

Literature Circle Guide to
CHARLIE'S RAVEN by Jean Craighead George

Summary

Charlie's beloved grandfather is ill, and Charlie will do anything to save him. He brings home Blue Sky, a lively baby raven, because his Native American friends claim the intelligent birds have powerful medicine. Grandfather, a naturalist, is intrigued, and urges Charlie to keep a nature journal about Blue Sky. But caring for—and protecting—a wild creature is a huge responsibility. Charlie's observations teach him wondrous things about ravens—and some surprising lessons about humans. Weaving natural history, myth, and a family narrative about life and death, Jean Craighead George proves again why she is one of the most admired children's writers working today.

Author Information

Jean Craighead George was born in a family of naturalists. Her father, mother, brothers, aunts and uncles were students of nature. On weekends they camped in the woods near their Washington, D.C. home, climbed trees to study owls, gathered edible plants and made fish hooks from twigs. Her first pet was a turkey vulture. In third grade she began writing and hasn't stopped yet. She has written over 100 books.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use these questions and the activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Charlie's Raven* by Jean Craighead George.

1. What is wrong with Charlie's grandfather? Why does Charlie think a raven will help?
Charlie's grandfather "had a heart attack last winter and was not getting better." (p. 3) Charlie's friend Singing Bird tells him that some Native American tribes believe that ravens cure people. (p. 7)
2. Where does Charlie find the raven? What happens when he takes it from the nest?
Charlie finds the raven's nest in a lodgepole pine tree on Bison Butte. (p. 3) When he climbs the tree a "yellow fog" and a "strange wind" appear (pp. 4-5) and the raven's parents throw pinecones at him with their beaks. (pp. 5-6) Note: The "yellow fog" is revealed to have been pollen on page 18.
3. What does Charlie feed Blue Sky when he first brings him home?
Granddad tells Charlie to "Mix some fresh eggs with last night's leftover hamburgers. Then break open one of my vitamin pills and add that. And I just

heard a mousetrap go off in our bedroom. Go get the mouse. Ravens love them.” (p. 16)

4. What sorts of calls does Blue Sky make to Charlie and his grandfather? What sorts does he make to the Spinders? Why are they different?

Blue Sky calls “kmmmm grrr” to Charlie, meaning affection or “I love you.” To Granddad, Blue Sky calls “knock knock,” expressing his dominance, or “Look at me.” The raven also frequently calls “gro gro gro” when he wants to be fed. Answers could further express that as a baby, Blue Sky was imprinted on Charlie and he considered Charlie a mother figure, and that with Granddad he was establishing the pecking order. Charlie also wonders if the calls to Granddad could be part of the Raven “cure”.

With the Spinders, however, Blue Sky and the other ravens call “KEK, KEK, KEK, KEK” indicating an alarm or warning. The ravens have seen the Spinders kill the birds and warn one another of the danger.

5. Summarize what happens when Grandma faces the mountain lion. How do you interpret Blue Sky’s behavior? Do you think it was good or bad?

On pages 153-155, Grandma goes outside to the toolshed and Blue Sky begins making an “exclamation” call. At first Grandma is annoyed, but then she sees a mountain lion on the roof of the shed getting ready to spring on her. Grandma throws a log at the mountain lion to scare it off.

Two interpretations of Blue Sky’s behavior are offered. Charlie and Grandma believe that Blue Sky was giving a warning, but Granddad points out that ravens will also lead predators to prey so that they can share in the food. Answers may likely lean towards Blue Sky considering Grandma a friend or family member. Charlie points out that Blue Sky had just been fed, therefore wouldn’t be looking for food. But there is a possibility that Blue Sky, being a wild animal, may have wanted to make a snack of Grandma.

6. Relate some examples of Granddad feeling better. Why do you think this is?

Throughout the book, Granddad often feels better after spending time with or observing Blue Sky. Answers may include the fact that it is revealed that the orange pills Blue Sky has been hiding were doing Granddad more harm than good. There is much room for discussion, however, about Granddad also feeling better because he is taking more of an interest in life. As a naturalist who specializes in raven behavior, having a raven in the house may certainly have a very positive effect.

There are also repeated references to the belief in the magic of ravens, as with Singing Bird's story about the Raven's cure.

7. Mr. Spinder's attitude towards ravens changes throughout the book. What is his attitude at first? What makes him change his mind?

Mr. Spinder tells Charlie that ravens are evil and says, "In the beginning these black ravens were beautiful white birds. Then they did wicked things and the gods made them black. They assigned them to the dying." (p. 9) Mr. Spinder is very superstitious of ravens, and because of the stories he'd always heard about them, believes they are "cursed". He admits that ravens had once thrown pinecones at him and his uncle said "they were evil and would pick out my eyes." (p. 177)

When the Spinders attend the ceremony at the Teepee Festival (pp. 125-130), Singing Bird's father Flying Cloud performs a dance "telling the connection between raven and mankind" and Singing Bird tells a story of Raven helping starving animals find food. Although Mr. Spinder seems to miss the point, there is room to discuss the seed of new ideas being planted in his mind that ravens might be good.

On page 175, Mr. Spinder announces "Ravens are great." Charlie considers the Teepee Ceremony, and Mr. Spinder says he did feel less afraid of the birds afterwards. He has also since observed his tree farm saved from an outbreak of army cutworms when "hundreds maybe thousands" of ravens devoured them all. There is much room for discussion about how the stories we are told have an effect on our attitudes.

8. The different raven calls mean many different things. Are there ways in which people communicate with more than words? Do any of the characters do this?

Grandma Sally wants Mr. Spinder's visit to end and calls to Charlie in "family code." (p. 21) She says, "How's Granddad?" but Charlie knows "the evenness of her tone" means that she's saying "I want to get rid of Mr. Spinder as gracefully as possible. Make an excuse."

Broader answers could include the body language and tone of voice people use in their daily lives to express irritation, good humor, boredom, etc. Discussion could include the clothing people choose to wear, hairstyles, the cars they drive, and what these things say about them.

9. The different characters in the book all have their own reasons for interpreting the behavior of ravens. Explain these differences and discuss where their ideas originate.

Granddad takes a naturalist's scientific approach to raven behavior, believing in observation and rational thinking. Singing Bird and her family are members of a

“Raven Owner” tribe, and take a more spiritual view through legends, tales, and ceremonies. Mr. Spinder is superstitious, having heard threatening stories about ravens. Charlie tries to take his grandfather’s approach, but also considers the ideas of others.

10. What is “the perfect round stone”?

Granddad tells Charlie the story of his own geologist father, and how he himself was more interested in living things than rocks. (pp. 158-159) As a boy, he’d shown his father what he’d thought to be a “perfect round stone” although his father answers that “Nature doesn’t make perfect circles or straight lines.” Granddad’s continuing search for the perfect round stone led him deeper into the study of the natural world, and that is how he became a naturalist.

Charlie decides that he will look for his own perfect round stone, and that “it has to do with ravens.” (p. 160) When Charlie tells Granddad that he thinks ravens do have magic and that he is one of the rare people to see it, Granddad tells him he’s close to the perfect round stone. (p. 171) Later, Granddad tells Charlie, “the ravens are the perfect round stone. You’ll never understand them. You’ll never know all there is to know about them. But like the search for the perfect round stone, you’ll always keep looking.” (p. 177)

Answers may reflect the paradox that the search for the perfect round stone is itself the perfect round stone. There is much room for discussion of the value in searching for what is “unknowable”.

11. What are some examples of Blue Sky’s behavior that can be considered both good and bad? Can you think of anything else that can be both good and bad? Explain your reasons. Throughout the book, Charlie discovers raven behavior that could be interpreted both ways (plus a third category, “mysterious”), which he collects in his notes. (pp. 85-86) Answers will vary as to other things which are both good and bad. There is much room for discussion about morality and ethics.

12. Suppose Charlie spent his summers with the Spinders instead of his grandparents. What might his “perfect round stone” be in that case?

Since throughout most of the book the Spinders hate ravens and try to kill them, answers could reflect that Charlie’s “perfect round stone” might be hunting or fearing ravens instead of studying them. However, perhaps through the influence of his Native American friends, and through the lesson learned when the ravens eat the cutworms on the Spinders’ tree farm, it’s possible that Charlie would ultimately still learn to love ravens after all.

13. On pages 64-65, the parent ravens are observed dropping off and picking up Pinecone as if the cabin is a day care center. Do you think it is accurate to say that the ravens are

really thinking about it this way? Explain.

Answers will vary as to the literal truth of a “day care center.” There is much room for discussion about anthropomorphizing wild animal behavior and using our own experiences to explain actions we don’t fully understand. The function of storytelling can be discussed, with regard to the manner in which unfamiliar experiences are compared with examples we do know, in order to better grasp the meaning of an action or event.

14. Re-read Singing Bird’s story about how the raven’s cure works on pages 69-70. Is this a story about magic, or is it a story about science? Can it be both? Explain.

Answers may reflect that since Singing Bird learned how ravens get vitamin D in *Science Discoveries* and made a story out of it, that it is really a story about science. However, since her story is also about a talking raven telling a Teton Sioux girl how to get more vitamin D from the sun, there is also magic to it. There is room to discuss how tales and fables often explain rational lessons, and do so in a very imaginative way.

15. When Charlie worries about how Blue Sky will take care of himself, Granddad says “He’ll take care of himself, or he won’t. That’s how all life is.” Do you think this opinion is harsh? What do you think makes Granddad come to this conclusion? **Since Granddad is a naturalist who has made a lifelong study of wild animals, his opinion is well founded. Answers may reflect whether or not students think it is fair that weaker animals get hurt or die, or that accidents happen. Discussion can include the reasons that it’s best to take care of oneself and others, and the many ways in which human beings can work to make life safer for themselves, as well as for all other living things in the world.**

Activities

1. Create your own animal vocabulary. The glossary at the back of the book lists several raven calls and their corresponding meaning. Choose an animal (or make up one of your own) and invent a list of sounds to communicate different meanings. Think about what you will need to tell others in order to be happy, healthy, and comfortable.

Students can discuss the basic needs to stay alive, such as eating, shelter, etc. They may also want to express feelings such as friendship, love, fear, and happiness. They might perhaps express more exclusive “human” needs, such as “I want that video game!”

2. Take scientific notes, as Charlie does in the book. You can study birds, a favorite pet, or members of your own family. Make a log sheet or use a small notebook. Put down the date, time, and location of your observation. Try to be objective. Try not to assume a

purpose for the behavior at this time. When your observations are complete, go back and review your notes, and "let the data speak." Look for patterns and trends. What do you notice?

There is room for discussions on objectivity and subjectivity, and about the difficulty in avoiding personal opinions when thinking about anything. Discuss whether Charlie was able to keep his own notes “scientific” in the book.

3. On page 36, Charlie learns about the Raven Owners, a tribe whose totem animal was the raven. Form your own tribe with its own totem animal or thing. What is it about your totem that displays the special qualities of your tribe? How would your totem help or protect you?

Students could work either individually or in groups to choose a totem and discuss its qualities. They might wish to create a flag or insignia that symbolizes their choice. There is room to talk about others who use totems (sports teams with mascots; businesses with advertising characters; Democrat/donkey, Republican/elephant, etc.)