

Ideas and Activities  
for  
Teachers

by Cynthia Rankin  
for

*The Perilous Year*  
Connie Brummel Crook

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Written by Cynthia Rankin

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Synopsis: *The Perilous Year*  
by Connie Brummel Crook

It is 1793, six years after the Hungry Year. Twin boys Alex and Ryan are upset on two counts: their beloved sister/mother Kate is getting married, and their Father has sprung a new bride and stepmother on them, Ann. She is only twenty -- hardly older than Kate. And she's the granddaughter of a Lord and Lady. But she is hardy and despite the twins' best efforts to drive her away with tricks and pranks, she seems ready to stay with her new life in the bush of Eastern Ontario.

The twins are older now, and restless for both freedom and responsibility. Alex, against his father's rules, goes swimming alone one hot August afternoon, and drifts away from familiar territory. He encounters some men out on a bateau and only after badgering them for a ride, and getting it, does he realize they are pirates. A squall comes up; the men are pursued, and before long Alex finds himself tramping through the bush, trying to get home in the company of one of the pirates, James. He arrives home to find a funeral in progress -- his own. His family (except his brother, who stubbornly insisted his brother was alive) had presumed Alex drowned when they found his clothes, days ago. Alex tells his brother about his adventure, but keeps the gold a secret. The pirates had buried it before they scattered.

Time has passed, it is winter and Ann is expecting a baby. Kate comes for a visit to help out, and Ann goes into labour earlier than expected. Kate is frightened -- she remembers her own mother dying in childbirth. Ryan bravely volunteers to fetch the midwife, who lives a few farms away. Unfortunately a snowstorm causes him to get lost, but he does manage with some help to bring the midwife in time; the baby is a girl, and Ryan is a hero.

In spring, Father and Ann must travel to King's Town. Ann's baby has club feet but Ann has a lead on a possible treatment. The boys are left alone with the task of cultivating, which must be completed before Father returns to seed. They are soon distracted by the arrival of James and another pirate, Ivan. The pirates help the boys with their task, in exchange for the boys' help in finding the location of the buried gold. They find it, and the boys convince the pirates that the gold should be returned to where it was stolen from -- not without some fisticuffs, and some agony on the boys' part, who know that medical intervention for their half-sister is going to be very expensive.

The boys return home with the pirates and gold in tow: Father takes charge and the pirates disappear. The story ends some years later, when James visits, now honest and beginning to prosper. He is given his share of the reward from the return of the gold.

## ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES

These activities, designed for students in grades 5-7, focus on major topics related to the Loyalist settlers in Ontario: courage, family, roles of women/girls and men/boys, dangers of living in the forest, community of neighbors, the relationship between white and Mohawk settlers, and difficult decision making.

There are many activities at a variety of levels. Read through the guide carefully and select those suited to the needs of your students.

*It is not expected that all students will complete all the activities in this guide.*

### Before Reading the Novel (Pre-teaching)

Pre-teaching suggestions encourage students to reflect on situations in their own lives that relate to incidents and themes in the novel. These suggestions are directed to the teacher.

1. *The Perilous Year* is a sequel to *The Hungry Year*. List the references to *The Hungry Year*. Refer to the study guide by Cynthia Rankin. It can be found on-line: [www.conniebrummelcrook.ca](http://www.conniebrummelcrook.ca)
2. Read the ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS. Note Ms. Crook gives credit to a student for triggering her imagination to write this sequel. Encourage students to write to Ms. Crook with feedback after they have read her books.
3. Collect copies of Connie Brummel Crook's novels and picture books. Make a display of her works.
4. Consider the title of the novel. Have students look up the meaning of the word "perilous" and define it.
  - a) Have them write about "perils" they have endured in their own lives. Since these might be private, it is best to have only those who volunteer to read aloud.
  - b) Have students brainstorm "perils" faced by the pioneers in Canada. Compare the perils faced by families today with those of two hundred years ago.
5. Direct the students' attention to the way the author has divided the novel into four main parts. Have students look at the titles of the divisions and suggest why there are four divisions and what they might represent. Students might need to read the first paragraph of each part. (You might need to help make the connection between the word "year" in the title and the seasons of the year.)

## During the Reading

1. As a class, make a map to locate all the places mentioned in the novel and indicate the importance of each location in the story. You will need a detailed map of Ontario.

2. Keep track of effective similes. Have the students use these in sentences or illustrate them to show the meaning. Examples of similes in the novel: “hands as big as a bear’s paws” (p. 104); “blue eyes shining like two beacons” (p. 151); “going around like a smoking volcano waiting to erupt” (p. 163); “turned like a bull” (p. 171); “shot up like beanstalks” (p. 189).

3. Keep track of idioms. Have students explain what the idioms mean in general and in the context of the novel. Use an idiom dictionary or the Internet to research the origins of each expression. Examples of idioms in the novel: “And all’s well that ends well.” (p. 130); “You just dropped a pebble in a hornet’s nest.” (p. 153); “a loose cannon” (p. 159); “In for a penny; in for a pound” (p. 156).

4. Pirates in general are not known for their tact. Alex is particularly offended by the insults shot at him and his brother by Ivan. These insults are probably fairly tame by pirate standards and in fact they add comic relief to the story. Shakespeare was also famous for combining interesting expressions to load his insult slingshot. Have students keep track of the insults in the novel and then write an argument between two pirates. Examples of insults in the novel: “dimwits” (p. 159), “confounded nincompoops” (p. 162), “little twerp” (p. 163), “pipsqueaks” (p. 163), “thumb-twiddler” (p. 167), “tomfool cat” (p. 184). Students can combine parts of one insult with another to create new expressions, e.g., pip-nincom-fool.

5. Select new vocabulary and trace its etymology. Most good dictionaries include the etymology of the words in the entry; however, there are specific dictionaries of etymology available. Some dictionaries also illustrate “the story” behind the word as well as its language of origin. The Internet is also a useful tool in this activity. Examples of words with French origins in the novel: cravat (p. 30), parlour (p. 39), bateau/bateaux (pp. 56 and 59), toque (p. 108), victuals (p. 152); Egyptian origins: oasis (p. 81); Greek and Latin: eulogy (p. 91), hypocrites (p. 183); Old English/German: mourn (p. 91), gunwhale (p. 177); Gaelic origins: shenanigans (p. 18), guffaws (p. 75), bannock (p. 131); Latin/ French origins: dowry (p. 191).

6. Keep a list of nautical terms and terms associated with pirates. Have students define the terms in their own words and use these words in sentences to show their meaning. This vocabulary could be used later in Novel Extension Projects.

Examples:

parlez from parlour (p. 39)

bateau (p. 56)/ bateaux (p. 59)

gangplank (p.58)

starboard (p. 62)

post (p. 62)

White-capped waves (p. 65)

oarsmen (p. 66)

beached (p. 67)

deckhand (p. 70)

vessel (p. 70)

mast (p. 62)  
spyglass (p. 62)  
unfurl the sails (p. 62)  
kidnapped (p. 64)  
inlet (p. 65)  
peninsula (p. 65)  
shoreline (p. 65)  
channel (p. 65)  
rigging (p. 65)  
topsails (p. 65)  
capsized (p. 65)

choppy (p. 67)  
sink anchor (p. 67)  
guffawing (p. 150)  
cutthroats (p. 150)  
decoy (p. 152)  
sandbar (p. 166)  
cask (p. 173)  
gunwhale (p. 177)  
escapade (p. 184)  
surly pirate (p. 184)  
hanged (p. 185)

7. Build vocabulary by giving students pairs of words that have a connection in meaning. Ask the students to find the words in context before consulting dictionaries. Then have students show how these two words are similar in meaning. A variation on this activity is to give students all the words in a random order and ask them to divide the words into pairs based on similar meaning.

Sample pairs:

- a) tomfoolery (p. 52)/shenanigans (p. 18)
- b) solemn-faced (p. 93)/mourn (p. 91)
- c) toque (p. 108)/mobcap (p. 129)
- d) bannock (p. 131)/victuals (p. 152)
- e) cutthroats (p. 150)/surly pirate (p. 184)
- f) dowry (p. 191)/treasure
- g) escapade (p. 184)/adventure (p. 192)
- h) perilous (title)/adversity (p. 94)
- i) heavy iron (p. 118)/iron-spider frying pan (p. 18)
- j) hypocrites (p. 183)/pirates
- k) “lady” (p. 43)/aristocrat (p. 23)
- l) shanty (p. 37)/rough-hewn benches (p. 91)
- m) ostrich feathers (p. 22)/ taffeta (p. 24)
- n) Loyalist (p. 60)/immigrants (p. 196) or pioneers (p. 197)

## Guided Reading and Discussion Questions

### Part One: Kate and the Twins, Chapters 1-5

1. Reread the first scene in which Ryan and Alex are spying on their sister Kate and Albert. (a) At what point in the scene does it become apparent this is an historical novel. Give specific quotations from the novel to prove your points. (b) How have courting rituals and marriage customs changed over the years? (Refer to pp. 13-14.)
2. Construct family trees for the O’Carr family and the Shaw family. Where possible include the ages of the characters.

3. What does Mr. Shaw mean when he says the pirates “. . . never bother us settlers -- except for a meal or two. They look for bigger prey.” (pp. 19-20)
4. Refer to pages 20 and 21. What was “the hungry year”?
5. What does the old adage mean: “Visitors are like fish -- after three days, they start to smell.” (p. 22) Why would Ryan rather be a horse?
6. Why are the twins shocked when they learn Ann is their new mother? Why do they dislike her instantly? Give reasons.
7. Ann’s red ostrich feathers are mentioned three times in three pages. (pp. 22-25) What do they symbolize? Why do the boys refer to Ann as Mrs. Redfeather? Is this a fair assessment? Why?
8. How do Ann’s reactions to her husband show she has many positive qualities? What are these qualities? (Refer to page 25.)
9. Why does Kate get over the shock of her father’s new wife much more quickly than the twins do?
10. Do the twins really dislike Albert? Why are they opposed to their sister’s marriage?
11. Kate will receive a land grant and so too will the twins when they are older. What are land grants and why were Loyalists and their children entitled to receive free lots of land? Is this a fair deal for all newcomers? Why or why not?
12. Why was Mr. Carr complaining about “the unworked lots belonging to the Church of England and decommissioned officers.” (p. 36)
13. Ann says, “the most beautiful road is the one that takes you home.” (p. 37) Agree or disagree and explain your answer.
14. What is a “stump puller”? (p. 37) Draw a picture of what you think it must have looked like, then research it on the Internet and compare your diagram to the “real McCoy”. How important would a stump puller be to farmers two hundred years ago? Why?
15. Do you believe Ann when she says she raised two bear cubs one summer and can almost talk bear? Why does she tell the twins this tall tale?
16. Ryan and Alex are twins but they have very distinct personalities. Write a character sketch of each twin and give page references and specific examples to show how their actions and words illustrate their distinct personalities.
17. Ann says her mother was a “lady” but she is not. What constituted a “lady” in those

days? What were the rights, privileges and responsibilities of a “lady”? If someone were referred to as “lady” today what would it mean?

18. Why doesn't Ann scold the boys when she is obviously aware they tried to make fun of her by replacing her sugar with salt? What does this say about her?

19. Why does Mr. Carr add field after field after field to his farm? Give reasons.

20. *The Perilous Year* is told from the third person omniscient point of view. (a) What are the characteristics of third person omniscient point of view? (b) Why is this the best point of view from which to narrate this particular novel?

### **Part Two: Alex and the Pirates, Chapters 6-10**

1. The author tells the reader it is mid-August 1793 in this section of the novel, but even if she had not, what specific details indicate the season of the year, the climate associated with it, and the time period?

2. Describe a “barn-raising”. Why do neighbours need to rely on neighbours to survive in this time? What other examples in the novel illustrate strong community support and co-operation?

3. Did Alex actually get “kidnapped” by the pirates? Explain your answer.

4. Why is it an even scarier situation for Alex if the pirates are American Revolutionaries?

5. Describe the sailors' plan to avoid detection by the British military ship.

6. Why does Alex go with James instead of the joining the British police ship?

7. Give specific examples and/or quotations from the novel to show that James is not a stereotypical pirate. Consider the manner in which he speaks and his actions directed towards Alex.

8. Alex says he misses Ryan most. “No one understood about twins.” (p. 74) What makes the relationship between twins unique? Would the novel work as well if Alex and Ryan were two brothers close in age? Why or why not?

9. In Chapters 8 and 9 the author refers to units of linear measure in feet, yards, and miles. Why does Ms. Crook do this when her novel will be read by modern day children more familiar with the metric system?

10. John Graves Simcoe was the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. Use the Internet or history text books and write a paragraph illustrating the most important contribution Simcoe made to Upper Canada.

11. The British government bought the land from the Mississaugas along Lake Ontario. Alex will receive his land grant “free of charge” (p. 85) because he is the son of a Loyalist. Is this a fair deal for the Loyalists? The Natives? Why or why not?

12. What qualities do Ryan’s father and James have in common?

13. Re-read the minister’s eulogy for Alex when he is presumed drowned. Does the description really reflect Alex? Support your opinion with specific examples from the novel.

14. When Alex turns to introduce James to his family, the pirate is gone. Where did he go? Why? Why doesn’t Alex discuss James?

15. Pretend you are Ryan and your twin brother Alex has just returned after everyone has presumed him dead. Write the first five questions you would ask him.

### **Part Three: Ryan’s Storm, Chapters 11-16**

1. The narrator says, “For weeks afterwards, Alex had been the hero of the township. Of course, he basked in the glory of it.” (p. 101) Why does Ryan feel jealous of Alex? Are these feelings justified? Are feelings of jealousy ever justified?

2. Sarah is busy filling her hope chest because she will marry Daniel soon. What is a hope chest? List at least ten items that would be found in the hope chest of a prospective bride 200 years ago.

3. Why are the twins so disappointed that Geordie will be staying with them while their father and Albert are checking the trap lines?

4. How does the controversy about sliding reinforce the different personalities of the two twins? Use direct quotations from the novel to prove your points.

5. Did Ryan follow correct life-saving procedures when he saved Geordie? Was there anything else he should have done or not done differently?

6. Describe the steps in warning someone with hypothermia. Did they follow current accepted procedure in Geordie’s case?

7. What does Ann mean when she says, “How providential that we were washing today.” (p. 115) What is providence? Do you believe in providence? Why or why not?

8. Who is the real hero in the rescue of Geordie? Why?

9. Why does Kate instruct the boys to fill all the pails with water and boil it?

10. What are the signs of freezing to death? At the end of Chapter 14 Ryan says he

“feels a bit warm . . . and . . . sleepy.” (p. 127) What is happening to him? How do the ellipses within this line reinforce the situation?

11. Both boys are saved by an older man: Alex by James the pirate and Ryan by Towi the Mohawk. What debt (if any) does each boy owe his saviour?

12. Why doesn't Ryan correct Mrs. Davies when she says, “And she [Ann] must be in a bad way to send you out in this weather.” (p. 129)

13. Why is Ryan so upset about Ann delivering the baby. Are his fears understandable given the history of his own birth? Explain.

14. Why was Ryan considered a hero? Does he deserve this honour? Is anyone else a hero? Explain your choices.

#### **Part Four: The Twins' Treasure, Chapters 17-20**

1. In what season does the final section of the novel take place? List the physical signs of the season described in the novel?

2. How does Mr. O'Carr earn a living for his family?

3. What is wrong with Mary Ann's feet? What was the treatment for this 200 years ago and what is the treatment today?

4. How are the boys to be used as a decoy by the pirates?

5. What is the deal that Ryan strikes with the pirates?

6. What does Ryan mean when he says, “In for a penny; in for a pound.” (p. 156)

7. The narrator says, “the trees keep secrets.” (p. 156) When a writer gives inanimate or non-human things human qualities it is called personification. Explain in your own words why this expression is an example of personification. Write three examples of your own invention to illustrate personification.

8. What do the twins plan to do with the pockets full of gold they are promised?

9. According to the pirates who is their greatest threat?

10. Why do Ivan's insults anger Alex so much?

11. Who is the real Ivan the Terrible? Is this a fitting comparison for Ivan the Pirate? Why? Give specific examples to prove your points.

12. Is Ivan correct when he says, “Never pays to tell the truth.” (p. 168) Why?

13. Onomatopoeia is a sound pattern created with words. It occurs when the sound being described is made by saying the word. For example “KER-CHHUUNNK!” (p. 172) Find at least five examples of onomatopoeia in *The Perilous Year*. (Hint: Look for all the expressions in capital letters.)

14. Why are the boys so disappointed with James when he doesn’t “beat up” Ivan for giving Alex a bloody nose?

15. How does James manipulate Ivan to help the boys without Ivan realizing it? When James tells Ivan to row closer to shore, Ivan assumes it is to avoid detection, but what are his other reasons?

16. Debate the issue between Ryan and Alex on page 180. If they keep the gold, are they thieves too? Why or why not? What would you do? Is it true that the boys are “hypocrites” if they use the stolen gold even if it is for a good cause? Why?

17. List at least five examples with page references to show James is not a typical pirate and is, in fact, a compassionate man. Is this a realistic portrayal of a pirate? Why or why not?

18. In life we learn not just those who are good, but also from those who aren’t. What finally convinces the boys and James to turn in the gold?

19. James explains they cannot return the stolen gold themselves because they “might get **hanged** for stealing.” (p. 185) When is the past tense of the verb “to hang” **hung** and when is it **hanged**? Write two sentences to show the correct usage of both forms of the past tense of the verb “to hang”.

20. How is Mr. O’Carr going to repay James for saving Alex the previous summer?

## **Epilogue**

1. Define the words prologue and epilogue. What do the prefixes “pro” and “epi” mean? What does “logue” mean?

2. How did the boys finance Mary Ann’s treatments in New York?

3. Do you think James and Ivan will make successful farmers? Why or why not?

4. What is a dowry? What were the advantages and disadvantages of a dowry for women 200 years ago?

5. People are often not what they might seem at first. Choose two characters that turn out differently than you might have expected from the outset. Write a paragraph about each and show how they changed and why.

## Novel Extension Ideas

Novel Extension Ideas encourage students to explore historical events and controversial issues, as well as to engage in related activities. Projects are intended for individuals, pairs, small groups, and large groups. Activities are directed to the students.

Students may express themselves through creative writing, costume design, computers, reports, oral presentations, newspaper articles, brochures, research projects, cooking, and more. *The activities reflect a vast range in levels of difficulty.*

Students will need access to reference materials to do research. Ask your resource librarian and history teacher for support. Check the Internet for information Web sites.

1. Write the sequel to *The Perilous Year* hinted at in the final chapter. Is there really silver buried in Meyers' Silver Cave? Keep the same time period and characters.
2. Land ho! Walk the plank! Hands off me gold, Matie! You know the typical characteristics of pirates even though you have probably never encountered a real one. But you probably didn't know there were pirates in Canada. James is not your typical pirate that is for sure, but neither is Jack in the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Write a pirate story in which the characters break some of the rules of the stereotypical pirates. Set your story in Canada in an historical setting. Use dialogue to reveal the unique personalities of each character.
3. Unfortunately pirates are not just an evil of the past. Current newspapers in tropical havens reveal shocking stories of modern day pirates who have overtaken yachts and sailboats on the high seas. The owners are never seen or heard from again. Use the Internet to research some of these current event stories. Prepare a report (written or oral) on the topic of modern day pirates.
4. Connie Brummel Crook has a novel about Laura Secord called *Laura's Choice* and a picture book based on the same topic called, *Laura Secord's Brave Walk*. Have a look at these two works. There is also a lot of potential for a picture book based on *The Perilous Year* as well. Stop for a minute and imagine the dynamic scenes of near deaths, rescues, and adventures. Write and illustrate the picture book version of *The Perilous Year*. You may change the title and even rework sections to your liking.
5. *The Perilous Year* is the sequel to Connie Brummel Crook's novel *The Hungry Year*. Read *The Hungry Year* and choose one of the suggestions below to bring the two books together in a project.
  - a) Choose three exciting life threatening scenes from each book and show how each reveals the strength of character needed to survive 200 years ago.
  - b) Use specific examples from both novels to illustrate the role of women 200 years ago.
  - c) Show how Kate has changed from one novel to the next.
  - d) Show how the Shaws and the O'Carrs are excellent examples of neighbours and friends helping each survive as early homesteaders. Use specific examples from both

novels.

- e) Illustrate the relationship between the settlers and the Mohawks. Give examples.
- f) Prove that although over 200 years separates Kate and the twins from modern day kids they are really very similar. Give specific examples.

6. Connie Brummel Crook is a true champion of historical Canadian literature for young adults. Prove this statement is true in a short essay. Write an introduction and conclusion. Write three paragraphs in the body of the essay to show how Ms. Crook has brought Canadian history to life for young readers. Give specific examples from her works to prove your points. Talk to your teacher about correct essay style before you begin this project.

7. *Have you learned lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside of you?  
Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced themselves against you, and disputed the passage with you?* Walt Whitman.

Sometimes we learn through adversity. How is this true in the story? Prove with examples in a series of well constructed paragraphs.

8. Research the author Connie Brummel Crook. She has written many novels and picture books. Refer to her Web site: [www.conniebrummelcrook.ca](http://www.conniebrummelcrook.ca) Write a biography of the author. Be sure to give specific details. Be creative and write an introduction, body and conclusion. Write at least three paragraphs.

9. There are at least four survival stories within this novel: James and Alex survive in the bush; Geordie and Ryan survive near drowning and hypothermia; Ryan survives nearly freezing to death; and the Davies survive the blizzard to aid Ann in childbirth. Survival stories are major themes in Canadian literature due to severe weather in all four seasons. Research one of the following topics: blizzards, freezing, water safety, hypothermia, bush survival, etc. Then choose a form that interests you to educate others about how to survive in those conditions. For example, you could make a five minute video, a brochure, a poster, an oral presentation, or write an informative article. The point of this assignment is to educate others about possible hazards and offer helpful and accurate survival information. (Refer to a series of brochures published by the Government of Canada's Office of Critical Infrastructure Protection and Emergency Preparedness in cooperation with the Canadian Red Cross. Call 1-800-788-8282 or an electronic version is available via [www.ocipep.gc.ca](http://www.ocipep.gc.ca))

10. Write a survival story (real or imagined) set it in historical time. Choose a period in Canadian history that interests you. Include details of that historical period to "show" the setting. Use vocabulary specific to the times. Pay attention to details, such as the types of transportation, clothing, food, inventions, etc. that existed at the time. Include dialogue in your story and be sure to have characters speak in the fashion of the day.

11. Write the obituary that might have appeared in the local newspaper at the time that

Alex was presumed drowned. Begin by reading obituaries in the current newspapers, then use the Internet to research historical obituaries from newspapers in Upper Canada 200 years ago. Try to make your obituary sound authentic. You might even go so far as to put it in the context of a 200 year old newspaper. You can age the paper by soaking it in tea to yellow it. When the paper is thoroughly dry it is ready for print.

12. Alex and Ryan really liked Ann's baking, especially johnny cakes. Create a class cookbook of very old recipes, for example johnny cakes. Students could ask elderly relatives for submissions or research on the Internet. See *Hearth and Home: 1784-2000*. It is a cookbook written by U.E.L. Kawartha Branch (April 2000) with an introduction by Connie Brummel Crook. Try out some of the recipes. *Note: Be sure to inquire about food allergies in the class and school before embarking on this project.*

13. Research the clothing worn by Loyalists at the time this novel was set. Choose two different characters from the novel (perhaps one male and one female) and make two period costumes. Present the costumes to the class using correct terminology and showing the function of each aspect of the outfits.

14. Research the United Empire Loyalists in Ontario. Create a report (written or oral). Begin by writing at least fifteen good research questions that need to be answered about the Loyalists. Your questions must require responses that cannot be simply answered with one word. (Sample questions: Where did the loyalists originate and why did they leave their homelands? Why did the Loyalists choose to come to Upper Canada? What was life like for them when they arrived in Upper Canada? What are some of the major contributions made by Loyalists in the development of this province and country? What evidence still exists of the Loyalists in Ontario today?)

15. Now that your class is aware of the history of the United Empire Loyalists (U.E.L.), inquire to see if there is a local branch. Perhaps your class can be involved in celebrations on Loyalist Day, June 19, if events have been organized by them in your community.