

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Call of the Wild

by
Jack London

Book Information

Jack London, The Call of the Wild

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201 Pages

Book Level: 8.0

Interest Level: MG

Buck, a dog that has been forced into the harsh life of a sled dog, befriends a man seeking his fortune in the Klondike gold fields, and must ultimately decide whether to stay with his master or obey his instinct to join the wolves.

Topics: Animals, Dogs; Animals, Wolves; Classics, Classics (All); Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Power Lessons AR, Grade 8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Buck the main character of the story, a mixed breed of St. Bernard and Scotch shepherd

Dave, Sol-leks, Billee, Pike, Dub, Joe other members of the dog team

Francois and Perrault the first owners of Buck after his abduction and sale

Hal, Charles and Mercedes people from the States who purchase Buck after his work with Francois and Perrault, inexperienced northern travelers who terribly abuse the dogs

John Thornton the man who rescues Buck from Hal and company, who is a kind, fair man whom Buck grows to love and respect

Spitz Buck's biggest rival on the dog team

Vocabulary

aurora borealis streamers or arches of light in the night sky that are believed to be of electrical origin and appear especially in the arctic regions

demesne an estate, region or realm

fiend a devil, demon, or excessively cruel being

slipshod careless

swarthy dark in color or complexion

Synopsis

The Call of the Wild is Jack London's chronicle of Buck, a mixed-breed dog who is sold illicitly from his home in California, and ends up as a work dog in the Canadian wilderness. After several owners, he finally heeds the call of his ancestors, and returns free to the wild.

Buck begins his long journey from the home of Judge Miller in Santa Clara when Manuel, the gardener's helper, sells Buck to gain money for his gambling addiction. In captivity, Buck learns to fear punishment by the club when he is put in his place by a man in a red sweater. He is then purchased by two Canadian Government mail carriers, Francois and Perrault, who show him how to be a part of a dog team. Along with these other dogs, he toils in the traces through many long and arduous miles through the frozen wilderness of Canada. He learns not only the law of the club, but the law of the wild, which is to either kill or be killed. Tension abounds among the dogs, with Buck vying for leadership with another dog called Spitz. He eventually kills Spitz, and becomes the leader of the team.

After his experiences with Francois and Perrault, he is purchased by Hal and Charles, men ill-prepared to traverse the wilderness. In their frustration, they abuse the dogs, some to the point of death. Buck survives because he is rescued from Hal by John Thornton, a prospector living near the White River. With this man, Buck comes to realize mutual love and adoration. Buck saves Thornton's life on several occasions, making quite a reputation for himself, and wins an enormous amount of money for him by singlehandedly pulling a sled laden with a thousand pounds for one hundred yards. With the money, Thornton and his partners head to mining country, where Buck begins to feel even stronger the stirrings of his wild side. He romps with a wolf-brother, and takes longer and longer excursions into the wilderness, where he brings down a moose.

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When he does return to once again be with John Thornton, he finds the men dead and their camp ransacked by a group of Indians known as Yeehats. The precious gold unearthed by Thornton had not been taken. Buck mourns his loss and then returns once again to the pack, where he becomes a legend among the Yeehats.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Buck is given thoughts and feelings, but except for a howl or two, no dialogue. If Buck had been given a voice by London, what might he say?

Buck's commentary might center around the sadness of his plight, the cruelty of his masters, his desire to be a leader and his yearning to be among his own kind in the wild.

Literary Analysis

There are several antagonists in the book. Who are they and how do they affect Buck?

Buck's first adversary is Manuel, who sells him, followed by the man in the red sweater, who teaches him to fear the club. He then encounters Spitz, although it could be said that Buck is an antagonist to Spitz. He is mistreated the worst by Hal and Charles, men who purchase him and kill off many of the team by their misunderstanding of dogs and the wilderness. Finally, Buck is his own antagonist, because he wars within himself when he is called by primitive urges to return to the wild.

Inferential Comprehension

What would have happened to Buck had Thornton never been attacked by the Yeehats?

Throughout the book, London makes it clear that Buck is being called to the wild, thus the title of the story. It seems most likely that Buck might continue to love and respect Thornton, but he would have nonetheless joined his wolf brothers in the pack.

Constructing Meaning

How might dogs such as Billee or Sol-leks survive alone in the wild?

Dogs, like people, have different personalities. Billee is portrayed as a whiner and one who tries to placate; he might have a difficult time surviving, for he seems to lack drive and self-confidence. Sol-leks is quieter and keeps to himself if not provoked, but can be made quite angry given the correct circumstances, such as approaching him from his blind side. Sol-leks, despite his blindness, would probably fare better than Billee in the wild because he is more aggressive.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Jack London was himself a gold miner at one point in his life, albeit an unsuccessful one. He traveled to the Klondike, staying at various places mentioned in the book: Dyea, Chilkoot Pass, and Dawson City. Find a large map of the area and label these places. Calculate where the dog team of Francois and Perrault traversed during their twelve hundred mile trek.

Understanding the Author's Craft Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* was first published in 1903. Because of the time during which it was written, the language and its structure are different from that of the present time. Take a passage such as the description of the rabbit chase, and rewrite it in more modern terms. Find several words throughout the book that are not in use today, and define them.

Comparing and Contrasting During the time

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frame of this story, it appears that it was common practice to bend the will of animals by any abusive means necessary. Dogs were treated as slave labor, forced to haul loads, and beaten into submission, the way the team was treated in the story by Hal. Research animal rights laws of today, and see how animals are protected from such inhumane practices. Research modern treatment and uses of dog teams.

Recognizing Details When Buck won the sled-hauling bet for Thornton, the man received sixteen hundred dollars. This was quite a large sum of money for that time, although prospecting towns sold goods at inflated prices. London tells that Thornton was able to pay off some debts and then go on to search for a lost mine. Obtain a book that discusses money values, and estimate what sixteen hundred dollars in 1903 would be worth today. What could one do with that sum of money?