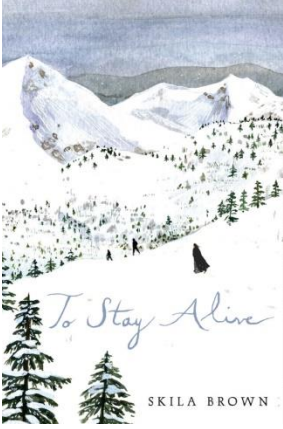


To Stay Alive: Mary Ann Graves and the Tragic Journey of the Donner Party by Skila Brown

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



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Candlewick, 2016
ages 10 and up

About the Book

The journey west by wagon train promises to be long and arduous for nineteen-year-old Mary Ann Graves and her parents and eight siblings. But she is hopeful about their new life in California, and the possibility of freedom from family demands that she aches for.

But when winter comes early to the Sierra Nevada, the Graves family, traveling alongside the Donner and Reed families, experiences one of the most harrowing, tragic, and storied journeys in American history.

Amid the pain of loss and the constant threats of freezing temperatures and meager supplies, Mary Ann learns what it means to be part of a family, to make sacrifices for those we love, and, above all, to persevere. *To Stay Alive* is a moving narrative told from the viewpoint of one of the survivors of the ill-fated Donner Party of 1846.

About the Author

[Skila Brown](#) is the author of verse novels *Caminar* and *To Stay Alive*, as well as the picture book *Slickety Quick: Poems About Sharks*, all with Candlewick Press. She received an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She grew up in Kentucky and Tennessee and now lives in Indiana where she writes books for readers of all ages.

The story of the Donner Party is thought-provoking because it raises so many ethical conundrums. **Spark a conversation** in your class with any of the following questions:

- What do you think about Harcoop being turned out of the wagons? Why didn't they go back for him? Do you think they should have?
- James Reed stabbed and killed John Snyder. Do you think the rest of the group handled that situation fairly? Why or why not?
- Think about the scene where Mary Ann confronts her mother about not sharing their food. Why did her mother make the choice she made? What do you think about it?
- Franklin Graves makes it clear that anyone going with him on the rescue mission will have to keep up with the group. He said stragglers could cause them all to fall behind and thus no one would make it out to get help for the others. Along the way, they left some people behind. What do you think about this? What was the right thing to do?
- Survival cannibalism has happened in hard times, like with the Donner Party. What do you think about it? Why does it feel differently than eating other kinds of meat? What do you think you would do if faced with that situation?
- Some people think pioneers like the Graves family did a brave thing by moving west and helping to expand the United States. Others think it was a terrible thing, as it led to the destruction of resources and forced displacement of many native people. What do you think? What might be different today if US westward expansion hadn't happened?

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REPRODUCIBLE Q&A

1. Why did the Graves family decide to move west?
2. Take a look at “Good-bye” on page 8. What can you deduce about each character from this poem?
3. Why do you think the chirping crickets are being compared to a ticking clock (page 26)?
4. The greatest hardship Mary Ann Graves faced along the way was running out of food. List three other hardships she faced.
5. Sometimes poems take on meaningful shapes on the page. List three examples of poems from the book that do that.
6. The book is divided into 5 seasons. Describe the mood or tone of each season.
7. Foreshadowing is a warning of what’s going to happen in the story. What is an example of foreshadowing in this book?
8. An ending of a story often reflects the beginning. Take a look at the first and last poems. Describe the connections you see.

More books about the Donner Party:

Donner Dinner Party by Nathan Hale

The Perilous Journey of the Donner Party by Marian Calabro

Unfortunate Emigrants by Kristin Johnson

Students who enjoyed *To Stay Alive*, might also like:

Audacity by Melanie Crowder

Salt to the Sea by Ruta Sepetys

Paper Hearts by Meg Wiviott