



Stranded in the Wild

Gary Rodriguez

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Stranded in the Wild is an emotional coming-of-age adventure with a positive message.

Gary Rodriguez's *Stranded in the Wild* is a riveting, character-driven adventure that pits a diverse group of adolescents against the treachery of the wild.

Four teenagers from different walks of life converge at Camp Arrowhead for a week of adventure. Savi is a faith-driven former gymnast and native Mississippian. Jade is a beautifully naïve and neglected city girl. Rico is a tender warrior “bad boy” from San Antonio. Conner is a spoiled rich kid whose jock antics irritate campers. The four are assigned to the same white-water raft.

When a rafting mistake leads to the loss of their guide and the treacherous currents of the Salmon River steer their raft off course, they find themselves stranded in an untamed wilderness with few supplies. The foursome defends itself against wild wolves, grizzlies, rattlesnakes, and a legendary creature called Vexel from whose clutches no hunter has escaped. They have six days to hike twenty-five miles to Camp Arrowhead before the river rises and cuts them off from home.

The characters are realistic and appealing, if they are at first high school archetypes. Their backstories determine how they respond to the immediate situation. Savi's cool calmness and fierce independence in stressful situations contrast with Jade's reactions; Jade is ill-equipped to handle stress. Rico's outsider status contrasts with handsome insider Conner's.

Each adolescent confronts challenges that alter their self-perception and their understanding of others. They experience emotional turmoil and personal sacrifice, and work together to formulate a course of action, addressing problems one by one. They bicker and relent to their basest instincts. Their sacrifices are complex, heartfelt, and realistic, and they all grow. This personal transcendence is the story's greatest strength.

The North Idahoan wilderness is the teens' biggest adversary. The setting is alternately peaceful, dark, spiritual, and mysterious. Its specter looms large, juxtaposing dark awesomeness against sweeter, more delicate elements.

The story proceeds at a quick pace, punctuated by brief periods of relief. No sooner does the group resolve some interpersonal problem than another challenge begins. Intense and suspenseful action sequences evoke even more fear and uncertainty.

By story's end, the teens resolve most of their internal and external conflicts. They triumph over adversity in their quest to return to civilization and address their relationship to nature. Some questions remain open, and the mystery surrounding the story's main adversary is ambiguous.

Stranded in the Wild is an emotional coming-of-age adventure with a positive message about teamwork and persistence in the face of adversity.

NANCY POWELL (November 26, 2018)

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