

The Bear by Andrew Krivak

Possible Passages that Correlate to Educational National/State Park Visits and Educational Hikes, StarGazing or Lectures

Part 1: The Bear

The Bear, of course, is the central symbol of the story and is featured both real and as fable. The first bear reference is on page 21, when the man tells his daughter her mother is buried on the top of a mountain summit that--to her mother-- "looked like a bear." The first actual bear to appear is on page 35, as the girl and her father observe "a bear emerge from the woods and walk toward the lake, splash around in the water until it had a fish in its mouth, then set off back into the forest and up the side of the mountain." The girl asks her father "Was my mother a bear?" and he laughs and asks her why she would think so. She tells him that her mother "didn't want to stay with us" and she "went away . . . up the mountain . . . just like the bear." This conversation leads to the man explaining that "We all have to sleep on the mountain one day," a sad truth that the man does not refrain from sharing with his daughter. He says "even the bear" will one day sleep on the mountain.

This passage is filled with foreshadowing—his own eventual death—and her grief and loneliness, but the comparison to even such a force of nature as "sleeping" or passing into death, gives her the unvarnished reality, but also takes away some of the fear of the unknown by making it a normal part of the process of life's cycle. In this passage, the girl feared her mother did not "want" to stay, but with this explanation, she is reassured that her mother loved her.

If a park ranger uses this book to enrich a lecture or hike for the community, a discussion of the bears habits—all of which are also highlighted in the text need not center on the fantastical aspects of the bear's meaning, but serves to heighten the deep and meaningful ways that thoughtful understanding of nature provides us with a way to further understand our own humanity.

Another passage that includes the bear and his habits occurs on page 38, when the girl asks if bears are "nice" or if they will "roar and come eat their food." Her father tells her that they will roar only "if you bother them" or "threaten their young." The bear arrives later in the book as a talking entity sent to fulfill his promise to his own mother that he "will travel a long way to do good, or their own or for another" (38). He wakes the girl from her grief-induced lethargy/coma and leads her to a cave high in the mountains as he attempts to take her back to her home. While this section certainly has fabulous context, there are many passages that harken to the real nature of bears. Note three below:

"One morning, they found a patch of goldenrod in a meadow, blooming like the sun, and the bear stopped and watched as bees drifted from lower to flower, then flew off with their lading of pollen. Each one he follow with his snout and stared in the distance after them, as if content

with observing their labor alone, until he said to the girl, This way.” (The passage continues describing the bear shimmy up the trunk and “consuming by the clawful bees, larvae, waxen comb, anything that clung to the fur of his toes.” (pages 114—115)

“The bear tilted his head back and pointed to a cluster of stars low in the sky, and with the same deep and rolling voice said, Look. That is my ancestor. The Great Bear. Do you see her? My mother taught me how find her and use her as a guide.” (The passage continues to describe the stars and constellation. Clearly the stars/constellations figure prominently in the book, so this passage could be a companion to a couple of others in the text dealing with stars and/or finding direction. (Pages 130—131)

“The bear seemed neither to notice nor to care about the condition of the cave. He walked in slow circles around the inner sanctum, as though he had lost something and was looking for it. Then he lay down against the back wall and asked the girl in a slow and quavering voice, How is your fire going?” (The reality of the need for hibernation are fictionalized in the story. The bear then sleeps and she can’t awaken him the next day when she tries—now that might not be the actual case if some person came upon a hibernating bear, but if that is the case, best to let others know, right? Pages 134—135. Later the author describes the bear as still shaking off his “winter sleep”—a lovely lyrical way to say hibernation.

Part 2: Other Animals

Other animals make appearances, and some are important symbols like the Puma and the Eagle. Some are included for the pragmatic reasons of food, tools for hunting, and fur for clothing. Descriptions of the girl and her father, and later the girl alone, making shoes, bows, and mittens result eventually her looking “ . . . like some ragged and otherworldly animal trudging through the landscape, a quiver of arrows on her back and over her shoulder an oaken bow.” (page 191)

The following lovely quote might be enriching for people as they hike through a forest and see birds/and other animals:

1. “She walked back to the fire with her catch, gutted one, and placed it over green twigs to cook, at which point she looked up and saw an eagle perched on a low dead branch of an oak tree at the edge of forest and plain. It was a beautiful bird. Head and tail feathers a soft ivory against the wings’ gray-black, its hooked beak and narrow talons the yellow of the sun rising above a bank of clouds. The whole of the bird looked as though it, too, had risen up out of the horizon of barren landscape entire and remained motionless in a perpetual attitude of study and hunt.” (183)

Part 3: Living from Nature

All sustenance comes from the lands the father/girl/bear and animals traverse. They eat much from the plants, and they hunt in ways original settlers and native peoples did. The following passage lists plants that nourished them:

“They ate mullein, rose hips, and cattails. As they journeyed farther, they gathered hickory nuts, sassafras, the samaras of maple trees, and the inner cambium bark of the birch and white pine when they began climbing deep into the woods. The bear seemed to know where every fruit, wild plant, and nut-bearing tree lay on or close to their path, and for the girl was a s surprised as she was grateful for the food of the forest.” (113)

She learns the skill to hunt game from her father, and later she must use these skills when he is gone. She creates tools from the nature around her, and there are descriptions of how she makes her own bow.