

Bless the Beasts and Children Study Guide

Bless the Beasts and Children by Glendon Swarthout

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Plot Summary

Bless the Beasts and Children by Glendon Swarthout is a coming of age story set in the mid-twentieth century. It portrays a classic quest as a group of six outcast boys from a summer camp go on a journey to rescue a herd of buffalo from being slaughtered.

The story begins with John Cotton, the leader of the group, awaking from a nightmare to discover that one of his friends has gone missing. Lally 2, the youngest of the group, has disappeared. Cotton gathers the rest of the boys, Lally 1 (Lally 2's older brother), Teft, Goodenow and Shecker and goes after Lally 2. When they catch up with him, they learn that Lally 2 has decided to go to free some buffalo before they are slaughtered. The boys had witnessed the part of the culling of the buffalo herd that day, and the experience had traumatized them.

This group of boys are known collectively and derisively as the Bedwetters. They are considered outcasts by the rest of the camp at which they are spending their summer. They have bonded together, however, and all decide to go together to help the buffalo. They sneak out of camp to the nearest town and steal a truck to drive to the buffalo preserve which is two hours away.

On their journey, they have to deal with a pair of youths who threaten to turn them over to the police. Teft drives them off by shooting the tire of their car. Before they reach their destination, the truck runs out of gas, and the boys have to walk the last mile to the preserve, having lost all hope of getting back to camp undetected.

In flashbacks, the reader learns about the broken homes and childhood traumas that have shaped all six of the boys in their formative years. Cotton's mother moves from relationship to relationship without providing her son with a stable home environment. Teft is burdened by the high expectations of his family. Shecker is the son of a famous comedian and habitual gambler who uses his own son as bait for bets. The Lally brothers have been brought up by household staff while their parents have been largely absent.

When they reach the camp, they realize that releasing the buffalo is a tall order, but under Cotton's leadership, they manage to release the massive animals from their pen. Taking another truck, they drive the herd to the boundary fence of the preserve, but they have taken so long to do it that the rangers at the preserve are coming after them. In desperation, Cotton drives the truck through the fence, freeing the buffalo, but sacrificing himself in the process as he drives the truck over the cliff beyond the fence.



Chapters 1 & 2

Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

Bless the Beasts and Children by Glendon Swarthout is a young adult novel centering around a group of outcast boys at a summer camp and their quest to save a herd of buffalo from being slaughtered in mid-1960s Arizona. Intermingling action with flashbacks that deal with the boys' histories, the story draws the reader into the comradeship of the group as they move towards tragedy at the quest's end.

Chapter one begins with a dream. The dreamer is named Cotton. He dreams that he is an animal being herded by men in trucks with guns. Just before a bullet takes Cotton's life, he stares into the face of his shooter. It is his mother. Cotton awakes in a sweat. He is the oldest of the boys in his group at the age of fifteen. Wide awake now, Cotton checks his comrades. Cotton is proud that the boys' situation is better now, at the end of the summer, than it had been before. He credits himself with that. This, however, has been the worst night of the summer. The boys had been traumatized by the day's events and gone straight to bed. Cotton realizes that something is wrong. Lally 2, the younger of the Lally brothers, is missing. Cotton wakes Lally 1, who tells him his brother had planned to hitch into town. Cotton decides that they must all go after Lally 2. He wakes the rest of the boys, Teft, Shecker and Goodenow, and they sneak out after their missing friend.

In chapter two, the boys follow the road out of the box canyon that houses their camp, pursuing Lally 2, who has a half an hour head start on them. They catch up with Lally 2 and spread out to surround him, but Lally 2 sees them and sits down to wait for them. Cotton approaches Lally 2 on his own.

Lally 2 is twelve, the youngest of the group. Cotton reminds Lally 2 that they are a group and they do things together. Lally 2 says that they all ought to go forward, not back. The other boys have been thinking the same thing. Cotton points out that to go on this unnamed quest they'd have to have a mode of transport. Teft volunteers that he can drive. They figure out that they can get to their destination and back in four hours, but Cotton is unsure if the boys are ready. Cotton warns them that this is bigger than anything they have ever done. There is real danger involved.

Cotton is the leader, but he refuses to push this decision. He proposes a vote, saying that the decision has to be unanimous. It is. Cotton is proud of the boys.

Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis

The first section of the novel introduces the six boys at the center of the story, some in greater detail than others. It establishes John Cotton as the group's leader. Cotton is the first character the reader meets, albeit through Cotton's dream. Goodenow and Lally 2 are the other two boys whose back stories are touched on in these early chapters,



though the reader can correctly assume that later chapters will flesh out the other boys' stories.

Cotton has a strong personality. When the book begins, he has already established his leadership of the group. They are the outcasts of the camp—the boys who nobody else would accept. Cotton's role is not only that of a leader, but of an older brother. He can even be viewed as a savior of the rest of the boys, and this messianic imagery continues throughout the book. The exploits of the group during the summer under Cotton's leadership are hinted at but not truly fleshed out at this stage. Despite his role, however, Cotton is not the catalyst for the coming quest. That role falls to Lally 2, the youngest of the boys.

The action of the story truly begins with Lally 2 leaving, the discovery of which leads the rest of the boys to go after him. There are vague mentions of a traumatizing event that had happened earlier that day that affected all of the boys, but Lally 2 most of all. All of the boys are referred to by their last names, hence Lally 2 is the younger brother of Lally 1. Despite being the youngest, Lally 2 is the most quickly driven to action by the unnamed events that have upset the boys. At the other end of the scale, Goodenow is portrayed as a coward, but even at this stage there are hints of the true strength of his personality. For example, in his initial threat to drown himself, though it is clear he will not go through with it, he has the persistence to stand in the water all day. With each of the boys, the reader is introduced to their surface reputation, but shown their true drives beneath the surface.

Though the boys' trauma is not detailed at this early stage, it can be surmised from Cotton's dream that it has something to do with the slaughter of animals and the betrayal of the boys' authority figures. Cotton dreams that the boys are animals being gunned down by their parents. This, as will be revealed, combines the literal trauma of the annual Arizona buffalo slaughter, which is key to the boys' quest, with their sense of parental abandonment from being sent to a boys' camp where none of them want to be and none of them fit in.

Cotton's primary concern as leader is in keeping the group together. He takes on the responsibility for the group by not allowing Lally 2 to leave alone, but all of the boys have been considering the same thing—their upcoming "quest", and Cotton keeps the group as a unit by insisting on a unanimous vote on whether or not to pursue their goal. It is apparent that he can already guess the outcome of the vote before it happens, but forcing an actual vote serves as a bonding agent to the fragile group.



Chapters 3 & 4

Chapters 3 & 4 Summary

In chapter three, Cotton tells the boys to gather anything they need, but to act quietly and quickly and meet in the truck shed.

In flashback it is revealed that Lally 1 had attempted to send a letter home, against Cotton's orders. Cotton had caught him and torn it up. Lally 1 (Stephen) had retaliated by killing all of the "pets" that the boys had gathered—lizards, spiders and even his brother's crippled jackrabbit.

The boys are all dressed in the camp uniform—blue jackets, wool shirts, tight Levi's and cowboy boots—but each has adopted their own individual headgear. The boys have brought along unnecessary gear. Lally 2 has brought his pillow, Goodenow a buffalo head. The significance of Lally 2's pillow has been hinted at (it acts a kind of security blanket to him) but the significance of the buffalo head is as yet unknown. The boys take a truck and wheel it out of the shed and up the rise of the road, where it gets stuck. They do not dare crank the engine yet for fear of waking up the camp. Cotton refuses to give up on the truck even when the other boys drop out from exhaustion. His stubborn streak will not allow him to give up so easily.

In another flashback, the naming of the camp groups is shown. Five of the six groups are given names of Native American tribes, each with an animal head as a trophy symbol. The groups can make their way up the ranks towards being named the Apaches—the highest honor—thus providing an incentive for working hard and excelling. The weakest group are given a chamber pot and named the Bedwetters. This is Cotton's group.

Cotton finally gives up on the truck. Teft suggests that they ride horses into town and steal a car there. They return the truck to the shed and head for the stables.

Chapter four begins with the boys saddling up the horses. Cotton voices to Teft that he is worried. If they mess up, they will have wrecked the whole summer for themselves. Teft says that the summer is wrecked anyway, unless they succeed in their quest. Teft slips away for a moment, returning with a rifle. The boys ride out of the camp. They are not accomplished riders, but competent enough and the thrill of their illicit ride fires them up.

The boys pause at the exit from the camp, impressed with what they are about to attempt. All the boys are crazy about Western movies, like "The Professionals", which they had seen earlier in the summer. They felt like they were in a Western. With Western cries, they ride out of camp.



Chapters 3 & 4 Analysis

These chapters are filled with anticipation. Until the boys ride out of camp, their actions are little more than the minor misdemeanors inherent to camp life. Elements are introduced that raise questions: why does Goodenow carry the buffalo head that, presumably, is the symbol of the dominant "Apache" group? How does Teft know how to hotwire cars or drive and, presumably, pick locks to get hold of the rifle? The now established format of the book, with flashbacks interspersing the narrative, gives the reader confidence that these questions will be answered in due course.

The failed attempt to take the truck demonstrates the fragility of the group. They are almost defeated by their first obstacle, yet Cotton's sheer force of will is demonstrated by his refusal to give up when everyone else has. Teft emerges as the problem solver of the group, suggesting that they take horses into town before taking a car from there, and foreseeing the need to bring a gun with them. Cotton seems to rely on Teft for confirmation of his decisions, and Teft is the closest thing that Cotton seems to have to a confidante within the group. Even the leader needs to lean on someone from time to time. This brief weakness humanizes Cotton.

It becomes apparent when they pause at the gate that the boys do not fully appreciate the gravity of what they are doing. As might be expected from a group of young teenage boys, the illicit adventure is as much about the thrill as the ultimate goal for these boys. They might have a noble end in mind, but they are playing at being movie cowboys and, coupled, with Cotton's doubts, this creates a sense of foreboding about the whole affair.



Chapters 5 & 6

Chapters 5 & 6 Summary

In chapter five, the boys gallop towards town until the horses start to tire. A flashback details Gerald Goodenow's issues with attachment to his mother and bedwetting. His stepfather is a rival to him and also punishes him for wetting the bed. Goodenow is in therapy for his problems.

The boys argue about what kind of car to steal. Shecker and Lally 1 want to take an impressive car like a Cadillac, but Cotton argues that they need to take something inconspicuous. He explains that they have to avoid any police entanglement. At a cocktail bar, they debate which car to take from the parking lot. Cotton realizes that the bar will close soon, so they can't take any of those cars because it will be quickly missed. They continue on to a motel, but a late arriving guest pulls into the parking lot, blowing their opportunity.

Down the road, they come upon a used car lot. They find the cars are locked and Teft admits that he doesn't know how to break into a car. A police patrol comes past and the boys scatter, but are not caught. Angry and frightened, they turn on Teft. Cotton sees them beginning to come apart. He worries that they are not prepared for what they have decided to do. Cotton gathers the boys in a huddle to "bump". It is a ritual of closeness that they boys have used during the summer to pull together. Teft spies an old truck in a body shop. It is unlocked and Teft is able to jump start it.

Teft had surprised the boys often during the summer. He had freed them from the tyranny of Wheaties, their counselor, by picking the lock to Wheaties' locker and exposing the illicit materials within—alcohol, cigarettes and adult magazines. Teft blackmailed Wheaties and bought the Bedwetters freedom for the summer.

Teft gets the truck started. The boys noisily jump in. Cotton warns them to calm down, reminding them that they are in a stolen car and armed. They carefully drive out of town, taking the main strip, and with all the boys except Teft hiding out of sight.

Chapter six begins with Cotton realizing that time is really tight if they are to reach their goal and return to camp before morning. He tells Teft to drive fast. They drive through the night into the Arizona wilderness, eventually stopping to let the boys in the truck bed switch positions. Cotton swallows a lump in his throat when he sees Lally 1, Shecker and Goodenow asleep in the back and huddled together for warmth. Pushing aside his warm feelings, Cotton wakes them up to push two of them up to the front of the truck.

Back in the camp, the boys had been encouraged to raid each other to steal trophies. Of course, the Bedwetters didn't have to worry about their chamber pot being stolen. The raids were supposed to teach grit and cunning. The Bedwetters had attempted a raid on the Apaches, but had botched it. They were clumsy and Shecker, who had



inexplicably brought his radio, managed to flick it on in the darkness. They were tackled, captured and tied up. The Apaches fetched their chamber pot and took turns urinating in it. After that, their cause was hopeless. They were irretrievably outcast. This is when Cotton had taken control. He put on a pair of dog tags bought from an army surplus store, shaved his chin (though it barely needed it), cracked open a stolen miniature of whiskey and lit a cigar. All this grabbed the boys' attention.

Cotton told the boys that he was taking charge and laid down a few rules. Nobody was to contact home, they were all to refer to each other by last names and they would all stick together, no matter what anybody else said.

The boys continue to drive until, eventually, Cotton spies the city of Flagstaff in the distance.

Chapters 5 & 6 Analysis

The quest starts in earnest in these two chapters as the boys leave the relative safety of the camp and go out into the Arizona night. The first order of business is to steal a car. When this proves more difficult than anticipated, the group almost crumbles, but Cotton holds them together by sheer force of will, and when Teft successfully gets a truck, they are all bonded again. It takes little to pull the group apart, but also relatively little to bring them back together. They are as easily manipulated by circumstance as by strong personality.

The next part of their journey is an uneventful trip to Flagstaff, but Swarthout uses the opportunity of the uneventful trip to flesh out the back story of how the boys came together and also to further establish the close bond that the boys have developed. When three of the boys fall asleep in the truck, huddled together for warmth, it is a demonstration not only of the trust that exists between them, but also of a bond that transcends the usual macho posing that affects the relationships between teenage boys. Indeed, it demonstrates a complete rejection by the Bedwetters of most of the concepts that their camp was supposed to instill in them. They have bonded and come together, but not quite in the way that their parents had intended when sending them to camp.

The story of their failed raid on the Apaches piques the reader's interest in how the Bedwetters came to own the buffalo head. If not through a raid, how does Goodenow come to hold the trophy? This kind of narrative hook adds to the mystery and intrigue of the novel and draws the reader forward in the story. One can be safe in the knowledge that such details will be explained, as the opening chapters have established a pattern of filling in details through the flashback sections.



Chapters 7 & 8

Chapters 7 & 8 Summary

As chapter seven begins, the boys have become hungry during the long drive. At a red light, Shecker and Lally 1 get out, against Cotton's orders. Cotton tells Teft to drive on without them, though he has Teft pull over a block later and says they will all feel better with a little food. They turn onto Route 66, but leave the main strip in search of an inconspicuous place to eat.

In flashback, Lally 2's infantilism is discussed. He uses it for advantage over his brother at home, but at camp it made him even more of an outcast. Before Cotton took him in, the other boys would not let Lally 2 sleep under the bed as he wished. Strictly speaking, Lally 2 should not have been at the camp, but his parents needed to offload both children for the summer, so an arrangement had been made.

The boys stop at an all-night bowling alley. Each boy orders a couple of hamburgers and a glass of milk. They are approached by a couple of youths in their early twenties who ask what they are doing there so late. The boys sass them, saying that they are a traveling group of musicians. The youths are not amused. Cotton, sensing danger, tells them that they are from a boys' camp and are on their way back from a camping trip. Shecker continues to talk back to the youths and Cotton hurried them out of the place before trouble can start. The youths follow them out and begin tailing them.

A short distance out of town, the youths make the boys pull off the road. They force the boys out of the truck, noticing as they do so that it is a hotwired truck. The youths consider telling the police about the stolen truck in order to curry favor with the local law enforcement. Teft pulls the rifle on them, but they aren't intimidated. Teft fires and punctures one of the tires on their car.

In flashback, the reader is introduced to the wilder side of Teft's personality. On the plane ride west, he had to be restrained after attempting to open an emergency exit at 35,000 feet. Upon pleading to go to the toilet, he had stuffed it with anything he could find, flooding it. Only upon seeing the Western vista was he silenced, never having seen anything like it before.

Teft levels the gun at the youths. The youths flee and so do the Bedwetters, hailing Teft as a hero all the way.

In chapter eight, the euphoria fades fast as Cotton realizes that the youths will likely call the police on them. He tells Teft to floor it so they can make their turn off, some eight miles away, before the police come after them.

The next flashback shows Shecker's camp experience. He was thrown out of four cabins before coming to Cotton, but even Cotton could barely tolerate him. A confrontation was quick to follow. Shecker cried anti-Semitism, but Cotton shot him



down, saying they all just wanted him to shut up. Cotton made the mistake of turning away and Shecker, who was bigger, tackled him and beat up on him until pulled away. But the incident cleared the air and Shecker settled down.

They reach the turn off and start up a dirt road, the last three miles of their journey. Feeling scared, they turn up their radios. As they make their way up the dirt track, the truck's engine begins to sputter.

Despite his annoying personality, it had been Shecker who had kick-started their rebellious actions. All the boys really wanted to see the new Western movie "The Professionals", and after Shecker threatened for three days to take off on his own to see it, Cotton called his bluff and they all went, taking the horses to the local drive-in movie theatre and bribing the ticket taker to let them in. They got caught because the theater manager called the camp director and were warned that they would be expelled from camp if they pulled another stunt like that.

Teft tries to keep the truck moving, but the engine dies. They have run out of gas. Teft takes the blame on himself, offering apologies to the other boys.

Chapters 7 & 8 Analysis

The first real hitch in the boys' plan comes when they are confronted by a couple of youths in Flagstaff. The youths are bullies, picking on the boys for kicks. While Cotton keeps a level head while they are in danger, it is Teft's recklessness that ultimately saves them. Resorting to gunplay is foolish, but with the boys so close to their goal, the threat gives the boys a chance to reach their destination without further hindrance. Cotton is even impressed by Teft's actions. Teft is probably the only one of the boys who is even capable of such action. However, Teft's triumph is a short lived one. His victory is cancelled out by his failure to notice that they were running out of gas. The flashbacks have shown how the boys' victories or near-victories over the summer have quickly been balanced out. They had, for example, been successful in sneaking out to a movie, but had gotten caught by the camp director.

Shecker is substantially fleshed out in this section. He is easily the most annoying of the boys and his mouth has gotten him into trouble. In this case, it is his wisecracking that brings the Flagstaff youths after them. Nonetheless, Shecker is also a driving force behind the boys actions. Truthfully, they seem to act in order to shut him up at times, but he drives them forward and is thus a vital part of the group.



Chapters 9 & 10

Chapters 9 & 10 Summary

Chapter nine begins with Cotton losing his temper at Teft. He aims his anger at the rest of the group too, then he lapses into a seething silence. In the short time it takes for Cotton to calm down, the group begins to disintegrate again. They have all begun to voice their complaints. Lally 2 is tired; Shecker is hungry, so is Goodenow; Teft is repenting his apology, feeling angry that he is deemed responsible; and Lally 1 doesn't even want to be there, blaming his brother for pulling him along. Cotton listens to them complain and resolves to test their character a final time. If they haven't yet learned to pull together, he thinks they are a lost cause.

Cotton announces that they all share the blame for running out of gas. They are only a mile from their destination, but they now have to rethink what comes next. If they turned back now, hitched into Flagstaff and took another car, they could probably make it back to camp before they were missed. If they go forward, they will surely get caught and be in a world of trouble. He calls for another vote, again it has to be unanimous. He reminds them that only they care about what they're doing and in a few days they will all disperse and probably never see one another again.

Cotton asks who is in favor of giving up and immediately raises his own hand. The other boys are shocked. Lally 2 is furious. He swears he will go it alone if he has to. Goodenow goes with Lally 2, saying Lally 2 is too small to go alone. This pushes Lally 1 into following his brother as well. Shecker cracks a joke at Cotton and follows the others. Teft is the last to go, but he leaves Cotton too.

This is exactly what Cotton had wanted. He realizes that the boys no longer need his leadership. He wants to run after them whooping and hollering that they have finally proved they can hack it in life, but instead he catches up with them and, wordlessly, takes his position at the front of the pack again.

In chapter ten, the boys walk out of range of any radio stations, leaving themselves alone in the wilderness. The moon's light is now proving intermittent as it moves towards the horizon, but they get a flash of moonlight that shows them the gate of their final destination, a campground beyond which is the killing ground of Cotton's dream. They hop the fence in darkness, but Goodenow slips and falls. He does not rise, but instead begins to retch.

Goodenow had threatened suicide during the summer after Cotton stopped him from calling home. Goodenow had run off, threatening to hang himself. Cotton had gone after him and found him standing on a barrel with a rope around his neck. Cotton talked him down, explaining that he had put the rule about contacting home in effect to teach them to be self sufficient. Eventually, Goodenow stepped off the barrel. Goodenow told Cotton about bumping—a ritual he had learned at a special school he had attended. Cotton



said they'd try it. He never really knew whether Goodenow would actually have killed himself.

In trying to get Goodenow to his feet, they realized what they were standing in. It was blood.

Chapters 9 & 10 Analysis

The last leg of the boys' journey is the point at which it all almost falls apart. The boys fragment at the disaster of running out of gas. Cotton has to test their resolve because the boys have reached the proverbial point of no return. In pretending to abandon them and the quest, he is testing the boys' faith in themselves and the importance of the quest they have undertaken. It is the youngest, Lally 2, that shows the strongest character. At this moment, he rejects the infantilism that he has come to rely on. He declares he will continue alone if need be. This display of bravery and confidence from the weakest member of the group drives the other boys on. Cotton's test is a complete success, but in this lies a sadness for him as the boys have proved that they no longer need him.

A lot of the imagery in this section of the novel is quite religious in nature. It is here that one really begins to see how Cotton has been something of a messianic figure to the rest of the boys. Cotton offers the rest of the boys temptation and they reject it. Upon reaching their destination, the boys are instantly bathed in blood. It acts as a baptism of sorts for the boys who have proven themselves worthy. This also marks the end of the journey, but also a new beginning. Having reached their destination, the boys must now achieve their goal.



Chapters 11 & 12

Chapters 11 & 12 Summary

The narrative of chapter eleven returns to the previous day. Returning from an off-site camping trip, the boys had seen a sign to a buffalo preserve. They persuaded Wheaties to take them as they were not due back at camp until later that day. The preserve was crowded and they joined a group of pickup trucks near to a woman with a telescopic sighted rifle. Some men drove a few buffalo into sight. The woman with the rifle fired and missed and the buffalo stampeded. She fired again, inexpertly, eventually taking down the bull buffalo. The woman rejoiced in her act. Equally inept shooters followed, slaughtering the buffalo with such lack of skill that the animals suffered before dying.

The "hunt" is explained to the reader. It is not really a hunt but a culling of the herd of buffalo. This three day event featured shooters drawn by lot gunning down thirty buffalo a day to keep the herd under control. It is a slaughter, and the animals die in pain and terror, but for the participants it is a party. The author steps out of the story to reflect on the collective American guilt at the slaughter of such a noble species over centuries.

In chapter twelve, after seeing the first buffalo killed, the boys asked to leave. By the time the third died, they begged. Wheaties, asserting the little power he had left over them, made them stay and watch the slaughter. By the end of the day, the boys knew there were thirty more buffalo left awaiting the next day's slaughter. Upon returning to camp, the boys unpacked and waited for the dinner gong.

In flashback, Teft's delinquency is discussed. He stole money, he stole cars and he wouldn't or couldn't explain why. His constant petty criminal behavior was kept quiet by his father, a powerful partner of a Wall Street investment house.

Immediately after dinner, Goodenow vomited. They all dwelt on what they had seen. Later that night, Cotton awoke to find Lally 2 gone and their adventure began in earnest.

Chapters 11 & 12 Analysis

It is fitting that here, at the center of the story, lies the true heart of the novel. The reader finally learns the driving force behind the boys' quest. This information serves as a bridge between the two halves of the quest. The journey is over and now the work towards the goal can begin. It is here too that the true powerlessness that has been experienced by the boys is shown in its fullness. They are forced to watch the slaughter of the buffaloes despite begging to be spared from witnessing the horror. Despite having held a measure of power over their counselor, Wheaties, during the summer, it is here that Wheaties asserts both his true power over the boys and his revenge for their disrespect of him. They cannot leave without him and thus must stay and suffer the trauma that is the final act in binding them together as a group.



The author departs somewhat from the established protocol of the story in this section. Both of these chapters are entirely in flashback, although he maintains the deeper flashbacks to examine the boys' histories and motivations. What really happens here is a long section of exposition, explaining the actions the reader has witnessed up until now, but also a commentary against the brutal slaughter of the noble buffalo and the shared guilt that all Americans have for the mass destruction of the species. If a little overbearing in its presentation, the understanding of the brutality of the slaughter and its place in American culture and history is necessary to truly grasp the effect that witnessing these events has on the boys and the partial destruction of the Western mythology that they hold in such high esteem. The author's decision to juxtapose Shecker's disastrous bar mitzvah with the horror of the animal slaughter only serves to heighten the understanding of the culture clash that the boys are experiencing.



Chapters 13 & 14

Chapters 13 & 14 Summary

In chapter thirteen, staggering from the blood-stained killing ground, Cotton leads them down towards the buffalo pens. The boys have not formulated a plan beyond freeing the beasts, and as they approach the pens, it becomes apparent that this might not be an easy task.

They reconnoiter the pens, massive fences of thick wood eight feet high. Catwalks run across the tops of the interior fences and Cotton realizes that someone must crawl out on them to see the locations of the gates. The prospect of crossing these in the dark is frightening. Lally 1 suggests drawing straws to see who will do it. As they get organized, Lally 2 takes matters into his own hands and climbs up to the catwalks.

In flashback, it is shown that Lally 2 had been terrified of his camp horse at first, but Cotton found him one night talking to his animal. He even tells his horse about the Ooms, something he has never mentioned to another human. After that conversation, Lally 2 proved to be a good rider, having bonded with his animal. He even won the next barrel race for the Bedwetters.

All the boys follow Lally 2 up to the catwalks. From above, the layout of the pens makes more sense. As they reach the center of the pens, the clouds part and reveal the buffalo herd, stopping the boys in their tracks. The massive beasts are six feet tall at the shoulder and weigh over 2,500 pounds.

The boys see that to free the herd, they must get them through three gates. Cotton explains to them that it isn't as difficult as it seems. Two of the gates they can open right away without danger. He, Cotton, would stay to open the final gate and release the herd, then the other boys could make noise to direct them out of the other gates. The boys seem frozen into inaction, but Lally 1, afraid of being upstaged by his younger brother again, gets moving and the rest follow.

The plan doesn't work. The confused and scared buffaloes stampede, not out of the three gates, but in a circle and back into their pen. Cotton thinks that the stampede has taken down the wall of the pen and crushed the other boys beneath it.

In chapter fourteen, he immediately discovers that there are no casualties. The wall had held. Barely. In the face of such obstacles, the group begins to unravel again, so Cotton has them "bump" again. Cotton explains that they have to close the first gate once the buffalo are through to prevent them coming back into their pen. He suggests that he and Teft should be the two to do it. Goodenow objects, saying that he and Shecker have barely contributed and it is their turn.

Under Cotton's leadership, the boys had executed a perfect raid that summer, causing chaos in the camp by pretending the horses had gotten free and capturing all five of the



other teams' trophies. Teft grabbed a rifle and fired a single bullet into each of the trophies. The whole affair, however, was seen as a breach of rules by the rest of the camp. The Bedwetters had left the trophies in the open, so there was no direct proof that they had been the ones to capture and mutilate them. The Director questioned them, but they would not talk, and he lost his temper, saying that one more act of disobedience would see them on the next plane home. The Bedwetters were no longer bullied, however. The other boys were uncertain as to how they might react now. They were seen as a little dangerous and certainly unpredictable. Raids ceased and the Bedwetters began carrying their chamber pot around as if it was a trophy.

This time, Cotton's plan works. They successfully set the herd free. The boys stop, stunned at what they have achieved.

Chapters 13 & 14 Analysis

The final phase of the quest begins, as one might expect, with a problem. Releasing the buffalo herd is no simple matter of opening a gate. Again, it is Lally 2 that spurs the boys to action. In the face of a dangerous task, crawling across a catwalk above the herd of massive buffalo, it is the youngest of them that once more throws caution to the wind and acts. The flashback to Lally 2's bonding with his horse demonstrates why the whole affair seems more deeply ingrained in him than the others. Lally 2 has a special bond with animals. He treats them as people and trusts them more than other people.

The danger of their situation is demonstrated by the unpredictability of the buffalo. Cotton believes for a moment that the stampeding herd has crushed the other boys. This thought foreshadows the death that will ultimately come at the end of the story. More than this, however, the unpredictability and instincts of the herd of animals mirrors the same traits in the group of boys. This creates an undeniable connection between the boys and the buffalo and symbolizes how, in setting the herd free what they will actually be doing is freeing themselves.

The capability of the boys to successfully achieve their goals by thinking outside the box is demonstrated in their successful, if unorthodox raid in which they capture all the other teams' trophies. Their unpredictability and difference from the conformity of the rest of the camp is clearly marked by their mutilation of the trophies. Rather than keeping a hold of them in triumph, they anonymously mark them. The knowledge of their victory is enough for the Bedwetters to revel in. They do not need to flaunt it. The reminder of the boys' abilities when they act together is an immediate foreshadowing of the next event—that of successfully setting the buffalo free. It seems that their goal is achieved. The reader has learned, however, that nothing for these boys comes quite so easily. The sense of triumph at the end of this section is tempered by the knowledge that, as in everything that has happened to the boys and that they have achieved, there is bound to be a price.



Chapters 15 & 16

Chapters 15 & 16 Summary

In chapter fifteen, Cotton produces some miniatures of whiskey to celebrate their achievement. Shecker begins dancing—an improvised "Indian" dance. The other boys join him, except Cotton. When they realize Cotton is not dancing, they stop to see what he is doing. Cotton is watching the buffalo, who are simply milling about in the open ground. He realizes they have achieved nothing. The buffalo will simply be rounded up again in the morning and slaughtered. Cotton knows that he needs to coddle them a bit in this moment of disappointment. Cotton tells the boys that they are almost done. It is a couple of miles to the fence at the back of the preserve, beyond which the buffalo can be truly free. He tells them they have done the hard part. They can lead the buffalo to the fence with the truckful of hay that is parked near the pens.

In chapter sixteen, they wonder how to break the wire holding the hay bales together. It is Shecker who steps up and snaps it with the rifle barrel. He is fat, but strong. They wait for Teft to jump start the truck. After a minute, Teft dangles the truck's keys out the window.

Another flashback discusses Teft and the high expectations he lived under. His father attempted to get him into an exclusive school, despite his less than stellar academic record. In the interview, Teft detailed his petty criminal exploits. The headmistress recommended the Boys' Camp to Teft's father.

There is a delay while Teft figures out the truck's controls. The boys are scared about what the buffalo might do to them if something goes wrong. Cotton is confident that the buffalo will behave as long as they are feeding them from the truck. They drive into the middle of the herd. Just inches from the animals, the boys are terrified. In the silence, the animals and boys consider each other and they bond. Lally 2 speaks to the beasts and begins to feed them handfuls of hay as the truck moves forward.

Chapters 15 & 16 Analysis

Celebration is short lived. The boys think they have achieved their goal for a moment, but there is more work to be done. With every setback like this there is a growing feeling that there is a price yet to be paid. The imagery used during this section heightens this feeling. References to the Vietnam War, Nazis and the naming of the pickup as the "Judas" truck all conjure images of danger and tragedy in the mind of the reader and develops an atmosphere of deep foreboding.

This atmosphere is broken by a moment of true peace and tranquility when the boys finally mingle with the animals they have come to save. The boys and buffaloes consider each other and recognize kindred spirits in each other. It is a beautiful and

spiritual image. It is only fitting that Lally 2, the most innocent among them, leads the way in drawing the animals towards their freedom.



Chapters 17 & 18

Chapters 17 & 18 Summary

In chapter seventeen, the buffalo are led towards the fence by the boys and, finally out of the danger of being heard, the boys let loose their nervous energy with hooting and hollering. The boys have lost track of time. The events of the previous night seem like an age ago. By now it is after five in the morning. Soon, people would be waking and the boys will get caught and be in deep trouble. Cotton gets antsy, thinking that they should have reached the fence by now.

Chapter eighteen begins with Teft telling the boys about his cousin's piranha, and how his cousin had been forced to get rid of it. He had put it into a pond full of goldfish at a local girls college. The piranha had taken a bite out of each goldfish. Quickly, the gardeners at the college realized what was wrong and poisoned the pond. The moral of Teft's story was not to just take a bite out of things, but to finish what you start. He references an as yet unexplained event at the Grand Canyon.

In processing Teft's story, they have neglected to feed the buffalo. Suddenly it is unclear who is herding who. Cotton's nerves are starting to fray. He wonders if Teft has been driving in circles. As dawn comes, they realize that the herd is growing. More buffalo from the preserve are joining the ones that they freed. In the morning light they look like strangers to each other, covered in mud, blood and hay. Lally 2 asks Cotton if they will all be going to jail. Cotton says they probably will, but they should be more worried about what the men from the reserve will do to them, as anyone capable of slaughtering animals like they do is capable of anything. Just then, they finally reach the fence and Cotton immediately sees a big problem.

Chapters 17 & 18 Analysis

Teft's piranha story is obscure in the same way that religious parables can be, but it carries the message that the boys have all learned over the course of the summer. The religious imagery continues to grow, with references to shepherds and sheep, the steady growth of the "flock" following the boys to freedom and the return of the idea of the "BC" logo on their jackets meaning "Before Christ".

There are still unanswered questions at this late stage of the story. It has not yet been revealed how the boys came to own the buffalo head. Indeed, new stories are referenced which we have not yet been privy to—the incident at the Grand Canyon, for example. This makes it apparent that, though the story is drawing to an end, there are some important details left to cover.

The flashbacks continue to color in the boys' personalities, but what has become apparent by this stage in the novel is that they all share a dysfunctional history within their own families. From overbearing parents to neglecting parents to broken homes,

the boys share a lack of a solid and supportive family foundation. Their similar histories brought them together, the summer's events and their quest have bonded them together like the herd of buffalo that they are freeing. In a very real way, their quest to free the buffaloes has freed the boys' themselves from the restraints of their broken families to the freedom of self dependency and the discovery that there are other people they can turn to for help and support.



Chapters 19 & 20

Chapters 19 & 20 Summary

Chapter nineteen begins with the boys confronting their final obstacle. The fence that bounds the preserve is much sturdier than the boys had imagined. Cotton has the boys scatter half of the remaining hay to hold the herd in place while he thinks. At first he tries to have the boys break down the fence, with much the same effect as earlier when they had tried to push the camp truck up the hill. This, after all, was a fence designed to hold in a herd of buffalo. Cotton refuses to give up. Only the sight of the approaching rangers in a jeep followed by others in trucks stops him. A final, desperate plan emerges. Cotton has Teft drive away from the herd, before having the boys get out of the truck. He tells Teft to get the rifle ready and to shoot at the jeep when they come over the next rise, just to scare them. Hopefully the gunfire will make them stop. It works. Cotton tells Teft that he needs three minutes.

A final flashback tells the story of the Grand Canyon hike in which the Bedwetters won the buffalo head from the Apaches. Climbing out of the Canyon, the older and stronger Apaches bet the Bedwetters, buffalo head against chamber pot, that they will beat them out of the Canyon by a full hour. A mile from the rim, the Bedwetters were ready to give up. Wheaties abandoned them in disgust. Of course it was Cotton that got the boys to move, shaming them and kicking them until they struggle to the rim. He brought them together in any way he could, and they won the bet with four minutes to spare. They took possession of the buffalo head and hurled the chamber pot over the rim of the Canyon.

Back in the present, Cotton has climbed into the driver's seat and asks Teft how to put it into drive.

In chapter twenty, Cotton floors the truck right at the fence. He bursts through the fence. At that moment, Teft runs out of ammo. Cotton pulls the truck back through the hole in the fence. He surveys the group, prouder than he has ever been, knowing that they have fulfilled their quest. Cotton drives the truck into the herd and steers them towards their freedom. The herd splits at the Mogollon Rim, galloping off to freedom, but the truck keeps going, right over the rim, carrying Cotton to his death. The men in the jeep and trucks finally reach the boys. The boys stand united in grief and triumph, having achieved their goal, but at a terrible cost.

Chapters 19 & 20 Analysis

The tragic end of the story is also a triumphant end. In terms of the flashback, the final details are filled in and the last pieces of the puzzle are given. The reader learns of the triumph of the Bedwetters in the Grand Canyon and how they came to have the buffalo head. This is an important story to relate at the end of the story because it demonstrates



strongly how much the boys depend on Cotton. This is what shows the reader that to be truly freed of their dependencies, doubts and childhood traumas, that they must be freed of Cotton too.

The truth of Cotton's death is left deliberately vague. There are hints that Cotton realizes that the boys need to be freed of his influence, but whether he deliberately drives over the rim, loses control of the truck or simply doesn't understand how to stop it is unknown. Cotton is a necessary sacrifice, whether he willingly sacrifices himself or not. Symbolically, in completing their quest, the boys no longer need him.

This end also fulfills a key part of the traditional adventure quest—that a sacrifice must be made to attain success in the quest. Thus, whether or not the reader buys into the religious imagery, the sacrifice has a justification in the roots of literary tradition as well.



Characters

Cotton, John Cotton

John Cotton is the leader of the Bedwetters. He is the most mature of the group and takes on the roles of father figure, drill sergeant, cheerleader and savior according to the needs of the rest of the boys. Cotton is the driving force behind the boys' development from broken and neglected individuals into more mature, complete and self sufficient people who have learned how to work as a group for the greater good.

Cotton is the product of a narcissistic mother and an absent father. His mother goes through a string of men in an attempt to remain young, and Cotton is a constant reminder of her steady aging. Because of this, his mother infantilizes him. Cotton has the strength of personality to fight back.

Cotton has a short temper and a stubborn streak. He is always the last to give up. Cotton is thrust into the role of leader not because he is a natural for it, but because he is the only one of the boys with the strength of personality to hold them together as a group. His leadership is a matter of survival for both himself and the rest of the boys. Cotton, growing up among images of war and idolizing the macho myth of the American West, needs a purpose, and finds it in the molding of the boys into a unit. Without Cotton, there would be no glue to hold the rest of the boys together and they would fall apart.

Cotton is also a messianic figure. He is the boys' savior. It is no coincidence that his initials are J.C. and that he ultimately sacrifices himself for his followers.

Teft, Lawrence Teft, III

Teft is a charismatic delinquent with a long background of petty criminal activities. He comes from a privileged background, but is overburdened with high expectations of achievement, particularly from his father. He is smart and a good problem solver. He is tall and thin and is big for his age. He plays a key role in the quest as he is the one with the skills to steal a car and drive it. He is also the one with the skills to pick the lock on the gun rack to secure their rifle. More than that, he has the courage, or foolhardiness, to shoot it when needed.

Teft will stoop to almost anything to get his way. It is he who blackmails the boys camp counselor to give them a degree of freedom. Teft is trouble. His antics on the plane ride out to Arizona mark him as out of control and dangerous. He has to be restrained after attempting to open an emergency door at 35,000 feet. It is this level of dangerous unpredictability that needs Cotton's leadership to channel into productivity instead of destruction. Teft's natural tendency towards destruction and chaos proves useful to the group, but without Cotton's tempering influence, Teft would just be a danger. Under Cotton, he learns to channel his impulses towards a goal.



Goodenow, Gerald Goodenow

Goodenow, though not the youngest, is in many ways the baby of the group. He is the true bedwetter of the Bedwetters, and indeed, this is what brings him to Cotton's group. Nobody else wants him when they discover he wets his bed.

Goodenow has a tendency towards the dramatic. He twice threatens suicide during the story. The second time, nobody is sure whether he might actually have gone through with it had Cotton not talked him down. Goodenow has an unhealthy dependency on his mother. After his father's death, he has spent eight years sleeping in his mother's bed, until she remarried. His stepfather despises Goodenow's weaknesses, his dependence on therapy and his mother. He is the driving force behind the attempt to make Goodenow more masculine and, ultimately, Goodenow's attendance at the camp.

Goodenow is quieter than the other boys. He doesn't often put himself forward, but he is the one who introduced "bumping" to the group, which proves a dramatic aid to the boys' learning emotional closeness and support from each other.

Shecker, Sammy Shecker

Shecker is the son of a famous comedian. He is obnoxious, loud-mouthed and has a persecution complex. He acts as if the world is against him and uses his Jewish background to further his self-imposed role as a victim. Shecker's family life is as dysfunctional as the other boys. His father travels a lot and is a habitual gambler. Shecker's father even uses Shecker in bets to his son's detriment. Shecker will try and do anything to please his father, even if he harms himself in the process.

Shecker is fat, but strong underneath. He is the joker of the group, but he doesn't know when to stop. This is something he learns under the guidance of the other boys who use the rather tasteless, but affectionate and effective "Gas 'im" to shut him up when need be. Shecker's mouth gets him, and the rest of the boys, into trouble, but he is quick witted and ready to help when needed, though he seldom volunteers himself.

Lally 1, Stephen Lally, Jr.

The eldest of the Lally brothers, Stephen, or Lally 1, has an intense sibling rivalry with his younger brother. He demonstrates sociopathic tendencies and is the laziest and most withdrawn of the group. His actions seem less motivated by togetherness with the boys than by a need not to be upstaged by his younger brother. Lally 1 acts grudgingly when he acts at all and nearly always in his own self interest.

The Lally brothers come from a household where they are neglected by their parents. Their parents frequently argue and make up before disappearing for weeks on vacation and leaving the boys in the care of the household servants. His brother is better at manipulating others, leaving Lally 1 with feelings of inadequacy.



Lally 1 has a deep seated anger, directed mostly at his brother, which manifests in acts of violence and destruction. Upon losing his temper, he viciously kills the small animals and insects that the boys have collected as pets. When Lally 2 triumphs in the barrel race, Lally 1 responds by destroying his brother's favorite pillow.

Of all the boys, Lally 1 develops the least throughout the story. His brother is the heart of the group, driving them to action almost as much as Cotton does, but Lally 1 only follows grudgingly, contributing the least but sharing in the glory of their success.

Lally 2, Billy Lally

Lally 2 is the heart of the group. He is also the youngest. He takes the plight of the buffalo to heart even more than the rest of the boys, so much so that he resolves to do something about it without even consulting them for aid. When despair takes hold of the group and action is required, it is Lally 2 that takes action and drives everyone forward. He doesn't have Cotton's leadership or Teft's know-how, but he has guts.

Lally 2, like his brother, lives a life of neglect, but has a stronger imagination and empathy with others in order to cope with it. He finds comfort in his imaginary friends, the Ooms, and in talking to animals, whether horses, buffaloes or the crippled jackrabbit that his brother kills.

Wheaties

Wheaties is the boys' camp counselor. He has nothing but disdain for the bunch of misfits he has been stuck with and takes his frustration out on them. Teft's discovery of his illicit belongings at camp (pornography and alcohol) enables the boys to blackmail him into giving them a measure of freedom at camp, but Wheaties is vindictive and revenges himself on them as he can. His greatest act of revenge is in forcing them to watch the slaughter of the buffaloes, which proves the catalyst for the whole adventure.



Objects/Places

Arizona

Arizona is a state in the southwest of the United States. It was the last of the forty-eight contiguous states admitted to the Union. It achieved statehood in 1912. Arizona is the sixth largest state. It has a largely desert climate, being hot and arid over most of its area. Arizona is home to the Grand Canyon.

Box Canyon

A box canyon is a small canyon with cliffs on three sides and the only easy entrance through the mouth of the canyon. They were frequently used to corral cattle or buffalo by gating off the open end of the canyon.

Tack Shed

The tack shed is where the necessary equipment for horse riding is stored, such as saddles and harnesses.

Flagstaff, AZ

A city in Northern Arizona, located just south of Arizona's highest mountains. At the time of the story, the population of the city was approximately 25,000. It lies along the famous highway, Route 66.

Native American Tribes

Five of the teams in the camp are named after Native American tribes. In order of achievement they are the Apache, the Sioux, the Comanche, the Cheyenne and the Navajo. Though these are among the better known tribes to popular culture, they are not all native to Arizona. They are all commonly used as adversaries to the heroes in Western films on the mid twentieth century. At the time the novel is set, Native Americans were referred to by the less politically correct term of "Indians".

Quebec

A province of Canada. Lying in the east of the country, the population is predominantly French speaking. It occupies a territory roughly the size of Texas, most of which is sparsely populated wilderness filled with lakes and mountains.



Bar Mitzvah

The coming of age celebration in the Jewish faith. At the age of thirteen, boys become responsible for their actions. Literally it means "son of the commandments". Prior to age thirteen, the parents are responsible for the actions of their children. The bar mitzvah ceremony often involves the child to read or recite a section of the Torah.

Torah

The term Torah refers to the five books of Moses, that form the basis of the Jewish faith. The Torah is the first of the three sections of the Hebrew bible. The five books of Moses are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They are also an accepted part of other faiths including Christianity.

Vietnam War

Fought between Communist North Vietnam and the government of South Vietnam, backed by the United States and other anti-Communist states, the conflict lasted nearly twenty years, from November 1955 until April 1975. U.S. involvement in the war was controversial and unpopular on many fronts. The war ended with the fall of Saigon and the unification of North and South Vietnam under Communist rule. As a result, Communist governments were also established in Cambodia and Laos. Nearly 60,000 U.S. troops were killed in the conflict.

Mogollon Rim

A geographical ridge running some two hundred miles across northern Arizona. It features high sandstone and limestone cliffs. It rises up to three thousand feet higher than the land to the south of it.

Grand Canyon

A massive canyon in Arizona that runs 277 miles long and is up to eighteen miles wide and over one mile deep. The Colorado River runs through the canyon. Many Native American groups had settlements in the canyon and its multitude of caves prior to European migration into the American west. The Grand Canyon was one of the United States' first National Parks.



Themes

Coming of Age

Bless the Beasts and Children is a classic coming of age story and the theme permeates the story and the characters. The boys all come from different backgrounds, but in essence they have been sent to Box Canyon Boys' Camp for the same reason—to grow up. The whole purpose of the camp is to turn boys into men. However, it is not through the outdated and simplistic methods of the camp that the six boys who comprise the Bedwetters come to mature, but through their own shared experiences as a group of outcasts. Over the course of the summer, they have bonded and come to rely on each other. This in itself is a sign of enhanced maturity. To rely on others is a difficult lesson to learn. The quest marks their final test on the threshold of moving from being youths to being men, even for Lally 2, who is barely more than a child.

Each of the boys have different lessons they need to learn in order to mature. Cotton has to learn to channel his stubbornness and anger in a positive way through leadership. He is the only one of the six with the strength of personality to hold the group together. Teft has to learn how to turn his ingenuity and wits to positive rather than destructive causes. Shecker has to learn how to stay quiet and stop alienating people. Goodenow needs to learn self sufficiency and confidence and how to use his emotional connections with others positively instead of as a shield. Lally 1 needs to discover how to control his impulses and protect those weaker than him. Lally 2 has to stop using his youth as both an excuse and a weapon. By the time the story starts, all of the boys have learned these lessons to some degree, as we will discover through the episodes of flashback.

The main thrust of the novel is how the boys use what they have learned in an epic quest—a journey that leads them into manhood. The journey also teaches them lessons of fear, sacrifice and simple morals. To the boys, the ends of freeing the buffaloes justifies the means they use to achieve their goal. Though moral actions are not always this simple, the moral fortitude of their ultimate goal is an important lesson for these boys to learn on their journey to adulthood.

The final act, Cotton's sacrifice, seals the transition from children to men. It is both triumphant and tragic. It frees them from Cotton's influence, which they no longer need, and teaches them about true loss. It marks one of the many paradoxes of adulthood as the boys are filled with feelings of joy and of grief simultaneously. It complicates their lives, and nothing marks the transition from youth to adulthood quite so perfectly.

Humane Treatment of Animals

At the heart of this book is the outrage over the poor treatment of buffaloes. From the perspective of the characters, it is not so much the slaughter of the beasts that is



traumatizing and morally offensive to them, but the manner in which they are killed. The annual culling of ninety buffalo from the Arizona herd is done in a cruel manner as inexpert marksmen drawn by lot get to shoot the buffalo, not with a killing shot and not for the necessity of culling them, but frequently wounding and maiming the beasts and for the joy of the kill.

The author even steps out of the narrative to detail the moral outrage of the near extinction of the noble beasts at the hands of Americans over the centuries. For the remaining (and protected) Arizona herd, it is again not so much the culling that outrages, but the manner of the herd being thinned. In the mind of the author, Americans are "born with buffalo blood on our hands..." (p.101).

The outcast status of the Bedwetters sees them treated almost as animals by their peers, thus they and the reader identify the boys more with the buffaloes than with the boys that have mistreated them. This is an important link to make as it creates an emotional resonance between the fate of the boys and the fate of the animals. As the reader comes to care about the characters, they must by necessity come to care about the beasts. This link is explicitly stated in the title of the book: "Bless the Beasts and Children"

Historically, Swarthout's novel sparked such a backlash against the true life practice of buffalo culling in Arizona that changes were made to the format of the buffalo culling, although the practice was never eliminated completely.

Myth versus Reality

The Box Canyon Boys' Camp perpetuates the rather macho myth of the Old American West. This same myth is the one portrayed by Hollywood movies, particularly during the middle years of the twentieth century. The boys in the story have grown up on these myths. The idea of the mythological cowboy permeates their psyches. Indeed, the boys are so eager to view a Western movie that they break all the rules of the camp to sneak out to see one at the local drive-in.

The camp purports to make boys into cowboys, promoting such traits as strength, guile and dominance over others. This perfectly fits the portrayal of the Old West; however, the boys' quest, though in the modern West, more accurately portrays the reality.

What the boys learn is that reliance on others is perfectly okay. Weakness is acceptable when one has support. Emotional closeness is important. Caring is important. Without each other, the boys cannot succeed in their quest. Though they utilize the model of the Old West—the boys are in effect outlaws, like "The Magnificent Seven"—their actions and in particular their goal, belies that myth. The boys who rebel against the notions of the camp they have been sent to are the ones that benefit most from their summer away. There can be no doubt that the Bedwetters will return to their homes more complete individuals than those who have bought into the myth perpetuated by the summer camp.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is mostly third person, though it occasionally slips into first person. The view is omniscient and reliable, in that the narrator can accurately describe the actions and emotions of the characters, but it is not always consistent. On occasion, the point of view transfers into the mind of a particular character, usually Cotton. As the emotional and spiritual growth of the boys lies at the heart of the story, this point of view is effective in showing the reader their development as individuals and as a group.

The story is told in sections. The first section of the book, roughly half of the story, shows the first part of their quest—the journey. It is interspersed with flashbacks to events that took place earlier in the summer at the boys' camp and earlier in the boys' lives at home. Developing the story in spurts like this fills in important details about the characters and the group as the reader needs to know them to enhance their understanding of the boys' actions.

Only when the journey is complete is the reason for the journey revealed. In a small section towards the middle of the book, an explanation of the catalyst for the boys' quest is given. This section also marks a departure from the point of view of the novel, as the author leaves the central story to give a brief history of the plight of the buffaloes. Saving buffaloes is the ultimate goal of the main characters.

The final section, achieving the goal of the quest, returns to the established point of view.

Setting

The novel is set in the Western U.S. state of Arizona in the mid-1960s. The key locations in Arizona are the fictional Box Canyon Boys' Camp, a summer camp in rural Arizona where the boys spent most of the summer. They also spend time in the towns of Prescott and Flagstaff, two small Arizona cities. Much of the novel is spent between these two cities on the roads of Arizona, including the famous Route 66. The final sections of the book take place at a buffalo preserve on the edge of the Mongollan Rim, a massive dropoff of cliffs in the northern Arizona mountains. Other notable Arizona locations are the Grand Canyon and Prescott's local drive-in movie theater.

In addition to these locations, episodes from the boys' home lives are visited in flashback. These variously take place in eastern states within suburbs of cities like New York and Chicago. One portrays a fishing trip in Quebec, Canada, another a vacation to Switzerland. These locations are less important to the story and thus are not detailed in quite the same way. The Arizona settings are portrayed with emotive and colorful language that make Arizona almost another character in the novel. The western setting



is very important thematically, and the author has taken great pains to be both geographically and atmospherically accurate.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel seems somewhat dated now, but is fittingly contemporary for the mid-1960s. It is littered with pop culture references of the time that may lack in meaning to many modern readers, but in their context, the gist of the reference remains clear. Such references are thus not a hindrance to understanding of the novel.

Each character has a distinct voice through their use of language or lack thereof. They have their own distinct vocalizations as individuals and shared vocalizations as a group. Such differences are heightened when the group seems to separate and lessened when they bond together.

Passages of story tend to be short and evocative. The story is broken up frequently with sections of flashback that take on a different tone than the language of the main story. These frequent changes keep the narrative interesting and provide necessary color and details to the main story.

When the author steps out of the story to detail the historical slaughter of the buffalo, the language becomes deeply emotional and passionate. It is a distinct difference from the tone of the story proper, and provides a clear separation between the two sections of the boys' quest.

Structure

The book is broken into twenty chapters of approximately nine pages each. The chapters are not named and most consist of short passages of action broken up by flashbacks that reveal details about one or more of the boys and explain their motivations and actions.

The plot of the novel is simple enough. It is a quest. The goal of the quest is left unrevealed during the journey. When the boys reach their destination, the reader is told what they are doing—journeying to free buffalo before they are slaughtered. The final section of the novel portrays the boys' attempts to free the herd. The journey is dangerous. Achieving their goal is more so. In the tradition of literary quests, it requires sweat, tears and sacrifice. Ultimately, in attaining their goal, the boys suffer great loss. Nothing is given without a price.

The novel is fast paced and easy to read, with frequent opportunity to stop reading between sections. Chronologically, it does jump around though most of the narrative occurs over the course of a single summer and the quest itself transpires over a single night. There is no complicated back story to contend with as the author shows only the important details of the back story in flashback when it becomes necessary to reveal them.



The middle passage when the author details the history of the American buffalo tends towards being slightly preachy, though the historical context and the horror of the treatment of buffaloes over the centuries is central to understanding the story.

Overall, the novel is easy to read, entertaining and emotional.



Quotes

"In a few days, according to camp theory, everyone would find his group, his home far from home, and his achievement level as well, for the laws of temperament and competition inevitably separated the deviant from the normal, the losers from the winners."

Chap. 1, p. 5

"'Send Us a Boy—We'll Send You a Cowboy!' was the camp slogan."

Chap. 2, p. 16

"Cotton's group was unique. They moved in with him because no one else would have them. They were known variously as the Weirds, the Screwups, the Locos. They were the bottom of the barrel."

Chap. 2, p. 17

"They strained against the pickup for minutes, it seemed, and as they tuckered out, as despair sapped them more quickly, even, than exertion, one by one they dropped out, winded, till only Cotton's intransigence held the vehicle in place."

Chap. 3, p. 22

"By camp custom, the Director announced, the team in last place on points was not honored with an Indian name. Instead, to activate its progress up the ladder of achievement, it was traditionally called the Bedwetters."

Chap. 3, p. 24

"[T]his has ever been the essence of our melodrama: some men with guns, going somewhere, to do something dangerous."

Chap. 4, p. 31

"Like blind boys, they found each other, and confirmed each other and through the FM of the flesh they sent to one another impulses of courage and affection."

Chap. 5, pp. 38-39

"We'll go home supermen, I swear to God."

Cotton, Chap. 6, p. 50

"If this ain't something to see in the night. Six milkdrinkers in a wired car and fancy hats with a half pillow and a buffalo head with a bullethole in it."

Chap. 7, p. 66

"[T]he night came down upon them. They covered before it, and before the implications of an empty tank."

Chap. 8, p. 75



"Dings! Dings! Wheaties was right—we are dings! We can't do anything right and we've got no damn excuse for living and—"

Cotton, Chap. 9, p.77

"[I]f they'll at least try and hack it without me, then they're over the rim, they've won the big game, and when they fly home they'll be okay, they can hack anything, even home."

Cotton, Chap. 9, p. 81

"One click of moonlight exposed the game and ended the adventure. One look shrieked what it was that smeared their palms and pants and chins and boots. It was blood."

Chap. 10, p. 91

"They had never known the arrow or the lance, the lightning or the fire that crazed their ancestors over cliffs and into swollen rivers, nor had they known, until yesterday, the sound and implication of a gun."

Chap. 11, p. 94

"They gutshot. They blasted horns from heads. They blinded. They crippled, shattering hocks and fetlocks. They bled buffalo to death before striking a vital organ."

Chap. 11, p. 100

"We are born with buffalo blood on our hands."

Chap. 11, p. 101

"After the first buffalo had been killed, they told Wheaties they were ready to go, they had seen enough. After the second, they insisted. After the third, they implored."

Chap. 12, p. 104

"The Bedwetters had never had a real plan, only a simple objective: no matter who, no matter what, to free from the pens the thirty animals doomed to die in the morning."

Chap. 13, p. 108

"With this bunch, you never knew who or why or what next. They were as bad as buffalo."

Chap. 13, p. 116

"What they had done was more immense than they had ever imagined. They quivered. Their toes sang songs. Their hearts beat poetry."

Chap. 14, p. 125

"Beasts and boys considered each other. They smelled each other. And suddenly boys of fifteen, fourteen and twelve were children once more. The breath of innocent animals blessed them."

Chap. 16, p. 142

"'Cotton was right,' said Goodenow. 'To make us finish no matter what. It's good for our characters.'"

Chap. 17, p. 149



"Oddball ideas bumbled through the alleys of their heads. Who, it occurred to them to wonder, was herding who? Which were the shepherds now, and which the sheep?"
Chap. 18, p. 153

"O twayne me a twim, where the ffubalo jym, where the rede and the telopen zoom."
Chap. 19, p. 162

"We said we'd finish and we are. That herds gonna bust out and so're we. Now. For good."
Cotton, Chap. 20, p. 170

"They had a last glimpse of John Cotton's red hair flaming like a torch as the truck seemed to soar and dive and disappear. And that was all, except for the remote but unmistakable concussion of metal and rock and the recognition of its meaning, which, microseconds later, cracked their hearts even as it freed them, too, forever."
Chap. 20, p. 171



Topics for Discussion

There is a lot of religious imagery in the novel, much of it centering around John Cotton. In what ways can John Cotton be viewed as a messianic figure, akin to Jesus Christ? In what ways does he differ?

The myth of the cowboy and the Old West is prevalent throughout the book. How does the camp perpetuate this myth? Do you think the boys that conform to camp rules or the Bedwetters better personify the cowboys of legend?

The boys come to see the buffalo as kindred spirits. How are the situations of the boys and the buffalo similar? Why do the boys identify so strongly with the animals?

The stories and personalities of the boys are gradually revealed through flashback throughout the novel. How does this affect the unfolding of the story? Would knowing some of the boys' more unsavory traits earlier in the novel affect your enjoyment of the story or empathy with the characters?

One of the goals of the camp is to make the boys more "masculine". What does this mean to you? Do you think the camp succeeds in its aims? How have ideas of masculinity changed in fifty years since the novel's setting?

How does the boys' ritual of "bumping" help them in times of crisis? Is it at odds with the macho ideas of the camp? Do you think the ritual is a weakness or a strength? Would the boys' parents approve?

The author departs from the established structure of the novel in the middle in order to detail the plight of the buffalo and the history of their destruction. Is this a necessary narrative device? Do you think it helps or hurts the story? How does it affect the pace of the story? Does its placement between the two phases of the quest provide a welcome break or an unnecessary distraction?