

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack London was born in San Francisco in 1876. Life was hard when Jack was growing up and he started working when he was 10. He did a variety of jobs, some legal¹, others not, and even spent some time living as a tramp. In his free time he went to the library and spent many hours there reading.

In 1894 he went back to school, and published his first short story *Typhoon*² off the Coast of Japan. Then in 1896 he went to the University of California, Berkeley, but had to leave because of money problems.

In July, 1897 he left for the Klondike Gold Rush³ in Alaska. Like many others, he became very ill and came home and worked as a full-time writer. He wrote short stories and soon became successful.



In 1903 he wrote the story which made his name⁴: *The Call of the Wild*. His next novel was *The Sea-Wolf* (1904). With his earnings⁵ he bought a large farm in California, where he died in 1916.

London was a prolific⁶ writer. Between 1905 and 1916 he published 18 novels and six collections of short stories, as well as a play and various works of non-fiction, including a biography. Other works were published after his death.

His most famous novels were *White Fang*⁷ (1906), *The Iron Heel* (1908) and *Martin Eden* (1909). However, he was criticized for his writing technique in later life: he took pieces written by other people in news reports, etc. and changed them to his own style. Some people felt it was plagiarism⁸.

- 1 **legal**: allowed by the law
- 2 **typhoon**: violent storm (in Asia)
- 3 **Klondike Gold Rush**: period from 1896 when gold was discovered in the Klondike area of Canada and Alaska
- 4 **made his name**: made him famous
- 5 **earnings**: money from work
- 6 **prolific**: writing a lot
- 7 **fang**: sharp animal tooth
- 8 **plagiarism**: copying other writers

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Call of the Wild (1903) is considered by many people to be Jack London's finest¹ piece of writing, and it is widely recognized as one of the classics of American literature.

The main character of the story is Buck, a large dog, who is stolen² from his comfortable life in California and sold as a sled³ dog in the frozen Klondike. Buck's new life is harsh⁴ and cruel and he is forced to learn to adapt in order to survive. He works in a team of dogs pulling sleds loaded with mail for the gold prospectors⁵ who have rushed to the cold north.



Buck is strong and determined and soon becomes the leader. Throughout the book, as Buck passes through the hands of various owners, he grows closer and closer to his primitive origins and the “call of the wild” becomes stronger and stronger.

The story explores a number of themes which were dear to London. London took a copy of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* with him when he went to the Klondike and the story strongly reflects Darwin’s theory of the ‘survival of the fittest’⁶. This law of the survival of the fittest applies to both the animal and human worlds: both men and animals need to use their strength and intelligence to survive.

London was a determinist and believed that our lives are conditioned by what we inherit⁷ and the environment which surrounds us. So when Buck lives with Judge Miller he is a pet and lives an easy, peaceful life. His deeper inherited instincts do not appear until he moves to an environment that allows them to develop. These themes are revisited⁸ in London’s later novel *White Fang*.

- 1 **finest:** best
- 2 **stolen:** taken without asking
- 3 **sled:** vehicle for moving things across snow
- 4 **harsh:** hard
- 5 **prospectors:** people looking for gold
- 6 **fittest:** in the best physical condition
- 7 **inherit:** (here) qualities you get from parents etc.
- 8 **revisited:** looked at again



The Yukon • Territory

Buck's Journey



BEFORE READING

- 1 What do you know about dogs? Circle the words in the box which can best be used to describe them.

| | | |
|-------------|--------------|----------|
| Carnivorous | Undependable | Friendly |
| Herbivorous | Dangerous | Useful |
| Intelligent | Wild | Loyal |
| Faithful | Domesticated | Strong |

- 2 With a partner make sentences using the words you circled.
- 3 There are many different kinds (breeds) of dogs, and each breed has a different use. Match the breeds on the left with the uses on the right.

- | | |
|--------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Alsatian | a a lap-dog, to be petted |
| 2 St Bernard | b a dog for pulling sleds in the snow |
| 3 Pointer | c a guard dog or police dog |
| 4 Pekinese | d a sheepdog |
| 5 Husky | e a gun dog, for hunting |
| 6 Collie | f a mountain rescue dog |

- 4 Have you got a dog? If so, write a paragraph about it. If not, either (a) write about a dog you know well, or (b) write what you think about dogs.

5 Answer these questions:

- a) What country does Alaska belong to?
- b) Where is Alaska located?
- c) What is the climate like?
- d) What wild animals live there?
- e) Who were the first inhabitants of Alaska?

6 Why did Alaska suddenly become famous at the end of the 19th century? Tick (✓) below.

- The film industry started there.
- People discovered gold there.
- Men started digging for oil.
- Ice-cream was invented there.

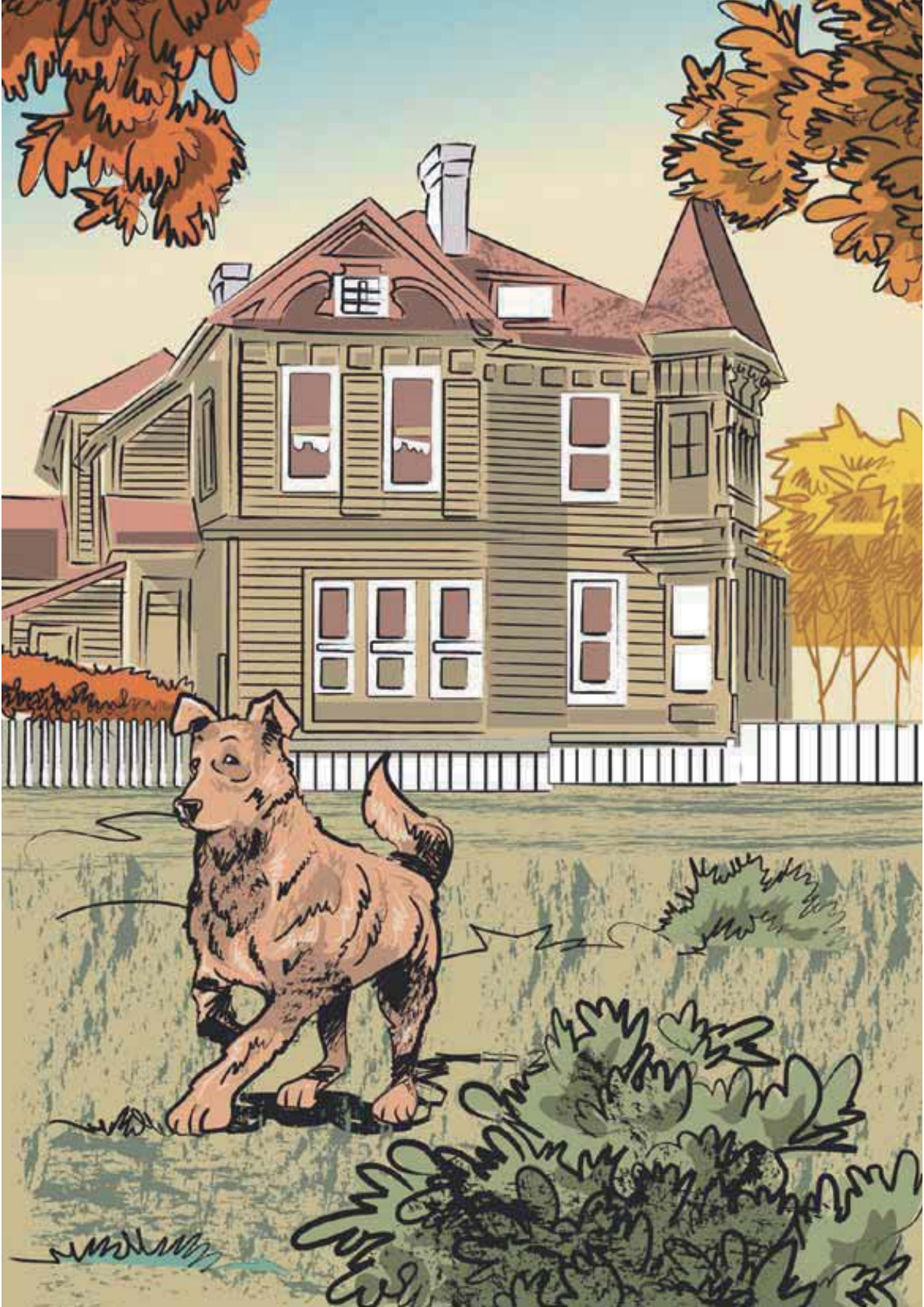
7 If you were going on a trip to Alaska what things would you want to take with you? Make a list under the two headings.

CLOTHES

EQUIPMENT



8 Would you like to live in or visit Alaska? Why/why not? Tell a partner.



INTO THE PRIMITIVE



Buck did not read the newspapers. So he did not know that there was trouble ahead¹. Trouble for every dog with strong muscles and warm long hair, from Seattle to southern California. Some men had found a yellow metal in the Arctic darkness, and thousands of other men were rushing there. These men wanted dogs that were heavy, with strong muscles for working hard and furry coats to protect them from the cold.

Buck lived at a big house in a sunny valley in California which was owned by Judge Miller. And Buck ruled over it all. He was born there, and had lived there for the four years of his life. There were many other dogs, but they lived together in the kennels², or inside the house. But Buck was neither a house dog nor a kennel dog. The whole of Judge Miller's land was his. Buck was king – king over all the creeping³ crawling⁴, flying things of Judge Miller's lands, humans included.

His father, Elmo, a huge St Bernard, had been the judge's inseparable⁵ companion. And when he died, Buck took his father's place. He was not so large – he weighed only sixty kilograms – for his mother, Shep, had been a Scottish sheepdog. He had had a good life and he was proud of himself, for he had not become a house dog. Hunting and other outdoor activities had hardened⁶ his muscles, and swimming had made him healthy.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 trouble ahead: problems in the near future | 4 crawling: moving on all four legs, close to the ground |
| 2 kennels: little houses for dogs to sleep in | 5 inseparable: impossible to separate |
| 3 creeping: moving close to the ground | 6 hardened: made hard |