

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

My Side of the Mountain

by

Jean Craighead George

Book Information

Jean Craighead George, My Side of the Mountain
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Written in the form of a diary, this story relates the days of a young boy in the Catskill Mountains.

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

Topics: Adventure, Runaway; Adventure, Survival; Natural Environments, Mountains; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

"Bando" an English professor who is lost in the woods when Sam finds and befriends him

Frightful a falcon nestling Sam takes to tame and train to hunt for him

Miss Turner helps Sam at her library when he needs special information, without betraying his secret

Sam Gribley the narrator of the novel, a boy who decides to live on his own in the woods

The Baron Weasel lives in a nearby den and amuses Sam with his "harassing friendship"

the Gribleys Sam's family who reunites with Sam at the end, as they all go "back to nature"

Vocabulary

barometer an instrument that registers atmospheric pressure

forum a public meeting or open discussion

jesses short straps secured to the leg of a hawk or falcon

mantle a cloak; something which covers or enfolds a body completely

tanning a process for turning hides into leather

tinder a material or substance used to start a fire

venison edible deer meat

Synopsis

My Side of the Mountain might aptly be subtitled "Walden Pond for Beginners". Sam Gribley, a teenage boy, decides to move to "the other side of the mountain", a wilderness area on his family's property, and live by his own wits in the woods.

Making a home out of a venerable hemlock tree, Sam applies lessons he has read about nature to feed, clothe and shelter himself in the wild. His diet of fish, various game and wild plants becomes an on-going buffet of surprises for the reader. He makes every necessary item for himself, such as fishhooks, game traps, a fireplace and a bed. Accounts of his labours are mixed with observations and encounters with his neighbouring animals and occasional human intruders.

A high point of his year comes when Sam attempts to throw a Halloween party for his "friends". Setting out a feast for them, Sam quickly learns that human kindness can lead to disastrous consequences when dealing with wild creatures. He fiercely chases his overwhelming guests from his home and accepts his condition of difference from them.

Sam does, however, develop an intimate relationship with one wild creature. He takes a baby "duck hawk", or falcon, from its nest, then tames the bird and trains it to hunt for him. "Frightful" becomes Sam's provider and virtual sibling. Their relationship is both practical and symbolic of Sam's tethered existence in the wild.

Again like Thoreau, Sam's nature-bound solitude does not escape the notice of others. Occasionally, Sam hikes to a nearby town to visit the library or shyly show off his home-made buckskin suit. A lost hiker, a professor of English whom Sam calls "Bando", becomes the boy's house-guest and friend.

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Bando appropriately calls Sam "Thoreau", and his adult appreciation of Sam's accomplishments in the woods ratifies the boy's independence.

Of course, Sam's life in the woods must remain secret in order to continue. There are close encounters with a fire warden, an elderly strawberry picker, and hunters, any of whom might cause Sam to tumble out of his way of life. Through Bando, Sam learns of a rumour that is spreading about him in the civilised world, as news reports of a "wild boy" living in the Catskills appear in various papers. Unlike Huck Finn, Sam has no raft on which to escape further from society. He is protected only by his invisibility in nature.

Belatedly concerned, not so much for Sam's safety as for the severe opinions of her neighbours, his mother decides to move the entire family to the woods to live with Sam, however it will no longer be the wilderness that Sam has known, as his Dad is building a house for them all to live in.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What kind of neighbor was The Baron Weasel?

The Baron was one creature who managed both to become familiar to Sam and yet remain untamed. Sam calls their relationship a "harassing friendship," because the weasel often nips and bothers the boy, but without seriously menacing him. In The Baron, Sam sees several dangers when they are near, including storms, snow, and hunters. Sam respects the weasel's independence, and he enjoys The Baron's extroversion. Their relations serve as a model for Sam's wildlife "friendships" -- familiar, respectful, but never (except for Frightful) intimate.

Literary Analysis

How does the author make Sam's story seem believable?

By letting Sam narrate the story, the author puts the reader right in the woods with his character. Once we are there, Sam is so detailed in the way he describes plants, animal behavior, and his own actions that the mountain feels quite real. Having only Sam's word for the taste of skunk cabbage, acorn pancakes or dandelion greens, the reader experiences a strange kind of participation in his meals. As Sam experiments and reports the various tastes, we listen and imagine. Sam tends to report things "as they happen," often quoting from notes he jotted on pieces of bark. He seldom writes "abstractly" about notions or nature. Finally, the author avoids putting Sam in a position where uncommon skill or valor are required to save or sustain him.

Inferential Comprehension

What lessons did Sam learn when he tried to give his animal neighbors a Halloween party?

He could not tame them to live with him on "human terms." They overran his house and devoured his "gifts," and Sam was forced to chase them back out into the woods. On the one hand, he learned he could not impose his wish for company upon the nature of "wildlife." On the other, he realized he was the scariest creature in the woods, able to force his "neighbors" to yield him the space to survive.

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Constructing Meaning

How is Sam's life likely to change after his family moves to the woods to live with him?

Sam's first thought is very practical: feeding "this city of people" will be more of a challenge than foraging for just himself. They most likely would have to cultivate food, rather than be simply "gatherers." Beyond that challenge, as the book ends Dad is already building a house. Sam will clearly have to once again fit his needs and wants into those of his family. He will no longer need to "protect his secret," however. His parents can prevent his life in the woods from being ended by strangers. In many respects, Sam's experiences prepare him to become more of a teacher to his loved ones. In a sense, he will be their "Frightful," their tamed provider, until he reaches "legal age."

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Sam's adventure stands in a long line of literature that has explored nature and the theme of surviving "alone." For younger students, you might expand their view of Sam by reading excerpts from works like *Robinson Crusoe*. Older students might be exposed to excerpts from Thoreau's *Walden* or Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. One point to such further reading might be the search for an answer to this question: Was Sam Gibley a hero?

Understanding the Author's Craft Sam is a keen observer of animal behavior. His descriptions of The Baron Weasel, for example, show an ability to personalize his subject while remain an accurate recorder of The Baron's natural activities. You might ask students to conduct a similar writing experiment with whatever type of animal life is available. Close observation and description of the activities of pets, squirrels, birds, or even zoo animals might further students' appreciation for Sam's prose and perspective.

Comparing and Contrasting Sam's fishhooks were one example of necessary tools he made for himself from a few handy materials. You could challenge students to "invent" some similarly

useful item for themselves, possibly after limiting them to a small number of supplies (glue, string, wire, sticks, anything found in "the woods," etc.). Sam was not such a purist that he wouldn't use a library book to guide him, so students should be likewise "resourceful."

Differentiating Fact and Opinion In the preface, George writes about running to the woods: "It is one thing to wish to go, and another matter to do it." One might also say, "It is one thing to write a book about a boy who survives on his own in the woods, and another matter to become one." You may find the practical, legal, and moral issues involved in a boy's running away as Sam did proper grounds for class discussion. Could Sam "really" have done it? Should he have done it in the way the book stipulates? If students tried to do what Sam did, would their parents react as Sam's parents did? George also admits in the preface that his publisher refused at first to publish the book because "...parents should not encourage their kids to leave home." You might ask students whether the publisher was right to change his mind. Why?