

The Bears on Hemlock Mountain Study Guide

The Bears on Hemlock Mountain by Alice Dalgliesh

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Plot Summary

The novel "The Bears on Hemlock Mountain" is about a family of three living in the wilderness at the turn of the century. Jonathan and his parents live in a small community at the base of Hemlock Mountain, and as Johnathan (also known as "John") explained it is more of a big hill than a mountain. John has many family members including his uncle, James, who is just a few years older than him. James and John are best friends. One day they are talking when John asks James if he has seen a real bear before. James says he had a long time ago.

John, who is nine years old, is asked by his mother to go to his Aunt's house to get a large cast iron pot to cook for all the family coming for a christening of a younger cousin. John is afraid of the bears on the mountain, but his momma tells him there aren't any on the hill. John, feeling comforted, gathers up bread crumbs, carrots, and nuts for the woodland creatures. As John starts off, his mother begins to worry, but distracts herself by singing "There are no bears on Hemlock Mountain at all, none at all." John also sings this as he is walking. A short while passes and John reaches the peak and sits down to rest, laying out all the treats. The woodland creatures come to eat the food he has provided. Soon John hears dripping water and realizes spring is fast on its way. He hopes the bears don't realize this. This spurs him into hurrying to his Aunt's house.

At his Aunt's house he greets her and skates around why he is actually there. She gives him milk and cookies. John is tired from hiking and randomly falls asleep. John wakes up hours later and realizes he needs to get home before dark and runs along, but forgets the pot. Johnathan turns around and goes back for the pot then sets off again. John's Aunt is scared for him and says to herself he should take care because there are bears on Hemlock Mountain. It becomes dark, and John is nearly to the peak of the mountain again when he hears something big. Through the trees he sees two bears lumbering towards him so he turns the large pot upside down and hides until he hears the bears right outside his pot. Eventually the bears are scared off by John's father and his group coming to find John. When John's father finds him and he tells his father about the bears, the other members of the group break free, track the bears, and kill them.



Chapter 1

Summary

Chapter 1 talks about how Hemlock Mountain got its name and how it's not really a mountain but a big hill. Johnathan is introduced as well as his large family. Most aren't named, but are listed just as a cousin or an aunt. Johnathan's mother can cook well and always feeds her family and the extended family that wafts through. She wishes sometimes they wouldn't just come through to eat.

Analysis

This the chapter where all the characters and the setting is put in place, and the author also establishes the mood of the story. From the start of the book the reader can tell the main character and narrator is a young child due to the lack of sophistication of the speech. Johnathan has a mother who cooks for all her family and anyone who drops by. She demonstrates the theme of Family in that even though she is constantly busy cooking, and it's tiring, she still does it. From the list of foods the narrator describes that she cooks, it is easy to infer that they are Living off the Land, another theme.

The story itself is set during a time period before electricity and modern conveniences such as radio, television, or phones. When families get together they tend to stay around for a while since there may be many miles between neighbors and relatives. Some have not seen their families for many years because they live in another state. John's mother seems to be the glue that holds the rest of the family and the extended family together. However, she has not expected that so many would be coming for the christening and realizes that she needs a bigger pot. This sets up the initial conflict in the story and sets the story moving forward. Without this problem to solve, there would be no story, it could be argued.

Discussion Question 1

Who does Johnathan have to spend time with and be friends with?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the theme of Family introduced in this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

How can the reader infer that most of the people living in the mountains live off of the land?

Vocabulary

turnip, hemlock, winter, yearn, meaningful, beautiful



Chapter 2

Summary

Johnathan looks up to his Uncle James, who is older by a few years. James is very cunning, attentive, and notices animals very quickly. John is very fond of these qualities. One day James leads John to the stream to see raccoons washing themselves. They sit and talk for a while and John asks James if he has seen a bear. James states he has but it was a long time ago. John wants nothing more than to see a bear.

Analysis

In this chapter the reader is introduced to John's best friend and uncle, James. James is fourteen and just a little older than John. Johnathan looks up to James and loves to go watch animals with him. James is what John wants to be, especially because James is observant of animals and John loves animals. John eventually asks about bears and how he always has wanted to see one. This is foreshadowing later events when he comes face to face with a bear. James states he saw one once but it was before John was born. By James and John being friends the reader can pick up on that the families are cut off from outsiders, and that there are others living around them but at a great distance. This introduces the theme of Isolation.

Discussion Question 1

What do both James and John have in common? What interests do they share?

Discussion Question 2

How can the reader tell that the younger boy idolizes the older one?

Discussion Question 3

Why would it be an advantage to grow up watching the animals around them?

Vocabulary

rummage, spittle, tobacco, willow, popular, raccoon



Chapter 3

Summary

One of John's cousins is getting christened and it falls to John's mother to fix food for everyone, all twenty of them. John's mother has no idea what to fix. John pipes up and says it should be cookies. His mother likes the idea but her husband can't get the pot she needs from her aunt because he was busy with the farm. So she sends John, instead. John is hesitant because he has heard of bears on Hemlock Mountain. John's mother dismisses his fear and says it is nonsense. John heads out and takes treats for his forest friends.

Analysis

John has a large family and John seems to be one of the older cousins close in age to Uncle James. John's mother seems to always be the one called on to cook and she is called upon to make food for the youngest cousin's christening. John suggests his mom make cookies for everyone. This notion is what sends him to get the pot. John is afraid of the bears on the mountain, but his mother dismisses this as just the jitters. This is a case of seeing something leading to believing of something. In other words, no one has seen bears for many years on the mountain.

John's mother also suggests that James tells lies or stories to upset John sometimes. John takes food for the small animals in the woods showing that he is tenderhearted. The theme of Isolation is demonstrated in this chapter as the reader sees that it is not a simple matter of scooting over to a relative's home or to a store for a pot. In fact, it is a very large task, and not simple. However, John's mother believes that he can manage it, and she sends him off to run the errand. She has faith in him that he is old enough to handle the trip.

Discussion Question 1

Why did John's mother believe that he could accomplish the chore of fetching the pot?

Discussion Question 2

What caused John's mother to tell him that there were no bears on the mountain?

Discussion Question 3

Why does John's mother think that James has told John about bears?

Vocabulary

bunch, footprints, stew, rifle, buckshot



Chapter 4

Summary

After John leaves the house and has been gone for a few hours his mother naturally begins to worry about his safety. John's mother begins to sing the same tune, coincidentally, that John is also singing. When John gets to the top of the mountain he sits to give out his treats to his woodland friends, which include raccoons, squirrels, and birds.

Analysis

John's mother worries like any respectable parent would, and to calm herself she sings to the beat while she cooks. This is also seen in John when he feels nervous about being alone. John takes solace in the fact that the friendly creatures of the woods are there to keep him company. John fights being lonely most of his trip up the mountain, and this shows he is not used to being alone for long stints. The theme of Isolation is demonstrated, again, as the reader sees that John is all alone in the woods, running this errand. His mother's worry underscores the fact that something could happen to him and provides some foreshadowing that something might indeed come up.

Discussion Question 1

What sorts of things could happen to John on this trip?

Discussion Question 2

Why does John take crumbs and bits of food with him into the woods?

Discussion Question 3

What made John's mother make up a song about there not being bears on the mountain?

Vocabulary

lonely, hopping, crunch



Chapter 5

Summary

John is startled by the fact that spring is so close, and he knows bears only hibernate for the winter. John is so excited to see a bear, and now that reality has hit him, he realizes how scary that encounter would be. John panics and moves quicker to his Aunt's. This may contribute to his forgetfulness in the next chapter. The author focuses on the isolation John is experiencing by bringing the reader's attention to the sound of John footsteps. It is very quiet on the mountain and all John can hear is his footsteps in the snow until he hears water dripping, signaling the return of spring. John becomes nervous since he has learned from his mom about bears in hibernation. This spurs John onwards to his aunt's house.

Analysis

John is startled by the fact that spring is so close and he knows bears only hibernate for the winter. The reader sees that John is having major regrets about wanting to actually see a bear. He's thinking about what that would really be like and he frightens himself. John panics and moves quicker to his Aunt's. This may contribute to his forgetfulness in the next chapter. Isolation is demonstrated in this chapter again, reinforced by the fact that John is all alone in the deep woods if something bad should happen. There is no one there to help him.

Discussion Question 1

Why does John become afraid?

Discussion Question 2

What does the dripping water mean to John?

Discussion Question 3

Why does John pick up the pace when he starts thinking about his situation?

Vocabulary

muster, quickened, footfall, generally



Chapter 6

Summary

Now John has found that the snow has already begun to melt on the other side of the mountain. The snow causes him to sink down, which slows his fast pace. Once he arrives at his aunt's house he is greeted by her and she seems worried that he came across the mountain by himself. She gives him cookies and milk and thoroughly exhausted he lays down to rest. Time slips by all the while.

Analysis

The melting snow has only made John become more stressed about the bears waking up, but he cannot go faster because the snow slows him down. Once he gets to his aunt's house she is worried and nervous for him to have come there. This immediate worry is a sign of the fact she knows there could have been danger on the mountain. This shows the difference between his mother, who did not seem to consider the danger John was forced into, and his aunt, who shows an awareness of how John could have run into trouble. She offers him milk and cookies by the fire. John is tired from sloshing in the snow, so it is no wonder he takes a nap. John doesn't even tell his aunt why he is there, but goes straight to lay down.

What the reader can infer from this chapter is that John was possibly too young and immature to handle such a chore. Not only did he not stick to the task at hand when he was wasting time playing in the woods feeding the creatures, now that he's at his Aunt's house, he's forgotten to tell her what he came for. Lying down for a rest is one thing, but taking a very long nap while the sun begins to set, is not a very smart thing to do if John wants to stay focused on his assignment. This shows the reader that John does not think ahead and it is going to get him into trouble.

Discussion Question 1

What should John have done instead of taking a nap?

Discussion Question 2

Why is his aunt shocked to see him?

Discussion Question 3

What probably contributed to John's tiredness?

Vocabulary

shyness, fancy, bubbling, gentle, hush



Chapter 7

Summary

John wakes in a fright because he has fallen asleep and he still has a long way to go to get home. John rushes out of the door and has gone quite a distance when he realizes he has forgotten the cast iron pot his mother sent him to get in the first place. He realizes he has no choice and heads back to get it. As his aunt watches him leave, she says he needs to be careful as there are bears on Hemlock Mountain.

Analysis

When John wakes up he feels scared because he knows he should not have fallen asleep and wasted time. This flusters him to the point he leaves and forgets the reason he even came to his Aunt's house. He has to turn around and get it after leaving and going a distance, which puts him further behind. His Aunt's earlier discussion about bears resurfaces as he takes off again. She warns him about the bears on the mountain. She knows the pot will slow him down and hopes he will make it home. She is shown as a sympathetic ally to John.

Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't John's Aunt keep him at the house?

Discussion Question 2

What had John done to slow himself down?

Discussion Question 3

What other courses of action could John have taken?

Vocabulary

slid, burden, hiked, determined, brow



Chapter 8

Summary

As John walks up the mountain it has become dark. John is starting to sing the song he sang on the way over, "There are no bears," Suddenly in the distance he sees two big figures moving towards him. John has only seconds to think of something, so he digs a small hole and turns the pot over on himself and hides in there and waits.

Analysis

The pot weighs John down and makes it hard for him to even move fast. The song about there being no bears comforts him, but the irony is not lost on the fact that in the middle of the song two bears appear and John has to hide under the pot. Had John forgotten the pot he would have been without the shelter, which keeps him alive. John waits for the bears to pass, and the reader should note that John had always wanted to see a bear; the foreshadowing comes full circle here as he has seen one and it terrifies him.

Several things should be noted here. First, there is the pot. The fact that it belongs to family means that the pot represents safety, belonging, and shelter. The pot literally becomes his safe haven, just as a family can for a person. Thus, one could state that the theme of Family is manifested in the symbolism of the pot. Next, there is the song that John's mother taught him. He sings it to give him courage. However, when he sees the bears, John has the presence of mind to dig a hole, and then tip the pot over on top of himself.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the pot's symbolism.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the irony in this chapter in regards to the song John sings.

Discussion Question 3

How does John show bravery?

Vocabulary

lumbering, foolish



Chapter 9

Summary

The bears approach the pot that John is hiding under. The only thing to keep him calm are the words of his song. The bears start digging at the pot and sniffing. Eventually, John hears his father and his hunting party coming up the mountain towards them. This scares off the bears and John calls out, but the pot is so thick and heavy that he is barely heard.

Analysis

Even though John is in danger he falls back to the song as a tool to calm him down so he doesn't alert the bears. The words of the song are a comfort to John and represent his mother's love. The bears can smell something different in the snow and stop. This causes John to question all his decisions made up until this point. John's dad makes noises coming up the hill and scares off the bears. John is grateful for his father and the other hunters who've rescued him. This demonstrates the theme of Family in that his father came looking for him and brought help. Just like the pot, the men who have shown up to protect him from the bears represent safety and refuge.

Discussion Question 1

How are the men and the pot both representative of the theme of Family?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the bears and why they might have been interested in the pot.

Discussion Question 3

What sorts of decisions has John made up to this point that were good? What bad decisions did he make?

Vocabulary

heavy, foolish, courage, mumbled, hearty



Chapter 10

Summary

When John finally is reunited with his dad after the encounter with the bears, he is relieved to see all of his uncles, too. John's father asks him why the pot is upside down and John tells him it was to hide from the bears. John hears a gunshot and his father says they are having bear steak for dinner. When John gets home he tells his mother there were bears on the mountain.

Analysis

John finally gets to tell his father about the bears and it is apparent his family has been worried about him. The song that John and his mother created is now obsolete because clearly there are bears on the mountain. The theme of living off of the land is demonstrated in that John's uncles shoot the bears for food. This underscores the harsh conditions that the families living on the mountain must endure. It is an environment where danger is just beyond one's own back doorstep. This is obvious with John's encounter with the bears.

Discussion Question 1

What does John's father mean when he says they are having bear steak for dinner?

Discussion Question 2

Is John glad that he was able to finally see bears? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of living off of the land.

Vocabulary

broad, shouldered, gleefully, cheered, followed



Characters

Johnathan (John)

John is around ten years old and lives at the base of Hemlock Mountain. John is the protagonist to the story. In the story he goes over the hill to get a pot from his Aunt and comes face to face with the animal he has always wanted to see, a bear. John has many relatives but the one he is closest to is his Uncle James. Throughout the story John demonstrates his childlike curiosity and fears. John goes through a personal change in his life throughout the story. In the beginning he was told there were no bears yet he always seemed to think there might be, and his fears were confirmed later on.

James

James is 14 and is Johnathan's uncle. James is very cunning and observant of the world around him and a role model to John. They share an interest in the natural surroundings and the wildlife around them. John looks up to James.

John's mother

John's mother is a very good cook. She sends John over the hill to fetch a pot from his Aunt. Her request was the main reason John was on the mountain.

John's father

John's father doesn't have a huge role in the story. He is a farmer and provides for the family. John's father and his hunting party come out to find John when he isn't home before night fall. This shows that John's father worries for John's safety when he is out in potential danger.

Aunt Emma

Aunt Emma is the one who has the pot that John's mother needs to borrow. She is afraid for John and is the only one in the story who states there are bears on Hemlock mountain. She also fed John when he arrived there. She takes care of him and is concerned for him.

Uncle Sam

Uncle Sam was in the search party for John. He left to kill the bears for food.



Uncle James

Uncle James was a member of the search party for John. He left to kill the bears for food.

Uncle Peter

Uncle Peter was in the search party for John and was part of the group that left to kill the bears for food.

Uncle John

Uncle John was in the search party for John. He was part of the party that left to kill the bears for food.

Black Cat

Aunt Emma has a pet black cat who John meets when he visits her house.



Symbols and Symbolism

Hemlock

A symbol used in past poems and history to kill things, hemlock is used in the story to kill an idea of there being no bears on the mountain.

Cast Iron Pot

This is the pot that John had to go over the mountain alone to go get. This pot belongs to Aunt Emma. However, the pot also represents Family and the love and protection that they offer John.

Carrots

The carrots are what John feeds to the wild rabbits on the way up the mountain so he didn't feel so alone.

Spring

Spring is a force of fear to John as he knows the bears wake up in spring and the snow was already melting while he was up on the mountain. Spring is ominous and hints at the danger yet to come.

Milk and Cookies

Milk and cookies are what aided John in falling asleep and leaving Aunt Emma's house so late. They represent something comforting to him.

Christening

The christening is a symbol of being accepted into the Christian religion. Because John's younger cousin was going to be christened, John's mother decides to make a big meal and send John over the mountain to his aunt's house to get a cast iron pot. Thus the christening sets the story in motion.

Bears

Bears symbolized a wild curiosity for John and once he meets them he is afraid of them. The bears also symbolize the power that nature can have over humanity.



Snow

The snow showed John's footprints and embodied his feeling of isolation. Also, because it was so heavy and he kept sinking down in it it also made him physically exhausted.

Aunt Emma's Black Cat

Aunt Emma's black cat is a symbol of bad luck. Black cats are sometimes seen as being unlucky or bringing misfortune. Aunt Emma's black cat represented symbolized that John's bad luck was falling asleep and forgetting the pot. This sparked the events that led to his meeting the bears.

Scarf

The scarf worked to keep the cold off of John. It was crucial to his survival in maintaining his body warmth so he could stay alive.



Settings

John's House

This is where the beginning of the story takes place. John's mother cooks here, and this is where John is tasked with fetching the pot. His home represents comfort and familiarity, a safe refuge from the wilderness. When he leaves he departs from his safe harbor and enters into the unknown.

Hemlock Mountain

Hemlock Mountain is a large hill and is rumored to be free of bears, these rumors were shattered. The mountain is an obstacle for John. It is still capable of the unexpected, as the reader sees at the end of the book when there are actually bears on the mountain.

Aunt Emma's House

This is where John gets the cast iron pot from and where the reader first realizes there might be bears on the mountain. Aunt Emma represents more comfort and sympathy towards John and worries for him being outside on the mountain alone given the danger.

The Forest

This is where a good section of the story takes place as John spends a lot of time feeding the woodland creatures and hiking to and from his and Aunt Emma's house. The forest represents the unknown where anything can happen despite warnings to the contrary. It also gives John a sense of isolation.

Inside the Pot

John hides out from the bears in here. It keeps him safe and envelops him with a place of refuge. Since the cast iron pot comes from his family it shows that his family protects him, and indeed they do since his father and his uncles find John while on a search party for him and save him.



Themes and Motifs

Living off the Land

This theme is seen throughout the whole book. John's whole family are settlers and therefore have to tend to live stock and gardens. When the bears are killed for food the reader can see the harsh reality that you have to either eat the mountain's sources of food or be eaten by them in that time.

Family

Family is an important theme in this book seeing as John has a huge family. The mother always cooks for her family and extended family, and even though she is very tired from doing it, she puts them first. When John takes too long coming home a search party is rounded up and they brave the forest looking for him. Aunt Emma shows fear for his safety going through the woods and prior to that took him in and fed him cookies.

Perseverance

This theme is shown when John faces hard times but pushes on through. When John first is afraid of going over the mountain he gets help calming down from his mother and goes even though he is nervous. The cast iron pot was heavier than he remembered but he continued to bring it back. These examples demonstrate a sense of perseverance.

Isolation

John has to overcome being isolated from everyone for a while and taking care of himself when he climbs up the mountains. The reader can tell it is not a short hike over the mountain as it takes the protagonist almost an entire day and night to get over. The author uses the snow as a way of showing how alone John truly is. The family is also isolated from other people, as shown with John's Aunt Emma living so far away even though she is supposedly a close enough trip for him to go get the cast iron pot.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view is third person omniscient, with the author giving rich, detailed descriptions of the mountain, the protagonist's home, and his interior thoughts. The protagonist is a young 9-year-old boy growing up in the isolated mountains in the late 1800s. The language is appropriate to a child's point of view and the children's novel's audience.

Language and Meaning

The main character of the story is Jonathan, who is a 9-year-old boy growing up in the late 1800s. He lives an isolated life with only his relatives and the woodland creatures, for company. As such, the thoughts and feelings of a young boy from this era are utilized, offering simplistic explanations and motivations for actions taken. The language, for the most part, is easily accessible for the very early and emergent reader, offering a lower lexile score.

Several situations are outlined within the book that readers may not be familiar with, including living off of the land, running a farm, or the way life had to be during the era in which it is set. However, the context clues are strong and well situated to offer meaning and understanding to those words, tools, or idioms that may not be immediately familiar to the modern reader.

Structure

The book is structured with ten chapters, each 3-5 pages long. There are accompanying black and white photos that facilitate understanding of the text and to continue interest for the very early reader. The structure of the book is typical plot diagram, offering the problem, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. The main conflict of the story centers around fear of the bears on Hemlock Mountain and how the protagonist deals with his encounter with the bears.



Quotes

Now Hemlock Mountain was not a mountain at all, it was a hill, and not a very big one. But someone had started calling it Hemlock Mountain, and the name had stuck. Now everyone talked about 'going over Hemlock Mountain.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph page 2)

Importance: This is important because it shows how word of mouth can alter things and lead to misconceptions.

The small creatures could not find enough to eat, but it was not so with Jonathan's aunts and uncles and cousins.

-- Narrator/ Author (Chapter 1 paragraph page 3)

Importance: This quote shows that John and his family were never starving for food and that they could live off the land well.

Young Uncle James had eyes that saw and ears that heard.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph page 5)

Importance: This is referring to how sensitive James' sense of sight and sound was. He could detect even the tiniest of movements, and this would be a valuable thing to have when living in the wilderness area in which they reside.

There is a song sparrow. Do you hear what he says?

-- James (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 5)

Importance: This is not about meaning the sparrow was actually talking but about how it sang and sounded.

Jonathan's mother could cook all the good things the family liked to eat.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 7)

Importance: This explains why she was chosen to cook the Christening dinner. She was a skilled cook and is a nurturer for her family.

There are no bears on Hemlock Mountain, no bears, no bears at all. Of course there are no bears on hemlock mountain. No bears, no bears, no bears, no bears at all.

-- Johnathan and Johnathan's mother (Chapter 4 paragraph page 10)

Importance: This is a song that John and his mom sing when they are trying to stay calm about John going over the mountain. Of course, the song proves to be false as there are in fact bears on Hemlock Mountain. Thus John learns to expect the unexpected.



Jonathan's steps were heavy and slow.
-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 20)

Importance: John was carrying the big pot and it made his footsteps sink in the snow more, so this caused him to move slower. It tired him out, but it also showed his endurance and perseverance through adversity.

There are bears on Hemlock Mountain.
-- John (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 23)

Importance: This is when John is confronted by two huge bears but is saved by his father. This is a total change from the way they all thought of the mountain and probably will change some things concerning safety in the village.

Why did I wait so long at Aunt Emma's? Why did I eat so many cookies? Why did I go to sleep?
-- John (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 30)

Importance: John is regretting sleeping because now he has lost precious time. He shows some self awareness that his carelessness was partially responsible for the dangerous situation at hand.