

Brian's Return
by
Gary Paulsen**Book Information**

Gary Paulsen, Brian's Return
Quiz Number: 25297
Random House, 1999
ISBN 0-385-32500-2; LCCN
115 Pages
Book Level: 5.5
Interest Level: MG

After living alone in the wilderness on the edge of death, Brian dreams of returning to the woods where he is more comfortable than in civilization.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Misc./Other

Topics: Adventure, Survival; Family Life, Running Away; Natural Environments, Forests; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Know Yourself; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Recommended Reading, YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant YA

Main Characters

Billy an older man who loves the bush as much as Brian; he helps Brian recognize his "medicine"

Brian Robeson a high school boy who struggles between his desire to return to life in the woods and staying with his mother and continuing to have difficulty fitting in with society

Caleb Lancaster a blind, retired police officer who enjoys hearing Brian's stories of the wilderness

Carl Lammers a football player who instigates a fight with Brian

Haley a boy who is outside of Mackey's Pizza Den during the fight between Brian and Carl

Susan a girl interested in Brian, who witnesses the fight between Brian and Carl

Vocabulary

bush land covered with dense, shrubby growth

canopy a covering of leafy branches

carnivorous feeding on the flesh of other animals

castigating severely criticizing

Synopsis

Brian Robeson, a high school boy, has spent the last two years of his life in a confused state of restlessness and discomfort. Brian is famous for surviving a plane crash in the Canadian wilderness, and this experience has changed his life forever. He tries to fit in with society and to get along with his school peers, but it is becoming more difficult to do every day.

One night, things come to a head in front of Mackey's Pizza Den. Brian has unknowingly upset football player Carl Lammers. As Brian and his friends Susan and Haley are walking into the restaurant, Carl sees Susan with Brian and becomes very jealous. Carl attacks Brian, and Susan and Haley are accidentally injured and knocked to the ground. When Carl takes a swing at Brian, Brian's newly developed survival instincts take control of his actions. Brian pummels his attacker as though he were fighting a wild animal and not a person. Carl is severely beaten. The police take Brian home, where one officer recommends he seek counseling.

Brian goes to see Caleb Lancaster, a retired police officer who has become a counselor. As Brian tells him about the beauty of the woods, the blind Caleb is moved to tears. Brian and Caleb develop a special bond, and Brian believes Caleb is the only person to truly "see" him. The day arrives when Caleb tells Brian it is time for him to return to the woods to rediscover who he is. They decide Brian should return to visit the Smallhorns, a Cree family who rescued him after his plane crash.

Brian packs and says goodbye to Caleb and his mother. A pilot agrees to fly him within one hundred miles of the lakes where the Smallhorns live. Brian knows he can canoe the remainder of the distance. The pilot takes Brian and two fishermen north. The pilot drops Brian off on Payson Lake and hands him

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a map, telling him he will see him again in the fall. Finally, Brian is alone in the woods. He repacks his gear in the canoe and slowly paddles in the nearby creek. A while later, he is taken by surprise when a doe jumps into his canoe, causing it to overturn. The doe's sudden appearance has changed his plans, and he camps for the night.

In the next few days, Brian again encounters the challenges and joys of the woods. He survives a horrid storm which collapses his tent, and he falls onto an arrow and injures his leg. But there are moments when the beauty around him takes his breath away. He spends some time reading Shakespeare, and he continues to give silent thanks for the opportunities he has to hunt. When he returns from one hunt, he finds a strange man in his camp. The man, Billy, teaches Brian about his medicine deer, which will guide him when the time is right.

Brian later has a terrifying encounter with a bear, but luckily escapes without being injured or forced to injure the animal. He realizes, with the victory over the bear, that he has left all parts of his old life behind. He finds further comfort in a dream about Billy, which helps him realize that when he had met Billy, he was meeting himself in future years. He makes the decision to stay in the woods and explore the lands around him; he will follow his medicine.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Brian makes a list of what he will need when he returns to the wilderness. He is careful to take only necessities and is somewhat reluctant to take modern items. Imagine you were going into the wilderness for an indefinite period of time. What would you take with you? Why?

Students should have a basic list of necessities and a legitimate reason as to why it is something they feel belongs on the list. Some examples might include a tent, sleeping bag, a few tools, rope, etc.

Literary Analysis

Brian finds it difficult to live a normal life with his mother, and he is continually drawn to his experience in the woods. The book is filled with vivid accounts of what Brian experienced while living in the woods. What do you think continues to draw Brian back to the wilderness? Why do you think he has such trouble fitting into the environment so many of his peers live in? Is there a place where you love to spend time that reminds you of Brian's passion for the woods?

Brian obviously had some traumatic experiences while trying to survive after his plane crash. He learned to survive on his own and to appreciate all the things nature can provide. He was alone during much of his wilderness experiences and came to rely on his surroundings to keep him company. He is drawn to a world very few can relate to and has trouble identifying with the people around him who do not know all the woods can offer. He also cannot relate to others, because they have not experienced the trauma he endured. Students should share a special place they have where they feel somewhat similar to what Brian feels when he is in the wilderness.

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Inferential Comprehension

The author, Gary Paulsen, lets the reader know he will not be writing another book in the Brian series. The final part of *Brian's Return* has Brian realizing he is in no hurry to get to the Smallhorns. He plans to take his time and see the country. What do you think will happen to Brian? Will he ever return home?

Brian's whole world is in the woods. It is evident throughout the story how much he feels at home in the wilderness. Predictions might include Brian's eventual return home to finish school or his finding a job that keeps him in the wilderness. He could spend the majority of his life roaming the country and publish an account of his experiences. He may also choose a life similar to Billy's.

Constructing Meaning

After reading *Brian's Return*, what are your feelings about Brian? Do you think he is being fair to his mother? Do you think he is too young to spend so much time alone in the wilderness? Do you think you are capable of surviving alone in the woods for an extended period of time?

The question should prompt the students to explain their thoughts on Brian's consuming desire to return to the woods. There should be some debate as to whether he really tried to make it in society.

Students might refer to Brian's maturity and inner strength as reasons why he can survive alone. On the other hand, they might feel he is too young and should be finishing school before making such an important decision as staying in the wilderness. Students' responses to their own capabilities will vary.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting In chapter twelve, Brian writes to Caleb that he saw a place that was "so beautiful that I don't think even Shakespeare could describe it...." Brian says he feels like he was in a painting, "a beautiful private diorama." Have students reread that chapter and create a diorama based upon Brian's description of his

canoe trip down the lake. They should include a brief description within their diorama of the scene. An alternative would be to allow students to choose their own passage from the book as their dioramic scene.

Comparing and Contrasting Brian has several serious challenges while in the woods. He accidentally rolls onto an arrow while his tent flounders in a storm, he comes face to face with a bear, and his canoe turns over as the result of a doe jumping inside. Have students write an account of a time in their lives when they felt truly challenged. Perhaps it was studying for a major exam, trying to run the mile in phy-ed class, "roughing it" while camping for the weekend, or dealing with a serious injury or illness in the family. Give the students the option to share their challenges with the class. How do students feel their challenges compare with Brian's?

Recognizing Feelings When Brian describes the winter sunset to Caleb, he is moved to tears. Discuss with students why Caleb became emotional upon listening to Brian's description of the sunset. Do they think he would have had the same reaction if he were not blind? Divide students into small groups. Give each group a box of items and one blindfold. Have one student wear the blindfold, while the others take turns describing items from the box. How difficult is it to guess the items? How do the students wearing the blindfolds feel when trying to "see" the item being described? Be sure to include a variety of easy and difficult items to describe and guess.

Responding to Literature With Caleb's encouragement, Brian takes a book of Shakespearean plays with him on his journey. Caleb tells him to read Shakespeare aloud to better understand the play. Supply several Shakespearean plays and have students read a passage silently and then have them read it aloud. Research ahead of time the passages that would be easiest for the students to understand. Do students find it easier to understand after reading aloud? How many students were able to understand what they read?