

# **The Education of Little Tree Study Guide**

## **The Education of Little Tree by Asa Earl Carter**

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## Overview

After his parents die, a young boy called Little Tree is raised by his Cherokee grandparents in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee during the 1930s. The novel follows Little Tree's daily life as he helps his grandparents learn to stand up for their rights, and in the process he learns a great deal about standing up for his own. As the novel progresses, Little Tree describes the simple life lessons he learns by living in touch with Nature.

## About the Author

Bedford Forrest Carter was born Asa Earl Carter on September 4, 1925, in Anniston, Alabama, and was the eldest of four children in Oxford, Alabama.

Carter served in the United States Navy during World War II and later returned to the University of Colorado, where he attended naval training school in 1944, and also studied radio broadcasting and political writing. By the late 1950s he was in Birmingham, Alabama, where his political activities included hosting a radio show for the American States Rights Association and providing leadership in the Alabama Council movement. Later, he founded the North Alabama White Citizens Council in Birmingham. He wrote speeches for Lurleen Wallace when she ran successfully for the governorship of Alabama in 1966 and was one of two writers said to be responsible for the words "segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" uttered by Governor George Wallace. Although Carter is associated by the media with George Wallace and publicly claimed that he wrote speeches for Wallace in the 1960s, Wallace denied any association or collaboration.

Carter ran unsuccessfully against Wallace in the Democratic primary for governor in 1970.

After his loss to Wallace, Carter gave up politics and left Alabama. He adopted the pseudonym Bedford Forrest Carter and assumed the role of a largely self-taught, part-Cherokee novelist. His pseudonym was culled from Nathan Bedford Forrest, a colorful, uneducated Confederate general.

Carter also used a Cherokee Indian name, Gundi Usdi, which he translated as Little Tree. So complete was his break with his old life that it was not widely known until after his death that the novelist and the former politician were the same man. By 1972 Carter was in Sweetwater, Texas, where he used the resources of the City-County Library to work on his first novel, *Gone to Texas* (1973). The highly successful film version starring Clint Eastwood is entitled *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). After publishing *Gone to Texas*, Carter moved to Florida, where he wrote three more novels, namely *The Vengeance Trial of Josey Wales* (1976), a sequel to his first novel; *The Education of Little Tree* (1976, reprint 1986); and *Watch for Me on the Mountain* (1978), a sympathetic portrayal of Geronimo.

Asa Carter's life and the publishing of *The Education of Little Tree* are wrought with controversy. Although the book is supposed to be autobiographical, there are many that doubt its authenticity. Carter's purported involvement as a writer for segregationist George Wallace and his association with the Ku Klux Klan have been the reasons why so much debate has arisen over his work and his portrayals of race.

Carter was a masterful storyteller whose prose style is characterized by fragments of sentences and fast-paced plots. He was heavily influenced by stories of the Civil War, as well as by his Cherokee heritage. He spent his last years traveling to promote his



books, attempting to arrange for films of the last three of them, writing the screenplay for one himself, and composing *The Wanderings of Little Tree*, an unfinished sequel to his third book. Carter was in the midst of a number of projects at the time of his death, which came as surprisingly as the knowledge of his double life. On June 7, 1979, in Abilene, Texas, Carter choked on food and the clotted blood that formed after a fistfight and died; he is buried near Anniston, Alabama.



# Plot Summary

In 1930 a five-year-old boy with no name is adopted by his Cherokee grandparents after the death of his mother. He goes to live in their cabin in the Tennessee Mountains. Granma names him Little Tree; and he is gently taught and nurtured in The Way of the Cherokee. In his formative years, he learns to respect nature and trust his instincts. He also discovers more about the unpredictable and worrisome ways of white men, especially politicians and businessmen. His distrust of whites becomes all the more extreme when he is forced to go to boarding school to be 'assimilated' through cruelty and rigor. Granpa and their friend, Willow Tree, the men he looks up to most in life, rescue him from the boarding school to continue his Cherokee upbringing.

The story begins at his mother's funeral. The relatives are arguing over who should look after Little Tree. Granpa, a half-breed Cherokee, intervenes and takes Little Tree home with Granma. Granpa and Granma quickly begin teaching Little Tree 'The Way' of the Cherokee. They teach practical lessons, such as how to identify plants, grow crops, and walk in ways that won't disturb nature. He is also taught spiritual lessons, such as the difference between the spirit, the body and the mind. He is taught what it means to be kin. Granpa also teaches Little Tree his whiskey trade, and gives him half of what he earns for helping out.

Little Tree also meets many interesting characters, such as Willow John, an old Cherokee who he strikes an immediate bond with; Pine Billy, a fiddler; and Mr. Wine, a Jewish peddler. These characters are an important part of the daily fabric and texture of Little Tree's life in the mountains. Despite a general sense of joy in his ideal world, Little Tree and his grandparents are often the subjects of racism, taunts and brushes with authorities. This has made Granpa skeptical and very wary of politicians and other authority figures, who he pretty much blames for all the troubles in the world.

Granma and Granpa spend a lot of time teaching Little Tree about his familial past, as well as about Cherokee history, as they believe it is important to understand the past to have a direction in the future. When Little Tree is six years old, the authorities take him to live in an orphanage. He is the only Cherokee and is not allowed to participate in many events, such as church. He feels lonely and disconnected. He speaks to his grandparents and Willow John every night through the Dog Star, which Granma had told him to watch, knowing they would be watching it at the same time.

He unintentionally offends a teacher in class and is savagely beaten by the reverend. From that day on, he tells his grandparents through the Dog Star that he wants to go home. John Willow senses something is wrong and goes to the orphanage. He scares the reverend into letting Little Tree go. Granpa is summoned to get him. Granpa doesn't tell Little Tree he is allowed to leave, wanting Little Tree to make his own choice about going home. Little Tree follows Granpa to the bus stop and tells him he wants to go home. Once home, Little Tree exalts being back on his mountain, feeling the earth and wind, hearing the trees sing and visiting all his favorite trails and secret places.



Willow John dies fairly soon after his return. Little Tree and Granpa spend Willow John's last moments with him and bury him by a tree looking out toward the Nations. Little Tree has two more wonderful years with his grandparents when Granpa dies. This is a devastating moment for Little Tree; although Granpa had assured him he would wait for him, and next time 'it will be better'. They bury him in his secret spot. It is a place on the mountains Granpa took Little Tree their first time out together, where you can watch spectacular sunrises. A year later, Little Tree buries Granma next to Granpa and lays their wedding stick between the graves to connect them. Little Tree takes the hounds and goes to find the Nations, only to discover they don't exist anymore. All the hounds but one have died on his journey. When the last hound is ready to die, Little Tree finds a place in the mountains to bury him. He knows that, as fast as this hound was, he'll have no trouble catching up to Granpa.





# Chapter 1, "Little Tree"

## Chapter 1, "Little Tree" Summary

Told from Little Tree's point of view, the novel begins when he is five years old, although we are not told his birth name. His mother has just died, only a year after his father's passing. After the funeral, his grandparents take him to their home. On the bus ride, Granma and Granpa are racially ridiculed; but at his tender age, Little Tree thinks the other passengers are just being friendly. After a long bus ride and an equally long walk, they end up at a cabin set behind trees at the base of a mountain range. The cabin has an open hallway, commonly known as a "dogtrot", to let hounds run through. On one side of the dogtrot is the communal living area with a kitchen; on the other side are two bedrooms, one for Little Tree and one for his grandparents. Little Tree's bed is made of deer hide, stretched on a frame of hickory posts. Once settled in bed, Granma sings a song about Little Tree, so the boy understands that this is his name from now on. He is happy to feel so loved, despite the loss of his mother.

## Chapter 1, "Little Tree" Analysis

The first chapter establishes the character of Little Tree and explains why he has moved in with his grandparents after his mother's death. Told in first person from a child's perspective, there are implications of racialism on the bus ride home. This foreshadows much crueler forms of racism ahead. Little Tree's description of the grandparents' home suggests they live in a traditional way, one that reflects their Cherokee heritage.



## Chapter 2, "The Way"

### Chapter 2, "The Way" Summary

Granma has spent a week making boot moccasins from deer leather. Little Tree wears the moccasins when he joins Granpa for an early morning walk on a high trail. On the steep climb, Little Tree feels the spirit of Mon-o-lah, the earth mother, through his moccasins. Their first stop is at a turkey run where they fix a trap. They continue up the trail and sit to rest. It is just in time to watch the sunrise and snack on sour biscuits and deer meat. They watch as a hawk, Tal-con, swoops down and kills a quail. Granpa explains that Tal-con is following The Way because Tal-con also helps the quails by eating the ground rats who feast on their eggs. He says that The Way means only taking what you need from nature, and you should take the smaller and slower animals. He jokes that only the bee, Ti-bi, takes more than he needs. This is why he is robbed by the bear, the coon, and the Cherokee. Granpa describes people who store and fatten themselves with more than their share. This leads to wars, land grabbing and changing the rules of The Way.

When they return to the turkey trap they find six turkeys inside. Granpa ties them up, lays them down and asks Little Tree to choose three turkeys to take home. After some deliberation Little Tree chooses the three smallest ones. Granpa is pleased and lets Little Tree carry one of the turkeys back. He tells Little Tree that if he didn't already have his new name, he would call him Little Hawk. Little Tree feels tremendous pride for having pleased Granpa by learning The Way. The chapter ends with a poem about Mon-o-lah and The Way.

### Chapter 2, "The Way" Analysis

Granpa takes Little Tree on the trail to introduce him to The Way, a Cherokee respect and understanding of nature. The most important lesson Little Tree learns is to take only what is needed. He also discovers that there is a sense of balance in nature... animals taking and giving and weeding out the slowest and the smallest as part of The Way. Granpa's reference to people who take more than they need alludes to the false promises made to Indians and the battles for their land. When Little Tree is asked to select three turkeys, it is his first test of understanding The Way. He looks up to Granpa, so is pleased to pass the test.



## Chapter 3, "Shadows on a Cabin Wall"

### Chapter 3, "Shadows on a Cabin Wall" Summary

That winter, Little Tree and his grandparents spend their evenings by the stone fireplace, watching the flames cast shadows on the walls. Every Saturday and Sunday evening Granma reads to them. Only on these nights do they light the coal oil lamp, as it costs a nickel to fill the coal oil can at the nearest settlement. Little Tree joins Granpa on the trips to the settlement to collect supplies and books at the library for Granma. Granpa can't read, so has a difficult time knowing if he's getting the right books for Granma. They keep a dictionary checked out all the time; as Little Tree has to learn five words a week, beginning from letter A. Granma's favorite books to read on winter evenings are Shakespeare plays, which often confuse Granpa. They seem to defy his sense of logic. One night Granma reads about George Washington, which greatly troubles Granpa.

Little Tree mentions in the narration that, years later, he discovers Granma only read the good parts about George Washington, not the parts that told how he killed Indians, so Granpa would have someone to admire. Granpa has a big distaste for politicians or any people in positions of authority, who he refers to as 'the law'. Granpa wonders if there could have been one good person in politics; but Granma slips up. She mentions a time George Washington was going to put a tax on whiskey makers and decide who could or could not make whiskey. A whiskey maker himself, this disturbs Granpa greatly.

A month later he and Little Tree walk to the settlement, when a car stops and a man offers them a ride. Little Tree is surprised that Granpa accepts; but once in the car, Granpa asks the man what he knows about George Washington putting a tax on whiskey. The man knows nothing about it and grows increasingly nervous as Granpa asked if Washington ever got a blow to the head in battle. After they get out of the car, Granpa tells Little Tree that getting knocked in the head is the only logical explanation for why George Washington put a tax on whiskey.

### Chapter 3, "Shadows on a Cabin Wall" Analysis

In this chapter we learn about Granpa's deep distrust of the white establishment, especially politicians. A mountain man who has always made whiskey as his trade, he finds rules about the whiskey business confusing and unnecessary. His respect for George Washington is shattered when he discovers he once put a tax on whiskey, hurting the wages of mountain men like him. We also learn that Granma is an avid reader, and the one who guides Little Tree in reading and understanding words. She also protects her husband from material she knows will upset him, an expression of her deep love for him.



## Chapter 4, "Fox and Hounds"

### Chapter 4, "Fox and Hounds" Summary

One late winter afternoon, Little Tree feels grown up when Granma gives him a deer shirt to wear, just like Granpa's. Granma also gives Little Tree some meat and biscuits, and says she'll sit on the porch that evening and hear them. Little Tree is curious about what's going on. Granpa leaves the old hounds, Maud and Ringer, in the cabin and sets off with the other dogs. As well as for guarding the crops and cabin, Granpa keeps the hounds for the fun of fox hunting. Little Tree explains how Granpa plays 'with' the game, not 'at' it. He commands respect from the white mountain men in the area for his skills at trailing animals and his sense of instinct.

As night falls, the path narrows between the mountains. It is a portion of the trail that Granpa calls the 'Narrows'. Soon they reach a creek Granpa refers to as 'Hangin' Gap'. They move off the trail and up a mountain above the creek. They sit in a pine thicket, which helps keep them warm. Granpa says they'll soon hear the hounds when they pick up Ol' Slick's scent, a reference to the fox. The purpose is not to kill the fox; and Granpa has never killed a fox in his life. Granpa says he's known Ol' Slick for five years; and he's even come to the cabin clearing to encourage Granpa and his hounds to try to find his trail. They listen as they hear one hound, Rippit, bay, but Granpa says he's being a 'bluffer dog' and hasn't really found the scent.

Soon, another bay breaks the silence and the other hounds join in. As the bays subside, Little Tree worries that the hounds are lost; but Granpa assures him they're just behind Clinch Mountain and they'll hear them as soon, as they come around it. Soon they hear the hounds, their bays and yelps getting louder. They watch as Ol' Slick appears by the creek below and sits calmly, watching the water. As the hounds get near, Ol' Slick hops rocks to the middle of the creek. The dogs have a devil of the time trying to get anywhere near Ol' Slick, which makes Granpa and Little Tree roar with laughter. As day breaks, they go down by the creek to eat their sour biscuits and meat. Granpa makes a dipper, from bark off a cedar tree, to scoop the fresh creek water. They stay very quiet and Ol' Slick appears on the other side of the creek, watching them for a moment, as if grinning. They head home. It is almost dusk before they reach the cabin. Granma is on the trail to meet him and picks up Little Tree. He is so tired, he falls asleep before making it inside.

### Chapter 4, "Fox and Hounds" Analysis

This chapter underscores Granpa's immense respect for nature and animal life, as well as his sense of humor. For Granpa, a fox hunt isn't a sport for killing... it's a game between the fox and the dogs; and he participates as an observer. He obviously admires the fox, Ol' Slick, for being so confident and wily, despite the chase. Ol' Slick seems to enjoy the game more than the hounds. Sharing this all night experience with

Little Tree is also Granpa's opportunity to continue to teach him about The Way, and about being in harmony with nature rather than against it. The shared experience also strengthens the growing bond between them.



## Chapter 5, "I Kin Ye, Bonnie Bee"

### Chapter 5, "I Kin Ye, Bonnie Bee" Summary

When it comes to words, books, or decisions, Granpa and Little Tree seek advice from Granma. Granpa tends to mix up characters in the stories, leading to confusion; and he deduces they must be reading too many books. One day on a trip back from the settlement, loaded with books and supplies, a large black car pulls up with two men and two women inside. A lady asks Granpa the way to Chattanooga. Granpa sets down his coffee and balances the books on his head so they won't get dirty. Little Tree sets down the coal oil can; as Granpa has taught him that when spoken to, you should give full attention that person out of respect. The lady grows impatient, asks if he's deaf, and again asks for directions. Granpa assures her his hearing is fine. Granpa gives her directions toward a mountain, due west. The lady is frustrated, wanting to know the right road to take. Granpa suggests they find a road heading west. The woman sarcastically asks if they're foreigners. Not knowing what the word means, Granpa replies "I reckon" before the car speeds off.

On the way home Little Tree asks Granpa if he's ever been to Chattanooga. Granpa says no, but tells a funny story about how he almost went when an Uncle got in trouble with women there. That night at supper, Little Tree asks Granma what 'foreigner' means. Granma explains it means it's a person who is somewhere they weren't born. Granpa says he wasn't born on the side of the road so he was a foreigner there. He complains that there are too many 'dadblamed' words, an expression he uses instead of 'damn' in front of Granma. He says he favors the sound of speech - how a person sounds - over what they say. Granma agrees, as that is how she communicates with Granpa. In narration, Little Tree explains her name is Bonnie Bee. Sometimes at night he hears Granpa say, "I kin ye, Bonnie Bee", his way of saying he loves and understands her. Granma has told Little Tree it is a love and understanding that has deepened so much over the years, that it would be difficult to put into words; so they called that feeling 'kin', short for 'kinfolk' or 'loved folk' who understood you.

Granpa then shares a story about his father's old Cherokee friend 'Coon Jack. One day, he entered the church with a pistol, saying he'd heard there had been bad talk about him. He assumed they were jealous that he handled the key to the song box. Granpa's Pa told 'Coon Jack he'd been doing a fine job, and that he was sorry for any misunderstood words on behalf of the congregation. Later, Granpa asked his father about 'Coon Jack. His Pa explained that, as a young man, he had fought in many battles, lost his home, and was forced to hide in the mountains. Now there was nothing left to fight about. That made him cantankerous, as that was all he knew, except for the key to the song box. Little Tree realizes that this understanding was about 'kin'



## Chapter 5, "I Kin Ye, Bonnie Bee" Analysis

The cultural differences between whites and Indians are starkly illustrated when the woman stops to ask for directions. For Granpa, it would only be natural to head to the desired location by foot. This, in turn, frustrates the woman, who only perceives him as ignorant. Her reference to him as a foreigner is an obvious insult; but Granpa maintains his dignity. Like Granpa, Little Tree does what he can to appear polite and show respect, but doesn't understand the woman's odd behavior. Granpa's preference of the way people sound, versus the words they use, has given him a strong instinct about who he can trust. Through Granma and Granpa's stories, Little Tree learns about the meaning of 'kin': the love and understanding that is between people who truly care for and comprehend each other.



## Chapter 6, "To Know The Past"

### Chapter 6, "To Know The Past" Summary

Little Tree's grandparents tell him it is important that he learns of the past. Without it, he can have no understanding of his future. They proceed to tell him about the history of his family and his tribe. He learns how the Cherokee once farmed the rich surrounding valleys, held harvest festivals, prepared for the winter hunt, and learned The Way. Little Tree also learns how their land was stolen by the government, under false pretenses, and that the Cherokee Nation was forced out of the mountains and valleys, driven together like cattle by army soldiers and moved to new lands on a journey called the Trail of Tears. The Cherokee had pride. They looked straight ahead, not down, as they marched; and they refused rides in the soldiers' wagons, no matter how sick or tired they were. Many young and old died along the way. In the beginning, soldiers let the Cherokee bury their dead right away. But as more and more died, in the hundreds and thousands, they were told the dead could only be buried once every three days.

The soldiers offered to put the dead in the wagons; but the Cherokee refused, instead carrying their kin. Not all the Cherokee left their lands, some fleeing into the hollows. They lived off fishing, wild game and sweet root and stayed as silent as they could, to not be detected. Sometimes one group would find another in this isolated environment. Granpa's family was a family of mountain people. They appreciated nature, like the Indians.

His Pa, of Scottish descent, had seen the faintest of signs in the forest that Indians might be there; and left a deer haunch, his gun, and his knife in that place. The next day the deer haunch was gone, but the gun and knife remained, along with a long Indian knife and a tomahawk. Granpa's Pa didn't take them, instead bringing ears of corn and hiding nearby. Eventually the Indians appeared, and Pa reached out to them. He eventually married one of the youngest daughters over a hickory stick, which they set over the cabin and never broke. Pa became an old warrior in his later years, fighting for the Confederates against the 'gubnment'. He was severely wounded. Years later, he limped as a result of a gunshot to the leg and had ailments of the stomach, as lead there was never removed. Eventually gangrene set in; but Pa gave his rebel yell and took pride that he'd not been killed in forty years by the 'guvmint'. He shared his last words with his youngest and only remaining son, Granpa, reminding him about kin and the fact that the mountains would not change, despite other changes. Pa's last words to his son as they headed back to their cabin were "I kin ye, son."

### Chapter 6, "To Know The Past" Analysis

This chapter reflects the grandparent's desire to help Little Tree understand his heritage over time, for all its misery and strength. Through their ancestral style of oral history, Granpa and Granma relate the lore of the Cherokee with stories that act like parables.



Unlike the romanticism that developed about the Trail of Tears', Little Tree is told of the brutal reality of the trail, and of the tremendous pride the Cherokee managed to retain under such oppression. Little Tree also gets a sense of his own family history through Granpa's stories about his father. Each story is unique, though the important messages and legacy passed from one generation to another is consistent.



## Chapter 7, "Pine Billy"

### Chapter 7, "Pine Billy" Summary

In the winter, Little Tree and his grandparents cover the corn patch with leaves and pine straw. The patch is on the 'slants', a sloping area at the foot of the mountain. There is little flat land around the hollow. The long, hard work becomes tedious; and they are often distracted. Granma digs herbs, which she uses as remedies for ailments of any kind. Granpa and Little Tree gather nuts. Despite the distractions, they manage to cover the corn patch; and a light rain helps seal the leaves to the ground. Then Granpa hitches the old mule, Sam, to the plow. Granpa occasionally lets Little Tree plow, despite the difficulties, as he is so small. At dinner, Granpa brags about what a good help Little Tree is in the fields; and Granma agrees he looks like he's becoming a man.

One evening, an oddly dressed man, called Pine Billy, comes to visit. Little Tree likes his bright yellow high top shoes. Pine Billy, an old family friend, is invited for dinner. He gives Granma four sweet taters, which she makes into a pie. Pine Billy eats three slices, while Little Tree has one and silently craves the last slice. Pine Billy pays the family compliments as they sit around the fire, making Little Tree feel good about him, despite the fact he ate three pieces of the pie. Pine Billy shares how he might have come into good luck.

He recently saw a big black car at the settlement and was sure the driver was a big city criminal. He told the policeman, Smokehouse Turner, about his suspicion; and they went to investigate. The driver told them he was from Chicago; but Smokehouse replied that if he was from Chicago, what was he doing with Illinois plates? He threw the man in jail. Now Pine Billy hopes that they'll get a big reward for his capture. Granma and Granpa agree it sounds promising. Pine Billy tells also them of another project. He has entered a competition in which he wrote a paper about what he liked about Red Snuff, and is convinced he has the most winning entry. Pine Billy takes the last piece of pie; but Little Tree doesn't mind, since Pine Billy was as good as rich, and deserved it. Little Tree falls asleep as Pine Billy plays his fiddle. He dreams that Pine Billy comes back rich, with a giant sack of sweet taters as a gift.

### Chapter 7, "Pine Billy" Analysis

Little Tree learns the laborious, traditional ways of farming and feels proud helping plow the land. Granma is wise about plants and teaches Little Tree about their medicinal uses. By teaching these skills, the grandparents are showing Little Tree how to become self sufficient off the land. Pine Billy is one of the many colorful characters in their lives. From a child's perspective, Little Tree sees him as wise and successful, though of course his get-rich-quick schemes are nonsense. But the fact that Granma and Granpa consider him a friend is enough for Little Tree to recognize him as kinfolk. Granpa especially loves hearing him play the fiddle, which has relevance later in the story.





## Chapter 8, "The Secret Place"

### Chapter 8, "The Secret Place" Summary

Little Tree feels like a giant, compared to the little critters living along the spring branch. He recalls the time he found musk bugs, which are hard to catch, and gave them to his grandmother. Granma said she never smelled anything so sweet and Granpa declared that, in seventy-odd years, he was unaware of such a smell. Granma told Little Tree he did the right thing; as when you find something good, the first thing you should do is share it with others. That way, the good will spread; and no telling how far it will go. Although Little Tree got very wet, Granma did not say anything. Cherokee don't scold their children for anything having to do with the woods. Little Tree especially likes watching umbrella spiders, as they leap from fern to fern to build their webs. He spends hours watching one particular spider try to build the widest web he ever saw. The spider keeps falling into the water, but always manages to get back to the fern until his web is complete. When walking around the spring branch, Little Tree notices that the frogs get quiet. Granpa explains that frogs feel the ground shake, and teaches Little Tree the Cherokee walk - toe down rather than heel down. After that, Little Tree is able to get very close to the frogs without disturbing their songs.

One day, while following the spring branch, he finds a small grassy knoll surrounded by laurel. Little Tree considers this his secret place. One afternoon he sees Granma pass nearby, moving 'quieter than a whisper through wood leaves.' He follows and finds her gathering roots. He tells her about his secret place. Granma explains that all Cherokees have secret places, and that she and Granpa have their own as well. She says that secret places are necessary, as every person has two minds. One mind has to do with the necessities of body living, such as finding food and shelter, raising families and so forth. The other is the spirit mind. Granma explains that if you use your body-living mind for greedy purposes, the spirit mind shrinks. Then in rebirth, the child is born with a small spirit mind that could eventually disappear; and the spirit mind could eventually be completely lost.

She explains that's why there are dead people in the world - those who only see dirty if they look at a woman, or lumber when they look at a tree, not the beauty. She describes the spirit mind like a muscle that must be used to grow bigger and stronger. It could reach the point you would have an understanding of your past body lives and experience no body death. She tells Little Tree how he can watch this in his secret place with the change of seasons: Spring is like the birth of a child, with lots of fussing, as the spirits get back into material forms. Summer is like our adult lives. Fall represents our older years; and winter our bodily death. Granma tells Little Tree that, in time, he will discover the gum tree in his secret spot also has a spirit.

Granma says she learned all this from her Pa, Brown Hawk, who could feel the tree spirits. Once, when she was a child, her Pa was troubled because the white oaks nearby were scared and excited. Lumbermen appeared and marked the trees to be cut



down. Brown Hawk felt the oaks cry. A road was built up the mountain to the trees. Brown Hawk discussed the situation with the other Cherokee. When the lumbermen went down to the settlement at night, the Cherokee would dig up the road. After a few days of this, the lumbermen put guards with guns on the road. Soon after, a large white oak fell down on a wagon, smashing it and killing several mules. It was a strong tree; so it had no reason to fall. The lumbermen gave up and never came back. Granma describes the celebration they had that night amongst the white oaks, and the death chant they sang to the tree that had given his life to save others. She tells Little Tree that Granpa was moving closer to the 'understanding' her Pa had, although he didn't know it. Little Tree asks if he'll get the same understanding, so he's not left behind. Granma says as long as he tries to understand, he'll be able to catch up to them.

## Chapter 8, "The Secret Place" Analysis

In this chapter, Little Tree shows a growing fascination with nature along the spring branch, where he will spend hours watching the tiniest creature to try to understand its ways. Granpa helps him get more integrated with wildlife by teaching him the silent Cherokee walk. Granma passes on the Cherokee beliefs about the mind and body, integral to the story, as Little Tree will notice both these sides of human nature many times in the future. While the body mind is a necessity, it can lead to selfishness and destruction, while the spirit mind is pure as embodied in nature. Later in the story, Little Tree's spirit side will be damaged when he is removed from the mountain. Little Tree also learns more about his family history at his grandmother's side. The story about her father underscores the problems the Cherokee face in a changing world, with the interference of others who don't comprehend their way of life or belief system.



## Chapter 9, "Granpa's Trade"

### Chapter 9, "Granpa's Trade" Summary

Granpa has never held a job, believing that work for hire uses up time without satisfaction. However, he believes it is good for a man to take pride in a trade. Granpa's trade is whiskey making, handed down on the Scot side of his family for several hundred years. Granpa tells Little Tree about city criminals who make cheap whiskey with potash or lye. They are just in it for the money, without caring about the whiskey itself. Granpa thinks this sort ought to be hung for giving the trade a bad name. He never puts anything in his whiskey, even sugar, which could help produce a bigger volume. He makes pure whiskey, using only corn. Granpa has no understanding of people who age whiskey. If they wanted to the smell a barrel they should stick their head in one, and then have a drink of honest whiskey. He refers to this sort as 'barrel sniffers' and believes rich men once schemed to fool people into thinking the barrel smell tasted better.

When Little Tree is almost six years old, Granpa thinks he should learn the trade. Even if he switched trades later, he will have one he could fall back on if necessary. Granpa's small copper still is in the back of the Narrows, by a creek that runs off the spring branch. It is well hidden by laurels and honeysuckles and made of pure copper. Granpa made eleven gallons of whiskey a month. He kept two gallons for himself and company, or in case of things like snake or spider bites. He sold the other nine gallons to a store for two dollars, which was enough for them to get by, with a little extra. Granma kept any extra money in a tobacco sack stuffed down a fruit jar. Granpa tells Little Tree he has a stake in that savings, since he is helping in the trade. Little Tree quickly realizes that whiskey making is both hard work and a family affair, from shelling and grinding the corn into meal, to the work at the still. At the hidden still up the Narrows, Little Tree helps stir and clean the pot. Granpa say he doesn't know how he managed before Little Tree started helping. Whenever they make whiskey, Granma keeps the dogs in the house. If she spots anyone heading up toward the Narrows, she can let the dogs out as a warning.

Granpa explains it is really important not to strike the pot with the bucket as it could be heard about two miles in the mountains. Talking or singing would also carry; but Granpa and Little Tree talk the Cherokee way, where their voices are low and carry like natural mountain sounds. They also listen to the birds, knowing if they stop chirping there might be trouble. Granpa's unique mark, which was on the top of every whiskey jar, is shaped like a tomahawk. He inherited the mark from his father and tells Little Tree it will be passed on to him one day. For now, he owns fifty percent as a helping partner; making Little Tree feel really proud, as he's never owned anything.

One evening, as they are putting the whiskey jars into the tow sack, one of the hounds, Blue Boy, appears. It is a warning sign. Granpa instructs Little Tree to head down one side of the mountain while he cleans up and heads down the other side. They'll meet at



the cabin. He warns Little Tree to step off the path and hide if he sees anyone. Little Tree heads off, knowing that if the still gets destroyed, it will be devastating to his family. Halfway down the Narrows, big men with badges appear from around the bend. Little Tree doesn't know what to do. If he jumps in the spring they will catch him, and if he runs back up the trail they'll find the still. So he leaps up off the trail and runs Cherokee style up the mountain, passing just over their heads. They try to grab him as he dashes by, but Blue Boy intervenes and fights with the men. The men try to give chase; but the other hounds, which Granma's loosened, join in the fight. Little Tree runs to the top of the mountain, exhausted from carrying the heavy whiskey jars. As the sounds of the men fade away, Little Tree falls asleep. It's dark when he wakes, but he hears the hounds picking up his scent to guide him home. As he comes down the hollow he sees Granma on the trail holding a lamp. Granpa is with her. Granma hugs Little Tree so tightly he feels like he will burst. Granpa carries the whiskey jars for him and says he couldn't have done better than Little Tree for all his years, and that he would be a fine whiskey maker one day. Little Tree doubts it, but feels proud.

## Chapter 9, "Granpa's Trade" Analysis

Although Little Tree is still very young, he feels great pride about learning a trade and having a fifty percent stake. Granpa, as always, is boosting his self-esteem and sense of worth in a world that doesn't respect them much. When the trade is threatened, Little Tree realizes that it is their only means of survival beyond what they grow or forage. The fact that they are able to live contended on only two dollars a month amplifies the Cherokee belief of only taking what you need. It makes Little Tree feel responsible about doing what's right, when the white men find him, despite the great personal risk. He manages it bravely. The ever-increasing love and bond between Little Tree and his grandparents are evident once they are reunited.



# Chapter 10, "Trading with a Christian"

## Chapter 10, "Trading with a Christian" Summary

The next morning the dogs are still jumpy and feel proud like Little Tree. But Little Tree tries not to act uppity, as his adventure was just part of the whiskey business. One hound, Ringer, is missing; so they set off with the other hounds to find him. They find him alive in the mountain, though it looks like he was bludgeoned. Granpa carries Ringer down, and they stop by the spring branch to wipe away the blood. Little Tree looks at his gray hair and bleary eyes, and realizes how old he is. He leans down and tells Ringer how much he appreciated his help in the mountains. Ringer licks his face in response. Granpa lets Little Tree help carry him the rest of the way. When they reach the cabin, Granpa lays him down and pronounces he's dead; but he was aware he had been found and taken home, so he felt good before he died. He says Ringer died the way all hounds want - 'doing for their folks and in their woods'. They bury Ringer under an oak, near the corn patch he used to protect. After saying their goodbyes, Little Tree feels empty and sad. Granpa tells him the only way not to feel sad at times like this would be never to love anything; but then you'd feel empty all of the time, so there was no point in that.

They pass through the seasons, working the whiskey trade and gathering various fruits as they hike through the woods to the crossroads store. Once, while picking blackberries, Granpa discusses the illogical use of words. For example, blackberries are red when they're ripe, not black, and green before that. He reminds Little Tree to listen to a person's tone, not their words, as words are easily misused. Granpa sells his whiskey at the crossroads store. The storeowner, Mr. Jenkins, is a friendly older man with a long white beard. He offers Little Tree a striped candy for helping pick up woodchips, but Little Tree doesn't feel right taking it for such a little chore. Mr. Jenkins finds an old candy stick he was going to throw away. Granpa says it is okay to accept it, as it's no use to anyone else. From then on, Mr. Jenkins finds such an old candy every month that Little Tree helps him rid.

Little Tree gets 'slickered' out of fifty cents at the crossroads store. He has saved nickels and dimes for a long time from his help with the whiskey trade and loves jingling the change in his pocket, though never spends it. He has his eye on a red and green candy box, which he thinks would be a perfect Christmas present for Granma. One day after they deliver their wares, they rest behind the store. Men pour into the store announcing that a politician will soon be there to give a speech. The politician arrives with fanfare, shaking every man's hand except Granpa's. Granpa explains politicians know Indians don't vote, so it would be wasted energy on his part. The politician gets on his soapbox and condemns Catholics for the ruination of Washington City, and that if he doesn't get into office to stop them, the ruination will spread. After the speech, a man appears with a small brown calf. The calf keeps its head down in the crowd. Little Tree walks up to it. The calf owner convinces Little Tree to buy it for fifty cents. Little Tree considers it a fair





exchange, since the man tells him it's worth a hundred times as much; but he's a Christian so will sell it cheap.

Little Tree shows the calf to Granpa, who seems less than pleased despite Little Tree's offers to let him own half the calf (as they are partners in the whiskey trade). Granpa isn't interested. On the way home the calf keeps falling down, and suddenly dies. Little Tree feels terrible having given up all his money, as it means he won't be able to buy the red and green candy box for Granma. Granpa cuts the calf and shows Little Tree the liver, which is speckled and diseased. That means they can't even eat the meat. But Granpa skins the calf and says he thinks Granma might give him ten cents for the hide. She does.

At dinner Granpa explains that part of learning is experiencing; and if he had tried to stop him from buying the calf, Little Tree might always wonder if he should have. Likewise, if he had agreed to the purchase, Little Tree could have blamed him for it dying. Asked what he's learned, Little Tree says, "I reckon I learned not to trade with Christians." His grandparents burst out laughing, making Little Tree confused. Granma rephrases what he learned, about having caution with strangers who make big promises. Little Tree is so exhausted he falls asleep at the table with nightmares of 'hard-shells' tearing up the still, Catholics killing the calf, and a Christian holding the red and green candy box, saying it's worth a hundred times the price.

## Chapter 10, "Trading with a Christian" Analysis

This chapter begins by exploring issues of life and death. A favored old hound is killed after fighting to protect Little Tree. Granpa helps alleviate his sadness by explaining the values a dog has: foremost to protect its loved ones. The fact that Ringer did this in the woods, and was alive long enough to know he was found and was taken home, made him happy at death. Granpa reinforces many Cherokee beliefs about remembering the good versus the bad of a being's life. When Little Tree is 'slicked' out of his fifty cents for a sick calf, he also learns a lesson about trusting strangers full of promises. He also didn't listen to the sound of the voice versus the words. Granpa's inherent distrust of politicians is evident, yet he has the tenacity to let Little Tree discover the results of seduction by words without intervening. This allows Little Tree to learn from experience and make his own decisions. This parallels a moment later in the story, when Little Tree is given the decision of whether to return to the mountain. Generously loving, his grandparents help lick the wounds by offering ten cents for the hide of the calf, so Little Tree can rebuild his savings. Little Tree shows his confusion of all people not of his own ilk when he has a nightmare about their injustices.



# Chapter 11, "At the Crossroads Store"

## Chapter 11, "At the Crossroads Store" Summary

Granma continues the lessons Little Tree learned from the calf scam by making him write how much he spent and lost on paper, going from fifty cents to ten. Little Tree resolves to keep the dime, or any future coins in his fruit jar, instead of carrying them in his pocket. On his next whisky run, he gets a dime for his share; and Granpa ups it a nickel, making his savings go up to twenty five cents. Little Tree continues to learn five new words a week, which he practices on his way to the crossroads store. Granpa often knocks words off the list, saying they are confusing or unnecessary. He believes that's how politicians get away with things, using slick language with words that discolor their meaning.

The crossroads store is often busy during 'laying-by' time, when farmers are idle between plowing and harvesting. After Granpa and Little Tree drop off their whiskey and collect their money, they squat by a shed in back and idle the time amongst the other men, while Little Tree sucks on his stick of old candy. They listen to the men talk about a depression and people in New York jumping off buildings and shooting themselves in the head. Granpa explains that New York City is so crowded that it drives people to do such crazy things. Old Man Barnett is often in back 'jumping' teeth. He uses a hot wire and hammer to literally knock out the tooth so it jumps to the ground. One day an older man, named Mr. Lett, comes to have his tooth jumped. When Old Man Barnett tries to wrap the hot wire around Mr. Lett's tooth, Mr. Lett gets his tongue caught in it and bucks like a mule. Afterward, they end up in a big fight. It's the first time Little Tree see Old Man Barnett fail to jump a tooth.

Little Tree meets a little girl at the crossroads store. She is always barefoot, even when it's cold. Her father is a sharecropper. Granpa tells Little Tree that sharecroppers rarely make enough to live on and the bigger the family is, the better the chance of getting work within the family. Granpa says Indians would never live such a life, and he would run rabbits for a living in the woods first. Granpa blames the sharecroppers' situation on the politicians. One day the little girl stands near Little Tree outside the store, her hair tangled and wearing a tow sack for a dress. Little Tree offers his candy stick for her to lick on. She tells of how much cotton her family is able to pick in a day. She asks Little Tree how much cotton he can pick. He replies he's never picked any. She says she figured that, because everyone knows Indians are lazy and don't work. Little Tree takes back his candy; but she says it's not because Indians can't help. They're just different, and maybe they do other things. Little Tree lets her lick on the candy again. She says her Pa is looking for a new place to share crop, a better place, and they'll be practically rich. Then she can get a new store bought doll. Little Tree tells her he has a dime, but keeps it at home since getting 'slickered' by a Christian. She says she is a Christian and that he will go to hell if he isn't saved. Little Tree sees she's a Christian because she's licked his candy stick down to a small nub.



Later he tells Granma about the little girl and she makes some pretty moccasins. The next month he gives them to the girl and explains they were made from the hide of his dead calf. She seems proud of them. But when she skips beside her Pa and he notices the moccasins, he whips her legs with a switch. They return to the store and the Pa angrily returns the moccasins to Little Tree, saying they don't take charity, especially from heathen savages. Granpa says he doesn't bear ill to the sharecropper because he had his pride, however misplaced. Since the children couldn't have many material things, he had to teach them not to expect them. At home Little Tree puts away the moccasins and doesn't look at them anymore, as they remind him of the little girl. He never sees her again.

## Chapter 11, "At the Crossroads Store" Analysis

The conversations at the crossroads store bear little meaning to Granpa and Little Tree, disconnected as they are from the white man's world. While they sit in the same shade as the white men, they are culturally worlds apart. Depression is just a word to them, as their lifestyle continues the same, with or without those troubles. The little sharecropper girl does share things in common with Little Tree beyond her age, both living off the land and holding a strong sense of pride. Yet prejudices and teachings separate them. Little Tree has been taught to distrust Christians, while the girl has been taught that Indians are lazy heathen savages. Despite this, Little Tree feels a connection to the girl, despite her Pa's anger over the moccasins gift. Granpa, meanwhile, recognizes her father's sense of pride, despite his prejudiced remarks. They too have a lot in common, both living in oppressed and disrespected worlds, except for the main thing that separates them - their own ignorance of each other.



# Chapter 12, "A Dangerous Adventure"

## Chapter 12, "A Dangerous Adventure" Summary

In March, Little Tree helps Granma pick Indian violets for a tonic tea. He also helps pick acorns that Granma grinds with hickory nuts and walnuts into bread fritters, which Little Tree and Granpa can't get enough of. They notice the occasional warm breezes announcing the oncoming spring. The ice begins to break and little dandelions sprout everywhere around the hollow, which they pick for greens. Soon the mountain comes into bloom - firecracker flowers, bluebells, moonflowers, and more, all sprouting at different times, depending on the body heat needed from Mon-o-lah's womb. As she starts to warm, only the smallest flowers sprout. Soon the bigger flowers are born and 'sap starts running up in the trees, making them swell like a woman at birthing time until they pop open their buds.' Granpa teaches Little Tree the bird signs. The mourning dove, for example, is a reminder of loved ones who died, its lonesome call meaning someone is remembering that person.

They stop trapping in the spring and summer, as animals are raising their young, so they fish for bass and catfish instead. They don't fish for sport, which Granpa considers a politician's hobby, but for supper. They make fish baskets out of willows, which allow the smaller fish to pass through gaps. Granpa also teaches Little Tree how to hand fish. As Little Tree digs in a fish hole by hand, he hears a whirring sound next to him. It's a rattlesnake, poised to strike! Granpa silently appears and tells him not to move a muscle. Suddenly, Granpa puts his hand between Little Tree's face and the snake's head, steady as a rock. The snake strikes fast, burying his fangs into Granpa's hand. Granpa uses his other hand to grab the rattler's head and choke it to death. Granpa cuts big slashes in his hand and sucks out the blood. His arm begins to swell and turn blue. Terrified, Little Tree runs to get Granma. Little Tree is emotionally distraught when he arrives; but Granma stays calm and gets the information she needs. She runs out of the cabin with a quickly packed sack, braids flying. Little Tree screams after her, "Don't let Granpa die!"

He lets loose the hounds and follows them up. By the time they reach him, Granpa's eyes are closed and his arm is nearly black. Granma sucks and spits out his blood and asks Little Tree to pull bark off a birch tree. She uses this to build a fire to burn her special herbs and roots. She spots a quail nearby... swiftly, she lifts her skirt and moves to the nest like a 'wind whisper', then throws her skirt over the nest. She splits the quail's breastbone, while still alive, and lays it over the snakebite. She holds it there for a long time, letting the writhing body suck the poison from Granpa. Granma keeps working on Granpa until nightfall.

They keep him warm with her skirt and Little Tree's deer shirt. Little Tree keeps a fire going while Granma stokes another small one by his head, lying close to him so her body heat will help. Little Tree lies against Granpa's other side, also hoping to help. Little Tree feels guilty; but Granma assures him none of this is his fault, or the



rattlesnake's. In a delirium, Granpa talks about his youth and running through the mountains. His breathing steadies. Granma says there is no way he will die now, so Little Tree is able to sleep in the crook of his arm. He wakes at dawn. Granpa, finding his wife buck-naked from the waist down, sits up and declares, "By God! Bonnie Bee, a feller can't lay his body down nowheres without you stripping buck-naked and haunching at 'em!" Granma slaps his face and laughs before putting on her skirt. Granpa skins the rattler to make a belt. They head back to the cabin, the dogs running ahead. Little Tree feels the best he's ever felt since coming to the mountains. He figures the fact that Granpa put his hand in front of the snake makes it more than likely Granpa 'kinned' him more than anyone, next to Granma.

## Chapter 12, "A Dangerous Adventure" Analysis

This chapter echoes others about Little Tree's growing assimilation into nature, greatly attributed to his grandparent's guidance. He is also taught more ways of the Cherokee, from gathering and recognizing the meaning of plants and birds to hand fishing. Again, these are self-sufficient and self-providing tasks that will serve him later in life. While it is evident that a strong bond exists between Granpa and Little Tree, the crisis with the snakebite expresses the real kinship; as Granpa has shown he would give up his life for Little Tree. For the first time, Granma goes from a more passive nature to aggressively doing whatever is necessary to save her mate's life. With her knowledge, resourcefulness, and physical prowess - the combination of which Little Tree has never witnessed before - she nurtures Granpa back to life, while providing comfort and reassurance to her grandson. Through this experience they are truly bonded as a family unit. They are mutually loving, supportive and now very dependent on each other, regardless of size, gender or age.



# Chapter 13, "The Farm in the Clearing"

## Chapter 13, "The Farm in the Clearing" Summary

That night by the creek, Little Tree is surprised to discover that Granpa had once been a boy. Granpa says he was nine years old in 1867, and had the run of the mountains. His Ma, Red Wing, was full Cherokee; so he was raised the Cherokee way. At the time, the land was occupied by Union soldiers and run by politicians. One day, while going to the settlement for supplies as a boy, Granpa finds a little valley with an old house. There are no farm animals, just some broken-down farming tools. He sees a woman with two young girls. An old, black man lives in the barn. He also sees a man wearing what is left of a ragged gray uniform. Half his leg is missing, but a hickory sapling is attached to his stump. The man and woman strap on leather harnesses and pull a plow like mules, with the black man guiding the plow. Granpa goes back the next day and watches from his hiding spot. The black man struggles with the plow.

Granpa suddenly spots union soldiers in a pine grove, watching the plowing before riding out of sight. After going fishing, he returns and sees that the union soldiers are also hiding nearby. He worries that the union soldiers plan to do something mean. The next day Granpa sets off to warn the family. He goes to his hiding place, but feels shy about approaching as he watches them at the plow. He is about to holler a warning, but sees a union soldier has returned with an old mule. The soldier whips the mule so it wanders onto the land. The woman spots the mule first and believes it as been sent by God. The family chases the mule until they catch it.

Granpa returns regularly to watch the family plow the land. One morning, Granpa sees the soldier drop off a white sack. The one-legged man sees him and waves. It's a sack of seed corn. The next morning the union soldier talks to the one-legged man and then helps with the plowing. Granpa can tell he's experienced at farming. He later finds out that he is a sergeant and a farmer from Illinois. The soldier also brings little apple trees, which they plant all around the field. One time, Granpa leaves a dozen catfish on the front porch, which the family cooks the next evening. They wave into the woods to invite Granpa, but he is too shy. He does bring the more fish, though. The sergeant and a skinny private help the family all summer, helping produce an excellent crop of corn.

Granpa begins to lose interest in the farm when the regulators come in with guns. They plant a pole on the land with a red flag. This means that the family is not able to pay the high taxes on their property. The one-legged man gets his musket. The Union Sergeant steps between him and the regulators. One regulator shoots the soldier, and then they all start shooting, killing the one-legged man and the black man. A rich man ends up taking over the valley. Granpa never found out what happened to the woman and girls. He did hear that when they went to bury the Sergeant, his fist was clenched so tightly, they had to use tools to open up his hand. All they found was black dirt.



## Chapter 13, "The Farm in the Clearing" Analysis

Granpa shares stories from his past as parables to help Little Tree understand his own history. In the story, Granpa has a surprising connection to the Union soldier. Both want to help the family and both have a good understanding of working the land. Although separated by ethnicity and culture, they have an equally appreciative sense of nature and how to nurture, rather than work against it. This is probably Granpa's first realization that someone he would normally distrust, a soldier, can be trustworthy and kind. When all seems as perfect as it can be, with a great crop of corn and new friendships between the family and the soldiers, the regulators destroy everything.

This parallels what happened to the Cherokee, being killed or forced off their land years before. The handful of dirt expresses the soldier's love of the land, similar to that of Granpa. This story helps Little Tree understand that, while ethnicities separate folks, kin is still possible with a shared sense of spirit.





# Chapter 14, "A Night on the Mountain"

## Chapter 14, "A Night on the Mountain" Summary

Although Granpa is half Scot, he thinks like an Indian. This gives himself to cherish nature, rather than trying to subdue it. Granpa explains that white men often misunderstand Indian meanings. For example, when an Indian holds up his palm, it means peace, as he is showing he has no weapons. Granpa is distrustful of handshakes.

At the crossroads store, Mr. Jenkins tells Granpa that two big-city men from Chattanooga are looking for him. They're in the whiskey trade and want to put him to work on a big still. Back home, Granpa tells Granma about the men. He goes to the still to hide it better and tells Little Tree to warn him if the men show up. Pretty soon they appear: a fat man in a lavender suit and a skinny one in a white suit. The fat man, Mr. Slick, asks for the old man but Granma doesn't respond. They assume she doesn't speak English. Mr. Slick wants to leave but the skinny one, Mr. Chunk, is determined. He asks Little Tree if he speaks English and offers him a dollar to lead him to Granpa. Little Tree takes the dollar and leads them up the high trail, away from the still. They make fun of Little Tree, calling him a bastard, as he doesn't recollect his father. Little Tree doesn't know what the word means and thinks they're being friendly.

The men suddenly realize they're high up on a rather dangerous trail. The higher they climb, the slower they move, falling way behind Little Tree. At one point they lay down to rest, unaware they are in the middle of a poison ivy patch. They get very impatient; but Little Tree assures them they're almost there. Little Tree assumes Granma will tell Granpa he took them up the high trail and will meet them up there. Little Tree moves ahead and waits for them at the top of the mountain. It takes a long time for Mr. Slick and Mr. Chunk to show up. They are so busy arguing that they don't see Little Tree and continue past him.

Little Tree waits for Granpa. He soon appears with Blue Boy. Little Tree offers to split his dollar with Granpa; but Granpa says he earned it on his own and he can keep the whole thing. They suddenly hear a yelp in the distance. Granpa calls out and the men respond with pistol shots. It's too dark to find them, so they pull out spring boughs and sleep under a tree, enjoying the light of the moon. They hear two men yell a lot. Granpa says they should settle down or they'll disturb the whole mountain. They wake at dawn and watch the beauty of the sunrise. Granpa tells Little Tree to run back and get something for them to eat in a paper sack and something for the men to eat in a tow sack.

Granma makes lunch for Little Tree and Granpa, and then boils fish with strange roots for the men. He returns up the mountain. Granpa ties the tow sack with the men's lunch to a tree. He says he's been hollering to them and they should be along soon. By the time the men appear, their shirts are torn and they have poison ivy bumps all over their faces. Mr. Chunk has lost a shoe. Granpa and Little Tree watch them from a distance.





When they see the tow sack they take it down and gobble it up. Pretty soon the men are running into bushes with diarrhea. They don't realize they're squatting in a poison ivy patch and wiping themselves with the leaves.

After an hour of this they collapse, exhausted. Granpa whistles down to them. The men get to their feet and scramble up the trail, following Granpa and Little Tree. Hours after Granpa and Little Tree reach the cabin, the men appear. Little Tree calls out and thanks them for their dollar; but they shake their fists and argue with each other. Little Tree again offers to split his dollar, but Granpa tells him to keep it and says it wasn't bad pay for the work. Little Tree agrees.

## Chapter 14, "A Night on the Mountain" Analysis

Granpa has an immediate distrust about the men from Chattanooga who want him to make whiskey for them. Earlier chapters have alluded to his disgust for big city whiskey makers. His first concern is protecting his still, and he sets plans in motion to get these men off his mountain. The men are out of their element on the mountain; and Little Tree, sensing Granpa's distrust, isn't about to help them in this regard, despite the fact they seem friendly. When they call Little Tree a bastard, Little Tree doesn't know what it means; but it won't be the first time he hears this. While the men suffer one of the most miserable nights of their lives, Little Tree's ingrained appreciation allows him to enjoy its glory. When Little Tree returns to get the lunch sacs Granpa requested, he tells Granpa about how they called him a bastard, causing her to add herbs that gave the men diarrhea. As a family unit, they manage to outwit the city slickers without their being any the wiser.



## Chapter 15, "Willow John"

### Chapter 15, "Willow John" Summary

Little Tree learns more about planting. Anything that grows above ground, like corn and beans, must be planted in the light of the moon; and anything that grows below ground should be planted in the dark of the moon. Granpa also looks for signs in the sky and from the weather, declaring when it is time to plant certain things. Granma suspects that, at times, signs not to plant might be tied to Granpa's desire to fish. Among other small crops, they plant watermelon. The watermelons grow slower than the other crops; though Little Tree checks them a lot, as he's never tasted one. Several times he tells Granpa that the watermelons look ready, but Granpa finds they're still green. One evening, Little Tree says he's sure he's found a ripe watermelon. The next morning they go to check it out. Granpa agrees it looks ripe enough to give it the thump test. The sound produced will tell them if it's ripe. Granpa thumps it quite a few times as Little Tree watches anxiously. Granpa says it's a borderline case and needs more testing.

He gets broom sedge straw. If you lay it crosswise on a watermelon and it just lays there, the watermelon is green. But if the straw turns crosswise, then it's ripe. Granpa lays the broom sedge straw on the watermelon. It lies there for a minute, but then turns and stops. Little Tree says the straw is too long, so they shorten it and try again. This time it turns a lot more. Finally Granpa says if they let it lay until the sun is overhead, they can then pick it. To Little Tree, the sun seems to take forever to rise; but they busy themselves cutting Okra. Finally Granma announces it's dinnertime and they all run to the watermelon patch. Little Tree cuts the watermelon from the vine. Granpa carries it to the spring branch and rolls it into the water. After dinner, they pull it out and carry to the shade of an elm. Granpa cuts the watermelon into slices. Little Tree gobbles it up, laughing with his grandparents when the juice runs down his face.

Little Tree was born in summer, so it is his season. It is the Cherokee custom to be told of your birthplace and parents during your season. Granma tells Little Tree he was born from nature. So he has all the brothers and sisters on the mountain of which she had sung about his first night on the mountain. She says he will never be lonesome with the trees, birds, water, rain and wind loving him. Little Tree says he's not afraid of the dark anymore, so Granpa says he'll depend on him in dark situations.

Now that he's six, Granma pushes him to keep learning dictionary words, though he finds a letter B page has been torn out. Pine Billy comes to visit more often, now that the watermelons have ripened. One time he tells them that he thinks the world is coming to an end. He's heard that out in Oklahoma, the wind was blowing away the ground. Granpa has already received letters from relatives in Oklahoma, formerly part of the Nations. They wrote of how white men had plowed land that shouldn't be plowed, and of how the wind was blowing it all away. Pine Billy has decided he wants to be saved. Since the world is coming to an end, Pine Billy plays sad songs on his fiddle.



Every Sunday, Little Tree and his grandparents go to church. They dress up in clean clothes and button up shirts. Granma always wears an orange, gold, blue and red dress that strikes her ankles, which Little Tree thinks makes her look like a spring flower floating down the trail. On the way to church, they always stop to visit Willow John, an eighty-year old full Cherokee, as tall as Granpa, with white plaited hair hanging below his shoulders and a flat brimmed hat. Willow John had once gone to the Nations, but returned three years later and never spoke about it. He has a sad look in his eye, like his thoughts are far away.

The four of them are always the last to enter church. They sit in the back row. One day, Little Tree finds a long knife lying where he normally sits, with a fringed skin sheath. Granma says it's a gift from Willow John. Indians leave gifts to be found and make no fuss about it. Likewise, Little Tree gives Willow John a nickel and a bullfrog, which he slips into his coat pocket. But at church the bullfrog makes a loud croaking sound, creating a huge disturbance in the church. Willow John begins laughing heartily, which makes everyone look at him. Little Tree notices how, from then on, Willow John's eyes always twinkled when he looked at him. After church, they all sit in a clearing for a dinner of game, corn bread, and vegetable fixings. After dinner, Little Tree watches Willow John leave, walking awkwardly with arms straight to his sides, looking straight ahead and with his hat low down. Somehow, he looks like he doesn't quite belong. The chapter ends with a poem about spending time with Willow John.

## Chapter 15, "Willow John" Analysis

Little Tree feels a sense of worth helping his grandparents with the planting of crops. When the watermelons ripen, it becomes a ceremonial event after all the waiting. Granpa and Granma make a big production of opening the watermelon, making it a little more special for Little Tree. Little Tree is also made to feel special about his birth season and the connection he has with all things on the mountain. His natural affinity to nature and the Cherokee way endears John Willow. John Willow's awkward stature on the fringes of the white world exemplifies a sense sadness about the loss of the Cherokee Nation. Little Tree's innocence, as shown through thoughtful actions, like hiding and giving a bullfrog at church, are the only things that put a spark in the eye of John Willow, and a sense of hope in his spirit.



## Chapter 16, "Church-Going"

### Chapter 16, "Church-Going" Summary

Granpa doesn't trust priests, thinking they don't have a realistic perspective on honest, hard work. The community is scattered in the mountain area. It is also small. So the only church services various faiths, including Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. There is also a stubborn man from the Church of Christ who has opinions that make others in the congregation pretty angry. As well, there is a rich Episcopalian family that gets preferential treatment, as they give a whole dollar at collection time. The priest opens their door for them and they sit in the front pew. He complains a lot about the Pharisees, or separatists, often looking and pointing toward Little Tree and his grandparents during these sermons. This always makes Granpa mad, as he's never known any Pharisees. The preacher also rants about the Philistines, which Granpa doesn't understand. After all, why rile up more folk when there's already so much trouble in the world. There is also a 'testifying time' when people confess their sins. Granpa never stands up.

Before preaching, time is set aside for people to talk about others who might need help from the church, such as a sharecropper family between jobs or someone whose house has burned down. Little Tree and his grandparents often bring vegetables or meat to help such folks, depending on the season. One time, Granpa brings a chair made he made from hickory wood and deer hide for a family that lost their furniture in a fire. Granpa spends a long time showing the man how to make the chair. He believes that it's better to help someone learn to be self-sufficient rather than dependent on handouts.

Granpa describes those who prefer to take from others, rather than learn for themselves, as 'uppity' and no better than another man's dog. He compares some nations to these men, nations who wanted the people dependent on them so they would do whatever they wanted, like dogs.

### Chapter 16, "Church-Going" Analysis

This chapter enforces the sense of separatism that Little Tree's family feels from the white man's world, viewing this obtrusive society as onlookers rather than participants. They also have a difficult time making rhyme or reason of the bible, as the stories are fairly disconnected to their spirituality and beliefs, despite the similarities in parables. They appear to attend church more from curiosity and for time to gather with friends before and after the event, than for the preaching itself. An important story moment is when Granpa teaches a man how to make a chair, giving him skills to be self-sufficient. Granpa has worked hard to help Little Tree become self-sufficient, even though Little Tree doesn't quite get the measure of this at his young age. His efforts to teach a man how to make his own chairs reinforce the lesson of self-sufficiency.



# Chapter 17, "Mr. Wine"

## Chapter 17, "Mr. Wine" Summary

Mr. Wine is an old Jewish back peddler who lives at the settlement. He visits Little Tree's grandparents once a month. Mr. Wine also works on clocks. In the evening, Granma lights a lamp while Mr. Wine opens his clocks on the kitchen table to repair them. Mr. Wine always shows up with something in his pocket, but has a terrible memory about it. Little Tree helps retrieve his memory and Mr. Wine thanks him for ridding him of fruit he forgot was in his pocket. He also keeps forgetting where his glasses are, until Little Tree points out they're on his head. Mr. Wine teaches Little Tree how to tell time and work out math problems. He tells Little Tree he's getting a good education because most children his age don't know anything about Macbeth or Napoleon. Mr. Wine then gives Little Tree a long yellow pencil and shows him how to sharpen it to be thrifty, so the pencil lasts longer. Mr. Wine also tells Little Tree about the two sides of education: the 'technical' or modern side, which helps you get ahead in your trade, and the 'valuing' side, which is about being honest, working hard, and caring for your folks. He explains that if you aren't taught on the valuing side, you'll probably use the modern side for bad, or for destroying and ruining

On one trip, Mr. Wine takes shows up with a yellow coat, which shines like gold. He says that, since he's always forgetting things, he made it for a grandson. But he's grown too big to wear it, and now he has no one to give it to. He thinks it's a sin to throw it out if someone else could use it. Old as he is, Mr. Wine wants no more sins on his shoulders. Little Tree offers to take it to help lift the burden. Mr. Wine is happy, saying he plumb forgot to ask Little Tree if he would do this favor. Granma hangs it on the bed post where he can see it at night. Little Tree plans to wear it to church and to the settlement, with the belief that the more he wears it, the more sin it'll take off Mr. Wine. Despite doing Mr. Wine a favor, Little Tree feels compelled to thank him.

When he crawls out of bed, he sees Mr. Wine praying on the ground and thanking a boy for bringing him so much happiness. Little Tree assumes he's talking about his grandson. Mr. Wine sees Little Tree and invites him to join him. Little Tree is curious why he lights a candle when a lamp is available. Mr. Wine tells Little Tree how his family lives across the big waters; so he lights a candle at about the same time as his distant relatives, in that their thoughts are shared at the same time. Little Tree tells him about his own folk in the Nation, scattered about, and plans to tell John Willow about the candle idea. The next day, after Mr. Wine leaves, Little Tree runs after him to thank him for the coat, but he doesn't seem to hear.

## Chapter 17, "Mr. Wine" Analysis

Like the Cherokee, Mr. Wine's Jewish family has been displaced, with only a candle lit at certain times to connect them through mutual thoughts of family. Mr. Wine has a great



fondness for Little Tree, relating to similarities with his own ethnic circumstance. Mr. Wine also teaches Little Tree practical lessons, like math and telling time, as well as about values, such as caring for family. His own beliefs parallel the Cherokee beliefs about body and spirit minds, which is probably why he and Little Tree's grandparents became friends. The kinship is there.

Mr. Wine references grandchildren, but also his folk who live across the ocean. Once senses that Mr. Wine has no relatives nearby, so Little Tree is a surrogate grandchild, the one he prays for with gratitude his last night at their cabin. It is apparent that Mr. Wine knows he is dying, hence his gift of the handmade yellow coat for Little Tree. He respects the Cherokee way, which embodies his own in many regards. His reference about his reason for lighting the candle at a certain time, because he knows loved ones will be thinking of him, parallels the way Little Tree will look at the Dog Star in the future.



# Chapter 18, "Down From the Mountain"

## Chapter 18, "Down From the Mountain" Summary

Fall comes early to the mountain, announcing it won't be long before 'winter dying'. Little Tree describes fall as nature's grace time. It is a time to put things in order, to remember, and to regret things that weren't accomplished. They all wait for Mr. Wine to come back for his usually monthly, visit but he doesn't show up. One evening, a man and woman in gray clothing appear. They are highly conservative and nervous. Little Tree describes them as being like politicians. The woman suggests Little Tree leave the room, but Granpa says that he isn't excluded from any family affairs. The man talks about people's concern about Little Tree's education. Granpa assures him that Little Tree is getting a good education as Mr. Wine can confirm, despite his forgetfulness.

The woman seems little impressed and gives Granpa a piece of paper, which he gives to Granma to read. The paper claims Granma and Granpa, being full bred and half-breed Indians, are uneducated, selfish, and old. It says they are taking advantage of Little Tree to help make their lives more comfortable. The letter also has things to say about Little Tree, which Granma won't read out loud, and that there are only so many days for them to argue the point in court before Little Tree will be sent to an orphanage.

After the man and woman leave, Granpa is stumped. His hand begins to shake. Little Tree rocks in the rocking chair and says he can double his dictionary words. He can't stop talking or rocking. Granma can only stare at the paper. Little Tree tries to assure his grandparents that the paper is opposite to the truth, that he burdens them and they in no way harden his life. His grandparents don't respond until Little Tree says he can share all he knows about a trade, which most children his age don't have. Granpa says the law being what it is, it's probably better not to mention the trade.

Little Tree sits on Granpa's knee and suggests he hides out with Willow John till the law forgets about him. He also asks what an orphanage is. Granma explains it's a place for children without parents, and that the law would find him at Willow John's. Granpa says they'll go to the settlement to visit Mr. Wine to get his advice. They go to Mr. Wine's apartment above the feed store, but no one answers. They go back to the feed store and ask a man about Mr. Wine. The man tells them that Mr. Wine is dead. Little Tree and Granpa are equally in shock. The man asks Granpa if he's Mr. Wales, and after acknowledgement, pulls out a tow sack.

He says that Mr. Wine knew he was going to die and even had a tag around his wrist of where to ship the body, with money in an envelope. The man describes him as a stingy Jew because he didn't leave a tip. Granpa shows his offense in a dignified manner and asks where he might find a lawyer. As they leave, the man in the store comments on how the old fool forgot to tag a candle, which he'd left burning by his head before he died.





They visit Mr. Taylor, a lawyer with a white beard, and give him the paper about Little Tree. Mr. Taylor tells Granpa he could take his money, but it wouldn't do him any good. Government bureaucrats don't understand mountain people. Granpa leaves him a dollar anyway. Granpa and Little Tree leave the settlement with a sense of defeat, having lost Mr. Wine and any hope for court help. It's the first time Little Tree remembers being able to keep up with Granpa as his feet are dragging so slowly. Near home, Little Tree asks what a 'damn Jew' is, like he heard at the feed store. Granpa wearily replies he doesn't know, but it must mean something far back, like the Indian. He says, "I hear tell they got no Nation either." His eyes suddenly look as empty and sad as Willow John. In the cabin they open Mr. Wine's tow sac. It's full of colored cloth, thimbles, and thread for Granma, and all manner of tools for Granpa. There are also math and reading books for Little Tree. They think the sack is empty but find two more items inside: a red apple and a candle. The candle has a tag that reads, "Willow John." That night, Little Tree rocks on the rocking chair, trying to assure his grandparents he'll probably like the orphanage and be home soon enough. When Granpa says they have three days left, they all rock the evening in silence.

They fill up the three days doing as much as they can. Little Tree goes to the crossroads store to buy his Granma the green and red box, which Mr. Jenkins offers cheaply (as it's old anyway). So there's enough left to buy Granpa some candy. On the last night, Granpa cuts Little Tree's hair, saying it'll be easier not to look like an Indian, and he is told he can't wear his moccasins. Little Tree tucks his moccasins under his bed and his deer shirt atop. He asks Granma to leave them there, as no one will be sleeping in his bed before he returns. He hides the candy and red and green box for his grandparents to find.

The next day, Granma won't go to the settlement, so says goodbye to Little Tree at the Cabin. Little Tree is smartly dressed in clean overalls, a clean white shirt, and leather shoes that have been stretched to fit. She hugs him tightly, the way she hugs Willow John when she sees him. She asks Little Tree if he remembers the Dog Star that appears at dusk. She asks him to look at it every chance he gets and he'll know that she and Granpa are thinking of him, like Mr. Wine's candle. Little Tree tells Granma to ask Willow John to look at it as well. Granma's parting words are "Remember the Cherokee married your Pa and Ma. Will ye remember that, Little Tree? No matter what is said... remember."

Granpa wears his black church suit and stiff shoes. As they clump down the hollow, Little Tree feels the pine branches sweep low and hold his arms, and an oak limb's finger pull the tow sack off his shoulder. A crow hawks non-stop. In Little Tree's mind, they are all saying "Don't go, Little Tree.... Don't go, Little Tree..." A lonesome dove calls and is not answered. Little Tree knows it is meant for him. Once at the settlement, Granpa and Little Tree wait for the bus on a bench. Their only conversation is when Little Tree has concerns about Granpa keeping up the whiskey trade without him. Little Tree assures that he'll probably be back soon enough to help. Granpa agrees.

The woman in the gray dress arrives and wants to get Little Tree away without any fuss. She puts a tag around Little Tree's neck. Behind the bus, Granpa gets on his knees and





also holds Little Tree for a long time, like he holds Willow John on visits. Then the woman grabs Little Tree and puts him on the bus. As the bus pulls away Little Tree goes to the back window to try to find Granpa. He finally sees him standing on a corner of the street, his hat pulled down low and his hands hung down by his sides. Little Tree cries out he'll be back soon, but Granpa can't hear. His shoulders are sloped, and Granpa looks old.

## Chapter 18, "Down From the Mountain" Analysis

This chapter shows the level of prejudice and ignorance that existed in separating Indian children from their families in the name of education. The white people perceive the Cherokees as shiftless and believe they can offer the children a better life through orphanages. They don't comprehend that Little Tree is more advanced than most children when it comes to self-sufficiency and knowledge about his natural world. Granpa is powerless to prevent Little Tree's situation, especially given his past in the whiskey trade. The grandparents sense what is ahead for Little Tree. They cut off his hair and put him in white people's clothes to help him fit in as much as possible. Like Mr. Wine's candle, Granma reminds Little Tree to look at the Dog Star at dusk and know that they're thinking of him. Granma also reminds him his parents were married by the Cherokee, obviously sensing he'll be called a bastard.

The evenings before he leaves for the orphanage, Little Tree is jumpy and can't stop rocking, a physical sign of his inner turmoil. He keeps seeking reassurance that he'll be back soon, though it is obvious that will not be the case. The last time Little Tree sees Granpa he looks as empty as Willow John, having suffered a great loss that feels as big as the Nation.



# Chapter 19, "The Dog Star"

## Chapter 19, "The Dog Star" Summary

Little Tree travels on the bus all night and is wakened by the bus driver in the morning. It's drizzling when he gets off the bus. A white haired lady greets him at the orphanage. She wears a long black dress and reminds him of the lady in the gray dress. She checks Little Tree's tag and leads him through the iron gates into the orphanage. They pass under elm trees that rustle. Little Tree thinks the trees have heard of him. The lady tells him he is going to see the reverend, and to only talk if he's asked a question.

The reverend has a pink face and is busy doing paperwork when Little Tree enters his office. The reverend tells Little Tree that the state can't provide money for these matters, but his Denomination has agreed to take him. He also says Little Tree will go to school and be assigned small work details. If he breaks the rules, he will be punished. He says there are no Indians at the school. Since his parents were never married, he is the first bastard they have ever accepted. Little Tree explains that the Cherokees had married them, but the reverend silences him, as he had not been asked a question.

The reverend tells Little Tree he does not have to go to church services, as bastards can't be saved, but he can listen in if he sits quietly in the back. He says that Granpa has been in jail and was unfit to raise him, so he assumes Little Tree has had no discipline. Little Tree tells him that Granpa almost got hung by the law once, which doesn't help to endear the reverend. The wind rises as he leaves the room, making them turn to the window. Little Tree knows that word has come about him from the mountain.

In the dormitory, Little Tree's cot is in a corner. It is separate from the others, except for one belonging to Wilburn, a tall skinny twelve-year old with a clubfoot. Wilburn is very bitter and says he plans to burn the orphanage down one day. Little Tree's job is to sweep the room every morning. During game time, he and Wilburn sit under a big oak. Little Tree silently talks to the oak, though doesn't tell Wilburn about it. The oak tells Little Tree she is sleepy, but will stay awake to send a message on the wind to the mountain trees that he is here. Little Tree tells her to tell Willow John. Now and then people come to view the children for possible adoption. Little Tree is told to stay out of the lines. None of the men and women ever talks to Wilburn, though he says he doesn't give a damn. Yet he still gets in line with a fresh shirt and inevitably wets his bed at night. Wilburn often cries in his sleep.

Chapel services are held at dusk. Since Little Tree doesn't have to go, he uses this time to watch the Dog Star from his dorm window. He imagines conversations with Granpa, Granma, and Willow John. During the day Little Tree attends class. One day the teacher holds up a picture showing a deer herd coming out of a spring branch. The deer are jumping on one another like they are pushing to get out of the water. She asks the class what the deer are doing.



Little Tree says he knows they're mating because it's the buck deer that are jumping on the does and he can tell by the trees that it's mating season. The teacher is in shock. She then starts shaking Little Tree, calling him filth and a bastard. He is taken to the reverend's office where he is severely beaten across the back with a big stick until he is profusely bleeding. He is sent to his dorm and told not to leave it for a week. That evening, Little Tree looks at the Dog Star and tells Granma and Granpa what happened, although he doesn't really understand it.

Every evening after that, he tells Granma, Granpa and Willow John that he wants to go home. Late one evening as Little Tree is about to go inside, he thinks he sees Granpa on the other side of the gate and cries out to him; but he disappears from view. On Christmas Eve, some townsfolk show up to bring presents for the children at the orphanage. A lady gives Little Tree is an orange while Wilburn gets an apple. Then Santa Clause hands out presents. Little Tree gets a cardboard box with a picture of a lion. On Christmas day they have a big dinner, then are free to do what they want. Since it's cold, everyone but Little Tree stays inside.

He is about to go back in, when he looks at the building and sees Granpa! He tells Little Tree he came to see about him, though Granma couldn't make it; and now he has to head home. Little Tree desperately wants to go with him but is afraid Granpa will get in trouble. He walks with him as far as the gate. Then Little Tree worries that Granpa might have trouble finding the bus stop at night and follows behind him. After a while, he calls out to Granpa and tells him he can help with the bus lettering. The bus arrives and Granpa gets on. Little Tree pulls on his pant leg and says he wants to go home. Granpa looks at him a long time before picking him up into the bus. Little Tree sits on Granpa's lap all the way home, his head in the warm comfort of his big chest. The chapter ends with a poem about the mountains and going home with Granpa.

## Chapter 19, "The Dog Star" Analysis

Little Tree is physically and emotionally disconnected from the other boys at the orphanage, except for Wilburn, who is himself an outcast because of his clubfoot. Little Tree is considered an outcast by the reverend and teachers, who view him as a filthy bastard who should be grateful for having their charity. Little Tree's only company are the trees, the wind, and the Dog Star. Looking at the Dog Star lifts his spirits. He believes he is being sent messages and memories from his grandparents and Willow John. Little Tree's understanding of nature gets him in severe trouble; and from that point he tells his grandparents every night through the Dog Star that he wants to go home. When Granpa finally shows up, Little Tree doesn't understand if he should leave or stay, but follows his heart and is grateful to be going home.



## Chapter 20, "Home Again"

### Chapter 20, "Home Again" Summary

It is early morning when they get off the bus and hike the road back to the mountains. Once on the trail, Little Tree says something is wrong. He takes off his shoes and says he couldn't feel the trail. Granpa laughs and takes his shoes off as well. He throws them toward the road as far as he can, shouting "And ye can have them clobbers!" Little Tree does the same thing, and they laugh until tears are rolling down Granpa's face. The wind picks up. Granpa says it's singing in the pines, telling everyone that Little Tree is home. They hear Ol' Maud bay and suddenly the hounds run up to greet Little Tree, jumping and yelping with joy.

As they cross the spring branch, Little Tree looks for Granma on the cabin porch; but she's not there. Granpa calls out and Granma comes running down the mountain, rolling and splashing in the spring water as she holds Little Tree. Little Tree changes into his deer shirt, britches and his boot moccasins. He takes off with the hounds, running all the trails and visiting his secret place. He lays there a long time, listening to the wind. Little Tree describes how his spirit has stopped hurting and he feels washed clean by the trees, the spring branch and the birds.

Little Tree returns at sunset to find Granma and Granpa sitting on the back porch. They all hug without using any words, as words aren't needed. That night, when he pulls off his shirt, Granma notices the scars on his back. Little Tree explains how he got them. Granpa says he is going to tell the sheriff that no one is to come for him again. Little Tree knows that when Granpa is set on something, that's the way it will be. He also says it would be better not to tell Willow John about the whip lashings.

By the fireplace that evening, Granpa explained how they started to have bad feelings watching the Dog Star. Then one evening, Willow John showed up and slept in Little Tree's bed. In the morning he was gone. Before church, they found a message belt from Willow John, saying he would be back and all was well. The next Sunday Willow John is back, but doesn't mention where he's been. Granpa gets word that the reverend wants to see him. Granpa says the reverend looked sick and was signing papers to return Little Tree. The reverend told him he had been followed for two days by a savage, who finally told him Little Tree was to go home. The reverend said he didn't want trouble with savages and pagans. Little Tree realizes the man, who he thought was Granpa near the orphanage, was, in fact, Willow John. Granpa says he wanted Little Tree to decide for himself if he wanted to go home. So he left the decision to him. Little Tree says he knew what he wanted to do from the moment he arrived at the orphanage. On Sunday, Little Tree runs to hug Willow John and thanks him. Willow John touches his shoulders, and his eyes are twinkling and shining.



## Chapter 20, "Home Again" Analysis

Little Tree is exalted to be home and reconnected to the mountain. He bathes in nature's wonders, listening to the trees sing about his arrival. His spirit, which was damaged at the orphanage, feels whole again. He knows he is where he rightfully belongs. Little Tree also knows that nature has no body mind and therefore knows no evil. Nature knows no words like hell; and Little Tree starts to forget them too, relishing in the spirit mind. Willow John, in a sense, fights his last battle to help set Little Tree free. Their bond is that much deepened by his selfless actions.



# Chapter 21, "The Passing Song"

## Chapter 21, "The Passing Song" Summary

It is freezing that winter, although Granpa says such winters are nature's way of cleaning things up and making things grow better. When Little Tree turns seven in summer, Granma gives him his parents' marriage stick. One day that fall, Willow John doesn't show up to meet them before church, which worries them. The next day Granpa and Little Tree set off to find him. They climb a trail up a mountain to his lodge. The hounds whine, which is not a good sign. When they enter the one-room lodge they find Willow John lying naked on a bed of deer hides. Granpa whispers his name. Willow John opens his eyes and says he knew they would come, so he waited.

Granpa lights a fire and makes a broth for Willow John. Little Tree covers him with blankets. In the morning, Willow John asks to be taken outside. Granpa carries him out to a high place. They wrap him in blankets and put on his moccasins. John Willow stares out over the mountains toward the Nations. Granpa puts Willow John's knife in his hand. He uses it to point to an old fir-pine and asks to have his body close to her, as she has been good to him. His body will give her two more seasons.

Willow John tells Granpa that he will wait for him. Little Tree tries to assure Willow John that he just has the flu and should stay at their cabin; but Willow John says he doesn't want to stay and he'll wait for Little Tree as well. Willow John starts his passing or death song, letting the spirits know he is coming. Little Tree and Granpa see his spirit slip away and leave his body. Granpa says Willow John will be back. They will feel him in the wind or hear him on the talking fingers of the trees. They dig a hole by the tree and place his body inside. They pile rocks on his body so animals won't get at him. Little Tree and his grandparents never go to church again, because it would not be the same without Willow John.

Little Tree has two more full and happy years with his grandparents, although he notices Granpa's step is slowing. One day on a high trail, Granpa slips and falls. he doesn't get up. He is sick and needs to be in bed. Pine Billy comes to visit with his fiddle and can't help but cry. Granpa tells him to quit the crying so he can hear the fiddle. Granpa's spirit mind begins to take over and he talks to Willow John a lot. He asks for his hat and tells Little Tree, "It was good, Little Tree. Next time, it will be better. I'll be seein' ye." Then he slips away.

Although Little Tree knew this moment was going to happen, he can't really believe it. Little Tree goes to walk on a trail, suddenly realizing he's not following Granpa and the world has come to an end. Finally he finds his way to the crossroads store and tells Mr. Jenkins that Granpa has died. He sends his son to help Pine Billy make the box. They carry Granpa up the high trail to his secret place, with Granma leading the way. It is the place Granpa first took Little Tree to watch the sunrise. Granma stares off over the mountains as the others leave her to be alone.



Little Tree works hard to cover Granpa's share of work and whiskey making. Granma pushes him to keep learning and reading books, which he reads to Granma in the evenings. The oldest hounds die later that winter. One day, when Little Tree returns, he sees Granma on her rocker on the back porch and knows she is gone. She is wearing the pretty dress that Granpa loved and has a printed note pinned to it. It reads, 'Little Tree, I must go. Like you feel the trees, feel for us when you are listening. We will wait for you. Next time will be better. All is well. Granma.' Pine Billy comes to play his fiddle while Little Tree sits with her body. The next day they bury her beside Granpa. Little Tree sets their marriage stick between them.

After the winter, Little Tree buries Granpa's whisky still and takes the money that Granma had set aside for him from the trade. He is determined to head west, across the mountains, to the Nations. The surviving hounds, Blue Boy and Little Red, go with him. On his journey, Little Tree works on farms. Little Red dies when he falls through ice in the Arkansas Ozarks. Little Tree and Blue Boy continue, but discover this is no Nation. One day, Blue Boy lies down and doesn't want to go. So Little Tree sets him on the horse he has purchased and they go in search of a mountain. He finds a small mountain, where he digs a grave in a spot Blue Boy will like. He figures with Blue Boy's nose, he'll have no trouble catching up with Granpa.

## Chapter 21, "The Passing Song" Analysis

The final chapter is full of loss and sadness with the deaths of Willow John, Granpa, Granma and all their hounds. Willow John asks to be buried near a tree, as his way of giving back to nature. His death also reinforces Little Tree's belief in the spirit world, as he believes he literally sees Willow John's spirit leave his body and float over the mountains. Like Willow John, Granpa and Granma each know when it is their time to die. They want to be buried on the mountain, forever connected to nature. Their final messages to Little Tree also offer reassurance that they are still present around him, and that he will see them again. Little Tree is only nine when he leaves the mountain. Yet there is a strong sense that the Cherokee way is so imbedded in his heart and mind, that he will continue The Way as he matures, helping keep it alive. The ending of the book is quite sad, as the Nation that Little Tree hoped to find no longer exists. It is a discovery Willow John had made years before, a discovery that saddened his spirit. Blue Boy's death is a final physical separation from his loved ones from childhood, though his beliefs will always keep them spiritually present.





# Characters

## Little Tree

Little Tree is five years old when the story begins. We never learn his birth name, as Granma gives him the name of Little Tree on his arrival to her home. It represents his connection to the animals and land. Except when attending church, or at the orphanage, Little Tree dresses in traditional Indian clothing, including a deer skin shirt, britches and moccasins. He also grows his hair log, like his grandparents. When he is sent to the orphanage, he cuts his hair and wears 'white' clothes to look less like an Indian, so he will fit in better. Little Tree is extremely innocent and only sees the best in people, even when they ridicule him or say offensive remarks to him. He doesn't really understand their meaning and his grandparents help protect him from potential hurt or resentment.

Little Tree feels a strong connection with nature that grows with his knowledge of the Cherokee ways. He also feels his spiritual side grow, the more he connects to nature. Little Tree looks up to Granpa, and only disappoints him once, when he purchases a sick calf. The error of judgment teaches him a lesson about not believing everything he hears. Like Granpa, he gains a distrust of authority figures, as they only seem to cause problems for his family. The experience at the orphanage, where he is savagely beaten by the reverend, only enhances this feeling. Little Tree is eight by the time his Granpa dies, and nine when his Granma dies. With no kin left, he spends several years in search of the Nation to find others like him. Sadly, there is no Nation left; and we don't find out where Little Tree goes next.

## Granpa

Granpa, whose given name is Wales, has a strong physical presence, standing 6'4". Granpa has always lived in the mountains and has no desire to go anywhere else. His father, a mountain man, was of Scottish descent. His mother, Red Wing, is a full-blooded Cherokee. He was raised in the traditional Cherokee way. To make ends meet, he farms the land, makes whiskey for sale, forages and traps animals. Granpa values his traditional Cherokee heritage and has a strong, inherent respect for nature. He takes only what is needed to get by. He greatly distrusts authority figures and blames politicians for all the problems in the world. Granpa has a great sense of humor and often has funny ways of looking at situations. He can't read; but when Granma reads from books, the stories often make little sense to him, as the characters and places are so disconnected from his world. Granpa is patient and loving with Little Tree, guiding him in ways that Little Tree doesn't always comprehend at his tender age. He teaches him many practical skills, as well as Cherokee beliefs. He grows to love Little Tree immensely, and risks his life to protect him from a snakebite. He lets Little Tree make his own decision on matters, even if means making a mistake, so that he learns to do things for himself and trust his instinct. Granpa praises Little Tree often, helping boost





his self-esteem. He dies when Little Tree is eight. He is buried on his favorite spot in the mountain, where he and Little Tree often watched sunrises.

## Granma

Granma, whose given name is Bonnie Bee, dresses in long skirts and has braids down to her knees. She is wise and knowledgeable about plants and herbs. She uses this knowledge to save Granpa when a snake bites him. She nurtures Little Tree's spiritual side and teaches him the difference between the body mind and spirit mind. Granma can read, so she often reads to Granpa and Little Tree. She likes Shakespeare plays the most, but requests all sorts of fiction and nonfiction books from the library. She also makes Little Tree learn words in the dictionary. Granma dies a year after Granpa, when Little Tree is nine years old. She is buried on the mountain beside him.

## Willow John

Willow John is an eighty-year old full Cherokee. He is a friend of Little Tree's grandparents. He is tall, with long white braids, and wears a hat like Granpa. He has a look of sadness in his eyes, stemming from the loss of his Nation and traditions. He seems uncomfortable living on the fringes the white man's world. He has a special bond with Little Tree because of his youthful affinity toward the Cherokee ways. Little Tree has the ability to bring a sparkle to his eyes, as he offers hope that traditions will continue. Little Tree and his grandparents see Willow John every Sunday, before and after church.

After church they share a meal together under the shade of a tree. Willow John is upset when Little Tree is sent to an orphanage. Sensing something is wrong, he goes to ensure his freedom. We learn he harassed the reverend for two days before telling him he had to let Little Tree go. In a sense, it is his last battle, as he dies soon after. When he is dying, he waits for Little Tree and Granpa, knowing they will come. They help take him to a mountain spot where he can look out over the lands that were once the Nation. He asks to be buried by an old tree that has been good to him, so it can live another few years off his body. It is his way of giving back to nature.

## Pine Billy

Pine Billy is a friend of Little Tree's grandparents. He wears bright yellow high top shoes, white rolled socks that are lump-tied to hold them up, overalls that fall just above his socks, a short black coat, white shirt and little hat. He is an amiable man and a fine fiddler. But he is not the brightest fellow, as evidenced by his various schemes to get rich quick. He plays the fiddle when he visits. He plays it for Granpa when he is dying, and also after Granma has died. He helps Little Tree bury both his grandparents.



## Mr. Jenkins

Mr. Jenkins is the owner of the crossroads store where Granpa sells his whiskey. By Little Tree's description, he is fat and round with a white beard that runs past the bib of his overalls, while his bald head shines like a pine knob. He is kind to Little Tree, giving him gifts, like candy, without degrading him. He acts like Little Tree is doing him a favor to rid him of unnecessary items, which Little Tree believes at his age.

## Mr. Wine

Mr. Wine is a Jewish peddler and good friend of Little Tree's grandparents. He cares very strongly for Little Tree and helps educate him on math and telling time. He reinforces the values his grandparents have taught him. Before he dies, he makes Little Tree a yellow coat. Respecting Little Tree's heritage, he pretends it was not originally intended for Little Tree, but appreciates him taking it off his hands. He also tells Little Tree about the candle he lights at a certain time each day, when he knows his loved ones far away are lighting theirs and thinking of each other. Mr. Wine knows he is going to die. He prepares all his items for shipment, including his body for burial. He leaves a bag of presents for Little Tree and his grandparents, as well as a candle for Willow John.

## Sharecropper Girl

Little Tree meets the sharecropper girl at the crossroads store. She is extremely poor and unkempt, wearing a tow sack for a dress and always barefoot, even in the cold. Little Tree gives her a pair of moccasins; but her father whips her for taking 'charity', especially from a savage heathen.

## Old Man Barnett

Appearing only once, Old Man Barnett pulls teeth at the crossroads store. He takes pride in his work, usually with a big audience watching.

## Mr. Chunk and Mr. Slick

Mr. Chunk and Mr. Slick are rude, self-interested men from Chattanooga. They want Granpa to make whiskey for them. Their plans go afoul after Little Tree leads them up the mountain and they get covered in poison ivy, as well as a bout of diarrhea from Granma's special fish.

## **The Preacher**

The local preacher is a skinny man who wears the same suit every Sunday. His hair sticks out on all sides, giving him a nervous appearance that matches his nature. As the only church in town, his denomination comes from all faiths, making his job a challenge. He has little tolerance for separatists, a category that Indians fall into. This he makes known to Little Tree and his family during his preaching.

## **Ethan and Red Wing**

Ethan and Red Wing were Granpa's parents who raised Granpa in the mountains the traditional Cherokee way. Ethan was a mountain man and a soldier of Scottish descent, while Red Wing was a full-blooded Cherokee. They are referenced several times in Granpa's stories.



# Objects/Places

## Granpa and Granma's Cabin

The cabin is set at the base of a mountain, under tall trees and near a spring. A porch runs across the front, while a dogtrot separates the two bedrooms from the common area and kitchen.

## The High Trail

The high trail on the mountain behind the cabin is where Granpa educates Little Tree on The Way, a Cherokee philosophy on nature.

## The Settlement

Granpa and Little Tree often walk to the settlement to gather books and supplies, such as coal oil. Granpa also sells his whiskey at a store in the settlement.

## Crossroads Store

The store where Granpa gets supplies and sells his whiskey. The grocer, Mr. Jenkins, gives Little Tree peppermint sticks. It is also where Little Tree meets the sharecropper girl.

## The Narrows

The Narrows is a narrow portion of trail by the spring brand that leads to the mountains. It is here that Little Tree and Granpa watch the hounds chase Ol' Slick, the fox. It is also the area where law enforcement officials try to catch Little Tree to discover the whereabouts of Granpa's whiskey still.

## The Secret Place

Little Tree's secret place is a grassy knoll with a gum tree hidden by laurel. He comes to this special place to reflect. Granpa also has a secret place he shows to Little Tree, their first night hiking up the mountain together. It is where he and Granma get buried.



## **The Orphanage**

Little Tree is sent to the orphanage to get an education, since his grandparents are considered unfit to care for him. There is a large metal gate at the entrance, enhancing its feeling of imprisonment.

## **The Dog Star**

The Dog Star is the star that Little Tree looks at to communicate with Granma, Granpa, and Willow John when he is at the orphanage. It is a bright star, easy to find in the sky.

## **Moccasins**

Granma makes Little Tree a pair of moccasins as soon as he comes to live with them. He loves wearing them, as he can feel the trail, unlike when wearing stiff shoes. She also makes a pair of moccasins for the sharecropper girl, but the girl's father makes her return them.

## **The Whiskey Still**

Little Tree learns to help Granpa operate the whiskey still. It is kept hidden up the Narrows near the spring branch. The family is dependent on whiskey making as their only source of income. They go to great lengths to protect it.

# Setting

The reader begins to feel as if s/he knows the mountain trails, the seasons, the cabin, the Spring Branch, the tiny field of corn, and the hidden whiskey still, where Little Tree spends several years under the care of his grandparents. The area in the eastern Tennessee mountains that Little Tree learns to love and calls home is fundamental to his view of the world. With Granpa by his side, his eyes are opened to the beauty of a sunrise, the behavior of the birds and animals, and the sounds of his surroundings.

Granpa teaches Little Tree to live with the land and take only what is necessary. Nature is the key backdrop to the story, and in many ways it is Mother Earth who is the central character and Little Tree's closest companion. Little Tree's grandmother tells him it is because he is born from nature: Granma said very few was picked to have the total love of the trees, the birds, the waters—the rain and the wind. She said as long as I lived I could always come home to them, where other children would find their parents gone and would feel lonesome; but I wouldn't ever be.

The other geographic setting which is presented as a dichotomy to the mountains is the town or civilization itself. When Little Tree and Granpa hike down to the crossroads store to sell their homemade whiskey and attend Church, they enter the other world. In this world, Little Tree is introduced to how other people live and speak.

And in most cases his impression of that world is largely a negative one filled with snooty aristocrats driving their automobiles, untrustworthy politicians, and those who seem to look down at the manner in which Little Tree and Granpa live their lives. As "foreigners" to the ways of the city, the notion is reinforced in Little Tree that he belongs in the mountains that are his true home.



## Social Sensitivity

The Education of Little Tree spends a good deal of time reflecting on the question of man's place in the world. This cannot be separated from the issues of the history involving the Native Americans being forced off their land by the white man and being relocated to reservations. Little Tree is told of the Cherokee's past, their forced relocation in what was called "The Trail of Tears."

It is through this history and Granpa and Granma's attempt to live in a world where Native Americans are denied certain civil rights and are forced to digest a religion that is not their own that Little Tree learns to distrust the government. Granpa's lack of faith in politicians is passed along to Little Tree, and justifiably so, considering the intrusion of the government workers on Granma and Granpa's property and lifestyle. Considering Native American history and Little Tree's segregation from the rest of society, the reader is asked what his place in the world should be.

Age versus youth is a topic that threads through the fabric of the tale. The book seems to debunk the idea that age always equals wisdom; rather, Little Tree becomes, even at a young age, wiser than many of the other characters in the book simply by stopping and listening to simple truths that either nature or other people teach him. He sees the mountains as vast and providing, and worthy of honor, rather than as a place to pillage and use to one's own advantage, with little or no thought to giving back to the mountain. When he goes into town, he observes everyone carefully, and does not blindly believe everything that his grandfather tells him about the world. He takes in his surroundings and decides for himself what is truth. Wisdom is not a function of age but of time itself—time spent observing, listening, communing with oneself and nature, and coming to conclusions about the world from a place of personal strength and opinion. Little Tree is an individual, and the fact that he is alone in the world after his grandparents die serves to solidify a vision of him as a singular, independent being. He is wise because he believes in the power of his own opinion.

At the same time, scenes are permeated with the larger issue of man versus nature.

In fact, Little Tree seems to be a bridge between nature and civilization, precariously balanced at the gap between the two.

The novel does not try to instruct the reader as to how to bridge the gap, but rather presents the problem bluntly. It contends that this clash will continue and that answers must be sought in order to avert the ever-increasing misunderstanding between primitive living and capitalism, with its attendant burgeoning bureaucracy.



# Literary Qualities

The voice of Little Tree drives the story.

Carter's use of first person narration gives the novel a personal, almost journalistic quality. As Little Tree recounts his experiences in an innocent child's voice, the reader is in essence experiencing the lessons first hand as he is invited to be a part of the education.

Because Nature plays such a vital role in defining *The Education of Little Tree*, Carter spends a good deal of time infusing his descriptions of the environment with detailed depictions of the natural habitat: smells take on their own vibrancy, and little sounds and sights appear to Little Tree as he learns to still his body and adjust to nature's grasp. The forest becomes a place not just of wonder but a home. It is as much through Little Tree's dealings with his grandparents against the encroachment of government regulations as his lessons from allowing himself to meld into the natural landscape that Little Tree begins to grow into an adult. And it is the descriptions of the natural landscape that allow the reader to feel the change in Little Tree from a man against nature to a man with nature. In addition, Carter creates a life and thought process for the plants in the forest through Little Tree's imagination. Just as Granpa and Granma's belief in the spirit of all living things influences Little Tree's way of viewing the world, the anthropomorphization of the trees and flowers teaches Little Tree to respect Nature and appreciate its beauty.

Carter also uses dialogue to define his characters. Because Little Tree and his grandparents are not formally schooled, the language and colloquialisms they use are not grammatically complex. Just as Granpa is always bickering about how many superfluous words exist in the world, the dialogue is kept simple, thus reinforcing the notion of living a life by simple means. For example, when Granpa was teaching Little Tree about how the foxes try to outsmart the dogs, he and Little Tree share the following exchange: Not far off a big bay sounded, long and hollow.

"That's ol' Rippitt," Granpa said, and laughed low, "and it's a damn lie. Rippitt knows what's wanted . . . but he can't wait, so he makes out like he's hit a trailscent. Listen to how falsified the bay sounds. He knows he's a 'lying." Sure enough, it did sound that-a-way.

"He's damn shore lying," I said. Me and Granpa could cuss when we wasn't around Granma.

Here, Granpa uses words that precisely fit the purpose of his speech; nothing is extraneous. Again, after Little Tree allows a salesman to swindle him out of money, Granpa discusses the situation in simple terms.

"Ye see, Little Tree, ain't no way of learning, except by letting ye do. Iff'n I had stopped ye from buying the calf, ye'd have always thought ye'd ought to had it.





Iff'n I'd told ye to buy it, ye'd blame me fer the calf dying. Ye'll have to learn as ye go."

"Yes sir," I said.

"Now," Granpa said, "what did ye learn?"

"Well," I said, "I reckon I learned not to trade with Christians."

.. . Granma said, "What ye mean, Little Tree, is that ye'll be likely to have caution at the next feller who tells you how good and what a fine feller he is."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, "I reckon."



# Themes

## Familial Bonds

Granpa and Granma thrive on Little Tree's energy and enthusiasm. They like to pass on their wisdom and stories. The divergent generations also share a comfort in familiar customs and traditions that have been passed down through generations. Many have been lost in the modern world. At his mother's funeral, while everyone is arguing about who should keep him, Little Tree instinctively goes to his silent grandfather and clutches his pant leg. The connection is instant, and Granpa insists that he go with them. The bonds are deepened through stories, lessons and shared experiences on the mountain. They call the love they share 'kin'.

The family works as a unit to plant and harvest the crop, make whiskey, and forage. They also enjoy time together in nature, visiting special friends and reading stories in the evenings. Granpa and Granma include Little Tree in all the family decisions and discussions. When the family is separated, they maintain the bond by communicating through the Dog Star. Once they are reunited, Granpa ensures that no one will separate them again. They spend their last few years together living life to the fullest. The experience molds Little Tree into an honest, ethical and self-sufficient boy who loves and follows the Cherokee ways.

## Spirit and Body

Little Tree learns and practices the Cherokee beliefs of the spiritual world. The body-mind is used for getting food, shelter and other human needs. The spirit mind is about understanding, love, and connection to the natural world. Little Tree uses his spirit mind to communicate with nature and listen to the spirits. This is especially important when he is taken to the orphanage and only has the trees, the wind, and the Dog Star for company. He feels the trees announcing his arrival and sending messages back to the mountain, which gives him solace.

The white world of religion does not acknowledge or comprehend the spirit world. It is too much entwined by strict rules and discriminating beliefs. According to the church, Little Tree is a bastard, who cannot be saved or go to heaven. Little Tree's beliefs don't include a heaven or hell. Rather, he will become part of the spirit world after he dies and be reunited with all his other loved ones. Granma tells him that the spirit mind must be exercised, like any other muscle, or it will shrink. When Little Tree returns from the orphanage, he feels his spirit mind grow in the mountain. He realizes that nature has no body mind. He feels cleansed and healed by nature's spirits.



## Cultural Differences

There are stark cultural differences between the Cherokee and others in their community. The differences create a divide that keeps the small, Cherokee population isolated from the mainstream. Little Tree once remarks on how Willow John looks uncomfortable living in the fringes of white society. Little Tree and his grandparents truly connect only with other Cherokee or other oppressed people, such as Mr. Wine. Mr. Wine has similar philosophies on life, if not the same religious beliefs. The only exception is Mr. Jenkins, the owner of the crossroads store, who is gracious and kind. The white world doesn't comprehend the Cherokee ways and is a constant source of threat. Granpa's whiskey trade is threatened by authorities. His land is threatened by taxes. His tribe is threatened with being dispersed, and Little Tree is threatened by changing beliefs of how Indian children should be raised.

In an attempt to be somewhat accepted, Little Tree and Granpa wear white people's clothes to church; and Little Tree cuts his long hair when going to the orphanage to look 'less Indian.' Years of threats, indignities, and bigotry have made Granpa highly distrustful of any person in authority, especially politicians, who he blames for pretty much everything. Perceiving this, Little Tree also becomes more wary of others.

## Life and Death

The story begins with death - the funeral of Little Tree's mother. Like his ancestors, Little Tree accepts death as a state of change into the spiritual world, not an end to that person's being. He also sees death in nature, one creature killing the other for survival. Yet he understands it is a necessity to keep the animal population strong and healthy. Granma also relates a story about a tree that gave up its life to save the forest from lumbermen. Rather than seeing things in terms of birth and death, Little Tree sees them as birth and rebirth, like the seasons.

The spirit world is vital to Little Tree's understanding of the world. So, while death can be heartbreaking, he knows he will never be alone. Loved ones will be with him, and communicate through nature, for the rest of his natural life. They will also be waiting for him when it is his turn to go to the spirit world. The story also ends with death - the death of Willow John, the family hounds, Granpa, and Granma. Granpa's death is profoundly difficult for Little Tree to accept, as he cares so deeply for him. There is also a constant reminder about the death of the Nation that has scattered Cherokee families. There is reference to the Trail of Tears, where thousands of Cherokee died while being forcibly removed off their lands. There is also the death of tradition, as the Cherokee are scattered and displaced. Little Tree gives Willow John sparks of hope, by carrying on the traditions in a new generation.



## Themes/Characters

What is the relationship of man to nature? Are the two one and the same, or is man separate from nature, an observer, a consumer? *The Education of Little Tree* follows the character of a young boy, Little Tree, as he seeks personal answers to these questions. Through Little Tree's experiences and observations, the reader gains an appreciation for the indelible beauty of the earth—the soil, the leaves, the individuality of the bark upon the trees. Through this tactile understanding of the vitality of nature, and man's indebtedness to the fertility of the earth, the reader witnesses the possibilities of how man might live with nature— not as an observer but in partnership with the living land. There are no hard and fast lessons in the novel, yet an overall examination of the way humans live subtly emerges from Little Tree's informal education from his Cherokee grandparents.

Portraying the world through the eyes of a child allows Carter to shift the perspective away from the drudgery of adult life—bills, tending to the home, feeding the children—and focus on an exploration of the environment without ingrained expectations. Carter begins the novel with the death of Little Tree's parents. While Little Tree's relatives "raised some mortal fuss" about what should be done with him, he latched onto his Granpa's leg, and thus his grandparents ended up taking him home with them.

Home is a log cabin with a wide hall running through it, and it is here, set back against the mountains, that Little Tree begins his education, not one so much about reading and writing but one about a holistic approach to living on the land. The book follows Little Tree as he at first tries to impress and please his grandparents but eventually learns that the best lessons come from listening to his own heart, and to learning to always try to give as much to the land as one takes. His lessons are subtle and lasting.

For instance, Granpa teaches Little Tree of the importance of feeling self-worth by showing him how he treated his hound dogs. Since ol' Maud was not a good tracker, Granpa gave her the job of guarding the family's corn patch.

"Like Granpa said, ol' Maud had no smell sense at all and was practical worthless on the fox trail; but she had keen hearing and eyesight, and this gave her something she could do and take in knowing she was of worth. Granpa said if a hound or anybody else has got no feeling of worth, the it's a bad thing."

This idea of connection to one's place and one's people is further taught through the emphasis on family ties. The way that Granpa and Granma care for each other strengthens Little Tree's desire to understand his relationships with other people.

"Granma said you couldn't love something you didn't understand; nor could you love people, nor God, if you didn't understand the people and God."

Little Tree learns a great deal about his past and the story of the Cherokee people.



Awareness of the history of the Native American and their losses are vital to Little Tree's curriculum. He learns that he, and his people, cannot possibly have a future without knowing about the past. Several peripheral characters whom Little Tree encounters during his years living with Granpa and Granma emphasize the unbreakable connection between the past and the future.

Willow John is an old Cherokee friend of Granpa and Granma's who Little Tree is introduced to on their Sunday trips to Church. Willow John represents the old ways of the Native American before the white man forced them off their land. Willow John, who is isolated and living in the past of another generation learns from Little Tree that there can be hope in humanity.

It is within Little Tree that Willow John sees the spirit of a new generation of those who respect and honor Nature and are learning their place in the world.

Another character who helps educate Little Tree is an old peddler named Mr. Wine who moves through the mountains.

Mr. Wine teaches Little Tree the importance of studying "figures," or mathematics, and the benefits of thriftiness, another reference to man's wisdom in only taking what he needs from the world. Through Mr. Wine's brief appearance, the ultimate lessons of Little Tree's education are laid out: "He said education was a two-part proposition. One part was technical, which was how you moved ahead in your trade. But, he said, the other part you had better stick to and not change it. He called it valuing.

Mr. Wine said if you learnt to place a value on being honest and thrifty, on doing your best, and on caring for folks; this was more important than anything. He said if you was not taught these values, then no matter how modern you got about the technical part, you was not going anywheres atall."

Interestingly enough, Mr. Wine's comments provide commentary on the Depression itself and the effects of modernization and mass consumerism.

"As a matter of fact, the more modern you got without these valuings, then you would more than likely use the modern things for bad and destroying and ruining. Which is right, and not long after proved out."

One problematic notion with regard to the theme of nature versus civilization is that pro-nature stances can come off as antiprogress. The Education of Little Tree takes a deliberately negative stance toward the intrusion of government on the lives of mountain people, but it does not offer any suggestions on how to marry the two. Little Tree explains that Granpa refused to ever have a job in public works. As he narrates, "'Public works', to mountain folks, meant any kind of job for hire." In fact, the only job Granpa ever had, and the only trade interaction he offered to the townspeople, was the illegal business of producing whiskey.



Thus, the only real business that Granpa offered off the mountainside was not even a legal trade, and when his business was discovered, the government threatened to take away custody of Little Tree from Granpa and Granma.

Later in the novel, Little Tree and Granpa go down into the town settlement to find a lawyer to take care of some business for Granpa. Upon reading the papers from the government that Granpa brought to him, the lawyer, Mr. Taylor, says to the two of them, "I could take your money, but it wouldn't do any good. Government bureaucrats that run these things don't understand mountain people. Don't want to. I don't think the sons of b—— understand anything . . . Nor Indians. We'd lose. They'll take the boy." While this passage asserts the idea that some people living in the towns were sympathetic to the Indians, it takes a reactive approach and does not offer a means for reconciling the two manners of living—by nature or by civilization.

# Style

## Points of View

The entire story is told from a first person point of view, that of Little Tree reflecting on the years he spent with his grandparents. While the perspective is that of a young boy, we can understand many adult behaviors and language that Little Tree doesn't comprehend. This is done through the description of actions and dialogue.

## Setting

The main setting for the novel is a mountain in Tennessee, where Granma and Granpa live. There are also surrounding community areas, such as the settlement, which include the crossroads store and the church. Since the mountain encompasses Little Tree's whole world, there are many mountain settings that hold special meaning, such as a secret place or the high trail. On the mountain, Little Tree learns about the Cherokee ways. He connects and bonds with nature. The cabin is the family's physical dwelling, a warm place, often visited by friends. Yet nature is also his home, and he often sleeps up in the mountains with Granpa.

The settlement nearby is where Little Tree and Granpa sell their whiskey and get supplies. They go to church every Sunday, but more to see their friend Willow John than hear the preaching. Once Willow John dies, the family stops going to church. The only settings outside of the mountain area are at Little Tree's mother's funeral, and the orphanage. Unlike the mountain, the orphanage, with its ominous metal gates, is constricted with strict rules, structured daily life, and an unloving atmosphere.

## Language

The highly descriptive language is at a level that young adult readers can understand. Yet many descriptions and phrases have a subtext more easily interpreted by older readers. The style of speech and descriptors are in keeping with the time period and various ethnicities. As all the citizens are from the same community, their speech tends to be quite similar. The differences in speech tend to be attributed to ethnicity and levels of education. As a novel told from a young boy's point of view, the author uses the language of a child's wonderment, when describing the natural and spiritual world of the mountain. Language is very similar in nature in expressing admiration or confusion about the people he encounters. This helps to provide an emotional connection to people and places, inherently important to a child raised in Indian tradition.

## Structure

The novel is structured in twenty-one chapters and follows a fairly linear progression, beginning with Little Tree's arrival at the mountain in 1930 and ending after his grandparents' deaths. However, chapters have overlapping sequences, especially when new characters are introduced or stories of the past are related from memory. While the stories are told in present tense, they are reflections from the future.





## Quotes

"I knew I was Little Tree, and I was happy they loved me and they wanted me." Chapter 1, p. 5

"It is The Way," he said softly. "Take only what ye need." Chapter 2, p. 9

"Granpa lived *with* the game, not *at* it." Chapter 4, p. 23

"I Kin ye, Bonnie Bee." Chapter 5, p. 38

"If ye don't know the past, then ye will not have a future. If ye don't know where your people have been, then ye won't know where your people are going." Chapter 5, p. 40

"A death march is not romantic. You cannot write poetry about the death-stiffened baby in his mother's arms, staring at the jolting sky with eyes that will not close, while his mother walks." Chapter 6, p. 42

"Granma said I had done right, for when you come on something that is good, first thing to do is share it with whoever you can find; that way, the good spreads out to where no telling it will go." Chapter 8, 47

"Granma could move quieter than a whisper through wood leaves." Chapter 8, p. 59

"Granma said your spirit mind could get so big and powerful that you would eventually know all about your past body lives and would get to where you could come out with no body death at all." Chapter 8, p. 60

"Most folks don't know - the Cherokees do - that there is a range of tone you can talk in that when it carries will sound like mountain sounds: wind in the trees and blush and maybe running water." Chapter 9, p. 70

"He said it was a funny thing, but when you got old and remember them you loved, you only remembered the good, never the bad, which proved the bad didn't count nohow." Chapter 10, p. 78

"When ye hear somebody using *words* again' somebody, don't go by his words, fer they won't make no damn sense. Go by his *tone*, and ye'll know if he's mean and lying." Chapter 10, p. 79

"Folks who laugh and say that all is known about Nature, and that Nature don't have a soul-spirit, have never been in a mountain spring storm." Chapter 12, p. 102

"Granpa said the woods would feed you, if you lived with the woods, instead of tearing them up." Chapter 12, p. 103



"Though Granpa never mentioned putting his hand between me and the snake, I figured, next to Granma, more than likely Granpa skinned me more than anybody else in the world, even Blue Boy." Chapter 12, p. 113

"Granma said very few was picked to have the total love of the trees, the birds the waters - the rain and the wind. She said as long as I lived I could always come home to them, where other children would find their parents gone and would feel lonesome; but I wouldn't ever be." Chapter 15, P. 144

"You couldn't tell if the eyes were dim, or if Willow John was looking past you into a dimness far away." Chapter 15, p. 147

"Granpa said if you showed a feller how to do it, it was a lot better than giving him something." Chapter 16, p. 158

"He said he only lit the candle at certain times, and they lit the candle at the same time, and that they was together when they did this for their thoughts was together." Chapter 17, p. 169

"The paper said Granma and Granpa was selfish, and being that way was total hampering me for the rest of my continual life." Chapter 18, P. 172

"Granpa knelt there, by the open door of the bus, and held me like he held Willow John." Chapter 18, p. 181

"You are the first, the only bastard we have ever accepted." Chapter 19, p. 185

"I stayed by the winder every evening for an hour and watched the Dog Star." Chapter 19, p. 189

"You are born of evil, so I know repentance is not in you; but praise God, you are going to be taught not to inflict your evil upon Christians." Chapter 19, p. 191

"Me and Granpa was going home." Chapter 19, p. 198

"Through that short winter day, I lay in my secret place. And my spirit didn't hurt anymore. I was washed clean by the feeling songs of the wind and the trees and the spring branch and the birds." Chapter 20, p. 203

"When I have gone, put the body there, closed to her. She has dropped many young and warmed and sheltered me. It will be good. The food will give her two more seasons." Chapter 21, p. 209

"It was good, Little Tree. Next time, it will be better. I'll be seein' ye." Chapter 21, p. 212

"I was not following Granpa, and then I knew the world had come to an end." Chapter 21, P. 212



# Adaptations

Paramount Pictures released a film version of *The Education of Little Tree* in 1997.

Earl Richard Friedenberg adapted and directed the novel. The film starred Joseph Aston as Little Tree, James Cromwell as Granpa, and Tantoo Cardinal as Granma.

Readers interested in novels that depict the lives and history of Native Americans may also like *Mountain Windsong: A Novel of the Trail of Tears*, by Robert J. Conley (reissued 1995), which tells the story of Waguli and Oconechee, a young Cherokee man and woman separated by the Trail of Tears.

Joseph Bruchac's *The Journal of Jesse Smoke, A Cherokee Boy, The Trail of Tears, 1938* (2001) is a sixteen-year-old Cherokee boy's record of the events leading up to the Trail of Tears, as well as the excruciating journey west. It is told in a diary-format novel that comes alive with details of everyday life and of Cherokee spirituality and world views.

On a similar theme of overcoming hardship and facing change, *Valley of the Moon: The Diary of Maria Rosalia De Milagros, Sonoma Valley, Alta California, 1846*, by Sherry Garland (2001), gives a fictionalized account of a young migrant farm worker. Maria Rosalia de Milagros, a thirteen-year-old orphan working on a California rancho in 1846, picks up a discarded diary in which she secretly records her thoughts and experiences. She writes about the hard work; the rare pleasures of church festivals; her coworkers and wealthy employers; and the disturbing increase of norteamericanos coming to California.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you feel it is necessary to find your place in the world? How do you think people discover their place?
2. Why does Granpa distrust politicians and the government? Why do some people today not agree with the government?
3. What do you think will happen to Little Tree in the future? How can he teach others?
4. How do you feel the Native Americans, such as the Cherokee, feel today in a much more modern world? Why is it important that they maintain their past traditions?
5. How do you think Forrest Carter portrays the Native American? Is he reinforcing a stereotype?
6. What do you learn from Little Tree's view of the world? How is his perspective different? Is it better? Is it worse?
7. Why does Willow John seem sad? What do you think his story is?



## Essay Topics

Explore the function of age in the novel as it relates to the central characters' personal sense of identity.

Discuss the role of the natural world versus the manmade world.

Discuss how the idea of spirituality works in the novel.

Trace the development of Little Tree's character over the years he lives with his grandparents and the resulting changes.

Explore the differences and similarities of Cherokee life with main class life in that period.

Discuss how familial bonds bridge generational gaps.



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the history of the Cherokee Indians. How are their beliefs different from your own?
2. Why were Native Americans persecuted? Were they or are they misunderstood? Why?
3. What would it be like to live in the mountains? Research the history of Tennessee's mountains and mountain people.
4. Why might it be important to live in harmony with Nature? How is man treating the environment today?
5. How do you think Little Tree will adapt to the modern world?
6. What was life like during the 1930s and the Great Depression?
7. Research "The Trail of Tears." How do you think America would be today if we had shared knowledge and co-existed equally with the native people who were here before us?

## Further Study

Bruchac, Joseph. Review of *The Education of Little Tree*. *Parabola*, vol. 14, no. 2 (May 1989): 108-109, 112. Bruchac's review praises the novel as a compelling, lifegiving autobiography that addresses basic human concerns in a compassionate and effective manner.

Carter, Dan T. "Southern History, American Fiction: The Secret Life of Southwestern Novelist Forrest Carter." In *Rewriting the South: History and Fiction*.

Edited by Lothar Honnighausen and Valeria Gennaro Lerda. *Transatlantic Perspectives*, no. 3. Tübingen: Francke, 1993, pp. 286-304. This is an essay (within a larger collection on Southern history) that discusses the irony of Carter's political affiliations and his novel *The Education of Little Tree*.

Clayton, Lawrence. "Forrest Carter/Asa Carter and Politics." *Western American Literature*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 19-26. Clayton discusses how Carter used his novel as a fruitful vehicle for his political criticism.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "'Authenticity,' or the Lesson of *Little Tree*." *New York Times Book Review*, vol. 24 (November 1991): 26.

This article takes the stance that authorship is not important in the larger picture; that it is the book, and the story that emanates from that book, that matters.

The book should stand separate from the personal life of the author.

## Related Websites

Barra, Allen. "The Education of Little Fraud."

<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2001/12/20/carter/print.html> Accessed April 11, 2002. This is a biting commentary on Forrest Carter's "secret" life as a white supremacist. The article focuses on the ironic aspect of Carter's political ties versus his assumed stance in *Little Tree*.





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Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996