

North to Benjamin

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Recommended Grades:	7-8
Subjects/Courses:	Social Studies, English Language Arts

Focused Education Resources Review

DESCRIPTION

Eleven-year-old Edgar must move again as his mother escapes another failed relationship and they end up in Dawson, YT where his mom found work house-sitting. Edgar makes a friend in Caroline, and in Benjamin, an old, smelly Newfoundland dog, and when Edgar's mother is about to create another disaster, he turns to Benjamin as his confidant, and magically Edgar discovers that he has no voice and can only bark like a dog. The two then face a predicament reminiscent of a Jack London story. This story of resilience, courage, adversity, facing challenges, and survival, with its mature content and need for teacher guidance, is suitable for guided literature circles and semi-independent reading studies.

CURRICULUM FIT

Does the resource support BC curriculum? Extensively

This product supports the Core Competencies of the BC curriculum:

- Communication
- Creative Thinking
- Critical thinking
- Positive Personal and Cultural Identity
- Personal Awareness and Responsibility
- Social Responsibility

Comments:

North to Benjamin supports the Big Ideas from the Language Arts Curriculum that "Language and text can be a source of creativity and joy" and "exploring stories can help us understand ourselves and make connections to others and the world." Students of this age will enjoy being able to talk to dogs and being transported to a formidable land of ice and snow. In addition, Edgar faces much adversity due to his mother's dysfunctionality. The choices he makes to cope with these challenges will likely resonate with many young readers. This novel might be further enhanced by a Social Studies interdisciplinary look at the history of the Klondike and a geographical overview of Canada's Great North.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Socio Economic:	The family struggles financially as Edgar's mother regularly leaves jobs and life partners. The transiency in their lives leads Edgar to have significant periods of absence from school. Edgar's mother brings them to the Yukon for a temporary house-sitting job and secures a job in a local bar. It is clear in the story that sometimes the family runs short of food and basic staples. They do not own a vehicle.
Violence:	Edgar's mother tells visitors at a house party that her ex-boyfriend, Roger, would have murdered them if they had stayed in Toronto. Edgar confronts his mother about her statements and it is revealed that Roger was abusive but had not hit Edgar. Edgar watches his own behavior to avoid being slapped by his mother. A school bully puts a dog collar and leash on Edgar's neck, taunting him for barking like a dog at school. The boys end up in the Principal's office. Edgar and Benjamin exchange threats of violence/death with a wolf.
Ethical:	Edgar often has to care for and clean up after his alcoholic mother. Edgar feels a lack of control over his life situation. Stress mounts as Edgar becomes aware his mother is having an affair with a man who already has a girlfriend. As tensions rise Edgar begins to communicate only as a dog, has the heightened senses of a dog, and believes he can understand the language of the dog they care for while house-sitting. Edgar has to decide if he will share information he discovers about the affair with his only human friend Caroline and her father's girlfriend.
Safety:	Edgar feels trapped by his mother's behaviour. Her alcoholism and problems with men often lead to disasters Edgar sees coming. Edgar lies about his grade level and academic ability when entering school. Edgar begins to take risks such as walking up to a bear. He attempts to cross a frozen river at night during spring break-up which leads to him nearly drowning himself and Benjamin the dog. Edgar is taken to parties where adults, including his mother, drink to excess. Caroline talks to Edgar about the possibility of having sex with Jason, the boy who bullies Edgar. Edgar is aware of his mother's sexual encounters with men and there are sensory references to sounds and smells.

Social Considerations Comments:

Do the social considerations support, rather than detract from, student learning? Extensively

The social considerations in this novel generate the conflict, suspense, and urgency in this powerful story. There are many real and difficult dilemmas that Edgar must contend with. The story becomes compelling because Edgar struggles to move past being a passive observer of his mother's behaviour. He befriends Benjamin the dog and Caroline which awakens something that propels him to try and protect them from the looming disaster he sees coming as his mother initiates an affair with Caroline's father. The serious situations are realistic and the risks Edgar begins to take are important because they reveal Edgar's fears and the significant shift in his character's response to his mother.

GENERAL CONTENT

Content:

Should this product be identified as Canadian?	Yes
Is the resource engaging?	Extensively
Is the content current for the intended curriculum and grade?	Extensively
Is the content accurate for the intended curriculum and grade?	Extensively
Is the content timely and important for student broad understandings?	Extensively

Audience:

Is the content appropriate to the emotional maturity and cognitive level of students?	Moderately
Does the resource provide opportunities for creative and critical thinking?	Extensively
Is the level of detail appropriate?	Extensively
Is the content of particular interest to male students?	Extensively
Is the content of particular interest to female students?	Extensively
Is the language use appropriate to the emotional maturity and cognitive level of students?	Moderately

Comments:

This novel, with compelling characters and a captivating setting, will engage sophisticated middle school readers. Edgar, although an odd hero, will resonate with many readers by virtue of his challenges. Many students will empathize with the trials and tribulations he faces because of his mom's dysfunctionality. From the beginning the author is able to build suspense out of Edgar's growing unease and inability to thwart his mother's destructive behavior. The author seamlessly suspends belief when Edgar turns to a dog and becomes dog-like for comfort. Teacher discretion will be needed to address the sexual innuendo, which though not graphic, is nevertheless part of the fabric of the story.

TECHNICAL DESIGN

Does the resource make effective use of the medium?	Extensively
Is the resource easy to use?	Moderately
Is the use of font, text size and presentation uniform?	Extensively
Are extraneous elements/illustrations kept to a minimum?	Extensively

Comments:

The cover art reflects a pivotal turning point in the novel when Edgar takes Benjamin over a frozen river at night to tell the truth about his mother's affair. The monochromatic silhouette of the characters in a stark environment assists students with visualizing the isolation and vulnerability of the characters in this moment. The font is easy to read and consistent throughout the resource. Readers may find the pacing of the novel a challenge. Edgar is abused and fearful so he has a preclusion to passively observe his mother's missteps. Stamina is required for readers to reach the point where help arrives for Edgar.

PRINT NOVEL

Does the text show insight into the complexity of the human condition?	Extensively
Does the text broaden students' experiences and understanding?	Extensively
To what degree is this text stylistically rich?	Extensively

PRINT NOVEL

Plot description:

Eleven-year-old Edgar escapes into wilderness novels while his dysfunctional mother Stephanie escapes yet another relationship. This time the pair land in Dawson, YT house-sitting until they can find their feet. Things seem to be going well when Edgar makes a friend, Caroline, who introduces him to Benjamin the smelly old Newfoundland that comes with the house. But when Stephanie takes a liking to Caroline's father, Edgar sees disaster on the horizon. Just when he most needs his voice Edgar finds he can only bark like a dog and Benjamin becomes his confidant. As Edgar tries to find the strength to warn others he and Benjamin face a predicament right out of a Jack London story he loves.

Related Comments:

North to Benjamin is a story about resilience and survival in an environment that seems impossible. The beauty and harshness of the Yukon is a metaphor for Edgar's mother Stephanie and the challenges she brings to Edgar's life. Readers who stick with the protagonist Edgar, who is somewhat silent and introspective, will be rewarded with an action-packed ending. As Edgar empathizes with the dog character in his favourite Jack London story he also literally becomes like the character. These magical elements pave the way for middle graders to deeply question Edgar's reality. The mature themes are supported by quality writing.

Descriptors:

Genre:

Contemporary
Mystery / Suspense
Magical Realism

Literary Highlights:

Complex conflict
Rich Characterization

Type:

Novel

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM USAGE

Comments:

Because of mature content, this novel requires teacher discretion in terms of its delivery. Guided lit circles and semi-independent reading studies would likely be appropriate. The content lends itself to discussion and creative writing assignments could focus on themes such as growing up, courage, bullying, adversity, making mistakes, and forgiveness. In lit circles students could share their reactions to Edgar's plight and the merit of the choices he makes. In their writing students could reflect upon whether this relates to any personal challenges of their own. A look at the history of the Klondike and the writings of Robert Service and Jack London offers cross-curricular possibilities.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Readability:

At intended grade level(s)

Comments:

North to Benjamin is written by Canadian author Alan Cumyn. He is a two-time winner of the Ottawa Book Award and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, the Giller Prize, and the Trillium Award. North to Benjamin is listed as one of the Kirkus Best Middle Grade Books of 2018 About Kids Navigating Solo.