

My Side of the Mountain Study Guide

My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George

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Plot Summary

“My Side of the Mountain” is a young adult novel by Jean Craighead George, which follows a year spent in the wild by New Yorker, Sam Gibley. When the novel begins, Sam has just made it through his first snowstorm successfully, and he recounts all the time that led up to it. In May, with only \$40 and a few other odds and ends, such as a penknife and a few changes of clothing, Sam heads north to the Catskill Mountain town of Delhi. His family owns ancestral land above the town on Bitter Mountain, and Sam, tired of living in crowded New York, is determined to make a life off the land. He has prepared for the journey extensively, studying wildlife survival at the New York City Public Library, and in the library in Delhi.

Sam heads up to his great-grandfather’s property, and there begins his life in the wild. He burns out a cave in a massive Hemlock tree in which to live, and begins to gather and store food, from plants and wild vegetables to apples and small game. Sam also manages to take a baby peregrine hawk from her nest, and raises her as a pet, naming her Frightful. Despite the mountain’s isolation, many tourists and local residents end up passing by. Sam avoids most of them, speaking to only a few, such as Bando, the English professor, who ends up at Sam’s place by accident, having lost his way. Sam spends the autumn continuing to collect food and supplies for the winter. The first snow storm passes, and at Christmas, Bando returns. Sam’s dad also appears for a visit and is incredibly proud of his son.

By the spring, news of Sam’s activities on the mountain have made it into the news. He begins to realize that he wants to be found, that he misses having people around – though not as close as they were in New York. At the end of the novel, Sam’s entire family – his father, mother, and eight siblings, including Alice (who will factor into the novel’s sequel, “On the Far Side of the Mountain”), come not to visit Sam, but to make a new home on the mountain. Sam is incredibly happy about this, but unhappy his mother will no longer allow him to live in a tree.



I Hole Up in a Snowstorm – I Meet One of My Own Kind and Have a Terrible Time Getting Away

Summary

I Hole Up in a Snowstorm – Twelve-year-old Sam Gribley journals on birch bark during a massive snowstorm in his treehouse, a small cave-like dwelling he has burned and hacked out of a massive hemlock tree. He has even constructed a fireplace to keep warm in the winter. He believes it is either December 4 or 5, but does not know for sure, for he has lost count. He has been too busy smoking venison and collecting berries, nuts, and small game for survival. His light source is a candle made from a turtle shell and deer fat with a strip of his old pants for a wick.

Sam explains that eight months before, he ran away from home to live on the land, and the food in the wild is good, from acorn pancakes to turtle soup. Sam's closest neighbor is the Baron, a wild weasel that lives in a boulder north of Sam's tree. Sam later burrows out of the snow after the storm, and calls his trained falcon, Frightful, to him. Sam has been striving since May to learn all the necessary skills needed for survival in New York's Catskill Mountains. Sam recalls that the snowstorms in New York City, where is originally from, seemed friendly, but up in the mountains, they seem deadly. He recalls his father telling him that their family still owns a swath of land up in the Catskills – Gribley's folly, marked by the name "Gribley" on a tree, and says that the land is no place for a Gribley. Sam thinks the land is the perfect place for a Gribley.

I Get Started on this Venture – Sam leaves New York in May with \$40, a penknife, a ball of cord, and an ax. He also has flint and steel from a Chinese store the owner shows him how to use. Sam hitches rides up to the Catskill Mountains, the last leg of the trip by truck. Sam tells the driver he is running away from home; the driver says that when he was Sam's age, he ran away to the city from the farm. He says he'll be back in the morning if Sam wants a lift back home, and laughs. Sam recalls how everyone laughs at him, including his dad, for wanting to run away to Great-Grandfather Gribley's land. His father tells him to try it as he boards a boat for Singapore.

Sam, meanwhile, heads a mile into the woods and is thrilled to be on his own. He remembers reading a book in the New York Public Library on how to survive on the land. He whittles fishhooks out of twigs and digs for worms. He ends up having to use grubs, for the mountain ground is still frosty in May. The first attempt at fishing goes bad, but the second is better. As the cold and dark sets in, Sam scrambles to make a shelter and collect firewood. He barely gets any sleep, between the cold and the sounds of whippoorwills. The next morning, Sam comes across a cabin owned by a nice old man named Bill, who cooks Sam's fish for him. Bill teaches Sam how to properly make a fire.



I Find Gribley's Farm – Bill tells Sam he'll leave the back door open if Sam needs shelter, but Sam doesn't think he will. He sets out to find his family's land, hitchhiking toward the town of Delhi. Miss Turner, a young woman who runs the town library, helps Sam locate his family's land in an old book, and draws a map for him. Sam explains he will be living off the land as his ancestors did more than 100 years before. A short time later, Sam finds the old stone wall that serves a boundary fence for his grandfather's property. He is excited. He catches and cooks a catfish for dinner, and he writes a note to Bill thanking him and telling Bill about the fire he has started.

I Find Many Useful Plants – Sam wakes up happy and refreshed the next morning, but very hungry. He collects mussels from the nearby river. After eating, Sam wonders how his grandfather ever managed to farm on a mountain. On his map, Sam makes a note of where Hickory trees are, to use the bark for salt and to collect nuts in the fall. He finds the old stone ruins of the farmhouse, but cannot find anything usable right away, and then finds some apple trees. He discovers a stream on the property, follows the stone walls that border and divide it, and finds a clearing with massive trees, which gives him an idea.

The Old, Old Tree – While Sam knows that his family's land is pretty remote, he is sure hunters or hikers will venture across it sooner or later, so he decides to build a house where no one can find him, because he fears that people will bring him home if they find him. He decides to live in a massive Hemlock tree. He takes advantage of the rotting heart of the tree to build his cave. It becomes his main focus, and he realizes he is very hungry as he works. It never seems as if there is enough food. He comes across dogtooth violets, which are known for having tasty bulbs. He also eats spring beauties, which taste like lima beans, and crow eggs. He boils the eggs in a cabbage leaf which doubles as a bowl. Near the hemlock tree, he finds a small spring with crystal clear water, and crayfish, which he eats. As the days pass, Sam goes from surviving minute to minute to preparing for the future as well. He keeps track of the days by carving notches in an aspen pole.

I Meet One of my Own Kind and Have a Terrible Time Getting Away – By June 5, Sam's cave in the tree is completed. As the time passes, he begins to store away food, plan carefully, and expands his diet to frog legs and cattails, among other things. He is working on making himself a bed when a woman comes across him. She is collecting strawberries, and gets Sam to help her, though Sam isn't thrilled because they are one less food source he will now have. She explains she has been coming to collect strawberries there for forty years. She talks about national and local news, about atomic bomb tests and Mr. Riley's three-legged dog, as well as duck-hawks. She believes Sam lives in Delhi, so she walks him down to town. She lives on the edge of town, and Sam heads to the library.

Analysis

Jean Craighead George's novel "My Side of the Mountain" follows a year in the life of twelve-year-old Sam Gribley as he lives off the land in the Catskill Mountains of upstate



New York. Sam is tired of crowded New York City, and living with a large family, so he hitchhikes upstate, to his family's ancestral land on Bitter Mountain above the town of Delhi. Sam's desire to get away from it all is not an uncommon one – no matter what that “all” might be. For example, the truck driver who drops Sam off near Delhi explains the he had to get away from home when he was younger, and so went to live in the city. Early on, the theme of independence becomes important in the novel, as Sam is determined to make it alone. Indeed, he intends his encounter with Bill to be the last encounter with Bill and, hopefully, anyone. Sam wants only to rely on himself. This also begins Sam's journey of self-discovery, of coming of age. He has very little to his name when he heads into the wild, including \$40 – which he will have no use for in the mountains.

Sam's decision to go into the wild is prompted in part by his father's assertion that Gibleys are not meant for the land – this coming as his father boards a ship for Singapore. Apparently, Sam's father believes that the ocean, that the water, is the future of the family. But Sam disagrees, and heads to his family's ancestral land in upstate New York. Sam's journey will also bring him closer to the past, as remnants of his family's past pop up all over the landscape. For example, the apple trees that his family planted still survive, as do the ruins of his family's former home. Not only is Sam going back to nature, he is going back to his roots. The foundations of the home of his ancestors prove to be metaphorical for their history, and not just the house that once stood upon it.

Most of the land Sam's family owns has reverted to wilderness, with tree growth and the encroachment of nature. Relatively little of the land is left open, save the meadow where Sam decides to build his tree house. He has come to get away from people, and so finds it quite annoying that an elderly woman appears to collect strawberries on the property. She is later revealed to be Mrs. Fielder, aged 97, who is very sweet and very kind. She believes that Sam must live down in the village, and insists on escorting him back down in grandmotherly fashion. Sam has no choice but to go along with her in order to get rid of her, and he ends up heading back to the library. Mrs. Fielder will later prove to be one of the sources of the newspaper articles that will come to be written about Sam.

Sam's first few weeks alone are spent in transition. He uses his knowledge to good use, applying everything he has learned from books. He moves from living off the land on a meal-to-meal basis, to collecting, preserving, and storing foodstuffs. His home in the tree serves not only as a good place to hide, but durable shelter that would prove invaluable in the coming months, especially once winter sets in. As Sam's basics are slowly being covered – especially when it comes to food – he begins to craft things for his home that are more convenient than essential, such as a bed on which to sleep. Indeed, Sam has gone from being something of a gatherer to a settler, making the transition between nomadism and dwelling, finding a place to call home. Sam is laying down his own foundation and his own roots (in a tree, interestingly) to begin his new life. Trees are rooted to the land, and to the past; Sam's family is rooted to the land, and to the past; and now Sam himself is rooted to the land, and this will one day become his past.



Discussion Question 1

Why has Sam been too busy to keep track of the date? What has he been doing instead? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why is fire so important to living off the land?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe no adults – the truck driver or Bill – try to stop Sam from going to live off the land?

Vocabulary

diameter, snug, gangplank, shadowy, whittling, emphatic, congregate, frantically, combustible, peck, loam, remote, coltish



The King's Provider – I Find a Real Live Man

Summary

The King's Provider – Sam heads to the library to learn about peregrine falcons, because he wants to tame one. Miss Turner helps him find the right information. She then gives him a haircut on the back steps of the library before he leaves. He collects apples on the way back home. Sam follows some falcons to a cliff, where they are nesting. He comes across a nest full of three baby falcons, but the mother attacks him. Sam grabs the biggest nestling, a female, and flees. His shoulder is a little bloody from the attack. He names the baby falcon "Frightful", after having a frightful time obtaining her, and washes his shoulder in the creek.

What I Did About the First Man Who Was After Me – As Sam returns home, he knows there is another person who has been around there. He has learned to commune with nature, and understand it – and the presence of a man is quite different. He sees a man in a forester's uniform moving around the meadow, and believes he is there to bring Sam home. Sam decides to hide, instead. He eats a rabbit, giving some to Frightful. Sam later realizes the forester is actually a fire warden, sent to check on his fire, the smoke of which was probably seen by someone else, and reported, for there has been no rain recently. Sam, meanwhile, pets and strokes the falcon, getting Frightful used to his touch, and knowing it makes them easier to train.

I Learn to Season my Food – The warden spends the night in the meadow. Early the next morning, Sam checks his traps. He has caught a weasel, which confronts and challenges him. Sam knows the weasel is angry at him for being trapped, and it jumps onto Sam's head, wrestling a mouthful of hair. The weasel then parades his way home like royalty, which gives rise to the nickname "the Baron." On the way back, Sam decides he wants to catch a deer, for food and for a blanket. The warden is gone, so Sam does his best to make a fire with little smoke. He boils hickory bark so a salty residue can be used for flavoring food. Sam also begins journaling on birch bark, explaining what he does as he does it. He carves out a niche in the tree to store his hickory salt, and then on June 19, finishes his bed. On June 20, he begins digging a pit to catch a deer, and training Frightful to hop on his wrist.

How a Door Came to Me – Sam fishes for trout until he has enough to smoke, preserve, and keep for a few days. He also discovers that the Baron is his neighbor. He also hears a gunshot, and sees a deer run into the meadow and die. Sam drags the deer into the trees, covers it up, and waits to see if anyone approaches, for he knows someone must be poaching. Eventually, the hunter comes along and goes, after which time Sam cooks the deer and feeds Frightful. After dinner that night, in the dark, Sam lies out in the meadow grass and can hear earthworms making their way to the surface, and popping out of the ground.



Frightful Learns her ABCs – Sam uses water and oak chips in an old stump to make tannic acid to tan the deer hide. This becomes Sam's door. He smokes and stores as much of the deer meat as he can. He becomes friendly with the Baron, and begins looking for ways to trap more deer, for his clothing is threadbare, and has the desire to make deerskin clothing. He finishes his pants by July, and now needs a shirt. Sam also continues training Frightful, getting her to come when whistled for. Each day, Frightful flies farther and farther. She also trains with a lure, eventually catching her first sparrow. Sam also spends his mornings collecting food, and the afternoons storing it away. He even burns out another tree to store extra food. As the summer comes, so do hikers and tourists, who pass through the property on the way to see the gorge, the end of a four-mile hike. On one occasion, a couple named Harold and Grace sit down to eat on the Baron's rock, and the Baron chases them away. It is a fond memory that Sam keeps.

I Find a Real Live Man – Sam takes a bath every day during the summer to begin his day while Frightful stays nearby. On one such morning, they meet a young, awkward, and scrawny raccoon that they name Jessie Coon James. Sam takes Jessie in, and Jessie fattens up. Jessie is good at finding mussels, and helps Sam dig for them. Frightful catches small game. Other foods eaten through the summer include pheasant and rabbits. Sam collects plants, such as pennyroyal, winterberry, and sassafras to make flavored drinks and to use to flavor foods.

One day, while in the apple orchard, Frightful alerts Sam to police sirens and a man between the house tree and the store tree. Sam wakes up the man, and discover he appears to be a convict. It worries him a little, but not much. He feeds the man, who decides to call Sam "Thoreau", which pleases him; and Sam calls the bandit "Bando". The man spends the night, explaining that he isn't actually a convict, just a lost English professor on summer vacation. He said he had come to Sam's campfire, hoping it belonged to some boy scouts, who would show him how to get back. Bando becomes friends with Sam, and spends a week or so with him, helping him to gather food and prepare for winter, makes blueberry jam, forms storage containers out of clay, and helps Sam build a raft and make willow whistles. Bando leaves not long afterward, saying he may be back around Christmas. Sam is lonely, but takes comfort in Frightful, the Baron, and Jessie.

Analysis

Living off the land is one thing, but being able to tame a part of the wild is something else entirely. Sam seeks to domesticate a wild duck hawk, or peregrine falcon. He does this first by studying up on the subject at the library, and then treks out around Bitter Mountain to the cliffs of the gorge, where he tracks down a falcon's nest. He selects the largest falcon, a girl whom he names Frightful. Frightful will become a close companion of Sam, and will become invaluable to him as time goes on. While the knowledge that Sam gains on how to handle falcons comes from books, his attempts are entirely self-sufficient. No one shows him what to do, no one helps him in person – it is something he learns nearly completely on his own. Again, the theme of self-sufficiency, of rugged independence, comes into play. Likewise, everything that Sam comes to use in training



Frightful, he makes himself by hand, rather than purchasing. Falconry supplies are not commonly sold, including in small towns like Delhi. Yet, this goes to the heart of the matter of independence. In history, the creation of things was often out of the necessity of survival, not convenience or ease. In other words, usually, if something was created, it was because it was needed and not available elsewhere.

Sam's independence also proves to be an intriguing thing for the man who stumbles across Sam's camp –the man Sam comes to call Bando. Bando, an English professor, has become lost while hiking the mountainside. At first, Sam believes Bando is a convict, but is much relieved to learn that Bando is harmless. Indeed, Bando has some unique skills that he passes on to Sam, such as how to make earthenware storage containers. Sam will use these to store blueberry jam and other foodstuffs. In an interesting way, this meeting of Sam and Bando can be viewed in light of history. Settling families were self-reliant, but their encounters with friends and neighbors – rare on the frontier or in the wilderness – were important not only for the social aspect of interaction, but for the trading of knowledge as well. For example, one family may have had a better process of preserving meats, while the other family may have known of better places to hunt. The shared knowledge would benefit both families, and actually increase their independence. The encounter with Bando means that knowledge is passed between both Bando and Sam in a very similar fashion. Bando, who couldn't even manage to avoid getting lost, now has a rudimentary idea of how to survive in the wild, while Sam has been able to gain the craft of working clay and making blueberry jam.

Apart from living off the land, and even domesticating a falcon, Sam also learns how to live in accord with nature, and how to understand it greatly. He is able to tell when people are coming, or have been around, for those particular people are quite far removed from nature. This is true of Harold and Grace, who decide that the Baron's rock is the best place for a picnic, and are subsequently chased off by the Baron. Apart from Bando, who finds Sam's place of residence, no one else manages to find Sam. Sam, actually, goes through great lengths to remove himself from having to deal with other people unless it is absolutely unavoidable. The departure of Bando, however, gives Sam cause to be lonely – but he takes comfort in Frightful and his other animal friends. Even with hikers and tourists still appearing on Bitter Mountain, Sam does not voluntarily seek them.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Sam want a falcon so badly? How does he obtain one? Do you think this is an appropriate thing to do? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What sorts of things does Sam use deer for? Why are deer so vital to his survival?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Bando go through such lengths to help Sam? What is in it for Bando? How does Sam benefit?

Vocabulary

deadfall, warden, hoods and jesses, rumpus, berated, stately, provoke, poaching, shrill, preening, furtively



The Autumn Provides Food and Loneliness – Trouble Begins

Summary

The Autumn Provides Food and Loneliness – September comes on and the creatures of the forest prepare for winter. So does Sam. He uses the raft to head upstream to collect more food and supplies, such as arrowleaf bulbs and bulrush roots. He also digs for wild onions. He uses clay mixed with grasses to build a fireplace in his cave, including a ventilation system for the smoke, and begins to get lonely. But the Baron nips at Sam's pants and scares the loneliness out of Sam. Sam finds old scraps of metal, nails, and a hinge at the old Gibley house, as well as an old wagon wheel, but has no way to cut it up or bring it back. Sam knows he also needs a blanket, still, as the cold begins to set in. He also worries that Frightful might fly away, but she does not. He later uses stone to strengthen his fireplace, but has to cut more holes in the tree for better ventilation.

We All Learn About Halloween – Sam begins harvesting nuts for the winter, seeing that squirrels are doing the same. He realizes it is him or the squirrels, so it had better be him. Frightful terrifies the squirrels, and keeps them busy so Sam and collect the nuts. He also harvests the last of the apples. The Baron comes in for a meal, which reminds Sam that it is Halloween. He decides to have a party. He leaves a carefully-rationed amount of nuts and food outside for the woodland animals, and then goes off to find some rabbits to finish winter underwear for himself. That night, many animals, including Jessie, arrive for the party. But they tear the house up, spills acorns everywhere, and a skunk even sprays Sam. He chases them all away, snarling and growling and making noises. He learns that in the animal world, might is right, and Sam is the biggest one of them all.

I Find Out What to Do with Hunters – Sam vows never to feed wild animals again. It is now early November, and hunting season has begun. He knows hunters will shoot at anything that moves, and he is wearing deerskin. Groups of hunters are camped all over. Sam decides to go and visit Miss Turner in the library. But on the way, Sam is nearly shot, so he scrambles up a tree and watches a hunter go after a deer. Sam later comes across a deer which he uses for his shirt, and for more meet. He comes to find two more hunted deer during the course of the season. He learns to follow hunters, watch them closely from the trees, and seize on killed deer when possible. As a result, Sam ends up with greater stores of meat, and is able to make a jacket with large pouches, and enlarge his blanket.

Trouble Begins – Sam is very happy about his new wardrobe. He reminds Frightful not to eat his clothes. Sam does his best to give himself a haircut with his penknife. Sam heads into town to the drugstore, and reads a comic book. While there, another boy in a leather jacket that greets him as “Daniel Boone”. He can tell that Sam is from New York, based on his accent. Sam explains he is doing research at the old Gibley place, and



invites the boy up if he can find it. Sam begins referring to the boy as Mr. Jacket. Back home, Sam realizes the sky is darkening, and he has forgotten to stack firewood.

Analysis

The autumn is a time of change, especially in the wild. The days are growing shorter, and the weather is getting colder at night. Sam knows that winter is coming, and while he has been slowly preparing for the winter through the summer, the autumn gives him motivation to move faster and harder in preparing for the winter. For example, he begins to contend with squirrels for harvesting nuts, and competes with small animals for apples, fruits, and other berries that he finds. It isn't just a question of independence anymore, Sam knows, but a question of actual survival. In a very primitive, natural statement, Sam explains that it is either him, or the squirrels. He already knows it cannot be him, that surviving the winter will require using every bit of strength, power, and intelligence he has in order to prepare.

Interestingly enough, part of Sam's preparation and independence come by way of the emerging theme of survival. He will do what he must to survive, as previously mentioned – and this means that in situations where he is not the biggest or most powerful force in the area, that he will adapt and become a scavenger of sorts. This is especially true of deer season. Sam has no real weapons, and does not want to encounter a hunter who may mistake him for a deer, so Sam takes to trailing wounded deer that hunters cannot find, or jumping in to hide them so that the hunters cannot find them. Sam then uses the deer for clothing and food. In so doing, he becomes a scavenger, using his intellect and cunning to avoid direct confrontations he knows he cannot win. It is all about survival – and it is him, or the hunters. It is an already foregone conclusion that it will not be the hunters.

For as one with nature as Sam becomes (from seeking to dominate physically where he can, to relying on scavenging where he must, to wearing deerskin clothing), he still routinely learns things as he goes. For example, Sam's decision to have a Halloween party – to invite all the animals of the forest – leads to utter chaos as the animals who ultimately come make a mess of his house, eat some of his food stores, and have their run of the place. Sam is forced to chase them all away, ultimately having to make animal sounds to do so, to establish his dominance. While Sam may not be as disconnected from nature as Harold and Grace were, his decision to leave food out for animals is as humorous as it is chaotic. There is a reason even visitors to wild areas are told not to feed the animals, and Sam finds out the hard way. Nevertheless, it is a valuable lesson he has learned, and one which he takes to heart as time goes on.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Sam cut holes into the tree in which he lives if it is getting colder? How does he deal with this?



Discussion Question 2

In the natural world, might is right. Is this true in everyday life? Why or why not? What does Sam learn about might being right in the woods?

Discussion Question 3

What incredibly important thing does Sam forget to do as winter closes in? Why is this so important?

Vocabulary

Indignity, superb, dignity, plumage, stupidity



I Pile Up Wood and Go on with Winter – I Have a Good Look at Winter and Find Spring in the Snow

Summary

I Pile Up Wood and Go on With Winter – Sam wakes up early the morning after he realizes he needs more firewood, and begins collecting and chopping. He makes a line of woodpiles that reach the forest, knowing that if he needs to, he can tunnel under the snow from one to the next, until he reaches the woods. As the first storm comes on, Sam is nervous, but afterwards, not worried anymore. He observes how much the Baron loves the snow. Sam realizes he can ice fish, and gather teaberry leaves by digging. He also realizes his plan to have to dig tunnels to get to firewood was silly, but important. He spends his days working on clothes, trying new meals, or writing on birch bark.

I Learn About Birds and People – Frightful and Sam go to bed early, wake up late, and use their spare time to explore the mountain in the snow. Sam is not lonely, despite his belief that he would be lonely come winter. He watches the chickadees and gives them all names based on people in the city, imagining the winter landscape to be Third Avenue. For example, there is Mr. Bracket, based on Mr. Bracket, who lives on the first floor of Sam's building, who hates when people make noise.

Christmas Eve rolls around, and Mr. Bando returns. He is proud of himself, having walked all the way from the state park entrance. He brings Sam some sugar, and a newspaper with a headline about a wild boy suspected of living off deer and berries in the Catskills, based on eyewitness accounts from residents of Delhi. Officials, the article explains, say there is no evidence to support the accounts. Other stories include an eyewitness account from Mrs. Thomas Fielder, age 97, while she was collecting strawberries. Another is by Fire Warden Jim Handy. Handy believes the boy has gone home. Some people, the articles reveal, think the boy is crazy. Bando knows better.

On Christmas Day, Sam is thrilled to see his father has arrived to visit him, and hugs his father tightly. His father is amazed Sam has managed to do what he has done. He has read about Sam in the papers, and decided it was time to visit. Sam's dad and Bando make fast friends. Sam's dad is very impressed with what Sam has done. He reveals that his wife, Sam's mother, and their eight other children are all well. Bando makes some flutes out of reeds from the stream, and they play Christmas carols late into the night. The next morning, Sam rises early with Frightful to catch a pheasant and some trout, which he then prepares for breakfast. Sam's dad believes he has never lived so well. Bando leaves a few days later, and Sam's dad leaves on New Year's Day. He leaves by a different route so no one can follow his tracks in the snow.



I Have a Good Look at Winter and Find Spring in the Snow – Winter continues on, and the snow piles up. Sam makes snowshoes out of ash saplings to walk over the snow. Sam learns to read the weather and learns that it is safer and better to stay in when it snows, or when the possibility of snow is real. Sam also comes to discover that he has a new mouse friend who visits him nightly. While out with Frightful on January 8, Sam discovers he has a new owl neighbor as well. This makes him happy because owls need good woods to live in. This means the Gribley property is good land. Toward the end of the winter, some of the snow melts, and an ice storm comes in, which takes two days to melt. The mountain is a mess from the ice and high winds, and many little birds have died. Toward the end of January, Sam feels achy in his limbs and has a nosebleed, and wonders if he is getting enough vitamins. Sam, writing after his time in the wilderness, recounts that he probably didn't have enough Vitamin C. Sam nevertheless gets along fine, and begins writing more and more about the animals, and less about himself. The deer, for example, go down to the valley to feed but come up to the mountain to hide and sleep. By February 12, Sam confirms that the owls nearby are laying eggs, meaning that spring is coming. He can also see that the deer are feeding down lower and lower as the snow melts.

Analysis

With winter upon Sam, and snow on the horizon, he realizes he has forgotten a key ingredient to surviving the winter: firewood. He scrambles to collect all the firewood that he can, and ingeniously stacks the wood in piles that extend from his tree to the woods, believing that if it snows to the point where mobility is impossible, he can tunnel from one pile to the next, and ultimately to the woods, where he will have a limitless supply of wood. Although the snow that falls isn't nearly enough to require tunneling, Sam's idea on how to keep ahead in the event of an emergency is profound. It is better to be safe than sorry, and this is something Sam has come to embrace as a philosophy for living and a requirement for survival. Apart from storing food and making clothes for the winter, Sam's plan to retain access to fuel for fire is not only inspired, but details the level of independence he has achieved.

While Sam believes that winter will be his loneliest time of the year, it ends up not being that way at all. There is enough to do to keep him occupied and busy, and the Christmas arrival of first Bando, then Sam's father, boosts his spirits. Sam's father is incredibly proud of Sam, and is amazed that Sam has managed to survive. Interestingly enough, though Sam is only twelve, his father does not attempt to get Sam to return home at all. In fact, it is altogether surprising to the reader that Sam's parents have not attempted to find him earlier, and have not attempted to get him to come home, either. Likewise, it is surprising that they have not even bothered to contact the authorities to try to track down Sam.

The book, originally published in 1959, may shed some light on this. Like the trucker who ran away from the farm to live in the city, it was not uncommon for children, teenagers, and young adults to run away in the first part of the Twentieth Century – and especially before – to seek their fortunes elsewhere, later to reestablish contact with



their families. Sam's parents were among the final generations of Americans who had grown up in times that were unconventional to modern readers, but very conventional to them. Yet, Sam's parents were also among the generations that were changing – looking away from living off the land to a more convenient way of life. Sam's father, when the book begins, would rather trust his future to the sea than to the mountain from which the family came.

In terms of unconventional living, even by the 1950s, anyone living without electricity, telephones, and television up in the mountains in deerskin clothing would have been seen as unusual, but not altogether bizarre. To the people of the time, it was more fascinating than anything else, as revealed through the newspaper articles about Sam. It was a time when Americans were confident in what it meant to be an American, and were seeking a return to their roots in many ways, though abandoning technology and improved standards of living were not among them. (This is one of the reasons why literature, films, and television shows about surviving or living in the American West were so popular among both men and women in the 1950s.) Indeed, even in Sam's primitive existence on the mountain, he still seeks a better standard of living, from deerskin clothes that will be durable in the wild to a bed to sleep on.

Discussion Question 1

Is Sam lonely? Why or why not? If he is lonely, how does he handle it? If he is not lonely, how has he managed this?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sam's dad come to visit him? What is his reaction to Sam's living conditions, and living on his own? Why do you believe this is?

Discussion Question 3

What signs of spring does Sam see in the land around him? Why does this excite him so?

Vocabulary

relief, plunged, portico, ingenious, conservationists, temptation, sanguine, copse, splendor



The Spring in the Winter and the Beginning of My Story's End – The City Comes to Me

Summary

The Spring in the Winter and the Beginning of My Story's End – From the owl eggs on, signs of spring are everywhere, from insects coming out to maple trees running sap. Sam makes his own Maple syrup, needing 32 cups of sap for one cup of syrup. The valley loses its snow, and turns green, though much of the mountain is still snow-covered. Sam also knows that Frightful wants to seek a mate, but he won't let her because she is a tame bird, and because he depends on her for survival. One day, Frightful gets away from Sam just as a college student named Matt Spell, who works for the Poughkeepsie New Yorker newspaper, arrives. He is very cold, and Sam brings him to a fire, introducing himself. Frightful comes back, and Matt is very interested in her. He is also interested in learning about the wild boy, and Sam reveals that he knows the wild boy. Matt wants to write an article about Sam, knowing the truth about who he really is – and Sam begs him not to. Matt promises not to publish if Sam will let him come and spend a few days in the spring, and see where Sam lives. Sam agrees, and Matt writes the article so as not to identify Sam. He makes the angle of the article informative, writing about ways to live off the land. Sam agrees to meet Matt at 3:30 on April 12 outside of town. Matt then departs. Sam then returns home to eat dinner, and discovers that Jessie Coon James is not a boy, but a girl. Sam worries all night about the article Matt intends to publish. Sam has an imaginary conversation with his animal friends in his head, in which Frightful tells Sam he wants to be found, or he would not have told Matt anything at all.

In Which I Cooperate With the Ending – Spring arrives, and Sam begins to live off the land once more. Sam makes up songs as he goes along, and one day meets a sad-looking man named Aaron, to whom he teaches one of his songs. Aaron explains he is in town for Passover, and has wandered off by himself for the day. Aaron is a songwriter, and very interested in Sam's songs. Sam later realizes that he intentionally sought out Aaron's company, whereas a year ago, he would have gone off to hide. A few days later, Sam meets Matt on Route 27, blindfolds him, and brings him up to his treehouse. Sam explains to Matt that people live too close together, and are too dependent on things like electricity and machines. He has come to live off the wilderness, just because it is there. It is no different for people who climb Mount Everest – just because it is there.

Matt spends several days with Sam, during which time Bando also returns. The three dig out another tree cave, and Sam likens it to a city in the woods, but wonders what he is doing. Matt warns that photographers may come soon. Sam doesn't understand. Bando explains that it is impossible to live quietly and live differently in American anymore. Everyone wants to know about it. A short while after Matt and Bando go, Mr.



Jacket arrives. He introduces himself as Tom Sidler, and becomes fast friends with Sam. Aaron returns to visit, and so does Bando, who along with Tom, becomes a regular visitor.

The City Comes to Me – With the dawn of June, photographers begin making the climb to photograph Sam and all he has done. Sam's dad and mom bring their whole family, including his sister, Alice, along with some reporters and photographers, to greet Sam when he comes down off the mountain. The family has decided to move up onto the mountain. Sam's dad explains that he had taken to the sea, believing that belonging to the land was in the past. He says that the Gribleys belong on the land. Sam's mom readily agrees. They will build a house to live in, at least until Sam is old enough to live on his own. Until then, he will live off the land, but live in a house. Sam knows his mom is the boss, and does not push it. He is thrilled to have his family.

Analysis

As noted earlier, most people in the 1950s were fascinated by living primitively, and living off the land. It is why so many people are so interested in Sam's story of survival up on Bitter Mountain. It isn't that they find it bizarre or idiotic, but unusual and vastly interesting. Of course, there are some who question Sam's sanity and abilities, but most people are more intrigued by Sam's story than anything else. Consider the English professor, Bando, and the writer, Matt – one who gets lost in the woods, the other who comes to write about the wild boy living in the woods – only for both to want to learn and live from the woods, themselves. It is an appealing way of life that must clearly be experienced to be understood. Matt and Bando have both taken the plunge, and have been immersed.

The other person who has been immersed, interestingly enough, has been Sam's father. Indeed, at the end of the novel, rather than coming to bring Sam home, Sam's father brings home along with him, in the form of Sam's entire family. The Gribleys are going to make a go of it living on the mountain, getting back to their roots as a family. Indeed, Sam's mother has always believed that the land was a part of the future. Sam's father, who believed the sea held the future, now believes the future is on the land, in accord with both nature, and the past.

This revelation – and the act of moving to the mountain – is a sort of vindication that everything Sam has done has been worth it, and invaluable in many ways. This is apparent through the five key themes that run throughout the novel (Coming of Age, Survival, Independence, History, and Family), and though Sam writes his time off on the mountain as Everest-like, the truth of the matter is apparent to the reader by way of those themes. By being away from his family, he has come closer to them. By living off the land, he has become self-reliant and responsible. By returning to the past, to his roots, he has become better suited to the present, coming to appreciate much of what he had previously taken for granted – such as food and clothing.



Discussion Question 1

Do you believe Sam wants to be found? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the entire Gribley family move up to the mountain? Would you ever do the same thing – go and live off the land? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sam dislike the idea that his father is going to build a house for them to live in? How does Sam respond? Why?

Vocabulary

falconer, ruddy, resounding, circumstances, tallow, sensational, puttering



Characters

Sam Gribley

Sam Gribley is the main character of the novel “My Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. A native of New York City, Sam Gribley is twelve years old, and is dissatisfied with life in the city. He has eight siblings, his father works at sea, and his mother is a homemaker. Sam longs to get away from the crowded apartment where he lives, and the crowded city streets. He decides he will go and live on Bitter Mountain, in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, near the town of Delhi, where his family still owns their ancestral land. Sam spends much time at the New York Public Library preparing for his experience. He reads about survival and makes careful mental notes about living off the land. He hitchhikes his way upstate, coming to the town of Delhi, where Miss Turner at the library there helps Sam to find the location of his family’s property.

Sam sets off to the old Gribley land on Bitter Mountain, and for the next year, lives off the land. When Sam begins his year, he is surviving on a day-to-day basis, and spending the nights in makeshift shelters. He decides early on he needs a more permanent, and better-hidden place to live, so he carves and burns out the heart of a massive Hemlock tree. He builds a bed and a fireplace for the house, and later commits to spending the summer and autumn storing away food, from nuts and berries to small game and deer meat, for he knows the winter will soon be upon him. Sam goes out of his way to avoid people, whether they are tourists, hikers, or fire wardens, and only deals with people when there is no alternative. It is through this that he meets Bando, teaching him and learning from him how to live off the land, and later Matt, becoming friends with both men.

As the winter sets in, Sam doubles his work to collect enough firewood to last through the winter, and even devises a system of woodpiles that extend to the woods, so that if the snow is deep enough, he may tunnel from one pile to the next to the woods, ultimately never running out of firewood. Though enough snow never falls to make this necessary, the planning has provided a litmus test of sorts for Sam, who realizes he truly can survive the winter. In the spring, Sam comes to realize that his time on the mountain is coming to an end, both as a curious public turn an eye toward his time on the mountain, and his father arrives, presumably to bring Sam home. However, this is not the case. Sam’s father has brought his entire family to live on the mountain, vindicating Sam’s efforts, and making Sam incredibly happy to have his family with him.

Frightful

Frightful is a young, female falcon that Sam has raised as a pet, friend, and trained hunter. Sam has long known that he wanted to try his hand at falconry, and to have a falcon at his side. Early in the novel, he takes Frightful from her nest as a baby, caring



for and raising her. As she grows, Sam teaches her how to come when whistled for, and how to hunt prey and return with it. Sam comes to depend on her work for survival, and he rewards her amply. Frightful comes to fully accept Sam as part of her flock, warning him when trouble approaches and remaining by his side in times of chaos – such as when various creatures make a mess in Sam's house on Halloween. Frightful is also protective of Sam, eyeing the other people who visit – including Sam's own dad – with suspicion and skepticism.

Miss Turner

Miss Turner is a pretty, young woman who manages the library in Delhi, New York. She worries deeply for Sam living up on the mountain alone, and helps him to find his family's property using old records. She also gives Sam a haircut when he ventures back into town following the encounter with Mrs. Fielder.

Sam's Father

Sam's father is a New York City native, whose ancestry can be traced to the family property in the Catskill Mountains near Delhi. Sam's father is, presumably, a merchant marine or civilian sailor, for his work brings him to Singapore at the beginning of the novel, though his job is never directly revealed. Sam's father believes that the sea is the future, and not the land of the past. Yet, when he learns his son has run away from home, he hopes that his son will succeed. Indeed, Sam's father is thrilled to see that Sam has thrived on the mountain – so much so that he easily convinces his wife and children that they, too, should move up to the mountain and make a go of it. At the end of the novel, Sam's father tells Sam that he was wrong, that the future is indeed on the land, and not the sea.

Bando

Bando is an English professor who visits with Sam on Bitter Mountain. When Bando first appears, Sam mistakes him for an escaped convict or bandit (which is where the moniker "Bando" comes from), but Bando reveals the truth about himself, which puts Sam at ease. Bando had become lost while hiking, and hoped that Sam's campfire meant there were boy scouts around who could direct him back to town. Bando stays on with Sam a few days, enamored with the way Sam lives. He comes back to visit several times, including at Christmas and in the spring. He learns much from Sam about surviving in the wild, and teaches Sam how to make clay pots and storage containers, and blueberry jam, and helps Sam to build a raft for use on the stream.

Matt Spell

Matt Spell is a college student who does work for the Poughkeepsie New Yorker newspaper. He has come to the mountain to investigate sightings of a wild boy, of whom



some approve and of whom some believe to be crazy. Matt intends to write an article about Sam directly, but Sam convinces him not to, offering Matt a deal: a chance to return in warmer weather to spend a few days and learn to live off the land, which excites Matt. Matt does not betray Sam's trust, and returns in the spring –though he does bring news that public curiosity about Sam has grown immensely in the time since his last visit.

Mrs. Thomas Fielder

Mrs. Thomas Fielder is a sweet, elderly woman who, at 97, has been a lifelong Delhi resident who heads up to pick strawberries on Bitter Mountain every year. She is one of the eyewitnesses who speaks about having encountered Sam in the woods, but does not believe he is crazy at all.

Harold and Grace

Harold and Grace are a husband-and-wife team of tourists that heads up Bitter Mountain to see the view from the gorge. They are the epitome of people who have totally lost touch with nature, and they sit on Baron Weasel's rock to eat lunch. They are subsequently chased off the property by Baron Weasel himself. It is a lighthearted even that makes Sam laugh.

Tom Sidler

Tom Sidler is a boy of about twelve who lives in Delhi and always wears a leather jacket, causing Sam to refer to him as "Mr. Jacket". Tom recognizes Sam's New York City accent, and comes to visit Sam on the mountain, even spending the night once in a while. The two become fast friends toward the end of the novel.

Baron Weasel

Baron Weasel is a weasel who lives under a large boulder to the north of Sam's tree house. Sam first meets the Baron, having accidentally caught him in a trap meant for small game. Unhappy, the weasel bites some of Sam's hair to establish his anger, and then proudly walks off, causing Sam to relate the weasel to royalty, and earning the weasel the moniker "Baron".



Symbols and Symbolism

Books

Books are read and carefully studied by Sam as he prepares to head off into the wild. Sam prefers to read books at libraries, where it is quiet, and where he can absorb the information in peace. He spends much time at the New York Public Library in New York City before his departure upstate; and later spends time in the Delhi library near Bitter Mountain. It is in books that Sam gains knowledge about how to live off the land, and how to train a falcon. It is also in a book of records that Miss Turner helps Sam to find his family's old property.

Penknife

A penknife is carried by Sam throughout the novel, and is one of the few things he brings along with him when he leaves New York. He uses the penknife not only for whittling as he goes, but to shape wood into hooks for fishing, to cut food, deer meat and deer skin for clothing, and to cut holes into the tree for fireplace ventilation.

\$40

\$40 in cash happens to be the only thing that Sam leaves New York with that does not become essential to his survival on the mountain. It is because of the non-use of the \$40 that it becomes a symbol of irony, and importance. Money, in a city or in a civilized society, is essential for survival, for it must be earned and used to purchase the things needed to survive. In the wild, money is useless, as the land is what is needed to survive. Everything Sam uses to survive in the wild – from his falconry equipment to his bed to his clothing to his food – he is responsible for making himself. He does not buy any of it.

Firewood

Firewood is a staple for survival in the wild. Sam uses firewood to build fires to keep warm, to boil water for drinking, and to cook his food, among other things. Firewood is plentiful through the summer and autumn, but as winter approaches, Sam realizes that firewood will be critical to survival. He realizes he has not spent enough time collecting firewood, so he sets out to do so. He even comes up with a plan: he creates piles of firewood leading to the forest, knowing that he will be able to burrow under the snow from one pile to the next if needed, and that he will ultimately be able to tunnel to the woods to collect more firewood if needed. The lack of firewood both symbolizes the final vestige of Sam's unpreparedness, but then also leads to his most elaborate plan yet for survival, and reveals he is truly prepared to live in the wild.



Deer

Deer are shot and killed for their meat and their hides by hunters during hunting season, and are coveted by Sam for the very same reasons. Sam makes it a point to hide deer that have been wounded and later die, so that the hunters cannot find them. This allows Sam to use the deer to survive. Sam smokes deer meat so that it may last him through the winter, and uses deer hide for a door to his house, for clothing, and for a blanket.

Nuts

Nuts are a good source of vitamins and minerals, and come in a large variety on Bitter Mountain. Sam uses nuts for food, and stores many away for use as food through the winter. Sam comes to realize in the autumn that he is competing against squirrels for the harvesting of nuts, and he kicks his primal frame of mind into high gear: it is either Sam, or the squirrels who will collect the nuts and survive, so Sam makes it a point to collect all the nuts he can.

Apples

Apples are a delicious food and good source of vitamins and minerals. Once grown as a crop by Sam's ancestors, apple trees now grow wild on the land, and Sam eats the apples through the summer, ultimately coming to collect and store them for the winter in the autumn. Like nuts, Sam must contend with other animals for the rights to claim the apples, which he does.

Hickory

Hickory is a kind of tree prized for the smoking and cooking of meats. Its bark can be boiled to create a salty residue that can be used to season food. Sam values hickory wood and hickory bark for both of these reasons. He spends much time collecting and using hickory wood and bark to his advantage when it comes to food. The hickory salt that Sam boils from bark makes much of the wild food he eats taste better. Sam later stores away a large amount of hickory salt for use in the winter.

Raft

Sam, with the help of Bando, constructs a raft for use on bodies of water, especially the stream near the Gribley property. Sam uses the raft to get across the stream, and to collect frogs and cattails for eating, as well as to collect other sources of food.



Clay

Clay is a type of earth found along the stream near the foot of Gribley's property on Bitter Mountain. Clay is collected by Sam to build a fireplace, so that he may stay warm in winter in his tree house. Clay is later collected by Bando, so that he can show Sam how to form earthenware, such as storage containers for blueberry jam and other foods. Sam uses clay to great effect in both ways, with the storage containers aiding him tremendously through the winter, and the fireplace keeping him warm.



Settings

Bitter Mountain

Bitter Mountain is the main setting for the novel “My Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Bitter Mountain is a heavily-wooded mountain that rises above the valley town of Delhi, New York, located among the Catskill Mountains. Bitter Mountain is where the Gribley family can trace its roots to a mountainside farm and residence. Bitter Mountain is where Sam heads to live on his family’s old property, and where he spends nearly the entire novel. Bitter Mountain is not only the location of Sam’s old family property, but is also where the meadow exists, in which Sam builds his tree house from a massive Hemlock. As Sam comes to find out, the mountain is frequented by tourists and hikers on their way to the cliffs of the gorge to see the view, by hunters in pursuit of deer, and by locals like Mrs. Fielder who collects strawberries.

The Meadow

The meadow is an open expanse of land near the top of the mountain, upon which grass and wildflowers grow, and is bordered on all sides by woodland and boulders, and it is at the edge of the northernmost extent of the meadow that Sam’s Hemlock house is located. The meadow is where Sam does much of his cooking, cleaning, and work, and is where he lays out in the evenings to relax or watch the sky. Though the meadow is useful to Sam, it can also be inviting to other people as well, such as tourists and hikers, who cross the meadow on the way to the gorge. It is in the meadow that Sam first meets Bando, and begins to teach Bando about mountain life. It is also in the meadow where Sam begins training Frightful.

Delhi

Delhi is a small, friendly town located in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, and rests in the valley of Bitter Mountain. Delhi has a library, drug store, and other convenience stores and buildings, as well as numerous homes. Most of the people who live there are natives, such as Mrs. Fielder. Delhi also appears to attract numerous tourists and hikers, who climb Bitter Mountain, striking out from the town to begin their journeys. Sam visits Delhi three times in the book: first, to ask Miss Turner at the library where his property is; second, while coming down the mountain with Mrs. Fields; and third, to visit the drug store for unknown reasons, during which time he meets Tom and reads a comic book.

Gribley Property

The Gribley property is located on Bitter Mountain above the small town of Delhi, New York, in the Catskill Mountains upstate. The Gribley property is the ancestral home of



the Gribley family, and it is to the Gribley property that Sam determines to make a go of living off the land. The Gribley property is still owned by the Gribley family, though it has long ago ceased being used. When Sam comes to the property, securing aid from Miss Turner in finding it, he discovers the old stone ruins of the house, the stone wall that bounds the property, and various other relics related to the past. He also discovers apple trees growing on the property, some presumably planted by his great-grandfather, others growing wild as the offspring of those that were planted. The property is perfect for survival, for it is near plenty of trees, a stream, and is full of wildlife.

New York City

New York City is the hometown of Sam Gribley. Sam is dissatisfied with life in New York, believing both the city and his apartment to be overcrowded. New York City is also home to the New York Public Library, where Sam researches how to survive in the wild. Early in the novel, Sam leaves New York City to head upstate, to his family's ancestral property on Bitter Mountain, above the town of Delhi.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Coming of age is a major, overarching plot in the novel “My Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Coming of age involves the character growth and maturation of an individual, usually based on real-world experiences, and may also be spiritual, emotional, moral, or physical in nature. The theme of coming of age in the novel revolves wholly around Sam, whose experiences in the wild lead to his coming of age in many different ways, and to a very positive end.

When the novel begins, Sam strikes out on his own from New York City, leaving his parents and siblings behind, and heads to his family's ancestral property in upstate New York. Sam is an inexperienced outdoorsman, and his attempt to go into the wild is something wholly new to him. Though he has some knowledge of it based on what he has gleaned from books, the actual experience of surviving in the wild is unknown to him. Never before has he had to rely on himself wholly and completely (also see the theme of Independence in this section of the study guide). Yet, Sam perseveres. He learns how to gather and hunt, builds his own shelter, and becomes reliant on the land rather than on others around him. His striking out on his own originally speaks to almost a sense of selfishness in some respect, that he doesn't want to be around others or deal with them –yet, this ultimately leads to even more growth in Sam's character.

Sam's reliance on himself is only possible with a little extra help from Miss Turner, from Bill, and from a few others here and there in the novel. His growth in terms of independence also softens his heart toward others. For example, he willingly shelters, feeds, and teaches Bando, and later Matt. He seeks out Aaron, who is sad and lonely, to give him some company. Rather than seeking to live only for himself, as in the beginning of the novel, Sam is reaching out to help others, and to be among them. By the end of the novel, Sam realizes how much he has missed his family, and is overjoyed when they come to live on the mountain with them. Rather than feeling that they are a burden, he now feels that they are blessing. He has come to love and appreciate them as never before, as he has been without them for an entire year.

Independence

Independence is a major and dominant theme in the novel “My Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Independence, thematically, generally means freedom – freedom from others, freedom from society, and freedom from dependence on anyone or anything other than the self. Independence in the novel is demonstrated through Sam and his commitment to living off the land, walking away from civilization, and embracing nature. His rugged independence comprises the majority of the plot, and becomes important both personally and symbolically (see the theme “History”).



When the novel begins, Sam is leaving New York City, tired of an overcrowded city and overcrowded apartment. Sam leaves the city with only a handful of possessions, including \$40, which will later prove to be an ironic decision. Sam is tired of having to depend on others, and having others depend on him as well, so he strikes out to live off the land because it just happens to be there, as he later explains to a reporter. Indeed, he has many motives for wanting to become independent.

Sam's journey to independence is a struggle at first. He initially goes into the wilderness, barely surviving from one meal to the next, moving from one temporary shelter to the next, and ultimately becomes not only self-sufficient, but well-planned for contingencies as well, such as his plan to collect firewood during the winter snows. This is a huge step for Sam personally, since his own father even took his committal to the wilderness as a joke. Sam personally proves he is tough enough, capable enough, and intelligent enough to survive on his own in the wild. This also matters symbolically as well, for Sam not only returns to his own family roots, but he proves his father wrong after his father claims that Gribleys do not belong on the land.

By the end of the novel, that Sam brings \$40 with him from New York can be viewed as ironic. In everyday life, money is the means of survival. People work and earn money in order to purchase food, pay for water, and for the other necessities of life. Without money, life in a civilized world is impossible. In the natural world, such as on Bitter Mountain, money is absolutely worthless. Sam's decision to bring \$40 out of New York is incredibly ironic, as it has no use whatsoever in the wild. Everything Sam needs he makes himself, gleaned it all from nature, from his falconry equipment to the clothes he wears, to the food he eats, to even the bed he sleeps on.

Survival

Survival is a major and important theme in the novel "My Side of the Mountain" by Jean Craighead George. Survival, thematically, has to do with endurance and perseverance, of overcoming great odds. For Sam, survival means staying alive in the wilderness by living off the land. Survival becomes essential to the novel, especially taken together with the various other themes of the novel, such as coming of age and independence. Sam's decision to go into the wild, to get by on his own, to survive based only on his own efforts, seems strikingly unusual for a kid from New York City, but Sam ultimately proves himself equal to the task.

When Sam first commits to the wilderness, he spends a miserable first night in the woods, being kept awake all night by sounds and the cold. Indeed, he ends up spending the next night in Bill's cabin before continuing on his own way. Sam quickly discovers that the core basic elements for survival are essential. They consist of food, shelter, heat (by fire), and clothing. Indeed, Sam's first days in the wild, including on his family's old property, are a meal-to-meal, day-to-day struggle for survival. Slowly, over time, as Sam adjusts to the new landscape, he begins to establish himself and does not have to survive on a day-to-day basis. He builds a permanent shelter out of a tree, and begins to cook and smoke meats and fish for storage and future consumption. As time goes on,



Sam is able to acquire vast stores of foodstuffs, ranging from meats and fish to nuts, berries, and fruit –all for consumption in the coming winter. He also comes to develop a bed to sleep on, clothing formed from deerskin, and even a raft to navigate the stream beyond the property, for collecting food and getting across the water.

The greatest illustration of Sam’s survival comes in his keen sense of planning as he becomes more and more experienced in the wild. He develops an ingenious system of wood storage and retrieval for the winter. He builds successive piles of wood from his tree house to the woods at the edge of the meadow, believing that, if there is enough snow, he can still tunnel his way under the snow to reach one woodpile after another, and ultimately the woods themselves should his stockpiles run out. Though this plan is never necessary, the fact that Sam has thought of it at all speaks volumes about his increased capabilities in survival. Indeed, Sam’s father is beyond thrilled that his son has managed to survive on the mountain – so much so that he ultimately brings his family back to live with Sam on the mountain.

Family

Family is an important, underlying theme in the novel “My Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Family, which never makes an overt appearance before the middle and the end of novel, is nevertheless extremely important in understanding the character of Sam. (Family, in this section, relates specifically to family as an institution and matter of relationships. For the importance of family to the novel historically and symbolically, please see the section “History”.) Family, thematically, involves the unconditional emotional, physical, and even spiritual support of, and loyalty to, people who may or may not be blood-related, but still act in accordance with the traditional family unit. In the novel, it is the Gribley family – and Sam’s relation to his family – that compose the theme of family in the book.

When the novel begins, Sam is headed for his family’s ancestral lands above the town of Delhi, New York. He has left behind his mother, father, and eight siblings. Sam is tired of the crowded city, and tired of his crowded apartment. At no point in the novel does he reveal that he even misses his family. They are a part of his past, at least at first, and he thinks little of them as time goes on, except to remember what brought him to the mountain. Indeed, Sam’s desire to go live off the land is met by mockery from even those in his own family, including his father. Among the reasons that Sam heads to the mountain is the chance to prove his father wrong – both about his ability to survive, and about the idea that Gribleys do not belong on the mountain.

When Sam’s father shows up for Christmas, Sam suddenly becomes aware of how much he has missed his father after all. Gone are all the bad feelings that, in part, drove Sam up to the mountains. Indeed, Sam’s father is incredibly glad to see Sam, and reports that the entire family misses Sam. Sam’s father confesses that he secretly had been hoping that Sam would do well on the mountain –a sure sign of fatherly affection and loyalty. When the spring rolls around, and Sam believes his time on the mountain has come to an end, Sam is surprised to discover that it has only just begun: his entire



family is moving to the mountain. They refuse to get along without Sam, and out of love and loyalty to Sam, they have to decided to go where he is rather than making him return to them.

History

History forms a major component and theme in the novel “My Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. History arises in the novel in both a familial and symbolic way, both being absolutely essential not only to the plot, but to the character of Sam and what it is that he is trying to accomplish by living off the land.

When the novel begins, Sam announces he is going to live off his family’s ancestral land on Bitter Mountain, above the Catskill Mountains town of Delhi, New York. At the time the novel was written – the 1950s – the United States of America was enjoying an economic boom and increased power and influence in the world following World War II. American pride was tremendous, and the ideas of rugged independence, self-sufficiency, and survival were emblematic of the times, and could clearly be seen through the prominence of the American West in literature, film, radio, and television. America was making its way in the world nationally, just as American settlers had once made their way in the world as well. While Americans were appreciative of, and enjoyed technological advancements, they had tremendous respect for the past, even if they didn’t want to return to certain elements of it, such as leaving behind electricity and other comforts of life. Sam desires to return to the past as well, by abandoning the city for the wilderness, to live off the land as was done in the past.

Indeed, Sam’s journey back to his family’s ancestral land is also incredibly important. Sam discovers the ruins of his great-grandfather’s house, which appear symbolically as foundations. The foundations form the basis for the house; the land on which Sam lives serves as the foundation for his family and his own existence. These are his roots. This is where he came from. Indeed, Sam’s moving into a tree – a permanent shelter – can be viewed in light of putting down roots to stay and grow. Indeed, while Sam has given up certain comforts of life, such as electricity, his time in the mountain allows him to prosper and expand, devoting time to things such as making a bed, clay storage containers, and clothing. Sam has, essentially, followed the trajectory of mankind. He seeks to get away from it all by going back to nature, only to return to civilization in increments by way of things like the bed that he builds. As a result, he comes to appreciate the things he has in his life, such as his family, which prove not to be annoyances in the end, but a welcome and beautiful thing. The family’s return to the mountain land – despite his father’s earlier misgivings – is representative of the traditional philosophical and emotional view that it is always the land that matters, that the land is home, the land is the past, and the land is the future.



Styles

Point of View

Jane Craighead George tells her novel “My Side of the Mountain” from the first-person omniscient reflective perspective, by way of main character Sam Gribley. Sam is clearly narrating the events of his stay on the mountain some time after they occurred (how long after is never explicitly mentioned), for he references his notes made during the experience as evidence and greater explanation of his time in the wild. This is done for a variety of reasons. Sam’s reflecting on the past allows him to provide important information that was not available to him at the time of the experience, and means that there is no incorrect information in the novel about surviving on the land should a reader decide to go out into the woods and try eating cattails or catching rabbits. This also demonstrates that Sam has lived well beyond the timeframe of the novel, and survives on the mountain to the day that he tells the novel, which is crucial to the theme of survival in the novel, for if Sam had not survived, there would be no novel. The first-person point of view also allows the reader into Sam’s head, for there is very little dialogue, and most of what transpires in the novel occurs in the thought processes of Sam as he struggles to survive.

Language and Meaning

Jane Craighead George tells her novel “My Side of the Mountain” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the novel is intended toward a young adult audience, so the language utilized to tell the novel must be at the comprehension level of the intended audience. Secondly, the novel is the firsthand account of Sam Gribley, a twelve-year-old boy at the time of the events, so the language used – as the novel is told in the first-person perspective – must be on the level of a twelve year old in terms of education and use. This use of language also lends believability and convincingness to the character of Sam, making it seem as if the narrator is actually a twelve-year-old boy. The simple language also enables the reader to clearly understand what Sam is thinking as he thinks it, and what he is doing as he does it – whether he is planning for a snowstorm or collecting and smoking meats for preserving.

Structure

Jane Craighead George divides her novel into twenty-two linear, unnumbered but titled chapters, with the majority of them being arranged chronologically. When the novel begins, Sam has just experienced his first snowstorm on Bitter Mountain. He then moves to recount everything that led up to the winter storm going as far back as May, when he leaves New York, through the winter where the novel begins. Sam then picks up from the winter to continue on through the spring of the novel, when his family comes



to join him on the mountain. Each chapter deals with a particular incident or set of circumstances, or a continuation of events from previous chapters. For example, the chapter “I Get Started on This Venture” recounts Sam’s travel to Bitter Mountain from New York, while the chapter “Frightful Learns Her ABCs” begins by continuing the previous chapter, “How a Door Came to Me”, in which Sam obtains the materials to build a door, but only builds a door in the following chapter the primarily focuses around the training of Frightful.



Quotes

The land is no place for a Gribley.

-- Sam's father (I Hole Up in a Snowstorm paragraph 23)

Importance: Sam reflects on the past and what brought him to Bitter Mountain. Sam recalls how his father and many others made fun of him for wanting to go and live off the land. Sam's father, who works on the sea for a living, believes there is no future in the land, and believes the future is elsewhere. He tells Sam this when he says that the land is no place for a Gribley. This becomes a source of motivation for Sam to prove his father wrong.

He laughed. Everybody laughed at me. Even Dad.

-- Sam (I Get Started on this Venture paragraph 15)

Importance: Sam continues to recall the events that led to his desire to seek to live on the land. His decision is met with laughter from everyone in his family, including his father. This demonstrates just how deeply Sam cares for his father, and how deeply his father hurt him when Sam announced his plans. Obviously, Sam is closest to his father, and to have even his father laugh at him is a monumental thing to Sam.

And then, do you know, I couldn't believe I was there.

-- Sam (I Find Gribley's Farm paragraph 17)

Importance: Sam heads up to the town of Delhi from New York, seeking his own version of the Promised Land – his family's ancestral property. Sam is overjoyed to have found it after consulting Miss Turner for help, and this is reflected as he explains he can't believe he is actually where he has intended to go.

I wanted a house that could not be seen. People would want to take me back to where I belonged if they found me.

-- Sam (The Old, Old Tree paragraph 2)

Importance: Sam is determined not only to live off the land, but to avoid people, and to avoid being taken back to the city because he is so young. He goes through extraordinary lengths to make this happen, hollowing out a Hemlock tree in which to live undetected. This also proves to be an incredibly durable and well-insulated shelter which will protect him through the winter.

Every day I worked to train Frightful. It was a long process.

-- Sam (Frightful Learns her ABCs paragraph 11)

Importance: Sam has long wanted a pet falcon, and to practice the art of falconry. He explains that the process is not easy, and is long and tedious, but rewarding. Frightful comes to provide an important source of food for Sam, as he trains her to catch and return with prey.



I, Sam Gribley, felt wonderful, just wonderful.
-- Sam (The Autumn Provides Food and Loneliness paragraph 5)

Importance: In the autumn, Sam begins to get a little lonely. It is the one thing that he has been unable to plan to contend with, but the solution is readily forthcoming. He keeps himself busy, and takes stock of his animal companions, Frightful, Baron Weasel, and Jessie C. James. In the end, he does not feel so lonely because of them, and actually feels quite wonderful for their company.

It's me or the Squirrels
-- Sam (We All Learn About Halloween paragraph 1)

Importance: In a very primal statement as the seasons change, Sam begins to double his efforts to store up food for the winter. In a matter of survival, he begins to race against the other animals, who are collecting many of the same food sources, such as nuts. It comes down to raw survival: it is Sam, or it is the wilderness. Sam decides it will be him who survives.

Hunters are excellent friends if used correctly. Don't let them see you; but follow them closely.
-- Sam (I Find Out What to Do with Hunters paragraph 18)

Importance: Sam, who has had to rely on his size and power for dominance of the food supply against squirrels and other small creatures, is outgunned and outmanned when it comes to hunters, so he adopts the approach of a scavenger. He feeds and survives off the kills of the hunters, hiding them so the hunters cannot find them, or finding deer that the hunters have been unable to find in the first place.

I did not become lonely.
-- Sam (I Learn About Birds and People paragraph 2)

Importance: As the winter sets in, Sam believes it will be his loneliest time since he is so isolated. Nevertheless, he isn't lonely in the least. He has much to keep him busy and occupied, and spends much of his time writing and journaling on scraps of birch bark.

I still can't believe you did it.
-- Sam's father (I Learn About Birds and People paragraph 61)

Importance: Sam's father, who visits over Christmas, is amazed and incredibly proud of Sam for having survived up on the mountain. His fatherly pride is plain for Sam to see, which makes Sam feel proud himself. Yet, his father's departure finally makes him feel a little lonely, and ultimately begins the path to the novel's conclusion.

I lived close to the weather. It is surprising how you watch it when you live in it. Not a cloud passed unnoticed, not a wind blew untested.
-- Sam (I Have a Good Look at Winter and Find Spring in the Snow paragraph 10)



Importance: Living out in the wild on his own, Sam is unable to depend on weather forecasts from the news, so he must rely on his own senses. He can tell when snow is coming based on the smell in the sky and the clouds that come in on the wind. Every subtle change in the weather is noticed, and Sam uses it to determine what is coming. He plays it safe rather than sorry, so he is always safe and sound inside when poor weather comes through.

You really want to be found, or you would not have told Matt all you did.

-- Frightful (The Spring in the Winter and the Beginning of My Story's End paragraph 82)

Importance: Sam has a conversation with Frightful in his head, in which he tries to figure out why he told the reporter as much as he did about his life and what he does up on the mountain. Sam comes to realize, through the imagined discussion with Frightful, that he truly does want to be found after all. He has gone from trying to avoid people at all costs to seeking them out himself. It is normal human nature to want to be around other people, and it is no different with Sam.