

# **Incident at Hawk's Hill Study Guide**

**Incident at Hawk's Hill by Allan W. Eckert**

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## Overview

Incident at Hawk's Hill portrays a less complicated world than that of today.

Evil, characterized by George Burton, and purity, characterized by Benjamin MacDonald, are readily recognizable. In its simplicity, the story itself becomes central. The straightforward plot allows the reader to spend more time absorbing the details of the natural world against which the story unfolds.

Wildlife plays an intricate role in the novel, and anyone who enjoys reading about nature will surely enjoy Incident at Hawk's Hill. Eckert gives readers a fascinating glimpse of the wildlife that populates a small segment of Canada and provides particularly extensive details about badgers.

The author portrays a family with problems that seem insurmountable but turn out not to be. Many a reader will identify with Ben, whose family does not understand him. He is hurt because his father cannot or will not reach out to him. The resolution of the conflict and the presentation of the problem from both sides make this a good book for parents and their children to read and discuss.

## About the Author

Born in Buffalo, New York, on January 30, 1931, Allan Eckert rose from humble beginnings to become one of America's foremost self-trained naturalists and historians. Eckert's father, Edward, died when Allan was very young, and his mother, Ruth, took her son to Chicago, where he grew up in poverty. Eckert scrambled for a living during his young adulthood, taking a variety of jobs ranging from Air Force staff sergeant to cook, dishwasher, fireman, postman, private detective, farm and factory worker, and trapper. In between, he attended the University of Dayton and Ohio State University, and in 1955 he took his first job as a writer, editing the National Cash Register Company's factory newsletter.

Eckert writes many different types of books, including nonfiction about history and nature, historical novels, and science fiction. His first two books, *The Great Auk* (1963) and *The Silent Sky: The Incredible Extinction of the Passenger Pigeon* (1965), set his basic direction as a writer: he puts facts into a more interesting form than textbooks do. When he can find enough facts, Eckert writes as a naturalist or a historian, as in *A Time of Terror: The Great Dayton Flood* (1965) or *In Search of a Whale* (1970): when he finds too many gaps in the historical account, he adopts the novel form, producing works such as *Incident at Hawk's Hill*, the "Winning of America" series, and *The Court-Martial of Daniel Boone* (1973). Eckert has also pursued an interest in science fiction, publishing *The HAB Theory* (1976) and beginning a series he calls the "Mesmerian Annals."

Eckert has often drawn criticism from more conventional historians. His style of inventing dialogue in order to create a more interesting story—which he calls "hidden dialogue"—violates the requirements of history in its purest sense, and academic historians have responded negatively to his work. Eckert's intention lies more in the direction of entertaining while informing, and his technique suits this purpose. It is so well suited, in fact, that he has received five Pulitzer Prize nominations, a Friends of American Writers Award, and an Ohioana Book Award. *Incident at Hawk's Hill* was named a Newbery Honor Book and the Austrian Juvenile Book of the Year.



## Plot Summary

Ben MacDonald lives with his family on a farm in Winnipeg, Canada in 1870. Ben is the youngest, at six years old. The boy is undersized and his behavior is often odd. Although he's not mentally retarded, the boy barely talks - even to his family. Ben spends most of his time following animals around, imitating their sounds. Esther MacDonald is understanding of her son's differences, but his father wonders if there is something wrong with the child. When the family's new neighbor, George Burton appears, he terrifies Ben by hoisting the tot high into the air. Frightened, Ben flees to the comfort of the animals in the barn. When Ben wanders away from the homestead, he is caught in a drenching downpour and takes refuge in an empty badger hole. When the badger returns, she accepts Ben as if he was one of her cubs.

The badger feeds Ben as if he were one of her offspring and defends him against Burton's fierce dog, Lobo. Despite his family's efforts to find him, Ben lives in the badger hole for two months. When he finally returns to the farm, Ben and his family develop a new appreciation for one another. The family allows Ben to keep the badger as a pet. George Burton returns to Hawks Hill and shoots the badger. He fights with the entire family. William MacDonald tells Burton to leave Manitoba and never return.

Ben's parents often disagree on how to handle their silent, withdrawn 6-year-old son. William MacDonald thinks that Ben needs discipline and should be forced to behave appropriately. Esther MacDonald thinks that he will come around in time. Meanwhile, they should accept Ben as he is, showing him lots of affection and patience. She fully expects a transformation by the time Ben starts school in the fall. Ben's relationship with his father becomes even more strained when MacDonald unthinkingly backhands the boy during one of Burton's visits.

Playing with animals in the meadow, Ben befriends a female badger with a distinctive notch in her ear. At first, the creature is leery of the boy, but he imitates her noises and feeds her. Weeks later, the badger's mate is caught in one of George Burton's traps and killed. The female badger gets two toes of her right front paw caught in another trap. She is unable to escape for more than two days. During that time, her three kits starve to death.

A few days later, Ben wanders far from home following a prairie chicken. It is an overcast day, so he can't tell directions from the sun. Ben walks for hours in the direction he thinks will take him home, but only gets more lost. When a drenching rain starts, Ben takes refuge in a nearby hole. The badger returns and Ben chases her away. Initially the badger tries to fight Ben, but her paw is injured and she barely scratches the boy. Soon the badger seems to accept Ben as a substitute for her dead cubs.

Ben is terrified of Burton and other strange riders, so he hides in the badger's burrow whenever people are searching for him. After three days, the townspeople give up, but Ben's family never stops looking for him. John and William MacDonald continue searching for some sign of the boy. Finally one day John finds one of the child's shoes,



then the other. Catching a glimpse of a strange animal nearby, John hides nearby and waits. He is astounded when Ben rushes out and pops down a badger hole. John convinces the boy to come home with him. John rides across the prairie to their father with Ben in his arms, shouting all the way.

The badger follows the horsemen home. She regards Ben as her cub, and protects him against the humans. Gradually Ben convinces the badger that it is safe, and she sleeps on the floor in the boy's room. George Burton arrives unexpectedly and shoots the badger, which is lying outside in the sun. William MacDonald confronts Burton, who shoots him and pulls a knife on John. Esther MacDonald threatens Burton with a rifle. William MacDonald tells Burton to leave the territory. MacDonald will pay the trapper for his farm, but he no longer wants the savage man as a neighbor.

Despondent, Ben refuses his father's help to bury the badger. Dragging the body towards the meadow where they first met, Ben realizes the badger is still alive. He screams for his father, and the entire family comes to help. William MacDonald doctors the animal, but admits she will probably die. Ben says if she does, his father can help him bury her.

Ben's disappearance brings the entire MacDonald family closer together. From his time with the badger, Ben comes to learn to trust and rely on others more. He values his family, now that he has them back. Ben is more willing to try to talk to his father. For the first time in his life, Ben feels he has something to contribute.

*Incident at Hawk's Hill* is the fictionalized account of an incident that actually occurred near Winnipeg about 1870. Allan W. Eckert is a natural historian who worked as a trapper at one point in his life. Eckert's intimate knowledge of natural history and animal behavior make the creatures in the novel entirely lifelike and believable. Yet, he never makes the animals cute or anthropomorphic. Eckert's novel was a Newbery Honor Book.

# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

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The Indians named the lake Winnipeg, meaning Murky Water. Now, in 1870, a city rises forty-five miles south of the spot where the Red River empties into the gigantic lake. Yet just 20 miles from the city, the prairie stretches endlessly in all directions. A Frenchman was the first to settle here, erecting Fort Rouge in 1738. The fort was soon abandoned, and about 1806 two competing fur-trading companies established Fort Douglas and Fort Gibraltar. Over the years, the Hudson Bay Company brought settlers.

Twenty miles from Winnipeg, William and Esther MacDonald, from Toronto, decide to establish a farm about 1850. The two newlyweds were disappointed that the land closer to Winnipeg was already being farmed, but once they stand on this rise, they feel it is exactly what they have been looking for. At first, the couple built a cabin and cultivated a small area. Over the years, the cabin grows to a roomy house with a barn and several outbuildings. The farm acreage increases each year. There is talk that soon a railroad will link Winnipeg with the eastern cities.

The MacDonald family grows over the years. John was born in 1854. Beth was born in 1858, the year the Minnesota Territory south of Winnipeg was admitted into the United States. Coral was born in 1861, when the Dakota Territory was admitted. Now, the MacDonald's biggest problem is their six-year-old son, Benjamin.





## Prologue Analysis

The author offers a somewhat idealized view of humans, especially Ben's parents, William and Esther MacDonald. They have an aura of quiet strength and are never frightened or exhausted by settling in an unknown territory, with few supplies and no friends. The MacDonalds didn't choose the site of their homestead rationally. Instead, they instantly recognize that it is the ideal place for them, without words. Eckert's inclusion of American history into the narrative seems a bit chauvinistic, implying that Canadians were necessarily more interested in the U.S. than vice-versa.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Ben MacDonald is following a mouse. He often follows mice, ground squirrels, snowshoe rabbits and insects imitating their movements and the noises they make. He even follows birds, if they will stay on the ground long enough. Even odder than Ben's following the mouse is the animal's reaction. The mouse seems to realize that he is being followed, yet is not alarmed and tolerates the boy. As the rodent hops along the barn floor, sniffs delicately and twitches its ears, Ben crouches and does the same. When the mouse makes a high-pitched chirring sound, Ben repeats it almost perfectly.

Suddenly a voice interrupts the game. It is his father, calling Ben brusquely to come out of the dim barn. At the sound of his father's voice, the mouse runs away. Ben reluctantly stands up and walks toward his father. His mother is waiting for them about halfway between the house and barn. Esther MacDonald announces that their nearest neighbor, Mr. Burton, is coming for a visit. Esther asks Ben to shake Burton's hand like a "little man." Ben only shakes his head once and stares at the ground in response. Ben's father notes that nothing short of a miracle is going to change the boy.

George Burton is the nearest neighbor. He purchased a neighboring farm from the Cecils when Edgar Cecil "crippled himself up pretty badly" in a fall off his horse. Burton's farm is about six miles from the MacDonald house. William MacDonald wishes he had bought the farm himself, instead of having an undesirable neighbor like Burton. The older MacDonald children are at school, so only Ben is available to meet Burton. The man's huge, fierce dog, Lobo, lunges at Ben, snapping his jaws. The animal stands in front of Ben growling, but finally under his master's command, backs down. Ben mimics Lobo's behavior, dropping on all fours.

The trapper scoops the unsuspecting child up and dangles him high overhead. Terrified, Ben flees to the loft of the barn and buries himself in the hay while Burton laughs. He apologizes for scaring the child. Burton asks William MacDonald's permission to trap possum, coyote and badger on the MacDonald land. William MacDonald can think of no genuine reason to refuse, so he reluctantly agrees, as long as the traps are several miles from the MacDonald homestead.

After Burton leaves, Esther MacDonald says she is afraid of the man. She chastises William for his indifference and curtness towards Ben. Esther assures William that Ben will outgrow his problems; he just needs affection and time. She urges William to try to talk with his son more, instead of merely barking orders. William wonders aloud how the boy will manage when he goes to school in North Corners next fall, as he can barely talk.

In the barn, Ben has doubts about going to school as well. He is frightened of his father's size and strength. Ben likes his 16-year-old brother John, and talks with him

more than his other siblings. He sometimes talks to Coral, but never to Beth, his bossy oldest sister. Ben distracts himself by mimicking a hen in the barn.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Ben most likely has Autism, a developmental disorder characterized by delays in social interaction, language and symbolic or imaginative play. Ben very rarely speaks and seems incapable of most social interaction, even with those to whom he is closest. Animals fascinate him, and most of his play consists of mimicking them. Like many autistic people, Ben has an affinity for animals and seems to understand them more readily than he understands people. Autism is a spectrum, and Ben's case seems to be relatively mild.

Ben's father is disgusted by his son's unusual behavior. He suspects there is something "wrong" with the boy, perhaps a mental deficiency. By contrast, Esther MacDonald thinks of Ben as only slightly different from other children. Despite the fact he is the size of a 3-year-old, almost mute and hardly ever engages with other members of the family, Esther is unfailingly warm, accepting and affectionate. While Esther's actions toward Ben are more sympathetic, by denying Ben's condition and refusing to address it, she is no more helpful than William.

In contrast to his idealized portraits of humans, Eckhart's animals are entirely realistic and believable. Eckhart is quick to dispel any notion that Ben talks to animals in Dr. Doolittle fashion. Instead, Ben merely gets the animals' attention and earns their trust by mimicking the noises the creatures make.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

About two miles north of the house at Hawk's Hill is an irregular outcropping of rock. One rock appears to separate itself from the others and move slightly. It turns out to be an animal made of flesh and blood, instead of stone. She is a very large four-year-old badger. The creature is low to the ground with soft, draping grayish-brown fur that nearly conceals her legs. She has a black head with three white stripes running from nose to shoulders. When the badger rises to her hind legs to look around or sniff the air, she looks a bit like a fierce but miniature bear.

The badger is preparing for the birth of her litter. She digs a burrow about a mile from a large colony of prairie dogs. The small rodents will provide a plentiful source of food, important when the badger's kits are young. High above a hawk cries out. The badger is unafraid. Hawks are no threat to a badger. Coyotes, wolves, bobcats and perhaps large eagles or owls prey upon badger cubs. Even packs of wolves or dogs avoid adult badgers. A badger will always escape if possible, but will fight fiercely with lethal claws and fangs if cornered.

Selecting her site, the badger digs quickly, soon reaching the loose soil below the level of grass roots. Her stubby tail lashes back and forth, as she digs. The badger's entire body is quickly below ground and she digs with her back feet, as well as the front. The 15-foot tunnel and den is well concealed. From even a few feet away, the entrance is invisible. Inside, the chamber is three feet high and about four feet in diameter.

Occasionally the badger emerges from her den and gives a chirping cry to her mate. He has followed her here, although he won't share the den. After the young are weaned, the male will help her to bring small prey like mice and ground squirrels to feed the kits.

Hungry after her labors, the badger emerges from the hole and pounces on a meadow vole. She crushes the animal with her teeth and devours it. Fifty feet from the entrance to the burrow, the badger begins digging again. She chatters in an angry voice whenever she encounters a rock. Rocks are frequently embedded into the sides of the tunnel. After about 40 feet, the tunnel enters the den chamber. It is gently sloped and provides an escape tunnel for emergencies. She gathers many balls of dried grass and carries them into the den as soft flooring.

This will be the badger's third litter. Her first litter consisted of three cubs. One day a large lynx attacked one of the cubs newly emerged from the den. The badger attacked viciously and was able to drive him away. Before he fled, the lynx managed to slash a notch in the badger's right ear. All three cubs survived, and the badger taught them to hunt.



The second litter was not so fortunate. There were six cubs, born in a burrow near Wolf Creek only about a mile from the first. A few days after the cubs were born, a huge storm had swollen the banks of the creek. The den was flooded, and the badger was able to save only two cubs. Predators later killed even those two. Soon afterwards, a horseman shot the badger's mate. Now she has a new mate. It is the first week in May, and the badger is almost ready to bear her litter.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

The badger's aggression and loyalty are demonstrated in the stories of her previous litters. Badgers are members of the weasel family, second in size only to their cousins, the wolverines. Like wolverines, badgers are fierce carnivores. The badger has long, lethal, curved claws on all four feet, especially long on the front paws. Badgers are among the most furious of fighters. Dogs, in times past, especially Irish terriers, were pitted against badgers in a practice called badger baiting. In folklore, badgers are known for their tenacity in battle, loyalty and love. The Pueblo people consider badgers great healers.

Eckert takes great care to describe the badger's burrowing acumen. The badger grunts and wheezes as she digs. She tosses the loose soil from the burrow with her hind feet. She scatters the loose soil around the area rather than leaving a telltale pile. This is a precaution she would not take for a temporary shelter, but instinct tells her to make the den for her cubs as inconspicuous as possible. The badger digs a slanting tunnel about 5 feet long. Then she digs a level passage for about 10 feet, where she digs an enlarged chamber big enough for her and her cubs once they are born. The entry hole is an oval eleven inches high and 18 inches wide.

Although Eckert describes the badger's actions in loving detail, he takes care never to attribute human thoughts or emotions to animals. It is clear that the badger is acting on instinct. The author is blunt about bloodshed in the natural world. He describes the badger killing a meadow vole to eat without unnecessary gore, but also without sentiment for either animal.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

George Burton soon spreads the tale about the boy who talks with animals in North Corners. Located about halfway between Winnipeg and Hawk's Hill, North Corners has a small trading post, a church and a school surrounded by about two dozen houses. In the weeks following Burton's visit, a string of visitors trek out to Hawk's Hill to see the boy. At church, William and Esther MacDonald overhear people talking about Ben acting like an animal.

Ben happily spends most of his days wandering the farm. Yesterday he lay on his back in a marsh watching a bald eagle swoop gracefully overhead. Ben fervently wishes he could imitate the eagle's flight. He follows a small falcon hopping along the ground and watches it devour a mouse. When the hawk is startled it lets out a shrill cry that Ben imitates. "Won't hurt you, hawk," he tells the bird softly. "Just want to watch. Don't worry, I won't hurt you." After the bird flies away, Ben retrieves the mouse's tiny jawbone. Nearby he sees a ball of woven grass, the mouse's nest. He pulls the nest apart gently to expose four tiny pink sightless mice.

Suddenly Ben hears a hissing in front of him. He finds himself confronted by a huge badger. His heart racing, Ben sits perfectly still. The animal growls and Ben mimics the sound almost perfectly. She chatters rapidly and Ben does the same. Suddenly remembering the tiny rodents in his hand, Ben offers the baby mice to the badger. The badger refuses to take them from his hand, but snaps the mice up when he tosses them on the ground near her. Tentatively, Ben touches the badger's cheek and notices that she has a notch in her right ear. Back at home, Ben is so thrilled that he actually answers when his father asks if he had a good time today. When Ben confides to his father that he met a badger today, William MacDonald warns the boy to stay away from the fierce animals. With any luck, MacDonald says, George Burton will trap the creature.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The residents of North Corners are more interested in ogling Ben than chatting with his parents. They are soon gawking at the boy, pointing him out as a half-wit who can talk with animals. They even call him a "freak" and say Ben's parents should have enough decency not to bring him to church. These actions are unfortunately typical of the isolation of autism, a much-misunderstood condition. It's revealing that the first words spoken by Ben don't occur until Chapter 3. Even then, Ben speaks to a falcon, not a human, and assures the bird he means no harm.

Esther and William MacDonald seldom disagree, but they are having heated discussions about Ben. Esther is convinced that everything will magically improve once Ben starts school. William is adamant that Ben needs discipline, and must be forced to



participate in family life. Ben is mostly unaware of this conflict. While he can't talk to animals, he feels most comfortable in their undemanding presence, and finds solace with them that is lacking in his relations with humans.

Eckert paints a seductive portrait of the marshy land southeast of the farmhouse, with bumblebees, pintail ducks, red-winged blackbirds, and even a blue heron feasting on frogs and fish. Ben has also seen muskrats and beaver in the land his father calls useless swamp. William MacDonald is no fan of badgers, telling many stories of the animal's destructiveness.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The female badger does not return to her den immediately after the encounter with the boy. She had blundered on the child from upwind, unable to smell him. Normally badgers avoid humans, but she instinctively realized this small boy wishes her no harm.

The badger cubs are 33 days old, still blind and helpless in the den. Too young for live food, they live on their mother's milk. Now, however, the badger is hungry and goes to the large prairie dog colony for prey. Heading back to the den with a large male prairie dog in her jaws, the badger sniffs an intriguing scent. She is tempted to explore it, but finally moves on, reluctant to put down her prey.

That night the badger's mate wanders through the same area, hungry. He follows the enticing odor for a quarter of a mile to its source. The sardine smell is intoxicating, and the male badger begins to dig eagerly. Suddenly, a sharp pair of metal jaws snap closed on his forefeet. All night the wounded animal jerks, bites and fights against the cruel metal contraption.

George Burton is not very attentive about checking his traps. For two nights and two days, the terrified animal struggles painfully. Burton finally arrives to find he has trapped a badger. He clubs the exhausted animal to kill it without damaging the skin. On the way back to his farm, Burton recognizes the female badger's breeding den. Hoping for another easy catch, he resets the trap nearby.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The badger is not afraid of Ben partly because she is stronger than he is, although a few pounds lighter. In her quest for prey, she flushes a grouse. The badger eats the abandoned eggs out of the nest. She stops to eat a rose hip from a nearby bush before finally devouring a prairie dog.

When her cubs are old enough to wean, the badger will bring them live food. Normally her mate would assist, hunting for prairie dogs, chipmunks, prairie chickens and mice. Once the cubs are two-thirds grown they will emerge from the den and she will teach them to hunt.

The author relates the details of George Burton's trapping objectively. A former trapper himself, Eckert finds little to condemn in the harvesting of furs. The only critical comment relates to Burton's laziness in checking his traps. This delay allows Burton's prey to suffer needlessly for almost 48 hours.





# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

George Burton arrives at the Macdonald homestead an hour before dark, just as the family is sitting down to dinner. They have no choice but to invite the trapper to eat with them, although both William and Esther resent it. While Esther finishes cooking dinner, everyone else goes outside to admire the badger Burton has trapped. Only Ben is silent. Burton recounts the story of Lobo's fight with another badger to the rapt MacDonalds. The badger fought back with teeth and claws, and Lobo would have been killed if Burton hadn't stepped in and clubbed the badger.

When everyone else goes in to dinner, Ben remains outside. Despite his mother's pleas, he won't leave the badger. He lifts the animal off Burton's saddle and turns it over carefully. Ben checks the right ear carefully, but doesn't see a notch. This is not the same badger that Ben befriended.

Inside, the men discuss badgers. William MacDonald admits he has never had any use for the animals. At two different times, MacDonald has had a horse that stumbled into a hidden badger hole and broke its leg. Both times, the horses had to be shot. Burton claims that badger meat makes a delicious steak.

Back outside, Burton manipulates MacDonald into skinning the badger for him. Ben is shocked, and tries to knock the knife out of his father's hand. MacDonald strikes out at Ben with his open hand. Surprised and frightened, Ben flees into the barn, taking refuge in one of the horse stalls. William MacDonald is consumed with guilt. He goes to the barn and apologizes to Ben, who remains silent. Later, Esther goes out to the barn to bring Ben back in.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

William MacDonald resents Burton virtually inviting himself to dinner, but tries to act like a good neighbor. Ben is horrified that his own father would skin the badger, but lacks the communication skills to tell him. Instead, Ben communicates in the only way he knows how, by trying to knock the knife out of the man's hand. MacDonald, furious at Burton, vents his anger on his small son.

Afterwards, William MacDonald realizes how huge and threatening he must look to his tiny son. He realizes that Ben is no bigger than an average three-year-old is. MacDonald bemoans the fact that although he sometimes tries to talk to Ben, he is rarely able to talk *with* him. Although John and Esther tell MacDonald that Ben's behavior will improve once he starts school, they share a private look. Even Ben's mother and beloved older brother are beginning to doubt that he will ever be able to interact normally with his family.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The badger remains in the burrow with her cubs for three days after capturing the prairie dog. Now, she's hungry again. About 100 feet from the den, she catches the same tantalizing scent as before. She finds the spot where sardines are buried under the ground. Gingerly she digs one of the tiny, silvery fish up and gobbles it down. Digging again, she finds another fish, but the ground feels like it is sinking. Instinctively, she jerks back her paw.

The badger's reflexes are not quite quick enough. The steel jaws of the trap have snapped closed, catching the two outer toes of her right front foot. Growling, shrieking and snarling, she fights the trap, trying in vain to open it. She snarls and bites the steel and the rocks supporting it. All through the night, she continues to fight the trap, in agony. She struggles through another day and night in the trap. She can hear her cubs mewling and crying inside the deep burrow. The tiny kits are starving to death, unable to reach their mother's milk. Through another day, the badger struggles, listening to the weakening cries of her three cubs.

In fury, the badger lunges away from the trap with all her strength. The trap holds firm, but the motion breaks the bones in her toes. The toes are swollen several times their original size, painful and throbbing. The badger begins to gnaw on the toes, ripping the flesh away in small pieces until she is finally free.

The badger dashes into the burrow. Two of the cubs are dead. The third, a tiny male, is so weak he can't suck. By nightfall he, too is dead. Instinctively, the badger leaves the birthing den. She plugs up both entrances, laboring with her broken foot. Too weak to dig a temporary burrow, she returns to a den she has used before. It is under a rock formation. Thick grasses have grown up to conceal both of the entrances. The tunnel she dug here actually tapped into a small cave under the rocks, so it is bigger than usual. The den is about eight feet around, and seven feet tall. Looking up, she can see the night sky where the rocks part.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The badger is fastidious about her den. Bones, feathers and pieces of fur from prey are buried beneath the floor of the second exit. When the baby badgers defecate, she consumes their wastes and cleans them with her tongue. The female badger buries her own waste far from the den.

Nature can be unrelentingly cruel. In a short time, the female badger has lost her mate and her cubs. She has had to abandon her den, walking miles on a ripped and swollen paw. The badger is in pain from her foot, but she still has the instinct to survive.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Despite his father's behavior, Ben MacDonald does not intend to run away. The furthest Ben has ever traveled with his family is to North Corners. On his own, he has never been further than a mile from the farmhouse, to the bank of the Red River. Today, Ben will wander much further than that.

John, Beth and Coral are away on the last day of school. Ben crawls over the big pile of dirt where John and his father are digging a new well. He flushes a prairie chicken, and begins to follow the bird. The bird will take a dozen hopping steps, and stop. Ben rushes after her, flapping his arms as if they were wings, and the bird takes another dozen hopping steps. Finally, the bird takes off with a whoosh, flying away. Ben chases after her as far as he can run across the prairie. The sky is overcast, with no visible sun. Ben finds himself near a pond he has never seen before. He explores the area around it and climbs over another hill.

Suddenly Ben notices that the sky is darker and he can hear distant thunder. His rumbling stomach tells him it is past lunchtime. He begins to walk swiftly towards home. After about an hour, he begins to feel uncertain. With the sun hidden all day, he can't be sure which direction is right. Nothing looks familiar.

Ben keeps walking for two more hours. He reaches an outcropping of rocks just as rain starts pouring down. Ben runs to the shelter of the rocks, losing his shoes in the process. He huddles among the rocks in the drenching rain, but there is scant shelter to be found. Suddenly Ben trips over a burrow in the ground. Without thinking, he begins to crawl into it. The tunnel is too narrow for him, but with his hands Ben digs to enlarge it. He continues to claw his way into the burrow until his entire body is out of the rain.

The female badger has been away from the burrow all day. Her forepaw is too injured for real hunting, so she has had to subsist on a few frogs and ducklings. Returning to the burrow, she is partway inside before she senses the boy. She snarls viciously, a terrifying sound in the close burrow.

Ben screams back at her, "Get out! *Get out!*" Ben snarls back at the badger, imitating her sound. The badger lashes out at the defenseless boy with her injured paw. She barely touches his cheek, but the pain in her paw is horrible. The badger begins to chatter as she did in the meadow the first time the two met. Ben mimics her again. At last, the badger backs out of the burrow and Ben, wet, muddy and bone tired, sleeps.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Since the incident with the dead badger, Ben can sense that his father is making an effort to be closer to him, but Ben doesn't know how to respond. Everyone seems to be



paying more attention to Ben. He tries to answer when spoken to. Like the badger, Ben's actions are driven by instinct. He acts to find shelter in the storm. He would have gone back out in the rain to head towards home, but Ben has no idea which direction to go.

During his wandering, Ben encounters a kingfisher, and a goldfinch. Again, Eckert is forthright about the realities of death and survival in nature, when the injured badger kills frogs and newly hatched baby ducks.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Ben slept only fitfully that night, although he was exhausted. He woke up once, thinking he heard someone calling him, but it was only the wind, rain and thunder. He keeps starting awake, expecting the terrifying badger to come back. Once a soft noise wakes him, and Ben sees the badger has returned. She is wheezing and whining this time, much less fierce and frightening than before. Ben scolds the animal, telling her to go away and leave him alone. Even when Ben scoops up some mud and throws it at the creature, she remains in the burrow about a foot away from him.

Just before dawn, Ben falls into a deeper sleep. Sometime in the morning, he wakes up. His hands are so muddy he can't see the skin, and his face feels the same way. Ben is terribly hungry and thirsty. He squirms back out the surface and drinks deeply from a small depression in a nearby rock. Walking through the tall wet grass, Ben notices that the mud is being cleansed from his feet and pants legs. He rolls around on the grass, removing most of the mud from his body.

The rolling prairie looks the same all around Ben. He has no idea which direction to go, to reach home. He is almost convinced the encounter with the badger was a dream, until he sees the fresh claw marks around the entrance to the burrow. He sees some rosehips nearby, and eats them, although they taste sour. Ben hears a noise nearby and hides in the rock outcropping. He sees a man riding a horse about a quarter of a mile away. Ben is ready to run out and stop the rider, when he sees the huge yellow dog. He stays hidden until the man is gone.

Ben crawls back into the burrow and falls asleep for several hours. When he awakes, he sees the badger with a prairie chicken. She is about to crawl into the burrow. Ben shouts, and the animal drops the bird. It rolls a few feet toward Ben. He notices the badger's notched ear, and the hurt, swollen foot. Starving, Ben grabs the chicken. He rips the feathers off the breast and tears away some raw flesh. The badger backs out of the burrow. Sometime later, the badger leaves the burrow entrance.

Deep inside the burrow, Ben feels something soft and furry against his bare foot. He shakes his foot, but the feeling returns. The badger is licking his foot. She has come in through the second entrance. Ben eats his fill of the raw chicken and gives the rest to the badger. Afterwards, Ben goes outside to get another drink. He sees Burton and Lobo in the distance, and quickly hides in the burrow again. As night falls, Ben becomes lonely and cries for his mother. He even calls out for his father.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Despite Ben's awkward relationships with his parents, he knows they love him and will protect him. When he realizes he is truly lost, Ben cries out, first for his mother and then



for his father. The rider on the prairie can only be George Burton, with his dog, Lobo. Ben hates and fears the man so much that he hides in the rocks until the man is out of sight.

In the daylight, Ben can tell for sure that this is the same badger who befriended him in the meadow by her notched ear. Once again, Ben is subjected to the harsh realities of nature when he must tear the raw chicken apart with his teeth, or starve.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The day Ben disappeared, Esther MacDonald was unconcerned until lunchtime. She glanced outside several times. When she didn't see Ben playing in the yard, she assumed cheerfully that he was in the barn with his father. It's not until William MacDonald comes in for lunch without the boy, that Esther begins to worry. Ben's father has been assuming the boy is with his mother. They call Ben for a long time before lunch, but finally give up. "Knowing Ben," his father says, "He's probably out talking with a chipmunk."

When Ben doesn't show up by the time they finish lunch, they launch a thorough search of the homestead including the barn, loft, and outbuildings. Terrified, William runs to the new well, but Ben is not inside. For hours, William rides the property in ever-widening circles. When John gets home from school, he helps. The girls help Esther search the house and outbuildings again. Finally, William asks the neighbors to join in the search.

Someone sends word to North Corners that a child is missing. Just before dark several wagons and buggies full of people arrive. The men will search on horseback, while the women have brought food to feed the searchers, including pie, roasts, ham, bread and vegetables. The men search throughout the night without finding any sign of the tot. After two days and nights without any sign of Ben, the 32 searchers conclude that he must have fallen in the rain-swollen river and been swept away. William MacDonald thanks them, but refuses to accept that Ben is gone. He vows that the family will keep searching.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Esther is happy to think that Ben and his father are getting along better, doing chores in the barn together. Esther is angry when William jokes about Ben's closeness with animals. Despite the mean-spirited gossip of some of the neighbors, North Corners is a closely knit community. Everyone contributes his or her time and resources to searching for the MacDonald's lost little boy. They continue to search through two days and nights of heavy rain, snatching just a few hours of sleep on the MacDonald's living room floor. William MacDonald shows his strong affection for his difficult younger son by refusing to give up the search. When everyone else leaves, MacDonald assures Esther that Ben is not dead, and that they will begin the search anew the next day.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Throughout the second night, Ben sleeps shivering in the badger's den. The badger can see Ben clearly, even in the darkness. She licks the boy, and snuggles next to him for warmth. Shortly before dawn, she leaves the den. When she returns she brings a prairie chicken egg to share with Ben. Famished, Ben drinks it raw.

Ben goes outside to drink from the hollow in the rock and use the bathroom among the rocks. From the rock pile, he spies three men on horses riding across the prairie. Quickly, Ben rushes to the burrow to hide again. He is also terrified that the riders will kill the badger, but she is cautious. The badger returns repeatedly, bringing one egg each time. Finally, she returns with a large garter snake. When the badger realizes that Ben won't eat the snake, she consumes it herself.

Soon Ben and the badger establish a pattern. The badger hunts by night. In the morning when he awakes, Ben finds prey like a chipmunk or a gadwall duck. Ben finds a sharp rock chip to cut the animals apart, so he and the badger can share. The badger continues to lick Ben, and he cleans her paw. First, he licks it clean, then squeezes the pus out and finally washes it, using his sock as a rag. He repeats the process for five days, until the wound seems to be healing cleanly. After 12 days, the badger is able to use the paw again.

After three weeks, Ben begins to behave more like the badger. He wakes at night and hunts with the animal, although he excels only at catching frogs. The two often roll together on the grass in mock fights. Suddenly on one of their nightly treks, they encounter Lobo, the fierce dog. The vicious dog growls and attacks the badger. At 90 pounds, the dog far outweighs the badger and his teeth are longer. The two animals fight. The dog grabs the badger's throat, and she digs furiously at his underside, trying to disembowel him. Furious and scared, Ben grabs the dog's tail and hind leg, biting into the Achilles tendon at the animal's ankle. The fierce dog turns to attack the boy. At that moment, the badger snaps her jaw shut on the dog's throat and finishes him off.

Ben realizes George Burton will try to shoot the creature that killed Lobo. When the badger wants to walk away, Ben grabs the dog's hind legs and drags it to the edge of the pond, concealing the body in the cattails. The two hide in the burrow, going hungry for a day and a night.

As time passes, Ben is growing weaker while the badger grows stronger. By the time two months have passed, Ben is lethargic. He has grown thinner and hunts with the badger only occasionally. Unless something changes, Ben will soon be dead, just as everyone in Manitoba thinks he is.





## Chapter 10 Analysis

Surprisingly, Ben speaks to the badger more than he did to his family. In his loneliness, Ben seems to place a higher value on communication and language. Ben's autism makes him extremely wary of strangers, so he hides whenever he sees riders he can't identify. Unfortunately, for Ben, he is hiding from the very people who are searching for him.

The badger has apparently accepted Ben as a substitute for her missing cubs. She hunts for him, licks him clean and keeps him warm just as she would her own cubs. She even tries to teach him to hunt. The prairie chicken egg is slightly smaller than a chicken egg. In all, the badger brings Ben eight eggs. Once she brings Ben a chunk of bread someone has dropped on the trail, and twice she carries hunks of dripping honeycomb in her mouth.

Badgers are fierce fighters, and many have killed dogs. The construction of the badger's jaw makes it almost impossible to dislocate. Once the badger bites into an opponent, it is very unlikely to let go. In this case, the badger's bite tears the jugular vein and blood spatters all over the badger, dog and boy.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

The MacDonalds reluctantly attend the memorial service for Ben ten days after he disappears. Even after two months, Esther and William refuse to believe Ben is dead.

Esther has become pale and gaunt, sleeping restlessly. William looks even worse. For a week after Ben's disappearance, he was in the saddle 20 hours per day. He followed the Red River all the way to Lake Winnipeg and back the other side, but found no trace of Ben. John is suffering as well, but he has accepted that Ben is dead. He sees no way a small child could have survived in the wild so long. With Coral and Beth, Esther continues to walk concentric circles around the farm, searching for Ben.

Finally, in the 8th week of the search, John begins to comb the area southwest of the farm. Everyone thinks Ben was headed towards the river, but that area has been thoroughly searched. John rides wearily, hopelessly searching for some sign of his brother. When he finds it, he can hardly believe it. At first, he takes the small lump in the grass to be a rock. Then John realizes that it is one of Ben's shoes, moldy from the damp.

John's first thought is to mark the spot. There is no wood around, so he sticks the barrel of his new .22 rifle into the ground. Once the spot is marked, John begins riding in concentric circles. He finds the second shoe, 50 feet away, within 20 minutes. John ties his handkerchief to a nearby bush. John regrets not firing the rifle to summon his father before shoving it in the earth. Still, the two men have agreed to meet at noon, so it is only a matter of time until his father heads this way.

John sees a low outcropping of rock about 100 yards away. That is just the kind of place Ben would like, so he veers in that direction, flushing a grouse. His horse startled, John catches a glimpse of another frightened animal off to his right. The creature disappears under the rocks. At first, John thinks the animal is a badger, but something about it seems different. Without really knowing why, John dismounts and takes up a watching post about 50 yards from the rocks.

Nothing stirs for half an hour and John wonders why he is bothering with this creature. Little by little, an animal creeps out of the rocks. It's human! It's Ben! John calls out, and the creature disappears down a badger hole. John calls to Ben down the hole, but hears only snarls and growls. John begins to reach into the hole when suddenly Ben comes out, spitting and snarling, clawing at John's face. John grabs him and the boy continues to struggle wildly. An enormous badger erupts from the hole and pursues John. He reaches the saddle just steps in front of the badger. Taking his whip from the saddle, John lashes the badger. Vaulting into the saddle with Ben, John rides away at a gallop. The badger follows but is quickly outdistanced by the horse.



Running the horse flat out, John rides to the northwest until he sees a horseman coming towards him. It is William MacDonald. Still too far away to see John clearly, William realizes that a gallop can only mean John has found something. William urges his own horse into a run. From 300 yards away, John starts shouting that he has Ben. Ben is safe. He doesn't stop shouting until the two rein in their horses.

Tears stream down William MacDonald's face. He tries to take Ben, but the boy snarls and clings to John. Overcome, MacDonald says a brief prayer of thanksgiving and the two turn to take Ben home to his mother.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

John realizes that his parents will never accept Ben's death until a body is found. So, he continues searching every day after his farm chores are completed. The new .22 caliber breechloader is John's proudest possession. It will likely be ruined forever by thrusting it into the earth, but he never hesitates for a second.

Ben has become so badger-like that at first John is unsure what he has actually seen. John tells himself it is dumb to wait beside the rocks; the animal he saw has probably slipped out another way. However, John can't bring himself to leave until he's sure. Once he discovers it's actually Ben, John can't wait to race to their father, shouting all the way.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

At Hawk's Hill farm, Coral stands outside, frozen to see John and her father riding up with Ben. Suddenly she recovers and begins screaming for her mother. "It's Ben mama, they found him! It's Ben *and he's alive!*" Coral races to the riders with Esther and Beth on her heels. Esther, murmuring, reaches up to take Ben from John, but the tot only clings harder to his big brother.

Still holding Ben, John dismounts and takes him into the house. The child is filthy and skeletal. His clothes are little more than rags, and he's covered with scratches. Ben's eyes roam the room as if looking for escape. John carries the boy into the kitchen, where he smells the familiar aromas of spices, bread baking and meat roasting. Suddenly Ben begins crying and calling "Mama." Esther holds her son. Finally, William MacDonald gives the boy a kiss and welcomes him home.

Just as the family is regaining their composure, there is a growl from the doorway. The female badger, tired from her run, stands there hissing and snarling. John and his father shout warnings. William MacDonald grabs the rifle from over the fireplace. Ben screams and rushes to the badger, flinging his arms around her neck. The badger licks Ben's face, but still growls at the family. MacDonald is poised to shoot the creature as soon as Ben is out of the way, but Esther stops him. She protests that the badger is just trying to protect Ben.

Gradually the badger becomes part of the MacDonald family. She allows no one but Ben to touch her. Ben sleeps with the badger on the floor. He feeds the badger himself. For the next week, Ben alternates between playing in the yard, chattering with the badger, and talking to his family inside. The only part of Ben's story they doubt is the death of Lobo. That is going too far, and they are sure Ben has started telling tall tales. Perplexed, John goes back to the prairie and finds the dog's body in the cattails, just where Ben said it would be.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Despite Ben's cries for his mother and father when he was lost, he is terrified by the noise and excitement of so many people, after his months in the wild. Esther realizes that Ben is attached to the badger and feels more secure when she is around. Esther insists that they allow Ben to keep the vicious animal as a pet, for as long as he likes. The badger becomes another member of the family.

Surprisingly, Ben now talks to his family much more. He tells them the entire story of his adventures with the badger. The MacDonalds are amazed that Ben's social skills have actually improved. Ben shakes hands with visitors now, although he refuses to go to school unless the badger can come as well.

The family realizes that if Ben's exploits are known, he will be considered a "freak" once again, known as the Badger Boy. With the doctor from North Corners and the Archbishop of Winnipeg, the family agrees on a cover story. They will say that an Indian has protected and fed Ben for the past two months, and he is miraculously returned to his family.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

The first Saturday in September, George Burton rides up to Hawk Hill. He wants to inquire about his dog Lobo, and to learn if there is any truth to the rumor that the great Blackfoot chief who rescued Ben plans revenge on a cheating white trapper. Morning chores are finished and the badger is resting on the mound of freshly dug dirt from the new well.

Seeing the man just 30 yards away, the badger dives for the well, just as Burton snaps off a rifle shot. The shot barely nicks the badger. Furious, she snarls and bares her teeth, running to take refuge under the porch. Burton fires another shot, killing the animal. Ben flies out of the house, throwing himself on the ground next to the badger and screaming "no" repeatedly.

Ben's father follows him out of the house. Burton realizes he has made a mistake when he sees the expression on William MacDonald's face. MacDonald calls Burton an idiot and demands the gun. Instead, Burton points the gun at the center of MacDonald's chest. MacDonald grabs the gun barrel. Burton's horse rears and the gun goes off. The bullet grazed MacDonald's side. He wrenched the gun from the trapper, smashing it against a metal plough. Burton pulls a knife and attacks MacDonald. John jumps on Burton's back, but the trapper knocks him unconscious.

A shot rings out. Esther stands on the porch with a rifle, demanding that Burton drop the knife. MacDonald takes the gun from her and Esther revives John. Meanwhile, MacDonald calmly tells Burton that if he ever sees the trapper again, he will kill him. MacDonald will pay Burton three thousand dollars for his farm - the same amount that Burton paid the Cecil family for the property. Terrified, Burton jumps on his horse and rides away.

William and Esther approach Ben. He is sitting next to the dead badger, stroking her fur. William volunteers to help bury the badger, but Ben says he will do it himself, in the prairie. Both William MacDonald and John say how sorry they are that the badger is dead. Reluctantly, they agree to allow Ben to bury her alone.

Ben plans to take the badger back to her burrow, put her inside and seal up both exits. However, she is so heavy that he can barely drag her back to the meadow where she first befriended him. Almost exhausted, Ben leans his head against the badger. Suddenly, he realizes he can hear her heart beating! Stumbling, he tries to carry her back towards the house. "Dad! Dad! Help me. *Dad!*"

The family comes bolting out of the house. William MacDonald himself treats the badger on the kitchen table, cleaning the bullet wound. He puts salve and a bandage on it. When MacDonald is done, Ben asks in a halting voice if the badger will live. William



MacDonald wants to say yes, but he refuses to lie to his son. Gently, he tells the boy there is a good chance that the animal will still die. Ben nods. For the first time, he understands what his father has left unspoken. Ben realizes how sad his father will be if the badger dies. Ben asks his father to help him bury the badger if she does die. William MacDonald agrees, and Ben envelops him with a big hug.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

With her eyes closed, the badger doesn't see Burton approaching from downwind until it's too late. It seems unusual that Burton has heard about the Indian who rescued Ben, but hasn't heard that the MacDonald's have suddenly started keeping a badger as a pet. Although it's a bit presumptuous of Burton to shoot the badger on the MacDonald's property, it is reasonable. All the discussions between the two men in the past have led Burton to believe MacDonald loathes badgers. Burton's fight with the MacDonalds is, however, not reasonable.

The family develops a new closeness as a result of Ben's ordeal, and especially the shooting of the badger. For the first time in more than a year, John affectionately refers to his brother as "Benjy." Eckert somewhat unrealistically implies that Ben's autism was a conscious choice, and he has now decided not to be autistic. Ben's experience with the badger helps him understand unspoken human communication.



# Characters

## Ben MacDonald

Benjamin MacDonald, at six years old, is the youngest child of the MacDonald family. A quiet, shy, fair-haired tyke, Ben is small for his age - about the size of an average three-year-old. Ben understands everything others say to him, but he rarely speaks. He is closer to his sister Coral, who is three years older, than to Beth, the bossy oldest sister. Ben's father, William MacDonald, seems huge and threatening to the boy. Instead, Ben is closer to, and tries to imitate, his bother John, the oldest of the MacDonald children at 16. John takes more time to try to understand and communicate with Ben on his own level, while William MacDonald thinks Ben is just spoiled, and needs discipline to behave normally.

Today, many of the behaviors Ben displays could be attributed to a mild case of autism. Ben relates better to animals than to humans. When Ben is stressed or hurt, he often retreats to the barn and takes refuge in the stall of a favorite horse. He spends most of his time alone, imitating the wild animals on the farm. Ben follows mice, prairie dogs and even birds if they don't fly away. Ben has an uncanny ability to imitate the sounds of wild animals. The author makes it very clear that Ben does not "talk" to the animals, but simply imitates them. Despite this, when residents of North Corners hear of Ben's behavior from George Burton, they begin to think of the boy as a "freak."

## The Badger

The Badger is a very large four-year-old female. Author Allan Eckert always refers to the badger as "she." The badger is almost as heavy as Ben, weighing 23 pounds. She is low and broad with sturdy muscles. The creature is covered in long grayish fur that ripples in the wind when she walks. She has a pointed black face with streaks of gray and white. The badger has traveled many miles to arrive near Hawk's Hill. She is attracted by the large prairie dog colony, which promises abundant food. Nearby food is important, because the badger is expecting a litter soon. In 1870, there were many badgers in the Canadian plains, from the Alleghenies in the east to the ocean in the west. They range south throughout the United States to the Gulf of Mexico.

The badger's ears are small and round, black on the outside and white inside. Her right ear has a distinctive notch out of it, the result of an old fight. When the badger had her first litter, a large male lynx attacked one of the cubs. The tiny cub barely had its eyes open and was venturing outside the den for the first time. The badger launched a vicious counter-attack on the lynx. She chased the huge predator away, but in the process, it slashed her ear, leaving a permanent notch.

Badgers are among the most furious of fighters. Dogs, in times past, especially Irish terriers, were pitted against badgers in a practice called badger baiting. In folklore,





badgers are known for their tenacity in battle, loyalty and love. The Pueblo people consider badgers great healers.

## George Burton

Burton is the human villain of the novel. He is somewhat stereotypical, huge, unkempt man with an unruly black beard, bushy eyebrows and a weak chin. Burton makes those around him uncomfortable. He is shifty-eyed, never meeting the gaze of others. His forced joviality is irritating. Burton is often accompanied by his huge, terrifying dog, Lobo. When he encounters William MacDonald on the road into town for the first time, Burton rudely refuses to stop and talk. Instead, the man informs MacDonald he will stop by for a visit, not waiting for an invitation. According to neighbors, Burton is a coward and a bully. Burton is originally from Quebec. He was a trapper until his brutality to Indians made it too dangerous. Burton worked for years at the Hudson Bay Company store. Some people say Burton underpaid trappers for their furs, and then resold them to the Hudson Bay Company at a profit. That is how he garnered enough money to buy the Cecil's farm.

## Lobo

George Burton's huge yellow dog, Lobo, is the animal villain of the novel. According to gossip, Lobo has killed at least one Indian who was wandering around Burton's camp late at night. Gossip aside, the animal is fierce, responding only reluctantly to its master's commands.

## The Male Badger

The female badger's mate is caught in one of George Burton's traps a few weeks after her litter is born. The animal struggles in agony for more than two days before Burton finds him. Burton kills the exhausted animal with a blow to the head, to preserve the valuable pelt.

## Esther MacDonald

Esther MacDonald is Ben's mother. She is a dark, intelligent, gentle woman who shares an aura of quiet strength with her husband. If Esther felt any fear as a new bride journeying to establish a homestead in an unknown land, she did not show it. Ben talks to his mother more than he talks to any other family member.

## William MacDonald

William MacDonald is Ben's father. He is of Scottish ancestry, with a craggy face, like an Indian, and sharp features. A well-educated man, William chose a life of farming



because he loves the land. With his bride Esther, he traveled to the plains from Toronto in 1850 with all their possessions on a wagon pulled by oxen. Finally, topping a slight rise, the couple recognized instantly that this would be their new home. MacDonald is slender but strong, with callused hands. He has difficulty understanding his youngest son, Ben. MacDonald wonders if there isn't something wrong with the boy since he seldom talks.

## **John MacDonald**

John MacDonald is Ben's oldest sibling, and only brother. Ben is closer to the 16-year-old John than to his father. He talks to John more than any family member except his mother, and often tries to imitate John. Ultimately, it is John who finds Ben after his sojourn in the Badger's den.

## **Beth MacDonald**

Beth is Ben's 12-year-old sister. She is the second eldest MacDonald child, after John, and tends to be bossy. Because Beth is obviously not interested in Ben's opinions and only wants to order him around, Ben almost never talks to her.

## **Coral MacDonald**

Coral is Ben's 9-year-old sister. He is closer to her than to Beth or his father because Coral treats Ben like an equal. Still, Coral is away at school most of every day and Ben spends most of his time alone.

## **Dr. Richard M. Simpson**

The MacDonalds consult "Doc" Simpson after Ben's return. The doctor visits the farm with his friend, the Archbishop. Together, the two men decide that for Ben's own protection, the story of the boy living with a badger for 2 months must never come out. Otherwise, they fear the local residents will regard Ben as even more of a "freak."

## **Archbishop Peter Matheson of Winnipeg**

The Archbishop visits the MacDonalds farm after Ben's return. He agrees with Doc Simpson that Ben's story must remain untold, for the boy to be accepted in North Corners. The Archbishop suggests an alternate explanation - that Ben was found and protected by a fierce Indian chief.



# Objects/Places

## Hawk's Hill

Traveling west from Toronto as newlyweds, the MacDonalds were sure they would recognize their new homestead when they saw it. Standing on the rise, the two heard the bell-like cry of a hawk soaring nearby and decided to name their farm Hawk's Hill. It is in the province of Manitoba, about 20 miles from the city of Winnipeg.

## North Corners

North Corners is the nearest town, about 10 miles away from the MacDonald farm. It has a store, a church and a school. John, Beth and Coral MacDonald ride horses into North Corners to attend school each day. When Ben is lost, the residents of North Corners unite to search for him.

## The Badger Hole

Lost in a thunderstorm, Ben takes refuge in a badger's elaborate den. The hole is a marvel of engineering, including about 30 feet of sloping tunnels, two exits and a large central chamber.

## The Rock Outcropping

Lost, Ben initially takes refuge in a rock outcropping. Unfortunately, it does not offer enough protection from the rain, so he crawls into a nearby badger hole instead. The badger hole has the advantage of a small natural cave under the rocks, which provides ventilation and a generous chamber.

## The Meadow

Ben initially meets and befriends the badger in a meadow near Hawk's Hill. Following a falcon, Ben watches the bird consume a mouse. When a badger approaches, both the boy and animal are startled. When the badger is shot, Ben decides to bury her in the meadow where they first met.

## The Barn

The barn is Ben's favorite place on Hawk's Hill farm. He takes refuge here with the horses in their stalls when everyday life becomes too stressful. He often hides in the hayloft and imitates the mice and other animals.



## **Ben's Shoes**

Running to escape the thunder and rain, Ben loses his shoes. After weeks of searching, John finally finds one of the moldy shoes near the rock outcropping. It is the first trace of Ben, suggesting the boy was not washed away in the river.

## **John's .22 Rifle**

John's most prized possession is his new .22 caliber rifle, a birthday present. When John finds Ben's shoe, he needs a way to mark the spot. With no trees around, John thrusts his precious gun, muzzle first, into the earth. This action will likely ruin the gun, but John is only concerned with finding his brother.

## **The Cattails**

When Ben returns to his family, he gradually tells them of his exploits in the badger hole. When he recounts the fierce attack by George Burton's dog Lobo, and his part in it, his family is initially skeptical. They believe the boy is telling "tall tales." It is only after John locates the dog's decayed corpse in the cattails - exactly where Ben says he left it - that Ben's family wholeheartedly believes him.

## Setting

The story takes place during two months of the summer of 1870. The MacDonalds live about twenty miles north of Winnipeg, where they own a farm on the prairie of Manitoba. Uncultivated land encircles the farm, and the Red River is less than a mile away. The novel takes place almost completely outdoors, either at the farm or in the surrounding countryside. Ben, the central character, is the youngest of the MacDonald children. Ben finds that he is most comfortable out-of-doors, where he can pursue his fascination with animals.

## Social Sensitivity

Eckert's realistic portrayal of violence in nature may concern readers, although most young adults have seen nature shows on television with similarly graphic depictions of the inherent violence of the animal world. On the other hand, some of the descriptions of eating raw animals are not suitable for the faint-hearted. The scene in which Ben and the Badger kill the dog Lobo, although necessary to the story, is particularly gruesome. But the novel contrasts killing for survival with killing for profit and for pleasure, and one could certainly use the book as a means of pointing out the difference to students.

It is also important to note that the book in no way advocates running away from home. Ben does not run away, and he is close to death when found. Eckert does not glorify an existence without parents.

## Literary Qualities

Incident at Hawk's Hill is based on a true story. A Benjamin MacDonald did live with a badger for a couple of months.

But little documentation exists for these events, so Eckert uses his own method to write what might be called a historical novel. He weaves his research about badgers and his knowledge of the incident into a form that is indistinguishable from a novel. Eckert strays from the conventions of history by turning real people into literary characters. But, in keeping with the author's usual preference for realism, the badger is not a character. Eckert refuses to anthropomorphize the animal—that is, to give human characteristics to it—and the result is a story that reads as much like fact as it does like fiction.

# Themes

## Autism

Ben's behavior suggests that he has a mild form of autism. Most autistic children have difficulty learning in the ordinary give-and-take of human interaction. They may prefer objects or animals to humans, avoid eye contact and seem indifferent to family members. Autistic individuals experience delays in communication, social interaction and imaginative play. In particular, they may lack the "theory of the mind," the concept that allows them to mentally view the world from another's perspective. Usually we develop this ability by the age of 5. Even as adults, many autistic people have trouble interpreting emotional cues like tone of voice and body language. Often, they can only understand what is explicitly stated. Autism is a spectrum, and the symptoms can vary from person to person.

Scientists theorize that autistic people experience sensory stimuli differently. The ultimate causes of autism are probably both genetic and environmental. Some researchers believe the number of autistic children is increasing, while others believe we are simply getting better at diagnosing autism.

Many autistic people eventually develop social skills that allow them to participate in school and social events. Animal behaviorist Dr. Temple Grandin is one example. Grandin has a Ph.D. in Animal Science. She is the author of the interesting book, *Translating Animals: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Unlock Animal Behavior*. Grandin is Associate Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. She says that she still finds it easier to understand animals than humans. Grandin confesses that she often misses social cues that others intuitively understand. The book, *Thinking in Pictures* details Grandin's experiences with Autism.

Many autistic people become adept at writing. Famous individuals who are reportedly autistic include professional golfer Moe Norman, artist Donna Williams and Thomas McKean, an advocate for the disabled. Despite the challenges, most autistic people lead fulfilling lives. Many say that if they had the choice, they would still opt to be autistic.

## Family

Family is paramount on the prairie, and in the novel. The MacDonalds are a self-contained unit that relies on teamwork. All of the children do barn chores before and after school. John supervises his sisters on the ten-mile horseback ride to school in North Corners. Esther and William work together on the farm, every day.

At the beginning of the novel, the only exception is Ben. His cold, withdrawn behavior and reluctance to communicate with other members of the family cause a rift. Of all the siblings, Ben is closest to his older brother John. At six years old, Ben looks up to the





16-year-old John as a father figure. Ben talks to John more than anyone else in the family, save his mother, and tries to imitate his actions. Esther is convinced that Ben only needs patience and love to overcome his obstacles. She is unfailingly kind and supportive, but may ask too little of Ben.

Of his two sisters, Ben is closer to Coral, who is only 3 years older. At least Coral will sometimes listen to him. Ben never talks to his older sister Beth. Beth is bossy and shows little interest in her younger brother. Perhaps the greatest schism in the family is between Ben and his father, William MacDonald. William is troubled by thoughts that there is "something wrong" with Ben. Typically of his era, MacDonald regards fathering a developmentally disabled or "abnormal" child as shameful. Often MacDonald thinks that they need to force Ben to behave in a more normal way.

After Ben's disappearance, the entire family comes to appreciate him more. Ben realizes he is an important member of the family. For the first time, he feels he has something valuable to contribute. Ben comes to appreciate his family more, and to rely on them for help when needed.

## Nature

The author, Allan Eckert is a natural historian. *Incident at Hawk's Hill* is filled with detailed information about the animal life near Winnipeg in 1870. If anything, the animal characters of the novel are more realistic and compelling than the rather stereotypical humans. Eckert carefully details the range, habits, prey and behavior of badgers.

Eckert portrays the marvelous engineering talents of the badger as she builds a den for her cubs (kits?). None of the animals is portrayed with human intelligence, thoughts or emotions. Instead, Eckert makes it clear that the badger, like all animals, acts through a will to survive and an instinctive knowledge. The author also paints a realistic portrait of Burton's trade as a fur trapper. Eckert, a former trapper himself, doesn't condemn the practice, nor does he minimize the agony it inflicts on animals.

Eckert does not attempt to sanitize nature for young readers. Although he uses age-appropriate language, he is forthright about the badger's care of her young, including building a den, nursing them and eating their waste. Badgers are predators, and Eckert details the badger's various hunts without sugarcoating them. During Ben's two months in the prairie, he consumes many raw items including prairie chickens, prairie dogs and eggs. In nature, death is part of life. As Eckert himself points out, few wild animals die of old age. Still, Eckert takes care to blunt the trauma of the badger's probable death with an ambiguous ending.

Besides the badger, many other animals make an appearance in the novel, including prairie dogs, grouse, kingfishers, red-winged blackbirds, several types of ducks and geese, frogs, mice, and domesticated animals such as horses and chickens.



## Themes/Characters

In *Incident at Hawk's Hill*, Eckert takes a true story and expands it into a novel.

He keeps the cast to a minimum, and the animals, particularly the badger, are as important to the story as most of the people.

Benjamin MacDonald is a six-year-old who looks closer to three or four. Short and thin, he is abnormally shy for his age. He probably suffers from a mild case of autism—a mental illness that causes its victims to withdraw from others—for he almost never communicates with anyone except his mother, and seldom with her. He appears to talk to the animals on the farm and in the wild, but he actually only imitates what they do and watches their responses. All of this makes him a much misunderstood boy.

Ben's father, William, is at the center of the misunderstanding. He wants to love his son, but he needs more from Ben. He wants Ben to love him, but Ben does not respond to his father's bumbling attempts at affection. William has come to Hawk's Hill to forge a new life in the wilderness. He has a pioneer's instinct for survival and a hardiness and a handiness in the face of concrete, physical obstacles, but Ben occupies an entirely different, spiritual level. This difference in temperament prevents William from establishing a genuine, loving relationship with his son. Only Ben's two-month absence allows William to overcome this obstacle.

Ben's brother John is more like his father. Eckert tells little about him, except that he will follow in his father's footsteps in farming. Ben, however, feels closer to John than to his father and talks to John more than he does to William. Ben's communicativeness becomes significant as an index of a character's appeal. For instance, Ben talks with his nine-year-old sister, Coral, a little, but he hardly talks to his twelve-year-old sister, Beth, at all. Ben speaks to his mother, Esther, the most, but even his conversation with her is minimal. She defends Ben to William, who thinks he is abnormal. She recognizes that Ben is different, but she feels that he will outgrow his shyness and become one of the family.

Ben befriends a mother badger by offering her some dead mice, and he develops a stronger relationship with her than with any human in the book.

She even lets Ben touch her. When Ben is lost in a violent thunderstorm, the badger takes him into her den and feeds him, saving his life; in his own way, Ben talks more to the badger than he ever has to his family.

The real villain of the piece is George Burton. Burton is a trapper who epitomizes the opposite of the angelic Ben.

Burton and his dog Lobo—the opposite of the good badger—strike the loudest chord of fear in Ben. When Burton brings a dead badger to the farm, Ben is relieved that it is not his, but he realizes the danger the trapper represents to his badger. William reluctantly



skins Burton's badger, leading to the biggest conflict between father and son. Ben's fear of Burton motivates his refusal to show himself when he sees the search party looking for him—he is rightfully afraid of what Burton might do.

The interdependence of Ben and the badger is one of the main themes of the book. The badger helps Ben when she shares her den with him and feeds him.

In turn, Ben saves the badger by cleaning the foot she had caught in a trap and by assisting her in killing the deadly Lobo. But this interdependence is not enough for either. Ben is slowly starving to death on his badger diet, and when the two return to the farm and the badger chooses to live with the MacDonalds, Eckert clearly demonstrates that there is no world that is good, for both of them together. Eventually they must part and live in separate worlds.



# Style

## Point of View

*Incident at Hawk's Hill* is told in third person past tense with an omnipotent point of view. This rather remote perspective allows Eckert to paint a sweeping historical account of the natural history of Manitoba in the prologue. It also allows the author to include information from a wide range of viewpoints. The narrative at times dips into the minds of the female badger, Ben, William MacDonald, George Burton and Ben's mother.

This construction creates a sense of a complete natural universe outside humans that Ben is aware of. This alternate reality is not accessible to other people. Thus, Ben's "handicap" also confers a special power to understand and appreciate animals.

The omnipotent point of view creates more emotional distance than a first-person narrative, or a novel with one or two viewpoints. Due to the highly emotional nature of Eckert's content, including the killing of several animals, an attack by a vicious dog, the terrifying loss of a small child and the near-death of a main character (the badger), this distance is a good thing.

## Setting

The novel is set in 1870, around Hawk's Hill, a farm in Manitoba province, Canada. Hawk's Hill is about 20 miles from the thriving city of Winnipeg, and about 10 miles from the nearest town of North Corners. The farm was founded 20 years before by Ben's parents, William and Esther MacDonald. Like many young couples of their time, the MacDonalds traveled west from Toronto in search of land to establish a homestead.

The farm at Hawk's Hill includes acreage planted to unspecified crops, a farmhouse, and several outbuildings. A neighboring farm once owned by the Cecil family is now under the control of George Burton, a shifty amateur farmer and an inconsistent trapper. The nearest town is North Corners, where Ben will attend school in the fall. The residents of North Corners regard Ben as a bit odd, but are more than willing to devote three days and nights of searching when he disappears.

The animal life in and especially around Hawk's Hill Farm is vital to the plot. Although the farm is on a plain, there are a variety of habitats nearby, including rock outcroppings, a swampy area, a large prairie dog colony, a pond and a river. All of these areas, and their wildlife, are included in Eckert's loving descriptions of the outdoors.

## Language and Meaning

One of the ways Eckert conveys character is through each individual's typical speech. The antagonist, George Burton uses many more colloquialisms and speaks in a much



less educated manner than William MacDonald. The result is that Burton sounds ignorant and crude, while MacDonald sounds hardworking but kind. For example, a quotation in Chapter 4 on page 70 reads "'Ain't lost the ol' touch a'tall,' Burton said and then, turning, 'C'mon horse. You'n me's gonna go visitin'."

By contrast, a typical statement by Ben's father occurs in Chapter 3 on page 55, "'Don't know what you did today, son' [William MacDonald] said, placing a hand on Ben's shoulder, 'but you must have enjoyed yourself. You've been smiling to yourself off and on ever since you came home. Did you have a good time?'"

Eckert uses forthright and sometimes even slightly scientific terms to describe various elements of the natural world. Examples would be "mammary glands" and "defecate." This is in keeping with his refusal to romanticize or anthropomorphize the animals in the novel.

## Structure

*Incident at Hawk's Hill* is really two parallel narratives told in alternate fashion. The first narrative centers around events at the farmhouse on Hawk's Hill. The second centers on events near the badger's burrow several miles away. The two provide alternate story lines of the human and animal inhabitants, with Ben providing the link between the two. Generally odd numbered chapters focus on humans, while even numbered chapters focus on the animals, especially the badger.

The novel is divided into 13 numbered chapters with a prologue. The prologue provides a sweeping portrait of the history of Manitoba. The first chapter details Ben's shyness, his affinity for animals over humans, and introduces the villain, George Burton. The second chapter focuses on the badger, her habits and the marvelous engineering feat of the breeding den.

Chapter 3 details Ben's first meeting with the badger, in the meadow near Hawk's Hill. In Chapter 4, the male badger is caught in one of Burton's traps and killed, leaving the female badger alone with her cubs. Chapter 5 tells of George Burton inviting himself to dinner at the MacDonald's farm, and reveals William MacDonald's negative opinion of badgers. Ben is shocked by his father's behavior, and flees to the barn, creating an even greater rift between the two. In Chapter 6, the female badger is caught in one of Burton's traps, and her three kits die of hunger.

Ben wanders away from the farm in Chapter 7, and takes refuge in the empty badger's den. He has an unfriendly encounter with the badger in Chapter 8. In Chapter 9, Ben is discovered missing and the citizens of North Corners mobilize to search for him. Chapter 10 details the pattern of Ben's life with the badger. Chapters 11 and 12 tell of John finding Ben and the boy's return to his family at Hawks Hill, followed by the badger. In Chapter 13, the climax, George Burton shoots the badger and fights with the MacDonald family. He leaves, and Ben discovers the badger is still alive. William

MacDonald treats the animal's wounds, although the badger's survival is far from certain. Ben discovers a new rapport with his father.



## Quotes

"Ben? Ben! I saw you come in here, so don't try to pretend you're not there. I want you to come outside." - William Macdonald, Chapter 1, pg. 2

"Don't know what you did today, son' [William MacDonald] said, placing a hand on Ben's shoulder, 'but you must have enjoyed yourself. You've been smiling to yourself off and on ever since you came home. Did you have a good time?'" Chapter 3, pg. 55

"A good time, Dad." - Benjamin MacDonald, Chapter 3, pg. 55

"'Ain't lost the ol' touch a'tall,' Burton said and then, turning, 'C'mon horse. You'n me's gonna go visitin'.'" Chapter 4, pg. 70

"He'll come around,' Esther said softly. 'You'll see. It just takes time, that's all. Time and understanding, and a lot of patience; more patience, sometimes than we think we can give. He'll come around, though.'" Chapter 5, pg. 82

"He ran until he was to the point where [the prairie chicken] disappeared, even though he knew she would no longer be there. He was panting heavily when he stopped." Chapter 7, pg. 97

"Why don't you go away and leave me alone!' [Ben] said loudly. 'What do you want, anyway? If this is your hole, it's just too bad. I'm using it now. You just go on away, you hear me? Get out of here!'" Chapter 8, pg. 105

"'Afraid he's right, William. Without any sign on the ground anywhere of Ben, the likeliest thing is that the boy went down by the Red [River] and somehow tumbled in. If so, God only knows where he might be by now.'" Chapter 9, pg. 131

"'You're wrong' [Ben's father] said, 'all of you. Esther and I, John and the girls, we thank you for your help, but we can't accept that he's gone. Go on home if you want. We'll keep on looking. Ben's somewhere and we'll find him.'" Chapter 9, pg. 132

"Ben, don't you know me? It's John, Ben. Your brother. Come on out, you're safe now. I won't hurt you, Ben. Don't be afraid." Chapter 11, pg. 159

"In his great excitement, John began shouting when they were still three hundred yards apart and he didn't stop until they reined in their horses. 'Dad!' he cried. 'Dad, it's Ben. I found Ben! I've got him, dad, and he's all right. *Ben's all right!*'" Chapter 10, pg. 161

"'I used to be so small when everyone else was so big,' [Ben] told them seriously. 'It was like everybody, even Coral and Beth, knew more than I did and there wasn't anything I could say that everybody didn't know already. But now I know a lot of things that *nobody* else knows, don't I?'" Chapter 12, pg. 171



"Don't talk Burton, just listen. You've nothing to say that I want to hear. I'm a God-fearing man and I detest violence, but I swear to you now as God is my witness, if you ever set foot on my land again, I'll kill you on sight." -- William MacDonald, Chapter 13, pg. 182





## Topics for Discussion

1. George Burton is evil from the beginning. Ben knows it, and so does the reader. List several ways readers are made aware of Burton's nature the first time Burton meets Ben.

2. Each character's appeal to Ben may be measured by the extent to which he communicates with him or her. Which characters does Ben find most appealing? Which does he find least appealing?

Do you agree with his assessments?

3. William MacDonald skins the badger Burton has killed, even though he is reluctant to do so. Why does he do it?

4. There are two major points at which Ben's relationship with his father dominates the story. At one time the relationship becomes worse, and at the other it becomes much better. What are those points, and why do they affect Ben and William so much?

5. William and John continue to search for Ben long after others have given up. What does this determination indicate about human nature? What does it indicate about their feelings for Ben?

6. Many events in the novel depict the interdependence between Ben and the badger. What single event most clearly demonstrates this aspect of their relationship? How?

7. When Ben and the badger fight and kill Lobo, they seem to be fighting something bigger, or at least something other than Lobo. What are they actually fighting against?



## Essay Topics

Ben is shy, silent and withdrawn. His father fears something serious is wrong with the boy. His mother thinks everyone just needs to be patient with Ben. In your opinion, who is right?

Ben seems to have some of the symptoms that today would be called autism. In your opinion, is labeling people as autistic good, bad, or both? Why?

*Incident at Hawk's Hill* includes a lot of factual information on badgers. What are some new facts you learned about badgers?

Who do you think the author, Allan Eckert, likes better - the people in his novel, or the animals? Why?

Ben imitates the noises animals make, but he doesn't talk to them. How would the novel be different if he did?

The residents of North Corners begin to think of Ben as a "freak" when they learn of his uncanny ability to imitate animals. In your opinion, is that labeling fair to Ben? Why or why not?

Why does Ben hide from the riders he sees?

How do the people from the community, including North Corners, react when they find out a child is missing? What would happen in your community if a child were missing?

Ben has to do some disgusting things to survive, like bite a fierce dog and eat raw meat. Do you think most people could do those things? Explain why or why not.

One reason Ben gives for being so silent is that he doesn't think he has anything worthwhile to say. Everyone else seems to know much more than he does. How does that change by the end of the novel?

The ending of *Incident at Hawk's Hill* is ambiguous. Do you think the badger lives or dies? What happens after that?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Eckert is careful not to depict Ben actually communicating with the animals or even understanding them.

Many other authors do not feel the need to take such precautions. Explain why Eckert does not want Ben to be a Dr.

Dolittle.

2. Ben communicates with people in one way and animals in another. Both ways are incomplete at best. Compare Ben's methods of communication, and explain why this element is important to the novel.

3. The principal conflict in the book is the one between man and nature. Show how this conflict develops with George Burton, and then show how it develops with Ben. What does this contrast do for the novel?

4. Obviously, the most important story line involves Ben's friendship with the badger. But Ben's father plays an important role too. Make a case for the relationship of father to son being the most important aspect of the novel.

5. A case could be made that today's youth, especially city dwellers, would be ill-prepared for an adventure such as Ben's. Using Ben for comparison, determine whether you would be able to survive in the wilderness for two months.

What would you need and what would you miss?

## Further Study

De Montreville, Doris, and Elizabeth Crawford, eds. *Fourth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978. Provides biographical background.

Metzger, Linda, ed. *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*. Vol. 14.

Detroit: Gale, 1986. Contains a brief summary of Eckert's life and career.

Ward, Martha E., and Dorothy Marquardt. *Authors of Books for Young People*. 2d ed. Supp. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1979. Includes a summary of Eckert's career.

## Related Titles

In one sense, almost all of Eckert's fiction is related to *Incident at Hawk's Hill*, since he researches and then recreates a historical incident according to the standards of the novel. Although he wrote none of his books especially for young readers, two that use the same approach as *Incident at Hawk's Hill* would undoubtedly prove interesting to the young reader as well: *Blue Jacket: War Chief of the Shawnees* tells the story of Marmaduke Van Swearingen, a white man who was captured by Native Americans and became a chief, and *Johnny Logan: Shawnee Spy* tells of a Native American boy raised by white settlers.

The "Mesmerian Annals," a series of novels beginning with *The Dark Green Tunnel*, may also appeal to young adults. This series uses the science fiction genre to explore human nature.



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