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 Dan Smith Author

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## BIG GAME BY DAN SMITH

On the eve of his thirteenth birthday, Oskari is sent into the Finnish wilderness on an ancient test of manhood. Armed only with a bow and arrow, he must survive and bring back what the forest will give him. Expectation weighs heavily upon him, as his father is one of the greatest hunters the village has ever known. *He* returned with the head of a fearsome bear following his night in the forest.

But Oskari is slight and small, and though he has ‘the blood of hunters in his veins’, he cannot even draw the traditional bow he must hunt with. So he heads into the forest with a heavy heart and hopes only of survival, and of bringing back some small token to avoid the shame of returning empty-handed. But deep in the forest, Oskari’s trial takes a sinister twist and he finds himself facing extreme danger, running from an armed group of men who have their sub-machine guns and rocket launchers trained on the sky above. An almighty explosion signals that they have brought something down, and Oskari hunkers down in an attempt to protect himself from the flaming pieces of shrapnel that fall around him.

When he emerges from the devastation and finds the President of the United States of America in an escape pod from the doomed Air Force One, Oskari realizes that if the two of them are to stay alive he must overcome his fears and stretch to the limit his bravery, tenacity, and ability to navigate the unforgiving terrain of the forest ... and the president must learn to trust in this small Finnish boy if he is to stay safe from the terrorists who are hunting him.



## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS . . .

'Could you survive in a wilderness? What if you had someone else to look after too? A really important person? Oh, and what if there were a load of bad guys after you both? I loved this story of all-action peril in Finland - and, working with the brilliant story by Jalmari Helander and Petra Jokiranta, we asked Dan Smith to write a novel that brought the film and characters to life on the page. It's a totally cracking thriller and you won't be able to stop for breath ... Watch out!'

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Growing up, I led three lives. In one I survived the day-to-day humdrum of boarding school, while in another I travelled the world, finding adventure in the paddy fields of South East Asia and the jungles of Brazil. But the third life I lived in a world of my own, making up stories . . . which is where some people say I still live most of the time!

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

When Barry Cunningham at Chicken House sent me the screenplay for Big Game and asked if I'd be interested in turning it into a novel, I wasn't sure I would be able to do it. After all, it wasn't my story. But when I read the screenplay, I connected with Oskari and was drawn to the amazing wilderness setting. Even before I reached the end of the script, I had put myself in Oskari's boots and knew I wanted to tell the story from his point of view. I wanted to give Oskari a life beyond the main story, and I wanted to show his fear and his utter isolation in the huge wilderness. I also wanted to show how brave he could be when he really put his mind to it. The boy you see on screen is the director's creation, but the one who hunts through the pages of the book is mine.

## DESCRIBE BELOW ZERO IN THREE WORDS . . .

Chilling. Fast-paced. Adventure.



# THEMES

- Bravery and Courage
- Friendship
- Survival
- Perseverance
- Boyhood and Manhood
- Clash of cultures

# WRITING STYLE

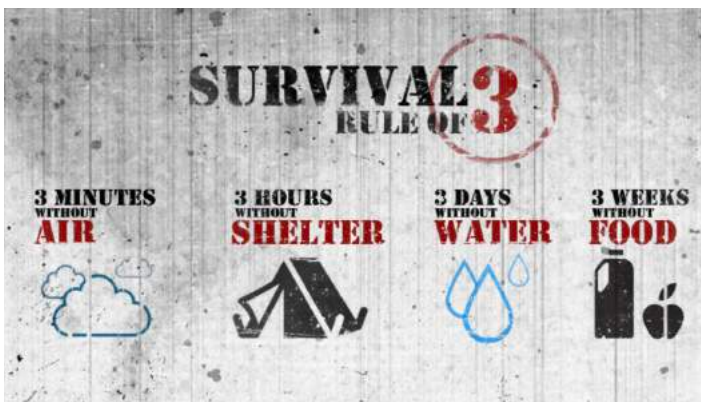
Big Game is a full-throttle action adventure. It is a tense and taut novel with moments of violence and danger, though much of its nail-biting appeal is achieved through suspense rather than through graphic imagery. The bulk of the action takes place in the forest of a small Finnish village and I use descriptive, rich language to create a sense of place and to describe the wilderness in which the story unfolds. The chapters are short and often end on cliff-hangers. Oskari and the President of the United States of America (real name Alan William Moore) are the two central characters, and the story revolves around them for the majority of the novel.



I am a firm believer in reading for pleasure, and I am not suggesting that after reading every chapter of a book, students should carry out a task and analyse the text. Sometimes it is better to simply discuss how readers feel about the story, or to maintain the momentum of the story and keep on reading. However, in the following pages, you will find some suggested activities based on selected chapters of Big Game. I have mostly concentrated on the chapters in the first half of the book. At the end of this document I have included some more general ideas for tasks, and some proposed research to enrich specific aspects of the story.

Please feel free to use these tasks in any way that suits your students, and your enjoyment of Big Game.





## MAKE A SURVIVAL GUIDE

Before I started writing Big Game, I knew that the action would take place in the wilderness, and that Oskari would have to know some survival skills. I wanted to make sure Oskari's adventure felt believable, so I spent a lot of time researching wilderness survival.

Ask students to make a survival guide for would-be adventurers. Here are a few things they might want to think about/research.

- What is the survival 'Rule of Three'?
- What kind of clothing would you need?
- What kind of equipment would you need?
- What kinds of shelter can you build in the wilderness?
- How many different ways are there to start a fire? What equipment would you need?
- How would you find food?
- What would be the differences between survival in a hot environment and survival in a cold environment?



# 1. CHAPTER 1, THE FIRST HUNT (PAGES 1-4)

## Engaging the reader

This chapter sets the scene for the story to come. The reader meets Oskari and joins him on his the hunt for the first time. But all is not what it seems. I wanted it to be tense, exciting, and to give the reader a sense of Oskari’s character. Ask students to think about how I have used my writing to engage the reader. Consider sentence length, paragraph length, sentence structure, character reactions, punctuation, sound, dialogue, repetition etc.

# 2. CHAPTER 2, THE PLACE OF SKULLS, (PAGES 5-14)

## Character Chart

By the end of the second chapter the reader has spent more time with Oskari. Ask students what are their first impressions of Oskari. What kind of a person do they think he is? Using **‘inference’** and **‘deduction’** what can they find in the chapter that supports their view of Oskari?

(**‘Inference’** is an interpretation that goes beyond the literal information given. **‘Deduction’** is an understanding based on evidence given in the text.)

Quotation	What does it tell us about Zak?
My stomach was turning somersaults . . .	Oskari is a nervous boy.



### 3. CHAPTER 3, THE TRIAL (PAGES 15-29)

#### Writing Emotion

This is a HUGE moment for Oskari. In this chapter he must stand in front of the men from the village and prove that he is strong enough to take the test of manhood. Everyone thinks Oskari will fail. Discuss this with your students. Can they empathise with Oskari? Do they know how he feels? Can they find passages in the writing that convey Oskari's feelings? Ask students if they have been in a situation when they have been nervous. A test, perhaps, or having to stand up and talk in assembly. How did they feel? How did they overcome their nerves? Ask them to write about it. Encourage them to use strong verbs and adjectives to describe what happened to them and how they felt.

### 4. CHAPTER 4, FIRST BLOOD (PAGES 30-39)

#### Comprehension

After reading this short chapter, students could either answer these questions themselves, or they could be discussed as a class.

1. After his ordeal in chapter 3, how do you think Oskari feels at the beginning of *this* chapter? What can you find in the text to support your view?
2. How long does Oskari have to spend in the forest?
3. How far does Oskari think he has travelled into the forest?
4. Can you find two reasons why Oskari dreams of bringing a buck out of the forest?
5. Why does Oskari lose control of his ATV?
6. Why is Oskari so afraid to damage the ATV?
7. How does Oskari secure the arrows in the quiver?
8. What kind of animal does Oskari see standing behind a fallen tree?
9. What disturbs Oskari from his hunt?
10. Who is Patu?



# 5. CHAPTER 5, HAZAR (PAGES 40-50)

## Create a Villain

In this chapter, I give the reader their first glimpse of Hazar. In a very short time it becomes obvious that he is not a very nice guy! Hazar is cruel and sinister, but he is also calm and controlled. Ask students to think about their favourite villains - Voldemort, Darth Vader, Kylo Ren, The Joker. What makes a memorable villain? Should they be crazy? Unpredictable? Dangerous? Inhuman? Or is a villain more sinister if they sometimes display a good side? Ask students to imagine their own villain for a story. Write a list of bullet points about their character, then write a short physical description.

# 6. CHAPTER 6, A DIFFICULT DECISION (PAGES 51-54)

## Using Imagery

We've all heard 'run like the wind' or 'as bright as a button', but writers try to use original imagery to make their writing more interesting. In this chapter, I write 'I crashed through the wilderness like a frightened animal.' I used this imagery because I wanted to use imagery that was in keeping with the subject matter of the story. Discuss SIMILE, METAPHOR, and PERSONIFICATION with students, then ask them to use those concepts to invent original imagery for the nouns in the table below.

The forest	
The cold	
The helicopter	
The dead body (be as gruesome as you like!)	
The ATV	





## 7. CHAPTER 7, FIRESTORM (PAGES 55-58)

### Devil of the Woods . . .

As Oskari is riding through the forest, he hears loud, terrifying noises, and sees bright lights. Whatever is smashing through the forest comes at him 'like a force of nature - like Ajatar, Mum's Devil of The Woods . . .'

I love myths and legends, so one of the best things about writing stories set in other times and in other countries is that it gives me the chance to investigate their myths and legends. See what you can find out about Ajatar, and other Finnish myths and legends. Do you students have any favourite myths? Roman? Greek? Norse? Do they know about any traditional English myths or legends? Ask them to choose a favourite and re-tell the story in their own words.

## 8. CHAPTER 8, SCAR (PAGES 59-66)

### Using Language

In the first few pages of this chapter, Oskari is remembering something that happened to him in the past. I used this memory sequence to build tension into the story, and to prepare the reader for something that will happen later. This is known as 'foreshadowing', and an experienced reader might suspect it will be important later in the story. Look at the memory sequence and try to see how I have used language to create a sense of adventure and suspense. How have I encouraged the reader to feel sympathy for Oskari? What imagery have I used? Think about personification, simile, metaphor, and sentence length.

## 9. CHAPTER 9, WHO ARE YOU? (PAGES 67-80)

1492

The escape-pod code is 1492. Can students think of any reason why this date is significant?



## **10. CHAPTER 9, WHO ARE YOU? (PAGES 67-80)**

### Interview

Oskari opens the escape-pod and meets the President of the USA. He is understandably surprised and suspicious! At the same time, it has also been quite a surprise for the president. Ask students to write a newspaper interview with either the president or Oskari, about the first time they meet.

## **11. CHAPTER 10, BIG GAME (PAGES 81-91)**

### Title

I always find it difficult to think of book titles, and I love that 'BIG GAME' can mean two different things. Ask students if they understand why the title of the book is 'Big Game'. Can they think of other book or film titles that can mean more than one thing? Can they think of an alternative title for Big Game? Ask students to design an alternative book cover for Big game.

## **12. CHAPTER 11, HUNTED (PAGES 92-107)**

### Newspaper Report

By now, the president of the United States has been missing for a while. Imagine that news had leaked about his plane being shot down. Ask students to write a newspaper report about the president being lost. Does anybody know where he was? Where did the plane crash? What might be the consequences? What are the authorities doing to try to find him? How long has he been missing? Is he alone? Are there any eye witnesses?



# 13. CHAPTER 11, HUNTED (PAGES 92-107)

## Characters

There have been a few different characters in the story so far. Can students match each character to the description that best suits them?

Character	Description
The president	Wants to prove everyone wrong.
Tapio	Grumpy and doesn't like weakness.
Hazar	Brave and strong and kind, but doesn't like to show his feelings.
The suited man	Lost and confused.
Hamara	Cruel and quick to anger.
Oskari	Sly and calculating - he just wants to get the job done.

# 14. CHAPTER 12, DEATH ON THE MOUNTAIN (PAGES 108-117)

## Write an Email

Oskari is doing his hardest to be as brave as he can. Sometimes, if we're trying to be brave, it can help to write down how we feel. Imagine if Oskari could write an email to his Mum telling her about what has happened to him and he feels. What would he write?



## 15. CHAPTER 13, FROM THE SAME WOOD (PAGES 118-133)

### Themes

'Themes' are ideas that are explored in a book. In the table below I have listed some of the themes I touch on in Big Game. See if your students can find examples for each theme. Can students think of any other themes I have not included in the table?

Theme	Example
Bravery	
Boyhood/Manhood	
Friendship	
Survival	
Perseverance	
Clash of cultures	

## 16. CHAPTER 14, HAPPY BIRTHDAY (PAGES 134-139)

### Continuing The Story . . .

This chapter ends on page 161 with Oskari finding a 'large white box.' Ask students to imagine they are the author. What happens next? What is inside the box? Continue the story using strong, dramatic verbs to capture the action.



## 17. CHAPTER 15, DEAD HEAD (PAGES 140 - 146)

### Diary Entry

Writing this chapter was heart-breaking for me. Oskari has been so brave. He has tried his hardest to make his dad proud, and he will do almost anything to prove everyone wrong, but when he finds the freezer chest containing the buck's head he realises that even his own father has no faith in him. Oskari is distraught. Discuss this with students. Do they understand how he feels? Can they empathise with Oskari? Ask them to imagine they are Oskari and write a diary entry explaining how they feel about what has happened.

## 18. CHAPTER 16, DESTINY APPROACHING (PAGES 147-156)

### Comprehension

After reading this short chapter, students could either answer these questions themselves, or they could be discussed as a class.

1. Who is 'good-looking and strong, with broad shoulders and a wide back.'?
2. In this chapter we find out who 'the suited man' is. Who is he?
3. The president says 'He must have sabotaged the other parachutes.' What does 'sabotaged' mean?
4. Why does Oskari say they should 'go into the trees?'
5. Oskari is running away, but what makes him stop?



# GENERAL TASKS

Oskari has a list of qualities he considers to be important for a boy living in a rural Finnish village. He dreams of being big, strong, brave, calm and tough, just like his dad – though Oskari's father thinks he is brainy, just like his mum was before she died.

In small groups, take all of these qualities Oskari aspires to possess and arrange them in order of importance. Which of these qualities do you think is the most important? Which do you think is the least important? Be prepared to make your case to the class and explain your choices. Is it possible for the class to come to an agreement on a final definitive list?

Do you think that Oskari's point of view on the qualities that are important changes from the beginning of the novel to the end?

Oskari's list is influenced by his environment – as he says on page 129, *'You have to be tough in Finland ... everyone has to see that you are tough'*. Still working as a class, come up with your own 'top ten' list of qualities you think are most important for a young person living in your own society. Finally, working independently, pick the three qualities from the list that you think are most important to you. What qualities do you most aspire to, personally?

Oskari is in the forest because he must take part in the ancient tradition of his village. The tradition marks the transition from boyhood to manhood, and all boys in the village must go through the ritual on the eve of their thirteenth birthday. As Hamara says on page 28: *'This boy ... stands here as every one of you once stood. Ready to uphold our traditions. He has one night and one day to find out what kind of a man he is ... Tomorrow, he will bring us what the forest has seen fit to give him ... The forest is a harsh judge ... It gives each of us what we deserve. We must know how to listen, and fight tooth and nail for our prey ... This is what we have done for centuries and will do for centuries more ... A boy sets out into the wilderness, but it is a man who will return.'*

The ritual focuses on the skills that will help the boys live as men of the forest. Considering the skills you think are essential for survival where you live, come up with your own 'manhood' or 'womanhood' ritual which you think could help prepare a boy or girl from where you live as they become a man or woman. Do you think boys and girls should go through the same rituals, or do you think they need preparing for adulthood in different ways? At what age do you think your ritual should be performed? When do you think young people become adults in your society? At what age do you think they should become adults?

Do you think rituals are important? Can you think of any rituals that exist in your own society or within your own culture? Do you know of any other rituals in other cultures that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood?

# GENERAL TASKS

**Teachers: for this exercise you will need a bag full of everyday objects, containing enough objects for each student in the class to pick two.**

Before his son sets off, Oskari's dad checks that he has his knife and his fire kit secured to his belt. He says, *'As long as you have those two things, you can survive anywhere and anything. Carry them on you at all times. Never put them in your pack, and don't lose them. Out there, they can be the difference between life and death ... The knife and the fire kit will keep you safe and warm and well fed for as long as you need.'* (page 7)

On a small piece of paper, write down a location that might be difficult to survive in (a desert, the North Pole, a mountain, the sea). Swap your piece of paper with someone else in the class.

Next, select two things from the bag of objects.

Write a short story set in the location you have been given. In this story, describe how you will use the two objects you have selected to help you survive. You may have to work imaginatively to find a good use for the objects, depending upon how well they appear to suit the environment you have found yourself in. **Teachers: you could use this opportunity to discuss the concept of 'lateral thinking'**

I wrote *Big Game* after being given the film script to work with. I had to take a story that had been specifically written for the big screen and turn it into a story that would work as a book. Using a favourite film, book, computer game, poem, song or graphic novel/comic as inspiration, try re-writing part of its story in a different medium - for example, you could pick a moment from within a book you really love, then try writing that moment as a scene in a movie. Think about the things that you might have to approach differently for it to work - in the book, for instance, it might be possible for the author to describe a character's thoughts in great detail, but in a film script you might have to write directions and make a character 'do' something in order to show the audience how they are feeling (e.g. Ted crouches down low behind a rock, squeezes his eyes shut tightly, and holds his breath).



# WRITING PROMPTS / DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tradition is of enormous importance to the people of Oskari's village. How important do you think tradition is in your own town/city/culture/religion?
2. Why do you think it is so important for Oskari to prove himself to the others in the village, and most especially to his father?
3. Why does Oskari feel so betrayed by his dad's offering at the special 'hunting ground'? Do you think Oskari should forgive his father? Why do you think Oskari's father did it?
4. On page 125, Oskari asks the president what it's like to be powerful. The president is taken aback and struggles to give an answer. What do you think it means to be powerful?
5. In what ways are the president and Oskari different? In what ways are they alike?

*6. 'And that's when it came to me. Like a bolt out of the sky that dusted away the clouds and showed me the real reason why that plane had crashed across my path and knocked me from the ATV ... The real reason why I had found the president. Because this was what the forest wanted. My wilderness. My president ... Now I understood. I was supposed to rescue him. This was my Trial. I had not come into the forest to kill something - I had come here to save something.'*

On page 160, Oskari has a sudden realization (or 'epiphany'): it is his fate to save the president. Do you believe in fate? Do you believe in the villagers' superstition that the forest will provide each young hunter with what he deserves? If so, why do you think the forest has seen fit to give Oskari the president?





# FURTHER RESEARCH

- Before writing Big Game, I didn't know much about Finland or the people who live there. What can you find out about them?
- Could Air Force One really be shot down by terrorists?
- What can you find out about the myths and legends of Finland?
- Can you find any true stories about people who have survived for a long time in the wilderness?
- The film Big Game was filmed in Bavaria, not Finland, because there aren't many mountains in Finland. What is the environment like in Finland?
- My book Big Game is based on the film. Have you seen the film? Can you find the differences between the film and the book?
- Do you know of any other books based on films? Which is better; book or film?

