

The Hour of the Wolf Short Guide

The Hour of the Wolf by Patricia Calvert

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Overview

The Hour of the Wolf combines the adventures of a courageous seventeen-year-old boy with an account of the most exciting dogsled race in the world, the Iditarod from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. This race, one of the most demanding anywhere, covers over one thousand miles of the roughest territory in the worst of winter.

There are blizzards, wolves, treacherous terrain and blinding snowstorms in which man and beast lose the way, as well as the fierce competition among seasoned drivers to be the first to arrive at the destination. What makes this story even more exciting is the fact that Jake, a seventeen-year-old from Minnesota, has not lived very long in the North, nor has he had any previous practice working with a dog team and training for such a race. Underlying the narrative are themes of perseverance and of the strengthening of character that comes to those who successfully pitch themselves against nature.

About the Author

Patricia Calvert was born in 1931 in Great Falls, Montana. She married George J. Calvert in 1951 and has two children, Brianne and Dana. Since 1964, she has worked for the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, first as a cardiac laboratory technician, then in the enzyme laboratory, and finally as senior editorial assistant in the section of publications. In 1976, she received a bachelor's degree from Winona State University. In addition to her novels for young adults, she has published numerous stories for children's magazines, using the pseudonym of Peter J. Freeman, her mother's maiden name.

Her novels have won numerous awards. In 1981, *The Snowbird* received the "Best Book" award from the American Library Association, as well as the Society of Midland Authors' Juvenile Fiction Award, the Friends of American Writers Award, and Young Women's Christian Association Award, and was nominated for the Mark Twain Award. In 1984, *The Money Creek Mare* was also nominated for the Mark Twain Award, and in 1985, *The Stone Pony* was nominated for the Maude Hart Lovelace Award.

Most of her writing reflects the rural background of her childhood, and her love and interest in animals. At present, she lives on a farm in Chatfield, Minnesota.

Setting

This is a novel where the setting is much more than just background scenery. From the intimidating mountain ranges to the icy plains of the North Slope, the countryside of Alaska itself becomes the main adversary which demands the most from those who try to live or travel in it. But not all of Alaska is wilderness. There is also the urban world of Anchorage, not very different from Jake's home, and the interesting but hostile Indian village, home of Jake's friend Danny and his sister Kamina. In fact, it is in the world of the tiny Athabaskan settlement where the two cultures, modern Alaska and its ancient Indian heritage, collide.

Here Jake experiences the anger and desperation of a people who consider themselves doomed and pushed aside by modern progress, and here the idea of his racing is born. Following in detail the route of the famous race, Patricia Calvert's dramatic description brings to life the wilderness, the feeling of being lost in the white world of blowing, stinging snow, and the satisfaction of arriving in the remote town of Nome.

Social Sensitivity

The theme of suicide may be considered controversial for a teen novel, but Patricia Calvert handles it with honesty and sensitivity. Teen suicide is, indeed, not a rare phenomenon, and the author demonstrates its causes as well as the healing process in simple but clear terms. While Jake is able to overcome the damage the critical attitude of his father has created, Danny, out of a much deeper despair about his social and cultural problems, seeks death in what at first appears to be an accident.

The similarity of his own feelings to those of Danny leads Jake to a fuller understanding of the devastating effects suicide has on those left behind.

Literary Qualities

The greatest appeal of *The Hour of the Wolf* lies in the atmosphere of the Alaskan wilderness and the exciting race that pits man against nature. Patricia Calvert's style is direct, offering a wealth of detail ranging from descriptions of sleds and outfits to the methods of training the dogs and the type of food taken on the trail. Once the race gets started, the reader is drawn into it by Calvert's graphic account of the raw physical demands as well as the harshness of the land.

The characters are believable and interesting. Patricia Calvert has an ear for natural dialogue, and her sentences are full of dog racing terms and Alaskan slang, words like "musher," "the big I," and "Insider," which lend authenticity to both setting and speech.

Drama is built up by a feeling of expanse and solitude that threatens to overpower the racer on the trail: "From high points on the river bank that were not screened with trees could be glimpsed a massive blue-and-white wall looming against the darkening Arctic sky. The closer Jake got to Skwenta, the more ominous and impassable that wall looked to be."

In addition to nature, the theme of growing up and developing self-worth is handled well and resolved in a satisfying conclusion when Jake is finally able to confront his father and even to understand him a little.



Themes and Characters

The two major characters in *The Hour of the Wolf* are Jake, the boy from "the Outside," and Kamina, the fifteen-year-old Athabaskan Indian girl. Both have in common that they are rebelling against their world.

Jake, failing to fulfill the high expectations of a father he is never able to please, has tried suicide as a way out, and for that reason is sent to his relatives in Alaska as a chance to get away from home and its problems. Here, for the first time, he is accepted for what he is, and feels free from the burden of his father's disapproval and his mother's emotional coldness. Yet the guilt of repeatedly failing at whatever he tries, even botching his own suicide, still follows him. When he meets Danny, a star quarterback and a seemingly successful and uncomplicated native student, a quick friendship grows between the two of them, spoiled only by the antagonism of Danny's sister, Kamina.

Kamina, too, has her own problems.

She despises the modern world of the white men, and longs for the past, realizing that her people and culture are gradually being destroyed. She seems to be the opposite of her sunny brother, Danny. The death of his friend in what seems to be an accident is a terrible shock to Jake, but more so when he discovers that Danny actually has committed suicide. For the first time, his own despair seems less important. He decides to take the place of Danny in the Iditarod and seeks the help of Kamina. As a grudging respect develops between Kamina and Jake, they become first rivals and then friends, hoping to run the race as a memorial to Danny.

For Jake, running the race becomes a personal test of courage, as he battles against the difficulties of the trail, which becomes a symbol to him of freeing himself from his father's dominance and proving to himself that he is able to succeed at something. For Kamina, on the other hand, the result of the competition with Danny is a growing awareness that one cannot turn back the clock, and that whether she likes it or not, she has to live with the modern world.

There are a few minor characters.

Danny is the first to reach out to Jake; Jake's aunt and uncle are warm and caring; and there are an assortment of helpful "dog racers"—but they are basically flat characters and only serve to move the story along or to show a different aspect of Jake. The dogs have different personalities, and as Jake gets to know them, he begins to admire their courage and understand their failings. The most important canine character is B. J., who, like his master, has to learn to persevere, and who eventually becomes Jake's lead dog, helping him finish the race.

The major theme in this story, as in many of Patricia Calvert's books, is that of survival and courage in a struggle against a hostile environment and cruel elements. Yet Nature



is more than an adversary, she becomes a teacher who helps young people mature and learn about themselves.

The encroachment of modern civilization on the native Indian culture is a secondary theme that develops from the main topic. When, at the end, Kamina decides to make peace with the modern world and to become a nurse to help her people, there is a hint of resolving the conflict between the cultures. Yet out "in the bush," the ancient spirits are still alive as Jake sees the ghostly wolf-like dog who spurs on his team during the last lap of the race, and who resembles Danny's lead dog who drowned with him in the icy river.



Topics for Discussion

1. What did Jake try to accomplish with his participation in the Iditarod race? And whom did he try to impress—his father, Kamina, or himself?

In what way did the fact that Danny committed suicide make it important for Jake to take his place?

2. Like the humans, the dogs in the story all have their own distinct personalities. In what way do they parallel human attitudes?

3. One of the more complicated relationships in the story is that of Jake and his father. In what way is his dad responsible for his attempted suicide, and how does the final meeting after the race show how Jake has changed?

How does his dad react to these changes?

4. Jake is able to overcome the problems that led to his earlier suicide attempt, but Danny is not. Why? How does Danny's attitude differ from Jake's? Do you think Danny would have grown up during the race, too?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When Jake first visits Kamina, he is introduced to the people of her village. Patricia Calvert uses Nyotek as an example of the problems the Alaskan Indian people face in their encounter with the white culture. What are those problems? Does she offer a solution in Kamina's decision to become a nurse, and is this solution realistic?
2. The theme of man against nature is a popular one in literature. Jack London, for one, has written a number of stories about it. What makes this topic so interesting to modern man? What is so unique about the Idatarod which has been called "the last great race?"
3. Teen suicide is a growing problem. What leads young people to commit this ultimate violence against themselves? Is it a sign of modern civilization? Is it accurately depicted in *The Hour of the Wolf*?
4. In many of Patricia Calvert's novels, animals have a healing effect on the human mind. What are the benefits of the human/animal bond? Why does his relationship and work with the dogs help Jake but not Danny?

For Further Reference

Coppinger, Lorna. *The World of Sled Dogs*. New York: Howell Book House, 1977: 197. This is a comprehensive guide to all aspects of dogsled racing and includes a section on the origins and history of the Iditarod.

Related Titles

Most of Patricia Calvert's books deal with a relationship between humans and animals. *The Money Creek Mare* is the story of a teenage girl and her love for a horse, and in *The Stone Pony*, fourteen year old Jo Beth resolves the anger and grief she experiences at the death of her older sister through her efforts to ride Ashleigh's horse. Nature and animals have a strong healing influence in Calvert's novels. And like feisty Kamina in *The Hour of the Wolf*, her young heroines have courage and perseverance in the face of obstacles and danger. These characteristics are best personified in the young heroine of her first novel, *The Snow Bird*, about the struggles of a pioneer family against the forces of nature.



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