

Brian's Return

by Gary Paulsen

After Brian returns from the Canadian wilderness, he finds he can no longer relate to home, the kids at school, or even the noise of his former life. Only by going back to the woods can he find and follow his medicine.

THEMES

wilderness, survival, problem-solving, animals, spirituality

Young Listener Unabridged Audio

I. PRE-TEACHING

A. Have the class define and discuss these terms:

circular, teeming, carnivorous, velocity, savage, semblance, solitude, incessant, static, aloof, perplexed, cobalt, transfixed, ionosphere, hibernating, insulator, meticulously, portages, anorak, droning, gurus, terrain, radically, concept, titanium, sutures, billowing, painstaking, nocturnal, meandering, tranquil, diorama, lagoon, canopy, foresight, marooned, deluge, embankment, wincing, castigating, kerosene, puncture, disinfectant, keening, illusion, momentum, dusk, fainted, ambled, detriment

B. Before beginning the story, discuss the following questions with the class:

1. Have you ever camped out? In what way is camping out different from being at home?
2. Do you sometimes feel that no one understands you? What would you like to tell someone so they would understand? Who do you think would best understand how you feel?
3. In what ways do native peoples live differently from us? What would you like about the way they live? What wouldn't you like?
4. How do you feel about hunting? Why do some people consider hunting for sport wrong?

II. PRESENTATION

A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Chapters 1 - 6: What bothers Brian most about being back in civilization? Why does he beat Carl so savagely? Why is he sent to counseling? Describe Caleb. What does Brian tell Caleb? How had he learned about mouse towns? What keeps Brian from going crazy after that? How does The List help him? Describe his bow. How does talking with Caleb help? What does Caleb tell Brian about going back to the woods?
2. Advance to Chapters 7 - 12 : Why is Brian's mother against his going back? How does he feel when he gets to the dock? What does he eat that night? Where does he sleep? Why does he have a soft spot for skunks?

Why do the two fishermen say Brian is lucky? How does he justify taking modern equipment? Why does he like moccasins better than hiking boots? What precautions does he take with his gear in the canoe? What happens? How does he bear-proof the camp? In what ways do the woods "come alive" at night? How does he feel on the lake that day?

3. Complete the story with Chapters 13 - Author's Note: Describe the storm. What happens to the tent? How does Brian manage to sort out what's happened? What is the most important thing to remember about living in the wilderness? How does reading Shakespeare affect him? Why doesn't he kill the buck? What does Billy say is wrong about hunting with guns? What does he say about the buck Brian saw? What has Billy left for him? How does Brian feel when he stands up to the bear? What has the bear taught him? What does he dream that night? What does the dream mean? Why does he decide not to go to the Smallhorns? According to Gary Paulsen, what happens to someone possessed by the wilderness? Where is he finding the wild now?

B. For Discussion:

1. Why does Brian hate hunting and fishing magazines and video games? How does he justify the hunting he himself does?
2. In what specific ways has Brian been changed by his time in the wilderness? Why can he no longer relate to his former life?
3. What does Brian mean when he says he hasn't conquered nature, but nature has conquered him?
4. When Brian says he needs to go back, Caleb asks him if he is "running away from" or "running to" something. Which do you feel it is? Why?
5. What would you say was the main lesson Brian learns when he returns to the woods?
6. Brian feels that meeting Billy was like meeting himself years from now. Why does he like this notion?

III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

A. Language Arts:

1. Have students choose a chapter that begins with Brian's letter to Caleb and finish the letter based on what happens in the chapter.
2. Have students sit alone and watch a sunset or a sunrise, then write a poem about what they have seen and how it makes them feel.
3. Have students listen to chapter endings, such as Chapter Ten when the deer jumps into the canoe. How do the chapter endings make the reader want to go to the next chapter?
4. Have students read a selection from Shakespeare aloud. How does reading Shakespeare's writing aloud help us better understand it?
5. Have students read *Hatchet*, *The River*, *Brian's Winter* and *Brian's Hunt* and discuss how the wilderness eventually defines Brian.

B. Art and Music:

1. Have students select background music that is appropriate to some of the scenes. They might use selections from Gustav Holze's *The Planets* or Respighi's *The Birds* for the scenes in the woods.
2. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They might cut out magazine ads, illustrations from hunting magazines, clothes and other goods sold at malls for one side of the board, then add pictures of a still lake, woods, deer, beavers, and wolves to contrast Brian's two worlds.
3. Have students begin keeping a nature journal including thumbnail sketches of trees, birds, animals and scenes from their world and handwritten notes about what they see and what it makes them think about. A good source for getting started is *Keeping a Nature Journal* by Clare Walker Leslie and Charles E. Roth (North Adams, MA Storey Books).
4. Have students make a medicine necklace like the one Billy leaves for Brian. What animals, birds, or other objects would they put on their own medicine necklace?
5. Have students paint a watercolor picture of the lake as Brian describes it.

C. Social Studies:

1. Brian realizes that the modern world is too noisy. Have students go to a busy street corner and write down everything they hear. Hold a discussion about noise pollution. What can be done to find peace in our noisy world?
2. Have students look through hunting or fishing magazines and write down their feelings, then hold a debate about hunting or fishing for sport.
3. Have students look at a map of northern Canada and find the lakes Brian describes.
4. Brian says that most cities were started by beavers. Have students find out if this is true.

D. Science and Math:

1. Have students listen and discuss what precautions Brian takes in the woods against fire, wild animals, and the weather. Why are these precautions necessary? Have them make a list of equipment they would take on such a trip.
2. Have students learn about mosquitoes and other insects.
3. Have students learn about the animals mentioned in the story, like beaver, deer, bears, moose, hawks, loons, and wolves.
4. Have students find out about the Northern Lights. What causes them? What are some beliefs among native peoples about them?
5. Brian feels he doesn't need to take a compass. Have students learn to use a compass.

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