

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

Book Information

Gary Paulsen, Hatchet
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Book Level: 5.7
Interest Level: MG

After a plane crash, thirteen-year-old Brian spends 54 days in the wilderness, learning to survive initially with only the aid of a hatchet given to him by his mother, and learning also to survive his parents' divorce.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Margaret A. Edwards Award; Newbery Honor; SLJ Best Book; State Award

Topics: Adventure, Lost/Abandoned; Character Traits, Self Improvement; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 14, 90%; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Power Lessons AR, Grade 5; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club - Kids Reading List

Main Characters

Brian Robeson a thirteen-year-old-boy who finds himself struggling to survive alone in the wilderness of the Canadian north woods

Vocabulary

altimeter a gauge on an airplane that indicates the plane's altitude
amphibious plane a plane equipped with landing gear allowing it to float on water
refracts bends a ray of light as it passes from one medium into another (air to water) distorting the image of an object

stymied frustrated
tinder/kindling dry, easily flammable material used to start fires

Synopsis

Thirteen-year-old Brian is headed north to the oilfields of northern Canada to visit his father for the summer when he must take over the controls of a small aircraft after its pilot has a heart attack. By calling upon all his previous knowledge and innate survival instinct, Brian manages to land the plane in a remote lake.

Alone in the woods, he takes stock of his belongings and creates a shelter, starts a fire, and finds food. Along the way, he "invents" the bow and arrow, builds a fish trap to store live fish, learns to hunt "foolbirds," and manages to become almost a part of his surroundings.

Nearly two months into his adventure, he experiences the unimaginable when he is attacked by a moose and thrown around by a tornado, both on the same day. These events still do not defeat the new Brian Robeson. He realizes he was in the same situation when he entered this environment and that he can regain what he had before.

As he sets out to rebuild his "home," he notices that the wind pulled part of the crashed airplane out of the water. This sparks him to realize that there is a survival pack inside the plane. He builds a raft, pushes it out to the plane and retrieves the pack. Inside he finds numerous items including food, cooking equipment, fishing lures, and a radio transmitter. Unwittingly, he turns on the transmitter before he sets about to cook some his newly found treasure--freeze-dried food. While he is cooking, a seaplane locates him and lands on the lake. Stunned at being found and unsure what to do, he offers to share his food with the pilot. He returns home safely, a permanently changed boy.

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Brian decided to take shelter under a rock overhang and then added walls to keep him safe from wild animals. If Brian had not had this rock cave to use as a shelter, what else could he have used?

He might have used fallen logs stacked in the shape of a teepee, or logs and vines strapped together and tied in trees as a raised floor.

Literary Analysis

Though this story may seem wildly impossible, there have been cases of individuals in similar situations. Can you recall any news stories or other books you may have heard or read that resemble this story?

Students may recall stories from the television shows Rescue 911 or Gilligan's Island, or books such as My Side of the Mountain or Swiss Family Robinson.

Inferential Comprehension

Brian discovered that his experience with the "foolbirds" was similar to that of the early trappers' experiences. What else did he experience that the trappers no doubt also experienced?

Encounters with bears, building crude fish traps, finding wild berries, and being caught in violent natural events (tornadoes, etc.)

Constructing Meaning

When Brian encountered a new plant or animal, he sometimes made up a name for it that described its appearance or actions, such as the foolbird and gut cherries. Can you think of examples of other things that may have been named by using this simple system?

Some possibilities include stinkweed, T-square, swivel chair, etc.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Over the course of the summer, Brian came to know what the northern Canadian wilderness was like. He learned which animals and plants he could eat or use, which animals to watch out for, and generally what the area held that could either harm or help him. Wilderness survival depends on an understanding of one's surroundings. Choose some remote areas of the United States, such as the desert Southwest, a swamp in the Southeast, the mountainous West, or the Midwestern Plains, and research the areas. Attempt to gain an understanding of the area and its natural inhabitants. Be sure to take note of edible and non-edible plant life, predatory animals, animal food sources, terrain, water supply and natural materials that could be used for shelter and/or protection. Prepare a display to be shared with the rest of the class.

Comparing and Contrasting When Brian realized the pilot had died and that he was left alone to land the plane and survive in the wilderness, he often tried to recall what a movie or television character or hero would do in his situation. Generally, though, Brian found that these images and thoughts weren't of much use to him. Think back to some survival or action adventure movies or television shows you may have seen. Compare the situations of the characters in the shows with the reality that Brian faced. Discuss how these differed and why. What could the movie makers have done that would have made the characters' situations more

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realistic?

Extending Meaning Inspired by the words of a former English teacher who always told his students to "stay positive, stay on top of things and get motivated," Brian emptied his pockets and laid the contents in front of him on the ground and then looked at what he was wearing. With this done, Brian began to think about how he could use these things to survive. In small groups, choose one person or several people to empty their pockets or purses and brainstorm ways the items could be used for survival.

Recognizing Details After Brian was rescued and returned to his home, he found that he was so affected by his experience that he could not put it out of his mind. He was intrigued by the plants and animals he came across during the summer, and he set out to research them. Brian located most of these things and found out their names, habits, and other basic traits. Look up the plants and animals Brian encountered and create a scrapbook of what he came across. Include such things as drawings, leaves, and magazine pictures.