



The Last Loon

Rebecca Upjohn

Interest level: ages 8–11

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144 pages

Consider the following question as you read *The Last Loon*:

How can something so small matter so much?

Story

Spending Christmas holidays in the wilderness with his ex-con Aunt Mag is not Evan's idea of a good time. What's worse is that everyone he meets—even his new friend Cedar—is making a big deal about a loon that is hanging around on the lake. Why should Evan care about a dumb bird? When he discovers that the loon will die without help, he realizes he does care, but rescuing the wild bird turns out to be a whole lot harder, and more dangerous, than he expected.

Author

When Rebecca Upjohn was growing up, she spent her summers listening to loons and she has never lost the thrill of hearing their calls. She has worked herding sheep, photographing buildings, selling books and producing a short film. She and her husband live with their two teenaged sons and a dog in Toronto. Rebecca's first book, *Lily and the Paper Man*, was published in 2007.

Author Website

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Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- The story of “The Flying Canoe” is a folktale. What is a folktale and how is it different from other stories? Why are there sometimes different versions of the same story? Have the students read a different version of “The Flying Canoe” or make up their own and act it out in groups. What part of Canadian history might the story be associated with?
- Have students write a letter from Evan to his mother explaining his concerns for the loon’s safety.
- Challenge students to write three new titles for the story that would give a good idea what it is about.
- Have students create an original character to add to the story. Have students include an illustration and description of their character, as well as information about how he or she would fit into the story.
- Challenge students to compare *The Last Loon* to a story they have read. They may use a graphic organizer such as a Venn diagram to do this, or simply write their comparisons in paragraph form. Share the students’ responses with the class.
- Share some book reviews (online or in your local paper) with students. Using the book review website provided in Resources, below, for guidance, have students write a similar, critical review of *The Last Loon* for the local newspaper.
- Direct students to find the mailing address of Orca Book Publishers inside the front cover of the book. Using proper letter-writing format, have students write a letter to Rebecca Upjohn c/o Orca Book Publishers. In their letters, students should include information about what they enjoyed most about reading *The Last Loon*. They may also choose to ask some questions about the characters, or about the author and her writing process.

Social Studies

- Loons appear in some First Nations/Native American myths. Some animals in these myths are portrayed in a particular way. For example, Coyote is often characterized as a trickster. Have students find two or three loon myths. How is the loon portrayed? What kind of character is it and why?
- Have students design a map of the area in which *The Last Loon* is set. Be sure to have students include a compass rose, a legend, clearly denoted landforms and plenty of color.

Science

- Straw-bale houses, along with other kinds of houses made from natural materials such as rammed earth and cob, are unconventional yet functional. Research with students the different kinds of Earth-friendly housing options. Divide them into small groups and assign each group a building type. Have groups research how their particular style of house is built, with what materials and how it holds up over time compared to traditional framed houses.
- The Common Loon is known to use four distinct calls (wail, tremolo, yodel and hoot). Have student research the calls and what scientists believe each call means. Can the students have a loon conversation?
- Scientists believe loons are related to penguins. How are they similar and how are they different? Have students research the five species of loon (Common Loon, Pacific Loon, Yellow-billed Loon, Red-throated Loon, Arctic Loon). Compare similarities and differences. What kind of habitat does each live in and why?
- The Common Loon is considered “at risk” in some areas. What does “at risk” mean? What are some of the threats facing loons?
- In pairs, have students research hypothermia. Why is it such a deadly condition? How does it affect the body? What are the treatments?

Math

Research the insulating properties of straw, cob and mud versus modern insulation. Which is more effective? Does it depend on climate or other conditions? See whether students can graph their comparisons.

Art

- Evan and Cedar create their own comic in chapter 16 called “The Fantastic Adventures of Hockey Man and Loof Boy.” Have the students write/draw a comic panel illustrating one of their adventures or a sequence where they confront the evil Lord Bowel and his wife, Lady Prune.
- As a class, create a quilt that represents *The Last Loon*. Give each student a piece of canvas and have him or her design an element of the story that was meaningful for them. Use fabric markers or paint. Students should rough out their designs on paper before transferring them to the canvas. When all canvases are complete, glue or stitch them together to create a class quilt.

Drama

- Have students prepare a sales talk for *The Last Loon*. The goal is to sell the book to one or more specific groups. Brainstorm with students the different types of groups that this book might be marketed to (e.g., parents, students, teachers, environmental activists, etc.). Have students draft a sales pitch and present it—complete with graphics for full effect—to their target group.
- Divide students into pairs. One student plays the role of the talk-show host; the other “becomes” one of the characters from *The Last Loon*. Encourage the host to ask questions that the audience would be interested in. Record the talk show and share with other classes.

Connecting to the Text

- Evan’s character grows and develops over the course of the story. Have students draw a character arc that shows Evan’s progress from where he is at the beginning of the story, to where he ends up. Along the way, have students note significant events that shape Evan’s growth (such as listening to campfire songs, looking at stars or realizing that he doesn’t want the loon to die).
- Using the graphic organizer found online (see Resources, below, for How and Why Characters Change), have students describe the transformation that Evan undergoes as the story progresses.
- Guide students through the creation of a plot diagram for a story that is familiar to them (*Little Red Riding Hood* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* are good ones). Divide students into groups and have them create a similar plot diagram for *The Last Loon*. Work with students to break the story into the beginning, the rising action, the climax, the falling action and the resolution.
- Make an overhead of the following list. Discuss with students some of the things that make for a good story:
 - ◆ a plot that is exciting, suspenseful, baffling or extraordinary
 - ◆ interesting situations that are well explained and believable
 - ◆ characters you care enough about to make you want to keep reading
 - ◆ characters you can relate to and who change and grow as they make decisions to solve problems
 - ◆ descriptions that make you feel like you’re there
 - ◆ a variety of settings
 - ◆ a fast start—action, danger, humor

- ♦ situations that provide an emotional response and give you something to think about
- ♦ a good ending with problems solved and characters getting what they deserve

Using these criteria, have students write a critical review of *The Last Loon*. Students should ensure their review touches on a number of the criteria with examples and reasons for their assessment. Share these reviews with the class.

- Ask students to define *setting* and to describe the setting of *The Last Loon*. How important is the setting to the story in this case? Is setting always this important to a story? Have students create a 3-D model of the setting for this story.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. When Evan first arrives at Aunt Mag's, he views having to stay with her "in the wilderness" as a punishment. What does he mean by "the wilderness"? At what point does he begin to see the value of being there? Brainstorm the differences between the city and the country and what is unique to both environments. Write a paragraph/poem/journal page about an experience you have had (or would like to have) in one or other environment and what made it memorable.
2. How scary is it when you don't know someone and you find out you have to spend a good deal of time with that person? Have you ever had that experience? Explain.
3. When Evan arrives at Aunt Mag's, he is certain he has been abandoned by his mother and father. He feels like he's too much trouble for his mother. What has made you feel abandoned in the past?
4. What does Cedar's generosity in giving Evan the knife say about his personality? What helps you decide when it's the right time to give something away that really matters to you?
5. As you see it, why does it matter so much to Evan that the loon survive?
6. In chapter 10, Evan attempts to rescue the loon. Why does he do it alone? What has changed by chapter 18 that makes him include Cedar? Is Evan's motivation different?
7. At the end of chapter 13, Evan says Aunt Mag looks at him like she can see inside him—including both the good and the not-so-good stuff. As you see it, why does this make Evan feel so strange? Have you ever felt like someone can understand you in the same way? Explain.
8. In chapter 18, Evan breaks his promise to Aunt Mag to not go on the lake again without permission. Why does he break his promise, knowing this time how dangerous a risk he is taking? Have you ever made a promise and broken it? Are there times when breaking a promise seems more important than keeping it? What were the consequences of breaking your promise? How did you feel afterward?

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

Although I grew up in the city, I had the great luck as a kid to spend many of my weekends and summers out of the city in the woods and on lakes and ponds. Our family camped, went on canoe trips and spent a great deal of time observing nature in the wild. I watched beavers play on a pond in the twilight. I caught frogs during the day and listened to their chorus on spring and summer nights. I hooted at Barred Owls on still nights and heard their answer. I learned to identify some animal tracks—and poops! I encountered moose and deer and once heard wolves on hikes in the woods and with my brother watched a black bear eat wild blackberries. These were all things I experienced just by being there. Half of my summers were spent at a cottage on a lake where I fell asleep to the sound of lapping waves and the call of loons.

When my cousin told me her story of a loon rescue one winter on the same lake I had spent so many happy summers as a kid, I knew I had to write about it. I knew too that it had to be a story for kids because of how important being around wildlife and the natural world had been for me growing up.

The idea for Evan came from meeting a boy at a school I visited who had never seen wildlife outside the city. And as I talk to more kids, I realized that many of them had never had the opportunities I did to observe wildlife in the natural world. I suddenly realized that Evan needed the loon as much as the loon needed Evan.

I had a great deal of fun writing from Evan's point of view. He and Cedar seemed to be a perfect match with much to share and learn from each other. I suspect they will find more trouble to get into together. I hope you have as much fun reading about them as I did writing *The Last Loon*. Enjoy!

Sincerely,
Rebecca Upjohn

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Barklow, William E. *Voices of the Loon*
- Bennett, Dean. *The Late Loon*
- Cherry, Lynne. *Flute's Journey*
- Evers, David C. and Kate M. Taylor. *Call of the Loon*
- George, Jean Craighead. *Julie of the Wolves*
- Léger, Diane Carmel. *Maxine's Tree*
- London, Jack. *The Call of the Wild*
- Love, Pamela. *A Loon Alone*
- Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*
- Ransome, Arthur. *Great Northern?*

Seuss, Dr. *The Lorax*
Spirin, Gennady. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*
Wargin, Kathy-jo. *The Legend of the Loon*

Nonfiction

Cassino, Mark. *The Story of Snow*
Klein, Tom. *Voice of the Waters: A Day in the Life of a Loon*
Guiberson, Brenda Z. *Life in the Boreal Forest*
Love, Ann and Jane Drake. *Snow Amazing: Cool Facts and Warm Tales; Cool Woods: A Trip Around the World's Boreal Forest; The Kids Winter Cottage Book; The Kids Campfire Book*
Love, Donna. *Diving Birds of the North*
Strong, Paul. *Call of the Loon*
Tekeila, Stan. *Fascinating Loons: Amazing Images and Behaviors*

Online

The IUCN Red List of Species at Risk
www.iucnredlist.org

The Common Loon
www.saskschools.ca/~gregory/animals/loon/ln.html

The Great Northern Loon (also Common Loon)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Loon

Loons
http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Gavia_immer.html

Hypothermia
www.searoom.com/cold1.htm

How and Why Characters Change
www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson858/change.pdf

Winter Survival Tips
http://camping.lovetoknow.com/Winter_Survival_Tips

Ice Safety

www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=2570&tid=024

Ice Safety—Self Rescue

www.ontariofishing.net/news/dec2007-1.html

Writing Book Reviews

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/bookrev/index.htm>