers use their experience and knowledge to make educated guesses about characters and their motivations. Readers who make inferences use clues in the text together with their own experiences to help them figure out the author’s meaning.

What the writer tells us about Father Keegan

Inference

What Father Keegan says, does, and thinks

Inference

What others say or think about Father Keegan

Inference

**Plot**

1. The story of the shipwreck turns into a mystery. As they read, have students (a) list all the questions Father Keegan and William ask about the victims of the shipwreck and (b) fill in the answers as they are revealed. (Note: some questions are not answered.)

Questions	Answers

2. After reading the book, have students summarize how the characters discovered the answers to their questions about the victims. Ask students what they noticed about (a) how Father Keegan and William work together to find answers and (b) their abilities as detectives.
3. Have students take note of the questions that were not answered and discuss possible answers to those questions. Have students consider whether not knowing the exact answers affected their enjoyment of the story, and explain why.

## Setting

Explain to students that the setting includes details of when and where events take place. These details set the mood. Have students add to the setting details for the two events in the chart. Then have students compare the settings. Ask students how the settings make them feel, and why. Have students discuss how the settings add to the story.

<b>Event</b>	<b>Setting</b>
the shipwreck (pages 38–40)	<i>wind grabbing Will and the priest and biting into their faces</i> <i>dim light</i>
dealing with the victims of the shipwreck in the hall (pages 48–49)	<i>a curtain hung at the rear of the hall to make a private space for the young woman</i> <i>several sheets of tarpaulins would receive the dead</i>

**TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK**

- (a) Compare the role of religion in William Murdoch's life with the role of religion in Amy's life.

(b) How has faith and practice changed in your family? Community? In your opinion, how important is religion in terms of faith, ritual, and practice?

(c) Is Amy "a child of her time" (page 27) with respect to religion? Do you think William Murdoch was a child of his time with respect to religion? Explain your answer.
- " 'Life is precious,' she said. 'We can't waste it. Those we have loved wouldn't want us to.' Bill challenged her when she said that. 'You are too young to understand real loss.' " (page 10)

(a) Do you think a young person can understand real loss?

(b) Death is one type of loss. What other types of losses can a person suffer from?
- "We owe it to those who loved us to keep living as well as we can." (page 11)

The continuity of life (including how life goes on) is a major theme in this novel. For example, Bill Murdoch was named after his grandfather, William Murdoch. List three events in the novel that connect with this theme.
- "Father Keegan didn't seem to care as much about things that had bothered the former priest, like how many times they [the men of the community] missed Mass or ate meat on Friday. But he cared a lot about how the people of his parish treated each other." (page 33)

Have students discuss and support their opinion of Father Keegan as a religious leader for the community.
- "The villagers always did everything they could to rescue those in danger. Earlier in the summer, three parishes in the area had come together, even though they were of different faiths." (page 36)

Do people of different faiths come together in your community? When?
- "At first, she was nervous about going into a building that belonged to Catholics." (page 48)

(a) Why do you think Mrs. Cameron was nervous?

(b) Have you entered a building belonging to those of a faith different than yours? How did you feel?

7. Wendy tells her father, Bill, that she and Keith are just dating. Bill finds out from Amy that Keith has been spending the night.
- (a) In your opinion, did Wendy lie? Explain your answer.
  - (b) Would you consider Wendy's lie a white lie? How are white lies different from other lies?
  - (c) Have you ever told a white lie? Has anyone ever told you a white lie? Why was the white lie told? What were the results?
  - (d) Are white lies acceptable? Explain your answer.
8. "The men, especially, thought that certain sins were only human nature. They weren't worth talking about, really. In this group of sins the men placed the times when they were mean to a neighbour. Or cheated the storekeeper. Or didn't help the poor of the parish. The angry words they sometimes spoke to their wives or children. The lustful thoughts about other men's wives. These were just human weaknesses. Nobody's perfect." (page 33)
- (a) Do you agree with these men that certain sins are only human nature? That nobody's perfect?
  - (b) Why is it hard for people to overcome their weaknesses?
  - (c) Explain why the following characters act as they do. Do they commit acts of sin? Or are they just acts of human nature? Are these acts forgivable? Explain your answers.
    - Bill Murdoch withdrew from his family and friends after his wife died.
    - Bill Murdoch did not like his ex-son-in-law.
    - Keith cheated on Wendy, then left her.
    - William's father beat William's mother. He made fun of his disabled son.
    - William came close to fighting with his own father.
    - John the sailor killed the merchant.
    - The people in the village gossiped.
9. "Everybody needs a warm, safe place that is full of love." (page 78)
- Explain how the following characters connect to the theme suggested by this quote:
- (a) Bill Murdoch, (b) Keith, (c) William Murdoch, (d) William Murdoch's mother, (e) Abigail, and (f) Mrs. Pierce.
10. "But the reason and the heart must work together, Will. What does your heart say?" (page 71)
- (a) Which do you listen to first: your reason or your heart? Describe a time when you listened to your reason. Or to your heart. Or to both. What were the results?
  - (b) Do you think it's important to listen to both?

**WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK**

1. While helping Father Keegan, Will realizes he enjoys detective work. And he is good at it. It is a defining moment for Will. How does this moment affect Will in later life?

Choose one important moment in your life. Describe what happened and how you felt. Explain what you learned from the event. Explain how the experience changed you. Would you call this moment a defining moment in your life? Explain why or why not.

2. (a) Imagine you are Abigail. The ship is being torn apart on the rocks. You need to save yourself and your unborn baby. What are your chances? What are your choices? Write an account of what happens on the ship and your rescue by the villagers.  
(b) Imagine you are Saul. Write an account of the shipwreck and the rescue.
3. Visit Maureen Jennings's home page at [www.maureenjennings.com](http://www.maureenjennings.com). Click on "Contact me" and email Maureen Jennings. Tell her what you thought of her book.

## PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

### 1. Find out about an ancestor

Have students find out more about one of their ancestors. Suggest they interview family members; look for old photos, letters, postcards, newspaper clippings, etc.; check notes in family albums, wedding books, or religious books (such as family Bibles); use the internet; visit cemeteries; and search out leads at the local library or museum. Have students share what they find out about their ancestors.

### 2. Draw a family tree

- (a) Have students draw a family tree of their extended family. Encourage them to include as many family members as they can along with connecting lines and brief descriptions of the family members.
- (b) Have the students show their family tree to the oldest member of their family and ask that family member to add to the tree.

### 3. Investigate naming traditions

- (a) Remind students that Bill Murdoch was named after his great-grandfather William Murdoch. Ask students to share how they got their names (and nicknames). Ask students how they chose names for their children.
- (b) Have students ask ten other people how they got their names and/or chose names for their children. Tell the students to jot down the answers they receive so they do not forget them. Put the students into small groups. Have them exchange their information and draw five conclusions about the ways people get their names (e.g., a lot of people are named after a parent or relative; a few people are named after movie stars).

### 4. Write a biography

Have students identify the oldest person they know and list everything they know about the person. Then have the students organize their facts in a character map under physical characteristics, personality, early life, important moments in life, etc. Have students write down 15 questions they want to ask this person about his/her life. (Provide students with a list of the following questions if they need ideas.) Have the students interview the person and add to the character map, then write a short biography of the person.

- Why did your parents name you \_\_\_\_\_?  
Did you have a nickname?
- What is your earliest childhood memory?
- What games did you play growing up?
- What did you do for fun?
- What were your family chores? How did you feel about having chores?
- Did you receive an allowance? How much? What did you spend it on?
- Describe your family pets.
- Describe your childhood friends.
- Did you rebel as a teenager? How?
- What do you know about your parents and grandparents?  
What stories did they tell you?
- Describe how you met your partner. Your marriage. Your life together.
- What was your attitude toward raising children? Teenagers?
- What was the best job you ever had? The worst? Why?
- What dreams did you fulfill? What dreams did you have to let go? Why?
- What's the biggest change you have seen in the world?
- If you could relive one moment in your life, what would it be? Why?
- If you could change one moment in your life, what would it be?  
How would you change it?
- What are you most proud of/ashamed of in your life? Why?
- What is the most important thing you have learned in life?
- Are you afraid of dying?

**FURTHER READING**

(Available from Grass Roots Press)

If students liked this book, they might also enjoy:

*Skyjack!*, Tim Vicary, Oxford Bookworms (GRP)

*Chemical Secret*, Tim Vicary, Oxford Bookworms (GRP)

*Hell Island*, Matthew Reilly, Quick Reads (GRP)

*Dead Man's Island*, John Escott, Oxford Bookworms (GRP)

*An Accident Waiting to Happen*, Vincent Banville, Open Door Series (GRP)

*A Cool Head*, Ian Rankin, Quick Reads (GRP)

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