

# THE SNOW FELL THREE GRAVES DEEP

VOICES FROM THE DONNER PARTY

ALLAN WOLF

## ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1846, a group of emigrants bound for California face a choice: continue on their planned route or take a shortcut into the wilderness. Eighty-nine of them opt for the untested trail, a decision that plunges them into danger and desperation and, finally, the unthinkable. From extraordinary poet and novelist Allan Wolf comes a riveting retelling of the ill-fated journey of the Donner Party across the Sierra Nevada mountains during the winter of 1846–1847. Brilliantly narrated by Hunger itself—world-weary, taunting, and all-knowing—this novel-in-verse examines a notorious chapter in history from multiple perspectives, among them caravan leaders George Donner and James Reed, Donner’s scholarly wife, two Miwok guides, the Reed children, a sixteen-year-old orphan, and even a pair of oxen. Comprehensive back matter includes an author’s note, select character biographies, statistics, a time line of events, and more. Unprecedented in its detail and sweep, this haunting epic raises stirring questions about moral ambiguity, hope and resilience, and hunger of all kinds.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

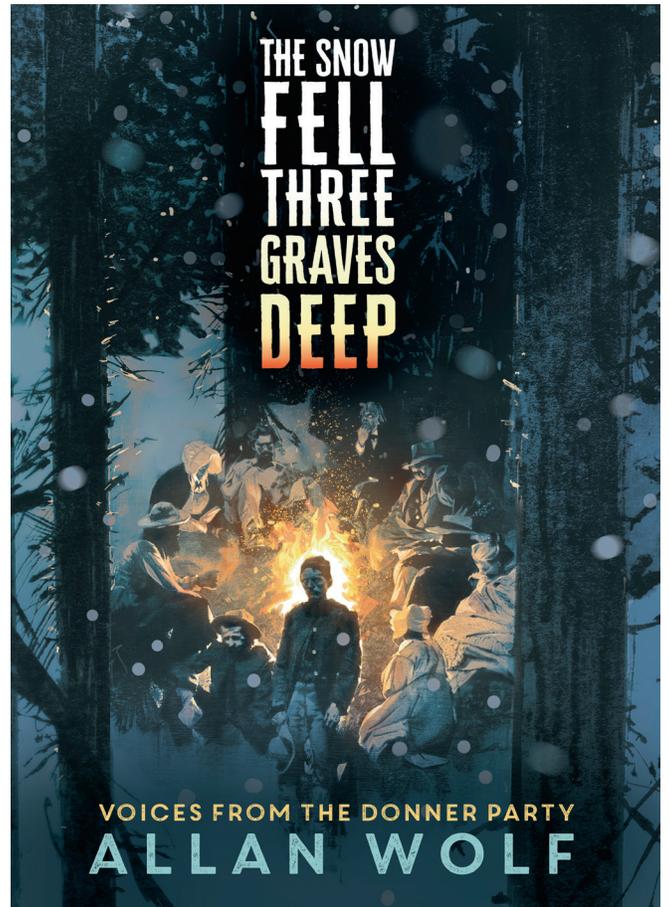


Photo by Charley Akers

A two-time winner of the North Carolina Young Adult Book Award, as well as Bank Street College’s Claudia Lewis Award for Poetry, Allan Wolf is the author of picture books, poetry, and young adult novels. His books for young people showcase his love of research, history, science, and poetry. Also a skilled and seasoned performer of thirty years, Allan Wolf’s dynamic author talks and poetry presentations for all ages are meaningful, educational, and unforgettable. He believes in the healing powers of poetry recitation and has committed to memory nearly a thousand poems. He lives in North Carolina with his family.



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### Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before you read this book, what had you heard about the Donner Party? Did this book change your mind about the people at all?
2. The author uses an unusual device to tell the story: Hunger is the narrator. What did you think of this? Did it work for you?
3. Before the prologue there is a reproduction of the ad that recruited young men “of good character” to join the wagon train to California. Think about what the men would be leaving and the uncertainties that lay ahead. Can you imagine undertaking such a journey?
4. The first verse is in the words of a child, Patty Reed, dubbed “the Angel” (page 7). Why do you think Wolf began with her?
5. Ludwig Keseberg says on page 12, “It seems the greatest danger we will face on this journey . . . is ourselves.” Does that turn out to be true? Why is Keseberg called “the Madman”?
6. Occasionally, Wolf turns to rhymed verse for his narrative (see page 27, “Upon Independence Rock,” for the first instance). Other passages are written in a free-verse style, using non-rhyming everyday language, almost like a monologue in a play. The words of Hunger are written in standard prose. What do you notice about these three different styles? How does Wolf use these forms to affect the reader in different ways?
7. In some cases, Wolf writes poems in two voices that are suited to reading aloud (see “The Parting of the Ways” on page 31). What other passages of this book might work well as a play, or as reader’s theater? Which character would you like to play? Why?
8. If you had been confronted with the choice of following the Hastings Cutoff or the older established road, knowing just what our pioneers were told, which one would you have been likely to take?
9. On page 33, Hunger says, “Curiosity is just a variety of hunger. Hunger is just a variety of hope.” What do you think these statements mean?
10. After James Reed meets Lansford Hastings, he says, “It crossed my mind how much Hastings was just like me. So how can it be that I didn’t much like him at all?” (page 59) How would you answer this question? What kind of a person was James Reed?
11. One of the saddest scenes that Wolf describes is when the party is crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert and Virginia’s pony becomes terribly weak and cannot continue (page 83). Virginia’s mother slaps her hand for giving the pony water when there is none to waste. And then they leave the pony behind, lying on the hard white earth, watching as they disappear into the distance. What were their choices here? Did they make the best one?
12. When the party is crossing the Great Salt Lake Desert, they must lighten their loads because many of their oxen have run off and the party can no longer take all the wagons. Tamzene Donner, “the Scholar,” tosses out a cookstove and tackle, but saves all her books, including: “Three copies of Webster’s newest dictionary. Four volumes of McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers. Four volumes of *Audubon’s Birds of America*” (page 87). What do you learn about her priorities, her passions with these decisions? Later, when even she realizes that the books must go, she says what they mean to her: “The history of our times. The geography of our world. The philosophy of our souls. The meaning of our stars. The balance of our equations. The truth of our spirits” (page 119). What do books mean to you?

13. When the Donner Party encounters Native Americans, we learn how the pioneers viewed the native population. On page 96, Hunger says, “Just as they are weighed down by their many possessions, they are weighed down by their sense of entitlement. Had the white strangers not looked upon them with such disdain, the Shoshone might have offered directions, six days back, to an easy pass at the northern end of the range that leads straight to Mary’s River and the established California Trail.” What does *sense of entitlement* mean? Why do the white men feel that they are entitled? How does it affect their trip and their lives?
14. When Reed kills John Snyder and is banished from the wagon train, his daughter Virginia finds her mother sobbing uncontrollably in their wagon and realizes that it is up to her, the child, to comfort her mother, the adult. She has an interesting insight then: “I have expected Ma and Pa to stop treating me like a child. But maybe being grown up isn’t about how people treat you. Maybe being grown up is about how you treat other people” (page 107). What do you think about that idea? Do you agree with it?
15. Two young men of the Miwok people, Salvador and Luis, “the Savior and the Slave,” leave Sutter’s Fort to help out the Donner Party. What kind of men are they? What do they think about the white people they are traveling with? Do they become fully integrated with the group?
16. Dreaming about the future is something that everyone does. The teenaged girls of the party allow themselves to think about their futures when they reach Truckee Meadows. Each girl says what she will do when she reaches California, from having a hot bath to getting married and having babies. What do you dream about doing in your future?
17. When Reed is at Sutter’s Fort, he confesses to Sutter that he had killed a man because he wanted Sutter to know the truth. Sutter says, “Let me tell you what I know about The Truth, Reed. The Truth . . . is entirely in the telling” (page 171). What does this mean? Do you agree with what Sutter says?
18. Many members of the Donner Party died from hunger and cold, but others did not, even though they suffered from the same conditions. What do you think made the difference between those who died and those who lived? Hunger, the narrator, offers several possibilities: angels, family, God, intellect, luck, and power and prestige. What do you think? Also, except for the grandmother who died early on, it was only men who died for a long time. Why do you think that was?
19. Tamzene Donner cherished the memory of her first husband, Tully, not truly letting George Donner, her second one, into her heart. What changed to cause her to risk her own life to be with him when he was dying?
20. Can you imagine a situation in which you would eat a fellow human being? Is it too horrifying to even contemplate, or does it just make sense when you are dying of hunger?
21. In the notes at the end of the book, Wolf speaks about narrative pointillism, creating a picture, or a story, one point at a time (page 357). You may have heard of the artistic practice of pointillism, but what do you think about it as a method of telling a story?

These questions were prepared by Grace Worcester, a former youth services consultant for the Vermont Department of Libraries. She has served on the Newbery Medal, Caldecott Medal, *Boston Globe–Horn Book Award*, and National Book Award committees.



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