

***Shark Beneath the Reef***  
*Chapter Synopses*

## Chapter 1 Synopsis - "A Round Black Eye"

We are introduced to Tomás Torres, a fourteen year old boy who lives with his mother, grandparents, uncle, aunt, and orphaned relative, Maria, in Loreto, a fishing village on the peninsula of Baja in Mexico. Tomás' father was killed while shark fishing. In the opening chapter we learn that Tomás is a daydreamer, often imagining struggles between good and evil, which will become an important theme in the book. We learn that Tomás is facing an important decision. He is nearing the end of his mandated school career and must decide whether to continue with his schooling and become a marine biologist or enter the family shark fishing business.

As the book opens, Tomás imagines himself killing a whale shark that he believes tore one of the family's fishing nets. Tomás pictures himself carrying the huge whale shark through the streets of Loreto. He believes that the townspeople will be impressed with his triumph over what he believes to be evil, the whale shark.

The author, Jean Craighead George, includes information about ocean ecosystems throughout the novel. In this chapter, facts about the whale shark are woven into the story line. We also learn about the culture of the people as the Spanish and Indian heritage of the Mexican people is discussed and explored through history and legend.

The *oficiales*, government officials, are discussed by Tomás, Miguel, and Ramon. The author leads us to conclude that the people of the village do not respect the *oficiales* but are somewhat fearful of their power. On the day the book opens, the people hear that the *oficiales* will make an appearance. Rather than encounter them, Grandfather grudgingly gives Tomás permission to climb the nearby

volcano. As the chapter closes, Tomás looks forward to finding the Spanish ship which people say is atop the volcano. In fact, Tomás believes he can see the billowing sails of this legendary ship when he looks at the mountain.

## **Chapter 2 Synopsis - "A Black Cross In The Sky"**

As the chapter opens, Tomás is explaining to his uncle that the coloring of the pelicans is an indicator of breeding stage. He also has a conversation with his grandfather about the lack of fish catch that has been made lately. We learn that there are Japanese fishing boats off the coast. The *oficiales* allow these foreign factory boats to fish off the coast because they pay money for the privilege. The ocean food chain and its effect on the local economy are discussed by Tomás, Ramon, and Miguel.

As his grandfather and uncle leave to fish, Tomás worries about the family's finances and again imagines a struggle between good and evil. He puts these thoughts aside as he prepares to climb the volcano and find the Spanish galleon that local legend says is resting at its top. As Tomás climbs the mountain, he muses about the geologic history, wildlife, and vegetation of the Baja Mountain range. The heat is intense and the going rough, but Tomás is determined to succeed as he believes the ship of gold is the answer to his family's economic problems.

When Tomás reaches the crater and peers in, he is sorely disappointed to find no trace of a ship. He digs around, hoping to find this legendary galleon, but finally must give up. As he does, a lone frigatebird flies above and appears to be the black cross mentioned in the chapter's title. Tomás believes this to be an omen of

"dark things to come."

### **Chapter 3 Synopsis - "The Reef Sends A Warning"**

When Tomás reaches the bottom of the volcano, he decides not to tell his Uncle Miguel that the ship is merely a legend. He sits at the edge of the reef, watching and thinking about the magnificent sea life around him. Tomás picks up a heavy rock and dives into this beautiful world. The author gives accurate and picturesque descriptions of the living reef. As Tomás explores, he believes he sees a whale shark, although he cannot see the distinctive head shape and markings in the dark cavern. Despite this, and the fact that the smaller fish have all disappeared which we learn is an indicator that a killer shark is nearby, Tomás refuses to heed the warning signals that this may not be a whale shark.

Just then he hears the Evinrude motor signaling that his grandfather and uncle are returning. They have caught a baby hammerhead shark which pleases them as it will bring extra pesos for Christmas. The author gives the reader much information about the appearance and habits of various sharks through the thoughts and conversation of the three men. Miguel and Tomás are surprised when Ramon says that he does not want to fish tomorrow. He believes the fishing is bad and their time is better spent preparing for the Christmas celebration. Tomás imagines the three of them carrying the huge whale shark into the plaza. He hopes that his grandfather's discouragement will disappear when he learns this huge catch is nearby. As the chapter closes, Tomás wonders if the whale shark is nonexistent like the galleon or the *oficiales* who didn't arrive that day.

### **Chapter 4 Synopsis - "Griselda"**

It is the next afternoon and the threesome are heading from the island fishing base

back to Loreto. As he gazes into the Shallows, Tomás thinks about the habits of sharks and again dreams of catching the huge whale shark. He sees a beautiful ray of sunlight reflected in the windows of the mission bell tower and believes this good omen cancels the black cross he saw earlier. The trio passes the sportfishing boats owned by Victorio, and Tomás thinks about his niece, Griselda. She is from Mexico City and is quite homesick for the busy life she left behind. Tomás remembers the way he tried to cheer her with his stories of the Spanish galleon and whale shark.

Finally the boat, the *ponga*, reaches shore. They ask Zoro, "the fox", to help them pull the *ponga* above the high tide mark. He obliges and asks the three if they had encountered the *oficiales*. Again, we have the impression that these government officials are feared yet command no respect. Tomás enters his village and sees the many preparations for the two week Christmas celebration. He hears a firecracker and knows immediately that his friend José has set it off. José's dream is to make beautiful fireworks.

Tomás is met by five year old Maria as he enters his grandfather's casa. The women have been busy with the Christmas preparations, and Maria is anxious to share these with Tomás. As the family gathers, the world of the *oficiales*, poor fish supply, and wholesalers who don't pay enough for shark fins seems far away. Tomás goes to bed but rather than sleep, he reads a book about sharks that his teacher had lent him.

## Chapter 5 Synopsis - "Ships and Sharks and Factory Boats"

This is a chapter of contrasts. Tomás awakens to his alarm clock - a crowing rooster. We follow him as he goes about his morning routine preparing to go to the island to spear fish. He learns his uncle has already left with the boat and his grandfather's aching legs had kept him awake last night. This bothers Tomás as he does not like to think about sickness.

As Tomás crosses the village to find a ride to the island, he detours long enough to cut himself a five foot length of palo blanco tree for a fishing spear. He pauses to look in the window of Stereolandia, a store that he believes is representative of the United States. But Tomás realizes the items in this store are unobtainable and the place next door with the clay floors and clothes hanging from poles and lines is more to his liking. They seem to represent the two neighboring countries of Mexico and the United States - so close yet so different.

Tomás continues on his quest to find a way to the island. He whittles his spear and waits near the fishing camp of Victorio which caters to foreign sportfishermen. Tomás hopes to see a familiar guide and ask for a ride to the island. He does not see anyone he knows, but as he is leaving, Tomás is startled to realize that his friend Griselda has been pushing the boats from shore. He is afraid she would be embarrassed knowing he saw her doing man's work, but Griselda spots Tomás and calls to him. He is surprised with the comfort she feels. He recognizes that Griselda's family is wealthy and powerful. The surroundings of the fishing camp are another contrast to the Mexico that Tomás knows. Griselda tells Tomás that her uncle has been working with Mexican government officials to get the Japanese fishing boats moved from the Sea of Cortez. Tomás is surprised to hear that this is the news the *oficiales* will bring to Loreto. As he prepares to leave, Griselda asks

him about his schooling decision. She encourages him to go to school as this is his only way out of the "pit" as she describes Loreto. This, again, is a contrast to Tomás's feelings toward his hometown.

## **Chapter 6 Synopsis - "The Whizbang Flare"**

Tomás excitedly runs home to share the good news with his family about the departure of the Japanese fishing boats. He finds his grandfather, feeling better, watering the banana tree. Ramon's reaction is one of great relief, and this feeling is echoed by the rest of the family. Wanting to share the good news, the group heads to the beach where they discover others have heard the joyous announcement. The explosion of firecrackers, set off by Tomás's friend, José, seems to confirm the government's new policy. José tells Tomás that in honor of the occasion, he will set off a whizbang, a large firecracker he made with the help of his uncle who works in a fireworks factory on the mainland. This is José's dream - to make truly spectacular fireworks.

The two friends return to José's house to look at the materials that are stored in a private area they have built. Tomás warns José to be careful as this is dangerous work. José agrees as he knows the power of the gunpowder. During this conversation, we also learn that José's family are fishermen, too. They use gill nets, a practice frowned upon by the Torreses, to catch fine eating fish.

The boys return to the beach where this is an atmosphere of celebration. The people feel that better economic times will return now that the Japanese will not be in the area. As night falls, José sets off his whizbang. This is greeted with astonishment by the crowd. A group of boys lifts José to their shoulders and

carries him through the cheering crowd. Tomás feels good that his friend's dream is alive, and he thinks about the day he, too, will be paraded through the village with his big shark.

### **Chapter 7 Synopsis - "Under the Overhang"**

On the morning after the big feast celebrating the departure of the factory boats, Tomás decides that the day has come to go after the whale shark. As he prepares to leave, he looks at his mother and thinks about the kind of woman she is. He reflects on how hard she constantly works. These thoughts lead him to question the politics and government of Mexico. The struggle between good and evil seem reflected in Tomás's thoughts as he equates the government with Tezcatlipocas, and the families and Lady of Guadalupe with modern Quetzalcoatl. In fact, he thinks of his father and realizes that he sometimes mixes him up with Quetzalcoatl.

Tomás's thoughts return to the present, and he sees that his grandfather is ready to leave. As the three walk, Tomás thinks about José's victory with the whizbang of the previous night. He thinks that José's father is right, and José should continue with his schooling so that he can learn more about pyrotechnics. This leads him to ponder the decision that he must soon make.

As they approach the beach, Tomás sees José's uncle, Diaz. This man, who used to be a black coral diver, is Tomás's living hero. Uncle Diaz has marvelous stories to tell about his days in the undersea world before the harvesting of black coral was banned. He can no longer hold a job and now spends most of his time drinking tequila. Tomás decides to ask him if he can borrow his diving mask to use on his quest for the whale shark. Uncle Diaz gets up to get it, but we realize he now lives in his own world and Tomás must continue on without the mask.

After Ramon and Miguel leave, Tomás finishes his chores and then begins his underwater hunt for the whale shark. He sees many beautiful sights and enjoys watching the world beneath the sea that teems with varied and colorful sights. Finally, Tomás sees a grouper that he would like to kill to bring back to his mother as it is her favorite fish. He struggles with the grouper and almost runs out of air before it finally dies. Just as Tomás prepares to leave, he spots the shark. But Tomás only gets a dim look and does not see the characteristics that would warn him that this is not a docile whale shark.

### **Chapter 8 Synopsis - "A Warning From a Fish and a Bird"**

Tomás continues his personal fishing expedition in this chapter. He wants to catch a spiny lobster as this is his grandmother's favorite food. He muses about the ocean food chain and when he finds a dead grebe that had obviously been attacked by a shark, he realizes that big sharks could be returning to the Shallows. The reader learns about the operation of a shark's jaw through Tomás's thought process. The young man also rethinks his plan to spear the shark, and realizes after the battle with the grouper that he would need to snag it with a large shark hook and pull him in. As Tomás reflects on the habits of the vultures who quickly arrive for the carcass of the grebe, he spots a strange boat heading for the island. He fears it is the *oficiales* and sits in the shadows so as not to be seen.

The white boat leaves and Tomás returns to his tasks. But soon Zoro and his son, Jesús arrive in their fishing boat. They ask Tomás if he has seen the *oficiales*. He tells them that he believes the white boat went north. Zoro seems pleased with this information and tells Tomás that they are checking gill nets. The importance of the

ocean food chain is again apparent as the fine nets used by Zoro kill all the fish, even those that are too small. When Tomás looks at Zoro's son, Jesús, who left school to become a fisherman, he is reminded of the decision he is facing regarding his future. This brings him to the thought that he should begin his fishing career immediately with the shark.

Tomás fashions a hook and line and stands at the end of the reef. From this vantage point he can see the fin of the shark but its head is under the overhang. Tomás observes that the shark has a wound and rejoices as this means that the shark is weak and will be easier to take. As the chapter closes, Tomás has hooked the shark. It tries to swim forward, and the battle begins.

### **Chapter 9 Synopsis - "*Oficiales*"**

Tomás holds on to the line as the great shark swims forward. After an hour, he feels the fish stop fighting. Then the shark gives a final tug, and Tomás's dream swims off. Had Tomás looked back at the sea, he would have seen the fins of a hammerhead rather than a whale shark. Tomás does manage to spear a red snapper but when he goes to add it to the rope that holds the grouper, he discovers his fish is gone! He wonders about the monster that could have done this, but, again, misses the clues that would have warned him of a hammerhead shark.

Ramon and Miguel return from fishing with a disappointing catch. After eating, the three relax for the evening by discussing the *oficiales*. Ramon observes that the *oficiales* ought to check not just the nets, but the shrimp boats as well. Miguel responds that the wealthier shrimp industry has money to bribe the government so

they will be left alone.

In the morning, Tomás helps Ramon repair the torn net and feels grown up because he is able to be a partner with his grandfather and uncle in the business. After the net is set, Tomás reflects on the beauty and spiritual dimension of a fisherman's life.

Soon after Zoro and his son arrive to tell the Torreses that the *oficiales* are in the vicinity, the government boat pulls up on the island. The two stern government representatives tell Ramon and Miguel that they are there for the government's tourism business. They explain that Loreto is being developed as a tourist center, and the family can only fish from the island if they pay rent. They are also told to stop filleting fish in the cove as the smell would offend tourists. They tell the Torreses that Victorio and others want to stop all commercial fishing in the area as they want more fish to be available for the wealthy sportfishermen who make up their business. The *oficiales* tell Ramon he can come to the office after Christmas to pay his rent. After the men leave, the Torreses stand on the beach feeling the fear in the air. It is not possible for them to pay rent. Tomás searches for a solution, but his grandfather hugs him and tells him to go to high school.

## **Chapter 10 Synopsis - "The Return of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca"**

When the Torreses arrive home, Tomás spots Uncle Diaz who now stands steadily. He obviously hasn't been drinking. He hands his diving mask to Tomás and tells him that he will dive with him and help him kill the whale shark. Both Tomás and Uncle Diaz have beautiful visions of this adventure which they plan for Christmas Day. This will solve the problem of the rent money for the island. José

greet Tomás and tells him that he has made a Roman candle and will set it off that evening after the pageant.

Full of plans, Tomás returns to his family to find that the American tradition of giving gifts has been adopted by his family. There are three gifts: one for Maria and two for Tomás. While this pleases Tomás, he feels a greater pleasure in the knowledge that he will soon give a gift to his family - the whale shark which will preserve their way of life.

Tomás dresses in his best and sets off to the plaza with José. Tomás notices for the first time that the actors who made him feel such fear in the past, are, in fact, ordinary people from the town. Griselda and her aunt arrive and talk with Tomás. Barbara tells Tomás that her husband, Victorio, would like Ramon to work for him as a sportfishing guide. Tomás immediately dismisses this notion as he is proud of his family's commitment to fishing for food rather than sport.

The pageant begins and Tomás is fascinated with the battle that ensues between good and evil. Characters are tempted by the devil, but the Quetzalcoatl figure guides them to make the correct decisions.

After the pageant Tomás talks with his teacher, Juan Fuertes, who had played the part of the hermit tempted by two devils. He asks Tomás if he has made his decision about school. Tomás replies that he must help his family. Juan Fuertes reminds Tomás of the famous scientists whose work had excited Tomás. He tells him that Mexico needs talented young people like Tomás to study the land and waters so they can be preserved. He tells Tomás that they will talk after the holidays.

As this conversation is ending, a huge explosion lights up the square. It is José's

Roman candle. The crowd cheers and José is carried through the plaza by the soccer team. Tomás notes to his teacher that the play is right and that good does win over evil. He promises Juan Fuertes that he will talk with him after he gets the whale shark for his grandfather.

## **Chapter 11 Synopsis - "Three Gifts"**

Tomás wanders through the celebrating crowd thinking about the symbolism he has just witnessed in the pageant. He tells himself that good will prevail but then quickly wonders which one is good. This is a question that Tomás will struggle with again in the future. He soon finds José who is elated with his success. Victorio joins the duo and asks José to work for him making fireworks for the tourists. He encourages José to take his offer as he can start to work immediately and won't have to struggle to find the money to pay for chemicals. Turning to Tomás, José asks for his advice. Tomás replies that it is dangerous work and that he may not learn how to make the elaborate fireworks if he doesn't learn from his uncle.

José is enjoying the attention his success has brought him and Tomás wanders off, with the ringing of his teacher's voice in his ears. He hopes that tomorrow's dive with Uncle Diaz will provide him with some answers.

The next morning the Torres family awakens to enjoy the Christmas celebration together. After Maria opens the beautiful doll that is her present, Tomás opens his first package. In it he finds a tackle box. His mother had given this remnant of his father's life to him. Tomás believes that this signals his mother's wish that he follow in his father's footsteps and become a fisherman. The other package is from his grandfather. It contains a new pair of pants for school. Ramon's wish for his

grandson is also apparent.

After the family enjoys Christmas dinner together, Tomás manages to get away for his planned adventure with Uncle Diaz. He wants so much to present the whale shark to his grandfather. When Tomás arrives at the appointed spot, Uncle Diaz is nowhere to be seen. He waits and watches, and finally comes to the realization that Uncle Diaz is not coming. He checks with José and learns that his uncle went to town. José has been working on his fireworks but does not have the necessary materials. Tomás reminds him of Victorio's offer, but José shrugs it off and notes that he probably didn't mean it. Tomás, thinking of his planned adventure with Uncle Diaz, agrees saying, "People are funny that way."

### **Chapter 12 Synopsis - "Have You Come For Me?"**

The day after Christmas, Ramon, Miguel, and Tomás walk to the government offices. As Tomás waits in the square for his grandfather and uncle, he looks at the bust of Benito Juarez, a president of Mexico in the mid 1800's, and thinks of all that this man did for the poor of his country. Miguel comes out to tell Tomás that the line for the permits is long and sends him home to cheer the women.

The family knows the situation is grim and this is apparent when Francisca tells her son that she may go to work. This upsets Tomás as he feels this is not something his own mother should have to do.

Tomás decides the time has come to go after the whale shark. As he walks down the road, he meets Ramon and Miguel who tell him the outrageous price of the island rent. Tomás is hurt when he hears that the *oficiales* feel their fishing camp is trashy. The men tell Tomás to go to the island to get the shark fins so they can sell them and pay the first month's rent. This is just what Tomás wants to hear, and he

rushes off to the *ponga*.

José catches up with his friend and tells him of his plans to go to the mainland to work with his uncle. He asks Tomás if he has made up his mind about his own future. Tomás tells him that Miguel and his mother want him to become a fisherman but Ramon's wish is for him to continue with his schooling. José advises Tomás to continue with school as he is very smart. Tomás does not answer his friend. They talk about Uncle Diaz, who was found in front of a divers' shop, drunk.

Tomás finally reaches his destination and is surprised when he jumps overboard with the mask. It is as if a whole new world has opened up. Under the water, Tomás can see details and get perspective he never had before. He observes the nuances of sea life that he had only read and heard about in school.

Suddenly a shadow appears. It is the shark. Tomás realizes with horror that it is the dangerous hammerhead! He panics when the shark hits him and then thinks of his father. His thoughts race as he calls out to his dead father. He wonders aloud if this shark has been sent by his father so that they can be together. Then, in fear, he questions why he was spared by the shark and not his father. The shark returns to the boat with his jaws open. Tomás cries for help as the chapter ends.

### **Chapter 13 Synopsis - "Of Sharks and Men"**

As Tomás starts the outboard motor, he finally realizes that the birds have been telling him all along that this is a killer hammerhead shark. He realizes that since he wanted to see a whale shark, this is what he saw. Tomás realizes he must become more practical and not see things only as he wishes to see them. He tries

to assess the best way to get his prize and finally decides on the small fine net that he is sure he can handle by himself. He prepares the chum despite his throbbing thigh. In fact, Tomás seems rather pleased with this bruise the hammerhead left on him. He sets the net and uses Uncle Diaz's mask to give him a clear view of the shark's location. The struggle between good and evil seems to play itself out before Tomás's eyes.

To Tomás's chagrin, Zoro and Jesús appear. He tries to hide what he is doing, but Zoro sees the signs and realizes that Tomás is after a big shark. The conflict between good and evil becomes more real as Zoro argues with Tomás over rights to the prize shark. Zoro insists that he will shoot it, and Tomás struggles for a way to assure that good will be on his side. He promises that if Zoro is sent away and he catches the shark, that he will become a fisherman. The wind symbolizes the difficulty of assessing good from evil as one minute the wind seems to be helpful to Tomás and the next moment it appears to work against him. Tomás struggles with Zoro and his son. But Zoro shoots and it appears he will claim the prize shark. Just as it seems that all is lost, Miguel arrives on the scene. He points out the fact that the shark is caught in the Torres' net. Zoro's resolve disappears and the two depart, leaving Tomás and his uncle to land the shark. Now the wind works with them and they are able to secure the shark, although Tomás points out that the approaching storm means they must stay on the island. Miguel agrees but not because of the storm. He tells Tomás that it will take a long time to butcher the prize. Tomás is suddenly faced with the reality of a fisherman's life. He will not experience the glory of carrying the monster into the plaza, but rather the hard work of preparing the shark for market. Tomás gazes at the powerful mouth of the hammerhead and thinks of his father. As he does this, the jaws open wide. Miguel scolds him and tells him that perhaps he had better go to school.

## Chapter 14 Synopsis - "Pebbles"

Miguel and Tomás must work into the night to save the shark from the storm. Their work finally done, the two warm themselves in the *palapa* and marvel at the way their friend, the thatch palm, not only keeps them dry, but also serves as the foundation of many daily necessities.

In the morning, Miguel tells Tomás that Ramon has decided not to pay the rent. Not only are his legs a problem and the fish disappearing, but he views the rent as bribery. Miguel tells Tomás that he must go to school so that he can use his knowledge to help the local fishermen. Tomás does not want to let go of the only life his family has ever known, and he begs Miguel to become fishing partners with him. Miguel tells him that this is not possible because he took a job with Victorio as a guide. Again Miguel encourages Tomás to go to high school for the good of all the local people. Tomás tells Miguel about the bargain he made to become a fisherman if he could catch the shark. Tomás tells him that he will become a fisherman by himself. As Tomás and Miguel butcher the shark, they talk about the nonexistent ship atop the volcano. Miguel had climbed the volcano when he was fourteen and knew it was not there. They agree, however, that it was a beautiful ship and that they would not want to have missed the dream of it. As the two work, Tomás marvels at the structure of the shark. He hopes that one day his son will go to school and find out how these mysterious creatures came to be.

The next day, they pack all of their belongings for they must not be on the island any longer. As Miguel takes Tomás to see the sea lions, Tomás hopes that he will not be sorry with his bargain and the resulting decision. The animals come into view and, again, Tomás has questions about their habits and habitat.

A young sea lion plays with Miguel and Tomás. Miguel has named the youngster Pebbles. Not only does she entertain them by catching a ball on her nose, but she twirls and spins in a kind of water dance. Miguel tells Tomás that he met this sea lion about a week ago. He asks Tomás if he should bring tourists here to see Pebbles' show. Tomás responds sharply, knowing that she would disappear, too, if her way of life is disturbed. Tomás thinks about the beauty of Pebbles and realizes that she is not a dream. Pebbles is real.

## Chapter 15 Synopsis - "The Teacher"

Tomás and Miguel walk home with the remnants of their fishing lives. Sadness seems to prevail until Tomás shares the news of the big shark with his family. He realizes that this is what is important -family love and not the glory of cheering crowds. The family encourages Tomás to end his fishing career with this success and go to school, but Tomás changes the subject.

The next morning Tomás walks with Miguel to Victorio's hacienda. Tomás realizes that it will be difficult for Miguel to work for someone. He waits outside until he sees Griselda and asks her if she can help get him a job with her uncle. She is irritated with Tomás as she had hoped he would go to school.

Tomás realizes that he must go to see Juan Fuertes and tell him of his decision. Señor Fuertes points out that the most a teacher can do is lead someone to think for themselves. He asks Tomás to recount the story of the shark. In telling his story, Señor helps Tomás to think about the fact that the wind was both hurtful and helpful that day. One can look at the wind's role in various ways just as Tomás could look at the volcano, pageant players, and Uncle Diaz in more than one way. Tomás finally realizes that a fisherman is like this, too. One could think of a fisherman as someone who studies the sea and helps preserve it. He watches Señor Fuertes write "Tomás Torres" on the high school application.