



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Call of the Wild

by Jack London



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Preface

Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* is a singular classic. It is a great novel that can be appreciated by readers of all ages, as well as a philosophical book that provides an action-packed adventure. Oddest of all, it is an experimental novel (half of the characters are canine, including the hero) that is a thrilling pleasure to read. No wonder this American novel has never lacked readers—both here and abroad.

“No man ever became great who did not achieve the impossible.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

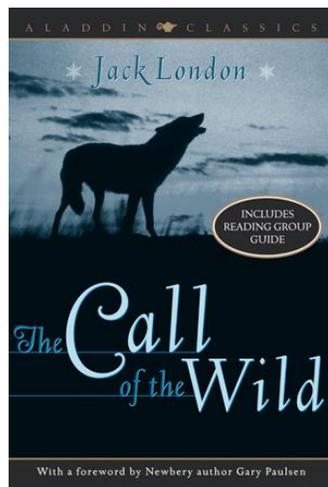
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

The hero of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) is Buck, a St. Bernard/Scotch Shepherd dog. Late one night in 1897, a poor farm-worker steals Buck from his comfortable Northern California home and sells him as a sled dog. Set mostly during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897–98 in Canada's Yukon Territory and Alaska, the novel chronicles Buck's struggles and successes as he learns "the law of club and fang."



Four years as a domesticated pet have not extinguished Buck's primordial instincts or imagination. He courageously survives brutal cruelty from humans and the wilderness, and he becomes the leader of his dogsled team. He endures hunger and fatigue, learns to scavenge for food, and fights with a rival dog. Despite all this hardship, Buck is "mastered by the sheer surging of life" for the first time. Ultimately, Buck struggles between his love for his last master, John Thornton, and his desire to answer the mysterious call of his ancestors.

Drawing from Egerton R. Young's historical narrative *My Dogs in the Northland* (1902), Jack London wrote *The Call of the Wild* in only one month. It first appeared in summer 1903 as a serialized work in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Although London was paid only \$2,750 for the novel, he won instant literary fame and wide popularity.

London's artistic intentions were often misunderstood. After one particular critique from President Theodore Roosevelt and naturalist John Burroughs, London wrote a letter of explanation: "The writing of [*The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*] ... was in truth a protest against the 'humanizing' of animals.... Time and again ... I wrote, speaking of my dog-heroes: 'He did not think these things; he merely did them'... These dog-heroes of mine were not directed by abstract reasoning, but by instinct, sensation, and emotion, and by simple reasoning."

For this, and for London's vivid description of the struggle for survival in a hostile environment, generations of children and adults have found *The Call of the Wild* an unforgettable adventure.

Major Characters in the Book

The Dogs

Buck

The narrator tells the story from Buck's point of view. Stolen from his California home to labor as a sled dog in the Klondike, Buck quickly learns to survive and triumph. In addition to his cunning, patience, and strength, Buck's greatest quality is his imagination, which allows him to fight by both instinct and reason.

Spitz

This well-traveled animal—a big white dog from Spitzbergen, Norway—is a practiced fighter who hates Buck. Despite his greater experience, Spitz meets his match when Buck challenges his leadership in a fight to the death.

Dave

The greatest desire of this gloomy, morose dog is to be left alone. Although he sleeps at every possible moment, he surprises Buck when they are first harnessed as a team: Dave loves his work and becomes a fair, wise teacher.

Sol-leks

His name means "the angry one," an apt description of his feelings whenever another dog approaches from his blind side. Like Dave, Sol-leks wants to be left alone, loves his work, and quickly teaches Buck the best ways to work as a team.

The Humans

Judge Miller

Buck and his father, Elmo, were the prized pets of this kind-hearted judge who owns a large ranch in northern California's Santa Clara Valley.

Manuel

This underpaid worker cannot support his wife and children. Motivated by easy money, he steals Buck one evening and sells him as a sled dog during the 1897-1898 Klondike Gold Rush.

The "man with the red sweater"

Never named, this man becomes the embodiment of one of the most important lessons Buck ever learns: In the quest for survival, the "law of club and fang" reigns supreme.

Perrault and François

These intrepid French Canadian couriers bear important dispatches for the Canadian government, so they are happy to find a dog as strong as Buck. They are never cruel to their dogs, and Buck grows to respect their kind severity.

Hal, Charles, and Mercedes

A mixture of selfishness, greed, and incompetence distinguishes these middle-class Americans as some of literature's most memorable antagonists. Hal's ruthless beating of Buck is sure to awaken the reader's desire for justice.

John Thornton

Thornton rescues Buck, and this man's kindness and love heal more than the dog's physical wounds. Master and dog save each other repeatedly.

About the Author

Jack London (1876-1916)

The adventures told in Jack London's fiction hardly surpass those from his real life. On January 12, 1876, the man we know as Jack London was born John Griffith Chaney in San Francisco, California, to an unwed mother, Flora Wellman. When Flora refused to have an abortion, the probable father—William H.

Chaney—deserted her. Her depression was so severe that she attempted suicide twice in two days. Eight months later, Flora married John London, a widower with two daughters. John London gave his adopted son his surname and his love, and Jack spent his young boyhood on California ranches.

After the family moved to Oakland in London's ninth year, Flora expected her son to contribute to the family income. His formal education stopped after grammar school, and his career among the working-class poor began. During his teen years, some of his jobs included newspaper boy, factory worker, oyster pirate, seal hunter, coal stoker, and sailor in Japan. In 1894, while tramping across America and Canada, London was imprisoned for vagrancy in an appalling New York penitentiary—an experience that helped make him a Socialist.

These events also ignited his desire for education, so the nineteen-year old enrolled as a freshman at Oakland High School while working as a janitor there. After one year, he quit school and often studied fifteen hours a day on his own—with the help of librarians from the Oakland Public Library—to prepare for the entry exams to the University of California, Berkeley. He was ultimately accepted, but his family's poverty again proved too great a responsibility. He left Berkeley after one semester, tried to earn money by writing, and worked in a steam laundry.

When his brother-in-law asked him to join the Klondike Gold Rush in 1897, Jack London quickly agreed. Though they never found gold, London found literary riches in 1899 by selling stories to magazines based on his experiences in Alaska and Canada. His breakthrough came in 1900 when Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish a collection of his Klondike tales, *The Son of the Wolf*.

Between 1900 to 1905, London married Bess Maddern, had two daughters, wrote and published *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), and traveled to Japan and



Jack London
(Copyright Bettman/Corbis)

Korea to report on the Russo-Japanese War. When he returned from Korea he divorced Bess, bought his beloved Sonoma Valley ranch in Glen Ellen, and married the woman he loved—Charmian Kittredge.

A man of abounding energy and zeal for life, he wrote more than two-hundred short stories, twenty novels, four-hundred nonfiction works, and three plays in less than twenty years. Despite his worldwide travels and diverse interests, he maintained a disciplined, rigorous writing schedule: one-thousand words (by hand) every morning. About writing he once said: "The three great things are: Good Health; Work; and a Philosophy of Life. I may add, nay, must add, a fourth—Sincerity. Without this, the other three are without avail. With it you may cleave to greatness and sit among the giants." Despite his early death at age forty, Jack London remains seated deservedly among America's literary giants.

An Interview with Sara S. Hodson

On August 28, 2007, Adam Kampe of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Jack London scholar Sara S. Hodson, curator of literary manuscripts at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

Adam Kampe: How old was Jack London when he began writing?

Sara Hodson: He started writing in his teens. He would send his stories to magazines and publishers, and every one would come back, rejected. He would impale every letter on a tall spindle that he had in his writing room next to his rented typewriter, and soon he had a four-foot-tall spindle of rejection letters. But he never gave up! London had a burning desire to fulfill his potential as a writer. He felt it was simply a matter of getting that first sale, of selling the first story.

AK: London was a voracious reader. Is it true that he carried *Paradise Lost* and *Origin of the Species* with him to the Klondike?

SH: That's right. The fact that he took Milton and Darwin tells you how much they meant to him, that those two books would carry him through the hardships and isolation. Each miner had to bring a thousand pounds of supplies—mostly food, of course—which was required by the Canadian government, so that they wouldn't have more dead bodies than would already be inevitable. Because he saw all the dead animals, London carried his own supplies in multiple trips up the Chilkoot Pass. He was there in the summertime,

and it took him ten trips to get his equipment and supplies to the top of the pass.

AK: What motivated him to leave California and head to the Yukon?

SH: He needed money, and he heard about the reports of gold strikes in the Klondike. I think he was also motivated by a historic time of adventure and excitement. Actually, he didn't get any gold, but he really struck it rich with gold nuggets of stories that he heard from other Klondike miners. These were the kind of strong, stirring, adventurous tales that he was drawn to. He recognized that this is where the future of his writing lay.

AK: How much did that one year influence the writing of *The Call of the Wild*?

SH: That one year was an enormous influence for *The Call of the Wild*. London saw dogsled teams in the Klondike. He saw the way they behaved. He saw the way they were treated by their owners and mistreated. He saw life at its most harsh, at its most elemental, where to make a very small mistake can mean the loss of your life.

AK: Are there parallels between Jack London and his canine protagonist, Buck?

SH: London was much like the dog Buck in that he was a scrapper. He fought for what he knew was his right, and he never settled for less. Buck started out in a sheltered environment and is then thrown suddenly, rudely, brutally into a world where he has to fight to survive every single day. If he doesn't learn the laws, he's not going to survive. He learns which dogs he can trust.

Jack London was like that when he arrived in the Klondike. He didn't know the life. He learned which men would show him what he needed to survive, the right way to behave toward other people and toward animals. John Thornton is also very much like Jack London. He's a man of compassion, who can deal fairly with both humans and animals. London had his own way of approaching people, which was always to be fair, generous, and caring.

AK: Why is *The Call of the Wild* still considered a worldwide classic?

SH: *The Call of the Wild* is a timeless book in that it's appropriate, useful, and enjoyable to read for anyone at any age at any time. It is a book about survival, and survival is an issue for everyone no matter whether we're surviving a day in the office, a hard day of manual labor, a bad relationship, or the Klondike without fire or food. A story of survival speaks to all of us, because it makes us look within. Would I have what it takes to survive in that kind of

environment? What would happen to me? It lets you imagine yourself in that circumstance.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Jack London

1870s

- 1875: The failure of the Bank of California leads to a financial crisis, draining San Francisco of capital for the rest of the decade.
- 1876: Jack London is born illegitimate to Flora Wellman, January 12.
- 1876: Flora marries John London in September.
- 1876: Mark Twain publishes *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.
- 1877: Unemployment abounds in San Francisco, leading to strikes and rallies attended by thousands.

1880s

- From 1881 to 1885, the Canadian Pacific Railway completes a line between Ontario and the Pacific coast.
- 1886: The Londons buy a house in Oakland, California, where Jack immerses himself in books at the public library.
- 1886: John Burroughs, American essayist and conservationist, publishes *Signs and Seasons*.

1890s

- 1892: John Muir is elected first president of the Sierra Club.
- 1894: London is arrested for vagrancy near Niagara Falls and spends thirty days in a New York penitentiary.
- 1896: Prospectors George Carmack, Skookum Jim Mason, and Tagish Charley Mason find gold in Canada.
- 1897: Thousands join the Klondike Gold Rush, including London, who journeys to Alaska in July. He returns to Oakland one year later, suffering from scurvy.
- 1898: The Spanish-American War begins.
- 1898: The Treaty of Paris gives the U.S. Guam and Puerto Rico; America annexes Hawai'i.

1900s

- 1900: "The Great Sickness," an influenza and measles epidemic, causes the death of a third of Alaska's population.
- 1901: After President William McKinley's death, Theodore Roosevelt becomes president.
- London publishes nineteen books, including *The Call of the Wild* in 1903.
- 1905: London divorces his first wife, buys a California ranch, and marries Charmian Kittredge.
- 1906: San Francisco earthquake rocks the Bay Area, followed by serious aftershocks and fires.
- 1906-1907: Jack and Charmian nearly go broke building their yacht, the Snark.

1910s

- 1912: Congress designates Alaska a territory, but it will not become the forty-ninth state until 1959.
- 1913: Woodrow Wilson becomes the twenty-eighth U.S. president, a year before World War I begins in Europe.
- 1916: Jack London dies at his home in the Sonoma Valley on November 22.
- 1917: The United States enters World War I.
- 1918: Armistice signed on November 11.

Other Works/Adaptations

London and His Other Works

Until Jack London blazed onto the literary scene with a collection of short stories, *The Son of the Wolf* (1900), the harsh landscape of Yukon Territory had not entered fiction. His voice was unique; his vision, unfamiliar. To London, the natural world is full of wonder and beauty but is also violent, unpredictable, and destructive. The hardships in nature force London's characters to be flexible and resourceful in order to survive—and sometimes they don't.

London's early novels feature some of the most memorable characters in American literature. The heroine of his first novel, *A Daughter of the Snows* (1902), truly has no literary precedent. Frona Welse is an assertive, strong woman whose Alaskan childhood has taught her "the faith of food and blanket." Buck, the dog turned wolf (*The Call of the Wild*, 1903), and White Fang, the wolf turned dog (*White Fang*, 1906), remain popular today. Both animals suffer under the brutal club of unjust human masters, become leaders of their dogsled teams, and use their imaginations to survive. In *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), Wolf Larsen—a dreaded seal-hunting captain and literature's most well-read pirate—captures Humphrey van Weyden and forces him to serve as sailor.

These characters challenge readers to confront their limitations, to enter a world where survival of the fittest is a daily reality. This world often mirrored London's own biography. The abuses of power that he witnessed and experienced—especially while tramping around North America and living among the homeless in London's East End—became the basis for socially conscious works such as *The People of the Abyss* (1903) and *The Road* (1907). Jack London often said, "I am Martin Eden," the hero of his partly autobiographical 1909 novel, who fights to rise from working-class poverty to earn a living as a writer. *John Barleycorn* (1913)—another provocative, semi-autobiographical work—chronicles a man's struggle with alcohol, what London called his "Long Sickness" and "White Logic."

In addition to more than fifteen novels, London was a prolific letter and short-story writer, journalist, and essayist, especially about his travels to Asia, South and Central America, the South Pacific, and Hawai'i. His adventures aboard the yacht he built with his second wife, Charmian, are recorded in his *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911) and her *The Log of the Snark* (1915). After these globetrotting feats, his two great loves—Charmian and their 1,400-acre California ranch—inspired such later fiction as *The Valley of the Moon* (1913) and *The Little Lady of the Big House* (1916). By the time of his death in 1916, Jack London was

one of America's highest-paid writers and enjoyed worldwide popularity.

Selected Books by Jack London

- *The Son of the Wolf*, 1900
- *A Daughter of the Snows*, 1902
- *The Call of the Wild*, 1903
- *The People of the Abyss*, 1903
- *The Sea-Wolf*, 1904
- *White Fang*, 1906
- *The Road*, 1907
- *The Iron Heel*, 1908
- *Martin Eden*, 1909
- *John Barleycorn*, 1913
- *The Valley of the Moon*, 1913
- *The Star Rover*, 1915
- *The Little Lady of the Big House*, 1916

Selected Collected Works of Jack London

- *The Portable Jack London*. Edited by Earle Labor. New York: Viking Penguin, 1994.
- *The Letters of Jack London*. 3 vols. Edited by Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Discussion Questions

1. When news of the Klondike Gold Rush reached San Francisco in 1897, thousands of men (and some women) left their homes and families to search for gold with no certainty that they would be successful. Would you have made a treacherous journey on such a hope?
2. *The Call of the Wild* has an unnamed narrator, who tells the story entirely from the perspective of Buck—a St. Bernard/Scotch Shepherd dog. How effective is Jack London's ability to sustain the story from a dog's point of view? What other stories have been told from an animal's viewpoint?
3. Describe "the law of club and fang" that Buck learns from the "man with the red sweater." Is this lesson relevant for the survival of humans today?
4. How does Buck respond when he is "suddenly jerked from the heart of civilization and flung into the heart of things primordial"? Why does the narrator believe his "imagination" is his greatest attribute?
5. How does Buck's first theft prove he will survive his new, hostile environment? What happens to his "moral consideration" after this transforming experience?
6. One of the novel's most important scenes is the fight between Buck and his rival, Spitz. Who initiates this fight? Does it have to end the way it does? Why or why not?
7. Buck begins to hear a mysterious, mournful song only after he is removed from his life as a domesticated pet and taken to the harsh natural environment of the Klondike. Why couldn't he hear this "call" in California?
8. Are Hal, Charles, and Mercedes the novel's primary antagonists? What does London suggest by including humans who seek gold at the expense of their own well-being?
9. How does John Thornton differ from Buck's previous masters? Why does Buck respond to Thornton with such devotion?
10. Ultimately, John Thornton discovers gold "like yellow butter." How does Buck respond to this new lifestyle, compared to the other dogs? Why does the "strain of the primitive" remain "alive and active" in Buck?
11. *The Call of the Wild* begins with the opening lines of "Atavism," a poem by John Myers O'Hara published in 1902. Although Jack London didn't know the full poem at the time, he felt these four lines perfectly summarized his novel. Do you agree?

Additional Resources

Works by Charmian Kittredge London

- *The Log of the Snark*, 1915
- *Our Hawaii*, 1917
- *The Book of Jack London*, 2 vols., 1921

Works about California and the Klondike

- Starr, Kevin. *Americans and the California Dream 1850-1915*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Walker, Franklin. *Jack London and the Klondike*. 1966. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 2005.

If you enjoyed *The Call of the Wild*, you might also enjoy:

- Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*, 1873
- John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, 1952
- Wilcon Rawls's *Where the Red Fern Grows*, 1961
- Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*, 1986

Credits

Works Cited

- London, Jack. *A Daughter of the Snows*. 1902. Hollywood, CA: Aegypan Press, 2006.
- . *The Call of the Wild*. 1903. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2003.
- The Portable Jack London*. Edited by Earle Labor. New York: Viking Penguin, 1994.
- Stasz, Clarice. *American Dreamers: Charmian and Jack London*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Walker, Dale L., and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, eds. *No Mentor But Myself: Jack London on Writers and Writing*. 2nd ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

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Cover image: "Siberian Husky howling" by Vivienstock. Dreamstime.



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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