

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Brian's Winter

by

Gary Paulsen

Book Information

Gary Paulsen, Brian's Winter
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Book Level: 5.9
Interest Level: MG

Instead of being rescued from a plane crash, as in the author's book *Hatchet*, this story portrays what would have happened to Brian had he been forced to survive a winter in the wilderness with only his survival pack and hatchet.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts; YALSA Top Ten; Young Reader's Choice Award/Nominee

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Disasters, Crashes; Natural Environments, Wilderness; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 7 & Up; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Seasons/ Weather, Winter

Main Characters

Brian Robeson the only principal character of this story, a resourceful, patient, intelligent boy with a respect for nature

David Smallhorn and family Cree Indians who make their living as trappers

Vocabulary

animosity ill will or resentment
flint a hard quartz rock that produces a spark when struck by steel
lance any of various sharp-pointed instruments
maniac a lunatic or madman
stymied frustrated

Synopsis

Brian's Winter is the sequel to another book by Gary Paulsen, titled *Hatchet*. In *Hatchet*, Brian's story centers around a summer survival ordeal. In this book, Paulsen takes the story one step further (at the request of his readers) and answers the question of what Brian would do if he were not rescued before the onset of winter. The background on Brian's plane crash and subsequent stranding in the wilderness is not discussed in this book, except in the author's forward.

Winter poses a completely new set of problems for Brian, enduring cold weather and obtaining food being the most important. Because of these factors, Brian knows he must prepare, but he is often forced to use his resourcefulness on a day-to-day basis, living a little on luck and a little on logic.

Brian has very little to help him survive: merely a pack of meager supplies from the plane that includes a sleeping bag, hatchet, matches, a rifle, and hunting knife. His clothing consists of only a pair of jeans and T-shirt, worn tennis shoes, and ragged socks and underwear.

Brian sets up housekeeping in a shelter formed on three sides by rock, and one side of materials that he winterizes with sticks and mud. He builds a fire inside, fashioning a hole in the "roof," much like a tipi. For clothing, he stitches together first the skins of rabbits, and later the skins of a deer and moose. He makes moccasins out of these skins, also, and is even able to construct functional snowshoes out of branches and strips of animal hide.

In the fall, Brian is content to feed on berries, rabbits, foolbirds, and fish. For winter food, he knows he needs more, as daily hunting is impossible in the cold. His first bit of luck is a partially eaten deer carcass left by wolves. After this is gone, he fashions a spear for himself, and a large bow and set of arrows and is lucky enough to kill a moose, and later a buck. These he skins, cuts up and drags back to his shelter.

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During his tribulations, Brian is also attacked twice by a bear, but he is not severely injured. He seems to have a silent understanding with the wolves, and he even "marks" his territory with urine. Several times, Brian wonders if he is going insane, but he is a realist and continues on his survival quest.

Throughout everything he experiences, we come to understand that Brian has a deep respect for nature. His biggest regret is killing other living creatures, even for his own survival. Brian is often introspective, but we do not gather much information about his past, other than he misses barbecue sauce and Coke.

Finally, on a hunting expedition, Brian comes across a track left by a sled. This he follows to the winter home of the Smallhorns, a Cree Indian family who traps for a living. He is sent home on the next supply plane, regretfully leaving the "home" he has grown to love and knowing that, someday, he will return.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

If we could watch Brian go hunting after his rescue, what might we see?

Brian has a distaste for the hunt, which is in conflict with his love of wilderness living. It is very much the way Native Americans view killing: offering sacrifices to the animal and plant gods in return for their ability to receive nourishment through death. Brian would probably never hunt to kill for sport, but perhaps he would go on a trapping expedition.

Literary Analysis

How does Brian change by the end of the story?

Brian is proud of his accomplishments, and rightly so. In a bit of irony near the end of the story, David Smallhorn asks Brian to show him how to use the bow and arrows. Thus we can say that Brian's sense of self-esteem has grown. He does not doubt himself as much, and by the end of the story, stops questioning his sanity. He reveres nature more than ever and has a special place in his heart for his "winter home."

Inferential Comprehension

Brian knows winter is coming. With his poor chances for survival, why does he choose to stay where he is, rather than make an attempt to walk out of the wilderness?

Obviously, this would make for a different story from the author's point of view, but if we simply look at the character of Brian himself, we know that he is a nature lover and ready for a challenge. Although not stated in the story, Brian must also have had some outdoor experience, perhaps hunting trips with his father or being a Boy Scout. We do not know how far into the Canadian wilderness Brian is. (In fact, in this book, we are not even told that the wilderness is in Canada; this is gleaned from reading about Hatchet in the foreword). On the other hand, perhaps Brian is really more frightened inside than he appears, and moving away from the plane crash location would narrow his chances of rescue.

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Constructing Meaning

How feasible would it actually be for a fourteen-year-old boy to survive in the conditions Brian experiences?

In general, most boys Brian's age would have little chance of surviving. It is obvious that Brian had quite a bit of luck concerning his circumstances: finding the carcass, not being mauled by the bear on two separate occasions, killing the moose almost by accident (which gave him the clothing most necessary to his survival), not being bothered by the wolves, not being killed by the "exploding" tree. However, he is resourceful and determined, making his own garments and even snowshoes.

Comparing and Contrasting

In many ways, Brian's actions and beliefs mirror those of Native American culture, from fashioning simple homemade weapons and clothing, to his reverence for life and his love of nature. To help students better understand this way of life, which most would find difficult to follow, have them research and discuss books dealing with Native American life and customs. Compare this to Brian's experiences. Of special relevance would be comparing his situation to that of teenage Native American boys, whose rites of passage into adulthood often included spending time alone in the wilderness, seeking a "vision quest," or showing their hunting prowess by bringing back food for the village.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting

Brian's list of supplies is meager: clothing ill-suited to the weather, a knife, a rifle that breaks, a hatchet, some matches, fishing line, and a sleeping bag. Discuss how Brian's survival might have been different if he had had even less than that, such as only a knife; or more, such as a tent and an ample food supply from the plane. Make a list of good survival gear to be stowed on a plane heading into the wilderness.

Understanding Characterization

This story is unique in that there is only one character to follow through the course of the book. A good discussion could center around what it is about Brian's character that rivets the reader to the book and makes one want to understand him better. Discuss how the author might have changed the flavor of the book by delving more into Brian's past.

Understanding the Author's Craft

The story is told in the third person by an all-knowing narrator. The book could have been written completely differently by using a diary or journal entry method. Discuss how this could affect the impact of the book. Examples of this would be Brian's own words concerning his ordeal with the bear or an account of the moose dying on top of him after he killed it.