

# Something About Alaska

AUTHOR

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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Mid to Upper Secondary  
(Violence, Language)



## SYNOPSIS

Nearing fifteen, Zac Greene travels to Alaska to reconnect 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, email the author at [jcooper@adelaide.tabor.edu.au](mailto:jcooper@adelaide.tabor.edu.au)

## STUDY NOTES

### BEFORE READING

- Where is Alaska? Find a map of the world and clearly label where Alaska is located.
- What animals live in Alaska? Find images of four different native animals and write a brief description of each.
- 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/>
- What is Denali? Find an image and list 3 facts.
- 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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMJQnp-1FnM&ab_channel=AlaskaPublicMedia)

## WHILE READING

**Chapters 1–5**

- How does Zac feel about seeing his dad again after four years? What is different this time?
- Why does Zac ignore his dad's advice by using his new sled without permission, and taking a different trail?
- How is Zac's dad 'Married to the wilderness'?
- Write an email from Zac home to his mother describing his first impressions of life with Dad at Greenvale Kennels.

### Chapters 6–10

- Why is Zac shaking even though the embassy is warm?
- Why doesn't Zac go back to bed and sleep after he wakes in the night?
- Why do you think Zac decides not to drink the booze when he is tempted?
- At the start of Chapter Eight, 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.

### Chapters 11–15

- Why is Zac worried about hitching a ride?
- What are Zac's physical and mental reactions to finding out he won't be able to make his flight home to San Diego?
- Why does Zac try to run away from Stanley? Would you have done the same? Why?
- Write what you know so far about Stanley. Consider his appearance, background and personality. Include why you believe he is trying to help Zac.

### Chapters 16–21

- Why is Stanley worried he will be in trouble if Zac had died in the storm?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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.

### Chapters 22–Epilogue

- Stanley suggests that Zac's dad is afraid. What might he be afraid of? 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.
- Why do you think Zac's dad went to watch Zac leave at the airport? How might he have got there in time?
- 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.

### AFTER READING

- 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.
- 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?
- 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 Two and Three. Make sure that your brochure looks professional and includes both written text and eye-catching images.

- In Chapter 16, Stanley tells the traditional folktale of *Kautjajuq* to Zac. 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.