

The Boat That Would Not Point

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Critical analysis

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 28 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about eight minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

The boat had been in the water eleven days and in that time she had broken Knud's heart twice. Downwind she was glorious. With the ochre-red sail squared off and the fjord running grey ahead of her she had made eight and a half knots past the yard, and Mette had watched the old man on the slipway take his cap off to her. Then they had hauled in and tried to bring her up towards the wind, and the boat had gone sideways across the water like a dropped plank.

Mette had worked on her for two years. She was built from a wreck — nineteen metres of oak lifted out of the mud at a river mouth, drawn, scanned and copied plank for plank: clinker-laid, each plank overlapping the one below, fastened with over two thousand iron rivets that Mette had closed herself with a hammer and a dolly against her knee. The sail was wool, twilled and then smeared with tar and ochre until it would hold a shape in wind. The keel was a single long oak timber, barely deeper below the planking than a man's knee.

That keel was the problem, or the finding, depending on whom you asked. A boat sailing towards the wind is pushed sideways as well as forwards, and what resists the sideways push is whatever hangs down into the water. With almost nothing hanging down, the reconstruction crabbed off to leeward of where she was pointing at an angle that Ingrid — who had sailed square-rigged ships for thirty years and did not guess at numbers — measured against painted marks on the shore at nearly thirty degrees. Thirty degrees of leeway means that to go anywhere upwind you give back most of what you gain.

Knud's reading was that this was the answer, and an important one. The wreck had come out of a river mouth, loaded with quern stones. Perhaps, he said, nobody had ever asked this hull to beat upwind. Perhaps she was a cargo boat for rivers, coasts and the one long run the season's wind would hand you, content to lie at anchor when the wind was wrong — and the shallow keel was not a weakness but a choice, a hull that could be run up any beach and loaded without a harbour anywhere near.

Ingrid's reading was that the boat had told them nothing about the original and a great deal about themselves. Of everything above the waterline, almost nothing had come out of the mud. The shape of the sail was a guess from a carving on a stone. The cloth was a guess. The standing rigging, the sheets, the bracing of the yard, the depth of ballast and the question of how twelve people should move as the boat came about were all guesses, several of them her own. A rig is not timber. It rots, it does not survive, and it is where upwind sailing is won or lost.

What struck Mette, sanding a repair on the eleventh evening, was that the two of them were looking at the same number. Thirty degrees was thirty degrees; nobody disputed the marks on the shore. Knud read the number as a property of the hull, and therefore as evidence about the people who had built her a thousand years ago. Ingrid read it as a property of the yard, and therefore as evidence about the people who had rebuilt her last winter. The hull was the only part either of them could defend with a drawing, and the hull was not the part under suspicion.

They argued it out over the winter and settled nothing, which Ingrid said was the correct result. In March they cut a new sail, narrower and flatter in the belly, and shifted a tonne of ballast aft, and in April the boat came up to twenty-two degrees of leeway and stuck there. Knud said that proved his point: the hull had a floor under it and they had now found it. Ingrid said it proved hers: eight degrees had come out of the sail alone, and nobody could say how many more were still sitting up in the rigging. Mette wrote both numbers in the yard book, with the date.

- 5 Weigh Knud's reading of the thirty degrees against Ingrid's. Which is better supported by what the passage tells you?

- 6 Mette notices that the hull is the only part anyone can defend with a drawing, and that it is not the part under suspicion. Evaluate what that observation implies about reconstruction as a way of finding things out.

- 7 Apply the passage's reasoning to a different case: a team reconstructs an ancient furnace from excavated clay walls and fails to produce usable iron. What should and should not be concluded, and how could the test be improved?

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • She was copied plank for plank from a nineteen-metre oak wreck raised from a river mouth — clinker-laid planking fastened with over two thousand iron rivets, a tarred and ochred wool sail, and a keel barely deeper than a man's knee. She made eight and a half knots downwind, and nearly thirty degrees of leeway when sailing towards the wind, later reduced to twenty-two.
- ☐ 2 • Because the parts that decide upwind sailing are the parts that did not survive. The hull was copied from real timber, but the sail's shape and cloth, the rigging, the bracing of the yard, the ballast and the crew's handling were all reconstructed from guesswork — some of it hers. A test can only measure what you actually built, so a bad result points first at the invented components, not at a design nobody has seen working.
- ☐ 3 • A crab moves sideways while facing another way, so crabbing describes a boat travelling noticeably across her own heading — pointing at one place and arriving somewhere further down the wind. Leeward is the direction the wind is going, so she was being shoved steadily away from what she was aiming at. The image also carries something clumsy and faintly comic, which matches the earlier comparison with a dropped plank.
- ☐ 4 • Even-handedly and with a dry affection for both. Each is given a genuinely strong case in their own idiom — Knud's historical imagination about beaches and quern stones, Ingrid's refusal to guess at numbers — and neither is mocked. The final paragraph lets them both claim the same result, which is quietly comic but not dismissive, and Ingrid's remark that settling nothing is “the correct result” is left standing without comment. Mette writing both numbers in the yard book suggests the writer regards the unresolved record, rather than a verdict, as the honest outcome.
- ☐ 5 • Ingrid's is better supported, though Knud's is not unreasonable. The decisive evidence is the March experiment: changing only the sail and the ballast — two reconstructed components — removed eight of the thirty degrees. That demonstrates directly that a substantial part of the figure belonged to the yard rather than to the hull, and since the rigging and crew drill were left untouched, nothing rules out more of the same. Knud's case rests on a real observation, that the keel is genuinely shallow and was genuinely copied from surviving timber, and on circumstantial support from the river mouth and the quern stones. But a hull cannot be judged in isolation from the rig that drives it, and his reading asks a measurement taken on invented equipment to speak for the original builders' intentions.
- ☐ 6 • It implies that a reconstruction tests a mixture, and that the mixture is weighted the wrong way round. What survives burial is heavy and wooden — hull, keel, fastenings — and that is also the part about which there is least doubt, so the reconstruction contributes little new knowledge there. What decides performance is light, fibrous and perishable, and therefore both absent from the record and unconstrained by it. A sea trial produces a single number that fuses the known and the invented, and the number cannot be unmixed. That does not make the method worthless: it narrows the field, since the March change showed which degrees were negotiable, and it exposes guesses by making them do work. But its results are properly reported as claims about one particular reconstruction, not as findings about the original.
- ☐ 7 • The parallel is close. The excavated walls correspond to the hull — the durable, well-attested part — while the variables that actually decide the outcome are the perishable or invisible ones: the charcoal, the ore's preparation, the air supply, the temperature held and for how long, and above all the smelter's judgement, none of which survive. A failed smelt therefore shows that this combination does not work, not that the original furnace could not make iron. The improvement

follows the method the boatyard stumbled into: change one invented variable at a time across repeated firings and record what each alters, so the failure is attributed rather than assumed; and report results as statements about the reconstruction. The general principle is that a reconstruction is only evidence about the past to the extent that the part under test is the part that was actually recovered.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

—

QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY **Elaborative interrogation**

After each paragraph, stop and ask yourself why what you have just read is true rather than something else — why does a shallow keel cause leeway, why does a rig not survive? Answer in your own words, out loud or in a line of writing, before you move on. Facts that are tied to a reason are stored with handles on them, and when you come to recall the passage a week later it is the reason you will reach first and the fact you will pull up after it.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

What is something you can do well but have never had to explain to anyone? Try asking yourself why each step of it works, and see where you run out of answer.

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your student read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, tone and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.