



BIG GAME BY DAN SMITH

SYNOPSIS

On the eve of his thirteenth birthday, Oskari is sent into the wilderness on an ancient test of manhood. Armed only with a bow and arrow, Oskari must survive and bring back what the forest will see fit to give him.


The test is an ancient ritual in the remote Finnish village Oskari has grown up in. Expectation weighs heavily upon him, as his father is one of the greatest hunters the village has ever known, having returned with the head of a fearsome bear following his night in the forest.

But Oskari is not his father. He 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.

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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, Dan Smith led three lives. In one, he survived the day-to-day humdrum of boarding school, while in another he travelled the world, finding adventure in the padi fields of Asia and the jungles of Brazil. But the third life he lived in a world of his own, making up stories ... which is where some people say he still lives most of the time.

Dan has lived in many places that inspire his writing – including Sierra Leone, Sumatra, and northern and central Brazil. He's even lived in Spain and in the Soviet Union, but he's now settled in Newcastle with his wife and two young children to keep him on his toes. And, boy, do they keep him on his toes!

Past jobs have included dishwasher *extraordinaire* (or, perhaps, just *ordinaire*), social security fraud (detecting it, not committing it), working on giant-sized Christmas decorations and a fistful of mundane office jobs, but throughout all of those things, he's always kept writing and now writes books for both adults and children.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'When Barry Cunningham at Chicken House sent me the screenplay for Big Game and asked if I might 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 – the boy who never felt good enough to make his father proud – and I



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 the depth that a book allows, I wanted to give him a background, 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. And now I feel that the boy you see on screen is the director's creation, but the Oskari who hunts through the pages of the book ... is mine.'

DAN SMITH

THEMES

- Bravery and courage
- Perseverance
- Boyhood and manhood
- Survival
- Clash of cultures

WRITING STYLE

Big Game is a full-throttle action adventure for readers aged 10+. 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 the author uses 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. 31 chapters, 265 pages, age 10+.



PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. *Wish list of qualities*

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?

2. *From boy to man*

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?

3. Just two things ...

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'.**

4. Suspense and the cliff-hanger

Dan Smith is a master of suspense, and the book is packed with 'cliff-hangers' - moments of high tension that leave the reader desperate to know what will happen next (take a look at pages 146 or 176 for a couple of good examples of cliff-hangers).

Look up page 176 to find the line '*Just a little further*' (line 10). In approximately 100 words, write a tense climax of your own for this scene, ensuring you leave it on a cliff-hanger. Share your piece with the class by reading them aloud.

Teachers: students could either read out their own stories, or hand them in anonymously and each select a story at random to read. To add an element of competition to the exercise, the class could give each story a 'cliff-hanger' rating - from '1 bitten nail' for not much of a cliff-hanger to '10 bitten nails' for the most nail-biting cliff-hanger, perhaps!

Once you have read all the stories, discuss amongst yourselves what makes a good cliff-hanger. What was it that worked in those stories that had good cliff-hangers?

5. From one medium to another ...

Dan Smith wrote *Big Game* after being given the film script to work with. He 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).

Think about any books you have read for which you have also seen the movies (such as the Harry Potter books). Which do you tend to prefer? Do you think it is possible for a movie to be better than the book it is based on? Given the choice, do you prefer to watch a movie and then read the book? Or do you prefer to read the book first and watch the movie afterwards? Why?

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?



