This Book Made Bill Nye the Science Guy

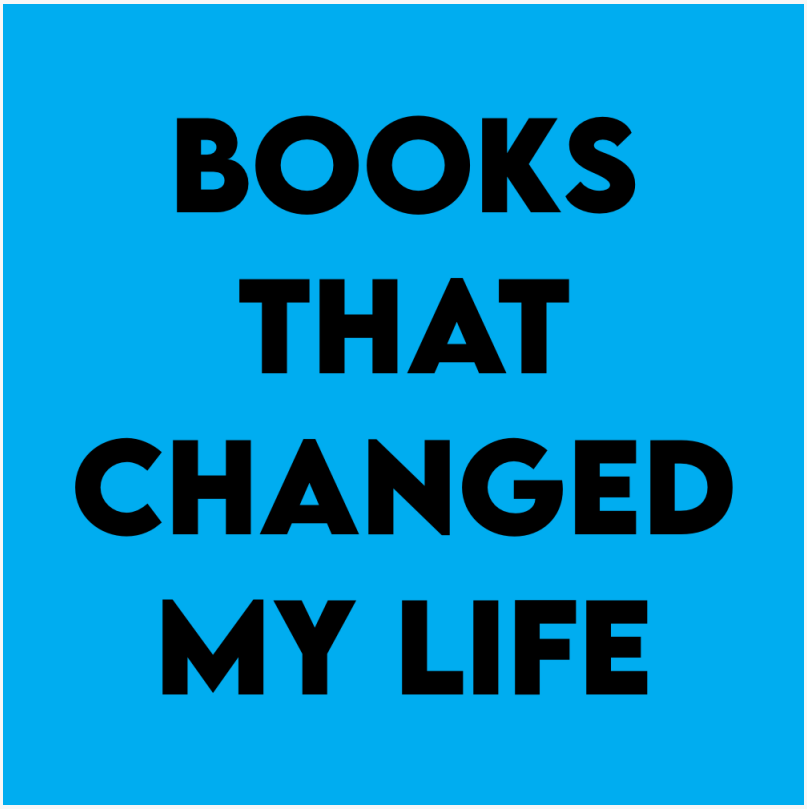
Bill Nye joins Books That Changed My Life to discuss the Newbery Medal-winning novel that set his life's course: "Carry On, Mr. Bowditch."

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, September 24, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- How did Bill Nye become the Science Guy? In a recent appearance on Books That Changed My Life, Nye says the story started in fifth grade, with a book about an indentured servant who taught himself Latin so he could read Newton. Nye joins host Chris Collins to discuss Jean Lee Latham's "Carry On, Mr. Bowditch," the 1956 Newbery Medal winner he says he has read "fifteen, I don't know how many times," and still can't get through without choking up.

Latham's book follows Nathaniel Bowditch, born in 1773 and bound as a boy to a Salem ship chandlery, which Nye clarifies is a "hardware store for your ship." There, between ledgers, Bowditch taught himself Latin, then French, then the celestial navigation that carried him across the trackless ocean, culminating in his magnum opus, The American Practical Navigator. Nye says ships still carry it today. For a fifth grader, Bowditch's self-made story was a blueprint. "It's empowering, man," Nye says. "This guy learned mathematics and pulled



Bill Nye.



Books That Changed My Life.

himself up by his bootstraps. There's an expression in there: he sailed by an ash breeze." The phrase is sailors' slang for rowing a becalmed ship by oar, and Nye took it to heart. "I just thought, that's what I want to do. I want to be successful, and I want to understand astronomy well enough to sail on the trackless ocean." He went on to mechanical engineering school and, by his count, six semesters of calculus. Careful not to draw too direct a parallel between himself and the Salem polymath, Nye remarks, "I do not play in his league, but he certainly inspired me in every way."

Collins points out that Bowditch was also a science educator, and Nye takes it from there. In Latham's telling, Bowditch kept order among rough, brawling crews by teaching them navigation. These were men who had grown up at sea, tying knots and climbing rigging "like crazy," Nye says, yet they couldn't determine where exactly they were. Give them the numbers, and, consequently, the ability to think like a scientist, and they'd become a good crew. "There's a lot to that," Nye says. It's a philosophy he recognizes, and he credits another hero for putting it into words. "There's an old saying, and I heard it many times from Carl Sagan: 'When you're in love, you want to tell the world.' I think that's part of what makes people want to be teachers. You're just so excited about algebra." Nye brought that conviction to his signature show, Bill Nye the Science Guy, handing every staffer a one-page document he called the "Rules of the Road." Nye shares his objective from the 1993 document on air: "Produce a TV show that gets kids and adults excited about science, so that the United States will again be the world leader in technology, innovation and sound management of the environment." Guests were to be treated "as though all the guests are scientists. They just chose to be actors." As for what makes a good teacher, Nye names patience and empathy, and borrows a line from Jack Moro, an aerospace designer and colleague: "Everyone you'll ever meet knows something you don't." What keeps a science teacher going? "You watch the eyebrows go up," Nye says. "It's the best."

For years, Nye has wanted to bring Bowditch's story to the screen. He's pitched it to a number of studios, and in true Los Angeles fashion, he has a screenplay. "I live in Studio City. I live totally in the Valley, and where I live, you have to have a screenplay, or they give you a ticket," he says. "Act one's not bad, act three is good, but act two, same old problem." So why hasn't the movie been made? Nye delivers an answer familiar to those in the film industry: "because it's hard." Collins asks whether Nye would consider narrating a new audiobook adaptation. Nye protests that he'd get choked up, but Collins counters with Bowditch's mantra, repeated throughout Latham's book: "Why not?" Nye relents: "Chris, you had me on the podcast, and you're getting it out of me."

Carry on, Mr. Nye.

Watch the full conversation HERE.

Press Contact: Ryan Oshinsky
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ryan@chriscollinsinc.com
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