

Guided reading

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Part one: You are entering Camp Green Lake

Chapters 1–2

This opening section is designed to hook the reader straight away. It is littered with unanswered questions – a classic authorial strategy to encourage engagement with the text. What happened to the lake? What happened to the town and its people?

Discuss the choice Stanley is given at the end of Chapter 2, what do the children think he will decide? (Will he choose jail or Camp Green Lake?)

Ask the children what is unusual about Stanley's name. (It is palindromic.)

Chapter 3

Questions begin to be answered in this chapter, and the seeds of the different, interweaving stories are sown. Draw attention to the two threads: Stanley's story and that of his no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather. Create a family tree to avoid confusion:

Elya Yelnats – great-great-grandfather to Stanley



Stanley Yelnats I – robbed by
Kissin' Kate Barlow



Stanley Yelnats II – Stanley's grandfather
(features in the film version, not in the book)



Stanley Yelnats III – father of our
hero and an inventor



Stanley Yelnats IV – sent to correction camp

Discuss the fact that Elya is our hero's great-great-grandfather, but Stanley-the-Inventor's great-grandfather.

Kissin' Kate Barlow is introduced in this chapter, although her significance to the story is as yet unknown. Discuss 'outlaws' and encourage

the children to consider whether they were all bad, and what might have driven them to their course of action.

Chapters 4–6

Consider how Sachar builds our knowledge of Stanley's character through inference. (Stanley considers different interpretations of the driver's parting advice to 'Be careful'.)

Point out that 'canteen' is the American word for 'water bottle'.

Can the children explain Mr. Pendanski's comment, 'You may have done some bad things, but that doesn't mean you're a bad kid' in Chapter 5?

Why does Mr. Pendanski insist on using everyone's proper names, and the boys insist on their nicknames? (Nicknames are important in terms of belonging/fellowship. Stanley feels accepted when he is dubbed 'Caveman'.) Notice the cruelty of Mr. Pendanski's attitude to Zero (Chapter 5).

Look at the reference to Barf Bag in Chapter 5. ('Lewis is still in hospital... He won't be returning.') Discuss the possibilities here and why not knowing what actually happened to Barf Bag raises tension.

Chapters 7–8

Chapter 7 is the longest to date. The structure – divided between describing Stanley's first hole and the story of Elya Yelnats – increases the sense of just how long and wearisome it was to dig that hole. What is the significance of Stanley declining a ride back to the camp? (Inner toughness; character development.)

Chapter 8 is a short, but significant, tension-raising chapter. Do the children make the connection between the diets of the yellow-spotted lizard and Mr. Sir? (Sunflower seeds.)

Chapters 9–12

Draw attention to the alteration of 'Rec(reation) Room' to 'Wreck Room'. Why might the boys

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break everything in a room that is designed for their recreation? Discuss how punishment can affect people (make them contrite, angry, resigned...). What do the children think is the most effective way to correct people?

Ask the children to consider the definition of 'interesting' in this section. Stanley's fossil does not qualify as 'interesting'. How does he feel about this? (A clearer explanation of the term would not raise such false hopes.)

Stanley begins to realise that bullies are cowards. Derrick Dunne would have been scared of the boys at Camp Green Lake.

How effective is Mr. Pendanski as camp counsellor? (Consider his use of platitudes, attitude to Zero, element of fantasy when discussing the boys' choice of career.)

Chapter 13

Stanley finds the metal tube and gives it to X-Ray, with the suggestion that the 'discovery' is saved until the following day. This continues Stanley's acceptance into the gang. Stanley is becoming less naïve. Discuss 'rite of passage' novels and Stanley's journey to greater self-awareness and understanding of his family history.

Chapters 14–18

Focus on how Sachar increases the reader's fear of the Warden: a character rarely seen but surrounded by rumour; she knows all the boys' nicknames; her treatment of Mr. Pendanski.

More emerges about Zero: he didn't watch *Sesame Street*; can't read; has no-one to write to; he thought Stanley was his friend but can't persuade him to teach him. How is Sachar positioning the reader? (Eliciting sympathy and curiosity.)

Chapters 19–22

Focus on the interactions between the different characters. Consider the encounter with the Warden. Is her reaction what the children would expect? Why is she punishing Mr. Sir and not Stanley? Who has dug Stanley's hole in his

absence? How do you know?

What do we learn about Zero's aptitude when Stanley starts teaching him? ('I'm not stupid...')

Detective stories are like jigsaw puzzles – lots of clues that eventually fit together to reveal the truth. The final sentences of Chapter 22 provide another piece of the puzzle – or possibly two. Could the lipstick cover have belonged to Kissin' Kate Barlow?

Chapters 23–26

This section comprises a flashback to the Kissin' Kate Barlow story. Note the change in the style of writing: it becomes more descriptive, featuring more adjectives and longer sentences. The theme of smelly feet appears again and Sam the onion seller is introduced. Discuss how the Green Lake townsfolk took no chances – they used both conventional and folk medicine. Were they wise to do that? There are parallels that can be drawn between Zero and Sam: both are intelligent but uneducated. Explain the problems associated with a white woman and a black man falling in love 100 years ago.

Note how quickly 'we value education here in Green Lake' (Chapter 25) becomes burning school books because of the teacher's illicit kiss with Sam.

At the end of the Chapter 26, Sachar directs a question at the reader: 'Whom did God punish?' Use this as the basis for a class discussion.

Questions surrounding the absence of a lake at Green Lake are answered at this point.

Chapters 27–28

Zero is revealed to be Hector Zeroni. The threads between the two families are being tied together. (Madame Zeroni and Elya Yelnats.)

In Chapter 28, at the end of part one, Kissin' Kate Barlow dies and with her dies the secret of where she has buried the treasure. She prophesies that Trout Walker and his descendants will be digging for the next hundred years. Can the children make connections with the present-day story?

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Part two: The last hole

Chapters 29–36

The change in the weather emphasises both the characters' emotions and plot details. God's thumb is revealed because of the unusual meteorological conditions. Invite the children to speculate about the shape of the rock. The change in the weather also presages the change in Zero's behaviour and his running away moves the plot forward.

Discuss how easy it is to misjudge people in the way Mr. Pendanski does Zero. Do the children think it is more character-building to teach Zero to read than to dig holes?

Examine how tension is raised as Stanley sets off to look for Zero. (Canteen empty from outset, sees his first set of lizards, odds of survival emphasised.)

In Chapter 34 a mirage is mentioned. The children could research this phenomenon.

How realistic is the finding of the boat the *Mary Lou*?

What is the purpose of *splosh*? (Connects Zero and Stanley with the earlier story; raises links in reader's mind.)

Zero and Stanley speculate about who Mary Lou was – but the reader is already knows. Why does Sachar do this? (Gives the reader a sense of superiority.)

Chapters 37–42

Can the children identify how these chapters on the mountain combine some of the story's puzzle pieces and link the three plot strands through character actions and themes? (The finding of water and carrying of Zero mirrors the Elya story; onions link them to the story of Sam and Kate; Zero and Stanley are linked via the sneakers.)

We also learn a great deal about Zero's childhood. Ask the children to pick out aspects of Zero's upbringing. (Family stole, didn't know it was wrong, did not go to school.) How might they describe it? (Bleak, unconventional.) Does

this explain why Zero keeps himself to himself?

Chapter 42 concludes with an authorial device. Stanley asks a question which is not answered – the reader must supply the answer unaided.

Chapters 43–47

The distance that Zero and Stanley walk back to camp is emphasised (as in Chapter 7 and the digging of the first hole) by interspersing the description of the walk with revelations about Zero's childhood.

Draw attention to Sachar's use of cliffhangers to finish Chapters 44, 45 and 47: as an authorial device to keep the reader engrossed.

In Chapter 46, as the camp staff wait for Zero and Stanley to die, they tell Stanley that he was to be released the previous day – his lawyer had been to visit. Discuss the irony of the situation.

Chapters 48–49

Ask the children to complete another part of the puzzle – the link between the Warden and the Kissin' Kate Barlow story. (Her surname is Walker; Kate died prophesying Trout's descendants would be digging for treasure for many years to come.)

Discuss the lawyer – a decisive, proactive woman who moves the story swiftly on.

What is the purpose of Chapter 49? (The anecdote about Sam and the onion juice that staved off lizards, allows the reader to make connections between this and the fact that the two boys were not bitten.) Rain starts to fall. What is the symbolism of this?

Part three: Filling in the holes

Chapter 50 fills in some of the detail, but again leaves the reader to 'fill in the holes'. Why is the ending so satisfying? (Threads tied together; story came full circle when Stanley carried Zero up the hill and broke the gypsy curse; themes neatly integrated; but not all questions answered – some left to reader to infer.)