

Mountain Dog

Multiple CCSS Literacy Links - Search and Rescue Dog Informational, to Novel in Verse, to Sierra Nevada, to Hispanic Heritage, to Resilient Twelve Year Olds

Aligning with ELA CCSS Common Core State Standards Literacy

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CCSS Literacy Alignment Support

*“family court/makes me feel dumb,
/with judges/and uniforms/wrapped up in rules.
/It’s a world made for grown-ups, not unlucky kids.”*

“My only battle /is against/my own past.”

At first glance, the exquisitely illustrated Ivanovo cover of a gorgeous chocolate Labrador retriever dog that is obviously the central rescue Mountain Dog, would signal a fictional treat for Engle’s middle school audience. The compelling human qualities in the illustration can suggest to student readers that within the fiction to come the central title character will “communicate” beyond a dog’s visual and sound capacity to play a key structural, idea, and knowledge role (RL-Reading Literature) in this work.

While realizing the tremendous Mountain Dog central character power within this fiction narrative would be sufficient to justify its being studied as a class or a rescue dog/animal/human relationship bonding story independent reading center theme (with other comparable texts- classic Lassie, Rintintin-Old Yeller, War Horse), it is obvious even before beginning the story that this work of fiction has important key ideas , details, craft, structure, and knowledge which are informational in purpose (RI- Reading for Informational Texts). This is signaled by the two sayings which preface the story- Fide Canem [Trust the Dog] - an Ancient Rome search-and –rescue proverb and That Others May Live-official motto of search and rescue teams all over the world.

Indeed student readers can easily integrate Night’s knowledge and ideas about the primacy of search and rescue and the power of the SAR (search and rescue dogs) to attain these life saving goals on their missions by writing informative, explanatory and argument to support claims, reader response essays, editorials, and step by step Power Point/sequenced visuals detailing how the structure of the book supports these two governing informational ideas (W-Writing Standards-Write arguments and informative/explanatory texts). Wow!! A chunk of key RL and

RI reading and writing standards are already implicit before the students even get to start Mountain Dog!!

But wait as the student readers begin this work- they glimpse a soulful illustration of a boy glimpsing out and see on the right side of this full page black and white illustration, a compelling novel in very accessible text verse in the voice of Tony the Boy with his emotions in spelled out in capital letters- NO NO MAYBE. The use by poet Engle of novel in blank verse to tell this fictive work filled with real world family court, pit bull fighting, parent jailing and minor foster custody data, immediately makes it emotionally accessible to the middle school readers in a terse structure that uses blank verse brevity to immediately access the themes, topics and issues- many of which are informational- animal abuse, foster care, search and rescue dogs- to the reader (RL and RI- craft and structure).

As the reader "gets" Tony the 11 year old boy's dire family court and personal situation- he is in need of "rescue" although he is not actually lost on the mountains, the next chapter in blank verse signals that the author has structured this emotional story to be told through two key perspectives-one the vulnerable Tony in custody of his uncle as his mother serves a sentence in prison for running illegal pit bull fights and the second-that of Gabe the Lab whose open-faced full page portrait sits to the left of his positive "always" affirmative response to Tony. Matching the emotional genuineness of the Lab's affection and loyalty Gabe's chapter is titled in capital letters- YES YES YES ALWAYS. Not only is the chapter structured to end in terse affirming "We will always be friends./Always language," but while Gabe is fictive Lab, his sharing of how dogs judge the universe through scent and sense negative odors and other enemy presences is on target in terms of his species behavior (RI).

While there will be a brief inclusion of a second canine at the end of this narrative, the story is compelling told and quickly grasped through the true to boy and canine dual shift blank verse perspective. Obviously, this allows the teacher to have the students list other characters referenced in the story: Tio, Tony's mother, Gracie, Beatrice, the social worker, and to suggest that students retell the story from their perspectives using either prose narrative, monologues, blank verse or even graphic narrative structure-which given the evocative Ivanov illustrations might work really well. Doing this will not only fully engage them in thinking about the real life issues of foster care, family/friend support of adolescents in crisis, and resiliency in face of personal obstacles that are beyond an adolescent's or adult's control; but also demonstrate the student readers' grasp of craft and structure and integration of knowledge and ideas (RL and RI).

Encouraging students to consider multiple perspectives through which a fictive narrative can be told and multiple text types and purposes to retell the same narrative events using dialogue, verse, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, graphic narrative frameworks, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences: opens up opportunities for Mountain Dog study to serve as an inspirational and achievable springboard for addressing Writing Standards (W) in terms of narrative writing.

But retelling the narrative through other perspectives of lenses and using other writing formats for these perspectives is just the tip of the writing iceberg for CCSS writing connections. A major thrust of the Standards are the need for there to be an informational component for fiction study. Engle's work names the following canine search –and-rescue organizations: CARDA, MAD SAR, SLOSAR and NSDA in the acknowledgments section. Natural research connections to her poignant story would involve students in actually writing short papers on how the data in the book is solidly grounded in the facts and reality of the services and animal understandings offered by these and other recognized organizations. "Fact checking" is part of newspaper research and part of communications career routines when film or video programs are developed about information topics.

Students might also want to research their local family court to find out about formal and informal foster/adoption family custody arrangements (this legal topic may be very close to home for many readers and this research very applicable to their situations and comforting). Tony decides he will go into veterinary care based on his interaction/bonding with Gabe. Engle, whose husband Curtis has a team of search and rescue dogs, crams the descriptive data about the capacities of Gabe in terms of search and rescue into Gabe's chapters.

Students will enjoy checking out Gabe's Canine Intelligence and data presentation with research into the facts, figures and insights about his breed and training necessary for certification as a search and rescue dog. In line with the tremendous bond between Gabe the Lab and Tony the anguished but suddenly flourishing foster placement, Tony begins a Dog Nose blog online. This electronic informational writing which permeates the novel in verse is fact based –an excerpt from it by two canines-Gabe and Luz and one human Tony is included in the novel. Not only can readers extend their research into verifying and expanding on the advice for staying "found" included in the expert, but they can be inspired to authenticate the Writing Standards-W by doing research using short research questions prompted by Mountain Dog- how to easily be rescued, the significance of the elephant step dance, foods that can be poisonous for rescue dogs- gathering relevant information from multiple and digital sources to expand on data in the novel.

Some readers who may initially question insights about dogs, berries and their toxicity, and legal issues involving minor children of prisoners and other topics in the book-can draw evidence from online, print, and other texts to support the positions and legal/veterinary issues covered in the novel. All of this will build and expand knowledge using the initial novel in verse as a foundation. In terms of actual concrete explanatory writing texts, this compelling story of boy/dog and uncle bonding also includes many biological and animal receptor facts- a dog nose has 230 million scent receptors and people shed 40,000 skin cells per hour- the better fort a search and rescue dog to find the lost human-that expand and tap science, mathematics and engineering. So within a great “read” a “STEM” treasure.

Again students can be challenged to exercise their Writing text types capacities by creating a factoid glossary or side guide to go with Engle’s books for readers in science classes or as a special domain fact guide for students of animal science and biology content. They can use Mountain Dog as an initial text to develop a science content information article with domain specific vocabulary. FYI because of the passions of B.B. in bear studies and Gracie in elephant studies, Mountain Dog is full of exciting insights and data about bears and elephants as well. Since author Margarita Engle is also a poet and the wife of the owner of a search and rescue team, she is privy to the precise use of special domain vocabulary as pertains to search and rescue dogs and veterinary animals/botanists. Among the special domain words specific to the life of a forest hiker are: thru-hikers, trail angels, trekkers, trail magic, trail names, Cowboy Church, ground pounders, and others.

Students can use the words in the book and their explanations as the start for their own “mountain dog” or forest ranger or even elephant centered glossary complete with illustrations or graphics. The student lexicographers might even have Gabe narrate as a graphic character this guide and research further words online using geographic locations and topics inspired by the book. FYI another rich sub cultural thread in the book is Tony Latino roots. His great uncle Tio Leonilo drifted to the United States on a raft and survived for a few weeks on a tiny nameless isle. He happily affirms his culture and uses Spanish diminutives of affection for Tony. Students may want to do cultural secondary source or primary source research into “mi’jo and te quiero” and the meaning of those terms in context for love starved Tony.

While Mountain Dog is a multi-layered boy comes of age and resiliently overcomes parent’s jailing to find true canine and family in Sierra Nevada mountains tale, it is also the story of a twelve year old city boy who learns something about himself and words. As Tony notes when he gets a poetry assignment:

“[it] feels free and easy. Maybe words/are my strength./I could turn out to be/a superhero/with secret /syllable powers.”

Beyond Tony's recognition of how Language- CCSS (L) empowers and enables him to become the hero of his evolving story, the easily accessible novel –verse but crammed with research inspiring veterinary and animal behavior data- format of Mountain Dog makes this a text readily read by a broad spectrum of adolescents for key Common Core reading ideas, details, topics and issues. Beyond its initial reading its verse format engages the emotions and research intellect of its readers to lead to follow up multiple perspective character- animal and human retellings, media transformations- animated film/podcast/reader's theater with playlist, and content dictionaries/glossaries and research. But most of all Mountain Dog activates Common Core Skills and Standards by getting at the core of literature links to its readers- the bonding of characters we identify with and cherish.

Gabe's "rescue" and resuscitation of Tony into the contributing community of connected animals and persons is the uncommon emotional learning core of this work. Fide Canem to get students engaged in character and multi-content common core. Who says blank verse is blank of content and skills?

Common Core Cornucopia of Mountain Dog Project possibilities:

1. Read Jack London's White Fang as a comparative text to Mountain Dog. What points of comparison between the psyches of the dogs can be made? What differences are there between Gabe and White Fang? Might Mountain Dog be rewritten in London storytelling style? Why yes? Why not? Explain and argue for your choice . *Writing Arguments, Craft reflections.
2. What media format , other than a printed book would best serve this work? Animated film, podcast, live action DVD or television series on Nickelodeon? Why? Offer casting and direction choices. Writing- Narrative texts
3. Should a picture book version of this story be done for younger children? Why or why not? If so, what aspects of the plot should be left out? Why? Reading-author's purpose- themes
4. What companion informational books might readers research to find out more about actual search and rescue dogs? Make a list of ten of them and for each one explain what features make it a good choice to build on this book's information. Research to build knowledge.