

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Toughboy & Sister by Kirkpatrick Hill

## Book Information

Kirkpatrick Hill, Toughboy & Sister

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121 Pages

Book Level: 4.8

Interest Level: MG

Ten-year-old Toughboy and his younger sister are stranded when their drunken father dies at a remote fishing cabin in the Yukon and, as a result, they spend a summer trying to cope with dwindling food supplies and hostile wildlife.

**Award:** BCCB Blue Ribbon Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Canadian Content, Canadian Content (All); English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 11, 90%; Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Sisters; Natural Environments, Wilderness; READNOW - Renaissance Learning, RLI - Grades 6-8 (Theme: Surviving)

## Main Characters

Mamma the mother of Toughboy and Sister, who dies in childbirth

Mary Ann Danov a friend of the Silas family who gives Toughboy and Sister cookies

Daddy (John Silas) the father of Toughboy and Sister, who dies from alcohol abuse

Mutt a "retired" sled dog who keeps Toughboy and Sister company at the camp and warns them of the bear

Natasha Toughboy and Sister's neighbor, who watches over them in the village and comes out to rescue them at the fish camp

Sam Danov a friend of Daddy who gives him a beer

Sister (Annie Laurie) a young orphan who manages to survive an entire summer at an isolated fish camp with her brother, Toughboy

Toughboy (John Silas, Jr.) Sister's older brother, who is concerned about showing people how grown-up he is despite his young age

## Vocabulary

**bannock** a flat biscuit that can be fried on a skillet

**cache** a place to hide or store things

**clabas** a knife with a curved blade used for cutting fish

**kicker** a term used to refer to the boat's motor

**potlatch** a festival or ceremony among the Pacific Northwest Indians in which a host gives gifts to the guests

**slough** a pool or swamp of marshy water and ground; an inlet or backwater from a river

## Synopsis

Toughboy and Sister are surrounded by strangers in the cool October days following their mother's death. People come from all over the surrounding Alaskan villages for Mamma's funeral, and Daddy leaves to get drunk somewhere. One night Toughboy and Sister overhear a group of women talking about who will take custody of them, and they are afraid that they will be separated. Daddy returns, however, and asserts that he can take care of his own children. In spring the ice melts off the Yukon River, and it is time for Toughboy, Sister, and Daddy to move to their remote fishing camp for the summer. Here they will catch and smoke salmon to sell. On the way to the fishing camp, Daddy stops at the Danovs' camp. Mrs. Danov scolds Mr. Danov and Daddy for drinking beer in front of the children. After they arrive at their own fishing camp, they begin to unpack. Daddy, however, looks uneasy and says that he needs to go back to town to get something that he had forgotten. Toughboy and Sister know that he wants to drink. Toughboy and Sister take care of themselves that night and Daddy returns drunk the next day, passes out in the boat, and is left there to sleep all night. In the morning, Toughboy and Sister discover that Daddy is not sleeping; he's dead. To make matters worse, the boat loosens from the stake that it was tied to and floats away downstream, leaving them stranded.

Weeks go by, and Toughboy and Sister learn how to cook their own food, burn tree fungus to repel mosquitoes, use a fishnet to catch salmon, wash

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their clothes, and survive on their own. After a terrifying encounter with a bear, the depletion of their food supply, and the accidental loss of their matches, their neighbor Natasha finally arrives to rescue them. They have survived an entire summer alone in the wilderness and will now go to live with Natasha until they are old enough to return again.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

How and why did Daddy die? Examine evidence from Daddy's past leading up to the day of his death to determine what problems he had, what made him go back into town, and what could have contributed to his demise. You will have to make inferences about specific details in order to put together a believable explanation for how and why he died.

*Daddy was an alcoholic. He often abused alcohol to treat his pain, and sometimes left Toughboy and Sister alone so that he could get drunk. Although he was trying to cut back on his habit, the one beer that Sam Danov gave him was enough to whet his appetite for more. Knowing that he would not have access to alcohol for the rest of the summer, he may have consumed more alcohol than usual on the night before his death. His exhaustion from the river travel coupled with the unusually hot weather (the first warm day of the year) probably caused him to pass out face first in the boat, which could easily have lead to suffocation, drowning, or blood-alcohol poisoning on the day that he died.*

### Literary Analysis

Explain one of the major conflicts that develops throughout this book's plot. Consider the possibilities of character vs. character, character vs. nature, character vs. self, and character vs. society in your attempt to describe the story's conflict. Examine the characters involved, the issues creating the conflict, and the effect the conflict has on the meaning or structure of the story.

*There can be a variety of correct answers. One such conflict is Toughboy and Sister vs. society, because of a community standard that expects young orphans to go to foster homes, even if it means separating the family. The following characters are involved: Toughboy and Sister, who need to prove that they can take care of themselves; Natasha, who holds the power of deciding where the children will go; Gladys, who could have taken Sister away; and Auntie Dina, who could have taken Toughboy away. The problem is that society considers Toughboy and Sister too young to take care of themselves, yet they do not know of anybody who is willing to take in both children. This conflict prompts Toughboy and Sister to survive on their own and prove to Natasha that they could take care of themselves and that they belong together.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Would Toughboy and Sister have been allowed to stay together if they had gotten on the boat and floated down the river until they were rescued?

*Probably not. By staying alone at the fishing camp, Toughboy and Sister were able to prove to Natasha that they were capable of taking care of themselves. This convinced Natasha to take them both home to live with her, instead of sending them off to separate foster homes.*

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## Constructing Meaning

What does Natasha mean when she repeatedly tells Toughboy and Sister, "You come from good people"? Do you think that Toughboy and Sister are "good people" by Natasha's standards?

*Natasha means that Toughboy and Sister's mother was a good woman who took care of her family and herself, worked hard, and didn't get into trouble. Natasha first makes this statement when she catches Toughboy running around late at night and differentiates "good people" from those who stay out late and get into trouble. Toward the end of the book she equates "good people" with "strong people" when she compliments Toughboy and Sister on their survival skills. The "people" aspect could refer to Toughboy's mother, father, grandparents, or ancestry. Because Toughboy and Sister are able to work hard and take care of themselves without getting into trouble at the fishing camp, they are "good people" as their mother and ancestors were.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Literary Features** An important theme in this book is the danger of alcoholism. Students can find examples of how Daddy's drinking problem affected Toughboy and Sister's life, the emotions that are involved with this theme, and how alcoholism affects the society in which we live. This theme is multi-disciplinary and can be examined in relation to history, psychology, science, and health. You can bring in case studies, newspaper or magazine articles, videos, speakers, or any other media device to supplement a class discussion on this very important theme.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Toughboy and Sister belong to a Northwest Athabascan Indian tribe. This book makes many cultural references that the students will find interesting. Student can use the library or internet to discover the locations of towns such as Kodiak, Galena, Koyukuk, Nulato, and Tanana, the tradition of the potlatch, the practices of the medicine person, or the tools and methods used for fishing (fish wheel, clabas, nets, etc). They may also work in

groups to develop inferential explanations from the story of how a fish wheel might work, what the typical family life was like in the villages, or what impact white society has had on the culture. For example, how did life change when the snowmobile replaced the dogsled?

**Making Predictions** *Toughboy and Sister* can be used to give students practice at making predictions. You could allow the students to work together in groups to brainstorm creative possibilities for what Toughboy and Sister will become when they grow up. They should then find as many details from the story as possible to support their prediction. For example, Toughboy may become a big-game hunter as a result of his experience with the bear. When they are finished brainstorming, have the groups write a short character sketch of Toughboy or Sister twenty years after the book ends. They should incorporate personality traits, setting, special skills, and a lot of creativity into this assignment. Allow the students to use their sense of humor and imagination to make the writing fun.

**Responding to Literature** Students should be able to make a personal connection with the story. You can ask the students to imagine themselves in Toughboy and Sister's position and describe what they might have done differently. If the students have a brother or sister, you can ask them to reflect on their relationship with their sibling and compare it to Toughboy and Sister's relationship with each other. Would they be able to enjoy an entire summer with only one sibling to talk to? If a student does not have a sibling, the student could reflect more on what they would do to survive or get help. This can be turned into a creative writing exercise using narrative or journal format.