

Author's Notebook

Fires in the Wilderness

1. **Historical Fiction**—*Fires in the Wilderness* is a story of fictional characters placed in an historical setting. Often authors of historical fiction take some liberties with history. However, they try to keep true to the times and circumstances. The characters in this story are the creations of the author. However, an individual nicknamed “Squint” did enroll in the CCC and did wash out at Camp Custer. Many of the events in this story are built on recollections of men who were once CCC boys. Can you think of an historical event that would be fun to write a fictional story about?
2. **Simile**—Similes and metaphors are tools that writers use to help readers gain a deeper understanding of feelings and circumstances. A simile is a figure of speech that compares things that are typically unlike each other. Similes follow phrases that start with the

words *like* or *as*. In Chapter 1, “Skinny Cats,” of this book, the main character says: “I felt *like* one of those skinny cats.”

3. **Metaphors** are figures of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily means one thing is used as a comparison for something else. Metaphors do not use the words *like* or *as*. Later on in Chapter 1, you can find the sentence: “We were skinny cats running for our lives.” This can be viewed as a metaphor. How would you describe your life as a simile or a metaphor?
4. **Foreshadowing** is a device that writers use to give the reader a clue about what will happen later in the story. In the second chapter of *Fires in the Wilderness*, Jarek has a dream that gives a clue into the future. What does this dream describe? Can Jarek’s father’s advice in the first chapter also be considered foreshadowing?
5. **Protagonist and Antagonist**—A protagonist is typically the main character of a story. The protagonist in *Fires in the Wilderness* is Jarek Sokolowski. An antagonist is someone or something opposing the protagonist. The antagonist in *Fires in the Wilderness* is introduced in Chapter 2, “Train to Tomorrow:” Can you identify the antagonist?
6. **Character Development**—Authors develop the primary characters (protagonist and antagonist) to help readers understand them, and give some feeling for the supporting characters. How is Jarek like his friends? How is he different? What kind of person

is Captain Mason? What about Ben, who shared the umbrella tent with the Polish friends?

7. **Bullying and Discrimination as a Basis for Conflict**—Bullying is a form of harassment by someone who has more physical and/or social power and dominance than the victim. In *Fires in the Wilderness*, Mike O’Shea is the antagonist and a bully. Through the course of the story, he harasses Jarek because of his nationality. This creates the story’s conflict. What other forms of discrimination exist? An excellent research project would be to do a report on how African-Americans and Native Americans were treated by the CCC.
8. **History Lesson**—Camp Custer still exists in Battle Creek, Michigan. The military camp was named after General George Armstrong Custer. One history challenge is to learn why a military camp in Michigan came to be named after General Custer.
9. **Depression Cash**—CCC enrollees earned \$30 a month. Of that amount, \$25 was sent home. That doesn’t seem like much money today. According to calculations using the Consumer Price Index, the purchasing power of \$1 in 1933 was worth \$15.56 in 2006. How much would \$25 dollars in 1933 be worth in 2006?
10. **Personal History:** In Chapter 7, “Training,” Jarek Sokolowski was issued serial number CC6-104377. This was the actual serial number of the author’s father, who served in the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1935, at Camp Cusino in Michigan’s

Upper Peninsula. Family history is often the source of inspiration for authors. Write a paragraph about someone in your family history who did or was involved in something that is of interest to you.

11. **Humor** is an essential part of life. Through the course of *Fires in the Wilderness*, the friends have fun with each other, and even play a practical joke on the antagonist. What is your favorite humorous event in the story?
12. **Word Choice**—The military has a special language. Terms that one group develops that aren't understood by another group are referred to as *jargon*. The author chose several military terms that were used in the CCC: mess kit, mess tent, KP, AWOL, and others. In addition, *jargon* and phrases from the Depression era were also used: railroad bull, LaSalle (automobile), and rube, among others. You probably use words that are unfamiliar to your parents or grandparents. Make a list of those words—your jargon.
13. **Idioms**—An idiom is a combination of words whose meaning is different from the individual words themselves. Each generation and group (such as the military) have their own idioms. In the first chapter of *Fires in the Wilderness*, Pick says, “Hold your horses.” By saying this, Pick isn't asking his friend to hold a horse. Instead, the idiom means to be patient. Can you identify any other idioms in this book? (You can find one in Chapter 2!) What are some of the idioms that you and your friends use?

14. **Defining Moments**—Many good stories have defining moments. These moments could be life-changing and shocking events. In *Fires in the Wilderness*, the death of Jarek’s brother, Squint, is one defining moment. Can you identify others?
15. **Misdirection**—Often, in storytelling, the author attempts to lead the reader to believe one thing, only to have events turn out differently. For example, Jarek is described as being a very good fighter who learned boxing skills from his father. Did you think that Jarek was going to win the boxing match against Mike O’Shea? Try writing a story that misdirects the reader to believe one thing, only to have events turn out differently.
16. **Messages**—Authors often insert messages into their stories reflecting their viewpoints and beliefs. In this book, one of the messages is that fighting doesn’t solve problems. Can you identify any other messages?
17. **Symbolism**—The horror and danger of fire is symbolized as a beast. After Jarek saves Mike at the end of the story, the concluding paragraph begins with: “. . . the most terrible of all beasts had been conquered.” What did the beast symbolize in this sentence? If you wanted to portray fire as something friendly, what symbol would you use?
18. **Title Selection**—Writers choose titles that will attract the reader and have a strong tie to the story. A good title shouldn’t give away too much of the story or its outcome, yet it should provide an enticing hint into

the storyline. The title for this book did not come easily to the author. Several ideas were rejected before finally settling on *Fires in the Wilderness*. What other titles would work for this story? Try to come up with three.