Concept Analysis; Hatchet


Summary: While flying a small plane over the Canadian wilderness, Brian Robeson’s pilot suffers a heart attack and he is left alone trying to land a plane. After surviving the crash landing Brian must survive alone in the wilderness with nothing but a hatchet. As the adventure unfolds, thirteen year old Brian faces extreme physical dangers such as starvation, porcupines, bears, wolves, and tornadoes. Not only must Brian try to survive in the hostile Canadian wilderness, but he also must deal with his parents’ divorce and the daunting thought that he might never be rescued.

Organizational Patterns: *Hatchet* is divided into nineteen chapters with an epilogue. Brian is the narrator and he flashes back and forth between the present and past, his recollections always usually have to do with his family and the divorce of his parents. We see the novel through Brian’s thoughts and he commonly writes very short sentences, only one word at times, that reflect his stream of conscious. These sentences clearly identify the subjects that are consuming Brian’s mind and bring a great insight for the reader. *Hatchet* isn’t a part of a series but Gary Paulsen did write four other book’s about the main character, Brian Robeson. Gary Paulsen takes a look at life for Brian after he survives through the adventures of *Hatchet*. The books are *Brian’s Return*, *Brian’s Winter*, *The River*, and *Brian’s Hunt*. If you needed to split Hatchet into thirds you could begin before the crash with chapters one through three, his time after the crash when he is in his shelter in chapters 4 through fifteen, and thirdly, after the tornado when his shelter is ruined and he rescued in chapters sixteen through the epilogue.

Central Question/Enduring Issue: Survival

How does difficulty build strength? How desperate would you have to be before you voluntarily ate turtle eggs? Being pushed to the limit of our capabilities brings about growth. Even though Brian didn’t put himself in this situation on purpose he still became an almost new person by the end of the novel. When his rescuer comes to find him, instead of being ecstatic about surviving he offers the man some food. When he first crashes and sleeps out with the mosquitoes his skin gets terribly sunburned and he is soar from the impact of the plane hitting the water. As he spends more time in the wilderness and conquers his weaknesses, his skin becomes accustomed to the sun, he learns that mosquitoes avoid smoke and his wounds heal. There are physical manifestations that Brian is becoming stronger because
of this terribly difficult situation. Brian sees the stark contrast between being able to run to the grocery store for food and having to hunt for survival. Humility is a key influence in Brian’s growth, when he recognizes his dependence on food he has a new perspective on life. Brian gains an appreciation for his basic human needs like fire, water and food. After feeling completely helpless, he can move forward with the understanding that life is precious.

**Why do we try to survive during hopeless times, and how can people handle loneliness?**

**Essentially, what is life worth living for?** It seems that even after all hope is lost that Brian continues to survive. After the crash instead of lying down to die Brian makes an effort at survival. His determination is driven by his family. Brian’s circumstance is so extreme that we see him handle loneliness in multiple ways throughout the novel. It seems to present the idea that we have a choice of how to handle our loneliness. In the story Brian uses reminiscence to keep optimistic; he thinks of his mother’s cooking and things that remind him of home to keep his spirits up when he feels so down. On page 56 Brian thinks of his friend, Terry, at home who he wishes were with him. His connection to his friends and family is a driving force for Brian to continue to try to survive. When Brian seems to be at his lowest point after the plane has past and he losses any hope that he had once had he deals with his loneliness by trying to kill himself by cutting himself with his hatchet. After this despairing moment has passed he reflects back on the situation with fear of how overwhelming the emotion was. Brian makes a resolution never to let his emotions get out of control.

**Issues related to this Study of Literature**

**Theme(s):**

**Isolation**- Brian is completely isolated from the rest of the world physically and mentally. Brian almost never speaks to another person throughout the novel, leaving only his thoughts to be our understanding of what is happening. It is apparent that Brian goes through stages of isolation. At the opening of the novel he is in the plane with the pilot but because of the noise of the engine it becomes impossible to speak. When he first crash lands in the forest his thoughts are frantic but he has no one to talk to and is left completely alone. He keeps returning to the devastation he feels due to his parents’ divorce, which isolates him from his family. He is isolated in knowledge as well because he saw his mother cheating on his father but his father doesn’t know. Keeping this secret eats away at Brian and makes him feel even more lonesome. We never witness groups or society in the novel, it only deals with individuals; Brian in the wilderness, his mother dropping him off at the airport alone in the car, his father who is isolated from the family up in Canada, and the pilot who works in a plane where communication is impossible.

**Irony**- Interestingly, animals are the only characters in the novel who have families. Brian encounters a mother and baby bear along with a family of wolves. Irony comes into play because the only unity that he finds is out in the isolation of the Canadian forest; he becomes one with his environment rather than with people. There is also dramatic irony when the reader sees Brian notice the fish in the water when he first crashes but he doesn’t make the connection that he can eat fish until much later.
Survival- At the heart of this story is the transformation of Brian from a confused and hopeless teenager into a competent, self-reliant person, quite literally. Being forced to provide for his physical needs allows him to conquer the emotional pitfalls relating to his family.

Setting:

Brian is from New York but he is flying over the Canadian wilderness to go visit his father while his parents are going through a divorce. He crash lands the plane in a small “L” shaped lake in the middle of a green forest thick with evergreens. He spends most of his time in an alcove cut out of the bottom of a granite boulder sitting next to the lake. He sleeps on what he calls sand, which is most likely finely ground granite that leads into the lake. The landscape is full of berries and animals who Brian encounters more than once.

Conflicts:

Man vs. nature- Brian battles the wilderness throughout the entire novel. He must overcome the challenges of survival from a bear, tornado, wolves, starvation, and wounds from a porcupine.

Man vs. himself- On page 122 Brian becomes so hopeless that he attempts suicide. His isolation has driven him into despair. When Brian thinks he hears a rescue plane pass him by he has lost motivation to survive. He must battle his own will to survive in order to triumph over his struggles. He also is having an internal struggle over whether he should tell his father about his mother cheating on him. Morality comes into question about determining what is right and what is wrong in that situation.

Foreshadowing: There are hints spread throughout that novel that a careful reader might pick up on. At the beginning of the novel Brian’s mom gives him a hatchet. Obviously since the title is Hatchet we can figure out that this is an important event, but it takes close reading to figure out why. If you examine the possible uses for a hatchet you might be able to anticipate his need to make a fire. After the plane crashes Brian swims to safety and then sits on the shore and notices a fish jump out of the water. To someone anticipating survival they might have thought immediately of food but it takes days for Brian to think of fishing to sustain himself. His original encounter with the Bear was lucky, but it gave us a hint about the constant presence of animals around him.

Narration: This is a first person narrative told from the point of view of Brian, a thirteen year old boy.

Allusion: Although the text itself doesn’t have many direct allusions to outside texts, the themes of the novel allude to many other survival novels; Swiss Family Robinson (his last name even sounds familiar), Robinson Crusoe, Lord of the Flies, The Cay, and Return of Santa Paws.
Affective Issues Related to the Work:

Cheating- Since Brian knows that his mother cheated on his father he is left with a torn conscience about whether he should tell his dad. Students can resonate with this feeling about whose confidences they should keep. It is difficult when you feel responsible for telling something to someone that you love that will hurt them. Drawing the line between minding your own business and butting into someone else’s issues is very difficult, especially when dealing with delicate issues.

Suicide- Brian’s attempt at suicide can be very shocking to students. It may be hard for any to relate with these extreme feelings, but students how have bipolar disorder, depression or other circumstances may be able to understand the feeling that life isn’t worth living. You do not need to single these students out in any way but it would be naïve not to think that students have or do feel emotions that drastic.

Independence- With his isolation Brian wishes desperately that his friend Terry could be with him. It is interesting that he was the first person Brian thought of after his crash who he needed. Students reading this book rely on friendships heavily to sustain their emotional needs. Looking to friends for support is something students will be affected by. Isolation accompanies his sense of independence, and it seems that most teenagers have this same feeling when they are breaking out on their own (even if that means wearing a new fashion to school). Growing into your own identity is a highly personal process that means there are times of loneliness.

Vocabulary Issues:

Hatchet is written with the language that a thirteen year old boy would think of, so there aren’t many, if any words that would be unknown to the reader. Students ranging from 5th grade and up should have no trouble at all reading this novel.

Kingfisher- A small to medium sized bird that is typically brightly colored. All have large heads, long, sharp, pointed bills, short legs, and stubby tails. They consume a wide range of prey as well as fish, usually caught by swooping down from a perch.

Also Mary Oliver writes a poem about Kingfishers that might be interesting supplemental reading for students.

Background Knowledge:

It seems that no background knowledge is necessary for students to understand the text, but below are some items that might help them visualize the setting in which Brian finds himself.

Plays on language- “Clouddown” and “foolbirds” were both words that Brian made up while being alone in the wilderness, it gives us a glimpse into his thoughts because he forms words by which he can convey
his particular experience. Shakespeare did this with language constantly; he would just make up words that seemed to convey the meaning that he wanted. What do these words tell us about Brian in each situation?

Canadian wilderness- This is a densely green forest with lakes and granite rock scattered throughout. Showing pictures to students of this area will enhance

Airplanes- Brian crashes in a Cessna 406 (pictured on the left) which can be more fully understood with some pictures to help visualize the situation.

Gary Paulsen anecdotes- At the back of the book Paulsen includes some personal stories that help us to see where he came up with the ideas for the novel. Here are two quotes pulled from the back:

“Virtually everything that happens to Brian in the book has happened in one form or another to me, just in the process of living. But there are two things that I made myself sit down and do as pure research. First, I ate a raw turtle egg. I was sitting on my porch by a small lake and I saw a snapping turtle come out of the water and lay her clutch of eggs, so I knew they were fresh. I also knew that the skunks would get the eggs that night. So I decided to try it. It was not the high point of my eating life. I cut the end off, held it up to my mouth without looking, and slurped it down. Or tried to. It got hung up about halfway down my throat and I had to work really, really hard to get it all the way down. It tasted something like old motor oil or tired Vaseline.”

Implications for Students of Diversity: Hatchet has no ethnic or cultural diversity, but it does address the issue of homes and how his home life has become completely changed. Having divorced parents creates a completely new system that children operate within and it can be a touchy subject no matter what the student’s home life is like. It is important to remember not to attack any of the emotions that Brian is going through as meaningless because most likely you will have students in your class that have divorced parents.

Gender Issues:

At first glance it may seem like there are no gender issues in this novel because Brian is alone in the wilderness but in the very absence of women, it could be a comment on a woman’s role. The only female in the novel is his mother who is adulteress. Women are placed in a negative light because the only representation they have in the novel is that of Brian’s mother. It is interesting to think that as a mother, she did supply Brian with the one tool that he
needed to make a fire and survive. We can derive that mothers are the source of good and evil in this novel.

Project Ideas:

“Soundscape” - This is an idea created by Leonora Macy who wrote an article about studying a novel through drama. The activity is described as “sound, song, words and phrases, either pre-recorded or performed live, [which] are used to create the mood and atmosphere of a character’s lived experience.” Have the students create the Brian’s wilderness “soundscape” in groups where they have to create the sounds described in the novel. On page 41 Brian explains how through the silence his surroundings are filled with sound. Use this section to help make the novel come alive for the students.

Interview the character (drama strategy) - In order to more completely interact with the text, students need to ask questions of the text. This is a role play activity where the students formulate questions for Brian that will eventually be turned into a news article. Designate a couple of “Brian’s” who will answer the questions as accurately as possible. Here are some sample questions:

How did you make fire and survive?

What did you eat?

What is the first thing you are going to do when you get home?

How did you build a shelter?

What kept you going for all that time alone in the wilderness?

These questions will help students to synthesize the events of the novel and get personal insight into Brian’s experience

Short sentences - Put students into groups of three to four and assign them specific pages from sections where you are trying to get into Brian’s psyche. Have each group go through the page numbers and record all of the short sentences that Paulsen devotes an entire paragraph to. After they have recorded them down in sequence with the pages post lists on the board. Find similarities and differences between what Brian thinks about at the beginning and end of the novel. Ask what implications those words or sentences have about Brian? How does knowing these words taken out of the story help us understand Brian better?

Enrichment Resources:

When Brian is desperately trying to catch a fish I thought that a good supplement would be to watch the scene in Mulan when the warriors are training for battle as they try to catch fish and sing “be a man.” It seemed to have a great connection into the text and the montage shows the growth of each person, similar to Brian’s own experience.

For information about the Gary Paulsen’s website:
http://www.randomhouse.com/features/garypaulsen/