

Abel's Island Study Guide

Abel's Island by William Steig

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Plot Summary

Abel's Island by William Steig centers on Abel, a rich mouse and newlywed. For the love of his wife, he chases her scarf in a hurricane. A flood sweeps him away to an island where he lives for a year.

It is August 1907. Two mice named Abel and Amanda are newlyweds. They picnic in the woods, dining on champagne and caviar; however, heavy rains descend. Abel and Amanda find shelter in a cave with other animals who also avoid the rain. The weather worsens, turning into a hurricane. As they watch the storm from the opening of the cave, Amanda's gauze shawl comes off her and flies away. Abel runs after the shawl, only to be swept away by a great flood. He descends down a waterfall and fights the river's rapids, taking hold of a rusty nail on a piece of fragmented wood.

He sleeps through the storm. When morning comes, the weather is beautiful. Abel lands on a tree branch atop a deserted island. The water level turns to normal so Abel scrambles down the tree and starts to build a boat, but it cannot withstand the rapids' force. He builds two more boats and has the same results. Then he has two more failed attempts of building a bridge and catapulting himself across the river.

Abel desperately misses Amanda and his luxurious life back home as a noble mouse. September and October pass as Abel stores food for winter in a hollow log he uses as his home. As a pastime, he sculpts red clay statues of Amanda and his family. On the eastern shore of the island, he finds a large book and a watch. He reads a chapter every day for entertainment. In a terrifying ordeal, an owl swoops down to eat Abel, but he manages to fight it off.

January and especially February are brutal months. In February, Abel takes a month-long hibernation inside the log. He becomes depressed. Spring comes and everything blooms. By May, he feels his old self again and meets an elderly frog named Gower Glackens who was swept away in the flood too.

Abel sculpts a statue of Gower who announces it is a masterpiece and says Abel has found his vocation. In June, much to Abel's despair, Gower swims back home. In July, there is a drought which lowers the river level. Abel swims back to his side of the river and spends a whole day walking to Mossville, his town. He sees Amanda on a bench, but decides to go home and wash up first before talking to her.

At home, he washes and dresses. He leaves the scarf on the entryway table. Amanda comes in, sees the scarf and screams out for Abel. They embrace as Abel says he has brought back her scarf.



1 and 2

1 and 2 Summary

Abel's Island by William Steig focuses on Abel, a wealthy mouse who is newly married. He gets swept away in a great flood and lives on an island for a year.

Chapter 1

It is August 1907 and two mice named Abel and Amanda are newlyweds. They live in town, but go on a picnic in the woods. The sky is a bit overcast, but Abel does not think the weather will be inconsiderate to them. During their outing, they have caviar and champagne and play croquet. Amanda relaxes by reading a book while Abel takes a walk. He finds a daisy and cuts it down to serve as a parasol for Amanda. All of sudden, rain pours and wind tears the daisy from Abel's grasp. He and Amanda huddle under his jacket. They head for home, but they do not make progress against the wind. They hear voices say "look up" so they do. They see animals peering out of a cave and go up to join them.

Chapter 2

The cave is full of cold wet animals, including several mice and toads they know. Everyone else is a stranger. The storm rages and turns into a hurricane. Abel and Amanda stand in the opening of the cave to look out. Amanda's gauze scarf comes undone and floats into the storm. Abel chases after it. Amanda screams for him. Before he knows it, he is caught in a monsoon. He hangs onto a nail that sticks out of a fragmented board. He stuffs Amanda's scarf into his pocket and buries his head into his blazer. The board moves and shoots downward into a waterfall. There is a thump. Abel no longer moves. He is cold, drenched and exhausted, but he still holds onto the nail. He worries about Amanda, but realizes she is safe in the cave. He thinks it is a strange experience, but he is able to sleep curled up around the nail as rain and wind pummel him.

1 and 2 Analysis

Abel and Amanda are newlyweds who seem to live a happy and simple life. They appear to be wealthy because they eat caviar and drink champagne. However, the first year of marriage is always tough. Thus, the storm represents the first year of married life. Though Abel and Amanda are wealthy and happy, they must be able to endure the ups and downs of marriage. The storm is their first tribulation as husband and wife. If they endure this trial, then they will succeed as a married couple.

Amanda's scarf symbolizes the catalyst for change. Their marriage seems perfectly happy until the scarf floats away. The scarf presents their first big problem. It is what changes their relationship as Abel and Amanda are now separated. Abel does catch the

scarf, but it is too late; he is in danger in an unknown place. Without the scarf serving as a catalyst, this major conflict would have never happened.



3 and 4

3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3

Abel sleeps for 14 hours. He wakes up startled, forgetting where he is. It is mid-afternoon and the weather is beautiful. He lies on the upper branch of a tree, which was submerged in the river the day before. The river returns to a normal level. The tree is in the middle of the river, so Abel is on an island. When the water level falls more, he can go down the tree. He wishes Amanda was with him. He screams hello, but no one responds. His usually prim and proper clothes are a mess. He believes others will worry about him, but how will they begin to find him? When Abel returns home, he will have a story to tell. Out of hunger, he nibbles on a cherry birch twig and then on a green chute. He believes he has the bravery, intelligence and strength to survive this ordeal. He goes to sleep once again.

Chapter 4

Abel wakes up in the morning feeling like a new mouse. He looks down to see the tree is on an incline. On his tree, he can see the river and waterfall above him and decides he must go home. Amanda will enjoy this story. He starts to think of how to get off the island. He is not strong enough to swim, so he needs a boat of some kind. He uses his nail and fragmented board as a boat and adds a rudder, or steering mechanism. While he works, he misses Amanda because they have not been apart since their wedding day. He tests out the boat, but it hits a rock and ends up in the water. He grabs onto a low-hanging leaf to keep from drowning.

Next he proudly designs a sailboat from tough grass and tree bark. He goes against his proper behavior and gnaws at the wood because it is faster than using his penknife. Abel uses some of the gauze shawl to make a mast. In a favorable breeze, he launches the ship and it collapses as his jacket and shipwreck float down the river. Next he builds a catamaran with two oars, but the river takes the oars. Abel is back on the rock, feeling hopeless.

3 and 4 Analysis

Abel slowly starts to turn his motivations to survival. Usually he lives a comfortable life, but now he must learn to survive on his own. Originally from a rich family, Abel has a long way until he is an outdoorsman, but his motivations for survival take over. For example, he usually eats caviar and champagne, but to survive, he nibbles on cherry birch and a green chute. His three attempts to make boats display his motivation to survive the river and leave the deserted island. However, Abel is stranded. This foreshadows that Abel must let his survival instincts take over in order to survive fully on this island.



In these two chapters, Abel starts to leave the mindset of civilization. His jacket floating down the river symbolizes this. Slowly, but surely, civilization leaves Abel. For instance, he stops using his penknife because he realizes how much time it takes to build the boats. In an uncivilized manner, he gnaws on the wood to sculpt the ships. As he distances himself from the civilized world, he becomes more of a survivor and a mouse who has a chance of surviving in the wilderness.



5 and 6

5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5

Abel sits on the rock as his catamaran collapses. Marooned on an island, he realizes he is nowhere near civilization. He thinks, how do rivers get crossed besides boats? Tunnels and bridges are two ways, but tunnels can flood and collapse. For Abel to die and never be found would be tragic because he is a great noble. He decides to make a bridge of some sort, yet it is impossible with the materials he has at his disposal. Exploring the island that day, he sees the rocks, trees, bushes and grass. They are extraordinary, but this adventure has been forced upon him because he wishes to be home with Amanda, his loving wife, his books, paintings and his other luxurious possessions. He will have to stay another night on the island, which has an abundance of edible plants. For dinner, Abel has wild carrots. His jacket and handkerchief floated away in the river, but he has Amanda's scarf, which he presses against his face to smell her scent. He cries out of fear of not leaving the island. He sees his personal star in the east, which his childhood nanny pointed out to him. The star can tell him what to do. He dreams of Amanda and falling.

Chapter 6

Abel thinks it is not an accident he is on the island. Maybe he is a bad person—a frivolous and silly person. He will not harbor a grudge against the river and accepts this situation. It is his third morning. With durable blades of crab grass, he starts to build a bridge. Braiding and weaving for hours, he thinks about Amanda and that no one will find him. By evening, he has woven enough rope to cross the river, but he is too tired and does not know what is on the other side. He finds a hollowed out log, ideal for protection against predators, and falls asleep inside it.

5 and 6 Analysis

The personal star symbolizes guidance. Abel needs guidance in order to survive the island and since no one is there with him, he must find his own guidance. The star will tell him what to do and Abel believes in that. The star alludes to the Bible story of the three wise men who see the star of Bethlehem and use it as guide to go to newborn Baby Jesus. As the wise men use the star's guidance, so will Abel.

In another allusion to the Bible, Abel is a Biblical name. He is the son of Adam and Eve. His brother Cain murdered him. Thus, Abel is viewed as the first martyr while Cain is viewed as the first evil. It is interesting that William Steig, the author, chooses to name his main character Abel because this name is strongly associated with religion. This foreshadows that the character of Abel may have to be a martyr at some point in the story. His martyrdom may aid in his survival on the island.



7 and 8

7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7

Abel works on his bridge. He will use his suspenders as a slingshot and shoot his braided rope across the river. He tries it, but it does not work. He gets upset, but he tries it again to no avail. He pulls the rope in, not knowing what else to do. He gets the idea to make stepping stones to walk across the river. After amassing a huge pile of rocks, he goes to sleep. The next morning he tries to make the stepping stones, but they are not big enough and other parts of the river are even deeper. Every night he sleeps in the log, which becomes half home, half hotel. It is a dry place when he needs it. Wearing her scarf, Abel thinks of Amanda constantly and of his friends and family.

Chapter 8

It is September and Abel thinks up a scheme to catapult himself across the river. He tries to fling himself with a rope and by bending a sapling to the ground, but he only flings himself a little bit. After his failed catapult attempt, he makes a fire of white smoke, which serves as a smoke signal. Abel learns to cook various vegetables and make thin bowls out of clay. He floats a bowl down the river with a note in it. The note is addressed to his wife, asking whoever finds it to please forward it to Amanda. He describes his location by the birch tree and tells Amanda not to worry, but to send help. He climbs to the top of the birch tree to see if anyone comes, but no one does. September becomes rainy, so Abel uses the log for shelter, lying down on Amanda's scarf. Abel knows Amanda dreams the same dreams as he.

7 and 8 Analysis

The scarf symbolizes Abel's touch point to his old life. He once had a civilized life with riches and a loving wife. However, this is all gone. He must accept the fact he lives on an abandoned island and he is all alone. Abel is not ready to entirely give up his old life as he clings onto Amanda's scarf, wearing it and lying atop of it. He simply cannot let go of the Abel he once was.

The log represents Abel's new life. This home is a departure from his old life, in which Abel had lived in a fancy home. On the island, he dwells in a hollowed out log. Some parts of the log are rotted. It is a dark place that serves as the simplest shelter possible. There are no luxuries; instead the log serves as protection against predators and shelter from the rain. Like Abel's new life, the log is there for survival purposes. Abel must accept this is his new home and if he does, he will learn to accept his new life.



9 and 10

9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9

Abel begins to send Amanda mind messages, in which he projects his thoughts to her. He believes Amanda hears him and in turn, she responds with loving messages. Abel convinces himself he can fly by using a leaf as a hang glider, but it only works for a second then he falls. Sometimes he feels really happy because he prances on the rocks and the trees since he is in the prime of his life. In late September, he begins to worry about the upcoming winter so he stores acorns, green nuts and wildflower seeds in his log. The red clay from which he makes bowls and dishes inspires him to sculpt life-size statues. He works very hard at sculpting and makes statues of Amanda, his mother, father, brothers and sisters. The leaves changing color signifies October, which is a beautiful month. Abel gathers more food.

In November, the dry leaves fall on the ground. Abel explores the island before winter. On the eastern shore, he finds a huge watch with a chain and an enormous book, left behind by a large creature who picnicked on the island. The book is named Sons and Daughters. Abel visits again to read the book. It is about a masquerade ball. The characters are bears. The book will entertain Abel, so he reads a chapter each day.

Chapter 10

Every morning Abel goes to the book and reads about the masked ball. The bear characters discuss the possibility of war. The main bear is in love with a beautiful lady bear. The book makes Abel sad for a normal life, but he continues to read. He covers up the book after reading it, so no one sees it.

Abel makes clay tablets with his name and arrows pointing in the direction of where he lives. In case rescuers come to find him, they will know where he is. Abel gets used to nature, but he still likes the ticking of the watch because it reminds him of civilization. He sends up smoke signals occasionally, climb trees, reads, works on his sculptures and relaxes.

One day, Abel is outside and an owl swoops down to get him. Abel goes between two rocks and stays there, frozen with fear. The owl stays atop the rocks. Abel pops out of the rocks and runs, but the owl catches him in his beak and carries him up in the air. With a penknife, he slashes at the owl's feet, who screams and drops him. Abel runs back to his log and covers up the openings with rocks. The entire night the owl perches atop the log. At first Abel is terrified, but then he gets annoyed because he wants to go out. Once daylight comes, Abel goes out, but he feels wary for a long time after, even though the owl sleeps during the day.



9 and 10 Analysis

The plot line of the large book foreshadows what happens in Abel's real life. For example, the bear characters discuss the impending war. Abel has his own war when he fights off the large predator, the owl. He must use a weapon, a penknife, to physically harm the owl. Therefore, Abel fights his own little war and wins. The main bear character is in love with the lady bear. This symbolizes Abel's unending love for Amanda. He is the warrior, like the bear soldier, and Amanda is his great love.

Abel's new life on the island reverts him back to his primal self: a field mouse. In his old life, Abel was a great noble of mouse society. He had fine things and lived in a civilized manner. On the island, he is just a field mouse. He eats like a mouse, storing seeds and nuts for the winter. He runs in the field and up and down the trees, like a normal mouse. He even fights off birds, as an everyday mouse would do. Abel begins to discover himself in this primal state. He is an artist, since he makes sculptures, and he feels he is in the prime of his mouse life. The primal state shows Abel as a survivor and competent character. However, he still longs for his civilized self as the ticking of the watch reminds him of civilization. He also reads and misses his wife very much. Thus, Abel is in a Catch-22 between his civilized life and the primal life he has on the island.



11 and 12

11 and 12 Summary

Chapter 11

It is November. Everything is gray and drab in nature. Abel is not sure he is well-prepared for winter. He has a gray brown feather that he thinks is the owl's feather, which makes him feel powerful over the bird. Abel mutters a poem, citing the owl will never get him. He casts a spell over the owl. His thoughts go back to Amanda. For his winter clothes, he weaves a cape with a hood out of tough grass. He stores mushrooms, seeds and berries for winter, creating an abundant storage and making him feel better. He thinks about why God makes horrible creatures like owls and snakes and ponders killing the owl.

Chapter 12

In December, Abel begins to talk to himself. Usually, he talks to himself internally, but now he does it aloud. He addresses Amanda's statue as if it is really her. The first snowfall is very deep, but he still goes to the eastern shore of the island to read Chapter 19 of the big book. The bear characters fight during winter in the worst part of the war; many have been wounded or killed. This makes Abel wonder about civilization. For example, the owl seems uncivilized. After reading the book, Abel has an encounter with the owl, but Abel stabs him with his spear. The owl rips his grass cape then perches on a tree branch. Out of anger, Abel throws up his spear, but it stabs the branch. The owl descends and chases Abel around the tree. Abel runs faster than the owl can fly around the tree. They reverse direction and the owl sits down from exhaustion. Abel leaves.

December grows colder, so Abel tears the book's margins to fill in the crevices of his doorway. Cold barrels through the log anyway.

11 and 12 Analysis

Abel reads the large book. The bear characters fight in a brutal winter war. It makes Abel think about civilization and how the owl, a creature who kills, seems uncivilized. He ponders killing the owl at first. This war story foreshadows how Abel must make a decision about his enemy, the owl. Will he kill the bird, like the bear characters kill each other, or leave it alone? This awakening about civilization changes Abel's motivation. At first, he wants to kill or hurt the owl with his spear, but when the owl sits from exhaustion, Abel simply walks away without killing him. Abel remains a civilized mouse when he does this. Unlike the bear characters, he chooses the high road and lets the owl live.



13 and 14

13 and 14 Summary

Chapter 13

There is a great blizzard in January, so Abel stays buried deep inside the log. He does not know day from night because he sleeps most of the time. He goes into his little store room to eat and then goes back to sleep. Eventually the sun comes and there is an occasional thaw. Abel sees the light of the sun, which is beautiful to him. Everything looks marvelous. February comes, but Abel still puts on his snowshoes and goes to read the big book. Captain Burin, the bear character, has been wounded, which is a signal for Abel. Will he live through the winter? He decides he is going to live because spring will come.

It is only February though, and unfortunately, January was only a prelude to February. It becomes colder and the snowfall is heavier. Abel stays in the log, shivering and freezing. He has a month-long hibernation, without sun and without escape. Abel is miserable and starts to get sick in a week. He begins to resent Amanda, saying that she is flaky because she let the scarf go. If she had not, he would be at home in front of a fireplace with soup and Amanda kissing him. How can he go on having these feelings for those he remembers? Misery overtakes him. Everything is sad and dreary. It is hard to have faith and believe his family is still out there.

Chapter 14

Sometime in March, Abel thaws. Two crocuses, or flowers, bloom out of the snow. He listens to the ticking of the watch. There are sunny days, but it is terribly cold at night. The snow melts and Abel finishes reading the book after a few more visits. At night, he finds his star in the sky, happy to see it. He communicates again with Amanda.

In May, everything blooms: flowers, plants and grass. Abel feels much better. He sees an elderly frog walking toward him. His name is Gower Glackens and he asks Abel who he is and where they are. Abel explains they are on the island and his name is Abel. Gower had gotten lost in the flood too. Gower asks if there is any post office or town around to which Abel says no and tells him his whole story. Gower is shocked and knows his own family is very worried. They go back to Abel's log and Gower drinks his wine.

13 and 14 Analysis

The changing of seasons represents the mental states of Abel. When it was sunny and warm in the summer, Abel was happy, feeling he was in the prime of his life. As the winter approaches, he goes into survival mode and feels a great sadness upon him. He begins to question things, such as if he will survive and Amanda's behavior. The small



bits of sun are his only escape from depression. But as February comes, Abel's mental state turns into misery. It reflects the weather outside because February is freezing and dreary. Everything is dead and so is Abel since he barely lives in his log. Once the spring comes, Abel begins to feel more alive as the flowers, trees and plants bloom. He is able to go outside again and enjoy his connection to nature. As the months become warmer, Abel's depression lifts.

Abel experiences the ultimate joy of spring as he meets a new friend, Gower Glackens, who seems to be in the same position as Abel. After months of hardship, Abel has a new friend and someone with whom to share his experiences. Spring often represents rebirth, especially in the Biblical story of Jesus rising from the dead on Easter. Abel not only experiences a rebirth in mental state, but he has a rebirth in friendship. He finally finds a companion.



15 and 16

15 and 16 Summary

Chapter 15

Abel and Gower remain together until June, becoming fast friends. Abel suggests Gower carries a rope across the river for him, but Gower says that does not make sense. The river spans thousands of lily pads long and he is not as young as he used to be. Abel reminds Gower he must get in touch with Amanda when he returns home. But Gower always forgets things because he is a frog. Frogs go into instant hibernation when their body temperature drops. It is similar to a comatose state. Gower plays a fiddle in an orchestra, has great-grandchildren by the dozen and an old wife. She and Gower fight constantly, then forget, then try to remember why they are angry. Gower asks Abel about his job, but Abel's mother takes care of him. He is from a rich family. It makes Abel sad to think about his family and how charming and sweet Amanda is.

When Gower is in his reptilian hibernation, he can catch flies with his tongue. This impresses Abel, but disgusts him too. Abel completes a perfect representation of Gower, who announces it is a work of art and Abel finds his vocation as an artist.

Chapter 16

The river is calmer so Gower will swim back to his family. Abel gets upset, not wanting him to go. Abel makes Gower promise he will get in touch with Amanda. Gower promises, but Abel knows he forgets everything. They both agree it was a great honor to meet each other. As Gower swims off, Abel sits alone on a stone and cries. He sees the star and says he is lonesome. The star replies it is lonely too.

15 and 16 Analysis

Even though Abel and Gower are different creatures, they seem to relate to one another. There are vast differences between the two, the biggest one being Gower's hibernation state. The hibernation is involuntary because Gower cannot control it. This hibernation is different from Abel's winter hibernation which was controlled by Abel. In Abel's hibernation, he is miserable and dreary. Gower's hibernation is a blank state in which he forgets everything. Both creatures must go into some sort of hibernation state to think about their lives and what is important to them. The hibernation represents a state of deep thought and true meaning.

When Gower leaves, the star serves as Abel's friend. It turns from a source of guidance, as the reader sees in the previous chapters, to companionship. It is comforting to Abel, similar to Amanda's shawl, which also comforts him. The star comes out at night and shines brightly, helping Abel through his loneliness.



17 and 18

17 and 18 Summary

Chapter 17

As summer continues, Abel waits for Gower's rescue crew, but it never comes. Abel makes food, sculpts plants, draws, swims and takes walks, but still no one comes. He is sure Gower forgot about him. During July, it is very hot and there has not been rain in many weeks. The river becomes shallower. Abel thinks about risking swimming across. He climbs the cherry birch tree and ties the scarf around it. He misses Amanda so much.

On one day of the drought, it is fierce and burning. The dry land soaks up any last bits of water. On another morning, it is August. The sky is dark with clouds. A few drops of rain fall, but it is quickly absorbed by the dry earth. He decides it is now or never to swim across the river. He starts to get sad because the island has been his home for a year. It has taught him things and brought him food and warmth. With great sadness, he says goodbye to the island.

Chapter 18

Abel flings himself into the river. He swims as best he can. When he is exhausted, he climbs atop a rock, lays his body out and rests. Abel does the best he can to get across the river. Finally, his feet touch bottom and he walks to the shore. He comes out of the water and touches the shoreline. He lies on the ground, announcing he is a free mouse. When he swims upstream, he thinks about his year on the island and if Amanda will be home. Have things changed? If she believes him to be dead, maybe she married someone else? He sees the island from afar, including his beloved cherry birch tree. The images will stay with him forever. He finds shelter in a jagged rock and falls asleep. When he wakes a cat stares him in the face.

17 and 18 Analysis

As Abel leaves the island, he leaves his primal self. He swims back to civilization, but upon doing so, he gets very sad. The island had been like a mother to him, providing warmth and food. He loves the island and all the unexpected treasures. Like a mother, the island teaches him many things. He has learned how to cook, sculpt and be successful in nature. Most of all, he has learned how to be a survivor. He survives a year on the island, quite a feat for a wealthy mouse from a noble family. Abel leaves his humble life since his motivation is to return to his civilized life. He wants to see Amanda again. It is time to return home.

As mentioned in previous analysis, the name Abel is a Biblical reference to Abel, the first martyr. The mouse Abel is a martyr too. Abel sacrificed his well-being to go after

Amanda's scarf, a very unselfish act. In doing so, he put himself in danger and lasted a year on the island. Though he was not killed like the real Abel, mouse Abel puts himself in serious danger in order to survive and finally return home.



19 and 20

19 and 20 Summary

Chapter 19

Abel does not move out of sheer terror. He cannot get to his feet. The cat seizes the moment and lunges at him. She now has Abel dangling precariously in her mouth. He feels the dagger-like teeth of the cat's hold as she holds him by the furry skin of his back. The cat trots off in a very decisive way as Abel thinks about his luck. Had he gone through a year on the island and the hardship of swimming across the river to be eaten by a cat? Amanda and his family may never see him again. He cannot fathom not seeing home again. He cannot understand how life can be so cruel. The cat finally drops him on the ground and pounces. The cat traps Abel under her paw and lifts the paw up. Abel remains frozen for reasons he is not sure of. Either he loses his mouse instinct, has great fear and no hope or he plays dead. The cat swipes at him, launching him in the air and Abel runs off. The cat pursues him and puts him in her mouth again. This seems like a game to her. Abel begins to bleed.

Abel is now curious about the cat's next move. They play a game of cat and mouse, which seems to entertain the cat. Abel runs toward a tree, running up the branches. The cat runs after him, but slips once. He is atop the tree on a thin branch, suited for his light body weight. The cat cannot climb up this far, but waits in the tree. At that moment, Abel realizes the cat is being a cat and he must be a mouse. The cat leaps for him and he bends a twig, which sends the cat flying. She hits branches on the way down, screaming in pain. She thuds as she hits the ground.

Abel stays in the tree and sleeps. He awakes in the morning to find Mt. Eunice in the northwest and a fire observatory. He knows where he is. He must travel northward to his home of Mossville. He should be there in less than a day. He runs down the tree, excited about seeing Amanda.

Chapter 20

By late afternoon, Abel arrives at the place where he had been swept away in the flood last year. He wonders if Amanda will be home and happy to see him. He reaches the edge of town at nightfall, observing Glover Park where townsfolk stroll and children play. It is civilized society. He sees Amanda sitting on a bench. He restrains himself from going to her. He has waited a year; he can wait a bit longer. He takes his house keys from deep inside his pocket and goes to his house.

At home, he washes up and dresses in his best clothes. He puts the scarf on the entrance hall for Amanda to see as she enters. He lies down on the sofa. She comes in and screams, "Abel! Oh, dear Abel! It's you! It's really, really you!" (Chapter 20, p. 117). They cover each other with kisses. Abel says he has brought the scarf back to her.



19 and 20 Analysis

The cat symbolizes the last obstacle Abel must overcome in order to return home. In life there are many obstacles, even when a person believes they are "home free." One must be aware and on guard at all times of the potential challenges of life. Abel overcomes the challenge of the cat by simply being himself. She is being a cat, so he simply acts like a mouse. The wealthy Abel from a year ago probably would have died in this showdown, but Abel summons his primal mouse self from his year of living on the island. He outsmarts the cat and wins the challenge. This shows how far Abel has grown from his year on the island.

When Abel arrives in Mossville, he does not immediately immerse himself back into civilized society. He needs time. Instead of talking to Amanda immediately, he goes back to his house. Symbolically, he finds his house keys, the entrance into the civilized world. He must go through a ritual of bathing and dressing properly to be accepted back into this society. Once he does, Abel feels like himself again, lying down on his expensive couch. This time before Amanda comes home allows Abel to reintegrate into civilized society at his own pace, in his own time. His decision is a good one because Amanda is happy to see him and they are a couple once again.



Characters

Abel

Abel is a rich mouse. He comes from nobility so he loves the good life. He drinks champagne and eats caviar. He has fine clothes, a nice house and other luxurious possessions. Amanda, his wife, is closest to his heart though. His adoration for her carries him through the year of living on the island. When the flood sweeps Abel away, he lands on the deserted island. At first, he makes many attempts to get off. Abel will not give up. But then pragmatism sets in and he realizes he cannot leave for the time being. Abel slowly changes from a rich, spoiled mouse to a regular field mouse. He gnaws at wood to build things. He eats wild plants, fruits and vegetables and lives in a hollowed out log. On the island, Abel returns to his primal state as a simple mouse.

The weather controls Abel's mental states. For example, in summer, he feels he is in the prime of his life as he runs and jumps. When winter comes, he hibernates, becoming depressed, even ill as he spends a month in his log. When spring comes, Abel feels himself again, content with his life.

For his entire life, Abel is a rich mouse. His mother pays for everything, even though he is married. On the island, he becomes an artist, sculpting life-size statues out of red clay. Abel finds his vocation as an artist and discovers the artistic part of him. The year on the island opens up Abel to explore new things and find the survivor and artistic parts of himself. When he leaves the island, he is a new mouse, well-rounded and educated in hardship.

Gower Glackens

Gower Glackens is an elderly frog. The flood sweeps him away, just like Abel. Gower is a grandfather and has dozens of great-grandchildren. He knows they worry about him. He also has a wife with whom he constantly fights. Because Gower is a frog, he goes into instant states of hibernation when his body temperature drops. It is similar to a comatose state. Thus, he forgets everything before it. Gower frustrates Abel because he cannot remember anything Abel says. Gower's forgetfulness is his downfall.

Gower is friendly and enjoys spending time with Abel. He spends a whole month on the island, but he misses his family very much. Though he is forgetful, he can remember his family. It is the one thing that sticks in his mind. Before leaving the island, he and Abel discuss their vocations. Gower plays the fiddle in an orchestra, thus he is musically inclined. He points out to Abel that his statues are works of art and that Abel finds his vocation. Gower is like a father figure to Abel in this way, guiding him in the right direction. He also points out to Abel that he must return home for the sake of his family, despite Abel's loneliness. It is like a father leaving a child for the first time. Gower leaves



the island, promising to find Amanda, but he forgets. The reader assumes Gower returns to his family, happy to be patriarch.

Amanda

Amanda is Abel's newlywed wife. She is loving and sweet. When Abel returns, she is overcome with joy.

Mice

The mice in the cave are freezing from being caught in the storm. They know Abel and Amanda.

Family of Toads

The family of toads in the cave knows Abel and Amanda from a carnival they had all attended.

Weasel

The weasel in the cave sits in a corner and prays.

Abel's mother

Abel's mother is indulgent and rich. Abel inherits his wealth from her.

Abel's father

Abel's father is aloof, honest, proud, stern and strong.

Owl

The owl tries to eat Abel and then chases after him. He is relentless in his pursuit until Abel exhausts him.

Cat

The cat plays a game of cat and mouse with Abel. She chases after him, giving him head starts. But in the end, Abel outsmarts her.



Objects/Places

Parasol

A parasol is a type of umbrella that ladies use for shade.

Amanda's Scarf

Amanda's scarf is made of gauze. It floats away in the storm. Abel catches it and during his year on the island, it reminds him of Amanda and his old life. He also uses the scarf as a pillow, blanket and mast for a boat.

Rudder

A rudder is the steering mechanism of a boat.

Catamaran

A Catamaran is a sort of boat.

Abel's Personal Star

Abel's personal star is the star his nanny pointed out to him in childhood. He asks it a question and it answers back.

Parabola

A parabola is a mathematical term for a U-shaped curve.

Log

The hollowed out log serves as Abel's home on the island. It keeps Abel safe from predators. He stores food in it and spends most of the winter in the log.

The Island

The island is where Abel spends a year of his life. It provides warmth and food, such as vegetables, fruit and plants. The weather turns the island into a sunny and happy place in warm weather or a dreary, miserable place in winter.



Mossville

Mossville is Abel's hometown. He returns to Mossville at the end of the book, seeing the townsfolk stroll in the park.

Large Book

The large book was left by a large creature on the island. Abel reads a chapter each day. The book is about bear characters that fight in war.



Themes

Civilization

One of the major themes of this book is civilization. Abel is a rich mouse from a noble family. He lives in the ultimate civilized society as he drinks champagne and eats caviar. He is used to the good life. However, when the flood sweeps him away, he leaves civilized society and lands on the deserted island. On the island, he slowly breaks away from his civilized life. For example, to build things, he starts to gnaw at wood. This is uncivilized to him at first, but then he realizes how much faster it is to gnaw than to use his penknife. Abel also begins to eat directly from nature. He eats raw nuts, berries and plants. Before the winter sets in, he scavenges for food, storing it in his hollowed out log for winter. Perhaps the biggest departure from civilization is Abel's log, which is rotting in certain parts yet serves as his home from predators. It is not about being civilized anymore. Pragmatism takes over so Abel can survive a year on the island.

However, Abel longs for civilization at some points. He loves to hear the ticking of the watch, which literally reminds him of civilization. He reads the large book to entertain himself and keep his brain active. He holds onto the scarf, a symbol of his love for Amanda and his old life. He dreams of being in his living room by a warm fireplace with Amanda kissing him. Finally, when Abel returns to Mossville, he cannot directly reenter civilized society. Instead, he enters at his own pace. He showers and dresses and awaits for Amanda to come home. He needs this ritual in order to become civilized again. In the end, Abel returns to civilization and it is where he belongs.

Survival

One of the major themes of this book is survival. Abel must survive a year on the island, but as a rich mouse, he does not have the skills at first. Abel must learn to be a survivor. In the first days, he tries to build boats, a bridge and catapult himself off the island. Nothing works. He realizes he will be staying for a long time, thus he must learn survival skills. He starts by eating seeds, nuts and berries. He scavenges food and learns to cook by fire. With the fire, he also sends up smoke signals to no avail. Upon building things, he uses a penknife, but when he realizes that gnawing is better, he uses his teeth. His home is a hollowed out log, a domicile safe from predators. It is rotted in certain parts, but for Abel, it is not about having a nice home. Everything depends on survival now.

As the winter comes, Abel stores nuts, seeds and other food in his log. He plugs up the openings of the log with rocks and margins of the large book's pages to keep out the cold. He sews a cape with a hood for himself out of tough grass. During the winter, he burrows in the log, freezing and depressed. He hibernates as a means of survival. The winter shows how Abel has acquired survival skills because he makes it through the brutal winter. When spring comes, he is able to go outside again and see the sunshine.



He is a happy mouse, who has survived the winter. Besides fighting the elements, Abel also outsmarts two predators, an owl and a cat, proving he is truly a survivor.

Primal Nature

One of the major themes of this book is primal nature. Abel discovers his primal nature during his year on the island. He normally is a rich mouse used to luxuries. But on the island, he must return to his primal, field mouse ways. This is a major departure for Abel because he is used to fine things such as champagne and caviar. But when he realizes he must survive, he regresses to his primal nature as a mouse. A mouse is a small creature often eaten by large predators. Mice do not generally have long lives. Therefore, to survive, Abel must summon his mouse instincts. For example, when he chooses a home, he picks the hollowed out log. Normally, this would be poverty for him, but in his primal nature, Abel sees the log as a perfect domicile. It is safe from predators. He can store food for the winter and plug up the openings with rocks to keep him safe. Another example is when Abel gnaws on wood to build things. He is shocked at first by how uncivilized it is, but then his primal nature takes over and he understands it is much faster to gnaw.

His primal nature comes out when fighting predators. The first predator is an owl that relentlessly chases Abel. The owl even sits atop Abel's log at night. Abel dodges the owl and escapes to the safety of his log, just like a regular mouse would do. The cat plays a game of cat and mouse with him. Abel realizes she is just being a cat, so he must act like a mouse. He runs up a tree and smacks a branch at her, which sends her screaming to the ground. Abel uses his mouse instincts to fight off both predators, since he has tapped into his primal nature.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the book is third person. This point of view is reliable, proven by the fact that the narrator knows the actions of the events on which Abel reports and the observations he makes about the island. The point of view is important to the book because a major aspect of the book is the emotional growth and development of the main character, Abel. There could not be the dramatic impact of this growth and development if the reader could not see into Abel's thoughts and most personal fears. Abel is a mouse who must survive alone on an island. He does not have much dialogue, so the point of view gives the reader a deep look into Abel's mind. The point of view is a close third person because Abel deals with intense emotions such as depression and loneliness when surviving the year on the island.

The story is told mostly through exposition with some dialogue when Abel speaks with Amanda at the beginning and end of the book and Gower Glackens, an elderly frog who comes upon the island. The passages have some description and they are short, but they do give a personal look into Abel's fears and development from rich mouse to survivor mouse. This method is most likely used in order to keep the reader focused on Abel. He spends the book surviving the seasons on the island. The reader must see the experience of survival through Abel's eyes to understand the full scope of his experience. The reader would be lost if s/he is not privy to Abel's thoughts. The reader feels the emotional pull of loneliness, depression and happiness along with Abel.

Setting

The setting of the book is a deserted island on a river. The island is full of plants and trees, including a cherry birch tree that is Abel's favorite. He climbs atop the tree and looks out onto the river. On the island, there is an abundance of food such as green chutes, fruit, nuts and seeds. The island provides the bark of trees for Abel to build things. It also has red clay for Abel to sculpt his statues. These life-size statues stand erect and are replicas of Amanda and his family. Abel lives in a hollowed out log. It is rotting in some parts, but it is a safe home, especially against predators. Abel blocks off the openings of the log with rocks.

On the eastern shore of the island, there is a large book and a ticking watch. The book is named Sons and Daughters. Abel reads from it everyday, covering it up afterwards with leaves. The ticking watch with a chain reminds him of civilization. The island can either be happy in the warm months or a dreary, miserable place in the cold months. The river surrounds the island. The rapids are fierce, not allowing Abel to swim back home. But when the summer drought comes, the rapids calm and Abel can swim home. In Mossville, his hometown, he goes to the park and sees the townsfolk strolling. He



returns to his fine house to greet Amanda. The book ends in Abel's house in a civilized setting.

Language and Meaning

The language of this book tends to be informal. The sentences are constructed in a manner that is common to everyday people, yet the book is about a mouse and is set in 1907. The sentences follow the complex rules of grammar. Slang is not used. Abel, the main character, does not have much dialogue because he is alone most of the time. When he thinks, he uses everyday language to express his thoughts and emotions. There are difficult vocabulary words interspersed throughout the text. The language adds a depth to the book that allows the reader a glimpse into the dangers and survival methods of living on the island for an entire year.

The language of the book tends to characterize the refined culture of Abel, a refined mouse. In other words, Abel speaks and thinks like a highly educated human. When the elderly frog Gower Glackens comes along, his language sounds simpler compared to Abel's language. The reader can tell from Gower's language, he is a much simpler creature than Abel.

Most of the book is told in exposition. There is not a lot of dialogue. The focus tends to be on the island and the seasons of the island. Weather is also an important element to the book. The language displays how important weather is to Abel and his survival. When talking about the weather, the language expresses heightened joy or extreme tragedy.

Structure

The book is comprised of 20 chapters, each approximately seven pages long. Each chapter has a number. The chapters tend to be normal length for a children's book and have short passages of description. Within the chapters are illustrations of ongoing events. Short amounts of time pass in a few paragraphs. Larger spans of time pass in between chapters; for example, one chapter takes place in March and the next chapter takes place in May. The time line of the book consists of Abel's life during his year on the island. Abel reports the most interesting or important events to him as he survives a year in the wilderness.

The plot of the book is fairly simple and without subplots. The book is about Abel, a rich mouse, who gets swept away by a flood and ends up on a deserted island. Abel must survive a year on the island alone, fighting off predators and harsh weather.

The book's pace is fast due to the author's use of short passages and short chapters. The dialogue is quick and to the point. The book is an easy read and the plot engrosses the reader into the world of survival on the island. The story line is linear with a few quick memories of Amanda and his family. There are no long sections of back story. The book is quite easy to read and entertains as a whole.

Quotes

"All he could do was wait and learn what its whims were." Chapter 2, p. 10

"How long could it last? How long, he wondered, could he abide it?" Chapter 2, p. 11

"It's certainly gotten around that Abelard Hassam di Chirico Flint, of the Mossville Flints, is missing." Chapter 3, p. 14

"You will do what you will do." Chapter 5, p. 32

"He had no use for the time the watch could tell, but he needed the ticking." Chapter 10, p. 60

"The environment didn't seem altogether friendly." Chapter 11, p. 64

"He was going to live; his wounds were healing, thank God." Chapter 13, p. 77

"How deeply one felt when alone." Chapter 13, p. 77

"I think you've found your vocation." Chapter 15, p. 93

"His whole being ached to be with her." Chapter 17, p. 101

"The island had been his home for a full year. It had given him sustenance, guidance, warmth, like a parent." Chapter 17, p. 103

"He was a free mouse." Chapter 18, p. 106



Topics for Discussion

How is survival portrayed in this book? How does Abel survive physically and emotionally during his year on the island? What is the toughest survival skill Abel must learn?

What does this book say about love? Who does Abel love the most? What about the island does Abel love? Does he discover a different kind of love on the island?

How is civilization portrayed? Is it good or bad? Is civilization better or worse than the island? Explain your answers.

How does weather control Abel's mental state and the island itself? During the difficult months, what realizations does Abel come to while in hibernation? In what type of weather does Abel learn the most about himself and why?

What does the large book represent? How does reading the large book help Abel in self-discovery? What lessons does the book teach him?

What does the river represent? How does Abel feel about the river? How does Gower Glackens feel about it? When Abel crosses the river, what does he realize?

What is the biggest lesson Abel learns on his year on the island? As a reader, what is the biggest lesson you have learned from this book? How do you foresee Abel's life back in civilization? Will he take any of the lessons he learned on the island and apply them to civilized life? Why or why not?