

A study guide prepared by IYC Tutor Byron Eden

Hatchet
By Gary Paulsen

As you read this book, Hatchet, please make a list of all words that are used that you do not know the meaning of. Bring your list to class each week, and we will resolve vocabulary words that you find.

1. When the story begins, we learn that Brian has a secret, but we are told nothing about what it is, or what it is about. What were your initial thoughts about Brian's secret? Have you ever had a secret that you have kept from everyone?

2. We also learn that Brian's parents were recently divorced, which was very difficult and painful for Brian. Have you ever experienced similar pains?

3. When Brian realizes that the pilot has suffered a heart attack, Brian is filled with fear. Have you ever had similar fears?

4. In Chapter 2 Brian tried to raise someone on the radio, but got little help. A different type of fear set in, helplessness, when he realized that eventually the plane would run out of fuel. Have you ever had similar feelings of helplessness?

5. The plane crashes in a lake. Now Brian must be concerned about getting out of the plane and swimming to shore. He now faces physical fears as well as emotional fears. When in your life have you experienced these two types of fear?

6. Brian comes to realize that he has survived the plane crash. He is all alone, with no food, or water, or shelter, or fire, or apparent means to be found and rescued. On page 46 Brian takes an inventory of everything that he has, and it is not much, with things that appear to be of little real value to him. What are the things that you think should be in a survival kit. What is the most important thing that he needs? What would be ten things that you think should be in every survival kit?

7. The author does a very good job of describing things that most of us would not pay much attention to. Brian is in pain, and must figure out if he was injured in the crash. One of the first problems facing him is that he is being bitten by swarms of mosquitoes and biting flies. Ordinarily this is a minor inconvenience to us, but Brian has no way to defend himself. Have you ever found your life in a great deal of misery, over something that ordinarily would be considered a minor inconvenience, due to your loss of control in the situation?

8. Brian learns that he must constantly assess the situation. What will he do for food, and for shelter? Will he be able to light a fire? How will he protect himself from all of the mosquitoes, and the much larger and more dangerous animals that are in the woods with him? How will he find help if he is ever to be rescued? Most importantly, how will Brian keep from losing hope?

9. Brian soon discovers that he needs to change the way he approaches problems. He needs to be able to look at situations objectively. He needs to invent tools to help him get the jobs done that face him. On page 107 he “invents” the bow and arrow for his use. What does he use? What are other examples in the book of things that Brian “invented” to make his life easier or more comfortable?

10. On pages 110-112 Brian realizes that a plane flying overhead had no chance of seeing him, with no chance of rescue. This gets Brian very depressed. (p.112) “He could do a day, but not forever—he could not make it if they did not come for him someday”. It is this lack of hope that upsets Brian so much. How can you relate to these feelings, while being locked up at IYC St. Charles?

11. On page 116 we see that Brian “wanted to die. He settled into the gray funk deeper and still deeper until finally, in the dark, he had gone up on the ridge and taken the hatchet and tried to end it by cutting himself”. Have you ever faced similar feelings? The hatchet was a tool that saved Brian’s life, enabling him to “invent” fire, providing light, and heat, and relief from the mosquitoes. But that same hatchet could also have taken Brian’s life. Have you ever found other things, which could be both good and bad, something that is both helpful, and possibly harmful?

12. On page 120 we see Brian after he has had a good day, and he speared his first fish. “At the end of that day, when he lay next to the fire with his stomach full of fish, he could feel new hope building in him. Not hope that he would be rescued—that was gone. But hope in his knowledge. Hope in the fact that he could learn to survive and take care of himself”. Have you ever had similar feelings of hope knowing that you had changed, and were better prepared to take care of yourself?

13. On page 122 Brian begins to think back on the many mistakes that he has made while stranded in the forest. How was the porcupine incident a mistake? How was his decision to bury the turtle eggs in his shelter a mistake? How was throwing sand at the skunk a mistake? How was gorging himself on “gut berries” a mistake?

14. Brian learns that in order to survive he must approach nature in a different way. He must respect nature more. The first food that Brian eats was the “gut berries”. In what way did nature help Brian to find these berries? (pages 58-59) In seeing the tracks left in the sand by the turtle, how was Brian able to figure out why the tracks were left in the sand just outside of his shelter by an unknown animal? (pages 92-94) How did Brian better learn to “read” the “fool birds” that often startled him when he stumbled across them? (pages 132-133) How did Brian learn how his approach to spearing fish was not working, and what did he have to do that was different? (pages 118-119) Why did Brian decide that he had to construct a “food shelf” above his shelter? (pages 125-126) What advantage did Brian find when he created a pen in the lake, for holding live fish, as found on page 128.

15. In Chapter 16 Brian goes from having a wonderful day, in which he was able to shoot a “foolbird”, so that he would have a nice dinner with meat, but Brian once again has a horrible day when he is attacked by a moose, and is injured quite badly in his ribs. The day gets even worse when a tornado passes through during the night. What damage does the tornado cause, and how does it leave Brian when it is all over? (pages 145-148) As damaging as the tornado was, it was also a blessing. In what way was the tornado responsible for Brian’s ultimate rescue? (page 149)

16. After a great deal of thought and effort, and hard work, Brian is eventually able to retrieve the survival kit. What was in the survival kit that resulted in Brian’s survival? (pages 176-177)

17. One of the items in the survival kit was a rifle. The rifle changed Brian, in that he had to be a part of nature, where he was so vulnerable, but now that he had a rifle he was more independent. Brian wasn’t sure that he liked the change very much. The same was true of the lighter, which brought independence. As with the rifle, Brian wasn’t sure that he liked the lighter either. After having read this book, are there some things that you might look at in a different light than what you had originally thought?

18. In the epilogue we learn that Brian has changed considerably from what he was before he left on a summer’s visit with his father in Canada. Brian never tells his father the “secret”. Why do you think that Brian keeps this information to himself?

19. What did you like about this book? What did you dislike? If you had to write an alternative ending, something different from what this author wrote, how would you have changed the story?

**My alternative ending to the book Hatchet
by**