



Stranded

by Nikki Shannon Smith

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The Story

Nature-loving Ava yearns to leave the noise of New York City behind for a *real* adventure in the great outdoors—that’s why she’s thrilled when her parents allow her to move in with her Auntie Raven in the Adirondack Mountains!

It’s a dream come true . . . until Auntie Raven is called away and Ava’s stay is cut short. But when wires get crossed, Ava finds herself alone in her aunt’s secluded cabin. Winter comes early in the mountains, and one night, a single storm will change everything. With a destroyed cabin, no cell reception, and no neighbors for miles, Ava begins to realize this adventure is more than she ever could have imagined.

Surrounded by mountains blanketed with snow and ice, Ava is completely on her own. It’s the ultimate test . . . and her newly-developed survival skills may not be enough for her to survive the winter. Ava might not be able to fight the cold and the storms that come her way, but can she work *with* nature long enough to survive it?

Reading Group Questions

1. Why is it so important to Ava to escape the city and visit her Auntie Raven at the beginning of the book? How do her expectations for the experience compare to the reality that awaits her? In particular, how does Ava’s understanding of Auntie Raven change over the course of the book?
2. Sometimes we need to make the wrong choices in order to find out what the right choices are. Can you think of a moment in the book when Ava made the wrong choice? How did she realize it was the wrong choice, and what right choice did it lead her to?
3. It’s often hard for family members to show their love for one another in direct ways. Can you think of two examples where miscommunication between members of Ava’s family lead to conflict or hurt feelings? How could these characters have communicated to one another, or reacted differently?
4. Think about what survival means for Ava while she is stranded, then think about your own life and what survival means to you. How are your circumstances similar to Ava’s and what lessons can you apply to your own situation?

About the Author



Photo © TomiGreen Davenport Upward Vision

Nikki Shannon Smith is from Oakland, California, but she now lives in the greater Sacramento area. She has worked in elementary education for more than 30 years and writes everything from board books to young adult novels. Find her online at nikkishannonsmith.com.

Author Q&A

Are there any people, experiences, or other stories that particularly influenced you as you were writing *Stranded*?

Going to summer camp as a Camp Fire Girl, combined with annual family picnics near lakes, fostered a deep love and respect for nature when I was young, even though I grew up in the city. I feel free and centered whenever I'm surrounded by trees and water. There were many scenes set in the Adirondacks that allowed me to relive those memories and bring them to life for readers. The book *My Side of the Mountain* has similar themes, and when I was a sixth-grade teacher, *Where the Red Fern Grows* was required reading, so I've read that at least five times. Of course, there had to be a dog in *Stranded*!

Did you have to do any research to write this story? If so, can you tell us a little bit about where you looked and what you found?

I love doing research—so much that I have to make myself stop to write the story! I tend to do a deep dive for information no matter what I'm writing. The first thing I did was look at good, old-fashioned paper maps. It allowed me to ground myself in terms of the layout of the area between Ava's home and Auntie Raven's home. I also explored online maps, so I could zoom in and look at aerial views. I always visit as many "official" websites as I can, and through those I looked at museums, lodgings, and live cameras. I searched for images and read all about the wildlife, weather, history, things to do, the 46ers, and the peaks they climb. There was some information I couldn't find, such as how mail delivery works in remote areas of the park, so I reached out to people via email. Nobody I asked knew the answer, so I made that detail up. My favorite information was about the 46ers, and now I wish I could spend a year in the Adirondacks "training" and becoming one myself!

What do you hope readers, legitimately stranded in the woods or not, will take away from this book? What would you love for a reader to understand more after reading?

I once heard someone say that after you write a book and it makes its way into the hands of readers, it's no longer yours. I think that is true in some ways. Each reader will bring themselves to the pages and embark upon their own journey. That's what makes reading so special. First and foremost, I want readers to take away whatever they were looking for (or didn't know they were looking for) when they opened the book.

With that said, I hope readers will feel encouraged to be their true, authentic selves and to surround themselves with people who love and accept them just the way they are. I hope they see that speaking up for yourself or for someone else can make a difference. I also want them to have an example of self-reliance and grit. Ava faces a life-and-death situation in nature, but children face all kinds of hardships and challenges: academically, socially, within their families. Some of them are dealing with things most adults have never had to navigate. I don't want them to give up. I want them to think outside the box, trust themselves to solve problems, but also to ask for help when they need it. I want them to know that no matter how stranded they are, literally or figuratively, there is always a way out.