

## The River

by  
Gary Paulsen

### Book Information

Gary Paulsen, The River  
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Book Level: 5.5  
Interest Level: MG

Because of his success surviving alone in the wilderness for 54 days, fifteen-year-old Brian, profoundly changed by his time in the wild, is asked to undergo a similar experience to help scientists learn more about the psychology of survival.

**Award:** Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Science, Psychology

### Main Characters

Brian Robeson a fifteen-year-old boy who had previously survived for 54 days alone in the Canadian wilderness

Derek Holtzer a psychologist for a government survival school

### Vocabulary

**coma** deep unconsciousness caused by disease or injury

**externalize** to bring out; to talk about causes outside the self

**hallucination** a perception of objects that are not real, usually brought on by a disorder of the nervous system

**submerged** covered over by water

**tinder** extremely flammable substance to be used as kindling

Brian Robeson is just getting over being a celebrity for surviving alone for almost two months in the Canadian wilderness when he is visited by three men from a government survival school. Derek Holtzer, a psychologist, wants Brian to go into the wilderness with him so that he can document what a person must do to survive. Brian is not sure he wants to go back and relive this experience, and it is not until Derek convinces him he will be helping others that Brian and his mother agree.

On the plane, Brian remembers the earlier plane ride when the pilot died and the plane crashed into the wilderness. Brian realizes something is bothering him and when they arrive at the designated lake, Brian tells Derek they cannot keep the survival equipment if they truly want to learn to survive. The plane takes off leaving Brian and Derek with only the radio and a briefcase containing paper, a pen, and a map.

The two begin by trying to make a shelter and fire, and everything seems much easier than the first time Brian was in the woods. Just as before, Brian needs luck to help him. Brian falls down an eroded bank only to discover flint and a place for their shelter. Things are going too smoothly for Brian, and Derek says the situation lacks "tension." The tension quickly arrives, though, in the form of a severe thunderstorm. While reaching for the radio, Derek is struck by a lightning bolt. It stuns Brian and burns out the radio. The next morning, Brian wakes to find Derek lying on his side, eyes opened, but unconscious. He waits beside Derek all through the following night, finally realizing that he is more than unconscious -- Derek is in a coma.

Brian weighs his two options. He can remain at the lake and risk Derek dying from dehydration, or he can make a raft and float down the river to a trading post shown on the map. His luck holds out when he finds trees downed by beavers. He builds a raft by lashing them together with sticks and strips cut from his jacket. The hardest part is getting the unconscious Derek onto the raft.

The river has many twists in it and Brian realizes

### Synopsis

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

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that it is taking much longer than he figured. Exhausted, Brian falls asleep on the raft and, when he awakes on a strange lake not appearing on the map, Brian starts to second guess his decision. The river straightens out, the current becomes stronger, and Brian is feeling better about their chances of reaching help until he hears a rumbling noise. The raft is heading toward rapids with large boulders capable of smashing it, and there is nothing Brian can do. Brian is thrown into the water, hitting his head on a rock. When he comes to, he is near shore, but the raft is nowhere in sight. He attempts to walk in the shallow water but when it becomes impossible, Brian decides he must try swimming. Weak and aching, he uses the current to help him float. Finally, rounding a bend he spots the raft with Derek still tied on board.

The next few hours are a blur, but Brian finds himself paddling the raft once again. After what seems an eternity, Brian hears the sound of a dog and sees help in the form of a young boy near a dock. The final chapter takes place seven months afterward. Brian receives a present from Derek -- a canoe called "THE RAFT" -- with a note telling him that the next time it will not be so hard to paddle.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

Why do you think Brian keeps talking to Derek when he is in a coma and cannot respond?

*Talking out loud helps Brian think out the situation even though he knows Derek cannot answer. He remembers that sometimes people in comas can hear, and he wants Derek to know he is working on helping him.*

#### Literary Analysis

Why do you think Brian refers to his previous last experience in the woods as "the Time"? Why does the author keep repeating it in the book?

*"The Time" is repeated as a concise way to illustrate the significance of Brian's adaptation to the wilderness. His overall experience of surviving in the wilderness cannot be called a camping trip or just an airplane crash. It was the entire experience in the first book, Hatchet, that the author is trying to make the reader understand. By using just those simple words, the author shows that the experience is as important and eternal to him as time.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Derek tells Brian that he was "right to leave all that [the supplies] in the plane -- absolutely right." The author then says "Later, when everything changed and he did not think there was hope, that statement was all that kept Brian going." How do you think this statement helps Brian?

*Students may respond that Derek has confidence in Brian and his decisions. If Derek believes in Brian, then Brian should believe in himself. Also Brian had made it once before when things were bad, and he can do it again. Brian should remain confident in his own decisions because he does not make them without thinking about all the consequences.*

#### Constructing Meaning

At times when Brian is going down the river, it is almost like he is fighting with another person. How has the author made the river seem like it is alive?

*The bends in the river cause problems and will not cooperate with Brian. The water bucks the raft like a rodeo horse. It pushes him under the water as if it is purposely trying to kill him. At other times the river seems like a friend, softly floating the raft downstream. It seems to make Brian think everything is okay, but then causes another problem for him.*

### Teachable Skills

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**Recognizing Setting** Brian and Derek are left on a lake in Canada. Let students research the Canadian wilderness to find out what type of weather, animals, and foods someone might encounter if they were in the same situation. Have the students make posters on their findings.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** Lightning is powerful. Have students research lightning and people who have lived after being hit by lightning. Discuss the dangers of lightning and what factors caused Derek to be struck. Contact a local television station or weather reporting station to see if a meteorologist can talk to the class about lightning and thunder storms.

**Describing Actions or Events** Building a raft without tools was no easy task for Brian. Have students build rafts using small sticks or other similar objects, pieces of grass, or small strips of cloth. If possible, make a water course with bends and have students attempt to "steer" their rafts by blowing to get them to the end of the course.

**Responding to Literature** Derek Holtzer and his two friends are from a government survival school used to train downed pilots, astronauts, and soldiers. Have students get into groups and discuss some of the various scenarios in which these people might find themselves having to survive. Examples would be astronauts stranded on another planet, soldiers caught behind enemy lines, or a small plane crashing in the desert, wilderness, or ocean. Groups could present their ideas to the others including what two items would they want along with them and why.