

Dogsong by Gary Paulsen

Book Information

Gary Paulsen, Dogsong
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Book Level: 5.2
Interest Level: MG

A fourteen-year-old Eskimo boy, who feels assailed by the modernity of his life, takes a 1,400-mile journey by dog sled across ice, tundra, and mountains seeking his own "song" of himself.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 14, 90%; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Sports/Recreation, Extreme

Main Characters

Nancy a pregnant Eskimo woman whose life Russel saves

Oogruk an Eskimo elder who teaches Russel the old ways of the Eskimos

Russel Susskit a young teenage Eskimo boy who yearns to learn the old ways of the Eskimos

Vocabulary

breechclout a piece of clothing that covers a portion of the body below the hips

hallucinate to have mental illusions of visions or sounds that are not really present

lead an area of open water between large ice floes

muktuk fermented whale blubber

musher the human driver of a dog team

umiak an Eskimo water vessel, much like a canoe

Synopsis

Russel Susskit, a teenage Eskimo boy, knows that he is confused about his life but does not

understand why. He knows he likes some of the old Eskimo ways, like eating meat nearly raw, and dislikes some of the new Eskimo ways, like using snowmachines to get around. His father suggests that he go to Oogruk, an elder in the community, for help. Not really sure of what he is seeking, Russel takes his father's advice, and Oogruk becomes his mentor. Russel moves in with Oogruk and begins learning the old ways of the Eskimos. Oogruk teaches him how to drive a sled team, shoot an arrow, and thank his prey for providing food. One day Russel attempts to hunt seal but gets caught in a storm and eventually finds himself stranded on a drifting ice floe. Once he controls his fear, he realizes he should have allowed the dogs to lead the way home. He finally reaches Oogruk's by making an ice bridge out of another floating piece of ice.

A short while later Russel decides to hunt for seal again. Even though he is blind, Oogruk says he will come along. When the two get out of sight of the village and within a few miles of the sea, Oogruk tells Russel to leave him by the sea and to not return home. Oogruk instructs Russel to run with the dogs to discover what the dogs can help him become. Confused and sad, Russel does as he is told. Russel leaves Oogruk on the ice, but returns thinking he can still save Oogruk. He finds he is too late; Oogruk has died. Now Russel sets off with the dogs to run as far as he can with no specific destination in mind.

Russel and the dogs run for days and finally stop when they find deer to hunt. He takes the hides to make a sleeping bag and the meat to feed himself and the dogs. When Russel finally rests, he finds himself in a dream about a great hunter. The hunter, who turns out to be Russel himself, manages to slay a woolly mammoth for himself and his starving family using an old Eskimo hunting technique. Briefly the man celebrates his success with people in a nearby village. As the hunter is returning home, he is caught in a fierce storm which delays his return so long that when he reaches home he finds his wife and children are gone, probably eaten by animals. All that remains of his home is the torn hides on poles and a lamp stone.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Dogsong

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Russel has this dream over the course of a number of days. During this time he finds an ancient lamp stone and also rescues a pregnant young woman from freezing. The woman has run away from her community out of shame for not being married; she is near death. Russel slowly nurses her back to health. After a time, however, the two run out of food. Though reluctant to leave the woman, Russel sets out on his great hunt.

After travelling for many days, Russel encounters a polar bear. He recalls how the hunter in his dream slayed the mammoth. Using this same ancient technique, he kills the bear. He feeds himself and the starving dog team and then returns with some meat to the woman, who is nearly dead. Russel feeds the woman, who then goes into labor prematurely. The baby is born dead and Russel takes it out to bury in the snow. Overwhelmed by sadness, Russel returns to the shelter to find the woman doing poorly. Day by day she looks sicker and sicker until finally Russel decides to take her to find the nearest village. The two set out for the northern shores where Russel believes he will find a settlement. As this trip concludes, Russel learns that he has become one with his dog team and that his "song" involves his dogs.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

When Russel decides to use Oogruk's clothes and sled, he notices that they are well taken care of and in good shape. What had Oogruk done to take care of them? What does this show about Oogruk?

He oiled them and kept them protected from the harsh elements of the outdoors when he was not using them. He had also patched them when they needed it. This shows that these items were very important to Oogruk, and he chose to take care of them even after he was too old to use them.

Literary Analysis

Early in the book the narrator mentions some of the ways the government and missionaries affected the traditional Eskimo way of life. What are some of the things these people brought into the Eskimo culture? Did these items help or harm the Eskimo people?

Until missionaries and government agents came into their environment, Eskimos did not have snow machines, televisions, "government houses," manufactured clothes, electricity, Jesus, diesel fuel, rose print tablecloths, magazines, rubber shoe pacs, or wood stoves. Some of the items, such as the snow machines, made life easier for the Eskimo people. The drawback was that the changes caused the people to forget their own culture and made them dependent on the missionaries and government for their survival.

Inferential Comprehension

When Russel wants the dogs to take him back to the village after he is caught in the snowstorm, the dogs are very reluctant to go. They know that Russel has them headed in the wrong direction. What can the reader infer from this situation?

Animals seem to have a natural sense of direction, but much of it can be explained by their excellent sense of smell, sight, and hearing. The dogs may have been able to catch a faint smell of sea water leading them to head the other way. They may also have heard something that indicates which way to go. Russel learns half of a dog's instincts can be trusted when his own fail.

Constructing Meaning

Russel's father advises him to listen to Oogruk's song since it would never lie. What does he mean? Why won't his song lie?

As Oogruk later explains to Russel, a song is not something a person has but rather something a person is. Therefore, a person's song cannot lie because a song must be lived, and not created or made-up. People's stories about themselves or the past can become jumbled or forgotten with age, but their song always remains the same.

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someone or something else.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft The main idea of this story, as the title suggests, is about Russel learning that his song includes dogs. He has to take a long hard, trip in order to realize this, but in the end he understands that the dog team makes his life complete. Therefore, his song centers on the dogs. Though most students may be too young to really know themselves and their futures, they most likely know what activities and hobbies they enjoy doing. Have the students study Russel's song and then think about themselves. Have them write what they believe would be their own song.

Comparing and Contrasting After reading this story, the reader can determine that the "old ways" of the Eskimos are very similar to the old ways of many cultures around the world. Have the students recall some of the traditions that are revealed in this book and then research at least two other indigenous American cultures for comparison. They should begin to see that many cultures had great respect for their elders, used animal skins and natural products to make all that they needed, had to hunt for their food, and retold stories of the past, especially for the sake of the young members.

Describing Actions or Events Have the students experience and understand the difficulty of what Russel undertakes on his run. Organize an outdoor survival day. In northern climates try to arrange for this in winter so it would be most similar to what Russel experienced. Some of the activities to include would be making a lean-to, shooting a bow and arrow, starting a fire without matches, and perhaps riding a dog sled if you can find someone to invite who has a dog team.

Responding to Literature When Russel is learning to ride the sled, he realizes that riding requires him to fit into the sled more than control the sled. He also learns to trust his animals and not to always try to control them. Ask the students to share an experience they had in which they realized they had to learn to give up control to