Michael’s Flag

Thunder crashed and lightning flashed. Great waves rose up and struck Michael’s small rowboat again and again. His eyes squeezed shut against the slapping waves, clinging to the edges of the boat for dear life, Michael bobbed about in the sea feeling no more significant than a twig. Then, the worst happened. One swell rose up and tossed both Michael and the rowboat up into the air, and when they came back down, they weren’t connected anymore.

He must have passed out, because the next thing Michael knew, he woke with the sun in his face. He looked around in a panic. He was bobbing about in the water, his head held above the turbulent surface by the orange life preserver around his neck. He had a headache, and he was very, very thirsty. He looked around to see if he could see his boat, but in every direction there was only blue-green sea, shifting foam, and diving birds.

Which way was land? Why couldn’t he see it? The storm couldn’t have pushed him that far out to sea, could it? He was too exhausted, and too dehydrated, to cry. He just hung there in the water, idly kicking his legs and sweeping his arms in front of him over and over again, like he was treading water.

Then something bumped against his leg. Michael froze. He held his breath. A moment later, a grey fin surface, and Michael suddenly remembered that sharks were attracted to thrashing in the water. He remained still, his heart slamming in his chest, his pulse so fast that he was sure that he must be vibrating, as the shark circled around and around him. It took every bit of his willpower not to thrash and scream for help. But there is no one to help, he reminded himself. And it I remind that shark that he could eat me, then I will die.

It felt like hours—it felt like days—before the shark finally lost interest in him and swam, slowly again. Finally Michael could breathe again, but he did not try to swim. My only hope is to just float here and hope that someone sees me, he thought to himself. His parents would be worried when he didn’t come home. Help would come, he was sure of it. It was only a matter of time.

Michael dozed a little, but was awakened by something scratching his face. He opened his eyes, and saw that a plastic shopping bag had drifted into him. He pulled it off of his face. It was white. He held onto the bag. After that, he started looking for things drifting past him on the surface of the ocean. He found a piece of driftwood, about four feet long and narrow, and grabbed it. It was too small for him to hang on to, but he had an idea. He pulled long fronds of seaweed from the water and used it like a rope to tie the white plastic bag to the driftwood. When it felt secure, he hoisted the wood up into a vertical position. The wind caught his plastic bag and blew it out suddenly. A distant boat or a helicopter may not see me, he thought to himself, but maybe they will see my flag.

Michael was asleep again when he heard the sound of a motor. He looked up to find two men in a boat, idling next to him. His makeshift flag was still standing upright between the back of his head and his life jacket, where he had wedged it in.

“You saved your own life, boy,” one of the men said to Michael as he helped him into the boat. “If it hadn’t been for that flag of yours, we never would have found you!”
**The Big Fish**

Jonah worked in the galley of a pirate ship. It was one of the worst jobs you could have on a pirate ship, but being on the ship was better than not being on the ship, and Jonah was out to make his fortune. The Geraldine had sunk only two days before, and somewhere at the bottom of the ocean which even now was lapping against the outside of the galley walls, a chest of gold had sunk with it. Jonah wanted to be the one to find it.

All day, every day, the pirates took turns going down in their scuba gear to look for the sunken chest.

“May I take a turn?” Jonah asked.

“You’re not on this ship to hunt for treasure,” the Captain told him. “You are here to catch fish, and to cook our meals. Now back to work with you!”

Jonah took the big fish that he’d just retrieved from his line, and walked dejectedly back down into the galley. For the first time it seemed as though he really may not get a chance to look for the treasure. He took the large fish and slapped it down on the wooden chopping block and cut it open. When he did, his knife made a clinking sound. “Now, what have you got in you?” Michael said out loud to the fish. He pulled the fish open and there, mixed with the other contents of its stomach, was a gold coin! Michael’s breath caught in his throat. “So you were attracted by something shiny, were you?” he said. He had a sudden vision of the chest of gold going down with the ship, not fastened tightly closed, as everyone had assumed, but while open, so that the gold coins had fallen and spread out in a sparkling shower, where perhaps more than one of them had been snatched by big fish like this one who thought they were eating a small, shiny fish.

Jonah’s ship stayed anchored there, over the wreck for a week. Every day while the pirates dived, Jonah set his fishing lines and hauled in fish after fish that he carried down into the kitchen. He found ten more gold coins before the captain decided to give up the search. They pulled up anchor and set off towards a new adventure, and no one but Jonah was the wiser—or the richer.
Compare and Contrast

1. Both of these stories center on something lucky happening to the hero. How does Michael get lucky in Michaels’ Flag? How does Jonah get lucky in The Big Fish?

   Michael

   Jonah

2. Which one of the boys do you think displays the most ingenuity in dealing with his circumstances? Why?

3. In The Big Fish, the ship’s captain tells Jonah that he’s not there to hunt for treasure, but to catch fish. How does Jonah manage to do both? Do you think he does the right thing in keeping his discovery a secret? Why or why not?