

Brian's Hunt Study Guide

Brian's Hunt by Gary Paulsen

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Plot Summary

As the story opens, Brian has set out to spend time in the wilderness. He plans to stay mostly by himself but has promised to work on some school work that he'll be tested on when he returns later to the city. Brian is sixteen years old and could have simply dropped out of school at this point but has discovered an incredible thirst for learning. He no longer is satisfied with simply memorizing facts in order to pass a test but now really wants to learn.

Brian's life and thoughts have been shaped by an event two years earlier when he was only fourteen. He'd been the only passenger on a small plane when the pilot died and the plane crashed in the Canadian wilderness. Brian recalls how incredibly inept he was at first as he tried to survive with no tools but a hatchet. He remembers the first time he'd managed to catch a fish and how he'd gradually become self-sufficient in the woods with no other people around. Then he'd been rescued and returned to the city and his parents. But Brian discovered he didn't fit in. The noises upset him and he hated the constant activity. He'd convinced his parents and the school officials to let him have time in the wilderness alone. He wasn't angry at anyone but had decided this is the life he now wants to lead.

Brian is traveling by canoe at a leisurely pace. His ultimate destination is the home of his Cree friends, David and Anna Smallhorn, who are camped on an island at the upper end of a lake shaped like an arrow. One evening David eats his supper on the banks of the lake and then pushes his canoe back into the water where the breeze will help keep the mosquitoes at bay. He's suddenly aware of a noise and discovers it's a dog. David is wary wondering where the dog came from, but soon discovers the dog is seriously injured. He considers possible causes of the wound but none of them make sense. David sews up the dog's wound and she immediately attaches herself to him. He's glad of the company and sets out for the next leg of his journey with the dog in the front of the canoe.

After traveling only a short distance more, David stops and kills a deer, feeding the dog all she can eat in an effort to help her rebuild her strength. He continues to consider the possible causes of her wounds and is suddenly struck with an overwhelming fear for his Cree friends. He rushes the rest of the journey and arrives at their camp to discover the bodies of Anne and David, mauled and partly devoured by a bear. He then finds several other dogs, all killed by the bear. Brian is fearful for the three children of David and Anne and takes time to scout for tracks and signs of what happened. He discovers the oldest daughter, Susan, in a canoe on the opposite shore of the lake, and brings her back. She's exhausted but unhurt and reveals that her younger siblings were visiting family in the city.

Brian buries the bodies and Susan uses a radio to call for help. Officials arrive and take Susan to her relatives but Brian declines the offer of a ride back to civilization. He sets out to find the bear with the help of the dog and soon discovers that the bear is actually

tracking Brian. When they meet, Brian is nearly beaten by the bear until the dog jumps into the fight. Brian is able to kill the bear with arrows.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

As the story opens, Brian is "in his world again." The season is late summer and fall will soon arrive. He is traveling in a canoe with more supplies than he'd had during his previous months in the wilderness. He has some food, including beans and rice along with salt and pepper. He has discovered that he likes tea and has tea and sugar. He also has some items to make his life easier, including a cook set. The items he considers a real luxury are the matches and each time he uses one to make a fire, he remembers his first time alone in the wilderness. He also dreams about how that first time in the wilderness came to be. He'd been the only passenger in a small plane and the pilot had died of a heart attack. The plane had crashed into a lake. Brian knows that he is very different now two years later and that he has matured.

Brian stops to watch some wildlife along the shores of the lake. He notes that most of the animals are not particularly afraid of him while he's in the water. He sees loons and fish. He hears some small animal, probably a squirrel or mouse, and notes that they make a great deal of noise scrambling through the dried leaves on the ground. He sees a moose and considers killing it but knows he can't use all the meat. He isn't willing to waste anything so resists the urge. He has a bow and plenty of arrows.

Brian thinks about his Cree Indian friends. One family includes the parents, David and Anne Smallhorn. They have a daughter named Kay-gwa-daush, or Susan. When David met the family, Susan was away at school. Brian has never met Susan but knows a great deal about her. He's seen her picture and knows her Indian name means "the attempter" because she wasn't afraid to try anything. David is headed to the Smallhorn camp, some thirty miles north of his current location. He plans to go that direction, at least partly because there are people and cities to the south and he wants to avoid that.

In chapter two, Brian travels along slowly, looking for a fish he might take for his supper. He thinks about school and what he's come to understand about learning. He says he once spent a great deal of time memorizing just enough to pass a test and make a good grade but has come to understand the need for studying and actual learning. Brian says he loves his parents but couldn't remain in the city. He says he also couldn't stand the idea of attending traditional classes but wants to continue his education. Toward that end, he has textbooks with him. He's to study on his own over the time he's away and will return to school to take tests to prove what he's learned. Brian says the school officials were flexible on this point because it was obvious he wants to continue his education.

Brian finds a northern in the shallows of the lake and sets out to catch it for his supper. He isn't in a good position so takes a great deal of time to turn the boat and put himself in the right spot. He then uses his bow and arrow to kill the fish. Brian had hoped the fish might float but it gives a few jerks and sinks to the bottom of the lake. He's wearing



only shorts and jumps from the canoe to pick up his fish. He gives thanks for the fish. Brian has learned a great deal about the food he depends on in the wilderness, including that venison is low in nutritional value while rabbit is high, and that uncooked fish is susceptible to botulism. He finds a place on the shore to make a fire.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The coming of age theme is seen in the first pages of the book. Brian remembers the plane crash that put him in the wilderness the first time and says he sometimes dreams about it. However, the dreams have changed over the years because he has aged. Brian points out that when the plane crash occurred, he was fourteen and "new" to the idea that he could survive on his own. At the time, the plane crash had seemed horrific. It no longer seems so horrible as time passes. Brian has also become more capable. In that situation now, Brian would accept his role and would simply step up to do what is necessary. Because he has changed, his dreams have changed.

Though he has never met Susan Smallhorn, Brian is enamored with her. He seems to have something of a crush on her based on her father's description of her and her picture. Brian is sixteen and is naturally at an age to become interested in girls so his interest in Susan isn't unexpected. He will later point out that there is too much emphasis placed on having the "right" girlfriend among the young people in the city but Brian himself has become interested in someone based only on descriptions and on the traits he feels to be important.

Brian always says "thank you" for the animals he kills in order to eat but it's not clear in this book who or what he's thanking. It doesn't seem to be that he's thanking God for providing but seems more likely that he's following the practices of the Indians in thanking the animal.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In chapter three, Brian thinks back to his first days in the wilderness after the plane crash. He'd been sure that he needed shelter and so had stayed in a cave when he should have been moving southward in an effort to find civilization. He knows it would have been incredibly slow because all he had was a hatchet. To start a fire each time he needed to cook a meal using just a rock and the hatchet would have taken time. But on this trip Brian has the luxury of matches, a knife, plenty of arrows, and other tools, as well as a small stone for sharpening his cutting tools. Brian finds a clearing at the edge of the lake and quickly cleans and cooks the fish, eating it all. He then makes tea and drinks the whole pot. Next he checks all his gear, including his tools and his clothing, to be sure everything is as it should be. Brian takes time to fix anything that needs attention, including a seam that needs to be mended. Brian notes that he has winter clothing and a sleeping bag but that it won't be enough to endure a severe winter season. It seems that Brian intends to spend the winter in the wilderness.

Brian then reloads the canoe and pushes off into the middle of the lake so the breeze will keep the mosquitoes at bay. He uses a small anchor to keep the canoe in place and settles down to sleep.

In chapter four, Brian is awakened by a sound but doesn't hear it again once he's fully awake. He strains to listen and eventually hears a whine that sounds like a dog that's begging. Brian is immediately at attention, wondering why a dog would be in the wilderness. He considers that it might be a coyote or fox and takes out his monocular to look at the bank. He misses the animal on his first sweep but as he's looking again he sees a four-legged canine on the bank at the spot where Brian had cooked and eaten his fish earlier. He watches as the animal moves slightly and becomes certain it is a dog. He wonders how a dog came to be in the area and continues to watch. He sees that it's a female and a nondescript breed. Then he sees a spot on her shoulder and realizes she's been wounded. He sees fresh blood and then the dog whines at him again. Brian notes that it's "an asking whine" and he resolutely decides he'll go see what he can do to help her.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The book is the sequel to two others, "Hatchet" and "Brian's Winter." The books are not exactly a series. "Hatchet" is the story of Brian who, at fourteen, is stranded in the wilderness for several months. He learns to survive and begins to develop self-confidence. In that book, Brian is rescued before winter sets in. In "Brian's Winter," Brian isn't rescued before winter sets in and has to learn to survive over the winter season. "The Hunt" could take up after either but there is a reference to a winter Brian spent in the wilderness when he had no supplies for enduring the cold.



Brian is sound asleep when the dog's whine first wakes him. Brian can't initially decide what it is that rouses him from his sleep but he trusts himself that something woke him. This is an example of Brian's emerging self-confidence.

The fact that the dog tracks him down from a great distance is evidence of one of the themes of the book - the relationship between dogs and people. Brian listens to the dog's whine and says it's that whine dog's reserve for communicating with humans. Brian's reaction to the dog is another example of that theme.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

In chapter five, the dog moves toward the canoe, head down, and tail wagging in an obvious gesture of friendship. Brian examines the wound in the dog's side by moonlight and sees that it stretches a foot and a half but is fairly superficial, only breaking the skin and pulling it back somewhat. Brian builds a fire so he can see the wound better. Brian knows the skin will have to be pulled back over the exposed meat and muscle. He has a sewing kit but knows the thread won't be heavy enough for the job. He uses fishing line to thread the needle and wonders if the dog will let him sew her up. He talks soothingly to the dog, hoping to calm her before he begins his work.

He uses water to wash off the exposed muscle. Brian is surprised at how hard it is to get the needle through the dog's skin. He has to pull at the skin to bring it back in place. He continues to talk to the dog and though she whines a few times, she lies still for his work. Brian has to take thirty-two stitches to put the skin back in place. He has a small bottle of disinfectant and uses that to wash the wound.

The dog goes to sleep by the fire and Brian begins to puzzle through the situation. The dog is skinny, obviously not able to hunt for herself and feels the need to be with people. But she's alone and Brian can't figure out why she might have left her humans. Brian comes up with a number of scenarios but can't make any of them fully make sense. Brian knows the dog could have been wounded by an animal or a human but doesn't understand why the dog would have simply walked away from her people. Brian returns to the wound itself and goes through a number of animals that could have inflicted it. He comes down to a bear. Brian decides he'll get some meat for the dog to eat and spend some time searching for the dog's tracks to see if he can figure out where she came from.

In chapter six, Brian has to tie the dog to the canoe to make her stay behind when he goes to hunt. Brian finds little sign of the dog's passing but decides she must have come from the north though he has no idea how far she traveled to find him. Brian finds a snowshoe rabbit and kills it with an arrow. Brian releases the dog once he reaches the camp and guts the rabbit, feeding the dog the entrails. He stretches the skin to dry and puts the rabbit on to cook in his aluminum pot. He catches several small fish, cleans them and adds them to his stew.

Brian removes the stew from the fire to cool and adds green leaves to make smoke to keep the flies and mosquitoes away. He has begun to feel an odd need to move more quickly and decides he'll head out as soon as they've eaten. He begins to think in terms of "family" and knows he'll be taking the dog with him. Brian decides he'll travel north to find the Smallhorns in the hope they can help him figure out where the dog came from. He also hopes he'll have the chance to meet Susan.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Brian has never had a dog. He recalls that his mother has allergies and had said Brian wasn't responsible enough to care for a dog. Brian scoffs now at all those things but it seems reasonable to assume that he wasn't responsible enough prior to his months in the wilderness.

Brian feels uneasy after finding the dog. He can't put his fingers on the cause of his unease but he trusts his instincts. The reader of this story hears only that Brian had encountered a bear during his initial time in the wilderness without learning the details. It seems reasonable to believe that Brian's sense of unease is at least partly because he has dealt with bears before and has a healthy respect for them.

There's another example of the connection between humans and dogs seen after Brian and the dog eat the rabbit and fish stew. The dog leans against Brian, hoping to be petted.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

In chapter seven, Brian wonders if he's going to be able to get the dog into the canoe. He rearranges his gear to make a place for her and lashes everything to the canoe in case the dog causes the craft to tip. The dog waits for Brian to turn the canoe sideways to the bank. He expects to have to pick her up and put her in but she jumps in and takes the vacant seat.

They travel throughout the day. Several times they see moose along the shore. Each time Brian expects the dog to go crazy, barking and alerting the moose to their presence. Each time the dog flattens her ears and looks at Brian. He says it's as if she's asking why he isn't taking the shot.

Brian stops the canoe and ties the dog again at the small clearing where he plans to camp. He then travels a short distance into the woods near another clearing where he hopes to find a deer. He soon finds three and chooses a small buck. He kills it with an arrow. He drags then entire deer back to camp so he can give the heart and liver to the dog. He builds a big fire so he'll have light for skinning and dressing the deer and for cooking their dinner. He puts water on to boil to drink. He tells the dog they'll stop for a day to eat their fill. He notes the dog seems happy at the prospect.

In chapter eight, Brian cooks a great deal of meat, including the tenderloin and the shoulder. He eats a lot and the dog continues to eat until he stops feeding her. He watches as her stomach becomes distended and worries that she's going to break open her stitches. Brian is pleased to have the dog for companionship and vows that he'll never again be without a dog. Brian decides that he'll leave at dawn though he'd planned to spend the day. He is again dealing with the feeling of unease that spurs him to move onward. He travels hard through the first day. He has large pieces of deer meat hanging over the side of the canoe to keep them cool in the water. As the day goes on, he struggles against the dragging meat and finds himself hurrying toward the Cree camp. After pushing for an entire day, he and the dog make camp. At first light, they eat quickly and get the canoe back into the lake.

During the second day of travel, Brian realizes there are hardly any noises from the shore. He finds that he's in the correct lake and discovers the island that's obviously where the Smallhorns are camped. The wind is blowing from the island toward Brian and he realizes he doesn't smell anything from the camp. He knows there would be a fire for cooking if the Smallhorns were still in the camp but he hasn't detected the scent of wood burning. The dog's manner changes. She is up and paying attention. She listens and growls and whines.



Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Brian says the dog acts completely at home in the canoe as she would if she were a Cree camp dog. A notable action that indicates this is seen when they see moose along the shoreline. The dog flattens her ears and doesn't even whimper. She tries to make herself lower in the canoe as would be necessary if she were with a hunter intent on killing a moose. Brian has noted that the animals along the shoreline seem to believe the canoe is nothing more than a log. The dog has obviously been taught to lower herself when they see an animal so her silhouette won't spook the animal. All indications are that the dog has come from a Cree camp and it will later become clear that she did come from the Smallhorn camp.

Brian continues to wonder at the relationship between man and dog. He's quickly dependent on the dog for companionship but he will also come to rely on her for her senses. When she's relaxed, he knows there is no danger imminent and he'll come to trust this fairly quickly. Brian is caught off guard by how quickly he's depending on the dog for companionship. He wonders about the first time man befriended a canine and thinks it probably happened in a cave.



Chapters 9 and 10, and The Hunt

Chapters 9 and 10, and The Hunt Summary

In chapter nine, Brian stops at the shore, where he finds the Smallhorn's cabin but hears no dogs and finds no people. He decides they must have already left for the season. Brian then realizes the door of the cabin is open. Brian steps into the cabin and comes to realize there's a horrible stench like rotting meat. The cabin is in disarray and Brian believes a bear must have broken in, torn up the place, and left food decaying. Then Brian goes to a pile of clothing in the corner and finds the body of David Smallhorn. Brian is horrified at the discovery and is sick, crying out his anguish. Once he's had time to calm down a little, he stops and analyzes the scene. He knows that David must have fought back and that he was trying to reach his gun when the bear attacked him.

Brian then wonders about the rest of the family. He knows David's wife, Anne, should be somewhere nearby. He also knows the three children, including Susan, might have been nearby. Brian sets out to look for them. Brian knows he'll have to return to do what's necessary for David's body but wants to first find out what's happened to the others of the family. He checks the cabin first but finds no other bodies so goes outside.

As soon as Brian is outside he realizes he'd missed a great many signs. There are bear tracks everywhere, especially on the side of the cabin toward the lake. Brian finds the kennel and three dogs dead on their chains. There is a fourth collar and chain and Brian realizes this is where his dog came from. He still doesn't understand why the dog would have left. The natural tendency would be to remain at the camp if Anne, Susan, or the other children were still there and alive. Brian finds measured tracks and follow them to the second body, that of Anne. She was mauled and partially eaten. As he had after finding David's body, Brian knows he'll later bury Anne but now focuses on the need to find the children.

Brian continues to follow the tracks and evaluate the signs. He realizes Susan must have been away from camp in the canoe, picking berries, when the bear attacked. She'd rushed back to the canoe and made it safely away from shore but without paddles. The bear had rambled along the shore, probably trying to reach her as she tried to remain away from the shore. Brian figures that Susan didn't return because she didn't have paddles and couldn't make her way back to shore but fears the bear might have gotten her. He watches the dog and realizes from her relaxed stance that the bear isn't nearby. He returns to his own canoe and sets out in search of Susan.

The dog alerts Brian when they're near Susan's canoe. Brian introduces himself and she starts to tell him about the bear but he stops her, saying that he already knows. Susan doesn't ask about her parents and Brian doesn't offer details. She falls asleep as he tows her canoe back to shore and he allows her that little respite from the reality she'll have to face.



In chapter ten, Brian buries the bodies of Anne and David. Susan says Paul and Laura are in Winnipeg visiting relatives. Susan goes to the graves of her parents and Brian tries to clean up the bloody mess in the cabin before Susan goes inside. She puts the radio back together and calls for help. A Canadian Mountie and a Natural Resources Ranger arrive. Susan says she has an aunt and uncle in Winnipeg that she and her siblings can stay with. The Mountie recognizes Brian as having been in the wilderness the months earlier and offers to take Brian out when they take Susan to her relatives. Brian declines the offer. Brian asks if they'll be hunting down the bear. The Natural Resources officer says they wouldn't be able to determine which bear was responsible.

As Susan prepares to leave, she knows that Brian will be tracking the bear. She pleads with him to be careful and says the bear is a "muckwa," or "devil bear." Brian says he'll see her once this is finished.

In the final chapter, "The Hunt," Brian sets out in search of the bear. The dog accompanies him. Brian knows the bear's tracks are distinctive and follows them without difficulty at first. When he loses the train, he learns to depend on the dog. After awhile, Brian realizes he's probably too far behind the bear to ever catch up. He decides to cut across country in an effort to make up some of the time. Then he realizes the bear is actually tracking him.

The bear attacks without provocation and Brian is caught somewhat off guard. He loses his grip on his bow and believes the bear is going to kill him. The dog jumps on the bear and gives Brian a moment to recover. Brian has an arrow and shoves it deep into the bear's chest. The bear grabs at the shaft and breaks the arrow. Brian hopes to get away while the bear is distracted but the bear is focused on Brian again quickly. Brian shoves another arrow into the bear and the bear lunges at him again. Brian believes he's probably going to die.

When he regains consciousness, the dog is whimpering, licking Brian's face, and pulling at his shirt. He is partially under the bear and manages to pull himself free. He has some injuries but none seem life-threatening. The dog sniffs the bear and, once she's certain it's dead, pees on the bear's leg. Brian builds a fire and sets out to clean the bear.

Chapters 9 and 10, and The Hunt Analysis

Brian knows that he can find the bear that killed Anne and David with little problem. The bear's tracks are distinctive which would be a clear indication as to which one of the hundreds of bears in the area had killed the Shornhorns. However, the officers who arrive at the Shorthorn's camp believe finding the bear would be impossible and deciding which bear was responsible would be equally responsible. Brian notes that the officers have a great many devices at their disposal, including GPS and modern guns. However, because they've come to depend on these things, they are incapable of learning from the wilderness.



Brian's attitude about the bear is that it has gone too far in killing David and Anne. Brian believes the bear has to be killed for that. The fact that the bear hunts Brian once he's away from camp indicates there is a serious problem and that the bear would keep on killing until someone killed it. But Brian's attitude about the bear once it is dead seems a little strange. Brian says he has to use as much of the bear as possible and he sets out to butcher it. It doesn't seem to bother him that the bear ate his friends. He says only that it would equally wrong to leave the bear to go to waste as it was for the bear to kill people.



Characters

Brian

Brian is sixteen and setting off by himself into the wilderness. Brian's background is important to understanding his personality and motivating factors. Two years earlier, when Brian was fourteen, he was in a plane that crashed in the wilderness. Brian spent months alone and when he was reunited with his family and taken back to civilization he found he hated the noise and activity, and that he didn't fit in. Brian thinks about these things as he's back in the wilderness and is thankful his parents and the school officials have allowed him to return to the wilderness. Brian notes that he could have dropped out of school but that he is very interested in learning. He cites the fact that being in the wilderness requires constant learning and says this has given him a thirst for all kinds of learning. He now wants to know about everything and isn't interested in learning something just for the sake of passing a test. Brian is at peace in the wilderness and is careful to be considerate of the world around him. He thanks the animals he kills for providing him a meal and passes up several easy kills because he couldn't use all the meat without letting some of it go to waste. When Brian finds that a bear killed Anne and David, he is determined to kill the bear. He doesn't argue with the officials who say the bear can't possibly be found but simply sets out to kill it.

Susan Smallhorn

Her Indian name is Kay-gwa-daush. She is the daughter of Anne and David Smallhorn. Susan is on the lake when the bear attacks her parents. She's obviously very fast because she manages to make it to the canoe before the bear can kill her as well. Susan survives by using her hands as paddles and keeping the canoe far enough from shore to evade the bear, an indication that she is quick thinking and that she understands nature and life in the wilderness. Susan cries a great deal when she discovers her parents' fate, which would be normal for a girl in her situation. Despite this, she has all the earmarks of a strong character and seems a capable person. Susan has been away at school which also indicates she is smart. When the officials who arrive at the cabin say there's nothing they can do to track down the bear that killed David and Anne, Susan realizes without words that Brian will be going after the bear. Both Susan and Brian know that Brian can find the bear. Her motivation for Brian to kill the bear is not defined but it seems reasonable to believe it could be revenge. Susan does, however, realize the bear is dangerous and that Brian is putting himself in danger by tracking the creature. Susan warns him to be careful and says the bear is more savage than would be expected of a bear.



David Smallhorn

David is the father of Susan. David and his wife Anne are living in a summer camp on a small island at the head of a lake when the bear attacks. David apparently tries to reach his gun but the bear kills him before he can fire.

Anne Smallhorn

The mother of Susan, Anne is apparently outside when the bear attacks. Her body is dragged away by the bear and she is partially eaten.

Brian's parents

They do not appear in this book but Brian refers to them. Brian says he doesn't hate them as it might seem from the fact that he doesn't want to live with them. In fact, he says he loves them and appreciates the fact that they understand his need to be in the wilderness.

Paul

Susan's little brother, Paul is away visiting relatives when the bear attacks occur. Brian is initially worried about him and searches for him until Susan says that he was away.

Laura

Susan's little sister, Laura is away visiting relatives when the bear attacks occur. Brian searches for her until he finds Susan and learns the little girl is away.

The Canadian Mountie

One of the two officials who arrives at the camp after Susan calls them, he offers to take Susan with him on the plane to her relatives in Winnipeg. He recognizes Brian and offers to take him out as well but Brian declines the offer.

The Natural Resources Ranger

One of two officials who arrives at the camp after Susan radios for help, he is obviously not very astute with regard to the wilderness and the animals. Brian asks if the ranger is going to hunt down the bear but he says it would be impossible to tell this bear from some other bear.

The school official

This is the person from the school who understands Brian's desire to learn though Brian can't remain in the traditional classroom setting. This person helps make arrangements for Brian to continue studying while he spends the months in the wilderness.



Objects/Places

Home

This is the wilderness to Brian.

The Northern

This is the fish Brian shoots with an arrow to eat before he finds the dog.

Winnipeg

This is where Susan goes to stay with relatives after the bear kills her parents.

The matches

This is the item Brian has that he considers a luxury.

The bear

This is the animal that kills David and Anne Smallhorn and tries to kill Brian.

The dog

This is the animal Brian finds injured that first alerts him to the fact that there might be bear trouble. She is completely trusting in Brian and he finds himself soon trusting her as well.

Muckwa

This is Devil Bear or the name Susan calls the bear that kills her parents.

The cabin

This is where Brian finds the body of David Smallhorn.

The kennels

This is where Brian finds three dead dogs.

The canoe

This is the craft Brian uses to travel to the Smallhorn camp.



Themes

The Relationship Between Dog and Man

Brian hears a dog whining and is immediately on alert because he knows the dog shouldn't be out here in the woods alone. When he discovers the dog is injured, he doesn't think twice about whether he'll help her but sets out to do what he can to help her begin to heal. Another interesting aspect of this theme is seen in the fact that the dog comes to Brian for help. The dog is lost in the wilderness and injured horribly but instinctively goes toward the one human in the region who happens to be Brian. Another important aspect of this theme is seen in the fact that Brian doesn't consider leaving the dog behind when he sets out to continue his journey. He makes the arrangements he must to accommodate the dog in the canoe and the dog obviously doesn't want to be left behind. While Brian's acceptance of the dog is immediate, he soon realizes this is a bond that he's been missing. While he loves the solitude of the wilderness, he also needs companionship. The dog provides this immediately even before she and Brian have time to form a lasting bond. Brian has never had a dog before which makes this bond instinctive on his part. This bond is seen in another setting later in the book when Brian sets out to hunt down the rogue bear. When he's in danger of being killed by the bear, the dog piles into the fight and helps Brian overcome the bear.

Coming of Age

The coming of age theme is seen clearly in the opening pages of the book but is not nearly as prevalent as the story progresses. As the book opens, the author compares Brian as he is at sixteen to Brian as he was at fourteen. He has aged by two years but has matured much more than that. Brian remembers that he was inexperienced when he found himself first stranded in the Canadian wilderness after a plane crash. He remembers his dependence on shelter. He'd clung to the idea that he needed a place to "live" where he would be protected from the elements and he'd settled into a cave to fill that need. Looking back at it from a distance of two years and a great deal of knowledge, Brian realizes he would have been much better off to have started walking south. At the time, he spent all his energy trying to feed himself. Now he has little trouble finding food and knows how to go about providing meals from the bounty of the wilderness. Another important aspect of this theme, other than Brian's self-confidence, is seen in his desire to learn. Brian says before the plane wreck that left him alone in the wilderness, he'd memorized facts long enough to pass the required tests for school. After the time in the wilderness, he'd come to discover the joy of learning rather than memorizing. He says he now wants to learn and points as an example the information he'd discovered about Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone.



Brian's Connection to Nature

Brian has a deep respect for nature and the animals of the forests. One clear piece of evidence of this theme is seen in Brian's attitude whenever he kills an animal for food. First, he is careful to kill only what he can eat. He has many opportunities to kill large animals while he's traveling north but knows that the majority of the meat would ruin before he could use it. For this reason, he passes up those opportunities. When it's time for his first meal, he kills a fish. It's a large fish but no more than he can eat as this meal. Later when Brian needs to feed both himself and the dog, he kills a rabbit. He doesn't waste anything and even stretches the skin to dry. When he kills the deer, he keeps a large part of the meat tied to the canoe and dangling in the water so it will stay fresh longer. Finally, when Brian kills the bear, he sets out to use as much of it as possible. He says to waste the meat and hide would be wrong. Another example of this theme is seen in Brian's ability to hunt and track. He understands how the animals act and react and so is able to put himself in a position to kill the fish, rabbit, and deer. He is able to follow the clues around the Smallhorn camp and discovers Anne's body by following the clues. He also discovers where Susan has gone and how to find her.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in the third person from Brian's perspective. The perspective is completely limited meaning the reader knows only what Brian knows, thinks, feels, or says. The reader learns a great deal about Brian and how he thinks though Brian doesn't convey these things to the reader. Since they are part of his personal history, the reader becomes privy to this information. For example, the reader learns that Brian has examined his abilities over the past few years and because he has become much more capable, he now remembers the crash of the plane two years earlier as horrific. He knows that his memories of the wreck have changed as he has change. The reader also learns about Brian's attitude toward the wilderness and the animals, partly because of his actions but partly because of the background presented to the reader. Brian spent months in the wilderness after the plane crash and it was during that time that he developed most of his attitudes, including the need to give thanks for any animal he kills in order to eat. The limited perspective would ordinarily mean the reader has to accept the character's words and actions at face value but the fact that Brian's thoughts are presented in the third person makes them more believable. For example, when Brian says he's learned to give thanks to the creatures he kills for food, some readers may question his sincerity. In this case, the limited perspective from third person seems to indicate the author is revealing that information about Brian rather than Brian revealing it about himself.

Setting

The book is set in the Canadian wilderness during somewhat modern times. The story is copyrighted 2003 and it seems reasonable that the story is set around that time. The majority of the story focuses on the wilderness and the connection between Brian and nature. There is a great deal of detail about the overall setting and these seem reasonable for the time and place. The author seems to know about the Canadian wilderness which makes the story more realistic. There are many details included about the setting. For example, he describes how the Inuit Indians catch seals and says the polar bear catches them the same way. There are several distinct settings within the overall setting. The Smallhorn's camp is the most important of these. It's here that Brian discovers the body of David Smallhorn and comes to realize that there's a rogue bear in the wilderness. The time setting is not overly important. Brian mentions that the rangers have equipment such as GPS and radios, and they arrive at the Smallhorn camp by plane. These facts are reasonable to the modern-day setting. The animals are an important part of the setting. The presence of the various animals and their roles in nature and in Brian's life make them vital to the story.



Language and Meaning

The story is only ninety-nine pages in length and is a sequel to two other books by the same author, "Hatchet" and "Brian's Winter." The story can be read as a stand-alone book but the reader who is familiar with Brian and his previous adventures are more likely to get the full effect. The overall tone of the story is one of hope and optimism. There are few words that a reader with an average vocabulary will not understand. The story is very straight forward and the reader is left to guess at little. The scene in which Brian finds the bodies of David and Anne Smallhorn is somewhat grisly and is described with a fair amount of detail. Some readers may find the idea that the bear eats on the body of Anne Smallhorn to be disturbing and may be upset at the description of the decay of David's body. There is an interesting contrast in the way Brian feels about the city and the way he feels about the wilderness. The story begins after Brian has left the city but the reader learns that Brian had hated the priorities of the people in the city, specifically the efforts to have the "right" car, the most money, and the popular girlfriend. Brian openly dislikes the situation in the city and this is the reason he's determined to live in the wilderness. The story moves fairly quickly and the reader looking for a fast resolution will not be disappointed.

Structure

The story is divided into eleven chapters. The first ten chapters are titled only by written number. The chapters vary in length. Chapter three is only six pages while chapter two is eleven pages. Chapter nine is sixteen pages in length. The titles given no clue about the contents of the chapter. The final chapter is titled "The Hunt." The fact that the final chapter is titled whereas the previous chapters are identified only by number makes an impact. An important part of the structure of this book is seen in the afterward. The first four chapters detail Brian's reason for his journey. The fourth chapter is about Brian's first encounter with the dog and the beginning of the mystery of the dog's injuries. Chapters five through eight focus on Brian's bonding with the dog and their trip to the camp of the Shorthorns. Chapters nine and ten detail Brian's arrival at the camp, the discovery of the bodies, and finding Susan. The final chapter is Brian's quest to find the bear and his killing of it. Though the afterward does not include any of the action of the book, the author explains his motivation for writing the book. According to the information in that section, the author has dealt with fans who wanted to know why he chose to write yet another book about Brian.



Quotes

"He'd been in the bush and survived with only a hatchet because he'd begun to try to learn about things that happened to him; basic things, even idiotic things. You eat the gut berries, you throw up. Don't eat the gut berries." (Chapter 2, p. 10).

"He ate the meat from that, he broke the head open and ate the brain and eyes (he had long ago stopped being picky or squeamish), put the bones and carcass back in the lake where the panfish could get at it and set to his gear." (Chapter 3, p. 21).

"And then she turned and Brian saw the shiny spot better and realized that the dog had been wounded in some way, perhaps in a fight, and there was a slash that started just at the top of her right shoulder and went down and back at an angle almost to her rear end." Chapter 4, Page 31

"Like it or not, and he was coming to like it, he now had a family, someone to look after. The dog would need food and more care and that meant he had to hunt, to kill." (Chapter 5, p. 42).

"He pushed the canoe into the shallows, turned it until it was sideways to the bank and turned to get the dog but she jumped in ahead of the cargo and sat down and waited for Brian to get in." (Chapter 7, p. 53).

"He had read somewhere that wolves could eat up to twenty pounds of meat in a single meal and he thought the dog was coming close. She...just...kept...eating." (Chapter 8, p. 60).

"In some way, the dog filled a hole in his life, filled a loneliness he hadn't even known existed, and he wondered if it had always been the same for men; if somewhere back in time in a cave a man took a wolf pup and sat him down and thought, There, my life is better now." (Chapter 8, p. 61).

"They had planes and guns and radios and GPS but in some ways they had no knowledge because they had all the gadgets; they missed the small things because they saw too big." (Chapter 10, p. 87).

"He did not have to hunt the bear any longer. It was hunting him, it could come to him, and it would be soon, soon." (The Hunt, p. 95).

"This bear had come to kill him and he was going to kill him and there wasn't a thing Brian could do about it." (The Hunt, p. 95).

"The dog had walked around the carcass, her hair still up, growling with bared teeth, but when the bear hadn't moved, and was obviously dead, she had moved closer, peed on the bear's leg, back-kicked dirt onto the body and walked away to sit off to the side, licking her left rear leg where she had a small cut." (The Hunt, p. 98).

"He had even hoped that he would feel more. But there was nothing but the loss of his friends. And a dead bear." (The Hunt, p. 98).



Topics for Discussion

What is Brian's attitude about animals? Why does he pass up opportunities to kill a moose for his first meal? What does Brian do each time he kills an animal for food? Why do you think he does this? What does Brian do with the bear he kills? Why?

Describe how Brian comes to have a dog. Describe the connection between Brian and the dog. How do they depend on each other? How do they help each other?

Who is David Smallhorn? Anne Smallhorn? What kind of people are they? What happens to them? Who are Laura and Paul? Where are they when the attack occurs?

Describe the scene Brian encounters at the Smallhorn camp upon his arrival there. What are the clues Brian finds that help him find Susan and figure out what happened to David and Anne?

Who is Susan Smallhorn? What kind of person is she? Why do you believe Brian is so interested in her? What does Susan say to Brian as she's leaving for Winnipeg?

What is the incident in Brian's life that shaped him into the young man he has become? How has he changed in the two years since that incident? What does he say he should have done differently?

Describe Brian. What kind of person is he? What are his strengths and weaknesses? What are his likes and dislikes?