

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Out of the Wilderness

by  
Deb Vanasse

## Book Information

Deb Vanasse, Out of the Wilderness  
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Josh tries to endure living in the Alaskan wilderness with his father and half brother Nathan, but Nathan's uncompromising reverence for nature and its wild creatures causes difficulties that reinforce Josh's determination to return to city life.

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Sons; Natural Environments, Wilderness; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; U.S. States/Regions, Alaska

## Main Characters

Al Harris Nathan and Josh's father, who supports Nathan's eccentric whims

Frank Donaldson a man from Anchorage who brings his children to his uncle's cabin to enjoy the wilderness

Josh Harris the protagonist of the story; an able teenager who longs to live in a city instead of the wilderness

Nathan Harris Al Harris's oldest son, who jeopardizes his life by trying to survive alone in the wilderness

Pete Donaldson Shannon's younger brother, who adores Josh and wants to learn all he can about hunting, trapping, and skating

Shannon Donaldson a teenage girl who shares Nathan's ideals and helps to locate and save Nathan

## Vocabulary

**cowering** shrinking back in fear

**hypothermia** lowering of the body's temperature to an abnormal degree

**jerky** meat cut in strips, dried in the sun, and smoked

**lynx** a wildcat having thick fur and a short tail

**ptarmigan** a grouse having feathered legs and feet

**sow** an adult female bear

## Synopsis

Josh Harris and his father, Al, had moved from city to city as Josh's father tried to locate Josh's missing half brother, Nathan. They found him living in Anchorage, and his father insisted on joining him when Nathan decided to live in the Alaskan wilderness by Willow Creek. Josh is not enthusiastic about the wilderness, and he longs for his life back in the city.

The story opens as the three Harrises are hunting. They come across a bear eating a moose kill, and the bear charges at them. Before Al can get a shot off, Nathan knocks the rifle from his hands. Josh is able to pick the rifle up and shoot the bear seconds before it would have mauled them. Nathan is angry, for he claims to have observed this second-year cub growing up and considers it his brother. He insists he cannot live with his father and brother anymore because of their indiscriminate killing. After dressing the bear, Josh and his father return to their cabin and find Nathan gone.

Nathan chooses to move to the nearby, vacant cabin of an elderly man who had moved back to the city. The arrangement seems to work until the Donaldson family arrives. Frank Donaldson is the nephew of the man who owns the cabin where Nathan is living. He wishes to use his cabin on some weekends and holidays. The Donaldsons stay in the Harrises' cabin on their first visit while Al tries to persuade Nathan to return home. Nathan agrees to leave the Donaldsons' cabin when they are vacationing, but refuses to join Josh and his father in their cabin. Nathan insists on living out-of-doors even though the weather is turning colder. His convictions are getting more extreme and he is getting thinner because he is eating only berries and thin soup.

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Josh suspects that Shannon, Frank's teen-age daughter, knows where Nathan holes up in the woods when the Donaldsons visit. He does not pursue it though, feeling Nathan's eccentric behavior is a burden on the family. Sensing his father's growing concern about Nathan, Josh proposes they give Nathan their cabin and move back to town. As they make preparations for this, a cold spell heightens their worry about Nathan. In spite of the thirty-below temperatures, Nathan has moved into the woods. Fearing for Nathan's safety, they persuade Shannon to lead them to where Nathan is staying. Shannon and Josh find Nathan facing an angry bear who is protecting her den and cubs. She mauls Nathan and goes back to her den. Josh administers first aid to his brother and Nathan is brought to town. Shannon reveals that Nathan was probably living in the bear's den, either as the ultimate test of survival or just to keep warm. Nathan is transferred to a hospital in Anchorage. While Nathan is in surgery, Josh talks with Shannon and is able to acknowledge that, although the wilderness will always be a part of him, he needs to take control of his own life.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Why is Josh resentful towards Nathan?

*Josh's life has had many difficulties. He was asked to be an adult at a young age. He helped his father through a depression after Josh's mother left them and, for many years, was on the road having to readjust his life constantly while his father looked for a son Josh did not even know. Josh understands his father's concern and worry over Nathan, but does not feel that same love for him. When Josh sees how Nathan spurns their concern, he starts to realize he is tired of sacrificing his desires for a brother who is controlling his life through their father.*

### Literary Analysis

How does the author portray teenagers and young adults?

*The author seems to present teenagers as very capable, self-sufficient, and purposeful people. Shannon knows her mind, is willing to try new things, and is able to defend her ideas. Josh is very capable in trapping and in cooking, and he accepts responsibility. Even Nathan, who has gone to an extreme, is shown as scholarly and a person of principle.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why does Nathan entrust Shannon but not his father or Josh with the knowledge of his whereabouts?

*Nathan sees his father and Josh as intrusive. He knows them well enough to know they will not let him risk being truly alone, which is his goal. Nathan feels he found a kindred spirit in Shannon. She respects his personal journey into the wilderness and agrees with many of his principles. She is not threatening to Nathan because she is not around much.*

### Constructing Meaning

What would you miss the most if you had to move to the wilderness and be homeschooled? Why do you think you would miss these things?

*Answers will vary, but might include friends, sports, activities, cultural opportunities, stores, and even school and teachers! Students will miss these things because they are comfortable, convenient, fun, or simply important to their happiness.*

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The Harrises live in a ten-by-twenty-foot log cabin. This area is not much bigger than many modern-day living rooms. Have the students sketch a design for the inside of their own log cabin. The design should include locations of doors and windows, a cooking and eating area, a place to sleep, and the location of

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a wood stove for heat. The sketches could be displayed so that others in the class can see them.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** Both Nathan and Shannon mention Henry David Thoreau as an author who is influential in their lives. Encourage the students to learn about this man and his works. They could write a short biography of Thoreau's life or read and summarize one of his works.

**Recognizing Details** The study of an animal in its environment takes careful observation and study. Josh is able to describe a lot about the lynx just from its footprints. Have the students choose an animal mentioned in *Out of the Wilderness* and study its traits and habitat. Have the students locate as many facts about the animal's habits as they can find. From this study, have the students propose the best way to track the animal for hunting or observational purposes.

**Describing Actions or Events** When the bear mauls Nathan, Josh and Shannon help him. Knowledge of first aid is essential when living in the wilderness far from medical help. The students can be assigned to make up a first aid kit that can be kept in their family car or taken on camping trips. Have them create a checklist of the contents to keep inside the kit so that items can be easily replaced when they run low. Students can also choose an emergency situation and learn the proper first aid protocol if that emergency arises. Some examples are shock, choking, drowning, severe bleeding, stings, and bites.