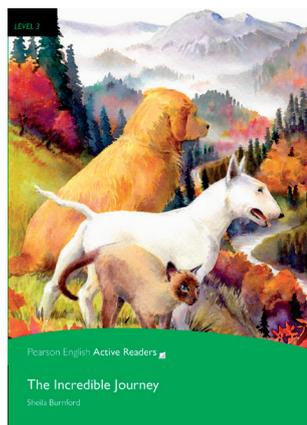


# The Incredible Journey

Sheila Burnford



## About the author and the movie

Sheila Burnford was born in Scotland in 1918 and emigrated to Canada in the 1950s. When her children were young the family had three animals that were loved and treated as part of the family. This prompted her to write a book about the loyalty of family pets and so appeared *The Incredible Journey*, published in 1961. The book achieved moderate success at first, but it was not until 1963, when Disney made a movie of the book, that it gained worldwide recognition. The black and white movie is now considered a classic, combining stunning shots of the Canadian landscape with a heart rendering tale of the love and dedication of the animals. It is an adventure story that is popular with both children and adults today. In 1993, Disney made a remake of the movie called *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. The film changes the story in some ways but retains the heart warming qualities of the original.

## Summary

*The Incredible Journey* tells the story of three courageous animals and their journey across the wild countryside of northwest Ontario, Canada. The story begins at the house of John Longridge, who is looking after three animals for his friend, Jim Hunter, who is working in England. The animals are Luath, a young Labrador, Tao, a Siamese cat, and Bodger, an old Bull Terrier. Longridge decides to go on a hunting and fishing trip and leaves a note instructing his housekeeper, Mrs. Oakes, to look after the animals. The animals, however, decide to try and find their owner's family and begin a journey of over four hundred kilometers. Early on, a young bear attacks Bodger but Tao fights off the bear and its mother. Bodger is injured and Tao helps him to recover by catching food for him. The animals continue their journey, occasionally meeting kind,

strange or unfriendly people along the way. Later, Tao is nearly drowned in a river flood and is separated from his friends. He is found by a kind family and looked after but instead of staying with them, decides to look for his friends. He then escapes from a lynx attack and is finally reunited with the two dogs. Towards the end of the book, the Hunter family returns from England. Longridge has realized that the animals are missing and a search to find them begins. With the help of the police and local people, Longridge and Hunter begin to realize the extent of the journey the animals are making. They both decide that the animals must surely be dead. A few weeks later, the Hunter family and Longridge decide to go on a trip to a lake. It is here that Jim's daughter, Elizabeth, hears Luath bark. Then the cat appears from the forest followed by the two dogs. The animals are weak, tired and hungry but reunited with their joyful owners.

**Chapter 1:** John Longridge lives alone in the wild countryside of northwest Ontario, Canada. There are lakes, woods and rivers and for half the year the area is covered in snow. Very few people live there. He is looking after three animals for the Hunter family. Luath, the Labrador belongs to Jim Hunter. Bodger, the Bull Terrier is his son's, and Tao, the Siamese cat belongs to Jim's daughter, Elizabeth. When Longridge decides to go on a trip to Heron Lake, three hundred kilometers away, he leaves a note, written on two pieces of paper, for Mrs. Oakes, his housekeeper, instructing her to look after the animals. However, a crucial half of the note gets accidentally burned in the fireplace.

**Chapters 2–3:** The next day, Longridge sets off on his trip. He says goodbye to the animals, telling them that Mrs. Oakes will look after them. Then, Luath decides to set off on his own journey and the other two animals follow. Mrs. Oakes finds the first part of Longridge's note and assumes he has taken the animals with him. The animals continue westwards, but Bodger is getting increasingly more tired and weak. He is then attacked by a young bear. Tao fights off the bear and its mother, but Bodger has been injured. Tao catches a bird and gives it to Bodger and he recovers some of his strength.

**Chapters 4–5:** Bodger is now able to carry on and the animals walk to a small lake, where they see a group of Indians camped around the shore. Bodger enters the camp and is befriended by the Indians. Then, the cat comes in and takes some of the food the Indians have offered. Luath, however, stays on the hillside and later barks to the

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other animals as a signal to move on. The animals continue their journey and meet a strange old man. He invites them to dinner, but they don't eat anything because he puts their food on plates on a table, as if they were human friends invited to dinner.

**Chapters 6–7:** The animals arrive at a river that they have to cross. The two dogs manage to do this, but Tao is swept away in a sudden flood. Luath tries unsuccessfully to rescue him, and giving him up as lost, the two dogs resume their journey. A Finnish family, the Nurmis, live in a cabin near the river. Their daughter, Helvi, finds the half-drowned cat, and the family nurses him back to health. When he has fully recovered, Tao leaves the Nurmi's cabin and begins his search for his lost friends.

**Chapters 8–9:** The two dogs continue their sad journey without their friend. One day they arrive at a farm and Luath is attacked by the farmer's dog. Bodger comes to the rescue and they escape. Meanwhile, Tao is about to be attacked by a lynx but hides in a hole. The lynx is shot dead by a boy who is on a hunting trip with his father. Tao is reunited with his friends. The animals meet some unfriendly people and then they are looked after by the kind Mackenzie couple. They are given food and shelter but they have to start their journey again. They have already covered three hundred kilometers.

**Chapters 10–11:** Longridge returns home and discovers that the animals are missing. He guesses that the animals are traveling west to find their owners and phones the police to organize a search. They receive information from the people the animals have met on their journey, but he is not hopeful that they are alive. The Hunter family returns home and receive the sad news. Weeks later, Longridge and the Hunters go on vacation to Lake Windigo. It is here that the Hunter's daughter hears Luath's bark coming from the trees. Then Tao appears, followed by Luath and finally old Bodger. After an incredible journey, the pets and their owners are reunited.

### Background and themes

#### Mankind's relationship with the natural world:

Northwest Ontario is a wild and lonely place where day to day survival is difficult and humans must learn to live in harmony with the natural world. The Nurmi family, for example, live a very simple life, eating the vegetables they grow, catching fish from the streams and cutting wood from the forests to sell. The Indians live in tents and eat simple food cooked on wood fires. Even though their lives

seem hard, the characters are all content because they understand and respect the environment they live in.

**The loyalty and friendship of animals:** The book uses animals to show the qualities that are admirable in humans. Tao looks after his friends by catching food for them and fighting off aggressive animals. Luath is very determined and his encouragement keeps the animals moving forward, and Bodger's affectionate personality ensures the animals are nearly always well received by the humans they meet. Also, the fact that the animals undertook such a long and hazardous journey to be reunited with their owners displays the love they have for them.

**Animals in literature and movies:** The use of animals to tell a story about relationships has a very long history. Aesop's famous animal stories were written over 2,500 years ago. Chaucer and the Grimm brothers used them in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. Animals have been portrayed in works of biting satire to make an important political point as in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and they have been used regularly by newspaper cartoonists to ridicule political figures. The invention of the animated cartoon movie created opportunities to portray animals in all kinds of situations and to give them human voices and human emotions. The animals used in these cartoons, such as Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, and Tom and Jerry, are now household names.

### Discussion activities

#### Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask the students to think of all the animals that people keep as pets. These can be the usual animals and the more exotic and unlikely ones. Write their suggestions on the board. Then put the students into small groups. Each group chooses a different animal and discusses the following points:  
*What does the animal look like? What does it eat? Where do people keep it? Why do people have this type of animal? What problems can the animal cause? Would you want this animal as a pet? Do you know anyone who has this animal as a pet?*
- Research:** Tell the students that the story takes place in Ontario, Canada. The students then have to use the Internet to find information on this part of the world.

#### Chapter 1

##### After reading

- Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *note, phone, history, England, lake*. Have the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapter 1.

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### Chapters 2–3

#### Before reading

- 4 Pair work:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to think about an animal story, a movie or book, that they are familiar with. Each pair then prepares a short talk for the rest of the class.

#### After reading

- 5 Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 2–3. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

### Chapters 4–5

#### While reading (end of p. 28)

- 6 Group work:** Put students in small groups and ask them to think of what they know about the Indians of the North American continent.  
*What do you know of their history? Do you think they have been treated badly in the past? What type of houses did they live in? What type of clothes did they wear? What kind of food did they eat? Did they have a religion?*

#### After reading

- 7 Write and guess:** Divide the class into small groups of four. Tell each student to look at a different illustration from Chapters 4–5 (pp. 26–27, p. 29, pp. 30–31, p. 33). Tell them that they have to write a description of the illustration (what they can see and what is happening), but make five deliberate mistakes. Then, they read out their descriptions to the rest of the group who have to look at the illustration and spot the mistakes.

### Chapters 6–7

#### While reading (p. 39, after "They worked hard and had a good simple life.")

- 8 Write:** Ask the students to write down all the advantages and disadvantages of living in the countryside, as the Nurmis do, and living in a big city.  
*Is life harder or easier? Why? Is it healthier? Is it cheaper? Is it boring? What are the dangers and problems of each place?*  
Get feedback from the whole class and write the lists of advantages and disadvantages of each place on the board. The class then votes on where they would choose to live.

#### After reading

- 9 Write, ask and answer:** Write *Why was Tao deaf for a while?* on the board and elicit the answer (Because he was in the water for a long time). Now tell students

to write similar questions about Chapters 6–7. Students then mingle with each other, asking and answering each other's questions.

### Chapters 8–9

#### While reading (p. 51, after "it hit the ground and lay there, dead.")

- 10 Pair work:** Ask students to discuss the following questions in pairs and then get feedback from the whole class.

*What type of animals do people hunt? Why do people go hunting? Is hunting a popular activity in your country? Do you think it's all right to hunt wild animals? Do you know anyone who goes hunting?*

#### After reading

- 11 Research:** Divide the class into four groups. Remind the students that the lynx is an endangered species, and that in certain countries it is protected. Ask the students to think of any other animals that they know that are in danger of dying out. Put the suggestions on the board. Each group chooses one animal and students use the Internet to find information on the animal.  
*Where does it live? What does it eat? Why is it in danger? Do people hunt it to eat it or to take something from it to sell? What are people doing to protect it?*

### Chapters 10–11

#### While reading (p. 62, after "He read a letter from Elizabeth again.")

- 12 Write:** Tell the students to imagine they are Longridge and they have to write a reply to Elizabeth's letter.  
*Explain the problem with the note you left for Mrs. Oakes. Say what you are doing to find the animals. Say how you feel about the fact that they are missing.*

#### After reading

- 13 Write:** Ask students to think of new chapter headings for the book. They should choose short clear titles that describe the most important point of each of the chapters. Then choose some examples from the class and write them on the board. Students then have to guess which titles should be at the start of which chapters.