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# Ideas and Activities for Teachers

by Cynthia Rankin  
for

## **The Hungry Year**

*Connie Brummel Crook*



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## **Synopsis:** *The Hungry Year*

### **Part One:** Into the Forest (Chapters 1-8)

October to mid-November 1787

It is October 1787, four years after the end of the American Revolution. Kate, whose grandmother recently died, has to care for her four-year-old twin brothers, Alex and Ryan. Her mother is dead and her father, David O'Carr, is more likely to scold than praise her.

The O'Carr family left a settled existence behind them two months earlier. After Cousin Hezekiah threatened to tell authorities of Mr. Carr's Loyalist activities, the family fled from their farm near Albany, New York, to Canada. Cousin Hezekiah seized the farm; as a reward for hiding a Loyalist spy, John Meyers, during the war (see *Flight* by Connie Brummel Crook), Mr. O'Carr was able to draw for a lot number. The free, but isolated land a mile (1.6 km) north of Hay Bay in Fredericksburgh Township has been surveyed, but not cleared.

As *The Hungry Year* opens, twelve-year-old Kate awakes in their covered wagon outside the cabin of her father's friend, Will Shaw, who has settled along the shores of Lake Ontario. Although initially frightened, Kate chases after a strange-looking cat. She gets lost quickly, but is led out of the forest by the sounds of a girl her own age, Sarah Shaw. The two girls instantly form a bond. Sarah explains that the odd-looking cat, called Bobcat, is a cross between a tabby and a bobcat. He was put out of the Shaw house when Mrs. Shaw had her fifth child.

After breakfast with the Shaws next morning, the O'Carrs press on to their lot, following the unpredictable Lake Ontario shoreline. Father finds a small clearing on their heavily forested land and builds a stockade-style cabin with the posts planted vertically between the cornerposts<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>four huge trees. Kate and the two boys assist. Kate also has responsibility for such household chores as making meals and doing laundry.

In mid-November, Mr. Shaw, with Sarah and her older brother, Albert, come to help the O'Carrs. They bring supplies and food, but hint that crops have been poor and food stores are low. Kate, delighted to see Sarah, takes her to a special place in the woods. When they find the remains of a campfire by the bay, Sarah tells Kate that Natives are near, but not to fear them. Bears are another matter, though. As the girls return home, a bear drives them up a tree. Albert and his dog, Rover, scare the bear away.

Will Shaw doubts that the cornerposts are stable, so he advises David O'Carr to take the cabin down and start again. Mr. O'Carr rejects the advice. They set up for winter as it begins to snow.

## Part Two: Trapped! (Chapters 9-15)

End of February to last week in March 1788

In the heart of a ferocious winter, Kate waits for her father to return from a day of hunting. All the family is hungry, but Kate must ration out their dwindling food store. Father reprimanded her in early January for letting the food supply get low without telling him. She *had* told him. When he later visited *Adolphustown*, Father found that "all Loyalists' cellars" were low. (p. 77)

Only Bobcat, who must have come with the Shaws in November and run off into the woods, arrives at the cabin.

Fear sets in as darkness descends and Father does not return. All four walls begin to shake from the floor up, and the four cornerpost trees sway in the wind. Afraid that her father cannot find the cabin in the dark, Kate places a candle before the window. When the swaying of the walls causes the curtains to ignite, she bravely drags the flaming curtains, covered by her own bed quilt, from the cabin.

Father arrives in the early morning, scolding Kate for almost letting the fire in the fireplace die. Kate tries to cover up the house fire by making new curtains, but Father discovers the truth. He reprimands her for carelessness and daydreaming. He often does.

Father leaves again, expecting to return home in a week. Although he throws Bobcat out, Kate lets him back in. After a week Kate is cheered by the thought that Father, gruff as he is, will soon be home. She falls asleep to the sound of nearby wolves.

But Father doesn't return. After another week, the boys are hungry, becoming weaker and rising later to make the days shorter. Out of food, all Kate has to feed the boys is sugar water, and Alex is ill. In desperation, the girl sets out to gather spruce bark to make tea. She gets lost in the woods and narrowly escapes a starving wolf. Despite her fear that the wolf might attack her, she ventures out again later to gather firewood.

The boys are too weak to go outside. Kate, starving as well, still gathers wood for the fire. With every sound the children think that Father is returning. Instead, Bobcat arrives on the doorstep with a rabbit. Every day for two weeks Bobcat delivers a rabbit. His hunting keeps them alive!

A three-day blizzard brings snow eight feet deep (about 2.5 m). Kate takes the boys out to help shovel a path, and Alex disappears under a mass of snow. He is shaken, but alive when Kate digs him out. That night, Kate returns outside to shovel a path to the cabin so Bobcat can get through with a rabbit. However, Bobcat barely makes it home. He is found suffering from serious injuries<sup>3/4</sup>a broken leg, gaping eye wound, and loss of blood.

Four days later, with Bobcat too hurt to hunt, all the meat is gone. The boys are too weak to get out of bed, and Kate can barely rise. Freezing, they all huddle together in one bed against fear, cold, and starvation. A storm swirls around them. Just after she thinks she hears knocking and the roof caves in over the door, Kate passes out.

**Part Three:** Out of the Storm (Chapters 16-22)

Early April to late May 1788

Kate wakes uneasily as a Native woman, Gajijáwi, pours something down her throat. While Kate was sick the past week, Gajijáwi's brothers fixed the roof. Although Gajijáwi speaks English clearly and tells Kate that her father sent them, Kate is uncomfortable with the woman. The Natives, actually Mohawk Loyalists, found Mr. O'Carr a month earlier, but he had such a severe fever and badly broken leg that he was able to tell them about Kate and the boys only recently.

Later, Gajijáwi's brother Tówi arrives with Grandma Shaw to help Kate. Kate sees Grandma Shaw as a fitting substitute for her own dead grandmother. The girl breaks down and reveals how scared she was during the winter. "I thought we would all ... die! ... I was afraid I would die first and there would be no one to take care of the boys." (p. 152) Grandma Shaw soothes Kate with the compassion and praise she deserves. "'You were very brave,' said Grandma Shaw. 'It's a marvel how you kept going. And thank the mercy of God that He sent the Mohawks to rescue you.'" (p. 152)

Grandma Shaw produces a letter in which Sarah calls Kate a heroine. Kate becomes more comfortable with Gajijáwi, telling her about her beloved mother's death and her father's hard demands. Gajijáwi also shares how much she misses her own dead mother, who was a heroic woman. Gajijáwi says, "It takes another, harder kind of courage to act bravely day after day as you did this winter." (p. 162) Gajijáwi shows Kate how to gather birchbark for paper, so she can reply to Sarah's letter. The twins, meanwhile, happily spend time with Gajijáwi's brothers, making maple syrup and pulling taffy.

Father returns home with the help of Gajijáwi's two brothers, soon reverting to his harsh, authoritarian ways. He is frustrated by his broken leg and wants to put Bobcat out and send Grandma and the Mohawks home. Kate thinks otherwise. She confronts him, stating that if Bobcat goes, she goes, too! Grandma Shaw offers quiet support, but Kate feels guilty about arguing with her father. The next morning, though, Father has a heartfelt talk with his daughter about her mother and describes a time when Kate's mother confronted him in a similar fashion.

In late May the Shaws and other families come to help build a new home for the O'Carrs. Their Mohawk friends arrive too and are invited to share in a feast¾surely a sign of better times ahead.

## ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES

These activities, designed for students in grades 5-7, focus on major topics related to Loyalist settlers in Ontario: courage, roles of women/girls and men/boys, dangers of settling in the forest alone, community of neighbours, and the relationship between white and Mohawk settlers.

There are many activities at a variety of levels. Read through the guide carefully and select those suited to the needs of your students.

*It is not expected that all students will complete all the activities in this guide.*

### Before Reading the Novel (Pre-teaching)

Pre-teaching suggestions encourage students to reflect on situations in their own lives that relate to incidents in the novel. These suggestions are directed to the teacher.

1.
  - (a) Have students list their home responsibilities on a daily, weekly, or regular basis and the approximate amount of time spent on each task weekly. (Tasks may include bed making, yard work, and washing dishes.)
  - (b) Ask students to write a list of leisure activities they engage in regularly and to note the time spent on each on a weekly basis.
  - (c) Direct students to interview their parents and grandparents to find out the amount of time spent on chores and leisure when they were children.
  - (d) Use the information gathered in (a) to (c) to begin discussions about work and household responsibilities. Do youths today have more or fewer responsibilities in the home? What role does technology play in the increase or reduction of time spent doing household chores? What effects do school and extracurricular activities have on chores?
2.
  - (a) Invite students to write about a time when they had to be brave. Perhaps they had to stay in a hospital, endure a family breakup, deal with a death in the family, cope with a disaster, or move to a new place. Ask them to illustrate their stories.
  - (b) With the students' permission, share the stories and illustrations. Use them as a catalyst for a discussion about the many faces of bravery.
  - (c) After sharing the stories and pictures, develop class definitions of *bravery* and *heroism*. It is important to stress that being a hero means more than saving some one's life.

3. Have students look at the front and back covers of *The Hungry Year* closely. Consider the meaning of the title. Brainstorm as much about the book as possible from the information on the covers. Consider the setting, plot, characters, and themes.
4. (a) Discuss the genre historical fiction. Explain to the students that historical fiction has two major components: real history and a fictional story. The setting is well researched and much history can be learned by reading an enjoyable story. Note the other historical fiction novels by Connie Brummel Crook listed at the front of this novel.  
  
(b) Read aloud the picture book, *Maple Moon*, written by Connie Brummel Crook and illustrated by Scott Cameron (Stoddart Kids, 1997). This book deals with a hard winter in Canada for the Mississauga and how a young boy's discovery of "sweet water" from the sugar maple saves his people from starvation. Obvious connections exist between this book and *The Hungry Year*. It is worth reading the picture book again after the students have read the novel.
5. Show the video *The World Turned Upside Down*. It can be obtained by writing to the United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada at Dominion Office (George Brown House), Suite 202, 50 Baldwin Street, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1L4, Telephone: (416) 591-1783. This short video clearly illustrates the plight of the Loyalists and also shows the challenges facing a Loyalist family arriving in the wilderness. It is suitable for junior grades.

### During the Reading

1. As a class, make a map to locate all the places mentioned in the novel and indicate the importance of each location in the story. You will need a detailed map of Ontario.  
  
Refer to the following places: Lake Ontario (p. 1), Albany, New York (p. 2), Township of Fredericksburgh (p. 5), Adolphustown Township (p. 5), King's Town (Kingston) (p. 5), Hay Bay (p. 6), New York State (p. 7), Port Oswego (p. 15), Clark's Mill (in Napanee) (p. 22), Appanea Falls (Napanee) (p. 22), Tyendinaga (p. 147), Mohawk Valley (p. 148), Grand River (p. 148) and the Bay of Quinte (p. 148).
2. Keep track of metaphors and similes. Here are some similes: relief settled over him like a blanket (p. 3), Kate felt like they had become statutes (p. 63), hungry as a bear (p. 93), brave as a hunter (p. 167). And a metaphor: the roof turned into a multitude of glistening eyes staring fiercely down upon her (p. 134). Have students use these in sentences or illustrate them to show the meaning.
3. Found poetry is constructed when the poet uses words, expressions or phrases she finds in another text such as a magazine, a novel, or a newspaper article. The found words are used in the poem to give the poet inspiration and direction she might not otherwise have.



Direct students to use five to ten words from the list below to create a found poem. It is best to encourage free verse (no set rhyme or rhythm) poetry for this activity. Review the words prior to writing the poems, so the students know the meanings. Refer to the words in context in the novel.

trundle bed (p. 1)	rationing (p. 71)
resentful (p. 2)	bedraggled (p. 73)
log cabin (p. 2)	vigilant (p. 87)
gingerly (p. 2)	lonely and afraid (p. 89)
stifled a scream (p. 2)	lightning speed (p. 98)
silhouette (p. 8)	hearth (p. 102)
chin-wag (p. 10)	dwindling food supplies (p. 104)
petticoat (p. 11)	gaunt body ( p. 113)
breeches (p. 18)	listless (p. 115)
refugees (p. 20)	generosity (p. 118)
drought (p. 22)	snowbound (p. 120)
rambunctious (p. 23)	whimpered (p. 124)
silent rage (p. 26)	ignite (p. 133)
exhaustion (p.26)	ice-laden (p. 135)
sorrow (p. 26)	uninhabited (p. 151)
grumpy tyrant (p. 27)	courage (p. 162)
pungent aroma (p. 40)	brave (p. 162)
cornerposts (p. 42)	scroll (p. 168)
felling trees (p. 44)	whittle (p. 175)
Timber (p. 48)	beet-red (p. 181)

4. Use the lists of words below to teach students about these spelling problems.

(a) **Easily Confused Pairs**

- bathe/bath (p. 23)
- complimentary/complementary (p. 35)
- wail/whale (p. 37)
- holed up/hold up (p. 64)
- hoarse/horse (p. 170)
- surveyors'/surveyors / surveyor's (p. 37)
- loose/lose (p. 90)

(b) **Unusual Spellings**

- grateful (p. 36)
- awkwardly (p. 88)
- lightning ( p. 98)
- weird (p. 113)
- stomachs (p. 118)
- toque (p. 132)
- panicked (p. 139)
- troughs (p. 165)

(b) **Irregular Words**

felling, as in "felling trees" (p. 44)

5. Draw illustrations and write definitions to show the meanings of the historical words found in the novel. Examples of words include trundle bed, buckboard, Loyalist, petticoat, breeches, and shanties. Each student in the class could choose five words and make a dictionary page for each word. Put all of the pages together in one book for class reference. (Refer to the Vocabulary/Glossary section of the other teacher's guides by Cynthia Rankin for Connie Brummel Crook's novels for specific definitions of historical terms.)

### **Guided Reading and Discussion Questions**

#### **Part One:** Into the Forest, Chapters 1-8

1. How do you know from the opening paragraph on page 1 that this story is set in the past?
2. (a) List Kate's responsibilities.  
  
(b) How do her responsibilities compare to yours?
3. Find and copy out three direct quotations from Chapter One to show how Kate feels about her father.
4. List all the hardships that the O'Carrs have endured by the end of Chapter One.
5. Draw a picture of Bobcat. Remember he is part tabby and part bobcat. Re-read the descriptions of him on pages 3 and 13.
6. Why is washing the clothes the hardest of Kate's duties? Compare this to today's methods of doing the laundry. (See page 14.)
7. Why is Kate's private box (p. 15) so important to her?
8. The author refers to Kate and her family as "refugees." (p. 20)  
  
(a) Define "refugee."  
  
(b) Show how the O'Carrs fit your definition.
9. "Kate never stopped feeling sick with exhaustion, sorrow and fear." (p. 26) List the events in Kate's life that contributed to each of these feelings.  
  
(a) What is a Loyalist?

- (b) Why are the O'Carrs Loyalists? Refer to page 25.
- (c) What did the Canadian government provide for Loyalist? Why?
11. Father refuses Sarah's offer to help them until Christmas and says, "The last thing I need is another girl on my hands. Although a boy that age could be a real help." (p. 33)
- (a) What would Kate's responsibilities have been if she had been male?
- (b) Would Kate have fared any better in the novel if she were male? Why or why not?
12. Refer to page 43, and draw a picture of the stockade-style cabin Father planned.
13. Research the Cherry Valley Massacre. Write two brief summaries of the events: first, from the point of view of the Mohawks, and second, from the point of view of the English settlers.
14. What is the best defence if you were to meet a bear in the forest?

**Part Two: Trapped, Chapters 9-15**

1. Do you really believe a cat could kill a rabbit and provide food for a starving family for two weeks? After you have written your response, refer to page 198 in the Historical Note.
2. (a) How does Kate's imagination keep her company during the long winter? Refer to page 75.
- (b) What else relieved the tension and kept Kate from panicking?
3. Kate asks, "Have you ever noticed how parents decide whether you're too old or too young, depending on what they want?" (p. 75)
- (a) Note three specific examples from the novel to show why Kate feels this way.
- (b) Identify two times from your own life when your parents claimed you were either too young or too old for something you wanted to do. Give one example of each.
4. After Kate has put out the fire in the curtains, the narrator finds that "The flames that had been so frightening before were now starting to soothe her." (p. 80) Show how both snow and fire possess positive and negative properties. Provide at least five examples of each. Use examples from the novel to prove your points. (For instance, snow can be boiled for tea, but someone could freeze to death in a snowstorm.)
5. How does Father's arrival, after the cabin nearly burned down, show his ungrateful and unsympathetic attitude towards his daughter?

6. What roles does Bobcat fulfil for Kate and her brothers?
7. Why does Kate refuse to play "pretend mother" for the boys? (p. 92)
8. How do the stories Daniel in the Lion's Den and David and Goliath reflect the situation of Kate and the boys? Refer to pages 93 and 108-9.
9. "...the cabin was silent. Kate longed for other sounds..." (p. 93)
  - (a) What are the sounds that Kate longs for and why?
  - (b) What are the everyday sounds in your house that you would miss if you were suddenly alone and everything around you was silent?
10. How has faith in God kept Kate and her brothers hopeful?
11. After Kate has survived a difficult challenge, she sits in her father's captain-style chair. What might this symbolize in the story? Refer to pages 114, 125, 129, 132, 142, and 154.
12. How do Bobcat's injuries keep Kate fighting? (p. 130)
13. (a) It is called personification when an author gives human qualities to inanimate or non-living things. The following are two examples where Connie Brummel Crook gives human qualities to the fire: "...she kept waking to feed the fire" (p. 128) and "The fire was so weak." (p. 133) How does the personification of the fire add to the story and also mirror what is happening to the characters in the story?
  - (b) Find another example of personification. (Hint: Look on page 134.)
14. What are the tell tale signs that all three of the O'Carr children are starving to death?

**Part Three:** Out of the Storm, Chapters 16-22

1. (a) Why is Kate so uneasy with Gajjáwi, when the Mohawk woman has saved her life?
  - (b) Why is Kate so accepting of Grandma Shaw, someone she has met only once before?
2. How do you suppose Gajjáwi and her two brothers learned to speak English so well?
3. Kate is relieved to hear her father is well, but feels apprehensive about him returning home. Why? (p. 148)
4. Answer Kate's question: "How was it that Gajjáwi always seemed to know what she was thinking?" (p. 150)

5. List the generous deeds done and gifts given by Gajjájawi and her brothers for the O'Carr family. List at least ten points.
6. Kate tells herself that she must not cry. (p. 151). Do you agree with Grandma Shaw that "Tears are nothing to be ashamed of at all." (p. 152) Why?
7. Why were the Mohawks better prepared for the harsh winter than the white settlers? Refer to page 153.
8. Sarah calls Kate a "heroine" in her letter.
  - (a) Define hero/heroine in your own words.
  - (b) Is Kate a heroine? Why or why not? Give specific examples from the novel to support your opinion.
  - (c) Gajjájawi says to Kate, "It takes another, harder kind of courage to act bravely day after day as you did this winter." (p. 162). Is she right or not? Please explain your answer.
  - (d) Gajjájawi's mother earned the name "Walks the Fire" because she saved a small child from a burning wigwam. Using the same principle, suggest an appropriate name for Kate based on her actions in the novel and explain why you think this name is fitting.
9. Kate says, "But he [Father] can't miss her [Mother] as much as I do." (p. 160)
  - (a) Do you agree with Kate? Why or why not?
  - (b) How does Father show he misses his wife?
10. After Kate finally confronts her father, Grandma Shaw congratulates her and says, "That a girl, Kate. Stand up for yourself." (p. 182)
  - (a) Do you agree with Grandma? Why or why not?
  - (b) How did the relationship between Kate and her father change after the argument?
  - (c) Predict what their relationship will be like in the future.
11.
  - (a) Based on the exchanges between Kate and Albert (p. 192), what do you think the future holds in store for them?
  - (b) Is this an effective "hook" to place in the final few pages of the novel? Why or why not?
12. Why is it appropriate to end the novel with all the characters sharing in a feast?

13. On the title page of the novel a quotation reads, "Thousands came ere hundreds could be fed."—William Kirby, *Canadian Idylls*. Based on what you learned in *The Hungry Year*, what do you think this quotation means?
14. How does the title of each section of the novel represent the events? Give specific examples from each section.

### Novel Extension Ideas

Novel Extension Ideas encourage students to explore historical events and controversial issues, as well as to engage in related activities. Projects are intended for individuals, pairs, small groups and large groups. Activities are directed to students.

Students may express themselves through drama, computers, reports, oral presentations, newspaper articles, ads, research projects, model building, cooking, and more. *The activities reflect a vast range in levels of difficulty.*

Students will need access to reference materials to do research. Ask your resource librarian and history teacher for support. Check the Internet as well for information Web sites.

1. Write a detailed survival guide to illustrate what you should do if lost in the forest. Be sure to include tips about encounters with bears and wolves.
2. Read the picture book *Anna's Goat*, written by Janice Kulyk Keefer and illustrated by Janet Wilson (ORCA Book Publishers, 2000). Compare how the family in this book struggles to stave off starvation with the O'Carr family's experiences. Then write and illustrate your own picture book on the topic of hunger.
3. Gather birchbark from trees *that have already been felled*. On the birchbark, write letters from one character in the story to another. Work with a partner and exchange letters. Write your response in role, as if you are the character the letter has been written to. (For example: As a character in the book, Sarah to an old friend in Albany, Grandma Shaw to a friend, Gajjáwa to other Mohawks, Father to Cousin Hezekiah).
4. One of Kate's many responsibilities was making bread for the family. As a class, make bread from scratch and plan a feast as a culminating activity. *Note: Be sure to inquire about food allergies in your class and school before beginning this activity.*
5. Research the tracks made by various animals mentioned in the novel (e. g., bear, bob cat, deer, fox, wolf). Make a large chart that shows what the animals look like, describes them in words, and identifies the tracks made by each. Use the chart in an oral presentation. A computer will be useful tool in this project.
6. Make a model of a log cabin either stockade style or with the logs horizontal. Research historic designs and draw your plans before you begin construction. Three-dimensional designs could be prepared on a computer.

7. Write a newspaper ad designed to encourage people to settle on land in Canada in the late eighteenth century. Keep in mind that you want to attract settlers, so market your product with a positive slant.
8. Choose a section of the novel that is rich in dialogue and present it as a play. Design a simple backdrop, props, costumes, and sound effects.
9. Draft a newspaper article featuring Kate as a hero. Write in inverted pyramid newspaper style whereby who, what, when, where, and why are answered in the summary lead. Age the paper to make it look old by soaking the white paper in strong tea or coffee. Let the paper dry thoroughly before writing on it.
10. The romantic interests hinted at between Kate and Albert at the end of the novel, could lead to a sequel. Write a sequel to *The Hungry Year*, but set it five or ten years in the future. Your sequel should be about the length of one chapter in the novel. Remember: couples married young in those days!
11. Write a memoir of that winter of 1778 from the point of view of one of the twins, Bobcat, the walls, or the fireplace.
12. Find parents, grandparents, or community members who are skilled in arts such as knitting, spinning, and whittling. Have students sign up for an arts workshop and learn how to knit, spin, or whittle.
13. Create a class cookbook of very old recipes, for example, cornmeal cakes. Students could ask elderly relatives for submissions or research on the Internet. See *Hearth and Home: 1784-2000*. It is a cookbook written by U.E.L. Kawartha Branch (April 2000) with an introduction by Connie Brummel Crook. Try out some of the dishes. *Note: Be sure to inquire about food allergies in the class and school before embarking on this project.*
14. Although the novel is set more than 200 years ago, hunger still exists in our own communities and in the world today. Start a program in your class to increase awareness of hunger and of the need to give to food banks and lobby for "food for all." (For example, you might take a class trip to a local food bank, initiate a food drive, start a breakfast program in your school, write letters to politicians, or bring in a guest speaker to address local and world hunger issues).
15. Now that your class is better aware of the history of the United Empire Loyalists (U.E.L.), inquire in your community to see if there is a local branch of the U.E.L. Perhaps your class can be involved in celebrations on Loyalist Day, June 19, if events have been organized by the U.E.L. branch in your community.