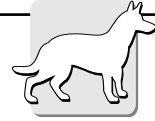


# Dogsong



## Synopsis

“I wrote *Dogsong* in camp while I was training my team for my first Iditarod,” Gary Paulsen once noted, many years after the book had been published. “It’d be twenty below, and there I’d sit by the fire writing longhand in my notebook.” *Dogsong* and *Woodson* are companion pieces, each propelled by the exhilaration of running a dog team. However, *Woodson* is an autobiographical account of dog sledding; *Dogsong* is realistic fiction. From the very first page, when we meet 14-year-old Russel Suskitt getting out of bed in the morning, the reader enters into his life and thoughts. And as we accompany him on his journey of self-discovery across the Arctic tundra, the strangeness of his Eskimo customs and environment fade into familiarity.

In the opening chapters, when Russel feels dissatisfied with his life in a government-built Eskimo village, his father advises him to speak with Oogruk, an old man who remembers the old Eskimo traditions. Oogruk tells Russel many stories about the old days, when each man “had his own song.” Inspired by Oogruk’s stories, Russel then becomes determined to find his own song. He takes Oogruk’s sled and dogs out for short runs in the Arctic wilderness. Slowly, as he learns how to run the dogs and use the old Eskimo weapons to hunt, Russel begins to identify the beginnings of his song.

Then Oogruk asks Russel to take him out to the sea ice, and it becomes clear that he wants to die. Although he feels deeply conflicted over the old man’s request, Russel obeys his wish, and then sets out on his own journey of self-discovery. He and the dogs become one, relying on each other for survival. One night Russel dreams about a hunter who kills a woolly mammoth to feed his family. He recognizes the hunter as himself, and the dream folds in and out of Russel’s real life as he pushes the dogs farther north. When he finds an Eskimo girl his age, half-dead and pregnant in the midst of the wilderness, Russel nurses her back to health, and his song becomes complete.

## Setting a Purpose for Reading

Invite students to skim the book and to read the synopsis on the inside dust jacket or on the back cover of the book. You may want to discuss with them the environment in which Eskimos live, above the Arctic Circle in northern Canada, Alaska, Siberia, and Greenland. Point out the region on a map, and share with students the following information: The sun doesn’t set for six months of the year in this region, and for the other six months it never rises. The area is sparsely settled and extremely cold. Students might then wish to set their own purposes for reading, or you can suggest the following:

- 1 Why do you suppose Gary Paulsen called this book *Dogsong*? How will the sled dogs in this book help the main character, Russel Suskitt, find his own “song”?
- 2 What do you want to learn about Eskimo life and traditions from reading *Dogsong*?
- 3 What message about life or nature does Gary Paulsen want readers to come away with after reading *Dogsong*?
- 4 What does Russel Suskitt learn about himself on his journey with a dog team?

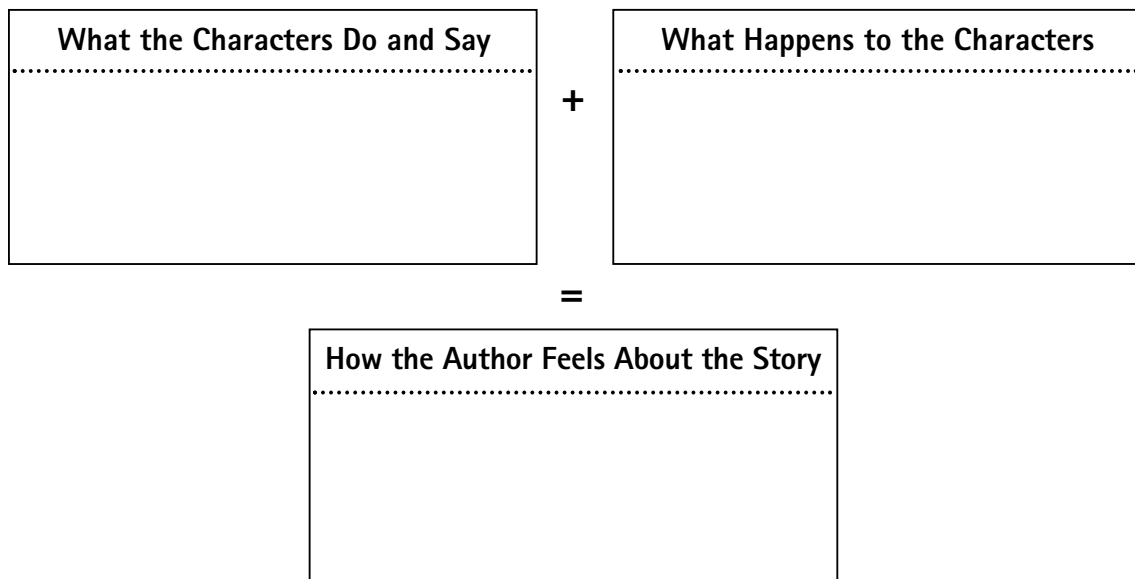
**Literary Element: Theme**  
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Explain to students that the theme of a story is a general, declarative statement that does not make reference to characters or events from the book. It is the message about life or nature that the author wants the reader to take away from the story. Point out that sometimes the author states the message directly in the text, but more often the theme is not stated directly. By recognizing the theme of a story, a reader will better understand the relationships between characters, events, and outcome, and will also develop a better understanding of what an author thinks or how the author feels about the story.

Present students with a strategy for identifying the theme in a story as they read. Discuss the following steps, which may be written on a chart or poster:

- 1 Think about what the characters do and say.
- 2 Think about what happens to the characters.
- 3 Ask yourself: What does the author want you to know about Russel Suskitt and his journey of self-discovery?

Students can compile their information on a chart like the one below:





## Literary Element: Character

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Explain to students that a character in a story can be a person or an animal and that a character's traits are the special and more permanent qualities of a character's personality. In addition, what a character says, does, thinks, and feels are an expression of a character's personality.

As students read *Dogsong*, have them pay particular attention to Russel's character traits, as well as his feelings, which affect what he thinks, says, and does. Encourage them to note how these feelings are different from the character's more permanent traits, and to use these lasting traits as well as Russel's feelings to help them make predictions about his actions. Finally, point out that an author may reveal a character's traits and feelings by the way other characters talk about and act toward him or her. Suggest that students note how other characters in *Dogsong* react to Russel and how their reactions help to reveal his character.

## Vocabulary

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Use word webs to help students understand concept words related to Eskimo culture and the Arctic. Draw two circles, one titled "Eskimo Life," and the other "Arctic." Then build each web by adding the words *breechclout*, *muktuk*, *taggle*, *toggle*, *lance*, *gaggle*, *quiver*, *shaman*, *harpoon*, and *mukluk* around the circle labeled "Eskimo Life," and *ptarmigan*, *herds*, *caribou*, and *carcass* around the circle labeled "Arctic." As they read, have students use context clues to define the words on the web. Encourage them to pay close attention to words they encountered previously in *Woodsong*.

**ESL** Vocabulary related to Eskimo life and the Arctic may be difficult for students whose first language is not English. If your students are studying *Dogsong* as part of the first unit, and have already read *Woodsong*, encourage them to identify words from *Woodsong* that are also used in *Dogsong*. Suggest that they use these words and phrases to assist them in decoding words that pertain to Eskimo culture and experiences, such as *toggle*. If students have not yet read *Woodsong*, you might have ESL students work with an English-speaking partner to decide which terms are important to know. Then have the partners prepare to discuss at least two words with the rest of the class.



# Comprehension Questions

## Chapters 1–3

1 Why does Russel become angry in the morning when he hears his father coughing in the next room?

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2 Why does Russel's father suggest that he talk with Oogruk?

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3 How does Oogruk explain the Eskimos' loss of their songs? Why did this happen to them?

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4 Compare Russel's relationship with his father to his relationship with Oogruk. How are they the same? In what way are they different?

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## Chapters 4–6

5 In what way does becoming stranded on the sea ice help Russel appreciate his dog team?

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6 How do Russel's father and the rest of the village react when Russel tells them he is going to live with Oogruk?

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7 Do you think Russel did the right thing, leaving Oogruk to die on the ice? Explain.

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8 Why was it important for Russel to test himself in the Arctic wilderness?

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# Comprehension Questions

## Chapters 7–13

- 1 What is Russel’s reaction to the snowmobile he finds in the wilderness? Why?  
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- 2 Russel was originally going into the wilderness to find his own “song.” How do you think he feels about taking a young girl along with him?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3 What message does *Dogsong* give the reader about the relationship between people and animals?  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 14 and Part 3

- 4 How did Russel’s hunt turn out differently from the hunt in his dream? What does he learn from the dream?  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5 How did Nancy and Russel react to the birth of the baby? Why do you think they had this reaction?  
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\_\_\_\_\_
- 6 What was Russel seeking on his journey into the wilderness? Do you think he found it? Explain your answer.  
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\_\_\_\_\_
- 7 What do you think Russel means when he says of his dogs, “They are me”?  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



# Exploring Theme

To figure out the theme of a story, ask yourself: "What is the big idea that the story presents? What message is the author trying to send me, and what does he want me to notice?" In *Dogsong*, Russel learns a lesson about life. The lesson he learns is the theme of the story. Answer the questions below. They will help you figure out the theme of *Dogsong*.

1 How does Russel feel about Eskimo life and culture at the beginning of the book?

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2 How does Russel feel on his first outings with the dogs under Oogruk's guidance?

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3 What does Russel learn about himself from the dreams he has while running?

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4 Suppose Russel had decided not to follow Oogruk's advice, and had traveled north into the wilderness? What incorrect ideas would he have about himself and Eskimo culture?

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Choose the statement that best reflects the theme for this story. Fill in the bubble next to the answer.

- Always listen to the advice of your elders.
- Anyone can learn how to run a dog team if he or she practices and keeps at it.
- It isn't the destination that counts, it's what you learn on the journey.



# Exploring Character

The main character in a story has special traits, or qualities, that are usually lasting. They do not change from day to day, the way a person's feelings do. Select one character trait that describes Russel Suskitt, and add it to the character web below. Then complete the web by listing Russel's thoughts, feelings, actions, and words that illustrate this character trait.

What Russel Thinks

What Russel Feels

A Character Trait of Russel

What Russel Does

What Russel Says