

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Far North

by

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Book Information

Will Hobbs, Far North
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Gabe Rogers and his roommate from boarding school find themselves stranded in Canada's Northwest Territories and need to learn to depend on each other for survival.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Society of School Libr. International Best/Honor; Spur Award/Finalist; YALSA Top Ten

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Main Characters

Gabe Rogers a high school boy from Texas who travels to the Northwest Territories, where he becomes stranded in the wilderness

Johnny Raven an elderly Indian, whose life-long experience in the wilderness helps him and the boys while they are stranded

Raymond Providence an Indian boy and Gabe's boarding school roommate, who also becomes stranded

Vocabulary

Canucks nickname for Canadians

Chinook warm, temporary, and unpredictable winds that blow off the ocean and suddenly warm the air in the dead of winter

Dene the native people of Canada's Northwest Territories

potlatch a ceremonial gathering to honor a person or event, characterized by feasting and lavish gift giving

the hammer a term used to describe the cold and darkness that descend upon the Arctic North in winter with the force of a sledge hammer

winter road a road, impassable in summer, that can only be traveled when the swamps and rivers are frozen

Synopsis

Gabe Rogers attends a boarding school in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada, in order to be closer to his father and to get to know the North. When he joins a young bush pilot, Clint, to fly to Nahanni Butte for the scenery, he discovers that his Dene, or Indian, roommate, Raymond Providence, is leaving school and returning home. The final member of the party is Raymond's elderly great-uncle, Johnny Raven, who is returning to Nahanni Butte following a hospital stay.

Clint offers to fly the party over the spectacular Virginia Falls of the Nahanni River as an unscheduled side trip and does so in spite of his inability to report his changed flight plan. Due to a series of circumstances, the plane is lost, Clint goes over the falls, and the three remaining travelers are stranded deep in the wilderness with few supplies and winter fast approaching.

Fortunately for the boys, Johnny Raven is an experienced wilderness survivor and hunter. Johnny teaches the boys how to make camp, trap, gather food, and generally make due with the resources around them. Early in the adventure, however, Gabe convinces Raymond, against Johnny's advice, to attempt to raft down the Nahanni River. After almost losing Johnny to the river, the attempt is finally foiled by the rapidly freezing river in a valley recognized by Johnny as Deadmen Valley. Johnny locates an old trapper's cabin in which the three settle.

As Johnny predicted, there is little game in the

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valley, and the one moose Johnny does see escapes. Johnny and Raymond believe that by leaving moose meat behind near the falls, Johnny had lost his "moose medicine" and would not be "lucky" with moose again.

As food is running low, Johnny demonstrates that animals will "sometimes give up their lives for hunters" as the three harvest a family of beavers. Shortly thereafter, Johnny dies, but not before passing his strong "raven medicine" on to Raymond.

Gabe and Raymond attempt to walk out on the frozen river, but come to impassable open water. They attempt to cross the mountains, are aided in finding food by a raven, and are then led back to Deadmen Valley by an injured moose. Following encounters with a grizzly bear and a stretch of very cold weather, they make another attempt on the frozen river. With Raymond unable to walk, Gabe pulls him out on a toboggan, a trip of about one hundred miles.

During a potlatch for Johnny Raven, Raymond shares the story with his people. It becomes clear that it is important for all to know both the old ways and "white man's" ways in order to preserve the spirit and philosophy of the Dene people.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

In the early part of this story, events occur that lead to other events from which there is no return until Gabe, Raymond, and Johnny are forced to face nature directly. List several of these critical events that lead to the actual beginning of their adventure.

Clint decides to take a side trip; he is unable to make radio contact; he decides to land above the falls; the plane stalls and won't start; the plane breaks free with Clint on board.

Literary Analysis

Throughout this story the author "hints" of things to come. This is called foreshadowing. Identify instances of foreshadowing used in *Far North*.

Early in the story, Gabe mentions that Clint would be dead, and he would watch it happen. Johnny's observation that Rabbitkettle was a bad omen signaled the trouble when they landed. When the raven "spoke" at night, the reader could predict that their first attempt to walk out would not succeed. Johnny and Raymond's discomfort with leaving moose meat behind warned of trouble finding meat. This was further reinforced when Gabe lost the meat in the river.

Inferential Comprehension

Gabe and Raymond came from very different backgrounds, yet shared certain characteristics that allowed them to cooperate. Identify some of these characteristics.

Both were strong and athletic and liked to be active. Both were willing to listen to other points of view. Neither was inclined to complain about his circumstance. Both willingly accepted responsibility for their own mistakes.

Constructing Meaning

Identify scenes in the story which could be considered "divine intervention" from an Indian's point of view. Try to explain them in the context of your own beliefs or strictly from the perspective of a naturalist.

When the beavers "give their life" for the hunters, it reflects a mutual respect between the animals and Indians. It could also be explained by the fact that the beavers were trapped and had no place else to go to breathe. When Johnny killed the bear with the spear, it was said that the bear allowed it. The bear was also old, and Johnny was a good hunter. The raven led the boys to the sheep and also announced the presence of the moose. Ravens are everywhere in the Arctic and are very vocal. They warn each other of movement in the woods.

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Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Two specific characteristics of the setting are emphasized in this story: first, the landscape, including the climate, and second, the long history of the Dene people as a part of that landscape. Have the students study and report on the indigenous people of the Northwest Territories in general, or a specific tribe, to verify or expand on adaptations these people have made to survive in this harsh environment.

Comparing and Contrasting Initially, Gabe wanted to fight with the wilderness and overcome or escape from it. Johnny, on the other hand, tried to fit in with it and work with what it offered. Have students identify a situation in their lives where, after a struggle, they were able to adapt to the terms the situation offered (for example: a move to a new school, a difficult class, new neighbors). Have them write an essay on their experience or an experience they might imagine that fits this description.

Recognizing Feelings Each of the boys in this story believed at times that they would not survive. Sometimes they relied on Johnny, sometimes on each other, and sometimes on memories of lessons from loved ones for inspiration to go on. Tell students to imagine themselves in a moment of desperation. To whom would they turn? On whom would they depend? Have them write out a brief scenario, either from their own experience or imagined, in which they ask for and receive support. Have them discuss it with someone they trust.

Responding to Literature The key to survival for Raymond and Gabe was in the knowledge and experience carried to this adventure by Johnny Raven. Though much of his knowledge came from his own experience, he learned it in the context of his elders, their stories, and the history of his people. Ask students what they know about their parents', grandparents', and great-grandparents' experience that has made an impact on who they are. Have students interview several of their relatives or members of the

community who represent different generations. They should ask the people about their experiences and what they learned from them. Then have them write a short report on what they discovered.