

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

On the Far Side of the Mountain

by

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Book Information

Jean Craighead George, On the Far Side of the Mountain

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170 Pages

Book Level: 4.5

Interest Level: MG

Sam's peaceful existence in his wilderness home is disrupted when his sister runs away and his pet falcon is confiscated by a conservation officer.

Award: State Award

Topics: Adventure, Discovery/Exploration; Animals, Birds; Natural Environments, Wilderness; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice

Main Characters

Alice Gribley Sam's younger sister who lives on the mountain with him; she has a talent for getting into trouble

Bando a friend of Sam's; a college English teacher who has a cabin near Sam's mountain

Bate alias Leon Longbridge man who impersonates a conservation officer in order to steal Frightful

Crystal Alice's pig

Frightful a peregrine falcon and friend to Sam; provides food for Sam and his sister

Mrs. Strawberry Sam's neighbor and friend; special friend to Alice

Sam Gribley the main character, a teenage boy who lives off the land on a mountain owned by his family

Zella Bando's wife, a lawyer

Vocabulary

habitat a place or region inhabited by animals and/or plants in their natural state

hacking placing a young unleashed hawk or falcon, who is just learning to fly and hunt, on a hack board, which serves as an artificial nest; food is left on the board in case the young birds miss their prey

jesses short leather straps tied around the legs of a trained hawk; the leash is attached to the jesses by a ring

peregrine mew a hatching area for peregrine falcons

pitons iron pegs or spikes driven into rocks and used as steps or supports; used for mountain or rock climbing

rousing when a bird lifts up its feathers and shakes itself

Synopsis

Sam and his sister Alice live on their own in the wild. They live off the land and, with a little help from friends, are building a life for themselves on the mountain. Sam has a peregrine falcon named Frightful. The bird is his companion and even hunts food for the family. A man, who identifies himself as a conservation officer named Longbridge, comes to Sam's home and confiscates the falcon because it is an endangered species. Sam is devastated and goes into town to determine if Longbridge is really a conservation officer. He spends three days on his own trying to deal with his loss.

A few days later he finds a note from Alice indicating that she has left the mountain. Sam is concerned for her because she has a way of always getting into trouble, but he also does not want to interfere with her freedom. After talking with his friend, Bando, they decide to follow her tracks.

They soon discover that she has purposefully left a trail for them to follow, and they believe that the pig, Crystal, is giving Alice clues on which way to go. Bando reads a notice in the paper about someone hacking falcons in the area. Sam finds evidence of hacking and finds that a coyote has killed a sharp-shinned hawk with jesses and a leash. He goes to find Bando and sees the man who called himself Longbridge, but Bando tells him that he is

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not Longbridge. They suspect that the man is selling birds of prey to foreign sheiks. Sam discovers the man and his customer, but he only has one bird with him and it is not Frightful. The pair are arrested by the conservation officer Bando had found.

Sam is disappointed at not finding Frightful, so he hurries off to find Alice. He finds her half way up a tree trying to see a goshawk nestling. She takes one of the baby birds to give as a gift to Sam. He thanks her for the gift, but believes the bird should be free. While camping near the nest, Sam hears Frightful calling to him. Alice tells him of seeing the man with the birds and setting Frightful free. Sam does not call out to Frightful because he knows that she should live free.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

What was the change in Sam's attitude from his initial reaction to losing Frightful to his decision not to call her to him at the end of the story?

When he lost her, all he could think about was himself. He depended on the bird for companionship and for food. By the end of the story, when he thought that Frightful was gone forever, either dead or sold, he discovers that she is flying free. He knows that she should be allowed to live free, so he does not call her to him. He makes plans to become a falconer even though it means raising hawks and falcons to be set free.

Literary Analysis

How did the author use Sam's journal in the story?

When Sam was upset, he found that reading his journal calmed him down. The author included the journal entries as part of the text at these points in the story. The journal entries described things that had happened before the point in time that the story began, so provided insight into why the current situation had arrived, or gave clues to what might happen next. The journal entries were a way to give background on the story characters.

Constructing Meaning

What did Sam mean when he told Bando that he was ready to learn how to generate electricity with his mill and make Zella and Alice happy?

Sam had been very resistant to changes in his lifestyle. He was happy with things the way they were and feared changes. He liked a simple life and saw electricity as something that would forever change his simple life. After all that happened with Frightful, and the lengths that Alice went to get him a hawk to replace his falcon, Sam learned that there are some changes that can make a person feel good. This insight makes him ready to bring electricity to his mountain and make others happy.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story takes place in and around the Catskill and the Adirondack Mountains. Sam and Alice live off the land under very primitive conditions. This story could be compared to several others in children's literature such as *The Sign of the Beaver* by Elizabeth George Speare, *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, or *The Swiss Family Robinson*. The students can compare and contrast the settings of these stories.

Understanding Literary Features The main theme is that freedom is important to all living creatures. There are many animals who are protected by being placed on the Endangered Species list. The students can research this list and how and why animals are placed there. They

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can find ways that people are helping to return species to the wild. There are also examples of animals who have been taken off the list because they are no longer at risk. Additionally, much has been written about the program to return the wolves to Yellowstone National Forest. The students could look at that program or others like it.

Understanding Characterization Sam thinks of the animals as friends and neighbors. The description of Jesse Coon James makes her seem like a person rather than a raccoon. Ask the class to find other animals that Sam treats this way in the story. Discuss other works such as *Charlotte's Web* and *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. The children might enjoy acting out or writing a section of the story making Frightful or Crystal or the weasel actually talk and behave like humans.

Understanding the Author's Craft Portions of this story were told by flashback and by reading the entries in Sam's journal. Ask the students to discuss ways the whole story could have been told in journal form. They would have to change the sequence of the story because the places where Sam reads his journal would not appear in his journal, so these portions would have to be put in chronological order. How would the tone and mood of the story change if told in this way? What if the story were told by an all-knowing narrator or by Bando? How would the story be different?