Cracker! the Best Dog in Vietnam, a guide for reading groups

About the Book

Firecracker—Cracker for short—leads a pampered life as the beloved pet of a young boy. But the German Shepherd’s life changes when the boy’s father loses his job, and the family is forced to move to an apartment that doesn’t allow dogs. The boy’s parents give Cracker to the U.S. Army to become a scout dog for the Vietnam War. Scout dogs sniffed out bombs, booby traps, weapons caches, and enemy troops for the Army.

Meanwhile Rick Hanski, just seventeen years old, is supposed to be in training to take over his father’s hardware store in a small town in Wisconsin. Instead, Rick announces one night after dinner that he would like to join the Army. After much deliberation—and some protests—Rick’s father agrees to let Rick join up. Rick becomes a dog handler assigned to Cracker.

The two don’t get along at first, but they must learn to work together if they’re going to survive in the tough jungles of Vietnam. Learning to survive teaches both of them a lot about themselves in this action-packed historical novel.

Pre-Reading Activity

Ask students to write a paragraph about the Vietnam War. Invite them to share their paragraphs in class.

Discussion Topics

- How does Rick’s family respond when he says he wants to join the Army? Explain why Rick wants to join even though he has a nice future laid out for him as owner or his father’s hardware store.
- Why doesn’t Cracker like Rick when she meets him? Explain how the two finally learn to respect each other. Discuss how their feelings about each other change during the course of the novel.
- Vietnam is often called a guerilla war. Explain what this means. Discuss why dogs were needed in this war.
- Rick goes on a secret mission with the Special Forces. What happens during this mission? Explain how this mission changes him.
- During the novel, sometimes soldiers made jokes or goofed around. Explain why the soldiers did this. Discuss why it helped them to survive to make jokes sometimes.
- A character arc is the changes a character goes through during the course of a story. Discuss the character arcs of both Cracker and Rick.
Research and Activities

- When Rick flies home, the pilot suggests that Vietnam veterans change to civilian clothes before they get off the plane. Have students debate the pros and cons of the Vietnam War as it was viewed at the time. Then have the students change sides and have another debate.

- Dogs have extraordinary senses. Do research on the senses of dogs that make them indispensable during times of war.

- Pick a character from the book. Write a paragraph about what you think that character’s life was like after the war.

- Choose a scene from the book and write a script based on the scene. You can change parts if you wish. Perform the scene with other members of your class.