

# **Deliverance Study Guide**

## **Deliverance by James Dickey**

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# Plot Summary

Deliverance is a novel by James Dickey, an American novelist and poet.

Lewis, Ed, Bobby, and Drew all decide to take a weekend canoe trip down a section of river in the North Georgia wilderness. Though none of them have any experience canoeing, and very little at all in the wilderness, each is bored with life in the city, and Lewis convinces them it is a perfect place for them to escape.

Ed is a graphics designer in his late forties who is unhappy at how quickly he has aged, and is Lewis' closest friend in the entire group. He's been with Lewis on similar trips before, though never this far into the wilderness. Though he has many second thoughts about going on the trip, he is very bored of his life in the city, and wants a chance to escape with Lewis and the others. He also wants to bring his bow along to go hunting, even though it is currently off-season. The four begin their journey in Oree, meeting numerous townsfolk who discourage the trip, but Lewis dismisses all of their concerns.

The first section of the river is simple enough, though all of them, being completely inexperienced in the water, have to learn quickly how to paddle in the rapids. They spend the first night camped out near the river, and Drew plays music for them. The next morning, Ed tries to shoot a deer while hunting but fails to hit it. Bobby is already very annoyed from the conditions in the river, as it is extremely hot and humid, and mosquitoes are everywhere. They continue uncomfortably down the river for some time until Ed signals Lewis on his canoe to pull over so they can rest.

When Ed and Bobby land, they are approached by two men, one holding a shotgun. They grow afraid and try to launch their canoes, but the man holding the gun forces them farther inland. There, Ed is tied up and Bobby is raped by the other man. Afterwards, they nearly assault Ed, but one of the men is killed from an arrow shot by Lewis. The second man escapes into the forest. The four of them decide to bury the body in the river so no one will ever know what happened. From there, they continue on down the river, desperately trying to make it to the town of Ainty as soon as possible.

Just as they enter another series of rapids, Drew is shot in the head and both canoes tip. Lewis' leg is badly broken as he goes under, and when they all manage to float into milder waters, Ed realizes he will have to scale the cliffs to face the killer before he can shoot at them again the next morning. Ed does so, and finds the place where he believes the killer will shoot. A man arrives, falls into the trap Ed has set for him, and is shot, but Ed himself is also badly wounded in the encounter. What is more, neither he nor Bobby can be certain they have gotten the right man.

They make the rest of the way to Ainty, and tell the authorities they lost Drew in a canoeing accident, and focus on keeping their story straight to avoid any suspicions. As the weeks pass, a dam is built over the river and floods the place where Drew's body and the body of the other man are hidden.



# Before

## Summary

Ed, the main character, is sitting at a table in a bar with his friends Bobby, Drew, and Lewis, who explains a dam is about to be built in a section of wilderness that will flood the entire valley. Lewis would like to canoe down that section of river before it is gone forever, and is trying to convince the other three to come along. They are sitting around a map listening to Lewis explain his plans for the trip.

Drew asks how they actually get to the river, and Lewis indicates a town on the map near the river. The town is named Oree. The plan is to enter the river at that town, and come out downriver at another town called Aintry. Drew worries that no one in their group knows anything about the woods. When Lewis asks them all what they will be doing later that afternoon, they all respond with boring, day-to-day affairs of their businesses.

Lewis waits for the group to decide whether or not they will go on the trip. Ed has always planned to go. Drew agrees to go if he can bring a guitar along. Bobby says that he'll go along providing they bring liquor. Ed wants to take his bow. They agree to meet early Friday morning to begin the trip.

Ed runs a graphics design studio with his friend and business associate, Thad. The business prints catalogues and ads for companies around the town. Ed returns to his office after his meeting with Lewis and the others. The model from Kitts awaits him for a photo shoot. Ed calls the photographer, Jack Waskow, to see if he is ready for the shoot. He enters the studio, and Thad is already present, preparing the model and set for the photographs. The model is also present and being prepared by several staff members. They position the model so she is standing where the photo shoot is going to happen. During the shoot, Ed approaches the model and touches her in order to move her in the shot. After they complete the shoot, Ed spends the entire afternoon brainstorming about it and tells Thad he will be taking Friday off.

## Analysis

Ed, Bobby, Drew, and Lewis are all middle-aged men from suburban households with suburban lifestyles. Among them, Lewis is by far the most adventurous. He has taught himself to use the archer's bow and traveled many places the others have not. The canoe trip is his idea, and in fact, Ed has followed him on many occasions. Ed is drawn to Lewis because of his adventurous nature, but does not try to escape the monotony of his own life quite as much as Lewis. Instead, Ed focuses on his graphic design business. It is interesting the reader does not meet Ed's family in the opening chapter of the novel. They are obviously a major part of his life, as he takes note of their photograph in the studio. Lewis seems to have made his point. When he asks all of



them what they will be doing in the afternoon, he is intentionally forcing them to compare their day-to-day routines up against the possibility of the canoe trip in a section of river that is still totally wild, with none of the monotony of life in the city.

The section of the wilderness they intend to travel through represents, at least to Lewis, a chance to reclaim some essence of danger he feels his life lacks. He is constantly testing and challenging himself with these escapes from the reality that he is a middle-aged man stuck in a world of few excitements and too much comfort for his tastes. None of the men have ever been canoeing before, and they have little experience out in the woods, but Lewis seems determined to make the trip nonetheless. Evidence that Lewis wants to experience something primal comes from his expressed intention to hunt deer while they are out along the river.

Ed's musings on his way from the meeting with Lewis color him a more thoughtful person, far more inclined to observe than to act. His life feels motionless and this bothers him for reasons he doesn't expand on. It seems as though he feels nothing important or challenging ever happens in his life, and this bothers him on a very deep level. By his own admission, Ed's employees are the safest when they do not strive toward greatness. The model used for the advertisement is similarly mediocre, at least Ed thinks so by the end of the shoot.

The reader may also notice Ed lies to his partner, Thad, about where he will be on Friday. Thad doesn't seem to care where he will be, which suggests Ed lied to him for some other reason than professional appearances. Perhaps some part of him knows the idea of the trip is ultimately unwise, but doesn't want to argue about it with anyone.

## Vocabulary

steins, terrain, marinas, blanched, gorge, spelunking, mystiques, cynical, capricious, tenacious, notarized, laborious, paraphernalia, meandered, affable, mote



# September 14th

## Summary

Ed wakes in the night. He's in bed at home, next to his wife, Martha. He wakes her up to remind her that Lewis is coming to get him at six-thirty. Martha asks if she's the reason he's going on the trip. He says no, but she is ordinary, and so in a way she is just as much the reason as everything else ordinary.

Ed goes to the living room and looks into a mirror. He sees rapid signs of aging. His wife enters and asks if he's seen Dean, their son. Dean suddenly laughs from where he's hiding behind piles of Ed's camping gear that has been piled up the night before in order to be ready for the canoe trip. Dean rises up behind the pile of equipment holding a knife playfully. Ed takes the knife from him. On top of his gear is his bow, which he'd purchased some time ago, inspired by Lewis, and learned to use quite well.

Martha asks if he knows where he's going, but only Lewis knows where they will be going exactly. Lewis himself arrives with a car full of more gear for the trip. Ed and Lewis load Ed's equipment and say goodbye to Martha and Dean. They pass Drew's car as they begin their journey, which follows them onto the highway.

They drive out to the countryside. Ed falls asleep but manages to hear Lewis speaking, and asks him to repeat something that draws his interest. Lewis tells him that they are going to a small part of the river that is very difficult to get to. Lewis also mentions a series of hills they pass and describes its mysterious inhabitants. Ed responds he doesn't care what mysteries or wonders are up in the hills. Instead, he says he is interested in sliding, which is finding something modest to do and sticking to it and making a life's work out of it.

Lewis says he believes technology and politics will fail someday, and a few men will start over in the hills. He believes survival depends on a man's body. He asks where Ed would go if society collapsed. Ed says he would head toward Florida for the better climate. Lewis responds he would go right where they are going now. Ed asks what life is like up there right now. Lewis says there is a lot of music in the region. Additionally, every family that he knows from the area has at least one member in prison. Lewis went on a hunting trip to the area a few years earlier with a man named Shad Mackey and the two became separated. A man from the area found Lewis. When Shad did not return to the area where they had agreed to meet, the man sent his son out into the wilderness to find him. By that time, it had grown dark, but the boy returned early in the morning with Shad, who had broken his leg. Lewis says he admires the lifestyle that gives a fifteen year-old the ability to drag a wounded man out of the woods.

Lewis has also broken his leg in the region on a fishing trip. The night before he broke his leg, he tells Ed he heard Tom McCaskill. Tom is an old man who goes to random places throughout the hills, gets very drunk, and begins to scream.



They arrive in the town of Oree and look for people to drive their cars downriver. The first man they find is an old farmer. Ed glances at his bow after realizing this trip will take him as far into the wilderness as he has ever been. Drew asks the old man if they can take the river to Ainty. The old man recommends against doing so, but Lewis sharply ignores him. Another man asks about Drew's guitar, and then tells a friend to get his banjo. Drew and Lonnie, the man with the banjo, play their instruments for a while. At the end, Drew asks for his address. The old man tells them they can't get to the river from anywhere in town because the riverbank is too steep there. The four of them drive to a garage in order to ask the workers there to drive the cars down to Ainty so that they will be waiting when they arrive there. The first mechanic they meet has cut his hand, and he also recommends against going down the river.

From the garage station, Lewis and Ed drive off and get lost almost immediately. They return to Drew's car and the mechanics mock Lewis and tell him to try to find the river again. Ed and Lewis once again go off-road in search of the river, and are finally able to locate it by the sound of rushing water. They find a place to launch their canoes and give their vehicles to the mechanics. Drew announces he'll be in Ed's canoe. From there, they launch and have to spend a short while figuring out how to steer.

They travel downstream past plastic bottles and waste from a poultry processing plant. They enter a section of shallow rapids and suddenly find themselves in danger of running into rocks all around them. They find a landing site for their canoes and unload their camping gear in the evening. Bobby and Drew aren't helpful, but Ed wants to sleep so he decides to unload gear related to sleeping while Lewis takes care of the rest. Once camp is set, Ed takes out his bow and greases it. Lewis builds a fire and they all eat dinner. After a while, Drew gets his guitar and begins to play.

Ed wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of something on the tent. He grabs the flashlight and finds that the top of the tent has been torn open by the talons of an owl who has come to rest on it. Ed reaches up and touches the claws before the owl flies away, but it spends the rest of the night hunting and returning to the tent.

## Analysis

The characters have entered the wild, which represents a stark contrast from their lives in the city. This is a major reason Ed in particular is going on the trip. He claims to be a day-to-day sort of person, and argues with Lewis frequently about his outlook on life, but Ed's lack of patience for everything ordinary suggests something in wrong about his own outlook.

Part of Ed's problem is middle-age. He looks at himself in the mirror and realizes he is aging quickly. In fact, Lewis remarks later on the trip that they won't be able to do things like this canoe trip much longer.

The car trip to the wilderness where they plan to begin their canoe trip is a gradual progression from civilization to the wild, and the conversation between Lewis and Ed



about the hillside and its inhabitants is foreshadowing future events. Lewis' curiosity of the hillside and desire to relocate there in the event of disaster is brought about by his fascination with the mysterious culture there and his desire to be self-sufficient, for the people of the hills are nothing if not self-sufficient.

There is, however, a dark-side to life in the wild. So many families have members in prison because life in the wild is harsher, and its inhabitants must be harsher as a result. Similarly, Ed and his companions are regarded with suspicion and contempt in the town of Oree. Lewis may want to live in the hills if society collapses, but the present inhabitants look down on his desire to test the river.

The beginning of the canoe trip is free of danger, though difficult. At this stage of the journey, Ed is both gripped with fascination at the beauty of his surroundings and aware of the potential dangers. Though he and Drew manage to navigate through the rapids, they are clumsy and Ed has to direct Drew to keep his paddle to one side while they run dangerously close to the rocks. Lewis and Bobby fare a little better, coming out of the rapids before them. Drew remarks he might be able to learn something from Lewis after all. Even out of the rapids they face challenges trying to find a place to land and unload their gear in the dark. If one of the canoes tips, they could lose supplies or even the canoe, which will go under if it takes on too much water.

Once landed, Bobby and Drew do little to help unload because they are simply along for the trip and have no idea what to do. The reader is never given the reasons Lewis invited these two on the trip, and they seem more out of place than Lewis, or even Ed, but Drew at least has a musical ability that the group enjoys greatly.

The owl perched on the tent represents the danger in the wilderness. Ed thinks it is a deformed hand when he first sees it. This suggests he is already afraid of the people in the hills. However, when he discovers it is the foot of an owl, he reaches up to touch it. He does this all night long whenever the owl comes to perch. He does this for the very same reason he came on the trip. Ed, like Lewis, is tired of safety, bored of life in the city, and willing to risk danger in the wild.

## Vocabulary

vane, normalcy, deliverance, oxbow, incessantly, helical, evasive, galvanized, dulcimers, narcissistic, eccentric, fanaticism, inconsequential, liable, instinctive, materialized, approximately, stagnant, gully, phosphorescent





# September 15th

## Summary

Ed wakes throughout the night. He leaves the tent in the morning to find it is foggy and warm outside. He grabs his bow and begins walking. The fog is very thick, and he has difficulty finding his way around. He begins to worry about falling into the river or getting lost. Suddenly, he spots a small deer. He shoots, but the deer hears the bow and dodges the shot. Ed tries to shoot again, but his nerves are a wreck and he's not able to do so.

He returns to the camp and finds Lewis awake, trying to start a fire. Lewis notices Ed is missing arrows, and Ed tells him about missing the deer. Lewis criticizes the miss and upsets Ed. As they prepare to board the canoes after breakfast, Ed suggests they change canoe partners, since Bobby is in a bad mood and probably can't handle Lewis at this point. As Ed and Bobby launch, Ed immediately realizes they are going to have a difficult day. Both are out of shape, and Bobby completely lacks coordination. Their canoe is too heavy so Ed signals for Lewis to pull ashore so they can exchange equipment. Lewis decides to go for a swim. Ed and Drew join him. Feeling refreshed, they re-enter their canoes and Ed finds the way much easier now that his load has been so greatly lightened.

Ed becomes very uncomfortable out on the river. It is hot out and he's sore from being in the canoe for so long. He signals Lewis to pull over again. Ed and Bobby land on the riverbank, and two men suddenly step out of the woods. One of them holds a shotgun. Bobby greets them, but they remain silent as they approach. Ed tells them that they are headed towards Ainty, and one of the men responds the river does not lead there. An argument ensues, and although Ed tries to convince them they mean no trouble, the shotgun is pointed at him as he attempts to leave. The men direct him into the woods, remove his gear, tie him up and cut him with his own knife. The two men return to Bobby and force him to lie down at gunpoint. The older man rapes Bobby while Ed watches helplessly.

Ed has been watching the river behind them and knows that Lewis and Drew have landed nearby. The two men return to Ed and untie him. As they force him to lie on the ground, the man holding the gun is pierced through the heart with an arrow and falls to the ground. The other man escapes immediately. Lewis appears in the clearing and tells Ed how he knew there was a problem. They try to decide what to do with the body. Drew says that they need to take it downriver to Ainty and explain what happened to the authorities. Lewis insists he's as good as dead, and if they turn his body over to authorities there will be an investigation and almost certainly a trial, the jurors of which would come from this area. Lewis wants to avoid this for two main reasons. First, the man probably has family all over the hills. Second, the locals in the area are very angry about the dam that is about to be built, and Lewis fears they might take out their frustrations on the four of them as city-folk.



Since they will almost certainly be put on trial if the body is found, they have to hide it in a place where no one will look for it. Drew argues against the plan. Lewis announces that they are putting it to a vote. Bobby agrees to hide the body, and although he's not initially certain, Ed agrees Lewis has a point and decides to go along with burying the body somewhere. Drew and Ed drag the body back towards the canoes. They load the body into one of them and go back upstream to find a place to hide it. There is a creek they mean to use in order to bury the body, and they come across it after twenty minutes or so. Once there, they drag the corpse to land and bury it in a patch of mud. Ed nearly changes his mind after the deed is complete, and suddenly finds himself desperately wanting to dig up the body.

Lewis leads them back to the creek and reminds them they have a long way to go. Lewis takes Bobby in his Canoe and Ed takes Drew. Ed is to take the lead, and he takes his bow back from Lewis because he wants a weapon with him from now on.

As they continue downriver, the banks on either side grow incredibly steep. They are deep enough inside the river that darkness falls on them very quickly. They suddenly find themselves in a series of rapids. As they round a corner, something happens to the back of Drew's head and they lose control of their canoe. Ed manages to grab the bow, but falls out of the craft into the river. He looks behind to see Lewis and Bobby collide with the abandoned canoe and the two of them are thrown out into the river. Ed is being pulled by the current as his leg smashes into a rock. A little farther downstream, he sees the canoes collide again and the wooden one is smashed apart. He realizes there is no way they ever could have made it down this section of the river in canoes, as the rapids were far too violent.

Ed stops himself in a calm section of water. Bobby crashes in behind him shortly after, and he asks him if he's seen Lewis, who floats down the river shortly. His leg has been badly broken and Ed has to swim out to retrieve him to keep him from floating downriver. Once they are on dry land, Lewis says that Drew was shot and killed. Ed leaves to get the canoe that wasn't destroyed on the river. He returns with it and a broken paddle.

Lewis and Ed both understand they are being stalked by the man who escaped from the clearing earlier that day, and that the same man is very likely waiting for them on top of the riverbank with his gun. Lewis says someone has to climb the ridge and surprise the man before he can shoot at them again tomorrow morning. Ed realizes he's the one who has to do it. He tells Bobby to leave very early the next day, and begins making his way up the gorge to the top of the riverbank. As he climbs the rock, the way becomes more and more difficult, and he nearly loses his bow.

## Analysis

At the beginning of this chapter, Ed is still thinking and acting like a person from the city. He misses the deer from very close range because he is nervous about the shot. Lewis asks where his steady buddy is. This reveals a bully-like aspect of Lewis' character, and



in fact he convinces everyone to go on the trip in the first place by suggesting they are not man enough to do so. Ed did not begin his morning walk with thoughts of hunting, but does so out of a desire to impress Lewis, who he clearly admires.

Bobby's discomfort in the wild serves to highlight the sense of isolation and restriction they are all currently facing. When they board the canoes, Ed and Bobby face difficulties from Bobby's sense of urgency. After a single night of mosquitos he's fed up with the place, but there's no way for any of them to get home easily. The trip has been poorly planned, and Lewis has based their chances for success almost completely on his physical abilities. Ed is worried about Bobby paddling too hard, and realizes more than Lewis they are at the mercy of the river.

So far, the four have not yet encountered anyone else during their journey, and most likely did not expect to. The only difficulties they have had to face come from nature, and these prove challenging enough. The impersonality of the river, as Ed calls it, gives the reader a sense that, in stark contrast to civilization, the wild is unorganized and dangerous. Rapids occur suddenly and without warning. Just as suddenly, hillside natives appear while Ed and Bobby land to rest.

The reader knows very little about the two natives, aside from what Lewis has told us about the society in which they live. Their assault on Bobby and Ed happens very quickly, and Ed believes they have done things like this before because they bind him to the tree in expert fashion, like they have done it before.

The reader is not given a reason for the assault. The only reason the natives have for attacking them, in fact, is they feel they can get away with it. There had been a general feeling of contempt for the four of them back in the town of Oree above, which came across as a feeling of suspicion and dislike for people accustomed to life in the city. This contempt has become outright hatred for them in the wild. It is little surprise to the reader that Lewis strikes the older man down with the bow, even if it comes as something of a surprise to Ed. Lewis has sought a test of his ability to survive for years now, and has found the perfect test of his skills in the clearing with Ed and Bobby. Lewis insists killing the man was the only option he had, but there is a deeper reason related to the conversation he held with Ed about survival earlier. He confirms this as the four discuss what to do with the body of the man. According to Lewis, the law does not exist up here. They are in complete control over what happens next, despite Drew's strong protests.

In the aftermath of the assault, Bobby is completely gripped by trauma, and in fact, Lewis is the only one able to think clearly. Ed recognizes this, and agrees with Lewis because they know too little about what will happen to them if they contact authorities about the incident. Lewis predicts a very disturbing outcome if they were to take the body with them downriver and try to explain what happened to the police. The possibility of trial by jury is what forces Ed to make his decision to bury the body. He hates making this decision, but feels it is the only way to protect himself, the others, and his family. He is strongly torn between the two options, as evidenced by his sudden desire to dig the body up after they've buried it.



Bobby and Drew are now completely unable to cope with life in the wilderness. They came along for reasons that had nothing to do with Lewis' test of his own strength and ability to survive. Ed, however, came along for a different reason entirely. Ed is a strong observer and more thoughtful than the others. He'd wanted to see Lewis' ability to travel down the river and measure up to it in some way. Until Drew is shot and the canoes fling all of them into the river, he has not measured up in any way. His failure to defend Bobby has convinced him the river is no place to be, and as they resume with their journey, he is only concerned with escape.

In fact, the four of them are so preoccupied with getting to Aintry, they take almost no precautions when they continue downriver. Not even Lewis knows what the rest of the river will be like, but the man who escaped does. Lewis believes the rest of the river will be easy to travel, but as the four head desperately down the river and Drew is shot, Ed falls into the river and realizes they never had a chance making it through this section in their canoes.

This is ultimately Lewis' failure, and he assumes far less importance throughout the rest of the novel. The other three trusted his ability to get them through the river, and even if Drew hadn't been shot before they entered the extreme section of rapids, they would have lost their canoes and perhaps their lives at this point. Lewis' underestimation of the river is critical, for all the exercise in the world doesn't protect him from a severely broken leg, and as they are dumped into a calm section of water, he is too powerless to bring himself out of the water without Ed's help. Ed realizes with horror there's a good chance the three of them only managed to survive because they were thrown out of their canoes before they hit the rapids. Drew's death, then, helped ensure their survival.

Ed is hurt himself, though nothing is broken. Bobby is too emotionally affected by the trip's events to do anything, and Lewis is seriously injured. Ed must continue on in Lewis' place as their hope for survival, and unlike Lewis, he is not reckless. Instead, he slides, which he described earlier as finding modest things to do and sticking to them. He understands a man is waiting up on the cliffs to kill them in the morning, and the only chance they have for survival is for him to climb those cliffs and lie in wait for him.

## Vocabulary

sorghum, salvaging, wallowed, moccasin, heron, hysterical, mottled, emphasis, quailed, abrasions, void, justify, cringed, vivid, squall, manslaughter, repulsive, conventional, conspiratorial, necessity



# September 16th

## Summary

Ed rests at the base of the cliff for a while before continuing. He looks down at the river before climbing up on the cliff. He thinks about having to kill the man up there for a long time, and finally climbs to a place where he is able to move forward on his knees until he makes it to a small canyon and is finally able to stand.

Ed realizes the man will probably shoot at them while they are in calm water, and tries to second guess the man as to where he will decide to take his shot. He finds such a place, hidden by boulders but easier to get to from inland. He decides to do his best to prepare for the man's coming, even though he understands the odds of his finding the exact place the man will wind up are small. He decides to do his best to protect Bobby and Lewis before trying to escape the wilderness. He finds a place to hide up in a tree and sets a trap for the man, then waits until morning.

Despite his efforts to stay awake and alert, he is exhausted and drops his arrow to the ground. He climbs down the tree to search for it, and just when he thinks it is lost, he manages to find it in the darkness. It has fallen just under where he hung his bow, and he climbs back up the tree to wait once more.

Suddenly, he hears someone approaching, and sees a man walking towards his hiding place. The man is studying the ground and holding a shotgun. He moves into Ed's shot and Ed fires just before the man sees him. Suddenly there is a loud noise and Ed falls out of the tree, stabbing himself with another arrow as he falls. He hits the ground and the man fires again. Ed looks over a rock to see him staggering around. The man fires the gun again, but without even taking aim. Ed sees that he's hit the man with the arrow just under his neck, but Ed's injuries for his own arrow wound cause him to pass out.

When he regains consciousness, he finds the man is missing. He pulls the shaft of the arrow out of himself, but it gets stuck and he has to cut it out with the knife. Then, he follows the trail of blood to the man he shot. He discovers this man is wearing a badge. The man who attacked them the day before had no teeth, and suddenly Ed is unsure he's killed the right person. He takes the body back to the clearing, then looks down at the river and sees the canoe with Lewis and Bobby on it. They have just left, which means Bobby did not do his part to ensure their survival. Furious, Ed aims the dead man's shotgun down at him, and nearly fires. Instead, he throws the gun down into the water. He climbs some rocks and waves to catch Bobby's attention, then goes through the man's belongings and discovers he's an honorary sheriff's deputy. He throws his arrows and bow into the river and uses the rope to lower the body down. He climbs down the ridge, even more exhausted than he was before, but the rope breaks and he falls the rest of the way. He surfaces next to Lewis, who is very ill from his injury.



Ed scolds Bobby for not leaving sooner. Bobby explains he couldn't move Lewis' body that early because it was too dark. Ed shows Bobby his arrow wound, which has been torn open from the fall. Bobby sees the body and asks if it is the right man, and Ed responds that he's not sure. They tie rocks around it and dump it in the river. Ed expects to find a bridge very soon, but it does not appear in front of them. Instead, they find Drew's body caught on some rocks, and even though the wound on his head does not look like it is from a shotgun, Ed realizes they cannot take chances and will have to drop that body in the river as well.

Afterward, they suddenly pick up speed and enter a series of extreme rapids. From the sound of it, Ed fears that they might be entering a series of falls. They round another corner and face the most severe patch of rapids they've encountered on the trip. After they escape from it, Ed tells Bobby that's where they need to say they lost Drew. A cow appears on the side of the river. Bobby wants to turn in because that's a sign there's a farm nearby, but Ed wants to continue on until they come across a bridge. They find one after another hour and get out. Ed goes to look for help and leaves Bobby with Lewis. Ed finds a gas station and enters it. The teenager at the station calls an ambulance for him, and he loses consciousness briefly. He's awakened by the ambulance driver and wants to take him to Bobby and Lewis but is too weak to move. Instead, he's put inside the ambulance and taken to where Bobby and Lewis are waiting. The police arrive, and Ed tells them the story he's prepared for them. They are all taken to the hospital, where the doctor examines his arrow wound and dresses it. From there, he calls his wife and explains the situation, then he's driven to where the vehicles were left and drives to Biddiford's, where he gets food and lodging, and meets back up with Bobby.

## Analysis

Unlike the incident with the deer the previous day, Ed is completely focused on climbing the rock. Previously, he'd been very aware of the aches and pains in his body, and he'd allowed them to slow his progress, but his survival instinct has taken hold and while he is still aware of the pain, it comes second in his drive to reach the top of the cliff. Bobby, on the other hand, is still totally unable to cope with the situation, and Ed knows it. That is why Ed has to be the one to climb the riverbank and wait for the shooter, aside from the fact that he is the only one other than Lewis who knows how to use a bow.

Ed has transformed from a man comfortable with the daily routine and safety of life in a city into a man willing to face great odds in order to save his own life and the lives of the people with him. There is no physical transformation here, but the emotional change he goes through is best shown through his treatment of Bobby. Ed threatens to kill him on the river if he does not do exactly as he says. He has little respect for the man anymore, and views his inability to leave when he was supposed to as weakness. Just as Lewis was wrong about survival coming down to physical strength and ability, Ed was right about sliding. He takes no greater risks than must be taken in order to survive and escape the situation unharmed. Instead, he controls what he can and leaves the rest behind. Where Lewis failed, Ed succeeds through a combination of intelligence and willpower. Even Lewis remarks Ed does everything better than he could have.



Once Ed reaches the top of the riverbank and searches for the most likely place for the shooter to strike, he feels as though his mind joins with the shooters'. This is where most of Ed's transformation takes place, and in fact is what nearly leads him to shoot Bobby in the canoe. This is also very likely how the killer was able to find them. After all, the river only goes in one direction, and it would make perfect sense for the shooter to go downriver and lie in wait.

Ed and Bobby are never able to determine if the man Ed shoots was in fact the man they had been waiting for. The entire encounter with him the day before is jumbled, and neither can be sure that they've killed the right man. Additionally, the man was studying the ground as he approached Ed, most likely looking at the tracks Ed himself had left. He studied them without much caution, which seems to suggest he didn't consider himself to be in any danger. This does not reflect the attitude of a man who has already lost a companion to the group of people he is now hunting, but then again, he simply may not have thought he was in any danger. The discovery of the deputy badge does nothing to resolve the situation, and only serves to worry Ed that people from the area might come in search of the man.

Their uncertainty deepens when they find Drew's body. The wound on his head may or may not be a gunshot, and even though Lewis insists that it is a graze, it does not look like a rifle blast. Ed cannot take any chances that it is a real gunshot wound, however, for fear that experts will examine the wound and ask questions about it. Before they dispose of the body, Ed says he was the best of all of them. He says this in part at Bobby because he has lost patience with the man, but Drew was in many ways friendlier and more approachable than any of them, as evidenced by the music he played with the native before they left on their canoes. Drew had a constantly cheerful attitude before they were attacked, and refused to accept Lewis' idea of burying the first man's body in the mud.

The story they tell is extremely important, and Ed understands this more than Bobby. If they tell different versions or don't agree on points, it is very likely the authorities will question them further. When they first arrive in Aintree, they have little trouble convincing authorities of their story. By all appearances, the three of them have been in a great tragedy. After all, the river is an extremely dangerous place to go, and bad things happen out there to people all of the time.

## Vocabulary

bristling, adrenaline, indifference, quivered, crevice, exhilarating, disconcerting, margin, bootlegger, persistent, concealment, hysteria, thrummed, jugular, blundering, honorary, catapult, hectoring, superimposed, cretinous

# After

## Summary

Ed goes to Bobby's room in the morning, tells him to buy new clothes and revisits the story they're giving people. Bobby says someone asked about the canoe that was destroyed and Ed realizes the authorities have probably found it higher than where they said they lost it. They change their story as a result. From there, they visit Lewis at the hospital, who is being guarded by patrolmen from the highway police who separate them and take Ed and Bobby back into town with them.

From there, a search party is organized for Drew. The group heads upriver towards the extreme rapids and Ed says they should start the search there. A group of people, mostly farmers, set out with hooks on ropes to drag the river in search of the body. Someone approaches Ed and asks him why he wanted to canoe down the river in the first place. Ed responds they were bored with city life and wanted to see the river before it was dammed up. The man says they won't find the body here, but instead will find it higher up. It turns out the man speaking to him is a deputy, and Ed demands to see the sheriff. When the sheriff approaches, the deputy reveals his brother-in-law has gone missing in the area, and he suspects Ed and the others are involved. After an entire day of looking, the search party barely makes any progress. The sheriff says they will search again tomorrow and Ed and Bobby can come, but are not required to.

Ed and Bobby go back to the hospital and say goodbye to Lewis. They wait for the sheriff, who arrives with the same deputy that accused them earlier. Again, the deputy insists they had something to do with his disappearance, but the sheriff dismisses the accusations.

Ed wakes early the next day and gets Bobby. They return to the sheriff's station for Lewis' car and ask him to send word to the people in Oree about the money they owe for the cars. The sheriff tells them never to come back up this way again. Ed retrieves the canoe with the car, even though Bobby is terrified of it. As they pull it out of the river, Ed sees people pulling coffins out of the grounds of a small cemetery. A child tells him that they are pulling the bodies out before the dam is built.

He instructs Bobby to tell Lewis' wife about the river accident, then goes to Drew's car to drive it back. When he arrives home, Martha asks him what happened on the river, and then sees the wound on his stomach. Ed tells her he did it to himself, then asks her to follow him over to Drew's house so he can explain what happened. He decides to go to work the next day, even though Martha asks him not to. He waits for the next several weeks to hear anything of the search for Drew's body, but nothing ever comes up about it and the dam is built.





## Analysis

Ed still desperately tries to protect himself and his friends from discovery and prosecution. The deputy's brother-in-law did go missing in the same area where he killed the man on the riverbank, and the reader might agree the two men are in fact the same person. However, Ed is uncertain. The man he killed had a badge identifying him as "Stovall," when the deputy referred to his brother-in-law as "Benson." This could just be the difference between his first and last name, and again, even if he was the deputy's brother-in-law, he wasn't necessarily an innocent person.

The transformation Ed undergoes on the river stays with him through his life. He is more successful as a businessman, and develops a strong friendship with a former employee who he had let go because the man aspired to greatness. As the sheriff requests, he never returns to Oree or Aintry, though he does spend his summers on a lake clear across the other side of the state.

## Vocabulary

jibe, outboard, sedation, levitated, inexorable, unfathomable, gullies, indignation, capsized, gunwales, incriminating, inundation, sinuous



# Characters

## Ed Gentry

Ed is a middle-aged graphic designer used to life in the city. He is very good friends with Lewis, though he strongly disagrees with much of the other man's outlook. He is steady, practical, and thoughtful, but the ordinariness of life in the city is bothering him. He undergoes a profound transformation on the river, using his practical-mindedness to save himself, Lewis, and Bobby, from the dangers of the wild and the man trying to kill them. Despite the fact that he is stabbed with his own arrow and suffers many other smaller injuries, he manages to get everyone but Drew out of the river and back to civilization.

## Lewis Medlock

Lewis is also a middle-aged man from the city, but has kept himself in very good shape, and goes on trips like the canoe trip he proposes to the group often. He wants to see the area before it disappears underwater, but he drastically underestimates the danger he places himself and the others in by doing so. Lewis is adventurous, but careless and often acts like a bully to those around him.

Lewis breaks his leg when Drew is shot, and from then on is powerless to help Ed on their journey. The trip changes Lewis in a different way from Ed. Lewis no longer acts or believes like he will live forever, and takes far fewer risks with his life.

## Drew Ballinger

Drew is a soft-drink executive who plays the guitar. He is friendly and maintains a good sense of humor until Lewis insists they bury the body of the man who attacked them out in the wilderness. He is shot in the head the evening of the second day, and when Ed recovers the body, he remarks Drew was what was best in all of them.

## Bobby Trippe

Bobby is an insurance salesman who Ed describes as ill-mannered and unpleasant. He is raped by the people who attack them along the river, and totally unable to cope with the situation he's been forced into.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Bows and Arrows**

Both Ed and Lewis know how to use a bow. The instrument saves their lives twice, but is also extremely dangerous, as when Ed stabs himself with one of the arrows.

### **Broken Legs**

Lewis has broken his legs in this same area prior to this trip. Another one of his friends became stranded overnight from a broken leg.

### **The River**

The Cahulawassee is a fictional river. Most of the novel takes place either on it or near its banks.

### **Canoes**

The canoes are the group's only way of transporting down the river. They are difficult to steer, especially since no one in the group has any experience doing so.

### **Oree**

This is the small town from which the group takes one of their canoes.

### **Aintry**

This is the town where the group lands their canoes and re-enters society.

# Themes

## Man versus Nature

The four men are constantly with odds with their surroundings while on the river. The current could sweep them into the river at any moment, the air is hot and muggy, and full of mosquitoes. The canoes themselves are uncomfortable and very difficult to manage. The four men are hopelessly stuck along the river once they set out. They cannot turn back because the river is too fast. Once they enter the river, they have to see the trip through until they reach Ainty.

The climate is bad enough, but there are also dangerous animals along the way, most notably snakes, which hang along the trees as they make their way down the river. These snakes are called water-moccasins, and are extremely poisonous. Lewis also sees an owl land on their tent in the night. The wilderness, as Lewis sees it, is a place to test one's ability to survive, but he is only partially correct, for the river is unpredictable, and in certain places there is simply no way they can go through it with their canoes.

## Man versus Man

Just as the men must face dangers in the wild from nature, they must face the other men who mean to kill them. The two men who attack Ed and Bobby on the riverbank are clearly from the area, and made to personify everything that is evil about the people who live there. These are men who mean to kill the entire group because they can, and ultimately Ed must face one of them in order to survive.

The confrontation is not entirely a physical one. Ed has to use his knowledge of the situation in order to outsmart his would-be killer, and manages to do so only because he was able to keep his wits intact and stay focused on the task at hand. Even more so than their struggles against nature, their ability to survive against hostile men depends on their ability to use every one of their available resources.

## Hubris

Lewis assumes a great arrogance in deciding to travel down the river without knowing what it will hold. His entire character is overconfident and steeped in misplaced pride in his own abilities. In a sense, it is this singular act, which the other three agree too, that the natives of the town of Oree take offense to, and eventually they are all punished in the wilderness, by the river itself and by an even deeper form of hubris. Hubris is constantly present in their struggles against nature. The reason that Ed fails to kill the deer is that at that stage of his journey, he is incapable doing such a thing, because he lacks the ability to commit hubris. When it becomes necessary to do so, he does not embrace the reality so eagerly as Lewis, and this is what allows him to save his friends.



The men who attack the four men on their canoe trip similarly act with extraordinary arrogance. Their assault on their victims derives from their desire to see the men shamed for no other reason than to produce the shame itself. Acts of hubris classically involve sexual assaults or mutilations of corpses, and by the end of the novel, each of the characters has either been shamed in such a way or committed just such a crime.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is a first person narrative told from Ed, a middle-aged man who recounts events in chronological order. This narration is held steady throughout the novel. Other characters tell Ed stories of things that once happened, but we never leave the point of view of this character.

The point of view of the novel gives the reader both a sense of being closely in tune with Ed's thoughts and desires at any moment, and also draws the reader's attention to points in the novel where important emotions or observations get left out. As an example of the latter, Ed seems to worry very little about whether or not the man he killed was the right one, but that is naturally a larger concern to the reader, who would like to believe that he did the right thing in killing him. Also, when he says that Drew was the best of all that was in them, he does not say why, and the reader is left to speculate why he said it.

## Setting

The novel is set primarily on a fictional river in Georgia during the late 1960s. The time the canoe trip took place is critical to the understanding of the novel, as people in a more modern society would have had ready access to better forms of communication and safety. At the time this story took place, canoeing was highly uncommon, and not the regular sport it is today.

Interestingly enough, the reader reads nothing of the political upheaval or constant turmoil that was occurring in the United States during this time. There is, however, a sense that great changes are occurring nonetheless, as the area surrounding the river is scheduled to become flooded by a dam in just six weeks after the four complete their canoe trip. It is most likely that the story was told at the same time it was written in order to convey the sense that even though society was progressing towards modernization, there were still great areas of untamed wilderness remaining in the United States.

## Language and Meaning

Most of the language in the novel is readily accessible to the modern reader, though the conversations people have do seem to take place in earlier times. The language is never complicated or difficult, but at times can strike the reader as indirect or odd, especially in connection with the river, which is given words for action that personify it frequently.

The novel makes subtle use of easy words that brings incredible character to the wilderness that surrounds them. The characters are never in a place that is not acting



on them in some way, and those actions are always shown through the language used to describe the setting. There is a constant and highly vibrant use of understatement present in the way the narrator chooses his words.

## Structure

The novel is divided into five chapters. The bulk of the novel is delivered in the middle three, which are titled by the dates in which their events occurred. This is a highly effective method of organizing the book, especially when combined with the narrator's delivery of the story.

The novel contains one major plot, which is the plight of Ed and his companions as they travel down the river. Small but significant changes occur to Ed, which though they are barely mentioned in the novel, do qualify as subplots. First, Ed becomes good friends with a man he fired after he finishes his canoe trip. Second, he stays in touch with the actress he used for the photoshoot, but no longer finds her attractive.



## Quotes

Lewis was the only man I knew who could do with his life exactly what he wanted to. (Before)

If there was one thing I felt reasonably certain about, it was my ability to get the elements of a layout into some kind of harmonious relationship. (Before)

I looked off at the blue forms of the mountains, growing less transparent and cloudlike, shifting their positions, rolling from side to side off the road, coming back and centering in our path, and then sliding off the road again, but strengthening all the time. (September 14)

The river opened and was there. It was gray-green, very clear and yet with a certain milkiness, too; it looked as though it would turn white and foam at rocks more easily than other water. (September 14)

Every now and then I glanced down at the bow at my feet, big-handled and tense-looking, and at its two arrows slathered with house paint. The big orange feathers spiraled out of them, and the emery-wheeled edges of the broad-heads shone in the sun like radium. (September 15)

I had never lived sheerly on nerves before, and a gigantic steadiness took me over, a constant trembling of awareness in a hundred places that added up to a kind of equilibrium, that made my arms move in long steady motions and showed me where the rocks were by the differences of the swirling water. (September 15)

I would have done something desperate if I had had a little more mobility, but I was practically nailed in one position; there was nothing desperate I could do. Yet I knew that if I were going to try something, I had better do it now. (September 15)

I took the knife and turned it so the curved part of the blade was in the wound, and drove it down with both hands. I felt it grate on the shaft. This will have to be it, I said. I'm not going to cut myself any more even if I have to grab the shaft and tear it loose, and tear myself in half with it. (September 16)

Where would we come out? What was there to see, that men had made, that would tell us? (September 16)

I began to take on so much weight that I could not get up, and then I could not even get my head up. I could feel my still body still trying to make paddling movements. (September 16)

Lewis came to us before I had a chance to say anything else. He moved a little, up from the waist; he came like a muscular act; the veins of his biceps jumped clear, clear as anatomy, and he opened eyes. (After)





The version was strong; I had made it and tried it out against the world, and it had held. It had become so strong in my mind that I had trouble getting back through it to the truth. (After)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

Why does Ed want to go on the trip? What about life in the city bothers him? What makes Ed suddenly attracted to the model he is using in the photo shoot? What makes Lewis so appealing to Ed? What is their relationship to Bobby and Drew? Why does Lewis invite Bobby and Drew on the trip? Do they really want to go? What makes Lewis want to take such a dangerous risk? Why do the others decide to follow him?

## Topic 2

Discuss the relationship between Ed and Lewis. Are they friends? Is Lewis really someone worth looking up to? What does Lewis think of Ed? Does Ed admire everything about Lewis? Is Lewis' belief that strength is all that matters correct? Is he right that the hills would be the only place to go after society collapses? What keeps him from moving there anyway? What else should Lewis have done to prepare for the canoe trip?

## Topic 3

Why does Drew play music with the native? How do the others react to this? Why is Lewis so rude and dismissive to the people they meet in the town of Oree? Does he seem to be bullying them? Discuss the contrast of characters between Drew and Lewis. If they are such different people, why do they appear to be friends in the first place? What is Bobby's role in the group? Why is Ed so unsympathetic to him?

## Topic 4

Who are the men who attack Ed and Bobby? Why do they attack Ed and Bobby? Was Lewis correct to assume that the other man would simply run away without trying to get revenge? Were the four of them right to hide the body in the wilderness, or should they have tried to contact authorities? Why does Ed suddenly want to dig up the body so badly after he's buried it? Is Drew still guilty of hiding the body, even though he protested strongly against it?

## Topic 5

Was Drew actually shot on the river? Does Ed kill the right man in order to save their lives? If Lewis is certain the wound on Drew's head is a graze from a gunshot, why aren't Bobby and Ed convinced? Why does Ed seem to care so little whether or not he's killed the right man? If it was the wrong man, would he have still saved their lives?



## Topic 6

Is Ed right to make up the cover story about what happened on the river? Is Lewis right that they would be in danger if the truth were known? What do you think would have happened if Drew had survived the canoe trip? Would he have gone along with the story or refused to tell it? Why didn't the sheriff take his deputy's suspicions about them seriously? Was it really because they had just been through a great tragedy, or because he didn't believe city folk were capable of something like that?

## Topic 7

Discuss the transformation that occurs in Ed. Why does he befriend the artist he once fired after the trip? Why does his business suddenly become so busy? Why does he purchase a vacation site on a lake if such a tragedy occurred on the water? Why does he stay in touch with Lewis, but not Bobby? What do you think happened to Bobby as a result of the canoe trip? Did he undergo any kind of transformation?