

Hatchet (Gary Paulsen) - Discussion Questions

After a plane crash, thirteen-year-old Brian spends fifty-four days in the wilderness, learning to survive with only the aid of a hatchet given him by his mother, and learning also to survive his parents' divorce.

1. What is Brian's state of mind as he heads from New York to visit his father in Canada? What affect does his mother's "secret" have on him? Why won't he tell his father...or his mother that he knows about her affair? How does his mother respond to Brian's moodiness?
2. Talk about Brian's decision to commit suicide—what finally drives him to this point? In what way is he changed by his failed attempt?
3. What inner traits does Brian develop to survive in the wilderness? To which of those qualities do you most attribute his survival? Consider patience, self-control, perseverance.... What else?
4. From the beginnings of literature, stories have pitted man against nature. In what way does Hatchet turn that theme on its head? How does Brian's relationship to nature change during the course of this novel? What lessons does he learn about the natural world?
5. Brian's English teacher once told him that his mind has the power to control his body. In what way has Brian achieved greater harmony between mind and body?
6. At one point, Brian catches a glimpse of his reflection in the lake. What does he see? How has he changed physically?
7. When Brian finds the survival pack, he rejects the rifle. Why?
8. Hatchet is a coming-of-age story—in the extreme. Once rescued and returned to civilization, how has Brian's survival experience changed him? In what way is he a different boy than the one who stepped on the plane at the beginning of the story? How, for instance, does he come to view his parents' divorce?
9. Put yourself in Brian's shoes. How would you fare in his situation? Which personal qualities and skills would you draw upon to survive? Could you survive?
10. What is the significance of the title? Why would Gary Paulsen have chosen "hatchet" as the name of his book? What does the hatchet symbolize?

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