

# **How to Eat Fried Worms Study Guide**

## **How to Eat Fried Worms by Thomas Rockwell**

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## Plot Summary

When the novel begins, Billy, Alan, and Joe meet up after a failed adventure to steal peaches from Old Man Tator's peach tree. Tom explains he couldn't join in since he was grounded for not eating dinner – a salmon casserole. Billy explains that salmon casserole doesn't sound so bad, which prompts the argumentative Alan to wonder what Billy wouldn't eat. He asks Billy if Billy would eat mud or worms. Billy explains he would indeed eat worms, so Alan levels a bet. Billy must eat 15 worms in 15 days, for \$50.

The rules are laid out. Tom will act as Billy's second to ensure there is no cheating, while Joe will act as Alan's second to ensure there is no cheating. The worms selected must be common worms, and may be prepared in any way so long as the worm is eaten. Billy agrees to the bet, knowing that winning \$50 will help him purchase the minibike of George Cunningham's older brother.

The day of the first worm arrives. It is boiled and coated in ketchup, mustard, and other condiments. Billy considers backing out of the bet at first, but Tom reminds him of the money involved. Billy successfully eats the worm, which worries Alan. Joe reassures Alan that there is no way Billy will win the bet.

The next several worms follow. At first, Billy has difficulty eating the worms, not because of the taste, but because of the thought that he is eating worms. He eventually moves past this, which further worries Alan. Alan explains to Joe that his father will be furious with him for betting, let alone losing \$50 on a bet. Alan and Joe concoct a story that eating worms is poisonous, which worries Billy but does not convince him because Alan and Joe laugh while they explain this. That night, Billy has an upset stomach which in a panic he blames on worm poisoning. He tells his mother and father about the bet and eating worms, but his father assures Billy that worms are not poison.

With his father's reassurance, Billy eats through the next several worms with ease. This causes Alan and Joe to panic, so they pull out all the stops. While they are away on a fishing trip for two days, they request that Billy's mom ensure Billy eat the two required worms. They hope Billy's mom will not allow him to do this, but their plan backfires. She creates a delicious European worm dish and a delicious ice cream worm cake for Billy to eat. When Alan and Joe return, they try gluing together a worm to make eating especially difficult, but Billy discovers the trick. They also bring Billy to Shea Stadium for a Mets game, stuff him with food and soda, and watch with glee as Billy falls asleep on the way home which means he will not eat his daily worm. At the last minute, Billy remembers he has to eat a worm, so enlists the help of Tom and Tom's younger brother, Pete, to find a worm. Using a toy siren, Billy, Tom, and Alan wake up Alan and everyone on his block so Alan can see that Billy has managed to eat his daily worm just before midnight.

Alan's father is furious with Alan and Joe for trying to trick Billy, and has Alan and Joe go door to door apologizing for the siren, and then tells them no more tricks. The boys end up getting into a fight which Alan's father ends by reminding the boys they are all friends



and need to get past the bet. Alan still tries a few more times to win the bet by locking Billy in a closet and giving him a fake worm, but these attempts fail as well. Billy ultimately wins the bet by eating his fifteenth worm. While Alan must work off the debt at a local store, Billy purchases his minibike and explains to Tom and Joe that he has come to like the taste of worms.



# Chapters I – IX

## Summary

Chapter I, The Bet – Alan and Billy visit with Tom to reveal that Old Man Tator caught them and their friend Joe climbing through his fence stealing peaches, so he made them give the peaches back and called their moms. Tom explains he was unable to join in because he was grounded for not eating supper, which consisted of salmon casserole. Billy says that one bite couldn't possibly hurt Tom. Alan asks Billy if he would eat mud. Billy says he would. Alan then asks Billy if he would eat worms. Billy says he would, but they would have to be cooked because they bleed. He also says he would eat 15 worms for \$100. Alan offers him \$50 instead. Joe shows up a moment later so Alan declares the bet, with Joe acting as a second for Alan, and Tom acting as a second for Billy like a duel. The ground rules are laid out. Fifteen worms must be eaten in 15 days. The worms will be regular ground worms. They can be prepared in any way, but Alan and Joe must select the worms. Billy agrees to the bet, knowing the \$50 will help buy George Cunningham's brother's minibike.

Chapter II, Digging – Tom, Alan, and Joe wander around behind Billy's barns. Joe insists the worms they find must come from a manure pile. Tom protests this, but Joe says that no one ever made a rule about where the worms had to come from. To be fair, Joe accepts that the worms can come from an old part of the manure pile. Joe insists, though, the worm has to be big enough to be eaten with a knife and fork. Tom accepts this if he can choose where to dig.

Chapter III, Training Camp – Billy does everything he can think of to prepare for the bet, including exercising, sleeping outside with the dogs, and gathering together things like ketchup, salt, pepper, honey, and other condiments for adding to the worms. Billy heads to the barn, where Tom, Alan, and Joe arrive a few moments later with a silver platter and a worm.

Chapter IV, The First Worm – Tom explains the worm on the silver platter has been boiled, and that it is a night crawler, a large worm found on the soil at night. Billy considers backing out on the bet because the worm is so large, but Tom reminds him of the money and the minibike. He also tells Billy that Alan and Joe will tell everyone at school that Billy chickened out. Billy then decides to continue. The worm is mixed with ketchup, mustard, salt, pepper, and horseradish sauce. Billy eats the worm, piece by piece, and declares it to be very good. He begins flapping around pretending to be a bird. Alan and Joe think Billy has gone crazy, so they flee the barn but then later realize he is only goofing off.

Chapter V, The Gathering Storm – Alan and Joe meet in the orchard. Alan is worried that Billy was so easily able to eat a worm. Billy knows his parents will be furious with him for losing \$50. Joe reassures Alan, telling him not to worry. Joe explains he'll find a



way to ensure they win the bet, such as peppering a worm to the point where all Billy can do is sneeze.

Chapter VI, The Second Worm – Billy eats the second worm. He explains to Tom that the worm doesn't taste bad because the only thing he can really taste is the ketchup and mustard, but the thought of eating what he is eating is making him sick. Alan and Joe inspect Billy's mouth to make sure the worm has been swallowed. They then all go to see a movie.

Chapter VII, Red Crash Helmets and White Jump Suits – After the movie, Tom and Billy walk home. Tom encourages Billy, insisting he'll prepare the worm in a different way next time. Billy again explains it isn't the taste of worm so much as the thought of eating a worm which makes him ill. Tom comes up with the solution of preparing the worm so it will look like a fish, while Billy must think "fish" over and over again while eating it, and must think about the minibike and how much fun it will be to dress up in race outfits and drive it. Billy is much more excited about eating worms, now.

Chapter VIII, The Third Worm – Tom fries the next worm up to a golden brown so that it resembles a fish. As Billy eats the worm, he reminds Billy over and over again to think "fish." Billy eats the worm without a problem.

Chapter IX, The Plotters – Alan and Joe discuss how to proceed next. Joe tells Alan not to worry, that he has everything figured out.

## Analysis

"How to Eat Fried Worms" is a children's novel by Thomas Rockwell which revolves around a bet made with ten-year-old Billy Forrester that he can't eat 15 worms in 15 days. When the novel begins, it is clear that Billy, Tom, Joe, and Alan are good friends who get into all sorts of trouble together. Their latest misadventure happens to be a failed attempt at stealing peaches from Old Man Tator. The reader should note that, as the novel opens, Billy and Alan arrive at Tom's house together. This is especially important given the divisions and fight that will occur between them later in the novel. Alan's suggestion of a bet is a challenge of friendship rather than an expression of any dislike between the two boys.

But as with all childhood friendships, the potential for disagreements exists over simple things. In this case, it is the worm bet. Childhood here proves to be an important theme as the very nature of the bet itself – eating so many worms in so many days for so much money – is reflective of the age of Billy and his friends (they are all around ten years old). Eating worms – and making bets about it – are the sorts of things common among children. Billy's pretend reaction being a bird after eating his first worm is also reflective of the lighthearted and humorous nature of childhood.

The nature of the bet, however, undermines the friendship between Billy and Alan – most likely due to the large amount of money placed on the bet – and brings out the worst kind of competition that can occur among children. So anxious is Alan to win the



bet that he will do anything to win, even at the expense of his friendship with Billy. The novel will be full of Alan's attempts to win the bet, even at the expense of his friendship with Billy. Meanwhile, Tom will do everything he can to help Billy win the bet not because he expects any reward from the bet, but because Billy is one of his best friends and there is a sense of loyalty that exists between Billy and Tom.

Honesty also plays an important role in the bet as it unfolds. In some cases, honesty shines through and in other cases, it does not. In some cases, the dishonesty is relatively harmless in nature – such as Joe's suggestion that they should pepper a worm so much all Billy will be able to do is sneeze. In other situations, as the reader will learn in coming chapters, the dishonesty over the bet will take a truly unfriendly turn.

The theme of determination also comes about by way of the bet. Billy is utterly determined to win the bet, and is willing to eat whatever worms he must to do this. This includes imagining the worms he is eating are fish rather than worms – a brilliant idea suggested by Tom. Alan, on the other hand, is so determined to win the bet that he is willing to do anything in order to lose. This comes primarily as a consequence of Alan knowing that he'll be in serious trouble for losing, let alone betting, \$50 on something like eating worms. Tom is determined to help Billy win the bet as a matter of friendship, while Joe seems determined to help Alan win the bet not only as a matter of friendship with Alan, but as a personal mission for victory.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Alan suggest the bet with Billy about eating 15 worms in 15 days? What are the rules and rewards of the bet?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Billy agree to take the bet with Alan about eating 15 worms in 15 days? What does Billy hope this will accomplish?

## Discussion Question 3

Even though Alan knows that his father will be furious with him for betting \$50 on a bet, he still does it anyways. Why?

## Vocabulary

sly, devious, schemer, obsequiously, pounced, screeching, night crawler, fink, plotters



# Chapters X – XVIII

## Summary

Chapter X, The Fourth Worm – As Billy eats the fourth worm pretending it is a fish, he begins to get annoyed with how closely Alan and Joe are watching him and whispering to one another as though they expect something to happen. Joe says it is merely because his father told him something important the other night. Billy asks about it. Joe says his father has warned him never to eat worms, because it is so bad it is probably worse than poison. Tom is suspicious and doesn't believe a word of it because Alan and Joe are snickering. Alan and Joe blame it on hay fever. Billy finishes the worm and leaves the barn with Tom. Alan and Joe blame each other for laughing and ruining the plot.

Chapter XI, Tom – Tom reassures Billy that if he isn't poisoned by now after four worms, there is no truth to the poison story. Billy insists Tom try a worm as well to prove it. As Alan and Joe go to find a worm, Tom takes off running.

Chapter XII, The Fifth Worm – Billy prepares to eat his fifth worm. He worries about the poison stories and Tom taking off running. He begins to wonder for the first time if he may actually lose the bet, and where he could possibly get \$50 to pay it off. Alan and Joe urge Billy to concede the bet. Billy calms himself, adds ketchup, mustard, and other condiments to the worm, and eats it with his hands. He then wipes his hands on Alan's pants.

Chapter XIII, Nothing to Worry About – Alan loses sleep over the thought he may lose the bet. He calls Joe in the middle of the night, asking what to do if he loses because he knows his father will never let him take \$50 out of his bank account. Joe reassures Alan that Billy is cracking, and won't last much longer.

Chapter XIV, The Pain and the Blood and the Gore – Billy has a nightmare where he goes to the butcher's shop and orders ten snake-like black worms, and then goes to eat at Longchamps Restaurant on Times Square in New York City where he is served a massive worm for dinner. He then dreams of a worm moving in to eat him, then wakes up in a panic. His stomach is grumbling and he worries that Joe was right about poison worms.

Chapter XV, 3:15 A.M. – Billy's mother wakes up, having heard Billy. She then wakes up her husband. Billy confesses eating worms to his parents. Billy's father reassures Billy it isn't the worms bothering him, but probably all the ketchup and mustard he has eaten. Billy's mother is worried and wants to call the doctor, but Billy's father assures them both that they have nothing to worry about. He explains he ate a live crayfish in college and never suffered from it. After Billy goes back into his bedroom, he hears his father double-checking with poison control on the phone to make sure he is alright. Billy is thrilled to learn he is.





Chapter XVI, The Sixth Worm – Billy eats his next worm without worry or concern. Alan is stunned and wonders where he went wrong and what he can do now. Tom waits in the bushes outside, afraid to come in.

Chapter XVII, The Seventh Worm – Billy eats his next worm while reading comics. Alan and Joe watch unhappily.

Chapter XVIII, The Eighth Worm – Billy adds a lot of mustard to his next worm. Alan says it is unfair to add so much mustard, but Billy says it is well within the rules for him to do so. Billy then asks why Joe hasn't shown up. Alan says he does not know why. Alan tells Billy to wait and see what happens from eating so many words. Billy is untroubled by this, and laughs it off. He eats the eighth worm, then leaves, ignoring Tom as Tom pops up from behind a barrel and says hello.

## Analysis

Alan and Joe's determination to win the bet is seen through their next major ploy to succeed. Both Alan and Joe let it be known that eating worms is just like eating poison. This is a dishonest move, and one which has the potential to cause serious harm. The reader should note that the theme of childhood is also apparent here as Alan and Joe do not think about what consequences the story made up by Alan and Joe about poison might have on Billy. At the same time, their laughter is evidence of their childhood as well, for they cannot keep straight faces.

While they laugh when they reveal this information to Billy, and though Billy and Tom suspect that Alan and Joe are merely trying to dishonestly trick them into losing the bet, Billy is still worried. Billy is worried enough that it causes him to lose sleep and experience nightmares – and a simple upset stomach becomes a terrifying ordeal for Billy. Billy's movement at three in the morning awakens his parents, who are concerned for their son.

Here, the theme of family becomes crucial to the plot. Billy confesses the bet with Alan to his parents. While his mother is worried that eating worms may be unhealthy, Billy's father has no such concerns. Although he double-checks with poison control just like a good father would to make sure beyond a shadow of a doubt, his reassurances make Billy feel much better. He is able to plow through eating his next several worms without a problem – which in turn stuns both Alan and Joe.

Meanwhile, Billy's friendship with Tom is temporarily strayed when Tom refuses to eat a worm and bolts away from Billy and the others. Meanwhile, the friendship between Billy and Alan appears to slowly be unraveling as the bet continues to come between them. Consider that earlier in the novel, after eating a worm, all four friends went off to see movies together. Now, after each worm meal, the friends go their separate ways, with Joe and Alan always plotting their next move. Joe reassures the troubled Alan that Billy is going to crack soon. Alan, who himself loses sleep over the bet, isn't so sure.



## Discussion Question 1

Why do Alan and Joe invent a story about worms being poisonous? What effect does it have on Billy?

## Discussion Question 2

How do Billy's parents fit into this part of the novel? What do they do for Billy when Billy believes he has been poisoned? Why does this matter so much to Billy?

## Discussion Question 3

After Billy's nightmare, upset stomach, and talk with his parents, he is able to plow through eating the next few worms without a problem. Why is this so? What does his confidence do to Alan and Joe? Why?

## Vocabulary

deracinate, lolling, apoplectically, agony, sullenly, sensible, rumped, hoarse, mammoth, discernible, triumphantly, serene, glowered, sheepishly, tentatively, disdainfully



# Chapters XIX – XXVII

## Summary

Chapter XIX, The Ninth Worm – The next worm Billy is given is very long, which makes Billy suspicious because Alan has rolled the worm in cornmeal and fried it, and because Joe stands in the barn doorway pretending not to be paying attention. Tom looks in from the window. Billy announces he will eat his worm plain, but Alan says this is not fair. As Billy scrapes off the cornmeal, he discovers that two worms have been glued together. Tom rushes into the barn and confirms that the worm is indeed glued together. Billy calls Alan and Joe cheaters. Tom upholds the bet, however, because Billy didn't actually eat the worm.

Chapter XX, Billy's Mother – Alan and Joe appear at Billy's at breakfast. They speak about the bet, which Billy's mother did not think was still going on. Billy, who has had a check-up with Dr. McGrath to ensure that no dangers have come from eating worms, insists he is fine to continue the bet to win \$50. Because Alan and Joe are going away to Lake Lauderdale overnight on a fishing trip, they ask Billy's mother to make sure Billy eats his next worm. Billy's mom agrees.

XXI, The Tenth Worm – While Billy's father, mother, and sister Emily are to have hamburgers for dinner, Billy is to have a worm. In an old recipe book, Billy's mother finds a recipe for Alsatian Smothered Worm, which Billy ends up loving. Even Billy's father is interested in trying the Alsatian Smothered Worm, but can't or Billy will lose the bet.

XXII, The Eleventh Worm – For Billy's eleventh worm, his mother bakes the worm into a delicious, sugary ice cream cake she calls Whizbang Worm Delight. While Tom is now tempted to try the worm prepared in such a fashion, Emily still is not.

XXIII, Alan and Joe plan to invite Billy along to Shea Stadium. There, they plan to pretend to give up on the bet and stuff Billy so full of food he'll fall asleep on the way home, go straight to bed, and forget to eat a worm for the day. Alan worries about how much money this will cost him to buy all that food, but Joe reminds him that a few bucks is nothing compared to \$50.

XXIV, The Twelfth Worm – Billy discusses the invitation to Shea Stadium, and Alan's saying he has given up, with Tom. Tom is suspicious. Billy makes himself a toasted cheese worm sandwich while Billy's mom gives Tom some chocolate ice cream.

XXV, Pearl Harbor – After Shea Stadium and all the snacks and sodas, Billy falls asleep on the way home. Alan and Joe are excited, believing their plan has worked as it is nearly midnight and there will be no possible way Billy can eat a worm at this point.

XXVI, Guadalcanal – As Billy's mom helps Billy get ready for bed, she asks him about the bet. Billy snaps wide awake, remembering he hasn't eaten a worm yet, and realizing



that the entire trip to Shea Stadium was a trick. Billy gets in touch with Tom and his little brother Pete, who immediately rush to help Billy dig up a worm. Pete finds a worm, and Tom encourages Billy to eat the worm where he can be seen. Tom then tells Pete to get his toy siren out.

XXVII, The Thirteenth Worm – Standing under the streetlight in front of Alan's house, Pete fires off the siren which brings many people to their windows, including Alan. Tom announces the eating of the thirteenth worm which Billy does raw. It is disgusting, but he manages to do it.

## Analysis

Alan and Joe's determination to win the bet continues to appear in their many plots to win the bet. Their determination comes by way of dishonesty in how their plots unfold. Alan and Joe glue together a worm with the hopes that the worm will be far too long for Billy to successfully finish eating. Alan and Joe next plot to bring Billy's mom into things. Believing that Billy's mom will never allow her son to eat worms, they ask her to ensure that Billy eats worms while they are away. But their plan backfires as Billy's mom prepares delicious worm meals for Billy.

When this plot backfires, Alan and Joe hatch the Shea Stadium plot, where they hope that after a Mets game, Billy will be too tired to eat a worm and will go straight to bed. This plot does not work either; it actually backfires on them in unexpected ways in coming chapters. While Alan and Joe are just being kids, and while their plots to win the bet in this section of the novel are still relatively harmless, they are increasing the strain on their friendship with Billy. The bet has truly gone from being merely an event of friendship to a serious contest where friendship is being endangered.

Family proves invaluable to Billy once again in this chapter. As the reader will recall, in previous chapters, Billy's parents reassured him that eating worms is not poisonous. This allows Billy to eat his next several worms without a problem. Now, Billy's mom ensures that Billy will be able to eat his next two worms quite easily – with delicious meals surrounding them. Billy's mom especially proves to be important when it is she who reminds Billy of the bet following his outing to Shea Stadium, saving him at the last minute from losing the bet.

Billy's parents recognize that the bet is merely a part of being a kid. Like any good parents, they are supportive of their children – even with such harmless, childish things such as eating worms. Billy recognizes this, and is very grateful to his parents – especially his mother for her last-minute reminder of the bet after the Mets game. The reader should also note that it is Tom and his brother, Pete, who help Billy to find a worm to eat that night. Family proves important to Tom as Pete, who has no connection to the bet whatsoever, is willing to help out finding a worm and getting his siren as a question of family loyalty to Tom. This will be incredibly important in future chapters as well.



## Discussion Question 1

While Alan and Joe devise different dishonest plans to win the bet, do you believe any of them are truly harmful? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do Alan and Joe want Billy's mom to ensure that Billy eats his two required worms while they are away? What happens as a result?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the plan to win the bet that Alan and Joe come up with involving Shea Stadium? Does their plan work? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

nonchalantly, envious, bloated, Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, glare



# Chapters XXVIII – XXXVI

## Summary

Chapter XXVIII, Hello, We're... - Joe, spending the night at Alan's, is awakened along with Alan by Alan's father. Alan's father is very disappointed in Alan and Joe trying to trick Billy, and for the neighborhood being woken up as a result. The next day, Alan's father sends them around the neighborhood to apologize to everyone and to let everyone know they have been punished as a result. They will have no allowance for two weeks, and no television and no dessert for a month. When Alan and Joe insist they can't lose, Alan's father reminds them that they tried to trick Billy and lost, and must not try to do so again.

Chapter XXIX (a picture of a clump of mud) – Alan confronts Billy, calling him a fink. Billy confronts Alan, calling him a cheater. The two boys end up fighting and throwing mud at one another. Tom and Joe join in. A rock ends up hitting Billy above the eye, and Billy ends up crying. Tom rushes to bring Billy home while Joe and Alan run away in fear.

Chapter XXX, The Peace Treaty – Alan's father sits all four boys down the next day on the couch, reminds them they have been friends for a long time, and tells them to work out their problems. He says that once they do, he'll take them to Friendly's for some ice cream. Billy explains that if he can complete the bet and buy the minibike, he'll share it with everyone. Joe likes this idea, and urges Alan to accept things as they are.

Chapter XXXI, The Letter – While Billy believes Alan will give up, Billy suspects that Joe will not. It is just then that Emily brings in a letter addressed to Billy and his mom from Dr. McGrath, stating that he was reading through a medical journal and learned that earthworms can induce paralysis, triple vision, and pimples. There are many misspellings and errors in the letter, but Billy and Tom do not notice these.

Chapter XXXII, Croak – Billy, eating a worm sandwich, begins to panic. His father glances at the letter and smilingly explains it is a fake.

Chapter XXXIII, The Fourteenth Worm – Billy now happily finishes his worm sandwich. Billy's father points out that some of the words used in the letter, such as "fulmar," actually means "bird." In other words, Alan and Tom had no idea what they were writing exactly.

Chapter XXXIV, The Fifteenth... - Billy meets Alan and Joe in the barn. Joe says he really does give up, even if Alan is still trying to plot. Joe explains that Alan wanted to load the latest worm with red pepper, but he wouldn't let Alan do this. Additionally, the worm is from disgusting muck found behind Bannerman's store. Billy still eats the worm without a problem, and arranges to be paid the \$50 the following day. Alan is very unhappy about this.



Chapter XXXV, Burp – Billy celebrates alone in the barn until he burps, a taste which resembles beans. After a few more burps, Billy realizes he has been given a worm shaped out of beans. He rushes out after Alan and Joe, accusing them of cheating once more. Joe denies any knowledge of what has happened, while Alan denies the worm was made from beans. Billy declares he will eat another worm just to make sure.

Chapter XXXVI, The Fifteenth Wo.... – As Billy prepares to eat a new, raw worm, Alan runs into the barn, pushes Billy and shoves him into the tool closet to prevent him from eating it. Alan explains as much, but Joe has had enough. Meanwhile, Billy begins kicking at the door, demanding to be let out. Alan decides that he will put Billy in the old cistern to ensure a victory. He begins pulling up boards to uncover the cistern.

## Analysis

As the reader will recall, Alan and Joe hatched a plot to prevent Billy from eating a worm by getting Billy to fall asleep after a Mets game – but this plot backfired when Billy's mom reminded him of the bet, and when Billy, Tom, and Pete woke up the neighborhood to demonstrate Billy has eaten the worm after all. Now, the consequences of the dishonest plot put together by Alan and Joe comes back to haunt them as Alan's father lays down the law and hands out punishments.

All children do silly and inconvenient things when they are young. Alan and Joe's plot led to the waking up of the neighborhood. Not only are they punished by Alan's father, but they are forced to go door-to-door to apologize to each neighbor individually. It is a good lesson for Alan and Joe, but it does not take away from their determination to win the bet even though Alan's father is extremely disappointed in Alan and Joe for trying to trick Billy. Family is very important here as Alan's father attempts to set a good example and teach both Alan and Joe to be honest and respectful in what they do. But as children, the lesson doesn't quite get through to them.

Rather than settling things between the boys, Alan becomes angry with Billy for getting him in trouble. It is at this point in the novel that the friendship between Alan, Billy, Tom, and Joe reaches such a low point that it almost ends. The boys get into an actual fight, just like all children do at some point or another. This fight ends in Billy being seriously hurt. Like any good parents, Alan's father has had enough and again intervenes. He sits all four boys down and reminds them that they have been friends all their lives, and that no bet should end that. He requires that they work out their problems. While the boys get past the fight, they still do not move beyond the bet.

The unfolding situation has a small impact on Joe in terms of honesty. When Joe learns that Billy intends to share the minibike with all of them, as a matter of friendship, he urges Alan to simply let the bet go. Joe prevents Alan from taking the very dishonest step of loading up a worm with red pepper. Later, Joe denies having any knowledge of the fake worm that Billy is fed by Alan, evidence that Alan's determination to win the bet has now far outpaced even Joe's determination to win the bet. Joe is determined to win



the bet, but not to the degree that Alan is. Alan locks Billy in a barn tool closet and prepares to throw Billy in the old cistern in order to ensure that he wins.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the bet affect the friendship between Billy, Alan, Tom, and Joe in this section of the novel? What happens as a result?

## Discussion Question 2

In this section of the novel, Alan emerges as the more determined between him and Joe to win the bet. Why is this so? What does Joe do that makes Alan the more determined to win the bet?

## Discussion Question 3

Alan's father must get involved in the bet in this section of the novel. Why? What things does he require of the boys, especially Alan and Joe? Why?

## Vocabulary

furtively, repetition, lassitude, malignant, defrauding, stagnant, muck





# Chapters XXXVII – XLI

## Summary

Chapter XXXVII, Out of the Frying Pan into the Oven – Billy's dad hears the commotion and comes to the barn. He tells Alan and Joe to go home, and then sends Billy up to his room. Billy tries to argue that he needs to eat the final worm, but Billy's dad sends him up to his room anyways, saying he has told Billy and his friends to stay away from the old cistern. Billy is stunned.

Chapter XXXVIII, \$%//!?Blip\*/&! – Billy angrily kicks his bed. He is enraged because he is only two bites away from winning the bet, and because he himself had nothing to do with the cistern.

Chapter XXXIX, The United States Cavalry Rides Over the Hilltop – Tom arrives to see Billy, but is told that Billy is punished. Tom asks what has happened in order to distract Billy's mom.

Chapter XL, The Fifteenth Worm – With Tom distracting Billy's mother, Pete gets Billy's attention through the window. Pete sends up a worm, which Billy eats just as Alan and Joe jump out of the bushes and call for Billy's mother. Billy's mother and Tom watch as Billy runs downstairs and dances around outside, excited to have won. Alan and Joe head home in defeat. Billy's mother comes outside and smiles.

Chapter XLI, Epilogue – Billy drives his new minibike over to see Tom and Joe at the creek for lunch. Alan is not there, as he is working off his \$50 debt at the store. Billy reveals he has a worm-and-egg on rye for lunch, and tells Tom and Joe not to tell his mom that he has grown to like the taste of worms.

## Analysis

Alan's determination to win the bet continues to the end of the novel. Alan continues to go to dishonest lengths to win the bet. As the reader will remember, the final attempt to win is very underhanded. In order to win, Alan locks Billy in a barn tool closet, and then decides that Billy should be put into an empty cistern to prevent him from winning – something timely interrupted by Billy's father. However, Billy's father no longer cares about the bet, but does care about the fact that the boys are anywhere near the old cistern, let alone opening it. He sends everyone home and grounds Billy.

While family seems to have let Billy down here, especially because Billy had nothing to do with the cistern, family and friendship both come through in the end for Billy by way of Tom and his brother, Pete. While Tom rushes into Billy's house to distract Billy's mother, Pete raises up a worm to Billy's bedroom window so Billy can eat the worm and win the bet. Pete does this out of familial loyalty to Tom and out of friendship for Billy.



Tom, likewise, enlists his brother to help Billy and distracts Billy's mom himself out of friendship.

When Billy's mom discovers what has happened, all she does is smile and return inside. With the bet now successfully completed, the friendship between Billy, Tom, and Joe has gotten back to normal. It even appears to have returned to normal with Alan, who at the end of the novel is working to pay back the bet – an honest outcome for Alan after so much dishonesty through the novel. Billy is successfully able to purchase his minibike, and childhood for the friends returns to normal as well. Billy, however, has amusingly grown to like the taste of worms and now eats them regularly.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Billy's father punish Billy even though Billy had nothing to do with the cistern? How does Billy respond to his punishment? Why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How do Tom and Pete come to the rescue for Billy late in the novel? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What becomes of the friendship between Billy, Tom, Joe, and Alan? Does it seem to return to normal, or is it broken beyond repair? Why?

## **Vocabulary**

cistern, peering, trampling, cavorting, hauled, bobbing, slunk



# Characters

## Billy

Billy Forrester is a ten-year-old boy and the subject of the worm bet. The son of Mr. and Mrs. Forrester and the older brother of Emily, Billy is a kind and humorous kid who loves spending time with his three closest friends, Tom, Alan, and Joe. Billy accepts the bet and challenge of eating 15 worms in 15 days from Alan, with the stakes being \$50. Billy has long had his eye on the minibike owned by George Cunningham's older brother's bike which is for sale, so he agrees to the bet in order to buy the bike. Tom serves as Billy's second, and helps to encourage Billy over the next two weeks.

Billy struggles with eating worms at first, worrying at one point that the worms have poisoned him, and survives several other tricks and plots by Alan and Joe to make him lose. Billy is injured when an actual fight breaks out between him and Alan, but their friendship is repaired. Billy is ultimately successful in winning the bet, and he is able to purchase his minibike. By the end of the novel, Billy has developed a taste for worms and now eats them regularly.

## Tom

Tom Grout is a tall, skinny, friendly ten-year-old boy with glasses who is friends with Billy, Alan, and Joe. Tom also has very picky tastes when it comes to food. For example, he is grounded for refusing to eat his mother's salmon casserole dinner.

When the worm bet is made between Billy and Alan, Tom agrees to serve as Billy's second to ensure that there is no cheating, and to make sure that Billy is treated fairly. Tom helps to encourage Billy, and even brings in his brother Pete to help find worms and keep things honest when Alan and Joe try to trick Billy.

## Alan

Alan Phelps is an argumentative ten-year-old kid who is friends with Billy, Tom, and Joe. Alan is very competitive and enjoys challenges. He challenges Billy to the worm bet, and wagers \$50 on it. Alan quickly becomes desperate to win the bet, knowing his father will be furious with him for potentially losing, let alone betting \$50.

With Joe acting as his second, Alan and Joe come up with all kinds of tricks and plots to win the bet, but fail every single time. Alan even gets into a physical fight with Billy over the bet, and ends up accidentally hurting Billy. Alan's father punishes Alan for his trickery, and helps the boys to repair their friendship. Alan ultimately loses the bet, and must work at one of the stores in town to pay it off.



## Joe

Joe O'Hara is small, dark haired, sly, and devious ten-year-old who is friends with Billy, Tom, and Alan. Joe is always coming up with plans and plots, and helps Alan to find ways to win the worm bet. While Joe will often act dishonestly, he is not cruel. For example, he refuses to allow Alan to smother a worm with red pepper to try to win the bet. Although Joe remains loyal to Alan through the end of the novel, acting as his second, Joe urges Alan to give up at several points because Billy wants to share the minibike and because Joe dislikes the level to which Alan has sunk to try to win the bet.

## Pete

Pete Grout is the younger brother of Tom. Pete is a kind, loyal friend, and a very loyal brother. When Tom fills Pete in on the worm bet and asks for Pete's help to ensure that Billy wins, Pete quickly joins in. Pete not only helps to find a worm the night of the near fiasco after Shea Stadium, but ensures Billy has a fifteenth worm to eat on the last day of the bet.

## Emily

Emily Forrester is the younger sister of Billy. Emily is kind, thoughtful, and very disgusted by her brother's willingness to eat worms. No matter how her mother prepares the worms for Billy the two days Alan and Joe are out of town, and no matter how delicious they look, Emily will not even try the worms.

## Mr. Forrester

Mr. Forrester is the father of Billy and Emily, and the husband of Mrs. Forrester. Mr. Forrester is a kind and patient man who regards his son's worm bet with amusement. Mr. Forrester reassures Billy that worms are not poisonous to eat and, like a good father, double-checks with poison control to make sure. Mr. Forrest later mistakenly believes Billy is responsible for the idea of playing near the cistern in the old barn, and so punishes Billy just short of his winning the bet.

## Mrs. Forrester

Mrs. Forrester is the mother of Billy and Emily, and the wife of Mr. Forrester. Mrs. Forrester is a sweet, caring woman who is at first grossed out by her son's worm bet, but then does what she can to help him along the way, such as preparing delicious worm dishes. It is Mrs. Forrester who later reminds Billy of the worm bet after his Shea Stadium outing, and turns a blind eye to Pete hoisting up a worm to Billy's bedroom window so that Billy may win the bet.



## Mr. Phelps

Mr. Phelps is the father of Alan. Mr. Phelps is immensely disappointed in Alan and Joe for trying to trick Billy into losing the bet, and is even more disappointed that their Shea Stadium plot backfired and disturbed the neighborhood. Mr. Phelps is further disappointed to learn the bet has resulted in a fight between Billy, Alan, Tom, and Joe, and so he sits all four boys down and urges them to work out their problems.

## Old Man Tator

Old Man Tator is a local elderly man who is known for the peaches that he grows. When the novel begins, Billy, Alan, and Joe have had an unsuccessful attempt at stealing peaches from Old Man Tator. Tator catches the boys, forces them to return the peaches, then calls their parents.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The bet

The bet consists of eating 15 worms in 15 days, and is posed to Billy by Alan when Billy says he could eat just about anything. To ensure fairness, Tom is made Billy's second while Joe is made Alan's second. The worms must be selected by Alan and Joe and can only be regular ground worms, but may be prepared in any way so long as the worm remains whole. One worm per day must be eaten, and it must be verified by Alan and Joe.

## Worms

Worms are the selected food that Billy must eat for the bet he makes with Alan. Billy must eat 15 worms in 15 days to win the bet. At first, Billy has difficulty eating the worms not so much for the taste as for the thought of eating worms. But with Tom's encouragement to imagine he is eating something else, with his father's reassurance that worms will not hurt him, and with his mother's delicious worm dishes, Billy is able to successfully eat 15 worms – and even to develop a taste for them by the end of the novel.

## \$50

Fifty dollars is the amount of money placed on the worm bet by Alan. Alan insists he will be able to take the money out of his account if he loses the bet, so Billy agrees to it. Alan, however, knows his father will be furious with him for losing \$50 should Alan lose the bet. As a result, the fear of losing \$50 becomes the driving force for Alan to win the bet, cheating and scheming to do so. Alan ultimately loses the bet, must pay Billy fifty dollars, and must then work to earn the money back.

## Minibike

The minibike belongs to George Cunningham's older brother. As George's brother is heading off to college, he is looking to sell the minibike. Billy has been saving up for the minibike and knows the \$50 will put him over the top. At the end of the novel, having won the bet, Billy drives the minibike over to the creek to hang out with Tom and Joe.

## Condiments

Condiments, such as ketchup, mustard, salt, pepper, and horseradish sauce are used by Billy to eat worms. Billy smothers his first few worms in ketchup and mustard



especially to cut down on the taste of the worm. He then expands to using other condiments throughout the course of the novel, making his eating of the worms easier.

## **Alsatian Smothered Worms**

Alsatian Smothered Worms are an old European recipe found in an old cookbook by Billy's mom. She prepares the worms according to the recipe – with season flour, sour cream, and onions, and fried. Billy finds the Alsatian recipe delicious, and looks forward to more worm dishes prepared by his mother.

## **Whizbang Worm Surprise**

Whizbang Worm Surprise is an ice cream cake with worms prepared by Billy's mother. The dessert features a worm in an ice cream cake bathed in peach, cherry, tutti-frutti, and candied orange whipped cream with jelly beans and almond slivers. Billy finds the dessert so delicious he barely even notices the worm.

## **Toy siren**

A toy siren is kept by Pete in the Grout family garage. When Alan and Joe attempt to trick Billy into missing a day by getting him to fall asleep on the way home from a Mets baseball game, Tom and Pete help Billy find a worm to eat before midnight. From there, they go to Alan's neighborhood, use the siren to wake everyone up, and demonstrate Billy eating the worm.

## **Fake doctor's letter**

A fake doctor's letter is written by Alan and Joe as an attempt to trick Billy out of eating any more worms. The letter is addressed to Billy and his mom from Dr. McGrath. The letter states that the doctor was reading through a medical journal and learned that earthworms can induce paralysis, triple vision, and pimples. The letter is full of misspellings and mistakes, and is easily spotted as a trick by Billy's father.

## **The fifteenth worm**

The fifteenth worm is the most difficult worm for Billy to eat, for he must attempt it three times. Alan tries to get Billy to eat a fake worm, then locks Billy in a closet and prevents him from finishing a real worm. When Billy is sent to his room, Pete sends up a final worm to his window so that Billy may eat the worm and win the bet.



# Settings

## Gratton

Gratton is a rural town in New York not far from New York City. The town seems to consist of small farms, meadows, and quiet neighborhoods. Billy and his family live on a small farm and have an old barn, while a few blocks over, Alan, Joe, and Tom live in suburban housing. The town is close enough to New York City to allow day trips to New York, such as when Billy, Alan, and Joe go to see a Mets game, but also rural enough to allow for barns and farmland.

Gratton's residents are also kind, forgiving, and patient, such as when Pete rings out the sound of his siren after the failed Shea Stadium plot, and Alan and Joe must go around and apologize to their neighbors for the incident. Gratton also seems to be an extremely safe and close-knit community, as Billy, Tom, and Pete (and their parents) have no concerns about wandering around at will, including in the middle of the night.

## The barn

The barn is located behind Billy's house on Billy's farm in Gratton, New York. The barn houses various kinds of animals, such as pigs. It is a primary place for Billy and his friends to hang out. It also becomes the setting for where Billy eats most of the worms during the worm bet.

While attempting to eat his fifteenth worm, Billy is locked in the barn's tool closet by Alan to prevent him from winning the bet. The barn also has an old, empty water cistern that the boys are forbidden from going near, but which Billy's father catches them near. As a result, he sends the boys home and punishes Billy.

## Billy's bedroom

Billy's bedroom is located at the front of the second floor of his house. His room overlooks the front lawn and the street. Billy's bedroom is where he has nightmares about worms, believes he has been poisoned by worms, and is reassured by his mother and his father. Billy's bedroom is also where Pete sends up his fifteenth worm to eat and win the bet.

## Alan's neighborhood

Alan's neighborhood is located four blocks away from where Billy lives in Gratton, New York. Alan's neighborhood is suburban, and there are several houses on his block. The entire neighborhood is woken up by Pete's siren when Billy seeks to demonstrate that is eating his daily worm that Alan and Joe tried to trick him out of eating.



## The creek

The creek is one of the favorite local places where Billy, Alan, Tom, and Joe like to hang out. Located beyond the edge of town, the creek is where the novel ends and is where Tom, Joe, and Billy meet to have lunch. Billy arrives at the creek by way of his new minibike, where he settles down to eat with Tom and Joe. It is then at the creek that Billy reveals he has developed a taste for worms.



# Themes and Motifs

## Friendship

In Thomas Rockwell's "How to Eat Fried Worms," the friendship between Billy, Alan, Tom, and Joe is severely tested and almost broken over a bet, but ultimately stays intact.

When the novel begins, Billy, Alan, Joe, and Tom are close friends. They do everything they can together, such as trying to steal peaches from Old Man Tator's orchard. Indeed, Billy and Alan seem especially close as friends, for they appear at Tom's house together at the start of the novel. It is Alan who first suggests the bet about eating worms after Billy reveals he will eat just about anything. With \$50 on the line, and the chance to purchase a minibike, Billy accepts.

Over the next two weeks, the friendship between all four boys takes a backseat to the bet. Alan and Billy are both determined to win the bet no matter what, but Alan is willing to cheat and risks his friendship with Billy in order to win. While Tom remains a loyal friend to Billy, and while Joe remains a loyal friend to Alan, the crumbling friendship between Alan and Billy splits the group. This ultimately results in a massive, physical fight in which Billy and Tom are forced to fight Alan and Joe.

It is Alan's father who intervenes, however, to remind the boys that they have been friends for far too long to let a bet or a fight come between them. Because of Alan's father's insistence, the boys are able to get past the fight and resume their friendship. Alan, however, continues to do whatever he can to win the bet, going so far as to lock Billy in a closet and to prepare to drop him into an old cistern. Billy wins the bet in the end, and by the end of the novel, the boys have made up and resumed their friendship.

## Childhood

Billy and his friend's childhood, at ten-years-old, forms the core background of "How to Eat Fried Worms," influences their actions as characters, and strongly influences the plot.

Billy, Tom, Joe, and Alan have few cares or concerns as children and are very close friends. They enjoy hanging out together at and outside of school, and get into all sorts of misadventures – such as trying to steal peaches from Old Man Tator's orchard. Tom's refusal to eat salmon casserole, and his being punished, are very much common in childhood, as are neighbors calling parents when their children misbehave.

The bet to eat 15 worms in 15 days comes out of childhood fascination not only with eating strange things, but with having few other concerns or responsibilities. Their participation in the bet is very much childish as well. Alan quickly wagers \$50, which he knows he will have a difficult time accounting for, while Billy's primary goal in winning is



to purchase a minibike. Childhood is also apparent through the very bet itself. Billy pretends to be a bird after he eats a worm. Apart from eating worms, the plots and schemes that Alan and Joe come up with to win – such as gluing worms together and writing fake doctor's letters – are very much in keeping with childhood.

That Billy goes to his parents about the worms is a common act in childhood, in which children seek reassurance and support from their parents. Parents are also brought in to settle disputes among children, such as the case when Alan's father brings the boys together after their big fight. Parents also serve to hand out punishments when their children misbehave, such as when Alan's father has Alan and Joe apologize to the neighborhood after the siren incident. That Alan, Billy, Joe, and Tom can so easily make up and be forgiving of one another by the end of the novel is also an important aspect of the forgiving nature and the kindness of childhood.

## Family

The author sends a clear message of the importance of family, for love, support, and encouragement, through the actions - particularly pertaining to Billy and his family - in "How to Eat Fried Worms." Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit.

When Billy believes he has been poisoned by eating so many worms, he goes to his parents with the truth about eating worms and the worm bet. His father gently reassures Billy that no real harm can come from eating worms, and he even double-checks with poison control to make sure. With confidence from his father, Billy plows through eating his next several worms. When Billy's mom is given the task of making sure Billy eats his next two worms, she creates delicious worm dishes for Billy so that the eating of worms is actually enjoyable. These demonstrations of support and encouragement provide Billy with the confidence he needs to continue working toward winning the bet. It's not that Billy's parents want him to eat worms, but they clearly want to see him succeed and obtain a goal he's made clear is important to him.

Billy is also helped by Tom and his little brother, Pete, in the bet. Pete is very loyal to his older brother, Tom, so when Tom asks Pete for help, Pete comes through. Pete not only helps Tom find a worm for Billy to eat the night of the Shea Stadium plot, but uses his siren to help wake up the neighborhood. When Billy is grounded on the fifteenth day of the bet, it is Pete who helps Tom ensure that Billy wins the bet by getting a worm to Billy. Pete does this out of loyalty to his brother, who helps Billy out of the loyalty of friendship.

Family also proves to be very important for the boys overall. It is Alan's father who cracks down on Alan, warning him about the wrongness of cheating, and telling Alan that tricking Billy into losing the bet is going too far. When all four boys end up in a massive fight, it is Alan's father who manages to settle things between the boys by making them sit down and work through their problems. This action demonstrates the



love a parent has for a child in teaching them how to treat others in the world, and how to be a good friend.

## Honesty

The author examines the importance of honesty, and the outcomes of dishonesty, throughout "How to Eat Fried Worms," with the prime example being the worm bet and the actions it leads the characters to make.

Billy and Alan agree to an honest bet: 15 worms in 15 days with certain rules. However, from the start, Alan worries that Billy will be able to successfully win the bet, so he and Joe decide to do whatever they need to in order to win. This includes tricks, schemes, and lies – all of which are dishonest. Alan and Joe first try to dishonestly tell Billy that eating worms is poisonous. When this fails, they try gluing two worms together to make the chore of eating a worm even more difficult. This, too, fails.

Alan and Joe next move on to trying to get Billy's mother to act as a judge for them to ensure Billy eats his worms while they are away, hoping that she will not allow Billy to eat worms. This plan backfires on them. Next, Alan and Joe try to get Billy to fall asleep without eating a worm following the Shea Stadium trip. This plan results in the siren incident, after which Alan's father tells them to stop trying to trick Billy, and impresses upon them the importance honestly trying to win the bet. Alan still tries to win the bet through dishonest means, however, from writing a fake doctor's letter to locking Alan in the barn's tool closet.

Eventually Alan goes too far for Joe. When Alan tries to win against Billy by giving Billy a fake worm, Joe denies having anything to do with it. When Alan tries to load up a worm with red pepper, Joe refuses to have anything to do with this, saying it is too dishonest. When Alan decides to lock Billy in the closet, and then wants to throw Billy into the cistern, Joe refuses to help. Joe may have no worries about fake letters and fake stories, but he is not dishonest to the point of being cruel.

The clear message being sent by the author is that dishonesty will never win.

## Determination

The theme of determination – basically one's desire and intent to do something or achieve a goal or outcome – becomes crucial for Billy, Alan, Tom, and Joe as they try to outdo one another through the worm bet. Determination to win the bet more than anything else drives each of the boys in "How to Eat Fried Worms."

Billy initially agrees to the worm bet because he wants to win \$50. He plans to use this \$50 to purchase a minibike. Billy's desire to win comes by way of his determination to own a minibike. He therefore is willing to eat 15 worms in 15 days to do it. Nothing, including fake letters, fake stories, and a number of different tricks such as glued-together worms, deters him from eating those 15 worms.



Alan, who has rashly wagered \$50 on the bet, knows he will get in serious trouble with his parents if he loses. Alan is therefore determined to win no matter what the cost. He does everything from trying to cheat Billy out of eating a worm for a day to locking him in a closet to actually physically fighting with him in his quest to win. He even risks losing his friendship with Billy because he is so determined to win.

Tom and Joe are also determined to see Billy and Alan win, respectively. Tom, who is Billy's second, is determined to see Billy win not only as a matter of friendship, but as a matter of winning as well. Joe, who is Alan's second, is determined to see Alan win not only as a matter of friendship, but a matter of winning as well. Both Joe and Tom are determined to go to any length to make this possible. Tom encourages Billy, helps him to find worms, and brings his little brother in to help while Joe plots, schemes, and comes up with tricks to ensure that Alan wins. Eventually, Joe's determination wears out as Alan goes to more and more extreme ways of trying to win. Joe finally even comes to oppose some of Alan's ideas as his honesty wins out over his desire to win.

# Styles

## Point of View

Thomas Rockwell tells his novel “How to Eat Fried Worms” in the third-person omniscient perspective. Rockwell’s novel follows the misadventures and struggles of Billy, Alan, and their friends as their lives come to revolve around the worm bet. The third-person narrative allows Rockwell to describe the thoughts, feelings, and actions of each of his characters to the reader, even when the characters themselves do not know what the others are thinking or doing. The third-person acts as a common, unifying voice between each of these characters and their lives, trying them all together through the story and the worm bet. For example, in Chapter XIII, Rockwell is able to talk about the sleepless night Alan is having over the bet, while in Chapter XIV, Rockwell is able to talk about the nightmares Billy is having – even though Billy and Alan have no idea the other is having a bad night. That the reader knows about everything going on helps the reader to not only more fully understand the plot, but also to be aware of the schemes and tricks Alan and Joe are planning to win the bet. For example, in Chapter XXIII, the reader learns about the Shea Stadium plot while Billy has no idea about it. This creates a sense of suspense and drama in which the reader hopes Billy will find out about the plot before it is too late.

## Language and Meaning

Thomas Rockwell tells his novel “How to Eat Fried Worms” in language that simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, Rockwell’s novel falls into the category of children’s fiction. Given that his readers are aged seven to ten, the language Rockwell uses must be easily understood by readers of that age range and level of education. Second, because Rockwell’s novel involves four primary characters who are at or around the age of ten, the language must be reflective of their age and level of education as well. This adds a sense of realism and believability to the novel. Words and phrases consistent with childhood like “geez” and “come on” are featured throughout the novel, while misspellings, the use of wrong words, poor grammar are featured in other places, such as the fake doctor’s note found in Chapter XXXI.

## Structure

Thomas Rockwell divides his novel “How to Eat Fried Worms” into 41 chapters, including an epilogue. The chapters themselves are broken up by full-page and partial black-and-white line drawing illustrations that provide visual representations of the events going on in the story. Chapter XIX, for example, contains an illustration of Tom and Billy pointing out the worm Billy is supposed to eat is actually two worms glued together, directly referencing the text. The chapters range from a few sentences to several pages in length, depending on the complexity of the part of the story they

contain. For example, Chapter XXXIX contains only a few sentences, while chapters IV and XX last several pages. This straightforward approach to the structure of the book is in keeping with the target of the audience – children – and allows them to easily read along with the plot by making transitions between chapters very easy.



## Quotes

I'll bet you fifty dollars you can't eat fifteen worms. I really will.

-- Alan (Chapter I, The Bet paragraph 34)

**Importance:** After Tom is grounded and not allowed out to play because he refuses to eat salmon casserole, Billy tells Tom that salmon casserole is not so bad and only a bite or two wouldn't have killed him. Alan, who is argumentative, then insists that Billy would never eat dirt or a worm. Billy insists he would eat worms, so Alan makes the bet. Billy, hoping to buy a minibike with the money, accepts.

If he doesn't give up himself, I'll figure something out.

-- Joe (Chapter V, The Gathering Storm paragraph 5)

**Importance:** After Billy successfully eats his first worm, Alan begins to worry he'll lose the bet and owe Billy \$50. His parents will be very mad at him for this. Joe tells Alan not to worry, that he'll think of some way to ensure that Alan wins the bet – such as heavily peppering the worm to the point where all Billy can do is sneeze and not eat.

I just taste ketchup and mustard mostly. But it makes me feel sort of sick. Even before I eat it. Just thinking about it.

-- Billy (Chapter VI, The Second Worm paragraph 5)

**Importance:** As Billy successfully downs his second worm, he explains to Tom that the worm doesn't taste bad because most of the taste is ketchup and mustard. What makes him nauseous, however, is the thought that he is eating a worm. That alone makes him feel sick to his stomach. It is something Billy will have to get used to, or he will lose the bet.

“But one thing's sure: It's worse than poison. Probably.

-- Joe (Chapter X, The Fourth Worm paragraph 32)

**Importance:** As Billy successfully eats his fourth worm, Alan and Joe put their new plan into effect by pretending that eating worms is poisonous. Joe pretends to have learned this from his father and mother's refusal to speak about what could happen if someone eats a worm. Joe fills in the gap by saying it must be worse than poison. Tom points out that Joe and Alan are laughing, and so cannot be believed.

For the first time he wondered what he'd do if he lost.

-- Narrator (XII, The Fifth Worm paragraph 5)

**Importance:** With Tom off running after refusing to eat a worm himself, and with Joe's poison worm story in his head, Billy wonders if he'll be able to eat his fifth worm. He wonders what will happen if he loses, and where on earth he could possibly get \$50 to satisfy the bet. Billy buckles down, however, and rushes ahead with successfully eating his fifth worm.





Joe, suppose I lose? My father'll never take the money out of my savings account. You think I'll lose, Joe?

-- Alan (XIII, Nothing to Worry About paragraph 7)

**Importance:** As Billy continues to eat worms without fail, Alan begins to panic. He knows his father will never allow him to take \$50 out of his savings account, and knows his father will be furious that the bet was made at all. Alan begins to lose sleep over this, and calls Joe in the middle of the night for reassurance. Joe tells Alan he has nothing to worry about, which settles Alan down and refocuses him.

Worms.

-- Billy (XV, 3:15 A.M. paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Billy, worried that worms might be poisoned, and experiencing a tummy ache and nightmares, cannot sleep. His parents wake up, worried about him, during which time Billy confesses that he has been eating worms. His parents check to ensure eating worms is not dangerous, which in turn reassures Billy that he will be okay. This helps Billy to more easily consume the next several worms.

Billy gulped it triumphantly, serene, untroubled.

-- Narrator (XVI, The Sixth Worm paragraph 1)

**Importance:** By the sixth worm, and following his conversation with his parents, Billy has no more concerns about eating worms. He eats them without thinking twice, causing Alan and Joe to panic. Alan and Joe then begin to plot how they may go about making it more difficult for Billy to win the bet.

Glue! You glued two crawlers together!

-- Billy (XIX, The Ninth Worm paragraph 20)

**Importance:** By the ninth worm, Alan and Joe are getting desperate. They try to trick Billy into being forced to eat an especially long worm coated in cornmeal and fried in a pan. Billy, however, discovers that Alan and Joe have glued two worms together, so does not have to eat this particular worm. The bet is upheld despite the attempt to cheat since Billy didn't actually eat the worm, but it underscores just how desperate Joe and Alan are becoming.

...so we wondered if you'd make sure Billy eats the worms today and tomorrow.

-- Joe (XX, Billy's Mother paragraph 16)

**Importance:** While Alan and Joe are away overnight on a camping and fishing trip, they ask Billy's mom to ensure that Billy eats his next two worms. Alan and Joe suspect that there is no way that Billy's mom will allow Billy to eat the worms, and hope this will help them win the bet. The plan backfires, however, because Billy's mom makes such delicious meals out of the worms that Billy doesn't think twice about eating them.



IF HE'S IN THE CLOSET, HE CAN'T EAT THE WORM, CAN HE?

-- Alan (Chapter XXXVI, The Fifteenth Wo... paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Desperate to win the bet, Alan next moves on to finding ways to prevent Billy from eating worms at all. As Billy prepares to eat his fifteenth worm, Alan shuts him in the barn's tool closet. Alan explains that if Billy cannot eat the worm, he cannot win the bet. Unfortunately, Billy's dad overhears the commotion and breaks everything up.

I don't know. I just can't stop. I don't dare tell my mother. I even like the taste now.

-- Billy (Chapter XLI, Epilogue paragraph 9)

**Importance:** By the end of the novel, Billy has won the bet and purchased the minibike which he now uses to get around on. He meets with Joe and Tom for lunch at the creek while Alan is forced to work at a store to pay off his \$50 debt. Billy explains he has brought along a worm-and-egg on rye for lunch, and explains that after having eaten so many worms, he has grown to like the taste.