

Hatchet Study Guide

Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

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Plot Summary

Hatchet was written by Gary Paulsen. In this novel, thirteen year old Brian is flying on a bush plane when the pilot suddenly has a heart attack and dies. Brian manages to keep the plane level until it crashes into a lake. Brian survives the crash, but that is just the beginning. Brian must find a way to survive the wilds of the Canadian forest if he ever hopes to be rescued. Hatchet is an adventure story that will take its character from a common city boy to a survivalist in a manner of days.

Brian Robeson is still reeling from his parents' sudden divorce when his mother drives him to a private airport where he is to fly on a bush plane to visit his father in the Canadian oil fields. Brian's mother gives him a hatchet as a parting gift and asks him to try it on his belt. For this reason, the hatchet is still on Brian's belt when he gets on the plane.

As they fly, the pilot shows Brian how to use the controls. Then, suddenly, the pilot becomes ill. It takes Brian a moment to realize the pilot is having a heart attack. Brian is frightened and unsure of what to do. Brian uses the radio to ask for help, but he loses the signal before he can say much. Brian decides to keep the plane steady until it runs out of fuel. Then, he will try to put it down in a lake. When the moment comes, Brian manages to do just that, crashing the plane into the middle of an L-shaped lake.

When Brian recovers from the crash, he climbs out of the lake and begins taking inventory of his situation. He finds a place where he can build a shelter and some berries to eat. After an attack by a porcupine in the middle of the night, Brian figures out how to make a fire and keep animals out of his shelter. Brian later figures out how to catch fish and even begins to move up to killing larger animals, mostly birds.

One night a tornado hits the section of forest where Brian is surviving. The tornado destroys Brian's shelter, and it also turns the plane so that the tail section is sticking out of the water. Brian recalls the survival pack that is in the back of the plane and decides to try to get it. Brian builds a raft and takes it to the plane. Brian peels the metal shell off the plane and makes a hole large enough to climb inside. Brian is able to recover the survival pack and drag it back to his shelter.

Inside the survival bag, Brian finds a great many things such as matches, cooking equipment, and multiple packs of freeze dried food. All of these items will be useful to him. Brian also finds a radio, but he does not understand how it works. So, he sets it aside. While Brian is making his first real meal in months, he hears a motor overhead. Brian is surprised to discover that the radio is an emergency transmitter, and he left it turned on. A trader flying overhead heard the signal and has landed to rescue Brian.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1

Brian is on a bush plane flying to the Canadian oil fields to spend the summer with his father. Brian's parents have recently gotten a divorce, a divorce caused by a secret that only Brian and his mother know, though Brian's mother does not know Brian is aware of it. Brian is angry with his mother, but he struggles to be polite to her. Therefore, when she gave him a hatchet before he left and asked him to put it on his belt, Brian did even though it was somewhat embarrassing.

On the plane, the pilot shows Brian how to use the controls, even allowing him to fly briefly. A short time later, the pilot becomes ill. Brian does not know what to do, so he does nothing. Unfortunately, the pilot has a final excruciating pain that causes him to jerk and in turn jerk the controls of the plane and move them off course. The pilot then becomes silent.

Chapter 2

Brian checks the pilot for a pulse, but cannot find one. Brian turns back to the controls and tries to straighten the plane, which had begun to fly downward. When the plane is steady, Brian tries to decide what to do next. Brian remembers the radio. Brian takes the radio headset from the pilot and tries to contact someone. He hears nothing at first, but then realizes he must take his finger from the controls. Someone answers Brian's call, but before he can get his full message across, he loses the signal.

Brian decides he must allow the plane to continue flying until it runs out of fuel even though he knows he is flying off course and the further he flies the harder it will be for rescue to find him. Brian reviews what he knows about planes, and knows that he must push the nose down when it begins to fall out of the sky to keep the speed up and pull the nose up before he hits ground to slow it.

Analysis

Brian's parents have recently divorced, so he is going on his first court ordered visit to his father. Brian's father has designed a new drilling bit, so he is staying near the Canadian oil fields. For this reason, Brian is traveling on a supply plane with only the pilot. It is a complicated situation that has left Brian full of confusion and anger toward his mother. Brian saw something involving his mother that he refers to as the secret. This secret clearly upsets Brian and he blames it for the divorce and the destruction of his family.



As Brian flies toward Canada, the pilot has a heart attack. Brian does not know how to fly. There is no one else on the plane. Brian suddenly finds himself in a desperate situation that could cause his death. It is a clear indication of Brian's character that he does not immediately panic.

Brian keeps a clear head, showing the reader that he is an exceptionally mature young man. Brian tries to speak to someone on the ground over the radio, but loses the signal before he can figure out how to tell them where he is. After the signal is lost, Brian is completely on his own.

Brian has read a great deal about planes and the pilot taught him a few things during the first part of the flight. For this reason, Brian has a good idea of what he should do when the plane runs out of fuel. Then Brian just has to wait for this to happen. The reader knows a crash will come; the only question is whether Brian knows enough about planes to survive the crash.

Discussion Question 1

What is the secret? Why does Brian refer to it this way? How does this secret make him feel?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Brian traveling on a bush plane? Where is he going? Why? How does he feel about this situation?

Discussion Question 3

Why does it take so long for Brian to realize how to speak on the radio? What happens when he finally contacts someone over the radio? Why is the signal lost? Why does Brian not manage to get anyone else on the radio? What does this mean for his survival?

Vocabulary

Stricken, terror, horror, thrumming, massive, wilderness, roaring, straightened, controls, pressure, pedals, controls, television, forgotten, vibration, momentarily, rudder, burned, beginning, altitude, excitement, windmilling, propeller, transmissions, positioned, procedure, impossible, remember, original, rebelled, simple, dashboard, landing, hopeless, listened, flight, screaming, released, hopeless, kilometers.



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3

Brian frantically studies the ground to find a suitable place to crash the plane. Brian sees an L-shaped lake and decides to try to crash the plane there. Brian moves the nose of the plane up and down, trying to keep the lake in focus. It is a struggle, but Brian manages to crash the plane in the center of the long arm of the lake. Brian frees himself from the seat belt and swims out of the broken windshield and makes it to the side of the lake before he passes out.

Chapter 4

As Brian begins to come to, he has a memory of the day he discovered the secret. When he wakes, Brian discovers that he is in a great deal of pain. Brian moves out of the water and lies on the beach to sleep some more. When he finally wakes, he feels less sore, but now must face the fact that he is alone in the Canadian wilderness. Not only this, but Brian is suddenly attacked by thousands of mosquitoes and flies. In a short time Brian is covered in bites. When the bugs finally go away with the rising heat, he finds some shade under a tree and sleeps again.

Analysis

Brian crashes the plane and survives. This is an amazing feat for a kid with no previous flying experience. Brian manages to get to safety before he passes out. Now the reader must wonder if this is only the beginning of Brian's struggles to survive.

Brian is not badly injured. He has only suffered a cut on his forehead and a great deal of soreness from the stress of the crash. However, the stress and anxiety of the crash cause him to need to sleep more than usual. For this reason, Brian sleeps away his first full day in the wilderness.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Brian want to crash the plane into a lake? How will this make the crash easier? What does Brian do to ensure the plane will fall into water?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Brian have such a hard time with the mosquitoes? What can he do to prevent this in the future? What does this suggest about Brian's chances of success in the wilderness?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Brian sleep so much? What is dangerous about the way in which Brian is sleeping out in the open? What does this suggest about Brian's knowledge of the wilderness?

Vocabulary

Exploded, screaming, spiraling, shattered, concrete, windbreaker, committed, plane, wrenching, momentarily, smashing, knots, rounded, dramatically, frightened, glittering, sudden, slowly, navigate, dizziness, scrunched, special, remembered, divorced, sandstone, mosquitoes, public, channel, absolutely, perfectly, reflection, identify, evergreens, abating, mentioned, naturalists, surroundings.



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5

When Brian wakes again, he is suddenly very thirsty. Brian drinks his fill at the lake, but is sick when he is done. Brian then becomes aware of an insistent hunger, but he has no idea what he might be able to eat. Brian remembers an old English teacher who was always trying to motivate the students. Brian uses one of the teacher's tricks now by taking inventory of everything he has. It turns out he has little more than some money, his hatchet, and himself. Brian becomes overwhelmed with desperation for a moment, but then begins to focus what he can control, not what he cannot.

Chapter 6

Brian explores the area around the lake and finds a natural bowl-shaped impression in the side of a ledge where he decides to make a shelter for himself. As Brian gathers wood to make the shelter, he sees some birds eating berries from a bush. Brian thinks if the birds can eat them, the berries must be safe, so he gorges himself on the berries before picking more to take back to his shelter.

Analysis

Brian has been in the wilderness for nearly a full day. Hunger is beginning to set in. Brian has also come to realize that rescue will probably be a few days, or even weeks, off. For this reason, Brian knows he must find a way to survive on his own. This is a daunting idea, however, and he becomes emotional. However, much to Brian's credit, he gets control of his emotions quickly and begins thinking about what he must do to survive.

Brian begins to work toward survival. He finds a suitable place to make a shelter and begins gathering wood for a door. Brian also finds some berries he can eat. However, in his haste to satisfy his hunger, Brian eats all the berries, those that are ripe and those that are not. This could come back to haunt him. However, Brian has found a source of food, giving hope that he will not die of starvation.

Discussion Question 1

What does Brian have on his person that might help him survive? What can Brian do with these items? What is Brian's first priority?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Brian become emotional? What frightens him the most? What causes Brian to calm down and focus? Is this a good sign for Brian's chances of survival?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Brian want to stay close to the lake? What benefit is there to remain close to the lake?

Vocabulary

Motivated, sloshing, gradually, heartbeat, increase, hatchet, assumed, commercials, tomorrow, background, heavily, flight plan, normal, hunger, airport, formality, abandoned, digital, motion, terrible, crawled, mention, ruefully, stomach, carrying, pouch, drooping, glistening, sunlight, disgust, branches, interlaced, several, undergrowth, sparrows, formed, darkness, noise, pained.



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7

Brian is sick in the night because of the berries he ate. Brian decides it was the unripen berries he ate that made him sick, so he carefully picks those out of the pile he has brought to his shelter before eating more berries for breakfast. Later, Brian goes exploring in the woods and finds raspberries bushes. As Brian is eating and picking the berries, he becomes aware of a large black bear behind him. Brian remains still and the bear eventually leaves. Brian then fills the remnants of his jacket with berries and returns to his shelter. Still shocked by the sight of the bear, Brian sleeps that night with his hatchet near his head.

Chapter 8

Brian wakes in the middle of the night and becomes aware there is an animal in his shelter. Brian throws his hatchet at it, hitting the wall and causing sparks to fall. This frightens the animal and Brian feels something pierce his leg. Brian realizes it was a porcupine and it slapped him with its tail, leaving behind eight quills. Brian carefully removes each of the quills. In a moment of frustration and fear, Brian begins to cry, but soon gets control of himself. Brian falls asleep and dreams of his father and his friend, Terry, trying to tell him something. When he wakes, Brian ponders on this and suddenly realizes what they were trying to say. There is some kind of rock in the wall of his shelter that sparks when struck. Brian realizes he can make fire from it.

Analysis

Brian is sick from the berries he ate, so he knows he must be more careful about what he eats. This causes Brian to go deeper into the woods to find more food, which he does in the form of raspberries. However, there are other creatures in the woods that need to eat. Brian runs into a bear. This alerts both Brian and the reader to the fact that there are many dangers in the woods and Brian must be very careful.

Brian is attacked in his own shelter by a curious porcupine. Brian is injured and this causes him a moment of self-pity. However, Brian quickly pulls himself together and deals with the situation. The following morning, Brian recalls how his hatchet hit against the wall and made sparks. Brian realizes that he can make fire from this. Fire would be a great coup for Brian if he can only make it work.



Discussion Question 1

Why is Brian sick in the night? Why are the birds not sick when eating these berries? What does Brian do about this illness?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Brian begin to cry? What is the cause of his emotional break down? How does he pull himself together? What does this say about Brian's basic character?

Discussion Question 3

What dream does Brian have? What does he realize his dream was trying to tell him? What could this do to help Brian survive?

Vocabulary

Accepted, understood, handle, apparently, rivulets, crushed, convinced, danger, moments, threaten, sturdy, raspberries, twisted, torn, clusters, direction, imbedded, heavily, porcupine, showered, attack, examined, flash, lance, quills, stretched, charcoal, expression, awakening, understand, question, assistance, incorrect.



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9

Brian experiments with different types of fuel for the sparks to ignite. He tries wood, grass, and paper money. Finally he settles on the finely cut bark of a tree. It takes a long time for Brian to get the fire going. Finally, he does.

Chapter 10

Brian discovers the fire keeps animals out of his shelter and keeps the mosquitoes away. For this reason, he must keep it going twenty-four hours a day. Brian collects a large amount of firewood to keep handy. However, the first night the fire nearly goes out as Brian is sleeping.

One night, Brian hears a noise outside his shelter. The next morning he discovers that a turtle has laid eggs in the ground near his shelter. Brian digs them up and eats half of them before deciding to save the rest for later.

Analysis

Brian makes fire. Fire is an important element that will help Brian survive in many different ways. Brian discovers the many uses of fire and becomes obsessed with keeping it going. Brian is afraid to leave it for too long in fear that it will go out. This gives Brian something to do and keeps his mind off of his hunger. Therefore, it is a good thing.

A turtle lays eggs near Brian's shelter. Brian has been living on nothing but berries for more than a week by this time, so the discovery of the eggs is a wonderful thing. However, Brian is concerned about eating the eggs raw and takes his time about eating the first one. After that, he eats several because they are much heartier than what he has been eating and leaves him more satisfied.

Discussion Question 1

How does Brian discover he can make fire? What does he use to make the fire? What does he find that will burn best? Why is it important for Brian to have fire? Why does he work so hard at the fire? Will it help him with the type of animal attack he suffered the night before? Explain.



Discussion Question 2

What is the difference between an accomplishment like Brian has done with the fire and lighting a fire with a match? How does Brian feel when he is done? What does this say about his character and his situation?

Discussion Question 3

What does Brian do with his days? How does he stay busy? How is this different from the life he would probably be living with his dad?

Vocabulary

Consuming, wonder, squatted, kindling, science, intense, strikes, fallen, brightest, waterfall, depression, smolder, rained, Cro-Magnon, wondered, forgot, searchers, leathery, surprisingly, gulp, reached, demanded, convulsed, roaring, easier, scraping, carefully, perfectly, awakened, tracks, understand, change, knowledge.



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11

Brian becomes aware that he has begun to change. His body has slimmed down, and he now hears things where before he would not have. His survival instincts have gotten stronger. Brian is determined to survive and to survive he has to find another source of food. While standing in the lake, Brian sees all the fish and decides that if he had a spear, he might be able to catch some.

Chapter 12

The spear Brian has made to catch fish does not work. Brian decides he needs a bow and arrow. As Brian gathers wood to make the bow and arrow, he hears an engine overhead. Brian rushes back to his shelter where he has previously prepared a signal fire on the ledge above. However, by the time he reaches the signal fire, the plane is already gone. Brian sinks into a feeling of helplessness, convinced he will never be rescued.

Analysis

Brian has adjusted to his new life in the wilderness. This life requires him to be dependent on his own instincts, which have become stronger. It is clear in this chapter that Brian is determined to live. This gives hope to the reader.

Brian is resourceful in his methods to try to find a way to add to his paltry diet. He wants to build a bow and arrow to help him catch fish. This shows resourcefulness, intelligence, and maturity.

Brian hears a plane engine above him and tries to light a signal fire, but fails to make it in time. When the engine sounds disappear, Brian is beyond disappointed. Brian is convinced he will never be rescued. It is a difficult moment for Brian, but he continues to fight for survival, showing the reader Brian's strength and bravery.

Discussion Question 1

What food source does Brian discover in Chapter 11? How does Brian plan to go about utilizing this food source? Will it work?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Brian's spear not work in catching fish? Why does he think of a bow and arrow? What else could Brian use a bow and arrow for?

Discussion Question 3

How does Brian respond to his inability to alert the rescue plane? Was it really a rescue plane? Why is this the only one Brian has seen or heard?

Vocabulary

Spear, sharpen, feed, shallows, lobster, crayfish, everywhere, patch, forest, scenery, beauty, engine, initially, bonfire, comprised, bluff, shelter, decided, overlooking, juggled, started, feathers, assumed, normal, roughly, alone, imagination, whispered, search, fainter, moments, flight, persistent, whine, baked, slammed, feathered, direction, shrunk, slush, discoveries, reburied, motive, invent.



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13

Brian has finally been able to catch fish, so many fish that he is growing tired of it. For this reason, he has begun trying to kill the birds he calls, which he calls fool birds. The bow and arrow work well together, though his first attempt nearly blinded him when the string was too tight and caused the bow to shatter. However, he now has it working well.

Chapter 14

One morning, a skunk comes to Brian's shelter and steals his turtle eggs. Brian tries to stop it, and the skunk sprays him. Brian realizes after this experience that he must make a stronger door for his shelter to protect himself and find a better way to store his food. Brian also realizes he could get hurt, and he should begin storing enough food to survive should he be forced to stay in the shelter for two or more days. To do this, Brian finds a recess in the ledge and makes a door to cover it. Brian then makes a gate for the lake to store live fish for easy catching.

Analysis

Brian is beginning to get along better. He has run into another bear and some wolves and survived. Brian has also learned how to catch fish and to catch birds. This has expanded Brian's diet and made it easier for him to survive, though he continues to be hungry all the time. Brian is showing the reader that he will survive despite all the dangers and obstacles in his way.

Brian has his eggs stolen and realizes he must do something about it. Brian reinforces his shelter and builds a place to keep food safely. Brian also builds a pen for live fish. Brian shows intelligence once again in his efforts to keep himself safe and to survive. It is clear that Brian has not given up despite the fact that a rescue seems to be a slim possibility.

Discussion Question 1

Where does Brian see another bear? What danger is there for Brian in this instance? How does Brian manage to survive this encounter? How does Brian happen to see wolves? How does he respond? What danger could these animals represent to Brian?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Brian want to find a way to store food? Why is it important for him to be able to get to food easily? What does Brian do to this end?

Discussion Question 3

What dangers are there in the wilderness for Brian? What things could happen to him to cause him to be unable to survive? What measures does Brian take to prevent such a situation?

Vocabulary

Afraid, wolf, claimed, patiently, attention, foolish, effortlessly, disappointment, mistakes, realize, gutted, different, madness, impossible, golden, splinters, forked, mental, journal, mistakes, mesh, breakthrough, splinters, speared, amounted, wonder, attracted, tightly, scraped, exception, relatives, temporarily, fashion, finished, fastened, wedging, heavier, hinges, relatively.



Chapters 15 16

Summary

Chapter 15

Brian has begun to lose track of time, but he remembers things based on events, such as the first time he caught a foolbird. It was difficult to kill the first fool bird and tricky to cook it, but Brian figured it out and was able to do it many times.

Chapter 16

One day while hunting, Brian is attacked by a moose. The moose chases Brian into the lake and smashes him down into the mud. When Brian tries to move away, the moose comes back and attacks him again, injuring his ribs. Brian stays still until the moose leaves, then makes his way carefully back to his shelter. That night, while resting, Brian hears a loud noise. Brian realizes it is a tornado. Brian hides in his shelter, but the tornado comes and rips apart his shelter and knocks him against the wall, again injuring his ribs. Brian is disheartened by the event and the damage, but he remains optimistic because he is still alive. The next morning, Brian begins gathering his things and assessing the damage. In the lake, Brian can see that the plane's tail is showing. It is as if the tornado flipped the plane and left it sitting at an angle. Brian thinks of the pilot and says a silent prayer.

Analysis

Brian has begun to change, and the reader can see this in the way that he no longer keeps track of days, but of events, too. Brian has gone from a suburban kid whose closest contact with nature was a park in the middle of the city to a kid who is able to track and kill a bird.

Brian has a bad day. First, he is attacked by a moose, and several of his ribs are broken. This could be potentially fatal under the right circumstances, so it is lucky that he has survived. Then a tornado hits and destroys everything Brian has built. This might cause anyone else to give up, but Brian is simply happy to be alive and determined to continue surviving. This shows the reader how much Brian has changed. He is growing stronger in character.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Brian not keep track of days any longer? What does the passage of time mean to Brian? What has caused this change?



Discussion Question 2

How does Brian refer to the killing of his first bird? How does he cook it? What does it remind him of?

Discussion Question 3

How did the plane become visible again? What does Brian feel when he sees the plane again? What could this mean for Brian?

Vocabulary

Submarine, patience, outside, feeding, amazing, magically, increased, pointed, easily, different, throwing, distance, outline, secret, streamlined, outline, bullet, pear, hunting, concentrate, disheartened, intact, tail section, tornado, difference, tough, scattered, position, precious, insects, difference, column, opposite, spark, clawed, pray, overhung.



Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17

Brian spends the day assessing the damages and restarting his fire. The next day, Brian is happy to see that his fish pen is still functioning. He spears several fish for breakfast. Brian then begins to build a raft that he can use to go to the plane and try to find the survival bag the pilot pointed out to him in the early moments of the flight. Brian has trouble making a raft that will stay together in the water, but he finally figures it out. However, by the time he is done, it is too late to go out to the plane. The next morning, Brian pushes the raft out to the plane, but he cannot find a way inside.

Chapter 18

Brian examines the plane. Then, in his frustration, he punches it. This shows Brian how thin the outer shell of the plane is and that he could break through it. Brian uses the hatchet to tear at the skin of the plane, but then he drops it. Aware that the hatchet is Brian's most valuable tool, he decides he must get it. Brian dives several times to the bottom of the lake to retrieve the hatchet. Brian goes back to hacking at the aluminum shell of the plane until he has a hole big enough to get through. Brian then goes into the plane and searches for the bag. When Brian sees the head of the pilot, he is sickened by what the fish have done to it. Brian quickly gets out of the plane with the survival bag.

Analysis

Brian has recalled that there is a survival pack inside the plane. Hoping that it might have food and some equipment that would be helpful to him, Brian decides to go after it. First, however, he decides to build a raft to help him carry the bag back to the shore. Building a raft is not as easy as it seems, and Brian has a great deal of trouble. But, as he has proven many times Brian is resourceful, and he manages to build a good, strong raft. Brian goes out to the plane, but he cannot find a way to get inside it. However, the reader knows that Brian is determined. He will try until he finds a way.

Brian is determined to get into the plane to find the survival bag, but he becomes frustrated when he cannot find an easy entrance. However, nothing has been easy for Brian thus far, therefore he is not surprised to have to work at it. Brian once again shows his perseverance when he finds a way into the plane by making a hole in the siding.

Brian shows the reader how important the hatchet has become to him when he dives to the deep bottom of the lake to get it. This is ironic when the reader remembers how annoyed he was when his mother gave him the hatchet and made him put it on his belt. However, the hatchet is Brian's mode of survival now, and he is aware of this.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Brian want to build a raft? What role will it play for Brian? Is this important? How does Brian build the raft? Why did his earlier inventions not work? Why does this one work?

Discussion Question 2

Why can Brian not find an easy way into the plane? What does he begin to do to get inside? Why does Brian want to get inside the plane so much?

Discussion Question 3

What does Brian see inside the airplane? How does this make him feel? Does Brian accomplish what he came to do?

Vocabulary

Forgetting, murky, obvious, vertical, stabilizer, ridge, pronounced, prune, sounds, together, pouch, weave, floated, operating, stumbled, ashore, heavier, rearranging, squeezing, fought, birdcage, formers, instinctive, pilot, formers, gentle, peace, nibbling, loosely, nylon, jammed, forward.



Chapter 19 and Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 19

Brian sleeps before he opens the survival bag and searches through it. Inside the bag, Brian finds matches, cooking utensils, a gun, and many packs of freeze dried food. Also among the items in the bag is a radio like thing, but Brian does not understand what it is and puts it aside until later. Brian then begins to make himself a feast with some of the freeze dried food. While waiting for the food, Brian is surprised by the sound of a plane overhead. The plane lands in the lake. The pilot, a fur buyer, tells Brian that he heard his emergency transmitter, the radio thing.

Epilogue

Brian returns home to where his parents briefly reunite in joy of his return, but they soon return to their separate lives. Brian tries to tell his father about the secret, but he never does. After his ordeal, Brian spends time learning about the wildlife he ate and shared space with in the wilderness. He also develops a fascination with food.

Analysis

Brian finds amazing treasures in the survival bag, but he realizes that he doesn't need most of them. However, the freeze dried food is an amazing treasure that Brian could not be happier to have. The first thing Brian does is to make himself a feast. However, before he can enjoy it, Brian is finally rescued. It is ironic that after more than fifty days in the wilderness, it only took one simple emergency transmitter to save him.

Brian returns home and is able to go back to a normal life. However, the ordeal has left him forever changed in ways that make him stronger and wiser. Brian has grown up during his ordeal.

Brian's parents get back together briefly, but soon they separate again. Brian's mother goes back to her lover. Brian tries to tell his father, but he never does. Brian was unfairly burdened with this secret, but he has grown enough to realize he cannot burden his father with it as well.

Discussion Question 1

What does Brian find in the survival pack? How might some of these things have helped Brian if he had found them sooner? Why does Brian feel like it is cheating to use these things now?



Discussion Question 2

How is Brian finally rescued? How did this rescue come about? How does Brian feel about being rescued now?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Brian research the animals that were in the wilderness with him? What does he learn about them? How does this help him deal with the aftermath of his ordeal?

Vocabulary

Happened, crashed, register, exploded, appeared, ragged, aluminum, matted, waterproof, careful, packets, rummaging, electronic, encased, plastic, understand, rifle, northern, population, actually, eventually, estate, nightmares, adventure, recover, networks, rough, ineffective, immensely, ability, gained, grouse, stupidity.



Characters

Brian Robeson

Brian Robeson is a thirteen year old boy. Brian's parents have recently gotten a divorce for reasons that only Brian and his mother understand. Brian saw his mother with another man a short time before she asked for a divorce. This secret weighs on Brian, but he has not been able to tell his father about it.

Brian is on his way for his first court ordered visit with his father. Brian's father works in the Canadian oil fields, so Brian is flying with a supply plane to meet him. During the flight, Brian's pilot has a heart attack and dies. Brian is able to crash the plane into a lake with what little he knows about planes from television and what the pilot showed him. Now Brian is alone in the wilderness with no previous experience to help him survive.

At first, Brian is sad and frightened, hoping to be rescued quickly. However, it soon becomes clear that rescue is not coming because Brian is too far off the flight plan that was registered for his plane. Brian shows his determination to live, however, when he continues to survive despite a lack of hope of rescue. Brian uses his head to survive and is finally rescued when he retrieves a survival bag from the plane and inadvertently turns on an emergency transmitter.

Brian's Mother

Brian's mother is having an affair. No one knows about this except for Brian who happened upon his mother and her lover by accident one afternoon. Soon after this moment, Brian's mother asked her husband for a divorce. Brian is angry with his mother for the destruction of his family, but he is polite enough not to disrespect her or cause her any more hurt than she is already experiencing from the divorce. However, the secret is a heavy burden that Brian lives with. He is determined to tell his father the first opportunity he gets.

Brian's Father

Brian's father is an inventor of some kind who has invented a new oil drill bit. This bit is being used in the oil fields in Canada. So, in the aftermath of his divorce, Brian's father is living near the oil fields. It is for this reason that Brian boards a bush plane to visit his father.

Brian's father thought his marriage was solid until his wife asked for a divorce. When his wife asked for a divorce, Brian's father did not fight it. This seems to show the reader that Brian's father is a kind man who does not want to cause any more hurt in a



situation that is full of pain. It is clear that Brian got some of his character from his father.

Terry

Terry is Brian's best friend. Brian was with Terry on the afternoon that he stumbled upon the secret. It was also with Terry that Brian once imagined what it would be like to be lost in the wilderness. Brian thinks of Terry often during his ordeal.

The Blond Man

One afternoon while riding bikes with his friend, Brian sees his mother in a parking lot with a blond man. Brian sees his mother kiss this man. Brian comes to realize that she is having an affair with him. Brian is burdened by this secret and struggles with his feelings toward his mother because of it. Brian also struggles because he knows his mother continues to see this man.

The Pilot

The pilot is a middle aged man who flies small bush planes to bring supplies to the oil fields in Canada. Brian hitches a ride with this man because his father is living near the oil fields in his role as the inventor of a new oil drilling bit. The pilot is quiet, but he does teach Brian how to fly the plane. Later in the flight, the pilot becomes ill and dies of an apparent heart attack, leaving Brian alone in a pilot-less plane.

Fur Buyer

Brian is rescued at the end of the novel by a fur buyer. During the summer months, the Cree Indians live near the area where Brian has been lost. After Brian finds the survival bag in the airplane, he inadvertently turns on an emergency transmitter. The fur buyer hears the transmitter as he flies over. The fur buyer is aware of Brian's plane crash and the search for him that was called off two months previously. The moment the man steps out of his own plane and sees Brian, he knows who he is and promises to rescue him.

Moose

Brian is attacked by a moose at one point during his ordeal. Brian is hunting and is not aware of the moose until it is charging him. The moose attacks Brian twice, breaking several of his ribs.



Bear

Brian comes across two bears during his ordeal. The first time, Brian is eating raspberries from a bush and a bear comes up behind him to eat as well. Brian escapes this encounter successfully. Later, Brian is doing the same thing when he nearly steps between a bear and her cub. Brian is smart enough to back off and to keep out of the line of danger.

Fool Birds

Brian notices some birds that he calls fool birds near the lake during his ordeal. Brian calls the birds fool birds because they appear to be stupid in the way they fly and hunt. One of these birds becomes the first meat, other than fish, that Brian has eaten while lost in the wilderness. Brian later learns these birds are ruffed grouse.



Symbols and Symbolism

Hatchet

Brian is given a hatchet as a gift from his mother. The hatchet has an attachment that allows it to be worn on the belt. Brian puts the hatchet on his belt on the way to the airport because he does not want to offend his mother. He forgets about it, so it is still on his belt when the plane crashes.

Windbreaker

Brian was wearing a jacket, called a windbreaker, when he boarded the plane. Brian uses this windbreaker to carry and store berries his first few days on the island.

Twenty Dollar Bill

Brian's mother gave him a twenty dollar bill to buy food should he be stuck in an airport for any amount of time. Brian uses the money to try to light a fire.

Flint Stone

Brian discovers by accident that there is flint in the walls of his shelter when he throws his hatchet at a porcupine in the middle of the night. Brian uses the flint to make a fire.

Spear

Brian makes a spear that he wants to use to catch fish. However, Brian does not immediately have success with the spear, but he keeps it. Later, Brian has luck with the spear as well as other weapons.

Bow and Arrow

When Brian has trouble with the spear in catching fish, he decides to make a bow and arrow instead. Brian is successful with the bow and arrow in catching fish. Later, he is able to kill fool birds and rabbits with it.

Survival Pack

When Brian first boards the plane, the pilot points out a survival pack in the back. Brian remembers this survival pack later when the tail section of the plane becomes visible in



the lake after a tornado. This survival pack includes an emergency transmitter that leads to Brian's rescue.

Shelter

Brian builds a shelter in a bowl-shaped ledge near the lake. Brian later improves the shelter so that it has a strong door and a place to store food.

Bush Plane

Brian is flying to the Canadian oil fields in a bush plane. However, en route the pilot has a heart attack, and Brian crashes the plane into a lake. Later, the tail section of the plane surfaces, and Brian is able to take a survival pack from it.

L-Shape Lake

Brian sees an L-shaped lake as the plane is falling out of the sky. Brian directs the plane to the lake in the hopes that it will lessen the impact of the crash. Brian later makes his home near this lake and eats fish from its waters.

Settings

Lake

Brian crashes the plane into a lake. Brian makes his home next to this lake during his time lost in the wilderness.

Canadian Wilderness

After the pilot of his plane has a heart attack, Brian is lost in the Canadian wilderness. Brian manages to survive by eating fish, bird, and berries. The wilderness is home to animals of all kinds, including bears, wolves, and moose. Brian is attacked by a moose during his ordeal.



Themes and Motifs

Survival

Brian is a thirteen year old boy whose parents have recently divorced. Brian knows that his mother asked for the divorce because she is seeing another man. This is a secret that neither of Brian's parents know he is aware of. In fact, Brian's father has no idea that his wife has been cheating on him. This leaves Brian in an awkward position and full of rage toward his mother. To survive this ordeal, Brian tries to be polite to his mother, but he looks forward to the time he will be able to spend with his father.

While on his way to see his father, Brian is left alone in a small bush plane when the pilot has a heart attack. Brian crashes into the Canadian wilderness near a lake. Brian survives the crash with minor injuries, but the wilderness is filled with unknown dangers that Brian must survive. Brian is understandably upset at first, but he soon realizes that he must focus on survival and not dwell on the unfairness of his situation.

Brian becomes determined to survive. Brian finds food, makes a shelter, and moves through each day as if he could be rescued at any moment. Even when Brian's hope of rescue seems to disappear, he continues to fight. When a tornado comes and destroys everything Brian has built, he continues to fight. Brian is determined to survive, making survival a theme of the novel.

Divorce and Secrets

Brian's parents have recently divorced. Brian's father is unsure of the reason. He did not fight the divorce to prevent further hurt. However, Brian knows the reason. Brian's mother has been having an affair.

Brian keeps his mother's secret not out of love for his mother, but because he does not know what to do with it. The secret is such a big one, however, that Brian is obsessed with it. Brian is filled with anger toward his mother and resentment toward her lover. This causes Brian to struggle with the divorce in a way he might not have otherwise done.

Brian's first court ordered visitation with his father causes Brian to end up lost in the wilderness. If not for the divorce, Brian knows he would be safe at home. This brings on more resentment toward his mother. However, when it is all said and done, Brian cannot bring himself to tell his father the truth and spread the pain. This shows that Brian has grown up. The divorce and its secret are still hard for Brian, but he has matured enough to understand that sometimes things happen and cannot be avoided.



Coming of Age

Brian is a normal, suburban child when the novel begins. Brian is filled with resentment toward his mother and pity toward his father. Brian's life has been ripped apart by his parent's divorce. It is the worst thing that has ever happened to him. During a trip to visit his father for his first court ordered visit, Brian is in a plane crash which leaves him stranded and alone in the Canadian wilderness.

Brian struggles every day to survive. Brian needs to find food and shelter, and he does these things with moderate success. As the days pass, Brian struggles with his resentment and fear. One day, Brian simply puts these emotions behind him and begins to adjust to his new reality. Brian fights hard to survive, even in the face of a tornado and a moose attack. Brian does survive. When the ordeal is over, he is a different person. Brian has matured, which makes this a coming of age tale.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is written primarily in the third person point of view. The main character is Brian Robeson, a thirteen year old boy who crashes in a bush plane and is lost in the Canadian wilderness for more than fifty days. From time to time, the straight narration mixes with authorial voice in telling Brian's story.

The use of both allows the author to back up from time to time to give the reader additional information important to the plot that Brian himself might not know or has not yet experienced. The reader has all the information necessary to follow the story and root for his survival.

Language and Meaning

The author has used simple English to tell Brian's story. Since Brian is only thirteen, the language lacks sophistication. This keeps the voice of the main character believable. Also, the simple language assures that the novel's intended young adult audience will not experience difficulty in reading or understanding the novel.

While the language does not contain any slang or foreign words that a reader might find difficult to understand, it does not speak down to the audience. It suggests a certain level of intelligence on the main character's part, making it easier for the reader to believe that such a boy would survive the ordeal he experiences in the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into nineteen chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter tells a small amount of Brian's ordeal, sometimes in short scenes that take place over just a matter of hours, or in long snatches that cover weeks at a time. Each chapter varies in length, most about five to ten pages long.

There is little dialogue in the novel because Brian is alone during most of the story.

The novel has one main plot and a few subplots. The main plot follows Brian as he suffers a plane crash and manages to survive alone in the Canadian wilderness. One subplot follows Brian's struggle with the secret that led to his parents' divorce. Another subplot follows Brian's emotional struggle with his situation and his need to grow up. All plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

And he would normally have said no, would normally have said no that it looked too hokey to have a hatchet on your belt. Those were the normal things he would say. But her voice was thin, had a sound like something thin that would break if you touched it, and he felt bad for not speaking to her.

-- Brian (Chapter 1 paragraph 49)

Importance: This quote illustrates the tension in the relationship between Brian and his mother. It also notes Brian's maturity in recognizing that his mother is suffering from the tension as much as he is suffering.

Be asleep, his mind screamed at the pilot. Just be asleep and your eyes will open now and your hands will take the controls and your feet will move to the pedals—but it did not happen.

-- Brian (Chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote illustrates Brian's reaction to the death of the pilot and the reality of his situation.

Then a wild crashing sound, ripping of metal, and the plane rolled to the right and blew through the trees, out over the water and down, down to slam into the lake, skip once on water as hard as concrete, water that tore the windshield out and shattered the side windows, water that drove him back into the seat.

-- Brian (Chapter 3 paragraph 12)

Importance: This quote describes the crash as Brian's plane falls into the lake.

The crash is over and I am alive, he thought.

-- Brian (Chapter 4 paragraph 20)

Importance: This is Brian's initial reaction to the plane crash.

What, in all this, was there to eat? He was so used to having food just be there, just always being there. When he was hungry he went to the icebox, or to the store, or sat down at a meal his mother cooked.

-- Brian (Chapter 6 paragraph 18)

Importance: This quote illustrates the shock of Brian's new reality as he comes to the conclusion that he will starve to death if he does not find a way to get food.

So fast, he thought. So fast things change.

-- Brian (Chapter 8 paragraph 9)

Importance: This quote shows Brian's state of mind as he assesses his situation.



Brian found it was a long way from sparks to fire.
-- Brian (Chapter 9 paragraph 1)

Importance: This illustrates Brian's frustration as he struggles to light a fire with a hatchet and flint stone.

They would not return. He would never leave now, never get out of here.
-- Brian (Chapter 12 paragraph 28)

Importance: These are Brian's thoughts as he watches a plane fly away without spotting him. Brian sees the situation and begins to come to grips with it even as emotions drive him momentarily to despair. This also shows some maturity in that Brian is beginning to face reality.

He was not the same.
-- Brian (Chapter 13 paragraph 17)

Importance: This is Brian's assessment of himself weeks after crashing in the Canadian wilderness. This quote shows growth and maturity in Brian because he recognizes he has changed.

Always hungry.
-- Brian (Chapter 16 paragraph 6)

Importance: This is the reality of Brian's situation.

That was the kind of thing I would have done before,' he said to the lake, to the sky, to the trees. 'When I came here—I would have done that. Not now. Not now....
-- Brian (Chapter 9 paragraph 18)

Importance: This illustrates Brian's frustration after he drops his hatchet into the lake while trying to cut his way into the newly surfaced airplane. It also shows some self analysis, a mature act that shows Brian has matured since crashing.

He had only a moment of warning. There was a tiny drone but as before it didn't register, then suddenly, roaring over his head low and in back of the ridge a bushplane with floats fairly exploded into his life.
-- Brian (Chapter 19 paragraph 22)

Importance: This is the description of Brian's rescue as it flies into the lake over his shelter.