

Big Red
by
Jim Kjelgaard**Book Information**

Jim Kjelgaard, Big Red
Quiz Number: 103
Yearling, 1982
ISBN 0-553-15434-6; LCCN
218 Pages
Book Level: 5.6
Interest Level: MG

This famous wilderness adventure portrays the story of a boy and his dog and their feud with Old Majesty, the legendary bear.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Adventure, Misc./Other; Animals, Bears; Animals, Dogs

Main Characters

Asa an old mule belonging to Ross Pickett

Bob Fraley Mr. Haggin's short-tempered overseer

Danny Pickett a sensible and mature seventeen-year-old boy who cares for Red and loves him dearly

Miss Katherine Grennan the beautiful but callous socialite who tries to take Red away

Mr. Haggin the kind and wealthy owner of Red and the Wintapi estate

Old Majesty the clever old grizzly bear that rules the Wintapi estate

Red (Champion Sylvester's Boy) a beautiful and intelligent Irish setter

Ross Pickett Danny's father, who wants to see Danny do well in life

Vocabulary

pelt the skin and fur of an animal commonly used for trade

shanty a small, roughly built cabin

varmint a wild animal of relatively little value

vittles a slang word for "victuals," meaning food

Synopsis

Danny Pickett is a seventeen-year-old living in the

Wintapi wilderness with his father, Ross. As trappers, the two lead a spartan but comfortable life living in a shanty on the land of the rich Mr. Haggin. When Danny visits Mr. Haggin's estate one day to tell him the infamous bear, Old Majesty, has killed one of his bulls, he is immediately drawn to the Irish setter that greets him. Although there is some unpleasantness between Danny and Mr. Haggin's overseer, Robert Fraley, Danny delivers his message and finds out that Red, as Danny calls him, is an expensive show dog. Danny heads for home that night and dreams of the dog he desperately wants but knows he will never be able to have. Interestingly, Red shows up on his porch the next morning and Danny returns the dog to Mr. Haggin in perfect condition despite having cornered a bear on the way to the estate. As a result, Mr. Haggin hires Danny to take Red back to his shanty and care for Red there. He then invites Danny to accompany him to a dog show in New York, a proposal that Danny happily accepts.

In New York, Red wins enough points to earn the title of champion and best of breed by defeating the top female setter, Sheilah MacGuire. Danny happily returns home with Red, eager to teach him the fine points of becoming a partridge dog. Ross, however, has other ideas for Red and suggests that Danny should train Red to be a varmint hunter. Danny avoids a conflict, but the issue remains a source of tension between them.

Red's training is difficult at first, as he tends to chase anything he smells. This bad habit actually helps Danny, however, as Red's encounter with a skunk prevents a rich socialite from Philadelphia from taking Red home with her. When Red finally learns to focus on the scent of partridges hiding in the bush, he quickly proves that he is a better bird dog than even Danny had expected. The big setter also proves his bravery as well as his love for Danny one night when he stands guard over the young man when Danny's ankle is trapped. Only in the morning does Danny discover that a lynx which had killed one of Ross's favorite pups had stalked him during the night.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

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The conflict between Danny and Ross over Red finally comes to a head, and Ross is hurt by Danny's refusal to let Red hunt varmints with him. However, the problem is resolved when Red helps Danny find and rescue his father, who was buried in the snow.

Red is, by now, Danny's constant companion. He is with Danny when the young man catches an escaped prisoner. He saves Danny's life again when he battles the wolverine that attacks them in the cabin along the trap line. So, when Danny brings Mr. Haggin's dog, Sheilah MacGuire, back to the shanty one night, Red is incredibly jealous. However, after Red proves his dominance, he accepts the mate Mr. Haggin purchased for him.

In the spring Old Majesty once again begins his reign of terror. Ross goes out to hunt him after the bear assaults the animals around the shanty, but Old Majesty is too much for him. Finally, Danny and Red track the bear down after a terrifying midnight battle. The two emerge victorious, although Red receives wounds that will prevent him from ever competing in a dog show again. Mr. Haggin finally agrees to sell Red to Danny, because with Sheilah's new puppies, he is sure Red's line of champions will continue.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why would taking Red varmint hunting make it difficult for Danny to train Red to be a partridge dog?

By taking Red on a varmint hunt, Danny would be encouraging Red to pay attention to the scent of any animal and to follow every scent. A partridge dog, however, must be able to ignore all other scents except for that of the partridge, as the dog must be able to smell the bird from far enough away that he or she does not cause the bird to fly away. After a varmint hunt, Red would be too confused by all the scents in the woods to be a calm and selective partridge dog.

Literary Analysis

What kind of book is *Big Red*? What characteristics does it have that place it in that category?

Big Red can be classed as adventure fiction. It is categorized as such because the characters and events in it are fabricated. Although most of the events that happen in the story are realistic, some, such as the wolverine's attack through the chimney seem to stretch the realms of probability. Finally, the plot line of the story mainly consists of a series of adventures that test Danny and Red's relationship and their abilities.

Inferential Comprehension

In the story, Mr. Haggin speaks clearly and uses standard English, whereas Danny and Ross use slang words such as "ain't" and "ketch" and often drop letters from their words. What do these differences in speaking habits tell the reader about the differences between the characters?

Mr. Haggin's use of standard English is probably evidence that he has had a formal education, whereas Ross and Danny probably have not had as much schooling, although they are both knowledgeable in the ways of the woods. Mr. Haggin has probably also been influenced by other businessmen who have been well educated. A related factor is that Mr. Haggin has more money than Ross and Danny do and, as a result, has been able to educate himself and interact with other educated people.

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Constructing Meaning

What evidence can be cited from the story to defend the statement "Danny is an honest young man"?

Nearly all of Danny's actions attest to his integrity. When Red runs away, Danny finds and returns him to Mr. Haggin, the rightful owner, even though he wants to keep the dog for himself. He also brings the dog to Miss Grennan despite knowing that she is planning to take Red away. Danny is always conscientious about the hunting rules and regulations as he will not hunt any animal that is not in season, even though he wants to start training Red to hunt partridge before the season opens. Finally, at the end of the story, he takes responsibility for Red's injuries and insists on buying the dog from Mr. Haggin as compensation.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Red fits all of Danny's expectations of what his ideal dog would be like. Have the students make a short list of the qualities they would want their ideal pet to have. Then have them choose an animal, real or imaginary, that would best embody those qualities. Provide them with craft materials to create an image of the animal, whether it is a puppet, a drawing, a statue, or a stuffed animal. Finally, display the students' creations along with a brief explanation by each student identifying the animal and listing its qualities.

Drawing Conclusions When Danny hikes into the woods, he can determine exactly what had gone on along the trail based on his observation of the details around him. Let the students watch a short movie clip or listen to a paragraph describing a situation in which something has happened but does not reveal the outcome. Then have them list all the details they can remember and attempt to draw conclusions about what had occurred based on the details they had observed. They can then compare their evaluations to the actual result.

Recognizing Details The story takes place in the Wintapi wilderness, an area which is evidently

populated by a number of animal species. Assign each student an animal mentioned in the story to research. Have them find out where it lives, what it eats, and what its general habits and characteristics are. Make a brief presentation of the facts they have uncovered, accompanied by a picture, about the animal to the rest of the class.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Danny, like many pet owners, acts as though Red is a human being by talking to Red and referring to him as such. For example, Danny tells Red, "You're wrong, Red, ... I don't like her better'n you ... Come on back, Red. You're still king-pin." One reason that people often do this is because animals periodically do things that seem almost human. Have the students write about a time when one of their pets or an animal with which they are familiar exhibited some human characteristic. Ask them to identify what the animal did and why it seemed so human.