The Mosquito Coast

by Paul Theroux

SUMMARY

The Mosquito Coast begins in contemporary suburban America. Allie Fox is brilliantly clever with his hands and his head is full of ideas. But he hates the modern world. His children have no television or toys, they wear old clothes and they don’t go to school. He hates his boss, Mr Polski, who Allie thinks is only interested in making money and doesn’t care about the future.

One day Allie decides to get out. He puts his wife and children in his van and drives them away from their old life. They travel by ship to Honduras. At La Ceiba, on the Honduran coast, his bewildered family watch as he buys a place called Jeronimo, a small town on a river in the jungle.

When they get to Jeronimo they find nothing more than a broken-down house in a clearing. Mother and the children are horrified, but Allie is delighted with it. Here he can be king. He controls his family and the Indians who work for them. Together they create a new life from nothing. However, there are elements he cannot control and soon things start to go wrong.

Theroux says that his stories complete him as a person. He lives in every sentence he writes. He does not enjoy literary fame – he prefers to be anonymous. He likes to be in remote places with people who have no need of books and do not know what he does. He writes in secret and delivers his finished novels in brown paper parcels. He says he is the shadow and his fiction is the reality.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Paul Theroux is a traveller. The nature of travelling means that you move on. Moving on, leaving things behind and looking for new experiences is an important theme in The Mosquito Coast. Allie Fox doesn’t like what he sees in America. His solution is not to stay and try to change it, but to walk away. When things don’t work out at various places in Honduras, he makes the family move on and start again.

The Mosquito Coast is a character study of a man who develops a paranoid obsession – of a man who thinks the whole world is against him and only he can save the world. He lives his life in a state of high tension, never resting in his attacks on America and western civilization. He fights against the current of modern life. He thinks he is the last real man in the world.

In Allie’s attempts to create a new world in the jungle, he tries to control everyone and everything around him. He makes everyone see things his way. When he feels threatened, he reacts aggressively and violently.

The novel also examines the relationship between father and son. Theroux elicits warm feelings towards Allie by telling the story through the eyes of his loyal and believing son, Charlie Fox. We feel sorry for Allie when Jeronimo is destroyed, but we feel more sorry for Charlie as he comes to understand his father’s failings and to lose his belief in him.

Theroux sets up an interesting paradox as the basis of the novel. All the time that Allie is searching for a simple paradise, he is planning how to change it and tame it. In fact it is the children who learn better to live with nature – eating wild plants, protecting themselves against insects with leaf juices, building a simple shelter from materials in the jungle. Allie, meanwhile, plants western crops in
neat rows, puts up elaborate mosquito nets and builds an ice-making machine.

The jungle has lived for centuries without ice. Allie brings ice from the modern world he has rejected. He claims that ice has many uses, for example to keep food fresh and to treat sunburn, and will make the Indians’ lives better. But what comes after ice? Televisions and vacuum cleaners? The machine also symbolizes his need for approval. He wants to work miracles, to show that he is a little like God. When he reaches Seville and finds that the missionaries have already introduced ice there, he is furious, thus revealing his real motive. And when he tells Peewee Maywit ‘you can tell your grandchildren about this great day’ – the day that ice came to the Mosquito Coast – then we realize that he is searching for immortality.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

1. Charlie Fox tells this story. We watch Allie Fox go slowly mad through his son’s eyes. How does this affect the story? How does it affect our feelings about the characters? How would the story be different if it was told in the third person?

2. Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss the missionaries in this story. Do they think the idea of setting up a mission to tell people about a new religion is a good thing or a bad thing?

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1–5

current (n) water moves strongly in a river
missionary (n) a person who goes to another country to teach the people about his or her religion
net (n) a piece of material with spaces between the knots, so that water can go through it but fish cannot
pump (n) a machine for making water move
mosquito (n) a fly that drinks blood from people and animals
rope (n) a very strong, thick piece of string for tying things
tank (n) a large container for holding liquid or gas
vulture (n) a large wild bird which eats dead animals
savage (n) an insulting word for somebody from a country where the way of living is simple
scavenger (n) somebody who looks for food and things they can use in places where people have thrown their rubbish

Chapters 6–10

block (n) a large solid piece
chemical (n) a substance made from gas, liquids and metals
clearing (n) a small area in a forest where there are no trees
explode (v) to blow up with a loud noise and break into lots of small pieces
hatch (n) a hole in a wall, with a door that people can go through
shelter (n) a covered place that protects you from bad weather
sled (n) a vehicle usually used for travelling on snow
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Chapter 5
1. Underline the words that are wrong. Write the correct words.
   (a) Jeronimo is on the coast.
   (b) Father tells Mr Haddy that America is a great place to live.
   (c) Father has thrown Mr Haddy over the side of the boat.
   (d) Mother and Mr Haddy catch five fat fish.
   (e) Father doesn’t want to stop at Santa Rosa because it’s not on the map.
   (f) Little Haddy is a pipanto.
   (g) Father is angry that the Zambus speak English.

Chapter 6
1. Work with a partner. Imagine you are Mr and Mrs Maywit. Talk about Father. Who is he? Why has he come? What difference is he going to make to your lives?

Chapter 7
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) How are the children’s daily lives different now from when they lived in Hatfield?
   (b) What do the Maywits do every day now that they didn’t do before?
   (c) Why doesn’t Father want Mr Struss in Jeronimo?
   (d) Why is Father so happy in Jeronimo?

Chapter 8
1. Match these sentence halves. Join (a)–(f) with (i)–(vi).
   (a) People are afraid of Fat Boy
   (b) Father says that everything he makes
   (c) Charlie thinks the inside of Fat Boy
   (d) When the children play
   (e) The children have learned
   (f) The Maywits’ real surname
   (i) to find food and medicine in the natural world.
   (ii) is like the inside of his father’s head.
   (iii) because they think it is magic.
   (iv) they pretend they are back in America.
   (v) is Roper.
   (vi) he copies from nature.
Chapter 9
1 Answer this question.
At the beginning of the chapter, Father says, ‘This is why I came.’ What does he mean?
2 People have lived in the jungle for centuries without ice. Write down reasons why Fat Boy is a good thing for the jungle and reasons why it is a bad thing. Compare your reasons with a partner’s.
3 Why is Father so angry that the people in Seville have already seen ice?

Chapter 10
1 Answer these questions.
(a) Why does Father want to take ice into the mountains?
(b) What mistakes does Father make in his plan?
(c) Why does he refuse to follow Charlie’s advice?
2 Talk with a partner.
(a) Why do the Zambos do what Father says?
(b) ‘He couldn’t control his life here.’ Why couldn’t Father control his life in the jungle?

CHAPTERS 11–16
Chapter 11
1 Choose a verb and put it in the right form to complete the sentences below.
have, can, never see, come back, wash, pack, turn, bring, cannot believe
(a) The women ...................................... clothes but no one is wearing any.
(b) Father thinks these people ...................................... a white man before.
(c) Father can’t believe that the ice ...................................... to water.
(d) He tells the Indians that next time he ...................................... them ice.
(e) He tells the ‘prisoners’ to escape if they ......................................
(f) The ‘prisoners’ ask Father if he ...................................... any guns at Jeronimo.
(g) On the way back Father says the Indians ...................................... the ice that he showed them.
(h) When they get back home, the Maywits ...................................... their bags and go with Mr Struss, the missionary.
(i) Father thinks they ......................................

Chapter 12
1 The white men with their guns arrive at Jeronimo. Why does Charlie understand how the Indians felt when the Foxes first arrived in their village?
2 Why does Father say the men are like mosquitoes?
3 Talk to a partner.
Can you think of a way to make the men leave without killing them? Compare your ideas with another pair’s ideas. Which is the best idea?

Chapter 13
1 Have Allie Fox’s inventions been good or bad for the jungle and the lives of the Indians in Jeronimo?
2 What lie does Allie tell about America? Do you think he really believes it himself?
3 If you were Mother, what would you want to do now?

Chapter 14
Work in pairs. Find things in this chapter that show that Father is going mad.

Chapter 15
Use these words to write a few sentences about the events at Guampu.
large clearing, church, music, TV, Father, lesson, opposite bank of the river, Father, pipanto, Jerry and Charlie, Emily, America, lights, Jerry and Charlie, explosion, the sound of a shot, the pipanto, back down the river

Chapter 16
1 Talk with a partner.
What did Allie Fox do wrong in his life in Honduras?
2 Allie Fox is dead. His family put what is left of his body in the earth. What will Mother say about him when they put his body in the ground? Write down your ideas. Show them to a partner.

Activities after reading the book
1 Talk with a partner.
What good experiences have the Fox children had in Honduras?
2 Work with a partner.
It is five years later. Mother and the children are back in America. You are Charlie and a new friend. Charlie tells his friend about his time in Honduras. Have their conversation.