Ecology of a Cracker Childhood Study Guide

Ecology of a Cracker Childhood by Janisse Ray

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The story of Janisse Ray as told in her book, "Ecology of A Cracker Childhood," parallels her own struggle throughout her childhood with the battle for survival of the longleaf pine forests of southeastern United States. Janisse was one of the four children of Lee and Franklin Ray. The family lived in a small house in a rural region of Appling County, on the outskirts of a small town named Baxley. Frank ran a salvage business for which he amassed old cars, car parts, discarded appliances and just about everything imaginable for his junkyard which was located just beyond the Ray's home. Janisse and her siblings were ashamed of the family business and of the cluttered junkyard that overpowered their home. If others asked what their father did for a living, the children would respond that he was a "salesman."

The children really had no worries about being embarrassed by their living conditions since Franklin, greatly influenced by the tenets of the strict Apostolic Church, disallowed the children from having friends over and in kind from his children visiting friends at their homes. Frank's two daughters could not wear long pants, cut their hair or wear jewelry or make-up. The children could not participate in sports or other activities at school. The family could not celebrate holidays like Christmas, Easter or Halloween. The eccentric and isolated conditions that the Ray children lived under had far-reaching impact on their lives and self-image. Poverty was another overbearing pressure on the family which further contributed the the children's feelings of desolation.

Long before the Ray children were suffering from isolation and abuse, the longleaf pine forests of the southeastern part of the United States were struggling for survival. The once pristine forests had begun their long decline when Andrew Jackson defeated the Creek Indians who had initially inhabited the region and who were then moved to reservations in the Arkansas. That left the rich, beautiful forests open to new residents—Celtic, Irish and Scottish migrant farmers and herders who took over the region. Demands by these transplants began more than a century of destruction that left the forests and the hundreds of animal and plants that lived there at risk for extinction. As the years wore on, desperation from the poverty in the region led to over-tilling of the earth and excessive logging of the mighty pines without an effective plan to replenish the region or consideration of what this overuse was doing to the inhabitants of the forest.

Janisse Ray's love of the pine forest and her hope to revive it was born somewhere amid her own struggle for self-worth. That she loved her family, despite all the hardships she lived under, comes through loud and clear in the account of her family life. What is also clear is Janisse's love for the pine forest and her hope and intention to see that it is one day be restored to its original glory.

Chapters 1 through 3

Chapters 1 through 3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1: Child of Pine

Janisse Ray grew up in rural Georgia, outside a town called Baxley in Appling County. The town was small with a population of only 3,500 during its most prosperous times. Janisse lived in a small house the yard of which led directly to the junkyard her parents ran. The small children were not allowed to play in the junkyard—there were multiple dangers lurking there. One of the dangers were the men the kids would see sneaking in at night and stealing radiators and other things off the cars.

Janisse's father insisted that she and her older sister, Kay, take piano lessons. Janisse hated the lessons and told her father that he was wasting money—she'd never catch on. Janisse would much rather be outside with the trees. Her favorite tree was a large pine which she would climb up in and sit astride a large branch as if she were riding it, as if she belonged there. Her mother would scold her that she wasn't acting "lady-like," but that didn't keep her from her beloved tree.

Chapter 2: Below the Fall Line

Janisse describes modern Georgia, bemoaning the loss of the beautiful longleaf pine forests that once made her state unique and majestic. Now the terrain is flat and dull, lacking distinction and beauty. The pine forests had stretched south from Virginia down to Florida and west to Mississippi. The beautiful pines, that at one time covered 85 million acres in its southern range, were felled by logging, turpentining, grazing and suppression of fire. By the end of the 20th century, only some two million acres of the forest remain, the majority of which is shared by only two states, Florida and Georgia. In 1995, the National Biological Service declared the longleaf pine as critically endangered. The fragile forest was found to be struggling with only one-percent of new trees developing naturally. Janisse felt the destruction of the forest at a very personal level—like a parent mourns for a child.

Chapter 3: Shame

Janisse and her brothers Dell and Stephen would play school in the junkyard, using the side panels of a dark-colored junkyard car for their blackboard and stolen chalk from school to write with. Janisse would be the teacher and chase her brothers around and over the old cars. When they tired of that, Dell would play preacher. The kids would use an abandoned school bus as their church, the back of which was their baptism pool. They would pretend it was filled with water and Dell would dunk his brother in the "water," pray over him and tell him he was saved. Stephen would complain that he was almost drowned.

There were cars of every description, some of which had meaningful stories. Janisse parents were driving the '47 Cadillac that was wrecked—her mother was pregnant with Kay when the accident occurred. She was thrown through the windshield and needed stitches but she recovered. An old Studebaker belonged to a captured bank robber. The spaces between cars were filled with every imaginable item—from bathtubs to tires and other car accessories to an old airplane wing. In the summer, the mineral rich soil in the junkyard would produce fat blackberries which the kids would happily gather for the family. Every couple of years a car crusher would appear to reduce their stagnant inventory of junk cars.

Janisse's love of trees was apparent even in those childhood days. She claimed ownership of a beautiful red maple at the end of the pond. No one could climb the tree without her permission. She would use it has her secret haven, a place where she could be alone to read and to think. When Janisse was in the sixth grade, she and her brothers formed the Thingfinders Club. Their objective was to search all the abandoned cars for any valuables left inside. The biggest prizes were quarters and wheat pennies which their father would trade with them for more than face value.

Once a week the family would go to town. Everyone would take baths and wear clean clothes. It was the only time they "socialized," which basically consisted of just saying hello to a few acquaintances. Frank, their father, would buy dented cans and discounted items—he'd buy everything from bread to shoe polish. He'd bring truckloads home and pack it in abandoned cars and give away what the family couldn't use. The four kids were each given a quarter to spend. In the '60s a quarter would buy a bag of candy, a set or jacks or a small box of crayons.

To make gas money for the family, the kids would scour the nearby roads and ditches to find Coke bottles which earned 10 cents per bottle at the local bottling factory. As young teenagers, the boys learned to work on cars and could get some of the old junkers running. On one occasion, they unscrewed the cap over an over-heated old car and both boys were badly burned by the scalding water that spewed out. The boys were moaning in agony but since they had no health insurance and no money, their mother, Lee, tended to their burns. Their father believed that faith healed everyone and no one in the family routinely saw doctors.

The kids were ashamed of their father's business. When asked, the kids would say their father was a salesman. No kids came to visit them and they didn't visit any schoolmates. They were isolated yet sensed that no other kids lived quite like they did. Janisse tried to lose her accent and disavow her past when she went to college. But after the first boyfriend she brought home from college dumped her after their visit, she knew it wasn't that easy. Years later, she came to realize that her past would always be part of her and had made her the person she came to be.

Chapters 4 through 6

Chapters 4 through 6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4: Built by Fire

Ever since the pine forest developed millions of years ago, it was in a constant struggle for survival against the lightning that would begin fires lasting for months. The green pine cones that were strewn in the grass would escape the fires and eventually blossom and branch out, replacing their elders who were destroyed in the fires. The pine trees, loaded with resins and oils, were vulnerable to fire. Many grew tall enough to save pines trees of shorter stature from the fires and thus spread in number. Eventually the pine tree became known as the pine that fire built. Fires were an essential element of the perpetuation of the pine forests.

Chapter 5: Iron Man

Janisse's grandfather, Charlie Joe Ray, was orphaned as a young boy and struck out on his own at just fourteen. He was a wild, bitter man who was prone to violence. He was harsh with his children and the kind of man who probably shouldn't have had any. Janisse's father, Frank, tried never to be alone with him. When he started whipping one of his kids, the furor he displayed made it seem as though he just might kill him. There was speculation that Charlie was manic depressive—a condition that often struck Frank's side of the family. Charlie felt most at home in the woods—sometimes he would disappear in them for days. Charlie hunted coon for a living, usually with his trusty dog Old Mack at his side. Much to the dismay of his wife, he traded a dairy cow for the dog. Her protests that she needed milk for the children fell on deaf ears.

Charlie and his wife, Clyo, started a small restaurant in town which eventually saw some success. There were two serious fights in the restaurant, one of which ended their business. In one disagreement, a neighbor accused Charlie of stealing some liquor he had hidden in the woods. Charlie, who was extraordinarily strong, took care of his accuser in short order, sending him away bloodied and humiliated. The second fight was between Charlie and a traveling boxer. Charlie thought the man was cocky and harsh words soon led to a violent fight. Charlie emerged as the victor—the fighter finally passed out. He carried the fighter to the train station and put him in one of the passenger cars. The restaurant was destroyed in the fight and went out of business.

Clyo had Charlie committed to a mental institution when she was no longer able to control him. Months later, he suddenly appeared one day. She told him that he couldn't stay and that it would be over her dead body if he dared harm one of the kids. Clyo gave him all the money she had and he left—left forever. While he lived in Florida, Charlie called himself "Iron Man," based on his ability to pick oranges twice as fast as anyone else. He wore a red kerchief around his neck and died his white hair coal black. He'd show up once in a while in Baxley but never lived at home again. When Janisse

was small, he'd come to see them once on occasion. He was fascinating to the kids but they had nothing to forgive him for. When he was in the area, Charlie lived in run-down shacks that he'd rent for forty dollars a month.

Janisse was one of her grandfather's favorites. He taught her to fish and taught her to fight so she'd be able to defend herself should the need arise. As Charlie got older, the kids would challenge some of his fictitious stories but they knew not to go too far. He charged after one of his own sons who dared to beat him in a footrace. Janisse admired her grandfather's knowledge of the woods and nature—he'd lived out in the open when he was an orphaned fourteen-year-old. She longed to learn what he knew about the outdoors. As an adult, she looked back to those days when she tramped around in the woods with the old man who seemed to be a part them, wishing she could return to those moments.

Chapter 6: Forest Beloved

Longleaf pines sometimes live to be five hundred years old. The tall longleafs though imposing and statuesque, were not an overpowering presence. They grew far enough apart that they seemed more like background, almost grasslands. Naturalist William Bartram called the longleafs a "vast forest of the most stately pine trees that can be imagined." (66) Longleafs are the heart of the forests they inhabit which support the growth of 191 species of plants, 122 of which are endangered or threatened. The wood of the longleafs is strong and resinous. The trees grow to heights of sixty to seventy feet and up to thirty inches in diameter. Their horizontal limbs literally sing in the breeze. Janisse related the sensation of feeling humbled in the presence of the mighty trees.

Chapters 7 through 9

Chapters 7 through 9 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7: Junkyard

Charlie convinced Frank to go in the salvage business when Frank was just 18 years old. Frank had some luck at first, quickly selling some junkers he purchased for scrap. Frank, who was more ambitious than Charlie, bought his father's share of the business and went in partnership with a man named Lee Woods. Frank showed real business savvy in buying and selling discarded autos. He was the ideal person to be in the salvage business. He was known to never threw anything away—he saw value in everything. It helped that Frank was a great mechanic and was able to repair many discarded appliances.

Janisse was just six years old when mental illness took her father. She returned from school one day to find him praying in his room with the curtains pulled shut. He was loudly begging God to take him. He jumped through the bedroom window sending glass crashing everywhere. Janisse feared that since her father and grandfather and other relatives were mentally ill that she too would one day fall victim to the disease. Because Frank was so vital and strong, it scared Janisse even more that he had succumbed to the illness. Years later, Frank wrote to Janisse that he felt blessed that he had been stricken with the condition. It made him a better person, made him love is family more, appreciate nature and respect his Creator. He had nothing but praise for the state of Georgia's mental illness program.

Chapter 8: Crackers

In the 1800s, English, Irish and Scottish families poured into the southern states where they displaced the Indians, becoming migrant farm workers and herders. They liked the distance between them and the government allowing them to rule themselves and worship as they chose. These people were called "crackers," which was another term for braggart and liar. They were considered a lawless lot by government officials. The term morphed into meaning poor, white southerners. Cracker speech, also called Southern highland, developed from the dialect spoken in the British Borderlands. Examples of cracker speech include: "Thar" for "there," "winder" for window," and "young-uns" for "young ones."

The formation of three Georgia counties, including Appling, were the result of Andrew Jackson's defeat of the Creek Indians. The crackers moved into the region, felling the longleaf pines to build their rudimentary cabins. The Creek were sent to reservations in Arkansas. Lee Ada, Janisse's mother, was a direct descendent of some of the first inhabitants of the county. Baxley was named after her great-great-great grandfather, Wilson Baxley. That side of Janisse's family had been in Appling county for 180 years. The crackers took full advantage of rich lands that they found themselves in. The land

was a perfect match for the pastoral ways of their Celtic culture. They allowed their pigs to root in the open forests, not knowing the destruction it was causing to the forest.

In 1858, a traveler, identified only as RJM, marveled at the beauty of the pine forest. When he returned 25 years later, it was unrecognizable. The grand woodlands were virtually gone. Janisse sadly concluded that isolation and poverty had driven her people to this destruction. "These are my people; our legacy is ruination." (87)

Chapter 9: Native Genius

Frank was a native genius—a man who could recycle, invent and fix any item he ran across. The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss would have labeled him a "bricoleur," a visionary whose skills and ingenuity allows him to use discarded items for purposes other than originally intended. Frank invented a device that would automatically cut the corn off the husk. He used old leather shoes that were loaded with nitrogen to fertilize the grape arbor. Frank made guns out of old auto parts.

Frank became ill after he attended a gun show with an acquaintance named Mr. Paschol. Frank began to shake and started hallucinating. Although his illness was attributed to the family's history of mental illness, there was always suspicion that Mr. Paschol had planted some LSD in Frank's lunch. Mr. Paschol never came around after that incident which left Frank on the brink for three years.

Lee knew it was the end when Frank locked her and the four kids in a bedroom and would not let them out while he ranted and raved in the other rooms. It was almost as if he knew he was losing what was dear to him and wanted to keep them for or perhaps even protect them from himself. Janisse's grandmother, sensing something was wrong when no on responded to her calls, had the sheriff's office do a welfare check. They arrested Frank who spent the night in jail and was transported the next day to the state hospital in Milledgeville. Lee was told by the doctors that he might never recover and may never return home. Lee stayed strong for the kids and prayed tirelessly for his recovery. As time went on, Frank began having more and more lucid periods—finally enough to come home.

Chapters 10 through 12

Chapters 10 through 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 10: Timber

After the Civil War, Georgia was invaded by lumber companies and turpentine producers. Lumber was in demand for building and by the railroads to fuel their wood-burning locomotives. By the 1880s, the Georgia pine forest was in big trouble. Some foresaw the growing problem—an editorial called the greedy lumber companies "timber butchers." The New York Times warned that the inhabitants of the region would do well to protect their land.

Naturalist Herbert L. Stoddard noted that the pine lands of southeast Georgia were a sea of burnt stumps as far as the eye could see. Between 1890 and 1900, the population of Georgia increased by 75 percent. It was during this period that Frank's side of the family migrated to Appling County. Janisse's great-grandfather, nicknamed Pun, was a county surveyor who sliced up the land again and again to accommodate the expanding population, re-zoning much of it for logging. Pun's wife, Mattie, was a nature lover. It was Janisse's hope that she tried to rein in some of the destruction. Janisse never learned the lesson of Pun and Frank who could ignore the destruction of the pine forest that was occurring right before their eyes. Ultimately, Janisse took on the burden and responsibility of that destruction—someone had to take on the huge task of reversing the damage.

Chapter 11: Heaven on Earth

Frank was a fundamentalist who believed that the Bible was a gift from God and that the people were on earth to serve Him. Janisse and her siblings could not have friends over or visit friends in their homes. Janisse had to wear her hair long and couldn't wear pants, jewelry or make-up. The family had no television and could not celebrate Christmas, Halloween or Easter. The children couldn't participate in sports or date. Janisse couldn't show her legs above the knee or her arms above the elbows. Frank was baptized in the Apostolic church and made the entire family travel two hours each Sunday to the nearest Apostolic church what was in the city of Brunswick. The family stood out like a sore thumb since they were the only whites in the church. Janisse was baptized in the church when she was twelve. After the ceremony, Janisse thought she'd be free of sin from then on and never again have another bad thought.

Janisse worried about mental illness—so many in her father's family had breakdowns. The code words in the family for their mental conditions were "sickness" or "taken ill." At school, words like crazy or nuts or lunatic disturbed Janisse. She would often feel a non-specific gloom, a feeling of impending doom.

Apostolic law was stringent—the children had to fast (no food or drink) until supper two days per week. In the summer, the fast would last as long as 40 days. Some nights a tarrying service was conducted in which the family called to Jesus, asking Him to present himself. The gift of the Holy Ghost was of paramount important in the church but it scared Janisse. She didn't want to be filled with something she couldn't control—she'd seen too many in her family with that problem. It was difficult to be the only one in class who didn't know what the latest TV show was or what happened at the Friday night football game. The kids decorated a pine tree out in the woods one Christmas and exchanged homemade presents there, all the time nervous that their father would discover their abomination. But Janisse took her religion to heart, praying each night that she'd be a better person and to be forgiven for her sins.

Chapter 12: Clearcut

Janisse blended her religion with her love of the pine forest. She came to believe that God did not like all his beautiful trees destroyed. He could not have liked how the new trees were planted in rows to facilitate their harvesting. The tree farm emerged in Georgia around 1940. These farmers "planted for the future." The new trees they planted would be ready to cut down in twenty-five years. To plant the trees, the farmers destroyed the surrounding soil and foliage—the trees were planted so close together that they blocked lower growing plants and grass from essential light. Lacking sustenance, animals deserted the forest. God didn't like "clearcuts" in his pine forests.

Chapters 13 through 15

Chapters 13 through 15 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13: How the Heart Opens

Janisse's love of nature began with the pitcher plant. She studied it for a 4-H project. The plant made her fall in love with rain, look forward to downpours and welcome days of drizzle. A carnivorous plant, the pitcher plant made her understand that predation was an important part of nature.

Frank wasn't a nature lover per se, but he would do anything to save the life of an animal. Just like he fixed cars and appliances, he would "fix" animals. He tried to save a frog he stepped on by sewing it up. He administered pain killer to a dog hit on the road. Miraculously, the kids later saw it walking down the road with its owner. Frank whipped his own kids with his belt because they didn't stop a neighbor boy from killing a turtle. After the beating, Janisse vowed to never strike a child. Frank mended an injured heron who lived with the family for several months before it finally succumbed to its injuries. Frank voted against euthanasia, abortion and capital punishment.

When Frank tried to wean himself off the Valium the doctor prescribed for him, he would begin to slip away. Twice it got so bad that he was re-hospitalized for short periods.

Chapter 14: Longleaf Clan

There is a community of animals that live in the pine forest. They include the Carolina and dusky gopher frogs, striped newt, pine warbler and pocket gopher. The largest venomous snake native to North America, the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, lives among the more innocuous creatures; in fact, it invades the gopher tortoise's burrow for winter refuge. There are hundreds of other animals, birds and plant life that make the forest their home—all of which face loss of habitat.

Chapter 15: Clyo Woodward

Janisse's grandmother, Clyo, never mentioned Charlie's name after she paid him to leave. Frank, born in 1937, was her sixth child. Named in honor of her hope in the President, he was named Franklin Delano. They were very poor—Frank remembered having one set of clothes and oftentimes no shoes. They felt lucky when they were able to have supper. Clyo received welfare for the children until Charlie cut it off by refusing to sign some documents—telling the government officials that he'd take care of them if she sent them down to Florida.

Clyo worked all day in the cotton fields despite her bad health—she was diabetic, had bad knees and lost a kidney. To keep the family going, she bootlegged whiskey on the side, an enterprise that Charlie had begun. Treasury agents caught Clyo twice, the second time she was arraigned in federal court. She got off with probation and never

sold another drop of bootleg. She returned to cooking and ran the Greasy Spoon Cafe in Baxley for a time.

Clyo's health deteriorated and and, at Frank's insistence, moved in with him and his family for a time. He tried to make her walk and eat right but Clyo was in misery. She died at one of her daughter's homes in 1980. Although she had refused to say Charlie's name for more than twenty-five years, she called out to him over and over as she laid dying.

Chapters 16 through 18

Chapters 16 through 18 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 16: Hallowed Ground

The red-cockaded woodpecker is the animal most connected with the pine forest. Janisse saw her first one when she was an adult. The bird was listed as endangered in 1970 and continues to decline. According to ornithologist Todd Engstrom of Tall Timbers Research, the red-cockaded woodpecker has three levels of need: live trees for roosting and nesting; a vital forest for foraging; and, for the very social bird, landscape for interaction with clan members. The bird is yet another victim of the destruction of the pine forest.

Chapter 17: Poverty

Frank always helped the needy and there were plenty of them in South Georgia. Frank invited an old drunk who happened by in for dinner. As the man was wavering toward the door, he slipped and his wooden leg fell off. Lee wasn't happy about feeding him but Frank insisted. When the Joads family came by, he always saw to it that their carload of dirty, hungry-looking kids got a baloney sandwich and some candy. Frank had the softest spot in his heart for hungry kids and old people.

Colorful neighbors surrounded the family, ranging from an old "woman of the night" to a couple who lived in their dirt-floor shanty with no electricity or indoor plumbing. Another poor couple's children were seen eating raw chicken drumsticks. One poor couple had up to thirty dogs. They couldn't pass up a stray and would feed the dogs before themselves. Images of the rural south during that time included a landscape of tar-paper shanties; bent over cotton field workers; school kids with no shoes; and, bathrooms for whites only. The land itself suffered from the poverty and lack of education. People were unaware of the impact that over-tilling and polluting was having on the land. They didn't think of the forest as a living entity—it was there to be used. It enabled them to just get by.

Chapter 18: The Keystone

One day when she was older, Janisse stopped at a fruit stand and found that a large gopher tortoise had been spray-painted gold and silver by the proprietor. He was doing it as a gag. Janisse tried to convince him that the tortoise would die in the hot sun—not to mention the toxins from the paint. He insisted on keeping it a few days then would let it go. Janisse called her father who then contacted the man. He agreed to let it go that night. This species needs to burrow in the earth for survival in the hot sun. Frank brought the turtle to the forest where he dug a two foot deep long burrow for him. When Frank looked the next day, the tortoise was gone—hopefully to build his own burrow somewhere. Survival of the gopher tortoise is essential for the entire pine forest

ecosystem. The creature is considered the keystone animal in the perpetuation of the system since so many animals depend on its burrows for retreat and sustenance. It was listed in 1992 as a threatened species. Logging, development and agricultural growth have stripped the tortoise of its habitat.

Chapters 19 through 21

Chapters 19 through 21 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 19: Beulahland

Janisse's grandmother Beulah, on her mother's side, had a great influence on Janisse and her siblings—she was their strongest connection to normalcy. The kids would often visit her all day on Saturdays. They loved romping around her large farm, following cow paths, playing hide and seek around the hen house and scouting for snakes in the rough terrain. Beulah loved birds and was probably one of the first in the region to have bird houses that provided sanctuary for the feathered creatures. The kids loved her delicious meals and Janisse and Kay learned a lot about cooking and recipes from her. Without being too pushy, she tried to convince Frank and Lee to allow the kids to socialize more. After dinners on Saturdays, Beulah would turn her TV on for the kids but would make sure to turn it off before Frank arrived to pick them up.

Chapter 20: Indigo Snake

Janisse and a naturalist friend of hers were riding in the area when she was home from school. At the same moment, they both spotted an indigo snake that was just emerging onto the road from the ditch. They caught the snake and Janisse allowed the docile creature to crawl around her neck and torso. She enjoyed the moment knowing that it would probably be the only time she'd ever encounter the rare reptile in the wild. The indigo is the largest North American snake, some reaching over eight feet in length. It is federally listed as an endangered species and it continues to decline. It is one of the animals that depends on the gopher tortoise's large burrows for retreat.

Chapter 21: Moma

Janisse's mother, Lee, was a 18-year-old beauty when she met 20-year-old Franklin. Lee's family did not approve of Franklin because he was from "bad blood." The only way he could spend time with Lee was in the company of her entire family. Knowing that Lee's family would not bless a marriage between the two, they eloped only months after they met. There's was a true love that lasted forever even through very tough times. Lee was an angelic, kind woman who was happy to be the support to her husband. She was a hard worker and kept her small, cozy house spotless. Lee lived for her husband and children. In addition to doing all the housework and cooking, she helped Frank with his chores and work outside. Lee sewed the clothes for the entire family, including collared shirts for Frank and the boys. She hardly laid a hand on any of the kids but her tears evoked enough shame to make them behave. When Frank was sick, Lee took over as head of the household and easily took on the role of decision-maker. On one of Frank's relapses, a doctor told him to make sure that he and his family eat well as some research blamed the high incidence of mental illness in Georgia on poor diet.

Feminism came easy to Janisse. Lee would listen patiently to her complain about the boys not having to make their beds or do dishes and then would call Janisse a "tomboy."

Chapters 22 through 24

Chapters 22 through 24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 22: Bachman's Sparrow

Bachman's sparrow was discovered by bird artist John Audubon who named it after his friend, John Bachman, a Lutheran minister. It is another bird that is in distress from the declining pine forests.

Chapter 23: Light

The teacher that most inspired Janisse was her fifth grade science teacher, Lucia Godfrey. She was a beautiful woman who loved nature and science. Her name—Lucia—meant light; and, light is what she shined on Janisse's future—giving her goals and direction. Lucian would walk through the pine forest with Janisse, pointing out to her the male and female pine trees. Janisse would sit in the front row in Lucia's classes, absorbing every single word about cells, pollination, evolution, adaptation and survival. The concepts were all new to Janisse and they excited her imagination.

Chapter 24: Flatwoods Salamander

The flatwood salamander and the striped newt are both listed as protected; however, the populations of both animals continue to decline. Both animals are suffering from the lack of natural lightning fires which thins out the underbrush on the forest floor. The animals are confounded by the thick undergrowth that prevents them from migrating for their breeding grounds. The siviculture, or controlled environment, is at least in part responsible for the decline of these species.

Chapters 25 through 27

Chapters 25 through 27 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25: Altamaha River

Janisse's first experience with the Altamaha River was when she was just three-months old. Frank had built a boat based on some instructions in "Popular Mechanics." Riding down the river at a good clip, the boat sprung a leak and soon everyone was in the water. Janisse was in an infant life jacket and was grabbed to safety by her frightened father. Soon after this incident, he sold the boat. Another time, the family visited an acquaintance of Frank's who lived on a houseboat on the Altamaha. Janisse was ten-years old at the time. Her brother Dell got up quickly tipping the boat and sending Steve overboard. The current was swift but so was Frank. He hurdled over the railing in his Sunday's finest—shoes and all—and saved Steve who didn't know how to swim. When Janisse was 18, she, Steve and Frank took a raft down the river. They had trouble navigating down through the swift water, hitting more than several snags along the way. They were finally able to reach a peaceful segment of the river and were cooked, ate and slept on the raft.

Chapter 26: Pine Savanna

The savanna is a bog that joins the pine forest flatwoods to the swamp. It is called a seepage bog as it takes on water from the high ground. The savannas are comprised of diverse vegetation and are totally open to sunlight. Fires, which control the growth of woody plants, are important to the survival of the savannas and the animals that live in the bogs.

Chapter 27: Driving and Singing

As kids, Janisse and her brothers would get in one of the old junkers and pretend to drive to faraway destinations. Since they never really got to go anywhere, they would get their ideas for world travel from the National Geographic. The kids first saw snow in one of the magazines. A few years later, they had the actual thing—a rare snowfall in southern Georgia that closed the schools. The kids made angels in the snow, made a snowman and had snowball fights. The family took the car out around the area after the snow melted off the roads and were amazed by all the snowmen that had been built. Riding in the car was one of the favorite pass times of the family—they didn't have much to do and it kept the family together. They often sang songs about the south or favorite gospel numbers.

Chapters 28 through 30

Chapters 28 through 30 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 28: The Kindest Cut

Leon Neel is an ecological forester in the pine forests of southern Georgia and northern Florida. He promotes the preserving of the forest while still operating successful businesses within it. He advocates managing the forest by selectively harvesting trees and replanting trees in a non-structured manner. Corporations that are focused solely on making money must begin to place focus on the need to conserve the wildlife and plants within the forests. Neel took Janisse to a pristine longleaf forest reserve to show her what an untouched forest was like. Many of the trees were over 200 years old. Neel has great concern about the the impact that the growing population and its demand for wood will have on the pine forests.

Chapter 29: Leaving

Janisse left home at eighteen to attend college. Her parents wanted her to be a school teacher but she wanted to study literature. She chose North Georgia College which was located in a small town called Dahlonega. Like her sister, Kay, Janisse received a full scholarship to the school. Janisse depended on her earnings from a job in the school cafeteria along with her small savings to make it through. She struggled with the harm that her social isolation had done to her. There were so many experiences that she never had, so many things she didn't know. But she tried to catch up. She got drunk for the first time in her life, climbed a cliff at night, and skydived.

In the Spring, Janisse enrolled in field botany. She became friendly with a mountain woman who shared her love of nature. They collected plant specimens, loved poetry and were advocates of feminism. Janisse got James Dickey, author of "Deliverance" to perform a reading at the school for a small honorarium and the chance to tour the woods he wrote about so much. Dickey's appearance was a great success and he thoroughly enjoyed the forest walk.

Chapter 30: Second Coming

When Janisse returned home she noticed the absence of the Bachman's sparrow, pine lilies meadowlarks, swamp frogs and magnolias and many other plants where they used to grow in the junkyard. Finally, the junk and toxins had driven the animals and plants out. Janisse dreams of the day she can bring back the long leaf pine forests and the savannas and the trees, plants and animals that once flourished there.

Characters

Janisse Ray

Janisse Ray grew up in the poor, rural south. From the time she was born until she left for college at eighteen, Janisse lived in the family home that was located in the southern Georgia county of Appling, on the outskirts of the small town of Baxley. Janisse's father, Franklin, was a salvage dealer. Unfortunately, the junkyard was located just beyond the small yard of the cozy family home. Janisse and her siblings were ashamed of the family business and would tell others that their father was a salesman. The yard was cluttered with dilapidated cars, auto parts and "junk" of every description.

Even though Janisse's mother was a traditional southern wife who did everything in the house and pitched in outside as well, Janisse somehow came by feminism easily. She could never understand why she couldn't play football or baseball with her brothers or why she had to cook and clean and they didn't. Inspired by her science teacher, Janisse became interested in science and botany in the fifth grade. She began to drink in every scrap of scientific data she came across, especially those in the field of botany. At this young age, her passion began to develop for the Georgia longleaf pine forests that had been abused and neglected for over a century.

In college Janisse majored in writing and later became a naturalist and activist for environmental causes especially those of the pine forests. She has used her writing abilities to further the cause of the pine forests, the restoration of which she and other colleagues are hoping and striving for.

Franklin Delano Ray

Franklin Delano Ray's mother named her son after FDR to show her support for and hope that the president could turn the suffering US economy of the 1930s around. Perhaps that spirit inspired Frank who had a tenacious and can-do attitude about anything he attempted to do. He ran a salvage business out of his family home's backyard. Frank was the perfect person to run a junkyard as he rarely threw anything away—he felt everything had value and that he, with his remarkable mechanical ability, could fix anything and he often did.

At twenty-years of age, he married Lee Ada and the union eventually produced four children, two boys and two girls. He had genuine love for his wife and four children, although he didn't spoil them in the usual sense of the word. He expected them to do well at school, help with the chores and have a deep devotion to God. Frank was charitable, always helping to mend injured animals and feeding hungry children or old people.

Frank joined the Apostolic Church and took on their strict policies, applying them to his children. His daughters had to wear dresses down below their knees and sleeves down

below their elbows. The children could not watch television and could not have friends over or visit friends in their homes. When the children stepped out of line, he whipped them quite harshly with his belt. Frank suffered on and off all his life from mental illness. It was suspected that he, like many in his family, was the victim of bipolar disorder.

Lee Ada Ray

Lee Ada Ray was Janisse's mother. Lee enjoyed her subservient role as the typical Southern housewife. She was strong, kind and charitable and was a hard worker, not afraid to dig and help her husband outside. She was a loving mother to her children.

Charlie Ray

Charlie Ray was Janisse's grandfather. He was orphaned at fourteen and lived on his own out in the wilderness. Janisse inherited some of her love of nature from Charlie. He had a tendency to angry outbursts and probably suffered from bipolar disease.

Clyo Ray

Clyo Ray was the long-suffering wife of Charlie Ray. She committed him to an mental institution and after he made his way back home, Clyo gave him all the money she had if he would agree to leave and stay away.

Beulah Branch

Beulah Branch was Janisse's maternal grandmother. She tried to convince Lee and Frank to allow the kids to have a more normal life. She'd fix delicious dinners for her grandchildren and let them watch TV when Frank wasn't around.

Dell and Steve Ray

Dell and Steve Ray were Janisse's younger brothers. Janisse played with them more than she did her sister because she liked to play sports and adventure games.

Melinda Kay Ray

Melinda Ray was Janisse's older sister. Melinda was more like her mother and was content to be the traditional southern woman. She and Janisse did not have a lot in common.

Lucia Godfrey

Lucia Godfrey was Janisse's fifth grade science teacher. She sparked Janisse's interest in science and in the Georgia longleaf pine forests.

Leon Neel

Leon Neel was an ecological forester of the pine woods of Georgia and Florida. He subscribed to a system of mimicking nature in the logging and replacement of the trees.

Objects/Places

Longleaf Pine Forests

The longleaf pine forests are one of the stars of this book. They originally spanned from Virginia south to Florida and west to Mississippi. They have been so depleted and overused that they now exist only in Southern Georgia and Northern Florida.

Baxley, Georgia

Janisse Ray was born in a rural area on the outskirts of Baxley, Georgia, a small town in Appling County. The town had a population of some 3,500.

Southern Georgia

The rural part of Southern Georgia that Janisse Ray grew up in was populated with mainly poor, white people. Images of that region included bent-over cotton field workers, whites only signs, children with no shoes and tar-paper shanties.

Crackers

The Celtic, Scottish and Irish immigrant farmers that moved into the south in the 1800s were referred to as Crackers which at the time meant braggarts or liars. The term eventually became synonymous with poor white southern people.

Frank Ray's Junkyard

Frank Ray ran a salvage business. The area beyond the yard of the rural Ray home became the junkyard which was filled and cluttered with junk of all description.

The Apostolic Church

Frank Ray joined the Apostolic Church which was located two hours away from the Ray home. He insisted that his wife and four children join the church as well. The family took the four-hour round-trip drive to the church every Sunday. They were the only white family that belonged to the church.

Grandma Beulah's Farm

The Ray children visited their Grandma Beulah quite often on Saturdays. The kids loves romping around on the large farm and enjoyed watching TV there while there father wasn't around.

Altamaha River

The Altamaha River is Georgia's largest river and the second largest river basin on the Atlantic seaboard. The Ray family had a couple of close calls in the river—one when a boat sank that they were in and another when Dell Ray, who couldn't swim, fell in. He was saved by his father.

Pine Forest Reserve

Leon Neel, an ecological forester, took Janisse to a pine forest reserve which had been untouched by man for twenty-five years. She was able to observe how a forest develops naturally without man's intrusion.

North Georgia College

Janisse elected to attend North Georgia College in Dahlonega, Georgia, after she graduated from high school. Because of her good grades and need for assistance, she received a full-scholarship to the school.

Themes

Childhood Abuse

Janisse Ray was the daughter of Franklin and Lee Ray. The family lived in a rural area just outside of the small town of Baxley, Georgia. Janisse had one sister and two brothers, all of whom lived under the strict and harsh rules of their domineering father. Lee rarely touched any of her children—she reasoned with them or made them feel guilty in order for them to behave. Franklin, on the other hand, used his wide leather belt on the kids, whipping them brutally when they got out of line or disobeyed him. On one occasion, they were punished for allowing another kid to abuse a turtle. He wanted to teach them that they had to speak up in the face of animal abuse. Ironically, in order to teach them to stand up for abused animals, he thought it was perfectly fine to abuse his own children.

The children suffered from emotional and mental abuse as well. Franklin was overzealous in applying the tenets of his Apostolic Church to his own life and children. The kids were not allowed to have friends over to their house nor could they visit schoolmates in their homes. They were not allowed to attend any sporting events or other school activities. Janisse and her sister, Kay, could not wear jeans or trousers. They had to wear dresses that hit them below the knees and sleeves that came down below their elbows. They could never wear jewelry or make-up. The family was not allowed to celebrate any holidays like Christmas, Easter and Halloween. One Christmas, the kids sneaked out to a pine tree in the forest and decorated it, exchanging home-made presents with each other. The whole time during their stealth celebration they were fearful that their father would discover their abomination.

The scars that are inflicted on children who feel isolated and different—different not in a good way—are long-lasting and destructive. Franklin was the head of the family and one of the rules his religion required that his word be followed. That Franklin had a mental disorder and obviously not thinking logically added to the bizarre conditions these children were made to live under.

Conservation

An overarching theme in "Ecology of a Cracker Childhood" is the urgency for the conservation and revitalization of the longleaf pine forests of the southeastern portion of the United States. The abuse of the pine forests began after Andrew Jackson defeated the Creek Indians providing space and an open door for the Celtic, Irish and Scottish migrants who began to herd and farm the land. There were no limitations placed on these people's activities and due to their overuse of the land, much of which was driven by poverty and ignorance, the decline of the pristine forests began.

People at that time had no idea that an ecosystem depends on every element within that system in order for it to survive. There are many examples of the need for conservation and how every animal and plant within the forest is crucial to its existence. The gopher tortoise is one of the keystone animals of the pine forest's ecosystem. Scores of other animals depend on the burrows the tortoise builds for shelter and retreat. By disturbing the gopher tortoise's activities and behaviors by overuse of the forest floor, hundreds of animals became displaced and endangered. Inhabitants of the pine forest, and indeed the overall forest itself, became victims of the domino effect of the disruption of the natural flow and life of one, then subsequent animals and plants.

Hundreds of species that are at risk will vanish from the face of the earth unless the current trend in the pine forests is not reversed. Naturalists and environmental activists are appealing to logging companies and others who are threatening the perpetuation of the forests through education and the reality of what their actions result in.

Self-Worth/Self-Identity

Living under harsh and strict rules and living conditions like Janisse Ray did growing up, brings self-doubt and questions of self-worth to a youngster whose identity has not yet been realized or established. Children feel unsure about themselves given even the most normal circumstances. But when children, like Janice and her siblings, are repressed in both their emotions and their hopes and dreams, just who they becomes even more elusive to them. Although children naturally develop their own wishes for their futures, it is the parents who often guide them in discovering their own self-worth.

In the case of the Ray children, they were not encouraged to explore their own imaginations or indeed even have them. Rather, they were told what was important in life which was the worship their Creator, complying with the tenets of the Apostolic Church and not bringing harm to anyone. As Janisse matured, her own nature was obviously strong because she began to question the way things were. She wanted to play football and baseball with her brothers and complained that they weren't made to do chores like she and her sister were required to. Janisse did not accept the "southern woman's role."

Although it was obvious in other ways that her father loved her and her siblings, Janisse's father gave no thoughts about the importance of a child developing into the best person he or she could be and that wasting a child's strengths or abilities was a tragedy. Janisse found herself and was able to break through the limitations placed on her by a dominant, well-meaning, though narrow-minded, father. Realizing her self-worth was a testament to Janisse's strength and intelligence. Many abused children are unable to overcome the long-lasting obstacles and struggles that such a childhood creates.

Style

Perspective

"Ecology of a Cracker Childhood" by Janisse Ray is written in the first-person narrative. The story of the struggles and joys of Ray's childhood could not have been told more accurately by anyone else. Her account is told through the eyes of the child who was there to experience them. Of course, a child sees things in a different way than does an adult and there could be a measure of unintended drama added to some of the accounts for that reason.

Janisse Ray's credentials for writing this book are undisputed. Not only did she live her story but she is a renowned poet and author. She graduated with an MFA in creative writing from the University of Montana, and has written professionally for numerous magazines and newspapers. Ray is more than qualified to tell the story of the abused and declining the southeastern longleaf pine forests. She is a recognized naturalist and a strong advocate for environmental concerns, especially those of the pine forests.

Ray's book is written with a passion that could only come from within. She, of course, lived in the shoes of that child whose experiences she retold. Her passion for the fading pine forests is just as genuine. Her emotional connection to the forest comes out time and again in her ardent descriptions of their demise and her hopes for their revitalization.

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Structure

"Ecology of A Cracker Childhood" consists of thirty chapters which are followed by an afterword entitled, "Promised Land" which contains Janisse Ray's plea for a consorted effort in the restoration of the longleaf pine forests in the southeastern United States. A brief lyrical essay entitled, "There Is a Miracle for You If You Keep Holding On," follows which is an emotional appeal for the rescue of the pine forests. The book chronicles the long history of the southeastern pine forests alongside the story of Ray's childhood. The account is presented in a basically chronological order although there are some exceptions, especially when Ray describes her experiences as a naturalist and environmentalist.

Before the first chapter, Ray has included a family tree that displays both sides of her family. This chart is helpful when reading episodes in which she discusses her ancestors. In her short introduction, Ray sets the stage for the intertwined stories of her childhood and the history of the Georgia longleaf pine forest. In the covers of the book, family photographs and pictures of the region are featured.

Appendixes include information about the animals and plants endemic to the pine forests. Listings of recently extinct species; endangered species; species proposed for endangered status; and, longleaf resources are included in the appendixes. In "Acknowledgments," Ray gives credit and gratitude to those who contributed to the completion of her book.

Quotes

"My homeland is about as ugly as a place gets. There's nothing in south Georgia, people will tell you, except straight, lonely roads, one-horse towns, sprawling farms, and tracts of planted pines. It's flat, monotonous, used-up, hotter than hell in summer and cold enough in winter that orange trees won't grow." (Chapter 2, page 13)

"We had no money and no insurance. Daddy tried to live a life of faith, which relied on miracles of God over those of doctors. God healed the sick and afflicted." (Chapter 3, page 28)

"A couple of million years ago a pine fell in love with a place that belonged to lightning. Flying past, a pine seed saw the open, flat land and grew covetous." (Chapter 4, page 35)

"A forest never tells its secrets but reveals them slowly over time, and a longleaf forest is full of secrets." (Chapter 6, page 65)

"The people were called Crackers. A possible derivation of the term comes from its meaning boaster, braggart; hence, a liar, as when Shakespeare writes, 'What cracker is this same that deafes our eares with this abundance of superfluous breath?'" (Chapter 8, page 82)

"Railroads were to pines what they were to buffalo: the means to extinction." (Chapter 10, page 99)

"It was not with great distress, not until later, that I longed to be normal, because I was so well shielded from the world that I did not know what normal was. I didn't know what I missed." (Chapter 11, page 115)

"A climbing, running rose grew around the front porch—we asked if we could pick some. Daddy said, 'You know it's a shame to pick something beautiful from dilapidated surroundings. There needs to be some beauty everywhere.'" (Chapter 13, page 140)

"'You have to spend a lot of time in longleaf to appreciate it....This is my twelfth year studying it. You have to see it at different times of the day and of the year, different seasons, different weather. Then you understand what a truly extraordinary forest it is.'" (Chapter 16, page 155)

"The land itself has been the victim of social dilemmas—racial injustice, lack of education, and dire poverty. It was over-tilled, eroded; cut; littered/ polluted; treated as a commodity/ sometimes the only one, and not as a living thing." (Chapter 17, page 165)

"Snakes were the lowliest of creatures, condemned by God to a life spent belly to ground. One unlucky enough to reveal itself was a dead snake—nobody cared whether

it was venomous or not. If a snake cross the road, you ran it over, pulling back and forth until it was unmistakably dead. (Chapter 18, page 179)

"If we had any spare time (when it rained—and thank God for each of the fifty-odd inches of annual rainfall), I wanted to read. Mama complained that's all we did. Reading was our gate into other realities—through it we could escape the hardships of our own days." (Chapter 21, page 199)

Topics for Discussion

What condition plagued the Ray side of Janisse's family? What individuals were impacted by the disease? What behavior was displayed by those inflicted with the condition? What fears did Janisse have about it?

How was Janisse influenced by her grandfather, Charlie? What did Charlie do for a living in Baxley? In Florida? What scrapes did Charlie get into and why? How did Charlie spend the last part of his life?

What influence did Janisse's grandmother Beulah have on her and her siblings? What kind of life did Beulah want for her grandchildren? What did Janisse and Kay learn from her? What did Beulah let the kids do that was forbidden by Frank?

How did the isolation that Janisse and her siblings were forced to live under impact them? How were their lives different than that of other children? What things were they not allowed to participate in? What effect did the childhood isolation probably have on them in their adult years?

How did man destroy the longleaf pine forests of southeastern United States? What event led to the displacement of the Creek Indians who were initially in that region? What people moved in after the Creeks were disbanded? What demands did the growing population in the region led to the decline of the forests? What mistake did the people make in trying to replant the forests?

What teacher sparked Janisse's interest in science? What field did Janisse enroll in during the spring semester of her first year at college? What animal did Janisse and a friend discover along the side of the road? Why was Janisse thrilled with finding this creature?

What animal and plant species of the pine forests are endangered as a result of the decimation of the longleaf pine forests? What is the importance of the gopher tortoise in the longleaf pine forests? How did the gopher tortoise get its name? What abuse of a gopher tortoise did Janisse discover?