

# The Dog Who Solved a Murder Mystery: A True Story

by **Joel Jacobsen**

Illustrated by **Jennifer Swain**

Curriculum developed by **Griffin Davis** and **Tiffany Owens**

Supplementary curriculum and copy editing by **Léna Garcia**



## OVERVIEW

### Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Ages 11 and up</li> <li>* Grades 6 and up</li> </ul>
Genre/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Historical nonfiction</li> <li>* Murder mystery</li> <li>* True tales</li> <li>* True crime</li> </ul>
Length	2,986 words
Content Advisories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Some graphic imagery</li> <li>* References to violent crime, murder, and execution</li> </ul>
One Sentence Summary	A historical recount of an 1890s New Mexican dog who helps a cowboy discover how his brother was murdered

Lesson Planning	
Topic/s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Life in the Old West</li> <li>* Historical research methodology</li> <li>* Animal loyalty and intelligence</li> </ul>
Key Theme/s Overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Persistence, patience, determination</li> <li>* Different cultural perspectives on the same issue</li> <li>* Problem solving</li> <li>* Legal justice vs. social justice</li> </ul>
Historic Events / Time Period for Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Ranch/cowboy culture of 1890s New Mexico</li> <li>* Spanish-speaking American life in the 1890s</li> <li>* Indigenous peoples in New Mexico and the Southwest in the late 1800s</li> </ul>
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Novel: <i>The Call of the Wild</i> by Jack London</li> <li>* Short story: "To Build a Fire" by Jack London</li> <li>* Novel: <i>In Cold Blood</i> by Truman Capote</li> </ul>
Author and Artists Information	<p><b>Joel Jacobsen</b> is the Assistant Attorney General of New Mexico.</p> <p><b>Jennifer Swain</b> is an award-winning Los Angeles artist.</p>

Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.8, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9
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## Author Biography

**Joel Jacobsen's** nonfiction contribution to the third issue of *Literature for Life* tells a story drawn from handwritten trial transcripts found in the New Mexico State Archives and newspaper articles from the 1890s. Joel is the author of *Such Men as Billy the Kid: The Lincoln County War Reconsidered*, which the great historian of American violence Richard Maxwell Brown wrote, “belongs on the same shelf as the classic works on the Kid and the County.”

## Artist Biography

Award-winning artist **Jennifer Swain** has been drawing pictures and writing stories for as long as she can remember. She attended ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. In college, she took many art classes and has been creating artwork ever since. Her artwork has been shown in many places, including as Floats in the Tournament of Roses. She has taught art at the Kindergarten-through-adult levels.

## SYNOPSIS

Drawn from handwritten trial transcripts found in the New Mexico State Archives and 1890s newspapers, “The Dog Who Solved the Murder Mystery: A True Story” tells of cowboy Tomás, who rides off into the snow with his dog Gallardo. Several days later, only Gallardo returns, injured and covered in blood. Tomás’s fate is revealed through the diligent sleuthing of the local Sheriff and the tireless, heroic actions of Gallardo. This true story reveals the rough justice and grit of the Old West.

## CURRICULUM

## Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

### Topic

Form groups of two to four students. First, take three to five minutes to individually jot down any notes or brainstorm any memories and details about the following prompt:

Describe a time when someone did something extraordinary for your benefit. Conversely, you may also write about a time when you went above and beyond what was needed or expected of you to help someone else. What did they (or you) do? What made the extra effort apparent? How did you (or the person you helped) react?

Now, in your small groups, orally tell the story of what happened.

### Main Ideas

In a reflective journal response, address the following questions/points:

- Write about a time when you or someone close to you got into trouble for doing something they knew was wrong.
- Write about a time when you or someone close to you got into trouble for something *they did not do* — *they were falsely accused*.
- In both cases, describe the context, the outcome, and the attitudes of the people involved. Include yourself either as the person in trouble or as an observer. Describe how you felt about the offense, the situation, and the resolution.

### Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following passage from “The Dog Who Solved a Murder Mystery”:

“From these recollections, and from contemporary newspaper articles and trial transcripts, we know how Tomás’s younger brother Maximiliano responded: he saddled up and let Gallardo lead him back out into the snow. But the sources don’t tell us how Tomás’s family made sense of the dog’s blood-matted fur. Humans don’t like uncertainty. When we hear of strange events, our minds automatically begin making stories to explain them, filling in the blanks. How did the members of Tomás’s family fill in the missing parts of the tale, the pieces Gallardo was trying so hard to tell them? What discussions did they have before the second son followed the first, setting off alone like Victim 2 in a horror movie?”

In a class discussion, address the following questions:

Why do you think the author doesn’t make up the family’s conversation? How does his omission explain human behavior differently than does fiction?

### Universal Themes

What kinds of experiences are the ones that can unite — or divide — an entire town or community? What kinds of events and experiences make everyone talk to each other, problem solve together, or try to make sense of what happened?

In your journal, in small groups, or on the board, list the kinds of events that might fit into this category. Drawing from your own life or the news, list specific examples of such events. What do the events have in common that engage people? How are they different from smaller events that do not bring people together in the same way?

### Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
saddle	sprinkled	telegraph
poured	cinching	bowlegged
wound	gallant	stragglers
myth	frigid	herd
scalp	scrunched	Great Depression
impatient	skulking	Rocky Mountains
rifle	caked	Colt revolver
leaping	embers	carbine
plunging	wisps	corral
ambush	carcass	bonfire
exceptional	slaughtered	hindquarters
endurance	cogitations	yucca
crudely	hermitage	saddlebag
butchered	macabre	overshoe
cactus	swiftly	posse
coals	hanging	hosanna

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
ashes	prosecution	Gusano
landscape	bonfire	telegraph
foreigner	isolated	overcoat
coded	gruesome	bridle
sheriff	hospitality	Navajo
	aggression	Apache
	tormentor	Tewa
	skins	Keres
	cowboy	plea bargaining
	depot	telegraph operator
	peddler	Mesa
	culprits	steer
	corroborating	
		rustling (cattle)
	clear-cut (case)	juniper
		piñon

## Vocabulary Activities

1. Review the vocabulary list and make a smaller sub-list of the words that give the story its 1890s Western cowboy flavor. Next, write a three-to-six-sentence paragraph which incorporates at least five such terms and gives your writing the sense it takes place in the Old West. You could write a simple description of a house, a person, or a brief event. Make sure your writing demonstrates the feeling of cowboy life in the Old West.
2. The author mentions that the dog's name, Gallardo, means gallant. What are the other Spanish names of people and places in the story, and what do each of them mean? (Translate all the Spanish names to English.) How do names in the two languages differ?
3. Find and research all of the legal and police terminology used in the story. Then, use it to write a brief scene from a modern court case or police drama. Are the words Jacobson used to describe the 1890s still relevant to our times? Which words stand out as different?

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. What makes this story so unusual that the author was able to find plenty of information on it now?
2. Do you think Jesús Vialpando is truly innocent?
3. What are some aspects of this nonfiction account that could only happen in the Old West? How is justice different today than it was back then? Is it different, or is it basically still the same?

## Text-Dependent Questions

1. What is the difference between the 1890s cowboy and the contemporary cowboy? Cite textual examples.
2. Because the story is set in a distant time and place, it contains unfamiliar words and references. What stands out to you? Does the author explain it well enough for you to understand? Do you have to do outside research? If so, how does one do so, and what might one learn? Cite specific places in the text to illustrate your answer(s).
3. What is the style of this story? Who is the narrator? How does he reveal himself and his perspective?
4. What, specifically, makes Gallardo live up to his name? Cite textual evidence.
5. Consider why strange details — like a one-armed peddler — make a story more memorable. What other details in the story help make it memorable?
6. We often imagine the “Wild West” as an arid, sandy place. However, both the author and artist’s rendition of New Mexico in January conflict with this image. Use textual evidence to describe how their depictions differ from the “Wild West” the movies have ingrained in our minds.
7. Does Gallardo’s anthropomorphisation (his human characteristics) enhance the story? How do you imagine Gallardo feels about the story’s characters? Is there textual evidence supporting the idea that he feels a particular way about any character?

## Writing Exercises

### Narrative

Try your hand at rewriting Jacobsen’s story as a fictional narrative recounted from Gallardo’s perspective.

### Descriptive

Re-write any section of this story as a short skit complete with a detailed scene description. For example, create a scene in which the family discusses what might have happened to Tomás. How did the members of Tomás’ family fill in the missing parts of his tale, the pieces Gallardo was trying so hard to

tell them? What discussions did they have before the second son followed the first, setting off alone like “Victim 2 in a horror movie?”

## Analysis

Research daily life in 1890s Western America. What was it like? Research where people lived, how they got food, what they did for work, how they dressed, and what their culture was like, etc. Then, write a comparison essay based on your research, explaining how differently we spent our time back then compared to today.

## Complementary Reading Text

Read “To Build a Fire” by Jack London: [https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource\\_files/to-build-a-fire.pdf](https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/to-build-a-fire.pdf) ([https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource\\_files/to-build-a-fire.pdf](https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/to-build-a-fire.pdf))

Jack London’s famous short story, “To Build a Fire,” is told from a third-person omniscient perspective. The reader is privy to many thoughts of an unnamed dog in the story.

Even though Gallardo does not narrate the story, he can be considered a protagonist. In both stories, the dogs are key characters. Compare and contrast the dog from “To Build a Fire” and Gallardo. Using textual evidence, explain their similarities and differences.

## Activity Options

### Classroom Activity One

Our culture is currently struggling with the ability to discern fact from opinion and rumor. As a class, discuss the difference between fact and opinion. Create a list of verifiable facts from the case as portrayed in “The Dog Who Solved a Murder Mystery.” Then hold a mock trial with a defense and prosecution of the accused murders. Use the facts from the case and any additional research to either prosecute or exonerate the accused.

(Should students wish to contact the author of the story for additional case materials, *Literature for Life* can facilitate this connection.)

### Classroom Activity Two

Have students go online or to the library to find some of the original source material Jacobsen might have used for this story. Students may either create their own nonfiction story from the material or write a short research paper discussing their methods of research. Rather than simply use the Internet, students should speak to a reference librarian.

### **Home Activity**

Search through news articles to find a verifiable account of an amazing feat or event — something done by an animal, a small child, or by anyone we would not normally associate with that ability. Take examples from significant historical events if you must, but the more local, the more relatable. Write a nonfiction account of the event or feat that draws from multiple sources, including first hand witnesses.

### **Guest Speaker**

1. Invite a K-9 officer and their dog to talk to students about how K-9s help solve cases. The officer can also talk about their views on criminality, justice, and the justice system.
2. Have a local journalist from a well-reputed newspaper discuss writing engaging nonfiction stories. They can talk about their research, how much fun it is, and how many strange things happen in LA everyday. They can also talk about the writing process, what it's like to be a journalist, and how they ensure factual accuracy and multiple perspectives in their writing, etc.
3. Invite the author and/or artist to come and speak to your class.

### **Field Trip**

Take a trip to visit a Los Angeles K-9 unit (<http://www.lapdk9.co>). After the trip, ask students to write an essay comparing and contrasting modern police dog heroes to Gallardo.

Alternate: Take a field trip to large research library or museum to look at how one might do research for a story like this. If possible, visit a local library, such as the Los Angeles Central Library.

After the trip, ask students to write an essay explaining differences between their initial impressions of the time period from reading the story, versus any new understanding or insight based on research done during the field trip to the library (described above). If students feel there are not significant differences then they can write about how their research supports the story's literary descriptions.

## **TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT**

### **Activity:**

Use the “double-bubble map” below to compare and contrast Jesús Vialpando’s version of Tomás Martínez’s murder with that constructed by author Joel Jacobsen.

Instructions for double-bubble map: In the five bubbles connected *only* to Vialpando’s name, bullet note the key elements unique to his story. In the five bubbles stemming only from Jacobsen’s name, bullet note the key elements unique to his story. Use the center five bubbles to note common elements of both men’s stories.

### **Writing Prompt:**

You are the judge tasked with deciding if Vialpando is innocent or guilty. Referencing details from your “double-bubble map,” write a one- to two-paragraph response in which you evaluate the validity of Vialpando’s account of the murder. Be sure to include textual evidence from “The Dog Who Solved a Mystery.”

## **COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE**

*This story and its exercises are appropriate for 6-12th grade. Sixth-grade standards are cited.*

### **Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.C Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

### **Vocabulary Activity Options**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4.A Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word's position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4.C Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning or its part of speech.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4.D Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

## Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.3 Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.C Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.D Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

## Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5 Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6 Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.5.A Interpret figures of speech (e.g., personification) in context.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

## Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1 Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources; assess the credibility of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and providing basic bibliographic information for sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9 Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

## Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.3 Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.C Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.