Into the Rapids
By Bradford H. Robie
2016

Bradford H. Robie has written for Highlights. In this short story, a boy falls into a river during a rafting trip. As you read, take notes on what Wyatt does when he's in the river.

One minute, Wyatt was perched on the edge of the raft like everyone else. The next, he was falling overboard, right into the monstrous rapids.

They were on the Arkansas River, navigating a 10-mile stretch of whitewater that passed through one of Colorado’s deepest canyons. There were seven people on the raft: six paddlers and Brody, their guide. Brody had cautioned them that some of the rapids would be intense. “Just follow my commands and we'll do fine,” he yelled over the thundering river.

Wyatt had become accustomed to Brody’s instructions of “Forward one stroke!” and “Forward two!” But now Brody was telling them to paddle backward.

Just seconds earlier, they had freed another raft that was hung up on a rock by intentionally slamming into the stalled raft. But the momentum had caused their own raft to enter some tricky rapids too quickly.

“All back, everyone, hard!” Brody shouted. “We do not want to hit this!” But it was too late. The raft rammed into the canyon wall. As they bounced back, one end of the raft was sucked downward. Suddenly, water was pouring in everywhere.

The paddlers struggled to keep their balance, but as the boat popped back up, Wyatt was thrown backward into the water. His body took off like a shot.

He was overwhelmed by the river’s frightful power. The water tossed him around, pummeling him with waves, pulling him under, thrusting him up. He caught breaths whenever he could.

1. Rafting and white water rafting are recreational outdoor activities that use an inflatable raft to navigate a river or other body of water.
2. Monstrous (adjective): having the frightening appearance of a monster
3. Rapids are where the riverbed is rocky, and the river runs fast over and around the rocks.
4. fast, shallow stretches of water in a river
5. the strength of force that something has when it's moving
6. Pummel (verb): to strike repeatedly
He looked over his shoulder, expecting to see Brody about to toss him the lifeline, but he’d already
moved 50 yards ahead of the raft.

*I can’t believe this is happening,* Wyatt thought. On either side of him, the canyon walls rose straight up
like skyscrapers, offering nothing to hold on to.

He tried to remember the safety talk he had half-listened to. “If you fall out, we’ll either pull you back in
or I’ll throw you a lifeline,” Brody had told them.

Wyatt’s brother, Johnny, had leaned toward him, whispering, “Wouldn’t it be awesome to fall in?”

“Like a flume ride,” Wyatt had joked, grinning.

Dad had shushed them, making it clear they should be listening to the guide.

“If you do fall in,” Brody had continued, “don’t stand up. Float on your back, feet facing downriver and
held high so your legs can cushion any rocks you might run into.”

Wyatt rolled onto his back now, pointing his feet downstream, and lost his grip on the paddle that was
still in his hand. He watched as the paddle quickly disappeared into the whitewater.

He knew he had to let go of the idea that someone was going to swoop down and save him. I have to
got out of this myself, he realized.

He thought of his middle-school basketball tournament — how he had kept calm and blocked out the
crowd while shooting foul shots. Don’t panic, he told himself.

The river quieted momentarily and Wyatt was able to catch his breath. Around the bend, he saw a
stretch of riverbank with some tumbled-down rocks that might provide a handhold.

Then he saw something even more promising: the raft they’d freed earlier was pulled up alongside the
riverbank. Its crew spotted Wyatt and started waving frantically. “Swim!” they shouted. “Swim to us!”

His hopes ignited, Wyatt turned onto his stomach and swam. He gave it everything he had.

“You can make it!” they yelled.

He was getting closer, but the relentless current was pushing him downstream, away from the raft.
Wyatt adjusted his angle by aiming higher upriver and swam even harder, using every last ounce of
energy.

Finally, he was just a yard away. Knowing this was his only chance, he took two strokes and lunged for
the raft.

---

7. an amusement park ride  
8. when a player takes a free shot from the foul line in basketball  
9. Frantic (adjective): wild or distraught with fear, anxiety, or other emotion  
10. Ignite (verb): to begin burning or to catch fire; to give energy or life to something
Immediately, he felt strong hands grabbing hold of his life vest and pulling him from the river. As he collapsed in a shaking heap, someone asked him if he was OK, but Wyatt was too winded to speak.

A moment later, his team's raft pulled up next to them. After Wyatt had recovered, Dad, Brody, and the other guide helped him climb into their raft.

“You did a great job getting out of a dangerous situation,” Brody told him. “You really kept your head.”

Wyatt grinned self-consciously, and then Brody said, “OK, team. We've got one more set of rapids today, and then we're home free.”

Wyatt looked at him in disbelief.

“Don't worry. They're small,” Brody said reassuringly. “Besides, the river's our only ticket home.”

Wyatt nodded as Brody handed him an extra paddle. He had a new respect for the river's power. But now, that same power was going to carry him safely back.

Brody pushed them off. “Forward paddle, everyone!” he called. And they started for home.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the main theme of the short story?
   A. Nature is powerful and can be dangerous if you're not careful.
   B. It's best to follow your instincts when something goes wrong.
   C. Rivers are too dangerous to be used for sports or fun.
   D. Don’t give up on something just because you don’t succeed the first time.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   A. “‘If you do fall in,’ Brody had continued, ‘don’t stand up. Float on your back, feet facing downriver and held high so your legs can cushion any rocks you might run into.’” (Paragraph 14)
   B. “He thought of his middle-school basketball tournament — how he had kept calm and blocked out the crowd while shooting foul shots. Don't panic, he told himself.” (Paragraph 17)
   C. “‘OK, team. We've got one more set of rapids today, and then we’re home free.’” (Paragraph 27)
   D. “He had a new respect for the river's power. But now, that same power was going to carry him safely back.” (Paragraph 30)

3. What does the narrator mean when they say that “the canyon walls rose straight up like skyscrapers” in paragraph 9?
   A. The walls are beautiful and intimidating.
   B. The walls are tall and smooth.
   C. The walls are steep and ridged.
   D. The walls are strong and supportive.

4. Which of the following describes how Wyatt responds when he falls into the water?
   A. He follows the safety instructions that Brody told the group before they went rafting.
   B. He panics and forgets all of the safety instructions that Brody initially gave.
   C. He is calm because he doesn't realize the full extent of the danger he is in.
   D. He ignores all of Brody’s safety instructions and does what he has to do in order to survive.
5. How do paragraphs 11-13 contribute to the story?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. When Wyatt falls into the river, he remains calm and collected. How is this a form of bravery? Describe a time when you were brave in a dangerous situation.

2. In this story, Wyatt discovers how strong the river is. Do you think this is proof that nature is more powerful than humans? Cite examples from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. Before their trip, Brody provides the paddlers with safety instructions. What can humans do to remain safe in the face of powerful and dangerous aspects of nature? Cite examples from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. Do you think it was necessary for Wyatt to fall into the river to fully understand its power? Why or why not? Describe a time when an unpleasant experience helped you learn an important lesson.