



Something About Alaska

J.A. Cooper

‘A beautifully crafted coming-of-age story... that sensitively explores the power of forgiveness.’

Cameron Nunn

‘*Something About Alaska* is like the Northern Lights: huge and wild, unpredictable and joyful, evocative and beautiful.’

Rosanne Hawke

Why use this text:

An exciting wilderness adventure with a tense father-son relationship at its heart, *Something About Alaska* is ideal for a wide range of lower secondary year levels, including reluctant readers and EALD students: featuring themes of family, wilderness, forgiveness, coming-of-age, and cross-cultural perspectives.

Synopsis:

Nearing 15, Zac Greene travels to Alaska to re-connect with the father he’s only ever known from a distance. But Zac’s dad is a lone wolf – a wounded soul who’d rather drown his regrets in a bottle of bourbon than confront the mistakes of his past. As Zac struggles to earn his father’s approval, things spiral out of control forcing Zac to take his chances with the Alaskan winter. Whatever hope remains for father and son quickly fades, as Zac is forced to hitchhike to escape the hostile weather and soon finds himself sharing a remote cabin with a total stranger... and his gun.

About the author:



Years ago, **J.A. Cooper** travelled the world over and once spent three months tending sled dogs in Alaska. His work as a teacher took him from southern England to the remote Australian outback, and he completed a PhD while living in a tin shed on 40 acres. Nowadays, his adventures mostly take place on the page. He loves reading and writing poetry and stories that reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. He has a passion for sharing the joy of poetry and storytelling with young and old alike and has taught Creative Writing and Communication at Adelaide’s Tabor College for nearly 15 years. To contact James about school visits and author talks, visit jacooperwrites.com

The author, signing the publishing agreement for *Something About Alaska*.

Pre-reading Research Task:

Activities from this research task can be used to ‘set the scene’ and give students some background knowledge about Alaska.

1. Where is Alaska? Find a map of the world and clearly label where Alaska is located.
2. What animals live in Alaska? Find images of 4 different native animals and write a brief description of each.
3. How cold is it in winter? Find the average temperature in Winter in Alaska. How long can a person survive at that temperature? Read this short story about the dangerous effects of extreme cold: <https://www.outsideonline.com/2152131/freezing-death/>
4. What is Denali? Find an image and list 3 facts.
5. What is the Iditarod? Watch this video clip to find out. What is the record for the fastest time it has been completed in?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMJQnp-1FnM&ab_channel=AlaskaPublicMedia

Reading Group Questions and Quick Write Activities:

These questions are designed to be used in small reading groups after completing sections of the text (each section being around 5 chapters long). There aren’t necessarily right or wrong answers, as the questions are intended to encourage students to reflect on what they have read and to spark discussion. At the end of each set of questions you’ll find ‘quick write’ activities, which can be completed individually and used as ongoing formative assessments.

Chapters 1-5

1. How does Zac feel about seeing his dad again after 4 years? What is different this time? (Chapter 1)
2. Why does Zac ignore his dad’s advice by using his new sled without permission, and taking a different trail? (Chapter 2)
3. How is Zac’s dad “Married to the wilderness”? (Chapter 4)

Quick Write:

Write an email from Zac home to his mother describing his first impressions of life with Dad at Greenvale Kennels.

Write approx. 250 words.

Chapters 6-10

1. Why is Zac shaking even though the embassy is warm? (Chapter 8)
2. Why doesn't Zac go back to bed and sleep after he wakes in the night? (Chapter 9)
3. Why do you think Zac decides not to drink the booze when he is tempted? (Chapter 10)

Quick Write:

At the start of Chapter 8, Zac describes “The Embassy”. Write a description of your bedroom in the same style. Use as much detail as you can to convey how you feel about it.

Write approx. 250 words.

Chapters 11-15

1. Why is Zac worried about hitching a ride? (Chapter 11)
2. What are Zac's physical and mental reactions to finding out he won't be able to make his flight home to San Diego? (Chapter 13)
3. Why does Zac try to run away from Stanley? Would you have done the same? Why? (Chapter 15)

Quick Write:

Write what you know so far about Stanley. Consider his appearance, background and personality. Include why you believe he is trying to help Zac.

Write approx. 250 words.

Chapters 16-21

1. Why is Stanley worried he will be in trouble if Zac had died in the storm? (Chapter 17)
2. When the yellow Dodge won't start, Stanley and Zac are faced with the difficult decision of what to do next. What would you do? (Chapter 18)
3. At the end of Chapter 19, Zac says he has had the best day in Alaska so far? Why do you think this is the case?

Quick Write:

In Chapter 16, Stanley tells Zac the traditional folktale of *Kautjajuq*. Folktales are traditional stories that contain morals to teach lessons about life. Write about the moral of the story of *Kautjajuq* and why you believe Stanley told this story to Zac.

Write approx. 250 words.

Chapters 22-Epilogue

1. Stanley suggests that Zac’s dad is afraid. What might he be afraid of? (Chapter 23)
2. Stanley tells Zac the proverb “...the caribou feed the wolves, but it’s the wolves that make the caribou strong” (p 208). How does Zac interpret this proverb? How does Stanley? What does this proverb mean to you? If you are unsure, do some research into the origins of the proverb first. (Chapter 23)
3. Why do you think Zac’s dad went to watch Zac leave at the airport? How might he have got there in time? (Chapter 25)

Quick Write:

In the Epilogue, Zac receives a package from his dad with a letter and a pair of snowshoe hare moccasins. Reflect on why you think Zac’s dad writes to him and how Zac responds. Also consider why you think Stanley makes Zac moccasins from the snowshoe hare pelts and how Zac feels about them.

Write approx. 250 words.

Post-Reading Reflection:

After completing the novel, students can reflect on the themes central to the text. In pairs or small groups, students can use a software program, such as *Canva*, to design a poster showing how one of the themes is explored in the text. Relevant images, words and quotes from the novel can be included.

Suggested themes include:

- Family
- Relationships
- Wilderness
- Forgiveness
- Coming-of-age
- Cross-cultural perspectives

Summative Assessment Tasks:

The following summative assessments tasks could be used at the end of a unit of work on the text. Included are an **Analytical**, **Creative**, **Multimodal** and **EALD** activity to cater for different student ability levels and learning styles. The EALD task includes a cross-cultural perspective. Suggested success criteria have also been included.

Analytical Task

They say you don't know your friends from your enemies until the ice begins to break.
(p129)

How does Zac see Stanley as both a friend and an enemy?

Write an essay of approx. 600 words discussing your answer. Follow correct essay structure with an introduction, 2 body paragraphs and conclusion. Follow TEEL structure for your body paragraphs. Include quotes and examples from the text to support your writing.

Success Criteria:

1. Correct essay format has been followed with an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion.
2. TEEL has been used to structure body paragraphs.
3. Examples and quotes from the text have been included.
4. Writing has been edited for spelling and grammar.

Creative Task

In Chapters 11 and 12, Zac meets Stanley and decides to take him up on the offer of a ride. Rewrite this scene from Stanley's perspective. Imagine you see Zac walking along the road in the snow and decide to stop and offer him a ride. What are your thoughts? Why do you decide to try and help him? What happens next? Use narrative structure and write approx. 600 words.

Success criteria:

1. Stanley's perspective is reflected in the narrative.
2. The story includes details and events from the original text.
3. Creative writing techniques have been used (e.g. descriptive language, dialogue, character, setting etc.).
4. Writing has been edited for spelling and grammar.

Multimodal Task

Greenvale Kennels relies on income from tourists visiting and taking sled dog tours. Design a brochure that Zac's father could use advertising available tours. Include details such as the length of the tours, cost and what is included. You need to use real locations from the text – see Chapters 2 & 3. Make sure that your brochure looks professional and includes both written text and eye-catching images.

Success criteria:

1. Locations from the text are included in the brochure.
2. The brochure is professionally presented and visually attractive.
3. Advertised tours are realistic and relevant details are included.
4. Text has been edited for spelling and grammar.

EALD Task

In Chapter 16, Stanley tells the traditional folktale of *Kautjajuq* to Zac. Folktales are traditional stories that teach lessons about life. They often use animals and mythical creatures as characters. This tale has a message about the need to feel loved and the importance of not holding on to anger. Choose another folktale with a message that you feel is important for young people today. See links to folktales on Page 7 or use the *World of Tales* website to help you: <https://www.worldoftales.com/#gsc.tab=0>

Your task is to create your own version this folktale with the same message. You could change the characters, the setting or make a modern-day version. At the end of your folktale add a statement explaining which folktale you based your story on and the message it teaches. Word count approx. 500 words.

Success criteria:

1. The folktale conveys a message.
2. Creative writing techniques in the style of folktales have been used.
3. A statement is added which states the original folktale and message.
4. Writing has been edited for spelling and grammar.

Links to Further Information:

Books with similar themes:

Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/hatchet-gary-paulsen/book/9781416936473.html>

My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/my-side-of-the-mountain-jean-craighead-george/book/9780141312422.html>

Julie of the Wolves by Jean Craighead George

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/julie-of-the-wolves-jean-craighead-george/book/9780060219437.html>

Promise Me Happy by Robert Newton

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/promise-me-happy-robert-newton/book/9780143796442.html>

Polar Boy by Sandy Fussell

<https://www.booktopia.com.au/polar-boy-sandy-fussell/ebook/9781921977374.html>

Information about Alaska:

Wildlife and Tourism

<https://www.travelalaska.com/Things-To-Do/Wildlife-Viewing/Alaskas-Wildlife>

<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/denali>

Alaska Native Culture and Folktales

<https://alaska.gov/kids/learn/nativeculture.htm>

<http://www.native-languages.org/inuit-legends.htm>

Mushing

<https://iditarod.com/edu/>

<https://sleddogtours.com/>

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Acknowledgement:

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