

Realistic
Fiction

The Big One

An illustration of a man and a boy fishing in a forest stream. The man, on the left, wears a red cap, a light blue shirt, and a tan vest. He holds a fishing rod. The boy, on the right, wears a yellow and red shirt and blue jeans. He also holds a fishing rod. They are standing on a rocky bank. In the background, there are large trees and a blue sky. A white line, possibly a fishing line, loops across the top of the scene.

by Paul Mason
illustrated by Vladimir Aleksic

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PAIRED
READ

Poetry

STRATEGIES & SKILLS

Comprehension

Strategy: Ask and Answer Questions

Skill: Point of View

Vocabulary

brittle, creative,
descriptive, outstretched

Vocabulary Strategy

Figurative Language

Word Count: 1,674



Education

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A



Essential Question

How are writers inspired by animals?

The Big One

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The bell rang for recess, and Sal and his friends swarmed onto the playground. It was the last day of school, and excited shouts carried over the playground like birdsong at dawn.

Sal was impatient. First thing tomorrow, he and his uncle Mikey were driving to their family cabin in the woods near Lake Lacuna.

The lake meant fishing and plenty of it. There was one thing, though—there was a no-technology rule at the cabin.

“You mean there’s not even a TV?” Sal’s friend Ricky was shocked.



Sal shook his head. “No.”

“Well, at least you can play video games, right?”

“Like I said, there’s no technology. It’s the family rule. We go there to fish,” Sal said with a shrug. “This year I’m going to land the Big One. It’s this enormous catfish that’s been living in the lake for years.”

Ricky wrinkled his nose. “Ugh, not my idea of fun. Give me a call when you get back—I’ll be playing games on my computer.”

The next morning, Sal watched from his bedroom window as Uncle Mikey’s pickup rattled to a halt outside his apartment building. Uncle Mikey spotted him and waved, his arm outstretched.

“Got time for a coffee?” Sal’s dad asked his younger brother as he led him to the kitchen.

“Just a quick one—I can feel those fish biting already.”



On the drive up to the cabin, Uncle Mikey and Sal chatted over the racket from the pickup. It grumbled like an old mule as it climbed the steep, winding road.

They finally drove into the little town of Lacuna. Uncle Mikey pulled up outside Pete’s General Store. “We’d better pick up a few supplies.”

Pete was behind the counter, head buried in a newspaper, but he looked up with a grin when he saw them come in. The wall behind him was covered in photographs of fish.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in. I haven’t seen you guys in a while.”

Uncle Mikey shook Pete's hand. "We're staying at the cabin for a few days, and we need some supplies."

"The fishing's not very good at the moment, but that could change," Pete said.

"What about the Big One?" Sal asked.

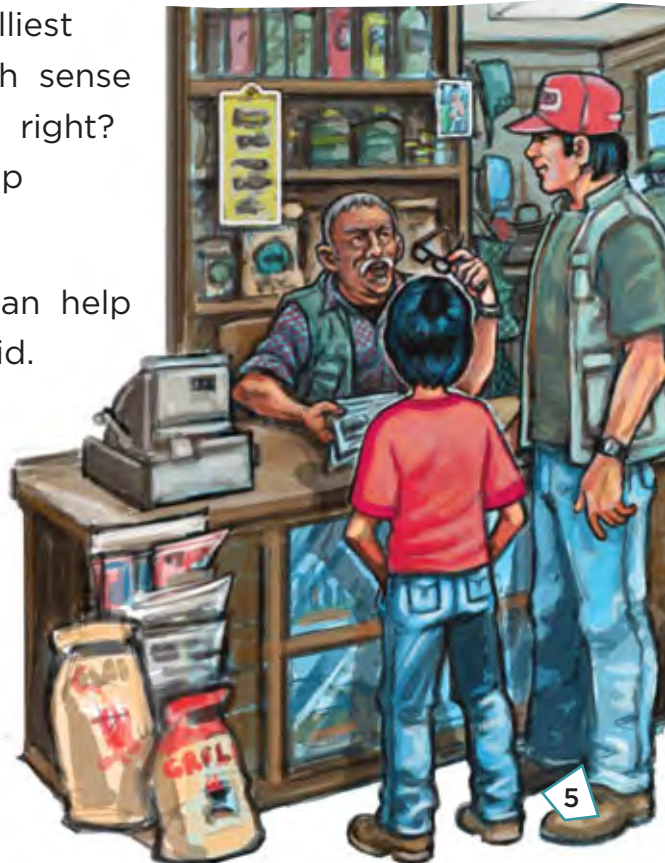
"You figure you're going to catch him?" Pete chuckled. "No one's managed it yet—the old fella even dragged one guy into the lake."

Uncle Mikey smiled. "That's just an old story."

Pete winked at him. "So what's your strategy?" he asked Sal.

"To use the smelliest bait possible. Catfish sense their prey by smell, right? I've been reading up on it."

"Well, I think I can help you there," Pete said.





When Sal and Uncle Mikey arrived at the cabin, they pushed open the creaky wooden door and brought their gear inside.

Sal loved the old cabin. Above the fireplace, stuffed and mounted, was the catfish his father had hooked as a young boy. The fish was enormous, but its fins looked brittle with age.

“Maybe if I land the Big One, he’ll earn a place up there,” Sal thought.

Uncle Mikey and Sal followed the path down to the lake’s edge, hoping to get a spot on the dock. There were already several people on the shore, rods in hand, but the dock was deserted.

It didn’t take them long to attach the bait to their hooks and cast out into the green water. Sal peered down, trying to see beneath the surface.

“This sure beats being inside,” Uncle Mikey said, gazing out at the woods surrounding the lake. “We have your great-grandfather to thank—he built the cabin so that he could hide away here and write in peace.”

“Write?” Sal asked, surprised.

Uncle Mikey nodded. “In his spare time, he wrote poems, and some of them were even published.”

Sal sat on the dock, dangling his feet and trying to imagine his great-grandfather writing in the cabin.

Then it happened—a pull. At first he wasn’t sure, but then the fish dragged at the line again. Sal sat up, his hands gripping his rod.

“Got one!” he gasped as the fish began to pull harder. Sal saw his line straining, and he tried to reach his reel to loosen the drag and let the fish run with the line.

He hauled on his rod, and then the line went slack. The fish had disappeared.

“The line couldn’t hold him. That must have been a whopper,” Uncle Mikey whistled.

Sal was disappointed, but now his heart was racing. He quickly tied on a new hook and sinker and cast his line back into the water.

Although he and Uncle Mikey stuck at it until the sun had set, neither of them got another bite.

The next day, they went back to Pete's to buy some stronger line and new bait. They decided to try a different fishing spot, and they even went fishing at night, but the catfish just weren't biting.

"Sometimes it happens," said Uncle Mikey.

Sal was starting to think Ricky was right. Maybe he should have just stayed at home and played computer games.

The night before they were due to leave, Sal stared at the stuffed fish on the wall and sighed. He had just one more opportunity, so he'd better make the most of it.

After an early breakfast the next day, Sal and Uncle Mikey raced down to the lake. They were trying a different site, which Pete had recommended, farther down the shore.

There was early morning mist on the lake, and the water was as smooth as glass. Sal had to admit it was beautiful, even if they were probably going to leave empty-handed.

He stared at the water, willing a fish to appear. Then finally it happened—the bite he'd been waiting for. Sal's reel started to click, and his rod dipped.

There was a tremble on the line, then a long pull. "Got something!" he hollered. His rod bowed over, and his reel continued clicking as the fish took the line. Sal began winding it in.





“Don’t reel it in yet.” Uncle Mikey dropped his rod and came over to help. “When the fish stops dragging, wind it in a little.”

Sal nodded. “It’s a big one!” He could sense the fish struggling as it tugged on the line, trying to escape. He stepped back from the water’s edge.

Still his reel clicked as the fish took the line. Then it paused for a moment, and Sal wound it in, but not for long. The fish fought back—the rod was bending under the strain.

At the surface, he saw a flash of dark tail and a glimpse of white belly. The fish wasn’t giving in easily, and Sal’s arms were getting tired.

Uncle Mikey was at his side ready to help, but Sal wanted to bring this one in on his own.

Sal heaved his rod up and back, and then he let it drop down as he wound in the line some more. The fish pulled away once more. Again Sal raised his rod, arms straining. Now he could sense the fish was becoming exhausted.



The fish was at the surface now, splashing and turning over, its tail flapping. It was a catfish! It had been beaten, and Sal knew it. He kept winding the reel, staggering backward away from the water.

“Wow, that’s a monster!” Uncle Mikey called. He took hold of the line and hauled the fish into the shallow water. Sal put his rod down, a huge grin spreading across his face. It was the Big One—it had to be.

The fish's head was huge, with long whiskers and blank eyes. Its skin was the color of cold steel, and its body was at least 3 feet long. It flopped in the shallow water, rubbery mouth opening and shutting.

"That's the Big One all right," Uncle Mikey exclaimed. "I've never caught a fish that big." He clapped Sal on the back. "Good job!"

Sal nodded. But now, seeing the fish flopping at his feet, he wasn't sure what he wanted. The catfish was old—it had been in this lake for years.

If they kept it, the legend would end there and the fish would be just another ornament gathering dust above the mantel.

Sal made up his mind. "Quick, Uncle Mikey. Take a picture with your camera before we put it back."



Uncle Mikey raised his eyebrows, but then he understood. He took a couple of photos of the fish before pulling the hook out of its mouth.

Struggling, they lifted the fish, waded into the water, and lowered it in. The catfish flopped around at first, then hastily disappeared beneath the surface.

Sal and Uncle Mikey packed up their fishing gear and headed back to the cabin. It was time to drive home, but first they stopped at Pete's.

“Well, nothing all week, and then the Big One. Good job, kid!” Pete chuckled.





“I took a picture,” Uncle Mikey said. “I’ll send you a copy for your wall.”

“Excellent,” Pete said, smiling.

As Uncle Mikey’s truck rattled down the highway, Sal reflected on the battle with the big fish. He thought about the way it lay there, thick tail flapping, still fighting to the very end.

The photographs might show the size of the fish and prove that he had caught it, but they wouldn’t tell the whole story.

“Maybe I could follow in my great-grandfather’s footsteps,” Sal thought. He could be creative and write a poem, something descriptive that brought the experience to life. A picture in words about the time he landed a legend but let it live on.

Respond to Reading

Summarize

Summarize how Sal is inspired by catching the fish in *The Big One*. Use your graphic organizer to help.

Details

↓

Point of View

Text Evidence

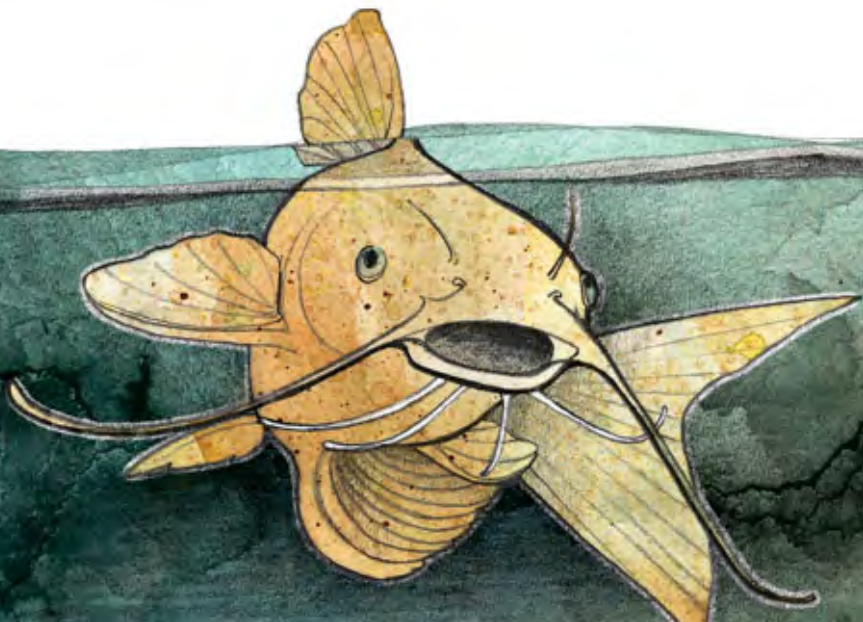
1. What features tell you that *The Big One* is realistic fiction? **GENRE**
2. Reread page 5. What is Sal's point of view about the Big One? How do you know? Now reread page 13. How has Sal's point of view changed? **POINT OF VIEW**
3. What simile does the author use to describe the pickup truck on page 4? **FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**
4. Write about how this story would be different if it were told from the point of view of Uncle Mikey. Use evidence from the text to support your answer. **WRITE ABOUT READING**

Compare Texts

Read some haiku that were inspired by animals.

Catfish

A glint like cold steel,
Catfish breaks through green water.
A splash, then it's gone.



Black Bull

Wet ground, herd grazing,

Impatient swish of black rope

Dares me to run past.





Crow

Rude bandit's harsh cry
Shattering afternoon peace,
Glad eye spies my bread.



Make Connections

What might have inspired the poet to write the haiku *Crow*? **ESSENTIAL QUESTION**

How does the catfish inspire the writer of *The Big One* and *Catfish*? **TEXT TO TEXT**

Focus on Genre

Poetry Haiku are short poems that have 17 syllables in three lines of 5, 7, and 5. Haiku often use figurative language such as simile and metaphor to describe something.

Read and Find Each haiku in the paired selection is inspired by an animal. In “Catfish,” the writer uses a simile to describe the fish. In “Black Bull,” the writer uses a metaphor to describe the bull. Reread these two haiku. Look for the simile and metaphor. How does each one help describe the animal?

Your Turn

Choose a photograph or illustration of an animal that interests you. Use this to inspire you to write your own haiku.

To write a haiku, start by writing longer lines, then remove words until you find the best way to describe the animal in the correct number of syllables. Remember to use simile and metaphor to describe the animal.

Display the haiku you wrote next to the image you used for inspiration.

Literature Circles

Fiction

Thinkmark

Characters

Who are the main characters in *The Big One*?
How did Sal change during the story?

Setting

Where did *The Big One* take place?
When did it take place?

Sequence of Events

What happened first, then, next, and finally in *The Big One*?

Author's Purpose

Why do you think people write poems?

Make Connections

What connections can you make between *The Big One* and a time when your feelings about something changed?

Animals All Around

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