



BIG RED

by Jim Kjelgaard
illustrated by Bob Kuhn

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“Clear-eyed and unsentimental, this is a story told with heart, honesty, and understanding. It sits on my bookshelf alongside *The Incredible Journey*, *The Black Stallion*, *The Yearling*, and *The Call of the Wild*.”
—Andrew Clements, author of *Frindle* (1949–2019)

About the Book

Before *Old Yeller* or *Where the Red Fern Grows*, there was *Big Red*, the classic boy-and-dog story of adventure and friendship in the wild mountains of Pennsylvania. This 75th Anniversary edition includes a new introduction by Pete Hautman, winner of a National Book Award.

Danny knows at a glance that Red, the big Irish setter, is the dog he has always dreamed of. But Red is a champion, and Danny is only a trapper's son who lives in a cabin on the mountain. Still, their bond is undeniable. Red is fast and strong, smart and noble, and incredibly loyal—when Danny twists his ankle and can't get home, Red stays by him all night, keeping a wildcat at bay.

Soon Danny and Red are meeting nature on their own terms, enduring a blizzard and even facing down a wolverine. But can Danny and Red take on the enemy that threatens everyone on the mountain—the savage bear they call Old Majesty?

Classroom Discussion

- A *classic* is defined as a book that has withstood the test of time. *Big Red* was first published 75 years ago. Discuss the distinctive elements of the novel that qualifies it as a classic. How is the novel both an adventure and a survival story?



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- Big Red’s real name is Champion Sylvester Boy. Mr. Haggin owns the dog and sends him to dog shows. Why does Mr. Haggin think that Big Red would be lost in Danny’s world? Contrast Danny’s world with Mr. Haggin’s world. What qualities does Danny believe a dog should have? How does Big Red have those qualities? Explain why Danny thinks that dog shows are a waste of a good dog.
- Why does Mr. Haggin send Danny to the dog show in New York? What convinces Mr. Haggin that Danny has a special relationship with Big Red? What is a *dog whisperer*? Debate whether Danny is a dog whisperer. At what point does Mr. Haggin realize Danny’s worth in helping with the new kennels? Toward the end of the novel, Mr. Haggin refers to his dogs as “our” dogs. How does this reveal his trust in Danny?
- Danny lives with his dad, Ross, in a cabin on Mr. Haggin’s property. His dad has hound dogs that he uses for hunting. What is Ross’s attitude toward Big Red? Danny asks his dad for advice when Red chases varmints. His dad suggests “a lickin’.” Discuss what Danny means when he says, “Red’s not the kind of dog you can lick” (p. 75). Explain the following simile: “Using a dog like Red for varmints would be like using one of Mr. Haggin’s finely bred saddle horses to do a mule’s work” (p. 76).
- Discuss Danny’s relationship with his father. How does Danny care for Ross when he is injured? Danny and Ross have a disagreement about Big Red. What gives Danny the courage to stand up to Ross? How does Ross regret the disagreement? How do Danny and Ross understand each other better by the end of the novel?
- Danny comes upon a man in the woods who claims to work with the warden. What makes Danny think that the man is an imposter? How does John Bailey, the warden, know that Danny is honest and trustworthy? How does it take courage for Danny to stand up to the man?
- Old Majesty is a bear that terrorizes the men and animals in the woods surrounding Danny’s cabin. How does Danny know that Ross expects him to hunt Old Majesty? What are the risks in hunting the bear? How does the hunt require faith in himself and faith in Big Red?
- Discuss the term *coming of age*. How does Danny come of age by the end of the novel? Identify the point in the novel when Danny becomes a man. What is Big Red’s role in Danny’s journey to manhood? After Big Red is mangled by Old Majesty, Danny must tell Mr. Haggin what happened. How does facing Mr. Haggin represent a *new* and more grown-up Danny?

Guide created by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

About the Author

Jim Kjelgaard, author of *Big Red*, was born in 1910 and grew up in the Black Forest region of Pennsylvania, which became the setting for many of his books (he called it “the Wintapi region”), including *Big Red*. In the 1940s and ‘50s he authored more than forty books for middle grade readers, making him one of the most influential children’s authors of the era. Jim died in 1959.

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