



Coyote's Song

Gail Anderson-Dargatz

Reading Level: 2

Interest Level: Adult

Book Summary

Sara used to be a back-up singer in a band. She left her singing career to marry Rob and raise a family. She is content with being a stay-at-home mom. Then, one Saturday, Sara's world changes. Sara and her family go to an outdoor music festival. There, on stage, Sara sees Jim, the lead singer from her old band. He invites her to sing with him. Sara also sees something else: a coyote. She takes its picture. When Sara checks her camera screen, the photo isn't there. Has she just seen Coyote, the trickster spirit? Sara once again feels drawn to Jim and life on the road. She begins to question the love and life that she and Rob share. Is the Coyote spirit responsible for turning Sara's life upside down?

Author Biography

By the age of eighteen, Gail Anderson-Dargatz knew that she wanted to write about Canadian women in rural settings. Today, Gail is a bestselling author. *A Recipe for Bees* and *The Cure for Death by Lightning* were finalists for the Giller prize. She currently teaches fiction in the creative writing program at the University of British Columbia. Gail divides her time between Manitoulin Island and the Shuswap region of BC, the landscape found in so much of her writing.

Note to the educator: The following activities are suggestions only. Please choose and adjust the projects and questions according to the specific needs and level of your students as well as their experience with doing novel studies. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK**Book Cover and Title**

- (a) Have students read the title and describe what they see on the front cover. Ask students to share their feelings and thoughts as they look at the cover.
- (b) Read the back cover with the students. Ask students, “Who is going to have to make a big decision? About what?”

Coyote: The Trickster

The First Nations people believed animals were an integral part of their lives and so created many stories and prayers about the animals that lived around them. Explain to the students that one character they will read about in *Coyote's Song* is Coyote, the trickster (known as Seklep in the Shuswap language). Coyote, the hero in many Shuswap legends, is foolish and likes to brag, so Shuswap legends about him are often humorous; however, Coyote is also well-meaning and acts for the good of humankind.

Read the following Shuswap legend about Coyote to the students, or distribute the story to the students and read it with them. Then discuss what makes the legend entertaining, what the legend teaches, and how Coyote is both a foolish show-off and a well-meaning spirit.

Why We Have Seasons

One day Grizzly Bear met Coyote, the trickster. Bear bragged about the power of his magic. Bear said he could control the light and dark. Bear said he liked dark most of the time, and so he was going to make it dark most of the time.

Bear and Coyote argued. They showed off their powers. At times, Bear won and it was dark. At times, Coyote won and it was light. Finally, Bear said, "Why don't we have it dark half the time and light half the time?" Coyote agreed. Coyote said, "Let it be light when the sun shines and dark when the sun goes down." Bear agreed.

But later, Bear was not happy with how short the dark time was. He wanted the dark time to be longer. So Bear said, "The dark time should be as long as the number of feathers in the tail of a blue grouse. Each feather will be one moon." Coyote counted the feathers in the tail of a blue grouse. He counted 22 feathers. Coyote argued that 22 moons was much too long for a dark time. "The people will die with such a long dark time," said Coyote, "and there will be no time to grow fruit or trees."

Coyote continued, "The dark time should last as long as the number of feathers in the tail of the red-winged flicker. Half of the feathers can be for the moons in the dark time, and half of the feathers can be for the moons in the time of light.

Bear agreed.

Bear found a red-winged flicker. He counted the tail feathers. He counted only 12 tail feathers. That was not enough! But it was too late to make any changes; after all, he had made an agreement with the trickster.

From then on winter has lasted six moons (months) and summer has lasted six moons. So, Coyote saved the people from having to suffer too long a winter.

(Adapted from *More Legends of the Elders* by John W. Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen)

WORKING WITH THE BOOK

Characters

Tell students that readers can learn about the characters in a novel in three ways—from (1) what the writer tells us, (2) what the characters say, do, and think, and (3) what others think and say about the characters.

As students read the novel, have them note a few examples from each chapter, where applicable, of how the writer develops the character of Rob, Sara's husband. Encourage students to make inferences about the character, where possible. Then put the students in small groups and have them (a) share their examples and (b) discuss how their opinion of Rob changes, and why.

How do we make inferences?

Active readers use their experience and knowledge to make educated guesses about characters and their motives. Readers who make inferences use clues in the text together with their own experiences to help them figure out the author's meaning.

What the writer tells us about Rob

Inference

What Rob says, does, and thinks

Inference

What other characters think and say
about Rob

Inference

Plot

The plot moves forward as the tension among Sara, Jim, and Rob increases. As the students read the book, have them note examples of tension among the three characters.

Sara and Rob	Example: <i>"I was going to sing at the Roots and Blues Festival! But I knew I was in for a fight with my husband over it."</i> (page 22)
Rob and Jim	
Sara and Jim	

After reading the entire book, have students look at their notes and discuss the following questions:

1. Describe the times Sara chooses to do something that adds to the tension between her and Rob. Why do you think Sara makes each of these choices?
2. Explain how both Rob and Jim were responsible for the tension that grew between them.
3. Describe how Jim adds to the tension between him and Sara. What do you think of Jim's behaviour regarding Sara? Give reasons for your opinion.
4. In general, why do people sometimes do or say things that they know will cause tension in a relationship? Have you ever done or said something knowing that your words or actions would cause tension in a relationship? Would you behave differently now if you found yourself in the same situation? Why or why not?

Setting

Explain to students that the setting provides details of when and where events take place. These details can add to the story in different ways (e.g., underline a theme, or invoke thoughts, feelings, and emotions). After reading the entire book, have students read the following two scenes from the book and discuss the questions that follow:

Scene 1: (Chapter Five, page 26)

My family walked with me to the stage where Jim and his band performed. As soon as Jim saw us, he ended the song and introduced me. I went to the stage to sing the country love songs we had sung together fifteen years before.

Up there, in front of that audience, I felt like I had gone back in time. Jim and I were young and on tour. And Jim wasn't singing to some woman in the crowd. He was singing his love songs to me.

Scene 2: (Chapter Twelve, page 51)

My husband was asleep in his La-Z-Boy chair in the living room. He often slept on Sunday afternoons. He never got enough sleep during the week. And now he was even more tired out from our arguments.

Rose was in the kitchen making little masks out of play dough. The masks Rose made were like the traditional masks Rob once carved out of wood. My husband had been a real artist. But he didn't have time for that now.

1. Where does Scene 1 take place? How does Sara feel on stage? Why do you think she feels that way? How long do you think those feelings last?
2. Picture in your mind what is described in Scene 2. What words would you use to describe the scene? How does the scene make you feel? Why? How do you think Sara feels as she looks at Rob? Explain why.
3. How do the two scenes underline the difference between Sara's relationship with Rob and Jim?

TALKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. "Sometimes I wasn't sure who I was anymore. I was 'Mommy,' I was Rob's wife, and I liked being both. But what about me, Sara?" (pages 8-9)
 - (a) What does Sara mean when she says "I wasn't sure who I was anymore?" Do you think Sara lost a part of herself when she married Rob? If so, what did she lose?
 - (b) How do you think Sara became unsure of who she was?
 - (c) Sara was a "Mommy" and a wife. What roles do you play in life (e.g., wife, sister, friend, employee, daughter)? Do you ever have moments when you feel unsure of who you are? When do these moments tend to occur? Do you think that most people feel unsure of who they are at times in their life? Give a reason for your answer.
2. "Look what time has done to us." (page 16)
 - (a) What was Jim referring to? How did Sara feel about Jim's comment? Why?
 - (b) Time changes a person physically. How else does time change a person? Do you feel time has changed you? If yes, describe how.
 - (c) Are there ways in which time cannot change a person? Explain your answer.
3. "I looked down at Jim's hand holding mine. Jim's hand was warm and soft, so unlike my husband's rough hands. I noticed Jim wasn't wearing a wedding ring." pages 17-18)
 - (a) What can a person's hands tell you about the person?
 - (b) Sara compares Jim's hands with her husband's hands. What does the comparison tell you about Sara's feelings toward Jim at that moment? Toward her husband?
 - (c) Why were Sara's husband's hands so rough?
 - (d) What sacrifice did Sara's husband, Rob, make for his family? Compare the work Rob does to support his family and the work he left behind. How do you think Rob feels about his work? Why? In terms of work life, do you think Rob's situation is unique? Or is it a situation that many people find themselves in?
 - (e) What comparisons can you make between Rob's life and Jim's life in terms of making sacrifices? Who do you think made the bigger sacrifices in life—Jim or Rob?

4. "He did find me beautiful. All at once I felt like my young self again." (page 21)
 - (a) How had Sara been feeling about herself before Jim came into her life again?
 - (b) If Sara had continued her singing career after getting married, do you think seeing Jim again would have had as strong an effect on her? Explain why or why not.
 - (c) Think about the people in your life. Who makes you feel good about yourself? Do they make you feel good through their actions, words, or both? How do you make others feel good about themselves? Share an example.

5. "Well, I'm not a singer anymore," I said. "That time of my life is over." (page 27)
 - (a) Why was Sara's singing life over?
 - (b) Do you think Sara was right to sacrifice her singing career for her family? Explain why or why not.
 - (c) How does Sara plan to have both a happy family life and a singing career? Do you think her plan will work? Why or why not?
 - (d) People's lives are made up of different stages. Some stages are determined by age (e.g., childhood or early adulthood). Other stages can be described by circumstances (e.g., starting life in a new place or getting divorced).

What stages in life have you gone through? What did you learn in these different stages of life? What stages of life are you looking forward to? Why?

6. "When we got home, I sat down at my computer and sent Jim an e-mail. The message was innocent enough, I thought." (page 31)
 - (a) Do you think Sara's first e-mail message to Jim innocent? Would you describe the e-mail as flirting or something more serious? Give a reason for your answer.
 - (b) Describe how Sara's and Jim's e-mails (i) become less and less innocent and (ii) affect Sara's feelings toward Rob.
 - (c) Do you think it is relatively harmless for people in a relationship to flirt with others through e-mail? Why or why not?

7. "Daddy's my hero," Rose said. (page 56)
 - (a) Why do you think Rose tells Sara that her daddy is her hero?
 - (b) How does this statement affect Sara?
 - (c) Young children often understand more than we credit them for. Do you agree? Give examples to support your opinion.

8. "Everything clicked for me. I knew what I had to do. I slipped the ring back on my finger. When the light turned green, I went straight, to the festival." (page 58)
 - (a) What ring did Sara slip back on her finger? What does this action suggest about Sara and her marriage?
 - (b) Why do you think Sara goes to sing in the festival?
 - (c) What "clicked" for Sara? What does she realize she needs to do in her life?
 - (d) Do you think it is ever possible to have everything you want in life? Explain why or why not. Do you think there comes a time in people's lives when they are satisfied with what they have? Or do people always want more?

9. "I love how you make me feel," I said. "I love that you believe in me. I love how we sing together. But all that is on stage. That's not real life." (page 61)
 - (a) What does Sara realize about her feelings for Jim? About a life with Jim?
 - (b) How did having Jim in her life again for a short while help Sara?
 - (c) Imagine Sara decided to go with Jim on the road. Do you think they would have made it as a couple? Explain why or why not.

10. "A lunar eclipse lasts only a few hours, not forever. This night's moon was the same old moon I had always known." (page 63)
 - (a) What happens on the night of the "same old moon"?
 - (b) What happens on the night of the lunar eclipse?
 - (c) How do the different moons underline Sara's relationship with Rob and Jim?
 - (d) What aspects of your life compare to a lunar eclipse? What aspects of your life compare to the same old moon you've always known? When you think about all these parts of your life, which parts are more important to you—the parts that compare to a lunar eclipse or the parts that compare to the old moon you have always known? Explain why.

WRITING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. Choose a character or event from the novel that you connected with in some way. For example, did the character or event remind you of something in your life? Cause an emotional reaction in you? Teach you something? Describe how and why in a paragraph.
2. Imagine you are Sara. You decide to leave your family and travel on the road with Jim. Write a letter to Rob explaining why you have left him and describing your hopes and dreams.
3. Think of the people in your life. Who do you think knows you best? Write a letter or email to this person telling them a few things about yourself that they do not know, but should. Explain to the person why you think they should know these things.
4. Jim, Sara, and Rob howl at the moon. Make a list of four or five crazy things you have done in your life. Choose one item from the list and write a paragraph about that crazy thing. Describe what the crazy thing was, why you did it, and how it made you feel.
5. Coyote in the story was described as a trickster. Have students give human characteristics to animals by completing the following similes:

as _____ as a fish	as beautiful as a _____
as _____ as a weasel	as funny as a _____
as _____ as a fox	as creepy as a _____
as _____ as a bunny	as smart as a _____
as _____ as a pig	as stubborn as a _____

PROJECTS and ACTIVITIES

1. Stories, Fables and Legends

Explain to the students that animals are often used in stories to teach lessons about human behaviour and morality. Using animals as characters is a non-threatening way of encouraging readers to enjoy and learn from the story without the fear that they will see themselves in the characters. Some traditional examples of using animals in stories to teach lessons include The Tortoise and the Hare, The Ugly Duckling, and The Lion and the Mouse. Invite students to share examples of stories, fables, and legends they know that have animals as main characters. As a class project, have students write down and illustrate the stories they know. Bind the stories into an anthology that the students can then share with the children in their lives.

2. Listen to Shuswap Legends

Have students listen to Shuswap legends, including legends about Coyote, at <http://www.cbc.ca/aboriginal/2009/01/legends-project-1.html> (Running Time: 54:25)

Description of Broadcast

The Shuswap legends and stories from the Secwepemc of Salmon Arm, B.C. aired nationally on CBC Radio Ideas in March 2006. The collection of traditional oral legends was recorded, dramatized and produced in the north Okanagan, using bilingual performers, original music, unique vocalizations and natural sounds from rural Salmon Arm and adjacent communities. The stories and legends are as meaningful today in these adapted versions as they were when they were first told thousands of years ago.

3. Reading Hands

Have students brainstorm a list of twenty or more ways that people use their hands in daily life. Then give each student a copy of the following poem and read it together with them.

Her Hands

© Maggie Pittman

Her hands held me gently from the day I took my first breath.

Her hands helped to guide me as I took my first step.

Her hands held me close when the tears would start to fall.

Her hands were quick to show me that she would take care of it all.

Her hands were there to brush my hair, or straighten a wayward bow.

Her hands were often there to comfort the hurts that didn't always show.

Her hands helped hold the stars in place, and encouraged me to reach.

Her hands would clap and cheer and praise when I captured them at length.

Her hands would also push me, though not down or in harms way.

Her hands would punctuate the words, just do what I say.

Her hands sometimes had to discipline, to help bend this young tree.

Her hands would shape and mold me into all she knew I could be.

Her hands are now twisting with age and years of work,

Her hands now need my gentle touch to rub away the hurt.

Her hands are more beautiful than anything can be.

Her hands are the reason I am me.

Source: www.FamilyFriendPoems.com Her Hands, Mother Poem

<http://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/her-hands#ixzz1vtqJZmfQ>

Have the students share their thoughts and feelings about the poem. Then have the students look at and think about their own hands. Encourage the students to write a poem about their hands by finishing the following sentences:

My Hands

My hands can hold ...

My hands can touch ...

My hands can make ...

My hands can carry ...

My hands can help ...

My hands can reach ...

My hands are ...

4. Exploring Identity: Who Am I?

Encourage students to explore their identity by having them finish the following sentences in writing:

(a) What brings me joy?

When I'm alone, I enjoy ...

When I'm with friends, I enjoy ...

When I'm with family, I enjoy ...

My favourite thing to do is ...

(d) What do I wish for?

One day I hope to ..

I wish I were better at ...

I want the best for ...

The world would be a better place if ...

(b) What are my strengths?

I'm good at ...

What I like most about myself is ...

A good thing I have done is ...

I am at my best when ...

(e) Who Am I?

Complete each sentence with one main idea.

I am ...

I want ...

(c) How do I relate to others?

I show people I care about them by ...

I help people understand me by ...

The people I care most about are ...

I feel best with a person when ...

I feel good when people say I ...

(Adapted from *Living with Healthy Relationships*, Grass Roots Press)

5. The Heavens

Have the students share experiences they have had that involve the night sky (e.g., seeing a shooting star, witnessing an eclipse, watching a lightning storm). Have students become astronomers and keep a night-sky log. Encourage the students to look up at the night sky for two minutes on three consecutive nights. Have them jot down what they see, a few words that describe the sky, and how the sky makes them feel at that moment. Then have the students compare their observations and feelings.

FURTHER READING available from Grass Roots Press

If students liked this book, they might also enjoy:

New Year's Eve, Marina Endicott, Good Reads, Grass Roots Press

In From the Cold, Deborah Ellis, Good Reads, Grass Roots Press

The Mailbox, Kate Ferris, Novels for Adult Learners

Fair-Weather Friend, Patricia Scanlan, Open Door Series

Love among the Haystacks, D.H. Lawrence, Oxford Bookworms

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