

## **Mountain Dog**

Margarita Engle author, Olga and Aleksey Ivanov –illustrator  
New York: Henry Holt, 2013. 215 pages

### Summary:

A story about a boy coming of age in the Sierra Mountains, coping with his mother's imprisonment and his stay at the home of his great uncle, a forest ranger with a search and rescue dog named Gabe. Boy finds self in the wilderness where he learns how to survive and thrive in life, while bonding with an empathetic highly intelligent Chocolate Labrador who is not only a trained rescue canine but a therapy animal as well. In addition, to offering its readers a tale of adolescent resilience and optimism, the story also provides tremendous scientifically grounded data and special domain facts and words in the animal behavior, mountainside botany, and use of animals as wilderness search team members.

Beyond its immediate connection to readers who have formed or want to form close bonds with animals to serve as fortress's against potential adult family and societal cruelty, the story also has an Hispanic cultural affirmative threat and a author's explicit message about the need to give back to both human and animal society's which provide immigrants with their original refuge. Beyond all of this science animal behavior, veterinary and botanical/wilderness factual content, this narrative is a quick emotionally gripping read precisely because its author chooses the novel in verse genre to share her narrative.

### Teachers Notes:

Since Engle tells the story through the two alternating poetry perspectives of Gabe the Chocolate Labrador rescue dog and Tony the 11 and a half year old in need of rescue when his mother winds up in jail for running pit bull fights, students can tap into the reading CCSS by retelling the story through other characters' perspectives . Among the other characters they can select are: Tony's jailed mother, Tio the forest ranger great uncle who rescues Tony by taking him in, Gracie the talkative girl with a passion for elephants and B.B. the bear scientist. Students can also practice argument writing by developing arguments for or against telling this story of boy and Labrador bonding in conventional prose narrative and argue as to whether a fiction filled with behavioral animal and botanical science fact is better served by prose narrative.

Tony the boy becoming increasing an animal advocate and veterinary medicine career bound writes a blog in tandem with Gabe the dog –called the DOG NOSE BLOG. Students can research rescue dog facts, habits and numbers online on some of the sites mentioned by Engle in her acknowledgements and develop their own factual blogs and humane animal issues sites/resources. Comparative texts are a natural for this book where the fictional dogs are

modeled on the author's husband's search and rescue dogs. Jack London's works and Romaine Gary's dog fiction as well as the classic Lassie and modern Marley works come to mind for comparisons.

Special domain terms used by search and rescue teams in the wilderness for hikers and dogs plus words and terms for bear "products" and botanical terms abound. These can easily be compiled by students into a glossary with illustrations or public domain images. Writing standards can be infused in an engaging way as student readers get an opportunity to provide arguments for a specific media version of this captivating work. Should it be a live action film with a child star as Tony and a rugged adult star-say Jimmy Smits as Tio and an actual Chocolate Lab? Or should it be an animated film with a talking and thinking lab hero? What would the score or playlist be for some of the key events? Who should direct? Right answer-no single one. Whatever the argument, the book represents another emotionally satisfying and rich addition to the ongoing collection of animal and child companion stories in which the relationship models a preferable community of love.

Margarita Engle is a Newbery Honor winner for *The Surrender Tree* and has written poems plus historical fiction works.

**Topics:**

Novels in verse, rescue dogs-fiction, foster home care, human/animal relationships, Sierra Nevada