

## Setting/Place and Time: Where in the World Are We?



"...the tundra was an ocean of grass on which she was circling around and around."

—*Julie of the Wolves*

The setting of a book is where and when the story takes place. *Julie of the Wolves* takes place entirely in Alaska in the twentieth century. Jean Craighead George actually traveled to Alaska, studying the place, its animals, and its people, before writing *Julie of the Wolves*. Her thorough research enabled her to create a very realistic, detailed world for Miyax's adventure.

### **Place**

The author places her heroine on the northern slope of the Alaskan tundra. Although Alaska is part of the United States, it is not part of the continental United States. Like Hawaii, Alaska is not attached to the mainland United States. It is attached to Canada and juts out into the Pacific Ocean near the Arctic Circle.

Miyax is lost on the tundra. The tundra is bare and flat and covered in short grasses, making it greenish brown in the summer. Because the Alaskan tundra is so far north, it's usually

very cold. It only reaches about 40 degrees Fahrenheit there in the summer. During the summer there are days when the sun never sets on the tundra. In fact, in Barrow, Alaska, the sun is always up between mid-May and early August. There are eighty-four days when it's never dark outside. This is because at this time of year, the Arctic Circle, the northernmost part of the earth, is tilted toward the sun. If you look at a globe you'll see that it's tilted to represent this angle. Miyax describes this time of year: "The sun slid down the sky, hung still for a moment, then started up again. It was midnight." In the summer the ground thaws a little bit. A thin layer of soil defrosts just enough for very short grasses to grow. Strong winds blow year-round, preventing taller plants or trees from growing. Miyax looks out on "a vast lawn of grass and moss."

In the winter, it's usually snowy there. Miyax observes its beauty when she says, "Her icy sled jingled over the wind-swept lakes. . . . the stars grew brighter as the hours passed and the tundra began to glow, for the snow reflected each twinkle a billion times over, turning the night to silver." At this time of year, the northernmost part of the earth is pointed away from the sun, so it is dark all day long for a very long time. For sixty-six days in the heart of the winter, the sun never rises above the horizon. The author describes this time of the year: ". . . the land would be white with snow and in three months the long Arctic night that lasted sixty-six days would darken the top of the world." With little or no sun, extremely cold temperatures (as low as 25 degrees below zero), and the fierce winds, there is very little life on the tundra in the winter. The author says, "Snowstorms came and went; the wind blew constantly."

The ground is frozen, so little plant life can grow. Without plants, small animals do not have much food to live on, and without small animals to eat, larger animals are also scarce. There are a few animals that have gradually adapted to the harsh Arctic environment. Mammals such as Arctic foxes, wolves, and hares live there. Arctic birds include the snowy owl and the ptarmigan. Some of the animals that live there, like the hare and fox, turn white when winter comes. They have adapted over many years to blend in with the snowy environment so that they will be hidden from their predators. The author explains: "The fox's brown fur of summer was splotched with white patches. . . . he would soon be white like snow." Some of the birds that inhabit the tundra, like the terns, only live there in the summer. When winter approaches, they migrate south to warmer temperatures. The caribou that sometimes Miyax lived on also migrate south in the fall to escape the harsh winter temperatures and to find more plentiful sources of food.

In the Arctic, a phenomenon known as aurora borealis, or the northern lights, occurs. The aurora borealis is glimmering ribbons of colored light that flash across the sky. This happens because there are electrically charged particles from the sun in the air. The particles are drawn to Earth's atmosphere by the magnetic field of the North Pole. These particles bump into Earth's atmosphere and release energy that people see as bands of light. The best place to watch this amazing sight is from Barrow, Alaska, between August and April. Miyax describes this beautiful natural phenomenon: "Fountains of green fire rose from the earth and shot to the top of the black velvet sky. Red and white lights sprayed out of the green."

In the second section of *Julie of the Wolves*, the author changes the story's location. The reader is suddenly in the populated areas of Alaska. Miyax spends time in both the village of Mekoryuk and the larger city of Barrow. Alaskan villages are small, with only a couple of hundred inhabitants. Villagers tend to live in low-roofed houses. Towns have only a few large buildings. Most manufactured goods are brought in by boat or airplane because the harsh weather makes driving difficult. Food is obtained by hunting Arctic animals. The people must wear heavy parkas and boots to stay warm.

These town settings are brought to life by the people who live in them. Eskimos are the native people who live in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of North America and Siberia. The word *Eskimo* is not actually an Eskimo word. Translated, it means "eaters of raw meat" and is a term that was given to the native people by the Algonquin Indians of northern Canada. The Algonquins called their neighbors this because they wore animal-skin clothing and were very good hunters. The name became commonly used by European explorers who encountered them and it has stuck. The term used by the people themselves is *Inuit*, which means "real people."

Some Eskimo, or Inuit, people settle on rivers and survive by fishing. Others settle inland and follow the caribou herds. Most settle on the coasts and survive by hunting maritime animals like seals, walrus, and whales. When Miyax was a small girl, she spent time with her father at a seal camp. She describes it: "There was Kapugen's little house of driftwood, not far from the beach. It was rosy-gray on the outside. Inside, it was gold-brown.

Walrus tusks gleamed and drums, harpoons, and man's knives decorated the walls. The sealskin kayak beside the door glowed. . . . The ocean was green and white. . . ." Miyax remembered the seals there, too: "She saw the soft eyes of the seals on the ice. . . . Then the ice would turn red."

The ability of the Eskimo people to adapt successfully to the Arctic environment is due to their inventive culture. They are skilled in taking natural resources and making them into useful devices. For example, their traditional clothing is made from animal skins. Miyax makes snowshoes for herself using frozen strips of meat, and an igloo home with blocks of frozen snow and ice.

## **Time**

Although Jean Craighead George does not specify exactly when her story takes place, the reader can assume it is the late twentieth century. The majority of the story takes place in the wild, vast tundra, where things seem to never change. There is little there to indicate the time period, except the oil barrels Miyax sees on the tundra. They are a sure sign of modern America, where the oil industry is so important.

The Eskimo, or Inuit, people are far away from the mainland United States, but they have most of the modern conveniences mainland residents have today. There are cars, like the one Amy's dad drives. There are gas stoves, like the one in Aunt Martha's house. Airplanes take people from place to place, like the one Miyax travels in to Barrow, and the one used by the

hunters who kill Amaroq. When Miyax meets Pearl, the two spend time at the Quonset. The people there are drinking Coca-Cola, listening to rock music, and wearing blue jeans.

All of these things probably remind you of things you see every day, so the story can't take place too far in the past or too far in the future.

### **Thinking about the setting**

- What are the different seasons on the Alaskan tundra like?
- What does the author tell us about the people and animals of Alaska?
- What are some clues from the author that tell the reader when the story takes place?

## Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"...my heart belonged to the wilderness."

—Jean Craighead George

**T**he theme of a book is the subject matter about which the author is writing. Themes are the main ideas on which the book is based. *Julie of the Wolves* has several themes such as survival in difficult circumstances, pride in one's culture, and courage.

### **Cultural pride**

Cultural pride is a very important theme in *Julie of the Wolves*. The Eskimo, or Inuit (as they call themselves), people have lived in harmony with their environment for thousands of years. On her trip to Barrow, Alaska, to research *Julie of the Wolves*, Jean Craighead George witnessed one of the ways in which the people live by old traditions. While she was there, an Inuit boy led her onto the ocean ice to show her a group of Inuit men who were carving up a huge bowhead whale that they had just caught. George was deeply moved by what she saw. She says, "Later I would learn that I had been observing a two-thousand-year-old ritual of carving the whale for distribution among Eskimo people."

Kapugen tells Miyax: “The Eskimos live as no other people can, for we truly understand the earth.” It is his words that she remembers throughout her adventures. Kapugen has taught her that the traditional ways of the Eskimo people are all she really needs to live a full and happy life.

Just as Miyax was taught, she keeps her clothing dry by placing it in whale bladder. She sings old ritual feast songs when she catches owls to eat. When the wolves provide her with a caribou killing, she pays tribute by raising her arms to the sun. She also pays tribute to the sun itself, when it finally rises on January 24. She appreciates how hard her people work to make use of caribou killings when nature provides them with one. And she cherishes the caribou’s liver as she eats it, understanding that it’s Eskimo tradition for women to eat the liver because it has the most nutrients.

Miyax remembers with great fondness the lessons she learned from her father at the seal camp. The author says, “He told her that the birds and animals all had languages, and if you listened and watched them you could learn about their enemies, where their food lay and when big storms were coming.”

At different times during the story, however, the reader sees that Miyax also feels that more modern, Americanized ways of life might be better. When she thinks of the mainland United States she thinks of what Amy had told her about it: “Julie learned about television, sports cars, blue jeans, bikinis, hero sandwiches, and wall-to-wall carpeting in the high school Amy would soon be attending.”

When she lives in Mekoryuk, Miyax is teased by the Eskimo girls there for not knowing more about American mainland culture. She has not gone to school like they have, and she doesn't know about modern conveniences, like gas cooking stoves. When she catches a glimpse of her reflection while lost, she's happy that her face looks narrower than it does round. She looks more like a gussak, or white, girl than an Eskimo girl. However, when a hunter in an airplane kills Amaroq, Miyax begins to think of mainland America as bad. She sees it as a culture that kills beautiful animals for money.

Even though she feels the push and pull of two different cultures, Miyax is more influenced by her traditional upbringing than anything else. It is this upbringing that finally makes her feel content in her life wandering the tundra. Miyax learns to live on her own and is at peace with the weather and the animals. After Amaroq's death, the author tells us, "When she thought of San Francisco, she thought about the airplane and the fire and blood and the flashes and death. When she took out her needle and sewed, she thought about peace and Amaroq."

This conflict between the traditional Eskimo way of life and modern American life haunts Miyax the most when she finds out Kapugen is still alive. The author tells us: "Eskimos turn to their elders for leadership and wisdom and they respect the animals and know that they couldn't live without them." Although Kapugen could now be a part of her life again, Miyax does not know how to feel about him. He is living a less traditional life than what she remembered. He seems to be swayed by modern ways now, and she is determined not to let those ways be a part

of her life. Should she swallow her pride and stay with Kapugen anyway? Or should she live in the way she has come to enjoy and leave him again?

George has shown the reader both the old and new Inuit ways of life and explores the tension between them. In the end, she leaves this question open-ended. The reader does not know for certain which Miyax will decide is better.

## **Survival**

Another important theme in *Julie of the Wolves* is survival. Miyax finds herself in a very challenging situation and has to be completely self-reliant, or dependent on herself, to make it through. Miyax looks to the wolves and to what she has learned from her culture to keep herself alive in the harsh conditions on the tundra.

Miyax begins trying to communicate with the wolves. She feels, based on what her father has told her, that if she can make them understand that she needs their help, they will provide it. She does this by closely observing their behaviors and mimicking what they do until she convinces the wolves that she is one of them. It works and the wolves accept her into their pack. They give her portions of the food they have, and they protect her from harm, such as when a grizzly bear gets too close to her camp.

The wolves also provide Miyax with companionship while she is lost. With no other people around, Miyax could have been very lonely. Having companions is another important part of

surviving. She forms very close, special friendships with certain wolves in the pack. She was especially bonded to Amaroq, and later on, to Kapu. They make her feel loved and comfortable when her family and friends are not there to do that for her. Later, she befriends Tornait, the small bird she finds that is also lost. In some ways, Tornait is a kindred spirit to Miyax. He is small and all by himself, just like Miyax. Having a companion, even a small bird, helps Miyax feel less alone on the tundra and helps give her the courage to continue her journey.

To feel even more comfortable, Miyax does things that make her happy. She decorates her camps, carves a totem, dances, and sings songs to celebrate nature.

Even without the help of the wolves, Miyax may have survived. Inuit traditions emphasized making do with what nature provides. Inuit people can live by using resources from their natural environment rather than relying only on modern technology. Miyax's father has taught her many skills that allow her to do what her ancestors traditionally did to survive. She could have easily become discouraged and given up when she found herself lost. She could have done this even more easily at certain times, like when Jello stole her food and the pack with all her supplies.

Instead of giving up, she uses the lessons of her people to help her. Miyax makes snowshoes out of frozen caribou meat to travel on, she sews a new mitten for herself out of animal skins and rabbit fur, and she even builds herself an igloo home. These are things that adults probably would have done for Miyax. But when

she is lost, there are no adults to help her. A reviewer said, “It is not so much the wolves who save her as her own native wit, her inborn sense of how to use, not fight, the elements.” She is able to survive on her own because she has learned to be resourceful.

## **Courage**

A third important theme in *Julie of the Wolves* is courage. Kapugen had taught Miyax that “fear can sometimes cripple a person to the point that he cannot think or act.” Kapugen has also told Miyax, “When fear seizes, change what you are doing. You are doing something wrong.”

Miyax shows her courage many times. It is brave of Miyax to leave her aunt. She was not happy with her life, so she decided to go live with Daniel’s family, whom she didn’t know at all. This took great courage. It is also very brave of her to leave Daniel. Something bad happened to her, and like her father taught her, she changed what she was doing. She picks herself up and leaves the life that included what frightened her: Daniel. Miyax also decides that she will travel to another part of the world all by herself. She will walk to the ship at Point Hope and make a new start for herself in San Francisco. This takes a lot of courage to do as well. Not many thirteen-year-old kids would act with such bravery, especially without having an adult around to support them.

Miyax’s courage is seen the most when she is around the wolf pack. She bravely tries to begin communicating with these large, sometimes ferocious, wild animals. Even when they growl or

snap at her with their teeth, she lets herself be afraid for only a moment. She moves past her fear and keeps trying to understand them, and to make them understand her.

It takes a lot of bravery for Miyax to persist in the harsh conditions of the tundra. Even when she thinks all is lost, she will not let herself become so afraid that she cannot help herself. She heeds Kapugen's words well.

### **Thinking about themes**

- What do you think is the most important theme in *Julie of the Wolves*?
- Do you think that the traditional Eskimo ways are better than the more modern Eskimo ways? Why or why not?
- When have you had to be courageous?

## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



The way an author develops the people in a story is called characterization. The writer helps the reader understand the people in the book by describing what they look like, how they act, the things they say and do, how they interact with the other characters, and how they react to different situations. This is a list of the characters in *Julie of the Wolves*, followed by descriptions of the most important ones.

### People

Miyax (Julie)	main character, thirteen years old when the novel begins
Kapugen	Miyax's father
Martha	Miyax's aunt
Daniel	Miyax's husband
Naka	Daniel's father; good friend of Kapugen
Nusan	Daniel's mother
Pearl	Miyax's friend

### Animals

Amaroq	the leader of the wolf pack
Kapu	the leader of the wolf pups
Silver	the female in the wolf pack
Nails	male adult wolf
Jello	male adult wolf

Sister                    the smallest wolf pup  
Zing, Zat, Zit        the three other wolf pups  
Tornait                the small, lost bird that Miyax befriends

**Miyax (Julie):** Miyax is the heroine, or main female character, of *Julie of the Wolves*. Her Eskimo name is Miyax. Her English name is Julie. When the novel starts, Miyax is thirteen years old. Miyax is a brave, patient, and resourceful girl. Miyax's mother has died. She has a close relationship with her father, Kapugen, but he has disappeared. Miyax believes in the traditional ways of the Eskimo people. She loves and respects animals and nature. She also sometimes wants to be more like the gussak, or white people, of the mainland United States.

When Miyax gets lost on the tundra running away from Daniel, the reader sees how she is resourceful and brave. Miyax uses all the elements of nature and the teachings of the Eskimo people to survive on her own when she gets lost. She creates shelters for herself, she finds ways of getting food to eat, and she eventually figures out which direction she needs to be going to get to the coast.

Although Miyax gets scared sometimes when she is lost, she keeps a level head. She remembers the teachings of her father and does not let her fear get the best of her. She uses what Kapugen has taught her to communicate with the wolves she encounters on the tundra. She also remembers the cultural pride Kapugen has instilled in her. Miyax thanks the animals for keeping her alive: "Impulsively, she paid tribute to the spirit of

the caribou by lifting her arms to the sun.” She realizes that she would not be able to live without them.

Although Miyax feels great pride about her Eskimo heritage, she sometimes feels confused about whether or not it is really the best way to live. She is exposed to modern ways of living during her time in Barrow and is drawn to cities, like San Francisco, on the mainland. In Mekoryuk, Miyax wants to fit in better with the girls her age by going to school and having jewelry. She wants to wear her hair short like white women, and wishes her face looked more like a gussak girl’s. Miyax is curious to see television and high school. But these feelings are usually outweighed by more positive feelings about traditional Eskimo ways of life.

Miyax develops a very close, unusual bond with the wolves. The reader sees how deeply she can care for animals. She loves them because they provide her with food. But Miyax also loves them because they protect her from harm on the tundra and because they act as companions when there are no other people around. She looks to them for comfort and company. Miyax tries to protect the wolves from the harmful hunters, so the reader sees how much she loves them in this way, too. She mourns Amaroq’s death a great deal. She even creates a totem of him so that his spirit can always be with her.

Miyax is a patient girl. Just as Kapugen said, good things happen to those who are patient. When she is learning to communicate with the wolves, it takes quite a long time for them to accept her into their pack. She does things wrong, and they push her away. But she persists and waits for them to feel comfortable with her

presence. Miyax's patience is also shown when she is able to capture birds to eat without any help. She searches and waits by nests until she finally finds food for herself. The food tastes that much better because Miyax had to wait patiently for it to come to her.

**Kapugen:** Kapugen is Miyax's father. He is a believer in the traditional ways of the Eskimo, or Inuit, people. Kapugen's wife, Miyax's mother, has died. When Miyax was younger, Kapugen disappeared. People said that he had paddled his kayak into the Bering Sea to go seal hunting and never came back. Although Kapugen is not physically present for most of the story, his personality is brought to life through Miyax's memories of him.

Miyax remembers that the day her mother died, Kapugen put Miyax inside his parka and took her to the seal camp with him. There, he taught his daughter all the traditional Eskimo ways of life. He taught her to be brave, he taught her to be resourceful, he taught her to respect plants and animals and all of nature. Kapugen taught Miyax how to communicate with animals and that she could survive off of the land if she wanted to. When Miyax is taken away from Kapugen, he is sad, but he lets her go. He thinks this is best for her and wants her to go to school. The reader sees that Kapugen loves Miyax very much because of all the things he has taken the time to teach her and because he only wants what he thinks is best for her.

Kapugen is known as one of the most wise and skilled living Eskimo hunters. He is well-respected by other Eskimos. Even though Miyax has always thought this, her beliefs about her

father are confirmed when she meets Atik and Uma. They speak very highly of Kapugen and say that he is the greatest of all living Eskimo hunters. The couple say that he is a wealthy man because he possesses intelligence, fearlessness, and love. He is the leader of their town, Kangik.

When Miyax sees her father again for the first time in a long time, the reader learns that he is living a more modern way of life. He flies an airplane and uses it to hunt. He lives in a modern house, with electric lamps and an electric stove. He has married a gussak woman. This makes the reader question what Kapugen's true beliefs are. The author cuts off the story before this question can be answered, leaving it up to the reader to decide.

**Amaroq:** Amaroq is the leader of the wolf pack that Miyax communicates with on the tundra. Amaroq is large, dominant, and protective. His senses are keen and accurate. Amaroq reminds Miyax of Kapugen.

When Miyax first meets Amaroq, she sees that he is large and black. He stands above the other wolves and holds out his chest. The pack looks to him for guidance, so the reader knows that Amaroq is wise. The other wolves in his pack pay tribute to Amaroq by smothering him with affectionate gestures to show that they appreciate his leadership.

Amaroq takes good care of his pack by providing them with as much food as he can. He hunts caribou and even lets Miyax have some. He allows Miyax to become a member of his pack, and so he takes care of her just as he does the rest. The author shows

how Amaroq takes care of Miyax when he protects her from the dangerous grizzly bear. Amaroq also removes Jello from his pack by killing him because Jello was a threat to Miyax.

Amaroq's senses are very sharp. For much of the book, Miyax must be on her hands and knees for the wolves to accept her. Even in a thick fog, through which Amaroq cannot see, he knows when Miyax is standing on two legs, proving that this good leader can sense things he cannot see. Eventually, Amaroq accepts Miyax for what she is and allows her to approach him while she stands upright.

### **Thinking about the characters**

- Which of the characters do you like the most? the least? Why?
- Is Miyax similar to kids you know who are the same age? How are they different?
- Is there a character in *Julie of the Wolves* who you think is a little like you? How so?
- Do you think any of the characters are like the others? What similarities do you see?