

The Village School Children's Book of the Month
My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George
Reviewed by Wendy Davenport, Curriculum Director

Some books stay with you over the years and *My Side of the Mountain* is one of them. It's been more than 50 years since I read it as a child, but I still remember it and how I couldn't put it down when reading it all those years ago. Since then, I loved reading it to my children and to my students and it stands the test of time. I have a good friend, a gifted outdoorsman, who says he reads it every year.

I remember as a child how I loved playing house outside using parts of the forest as furniture and making pretend food from leaves and acorns. I have fond memories of my children doing the same thing, and I love seeing the children at the Village School making houses and forts in the woods at recess. *My Side of the Mountain* speaks to that urge to create and build and live in the woods, at least on an imaginary level.

In the book, young Sam Gribbley leaves his family in New York City to go and find his grandfather's deserted land in the Catskills with the dream of being totally self sufficient. His father willingly lets him go, but expects him back the next day. However, Sam lives there alone successfully for over a year, learning to live off the land by trial and error and a lot of ingenuity. His first lesson is learning how to start a fire (his first night is wet and cold as he is unsuccessful) and then how to fish and what plants to eat. Eventually he makes his home in a hollow hemlock tree, making everything he needs, from bowls made out of turtle shells, whittled forks from wood, to deerskin clothes. A keen observer of nature, he becomes finely tuned to the natural rhythms of the creatures around him, and he watches an owl raise her young in a nearby nest. He also befriends a weasel, a raccoon, and a white tailed mouse. Perhaps his biggest accomplishment is raising and training a baby peregrine falcon, Frightful, to hunt for him. Once he trains Frightful, he is never without meat as she is a skilled and fearless hunter. Most importantly, she is a beloved companion, whose company helps him to stave off loneliness.

Sam tells his story with just the right amount of detail. One feels as if one is there and can see him doing things like cooking water in a bowl made out of a leaf in one's mind's eye. It feels like you are there living his life and sharing space with him in that hollow tree. The result is a wonderful combination of fantasy and science and one fully enters the world Sam creates. My naturalist friend loves the book because of its accuracy. Sam's observations of nature and survival techniques ring true. It's no surprise that the author, Jean Craighead George, reports that she "had the knowhow for surviving in the woods" (Author's preface); her father was a naturalist and scientist and her two brothers were two of the first falconists in the United States. She knew exactly how Sam would live in a hollow tree like the ones she explored as a child, and she knew exactly how Sam would survive and live off the land. She knew it so well that she wrote the first draft of the book in two weeks. Perhaps George's knowledge and passion is the magic ingredient that makes this a book that stands out over time, and a wonderful bedtime read-aloud. At any rate, don't miss this old classic- readers from 7 to adult will love *My Side of the Mountain*!