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Young Adult Fiction

The Winter Road
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Silence blankets Willa's rugged survival trek in this novel about a seventeen-year-old girl who crashes her uncle's Cessna on a solo flight from Ontario in January. Once the storm that causes the crash subsides, Willa waits a week by the plane before realizing that rescue efforts have probably been abandoned because she is believed to be dead. Her only chance of survival is a solo journey through deep snow in temperatures that drop as low as forty-three degrees below zero.

Armed only with her uncle's minimalist survival kit, Willa's endurance and ingenuity are tested many times. The cold forces her to warm her fuel canisters with her own body heat to get the fuel to burn. Frigid air burns any uncovered skin, and every step sinks her so deeply into the snow that she cannot stoke her signal fire fast enough for the low-flying rescue planes to spot its smoke. Making snowshoes out of tree branches and the plane's seatbelts, Willa resolutely battles both the elements and her own fears. Memories of her brother, Ray, who has been dead six years, and his confidence sustain her as she combats hunger, self-recrimination, and the ever-present danger of hypothermia.

Willa is at her ingenious best when her food—oatmeal, freeze-dried chicken pilaf dinner, and her uncle's "goat bars"—runs low. Inspired by memories of ice fishing with her father, she improvises a fish trap and patiently waits through two days of low-level starvation-inspired panic before catching the fish that will sustain her through the next several days. When the fish provides insufficient nourishment, she slices cattails into the broth. Finally, on Day Eight, she sets off to find a human settlement, wearing her handmade snowshoes and pulling a toboggan improvised from a piece of sheet metal pulled from the plane's wreckage.

The author, who has worked as a carpenter and an attorney, based this debut novel on his own winter camping experiences. Details such as how frozen condensation from Willa's breath glazes the inside of the igloo she builds to shelter herself from a second storm lend authenticity

to the narrative, as do the minutiae of how she occupies herself waiting for the storm to pass. Readers might wish for more details of Willa's psychological resources, which provide glimpses into an adolescence marred by her brother's death and her parents' inadequate responses to it. Willa's ability to withstand the silence enforced by her physical isolation stems from the emotional loneliness she has born for so long.

The Winter Road has been nominated for a 2007 Best Books for Young Adults award by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). Its rugged landscape and likable protagonist will hold the interest of young adults, stoking dreams of wilderness adventures in which they too can persevere.