

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Winter Room

by
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Book Information

Gary Paulsen, The Winter Room

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A young boy growing up on a northern Minnesota farm describes the scenes around him and recounts his old Norwegian uncle's tales of an almost mythological logging past.

Award: Judy Lopez Memorial Award for Children's Literatur; Margaret A. Edwards Award; Newbery Honor

Topics: Countries/Regions, Norway; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 5, 90%; Places, Farms; Popular Groupings, Middle Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Science, Agriculture; U.S. States/Regions, Minnesota

Main Characters

Alida Uncle David's beautiful, young wife who died in childbirth

Eldon an eleven-year-old farm boy who narrates the story of his family's life on a northern Minnesota farm

Father a hardworking and tender farmer

Mother a dedicated wife and mother who takes pleasure in simple things

Nels David's brother, who brought David to the United States with him after David's wife passed away

Rex the family's old farm dog

Stacker one of the family's large workhorses

Uncle David an elderly widower and former logger who lives on his nephew's farm with his brother; he tells stories that bind the family together

Wayne Eldon's thirteen-year-old brother, who has taken on more adult responsibilities on the farm; he and Eldon are close but scrappy

Vocabulary

ferments undergoes a chemical reaction in which the sugars and starches in a compound are converted to carbon dioxide and alcohol

geldings castrated animals, especially horses

harrow a farm implement with a heavy frame and discs used to further break down plowed soil

mica an aluminum silicate mineral that comes apart in flexible, often transparent sheets

peavy a tool having a long wooden handle, a point, and a hook used for handling logs

posse a group of people organized by a sheriff for law enforcement

snoose chewing tobacco

tallow hard fat from body parts of cattle, sheep, pigs, etc. that is used to make candles

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Eldon is a keen observer of life on the northern Minnesota farmstead where he lives with his thirteen-year-old brother, Wayne, his father and mother, old Uncle David, and David's brother, Nels. He describes the rhythm and work of their lives from spring through winter of this year in his boyhood, interjecting incidents from previous years to give a complete picture of his family.

Spring is a soft time on the farm according to Eldon, in contrast to Wayne's teacher's beliefs that spring is a time of awakening. Eldon describes it as a time when everything melts and gets messy, and when the cows become stuck in muck getting from the barn to the pasture. The smells are overwhelming. When the calves are born, it is the boys' job to teach them to drink milk from a bucket. They take turns working the cream separator. Work is not so intense yet at this time of year, and there is time for Eldon's parents to go to town on a Saturday night if they wish. Eldon recalls a time two years past when Wayne found a book about cowboys at the beer and dance hall on one of those nights. When they got

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home, the boys started reenacting the scenes. Wayne became daring and attempted a leap from the hayloft onto one of their horses, which ended in a hilarious disaster.

Summer means work on the farm from sunup to sundown. Father starts working the fields with an old tractor and plow. He follows that with a team of work horses. Eldon cannot do the hard work of Father, Uncle David, Nels, or Wayne because of a childhood illness. The Ransens, a family from a neighboring farm, come to help with the haying and thrashing, and in return, Eldon's family goes to the Ransens' farm to help them with theirs.

Fall starts with a trip to the lake. The boys swim while the adults sit and talk. Eldon hates late fall when all the grain is stored and it is time to butcher the livestock. He watches the killing, however, even though it brings back memories of his childhood illness.

Winter arrives with the first snow, which transforms the landscape. Winter is also the time the family gathers in the evening when all the chores are done to sit around the wood stove in a downstairs room. They never use this room except in winter, thus they call it their winter room. They gather to hear stories told by Uncle David, who had emigrated from Norway and worked as a logger until settling on the farm. He begins each evening with the story of Alida, his beautiful wife, who died in childbirth. He admits he was broken by her death and still is. Nels found him wandering along a fjord and brought him to America with him. The story chokes everyone up every time Uncle David tells it. He follows that story with others that vary from night to night, and Eldon relates two he feels highlight the types of stories Uncle David tells. One is a legend about a Viking warrior named Orud, whose thirst for power brought ruin to his village. The other story is about a logger named Crazy Alen, who loved playing practical jokes and played his best one as he was dying.

This routine, however, is almost ruined forever one day. A fierce storm is expected, and the men chop enough wood to last until the storm and fierce cold

pass. Father uses a huge double-bladed ax that once belonged to Uncle David. When it comes time to settle by the wood stove, Uncle David starts his storytelling differently, this time by beginning with a tale about a woodcutter whose skill with an ax was so amazing that other loggers would stop their work just to watch him. Father interrupts the story and says that Uncle David is describing himself. Eldon senses Wayne tensing and getting angry. The next day in the granary, Wayne, in tears, tells Eldon that Uncle David is a liar and a braggart. Eldon realizes Wayne has taken all of Uncle David's stories literally. Uncle David overhears Wayne's accusations and is pained. He stops telling stories at night and there is tension in the air. A few days pass and Eldon decides to fight Wayne because he is angry he ruined things. While tussling up in the hayloft, they see Uncle David enter the granary and take out two axes from the bin and then stand before a length of cord wood. He is transformed momentarily to a young man as he raises the axes and swings one into each end, cleanly splitting the log, with the axe heads meeting in the middle.

The story ends when evening comes that night and Uncle David begins with the story of Alida, and the boys listen.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why do the adults sit in the same places every time they gather around the woodstove?

Throughout the story, Eldon tells about the rhythm and routine of the family's life. They have defined roles and responsibilities, and the routine brings comfort to them. It reassures them that all is well. So it is with their seating arrangement. They all know their "role" when they come to the winter room. The arrangement brings order and comfort to the end of their day.

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Literary Analysis

Of all the stories that Uncle David has told, why does Eldon choose the three stories, and what do they reveal about Uncle David?

The three stories, "Alida," "Orud the Terrible," and "Crazy Alen" show different aspects of Uncle David's character. The story of "Alida" shows his tenderness, sensitivity, and loyalty. It is not surprising, then, when Uncle David is devastated by Wayne's remark. With "Orud the Terrible," Uncle David reveals a dark side of the history of his ancestors and the damage they did. This story also shows that there is retribution for bad behavior and sometimes long-term consequences. Perhaps it parallels his guilt over the clear-cutting of trees in his new country. "Crazy Alen" shows that Uncle David sometimes takes things lightly and enjoys the humor in situations. In some ways, he can laugh at death, telling his family he wants to be thrown on the manure pile when he dies.

Inferential Comprehension

What prompts Uncle David to begin differently the night he tells the story of the woodcutter?

Most likely the preparation for the storm inspires Uncle David to change his routine. The men and boys had been cutting and stacking wood over the course of many days, and it may have reminded Uncle David of his days as a cutter in the forests. Perhaps seeing Father use the old ax rekindles his memory, and he may yearn for his youth again, remembering how much he accomplished in a day. His cutting days may have somewhat healed the intense pain he felt over Alida's death. Maybe the woodcutting for the storm gives him a renewed sense of relief from his grief, so he starts the night's storytelling differently that evening.

Constructing Meaning

Sometimes authors use a series of statements to emphasize an idea. In *The Winter Room*, when Uncle David tells the story of Crazy Alen, he uses such a series to emphasize the intensity of the cold. He says, "In the middle of that winter when it was so cold you could spit and it would bounce, when steel ax heads broke if they weren't warmed before you chopped," Ask the students to continue this series using their own examples.

Students should come up with a few examples to finish this series, creating an image of intense cold. Encourage them to be creative and use images from their own experiences. This exercise could be adapted to make a series of statements about other conditions, such as heat, poverty, etc.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details The descriptions of the farm and its buildings are quite detailed. From the narrative, ask the students to draw a bird's-eye view of the inside of the family's house and barn, placing the various pieces of furniture or equipment in the proper rooms. The pictures could be displayed around the classroom. Have the students discuss their interpretations of the descriptions.

Understanding the Author's Craft Uncle David is a master storyteller. He uses colorful descriptions, maintains suspense, and elicits emotional responses from his audience. Encourage students to become story writers and storytellers. Ask them to write a short story and then tell it with expression. Stories can be true or made up, funny or serious. Before starting this exercise, conduct a class discussion about what makes a good story. Have students work in small groups to offer each other suggestions for improving their work, and have them rehearse their presentations so they can achieve maximum effectiveness in their performance.

Comparing and Contrasting When Uncle David and Nels first came to this new land, it was covered with vast forests of huge trees. Have the

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students do some research to find out how, a century ago, trees were harvested and transported to cities that used the lumber to build homes and businesses. The students can contrast these methods with current methods used by the logging industry, noting modern conservation methods the industry employs to ensure forests continue to be a usable and renewable resource.

Responding to Literature Even though there are some modern conveniences at the time the story takes place, the family lives a rather spartan existence. Ask the students, with their parents' permission, to give up a modern convenience for a day. They can choose to be without electricity, the telephone, or a car. Have them journal about their day and how it is different from their usual routine. For instance, if they give up electricity, what do they do differently without TV, computers, lights, stereos, refrigeration, and washing machines? Have them talk about their experiences with the class.