

# **On the Far Side of the Mountain Study Guide**

**On the Far Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George**

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## Plot Summary

“On the Far Side of the Mountain” is a young adult novel by Jean Craighead George. It is the sequel to her novel “My Side of the Mountain”, and is a prequel to “Frightful’s Mountain”. “On the Far Side of the Mountain” picks up approximately one year after “My Side of the Mountain” left off. Sam Gibley, now about thirteen or fourteen, lives on Bitter Mountain above the town of Delhi, New York, in the Catskill Mountains, with his sister, Alice, and his pet peregrine falcon, Frightful. Alice and the rest of the Gibley family, arriving one year after Sam on the mountain, left three weeks later, unable to make a go of it. Alice stays behind and lives with Sam for the next year, at which time “On The Far Side of the Mountain” opens. Sam is continuing to live off the land with his falcon, Frightful, providing meals for his sister, Alice, and making friends with everyone on the mountain, from Bando and his wife, Zella, to Mrs. Fielder, also known as Mrs. Strawberry for her love of strawberries. When the novel begins, Sam is faced with two major problems. A conservation officer, Leon Longbridge, arrives to take away Frightful, saying it is illegal to harbor an endangered species. Sam is heartbroken. At the same time, he discovers that Alice has run away.

With Bando’s help, Sam seeks clues as to where Alice may have gone. She leaves behind various clues, such as compasses and sundials, so that Sam and Bando may figure out where she went. The journey leads them far away from Bitter Mountain, all the way out of the Catskill Mountains, and into the Helderberg Mountains. There, Sam meets and befriends a pretty girl named Hanni, who is friends with Alice. Hanni is apparently in on what Alice is doing, but will not tell Sam what is going on. Sam and Bando continue on into the Helderbergs, exploring caves, streams, and waterfalls as they go, believing that Alice’s final destination must be the Helderberg Escarpment, a great cliff with a beautiful view and waterfall.

As Sam and Bando arrive in Rensselaerville near the Escarpment, they not only close in on Alice’s trail, but discover a falcon poaching scheme. Sam recognizes the conservation agent, Leon Longbridge, whom Bando says is an impostor, for he knows the real Leon Longbridge. Sam has the local conservation officer, Sean Conklin, contacted, and he and Bando watch as Conklin arrests the Longbridge impostor, his associate, and the Arab to whom they are attempting to sell a falcon for \$50,000. Sam later finds Alice at the escarpment, who has captured a baby goshawk for Sam. Sam tells her they must let the hawk go, for it is against the law to keep it. Alice is saddened, wanting Sam to have a pet falcon, but understands. It is then that they see Frightful flying in the sky. Alice explains she came upon the birds kidnapped by the poachers, not realizing what was going on at the time, and freed Frightful. Sam wants to call Frightful back, but then refuses to do so, knowing she must be free in the wild to live among her own kind.



# A Storm Breaks – I Start Over

## Summary

A Storm Breaks – It is a hot, humid, June day. Sam Gribley, now about the age of thirteen, looks over his land and all that he has built, including a millhouse and a root cellar. Sam's family has departed Bitter Mountain, except for his younger sister, Alice, who is currently unseen by Sam. Sam's domesticated, trained peregrine falcon, Frightful, sits nearby. Sam is afraid Frightful will one day leave him, as she nearly did the year before when a male peregrine falcon – a tercel – tried to court her, but she returned to Sam.

Frightful is so trained she can adjust her feathers and body posture to alert Sam as to whether a human is coming near, or another bird. Someone is now approaching, and Sam worries it might be a black bear. Baron Weasel, a weasel who lives near Sam, runs into his den. The approaching being turns out to be Leon Longbridge, the conservation officer, who has learned that Sam is keeping a pet falcon – an endangered species. Sam offers to let her free, but Leon – also a falconer – knows that Sam only needs to whistle to bring her back. Longbridge reveals that a falcon like Frightful must be bred in captivity, for it does not recognize fellow falcons as its own kind. Frightful's young will then be hacked back into the wild – a system where food is provided until the bird can hunt on its own. Sam's requests to leave Frightful with him are unheeded by Longbridge. Sam notices Longbridge has one blue eye and one brown eye. Sam attempts to cut Frightful free from Longbridge's arm, but Longbridge stops him, telling Sam that he should arrest Sam for harboring an endangered species as well as assaulting an officer of the law, and then departs. Sam worries how he'll feed his sister, now, without Frightful, and he is glad his sister was not there to see what happened.

The Population Shrinks – Sam goes into his tree house and feels like crying, but can't. He has food to find. He looks around at all he has done: a pile of furs now replace his sapling bed, he has built a desk to work at, and a stone grill for cooking outside. He pulls out his leather-bound journal, a gift from Miss Turner down at the library, and reads past entries. In late June, a mere three weeks after arriving, Sam's entire family, which came to live on the mountain, departed, unable to survive on the land. Sam's father allows 10-year-old Alice to stay behind, provided she does correspondence school. Sam is not thrilled about it, but his father tells Sam that Alice probably won't want to stay long, that she'll get homesick quickly. Sam's father leaves his toolbox behind at Mrs. Fielder's house – who Sam nicknames Mrs. Strawberry, for all the strawberries she collects and was collecting when he first met her – but Sam says that he won't need them. It is actually Alice's idea to build a plumping mill which uses the power of flowing water to grind acorns for flour for use in food – an idea given to her by Miss Turner. This evolves into an actual waterwheel mill, powered by a spring, which Sam dams to make a small pond. Sam also helps Alice build her own treehouse in a white oak tree fifty yards into the woods, using his father's tools after all. It is based on an Ojibway Indian wigwam, and has a porch and a weathervane.



I Start Over – Alice has now been living on the mountain for nearly a year. Sam writes in his journal, detailing the day's events with Longbridge. Sam hears Alice go into the root cellar. She is always leaving Sam notes about what she is thinking or doing. One of her recent notes has to do with thinking about waterfalls. Sam, meanwhile, just wants to be alone for some time, and decides to go and see the sheriff, realizing the conservation officer never showed him any identification. Sam leaves Alice a note explaining what has happened, tells her to continue smoking the fish for storage, and then heads down to the town of Delhi. There, he learns from the secretary at the Sheriff's office that Leon Longbridge is indeed a conservation officer, and does indeed have the power to confiscate endangered animals from people.

Sam then leaves and walks along the West Branch of the Delaware River, contemplating how to get more food. He does not want to use a gun, so he decides to go with a sling instead – the kind that David used to kill Goliath in the Bible. Sam fashions a sling and tries to practice with it, but misses his target. He considers asking Miss Turner for help, but is embarrassed to face her after the issue with Frightful. He remembers how Mrs. Strawberry had forgotten to pay a bill once, so a merchant had tried to take her horse, Slats, until a passing motorist intervened and Alice rode the horse back. Sam decides to spend the night alone, in the woods, knowing that Alice can take care of herself. When Alice becomes obsessed with a plan or a project, she notices nothing else. This once leads her to stealing mercury from Mr. Reilly's thermometer without thinking about it, and Sam has her buy Mr. Reilly a new thermometer with some of the \$40 Sam brought from New York two years before.

## Analysis

“On The Far Side of the Mountain” is a young adult novel by Jean Craighead George, which follows the adventures of Sam Gibley, and his little sister, Alice, as they live on Bitter Mountain one year after the events of “My Side of the Mountain”. Sam, now approximately thirteen or fourteen years old, has accomplished a lot. When he was twelve, he came to live on ancestral family land on Bitter Mountain, to rough it out and survive on his own. His family follows suit, but does not stay long – except for Alice. Sam has mixed feelings about Alice living nearby in her own treehouse, sometimes annoyed with her, sometimes grateful for her. While survival is key for them both, Sam is mostly concerned with making sure that Alice has enough to eat. Key to this is Frightful, who helps to hunt extra food for Alice, and for Sam, to consume. Despite their location, Sam and Alice are not entirely alone, for they have caring neighbors within a mile or two on all sides. Because of this, the idea of neighborliness, of friendship, becomes an important theme that will run throughout the novel – especially when it comes to Sam's friendship with Bando.

News of Sam's activities on the mountain have certainly gotten around – enough so that conservation officer Leon Longbridge has learned that Sam has a pet peregrine falcon that he has been keeping. Longbridge confiscates the bird, threatening to arrest Sam if Sam tries to stop him. The loss of Frightful is heartbreaking for Sam – not just because he has lost his first mountain companion, but because Frightful is critical to the supply of



food for both himself, and for Alice. No matter how Sam tries to reason with Longbridge, Longbridge will not allow Sam to keep Frightful. It is humiliating to Sam, and he spends the next few days avoiding people, so he won't have to tell them the truth of what has happened.

Although Sam does not realize it yet, the issue of Frightful being taken away has greater implications for both Frightful, and nature at large. This experience – between Sam and the law – will pave the way for a broader theme of the importance of nature, though Sam cannot see this at the moment. He merely feels that he has been deeply wronged by a conservation officer, and his anger and sadness are clear. Sam determines to learn how to hunt himself by using a sling, not wanting to rely on a gun. He begins practicing with the sling, but is not very good. He compares himself to David in the Bible, who slayed Goliath with a powerful sling. There is more to this analogy than meets the eye. Sam is not just seeking a sling to hunt food, but the events of the struggle between David and Goliath become a metaphor for Sam in his struggle to win back Frightful, with the legal system taking the form of Goliath.

Of interest in the chapter “I Start Over” is the appearance of \$40. In the previous novel, “My Side of the Mountain”, Sam leaves New York with a handful of possessions, including \$40. In everyday life, money is essential. It is earned through work and spent on the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter. In the wilderness, it is absolutely useless. Indeed, throughout the entire previous novel, the \$40 has no purpose whatsoever. It does nothing to help Sam survive in the wild of Bitter Mountain. It becomes an ironic symbol in that it has no value. Interestingly, toward the close of the chapter “I Start Over”, the \$40 makes an appearance in order for Alice to buy a new thermometer for Mr. Reilly – a sure sign of the encroachment of civilization. This will also be seen in coming chapters.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Leon Longbridge take Frightful away from Sam? How does Sam react? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

What reasons does Sam give Leon Longbridge for why he cannot take Frightful? How does Longbridge respond?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Leon Longbridge is justified in confiscating Frightful? Why or why not?



## Vocabulary

rousing, courtship, harboring, perpetuation, hacking, philosophy, incredulously, stupendous, confiscated, tantalizing, conspicuous



# A Trade Comes My Way – I Am In For a Surprise

## Summary

A Trade Comes My Way – Sam stays away from home for three nights, trying to use his sling, killing one squirrel, and missing forty others. Bando swings by to visit Sam. Bando was Sam's first real friend on the mountain, and helped Sam to make clay pots and build a raft among other things. Bando is an English professor at a college near the Hudson, and now owns an old cabin two miles down that he shares with his new wife, Zella, a lawyer, who is forever encouraging Bando to make improvements, such as putting down an actual floor. Bando reveals he has sold two chairs he made out of logs –Adirondack styled furniture, which consists of unpeeled branches and crooked forks of trees. Sam agrees to help Bando, though Sam wants no part of the business end. He knows that if worse comes to worst, he'll be able to earn money to buy food – though the thought makes him cringe. Sam and Bando get to work using the mill-powered saw in the millhouse. Alice is determined to get the millhouse to generate electricity as well, but Sam doesn't like the idea. As he thinks about this, he looks unhappy, and Bando notices something is bothering Sam. Sam reveals what happened to Frightful.

I Go Backwards in Order to Go Forwards – Sam reads through his journal, reveling in the past, and thinking about what he now has. He reads about building the mill, the plumping device, and the dam, based on the way beavers construct their dams, using sticks and mud. The millhouse was constructed of stone without mortar, based on information in a book given to Sam by Miss Turner, who helped to construct the mill herself. The mill ultimately became a group project: Mrs. Strawberry tapped the stones into perfect blocks, while Sam, Bando, Zella, Miss Turner, and Alice built with them. The roof and waterwheel were later completed, which Sam now uses for the purpose of sawmilling and forging. Sam remembers this as propelling him from the Stone Age to the Industrial Revolution. Sam also reads about his constructing a mason jar barometer to help predict weather, and a major Christmas snowstorm in which he played checkers with Alice to pass the time.

I Am In for a Surprise – Sam walks to the root cellar to see that Jessie Coon James, his friendly neighbor raccoon, has been attempting to get in to eat some food. As Sam goes through the food supplies, he realizes a lot of food is missing, such as cattails and hickory nuts. Sam gathers a squash for dinner, locks the cellar securely, and then goes to Alice's house. Jessie now lives with Alice, even having raccoon babies in Alice's house. When he gets to Alice's house, Sam discovers Alice is gone, having left behind a note that says she is leaving. Sam is stunned, but reminds himself he did the exact same thing to his family nearly two years before.

Bando arrives just then, bringing a pamphlet on generating electricity from water mills for Sam from Zella that Alice claims Sam wanted. Bando says that if the mill ever





generates electricity, Zella wants a line to run down to their cabin for lighting and a stove. Bando begins cutting some wood at the mill while Sam begins making dinner. Sam does not tell Bando about Alice, believing Alice has a right to privacy, and will tell Sam sooner or later what she has been up to. Sam is still worried about Alice, and wonders where she has gone. She has left all her books, but taken all her maps from her correspondence course, her boots, some clothing, some animal hide, her gloves, a Swiss Army knife, and gloves. Sam is worried, envious, and curious as to where Alice has gone. He decides to go and see if Mrs. Strawberry knows anything.

## Analysis

Even more troubling to Sam than the confiscation of his bird, Frightful, is the disappearance of his sister, Alice, who says she is going off on her own, and that Sam has taught her well enough to survive. Sam is angry and shocked at this revelation, but reminds himself that he, too, essentially did the same thing to his parents some two years before. He tries to console himself that Alice has better skills to survive than he did when he first set out from home, and that she is nearly as old as he was when he struck out on his own. Nevertheless, her disappearance will not only come to intrigue him, but will prove to be something he wants to follow up on. Both Alice's disappearance and Sam's desire to see that Alice is okay form the locus from which emerges the theme of mystery in the novel: Being able to determine where Alice is, why she has left, and how she is doing will become central to the plot moving forward.

At the same time, the reader can see the continuing encroachment of civilization onto Bitter Mountain. Sam had originally struck out to Bitter Mountain to get away from it all, especially people. In his year on the mountain, Sam used no electricity and did everything by hand, managing to survive – especially with the assistance of Frightful. Now, with the advent of the events in “On My Side of the Mountain”, things have already changed quickly for Sam. The extremities of his mountain are populated by people. Mrs. Fielder is down the mountain toward the town, whereas Bando moves into a cabin on the other side of the mountain, toward the bottom – and he is not alone. He brings his new wife, Zella, along as well. Sam's own property on the mountain is now inhabited by his sister.

If this wasn't enough, Alice's planning and projects ultimately leads to the creation of the millpond and sawmill, and before she disappears, she has been pushing Sam to rig the mill to generate electricity. Sam is horrified at the prospect. He already consents that the construction of the mill has propelled him from the stone age to the Industrial Revolution, and this is too much progress for him, entirely too fast. The sawmill, however, becomes invaluable to the other members of the mountain community, from Bando for floorboards for his cabin and furniture, to Alice for the grounding of acorn flour. Further evidence of the encroachment of civilization comes by way of Bando's deciding to use the mill to create Adirondack furniture to sell for actual money. The thought of business, like electricity, horrifies Sam, though he agrees to help Bando, wanting no end of the business part.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Sam's millhouse become so important to both him, and the mountain community? How does Sam feel about the millhouse, personally, himself?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Sam not tell Bando about Alice? Do you think he should have? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Sam think about Alice leaving? How does Alice leaving relate to Sam's own story?

## Vocabulary

miffed, humdinger, facetiousness, counteracts, abundant, admonish, envious



# I Am Sent East by Northeast – Bando Finds Some Old Adirondack Furniture

## Summary

I Am Sent East by Northeast – Sam hikes down to see Mrs. Strawberry. She reveals that Alice is up to a new project, but she doesn't know what it is. Sam tells her that Alice has left home, and Mrs. Strawberry tells Sam not to worry, that she last saw Alice three days before. Sam realizes this is the day after Frightful was taken. He and Alice can walk twenty miles in one day, which means she may have gone as far as sixty miles since then. Sam wishes Alice would have at least told him where she was going. Mrs. Strawberry remembers that Alice was leading her pet pig, Crystal – a gift from Mr. Reilly – on a leash, which makes Mrs. Strawberry believe Alice is going off to find her own place, though they were headed toward Sam's mountain. This makes Sam feel better. Sam decides to talk to Mr. Reilly, cutting his way across some wetlands. He discovers a compass Alice has made in the mud using a stick to track east and west by shadow. Sam discovers she has plotted her course, east by northeast, though for a small portion of the trip, she is headed due south. Sam knows now that she has a long-range objective.

Zella Makes Sense – Sam believes that the answer to where Alice is going is in Bando's cabin. He decides to go there first before beginning his daily chores. He tells Bando that Alice has gone. Sam reveals he has been tracking Alice based on her compass in the mud. Bando and Zella are surprised. They consult topographical maps and learn that the Helderberg Mountains are east, northeast. The Helderbergs have a pair of goshawks, the most aggressive birds of prey there are, Sam and Bando explain. The Helderbergs also have numerous waterfalls, Zella reveals. She also explains that Alice once told her that she wanted to explore waterfalls, swim in them, and sleep beside them, and that bringing along a pig would be an excellent way to find food, for pigs know how to dig up tubers and bulbs. Pigs are also good at finding water, Sam says.

By consulting a map of Delhi, they discover Alice is headed south along Peaks Brook, from which Alice can head northeast when she reaches the West Branch of the Delaware River. Sam and Bando decide to follow Alice to make sure she is alright, while Zella heads to Poughkeepsie for a trial. As Zella leaves, she tells Sam how sorry she is about Frightful, and says that Leon is a good man. Sam and Bando, supplies ready, begin their journey at once, believing Alice can't be more than ten or fifteen miles away, because she wouldn't have been able to make a compass with bad weather until after Frightful had been taken.

I Learn to Think Like a Pig – Sam and Bando head toward the West Branch of the Delaware River, believing they will find Alice at, or near, the most powerful stream coming off a mountain from a waterfall. They ultimately head upstream, as she is headed northeast. Yet, they know if Alice heads northeast, she will have to go through



the town of Delhi with a pig on a leash, and she will not want to do that. The only option she has is to climb Federal Hill, which is 900 feet up. Nearby, Sam finds pig hoof tracks. They follow the tracks to Federal Hill, and even find some of Alice's footprints. They believe they cannot be far behind her. As they climb, they decide to head to Fitches Brook, which, according to the map, is the only place steep enough to make a waterfall and be at by evening. They find Alice's campsite, which is not very attractive to them, but to a pig, is a good place to look for food. Sam says they will have to think like pigs as well as like Alice. They make camp for the night. Bando thinks Alice will be fine. Sam still worries for her, and for Frightful. Bando tells Sam about the university mew where falcons are kept, and says it is a warm, wonderful place for them to be and mate.

**Bando Finds Some Old Adirondack Furniture** – Sam and Bando clean up their campsite at dawn, and move on. They come across a second compass from Alice, which reveals her direction to be eighty degrees, meaning she headed more easterly. According to the map, the direction takes Alice to Schoharie Reservoir, and Manorkill Falls. Sam and Bando take off once again. They enter Plattekill State Forest. They make camp for the night, and continue on in the morning. Consulting the map, they decide to follow a power line, beneath which the terrain is easier, and which in turn leads to a road at the foot of Manorkill Falls. As they arrive at the power lines, they see evidence of Crystal's having dug up plants to eat, including Jerusalem artichokes.

They now know that Alice has also followed the power lines.

They go through the woods, come across the grave and former summer home of nature writer John Burroughs, near White Man Mountain. At the home, Woodchuck Lodge, now owned and overseen by the National Park Service, Sam and Bando break to eat, Bando admires the Adirondack furniture at the place, and continue on their way to Manorkill Falls. Alice has left behind a directional stone and an acorn, her signature woodland mark.

## Analysis

The theme of mystery is now in full swing. Bando agrees to head out with Sam to find Alice. Their journey is motivated by three primary concerns, which taken together, form the mystery. They want to discover where Alice is, why she left, and above all, if she is okay. That Sam is relying on Bando for help also speaks volumes about just how far Sam himself has moved toward civilization in many respects. In the past, especially during his time alone on Bitter Mountain, Sam would go through great lengths to avoid dealing with people. Now, he relies on them, such as in the case of the entire mountain community, from Miss Turner to Mrs. Strawberry, coming together to build the sawmill. Bando is quite fond of Sam, valuing his friendship and admiring his ruggedness. The theme of friendship becomes quite clear as the novel progresses, especially through Bando's decision to go with Sam to find Alice. Bando is beginning an Adirondack furniture business, and puts that off in order to help Sam find Alice. His concern for Alice is more than just worry for another human being, but a concern of real friendship.



Indeed, even Bando's wife, Zella, new to the mountain and to the mountain way of life, has become friends with Sam and Alice.

Working together from what they know about Alice, Sam and Bando believe that Alice must have either gone to find a new home or have gone to visit a waterfall. They are able to determine Alice's intended path by way of clues she leaves behind, such as compasses and acorns. The issue they have is determining which waterfall Alice has gone to, for there are numerous waterfalls in the area, and the number of waterfalls only increases as they head into the Helderberg Mountains. Passing by the home of John Burroughs, Sam realizes that Alice has not only changed course, but changed plans as well, for she has left behind a directional stone and acorn rather than an actual compass. Now, the mystery deepens even further. Why has Alice changed plans? Where is she going now? What is the new plan?

At the same time that friendship and mystery become important to the course of the novel, so too does the theme of nature. Hinted at before by the legal system protecting endangered species, Sam learns more about the natural world through Crystal the pig. Sam has long thought pigs to be smelly, annoying creatures that ruin the landscape and gardens, but as he discovers from Zella, and learns along the way in pursuit of Alice, pigs are good at rooting around for food – meaning that Alice will at least be well-fed. The roughed-up ground that Crystal leaves behind provides further clues for Sam and Bando to follow – for, as Sam notes earlier, he must not only think like Alice, but must think like a pig as well. For the first time, Sam isn't thinking about the world through his eyes, but through the eyes of an animal. This is an incredibly important step for Sam to have made, and will prove to be incredibly important by the end of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

What steps do Sam and Bando follow to figure out where Alice is headed? Where do most of the clues for these steps come from?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Sam feel better that Crystal is along with Alice? What is important about Alice having a pig with her?

## Discussion Question 3

What do Sam and Bando believe is Alice's ultimate destination? Why? What clues lead them to this conclusion?

## Vocabulary

linger, discipline, rookery, muses, vigorous, dubiously, omnivores, pristine, traverse, bushwhacking, heartily



# I Become Royalty – The Dawn Breaks Over Me

## Summary

I Become Royalty – Alice is not at Manorkill Falls. Sam and Bando consult their maps of Schoharie County and Albany County. Below them is a farm, and Sam wants to ask the people who live there if they have seen anything. He believes Alice's directional stone and acorn mean not only a change of direction, but a change of plans as well. He believes now that Alice wants to be followed, and will have left this change of plans with a person. Bando doesn't believe it is a good idea, for he thinks that the farmer will call the police to let them know a little girl is missing. He decides to head to West Conesville, half a mile away, to call Zella to let her know how they are getting along as promised, and will then meet Sam at a rural cemetery a mile away. Sam agrees to this plan.

He heads to the farmhouse, upon which the family name Sandtford is on a gold plaque on the door. There, he meets Mr. Sandtford. The Sandtfords can trace their ancestry to the first Dutch settlers in New York. Mr. Van Sandtford explains that Alice and her pig are friends with his daughter, Hanni, and her pig, and they have gone on to the 4H Club Fair at Livingstonville. Mr. Sandtford's son, Hendrik, has driven them. He also reveals that Alice has been at his house a few days, and helped Hanni tend to farm chores. This confirms to Sam that there has indeed been a change of plans. As he leaves, Mr. Sandtford tells Sam his sister's Spotted Poland China pig will certainly win a prize, and offers Sam some tea, calling him "Mr. Van Rensselaer". Sam declines, and wonders in his mind what Alice is up to.

Rather than wait for Bando, Sam heads to West Conesville's Ruffed Grouse Hotel, where Bando is eating a meal. Sam tells Bando what he has discovered, and Bando reveals that the Rensselaers were essentially new world royalty, given a grant in the 1600s by the Dutch King for land that became Albany County, and in turn, rented out 120-acre parcels to Dutch immigrants, making the Rensselaers rich and powerful. Sam really begins to wonder what Alice is up to. Bando takes a hotel room for the night, to sleep well and shower, while Sam sleeps outdoors again.

I Get News of Alice – Sam and Bando enter the Helderberg Mountains in the morning, avoiding bogs as they go. They are mountains of limestone and shale, and have many underground rivers and caverns. As Sam and Bando travel, they explore caves they come across. They soon enter Livingstonville, a quaint little town with multipurpose stores. Sam and Bando get lunch at the all-purpose store, and learn from another customer that there are no fairgrounds in Livingstonville.

The postmistress, Mammie, who runs the post office section of the store, explains there is a hog show just up the road at the Monroe Farm, toward Rensselaerville. Alice's use





of the name now makes sense to Sam. Bando finds a story in the newspaper about the fair, and then finds an interesting ad in the personals column, about Skri hacking falcons at Huyck Preserve at 6 p.m. on June 25, that very night, and that final arrangements can be learned at the R library. Mammie explains that Huyck Preserve is on the near side of Rensselaerville.

Sam believes beyond a shadow of a doubt that Alice wants them to follow her. Bando isn't so sure, but is still willing to go along. Near the town, Sam points out on a map, is a waterfall, and plenty of land for a pig to graze on. Bando encourages Sam to check with Hanni before moving on to see if there is a new clue to find Alice, then asks if Sam wants to go to the hacking. Sam does indeed want to go. At the Monroe Farm, they discover that the Monroes breed Spotted Poland China pigs. They discover a sumac bush that has been cut and pointed toward Rensselaerville, with an acorn in the cut.

Sam then seeks out Hanni on the farm. Hanni is very pretty, and tells Sam that Alice told her that he should stick to their original plans. Sam has no clue what that means. He then asks where Crystal is, and Hanni points him toward the pig, saying Alice will be back for the pig. Sam pets Crystal, and Hanni asks if Sam Van Rensselaer understood the message, and smiles –and Sam knows Hanni knows who he really is. It makes him happy. Sam then meets back up with Bando, and they head on.

The Dawn Breaks Over Me – In Rensselaerville, Sam and Bando part ways. Sam will go to the waterfall while Bando goes to the library. Before Bando goes, he explains that there is something troubling him about the hacking at Huyck Preserve. His own university friends hack in the morning, not the evening, and the news of the hacking wasn't front-page material like the hog show. He thinks who the ad is addressed to –Skri –means something bad is being covered up. They agree to meet at the library as Sam leaves for the waterfall.

Sam follows Tenmill Creek, past an old mill, and then sees a stone wall which helps to protect a cave from water and wind near the waterfall. He realizes it must be Alice's castle. Alice is not home, so Sam decides to wait. It starts to get dark. Below him, he hears a kingfisher call out a warning, and sees an eastern coyote on the prowl. The coyote places a dead bird down and draws in a crow, which she eats. Sam is puzzled by the dead bird left as bait. It is a healthy, adult sharp-shinned hawk. Sam follows the trail of the coyote where she came from, and discovers a mess of feathers all over, and a still-warm, though put-out fire. He discovers that all sorts of birds of prey have been there, but no one else is present. He imagines it must be the site of the hacking, but something doesn't feel right to Sam.

He collects some jesses, a leash, and a ring – falconry equipment – and heads back to town. He comes across the old 1789 Grist Mill on his way back, and is very impressed with it. At the library, the librarian reveals to Sam and Bando that a lot of falconers have been around lately, and interest in falcons has been high. The librarian believes many of them are poachers, has seen two of them headed up Tenmile Creek, and also reveals that the conservation officer is currently rooming across the street. The librarian points to the community bulletin board, where a falconer has left a message, saying the





hacking has been changed to Beaver Corners at dawn the following day, courtesy of Bate. The receiver of the message has signed it in Arabic, to acknowledge receipt of the message. Arab sheiks, it is revealed, prize falcons above all other birds, paying even more for them than racing cars because they are so rare now due to the use of DDT. It is a business that stretches back even before Jesus's time, the librarian explains. And both men are in town.

Bando buys Sam dinner, during which time Sam suggests using daylilies to the chef, Mr. Milo. Outside, later, Sam and Bando see a man leave the library. Sam says it is Leon Longbridge, the man who took Frightful. The man looks at them and drives away in his car as Bando says that the man is actually an impostor, and is not really Leon Longbridge, but a poacher. Sam knows the poachers are headed toward Alice, and he leaves immediately to find her.

## Analysis

Alice's own journey takes some unexpected turns, as she befriends some locals to the point of bringing them in on her secret. Alice has made a new friend in Hanni –and Sam may just have found a future friend, or even girlfriend, in Hanni, for he not only finds her very pretty, but she appears to like him right away, probably due in no small measure to kind words said about Sam by Alice. Sam also wonders why Alice has been using the name "Rensselaer" as well – something about which Hanni probably knows the truth, but refuses to say so. Indeed, it is because Hanni is in on Alice's secret that she encourages Sam to stick to the original plan, based on a message left for him from Alice. It would now appear that Alice has two motives in her disappearance: the original, main reason, and a secondary reason – both of which will ultimately be revealed to Sam.

A new mystery also opens up as Sam and Bando journey toward the Heldersberg Escarpment, which they believe to be Alice's ultimate destination. They discover that there is to be a hacking that very night, but it gets postponed until dawn. Bando immediately suspects something is wrong; and Sam's discovery of the falcon in the mouth of the coyote further concerns him –not only for the fate of his sister, but for the fate of Frightful as well. When Sam learns that the man whom he believed was Leon Longbridge is actually an impostor, Sam is terrified that something has happened to Frightful, and to Alice, whom he cannot find. Sam and Bando learn that the poaching of hawks is a lucrative, and illegal business.

Sam's greatest fears for Alice (as well as for frightful) arise from the fact that the poachers have set up their operation in incredibly close proximity to where Alice has camped. Between the coyote and the poachers, the image of David and Goliath is again brought to the fore, as it now appears that Sam will be struggling against something much greater than himself: a well-funded, and obviously brutal poaching operation. That Leon Longbridge is not Leon Longbridge likewise leads Sam to conclude that Frightful is either dead, has been sold, or is about to be sold.



It is incredibly important to Sam that Alice and Frightful are alright, not only because he is responsible for them, but because he loves them. They are his family –and the theme of family becomes stronger toward the end of the novel. Whereas Sam was once annoyed by his sister’s calls for electricity and a plumping mill, he worries that she will even be alive to annoy him anymore. The sense of loyalty he feels for Alice by way of family is tremendous, for he will be risking his own life in order to make sure Alice is alright.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Sam recognize Leon Longbridge? How does Bando realize it is an impostor?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is falcon poaching so common? Why do falcons cost so much money?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Alice let Sam know she has changed plans? What were the original plans? What have the plans changed to?

## **Vocabulary**

pitons, radically, awkwardly, sheepishly, pock, subterranean, emboldened, devastated, mischievously, chides, meridian

# I Am On the Track – A Bird Talks to Me

## Summary

I Am on the Track – Sam realizes, as he rushes toward Alice’s camp, that Frightful has been stolen from him, that the Longbridge impostor must be Bate, who sells birds to whoever Skri is, under the codeword of “hacking” whenever he has a bird to sell. What Sam doesn’t know is if Alice has been harmed or taken captive. At her cave, she has left a note on her pillow, asking Sam if he is having fun, and revealing that she has seen falconers who left the woods after a coyote killed one of their birds. She reveals she has good news for Sam, and will meet him at the Helderberg Escarpment. Alice has left hickory nuts for Sam, has revealed the location of coyote pups under a rhododendron bush, and makes light of the fact that she used the name “Van Rensselaer.” She ends her note by saying that Hanni is neat.

Sam is thrilled Alice is safe, but is angry at her for what she has done. He then rushes off to get Frightful back. Back in town, Sam goes to Mr. Milo at the restaurant, to call the police, but he replies that the nearest police are twenty miles away. Sam explains the situation, and Milo calls Sean Conklin, their conservation officer, who can make arrests. Sam heads toward the falls, stopping in the town of Berne to read a historical marker, which reveals that in 1839, the farmers of the area rebelled against the Von Rensselaer family, even fighting against state militia and agents of the family to not have to pay high taxes to the family. In 1876, the United States Supreme Court finally rules against the family, and allows the farmers to own their own land.

In East Berne, Alice leaves another marker – this one a sundial – to let Sam know she is on the move. Near Beaver’s Corners, at an abandoned church, Sam finds Bates’s truck, but no one is around. Sam enters a cavern which leads to the basement of the church. Bates, his driver, and Skri are arguing over a fifty-thousand dollar price tag for a prairie falcon, when Skri wanted a peregrine falcon, and a sharp-shinned falcon. Sam believes Frightful is dead, and meets Bando and Conklin outside. Conklin explains that not many people know about the church basement, for it was a meeting place for the old tenant farmers that rebelled against the Rensselaers. Conklin has been after Bates and the others for a long time, and gladly puts them under arrest. They will be taken to Altamont. Bando goes with Conklin to help hold the prairie falcon. Sam then goes to the Helderberg Escarpment, worried that Alice will be hurt by an aggressive goshawk.

A Bird Talks to Me – At the Helderberg Escarpment, Alice climbs a tree to see goshawk nestlings, and is nearly attacked by one, but is warned in time by Sam. Alice is very happy to see Sam, but does not climb down. Sam goes up after her, and helps her down. Goshawks circle to attack. They take shelter in a ledge under an overhang on the cliff. There, Alice reveals her surprise: she has secured a baby goshawk for Sam, after learning of what happened to Frightful. Sam is thrilled with the gift, and immediately takes to the baby hawk. They decide to stay on a few days, because the waterfall that



they can see is beautiful. Sam reveals he must return the bird, because they are protected by international law, according to Conklin. Alice is sad, but understands.

It is then that they hear Frightful in the sky. Alice reveals that she freed Frightful when she discovered her in the woods by Rensselaerville. With no one around, she freed Frightful, and intended to free the other two, but a coyote got one, and some men came back for the prairie falcon. She explains they killed the coyote and her pups. Sam finds this disgusting, and reveals they were all arrested. Sam, meanwhile, knows that all he has to do to get Frightful back is to whistle for her, but he cannot bring himself to do it. He explains she deserves to be in the wild with her own kind. Frightful flies out of sight. Sam is happy, but also sad.

Alice also reveals she has brought her pig to the Monroes to be bred, and she will keep Crystal and her piglets at Mrs. Strawberry's farm. Sam thinks Alice has been selfish, but then thinks better, knowing that Alice was mainly worried about him, and will not let the piglets tear up the mountain. Bando arrives a few moments later, revealing that Bates, his driver, and the Arab are awaiting trial, while the prairie falcon is being sent home to Idaho. Sam explains he has let Frightful go. Bando is impressed, and understanding. Sam says he will arrange for the mill to generate electricity, and he will work to get a falconer's license, and will help Bando's friend, Steve, raise and release falcons into the wild. Bando is, once more, impressed.

## Analysis

As the novel concludes, multiple things are made apparent with respect to the theme of mystery. Alice originally left the mountain in order to secure a new pet falcon for Sam, but became distracted by the idea of breeding Crystal, and raising piglets. This causes her to veer off course, to change plans, and then to revert to the original plans, as explained by Hanni in Alice's message for Sam. Alice does not intend to leave the mountain, but merely to have seen what else is off the mountain. Out of gratitude for Alice's safety, and because he loves his sister, Sam agrees to convert the mill into an electric generator. He also agrees to stay with Alice for a few days at the Escarpment waterfall, for it is beautiful, and Alice wants to stay for a while. The poachers – Bates, his buddy, and the Arab – are all apprehended by Sean Conklin, the conservation officer for the area that includes Rensselaer. In several ways, the location of the apprehension – at the old church – is symbolic of the delivering of justice, the greatest judge being God. It is in the church that the tenants originally met to rebel against the Rensselaers, seeking justice against corruption and taxes. Just as God watched over David against Goliath, so too does God watch over Sam, nature, and the righteous.

The idea of a David vs. Goliath struggle also reappears toward the end of the novel, and should not be dismissed. It is not merely Sam struggling against nature to provide food for his sister, or against the poachers –but it is the animals and the natural world itself, struggling against the encroachment of civilization and the ruthlessness of certain men to trample nature for the sake of profit. In this case, poachers not only kidnap rare birds to sell, but also kill coyote pups in the process because they pose a threat to the



business. As Sam remarks to his sister at one point, men think they have the right to be the ultimate predator. The imagery of David and Goliath-like struggles can also be seen in one other place as well: the tenant farmers of the Von Rensselaer family struggling against established power for freedom and for self-autonomy. They must contend with New York militia, agents of the family, and the power of the state in order to do this, finally winning their case in court in the 1870s. Though this seems to be out of place in the novel, it is not: it is very clearly reflective of the modern-day contest between man and nature.

Sam also discovers that Frightful is not dead, but very much alive and very healthy. It is only at the end of the novel that Sam comes to discover the importance of the natural world, in and of itself. Sam knows Frightful must live and thrive among her own kind, and not among men. As such, theme of nature is crowning to the novel: man must not destroy nature, or abuse it as in the case of the poachers. Man must respect, and live in accord with, nature. Sam at last understands that at least parts of the legal system aren't designed to cause him harm or hurt him in any way emotionally, but are intended to protect nature, and creatures like Frightful.

## Discussion Question 1

In the end, what is Alice's journey – and her desire to get Sam to follow her – all about? How does Sam react?

## Discussion Question 2

Despite all of Alice's efforts to get Sam a new pet falcon, Sam returns the bird. Why? How does Alice react? Is her reaction justified? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Sam let Frightful go? Do you believe it is the right thing to do? Why or why not? What would you have done? Why?

## Vocabulary

incriminate, poachers, talons, frantically, mercilessly, bedeviled



# Characters

## Sam Gribley

Sam Gribley is the main character and principal protagonist in the novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Sam lives with his sister, Alice, on Bitter Mountain on their family’s ancestral land, above the town of Delhi, New York, in the Catskill Mountains. Sam is about thirteen or fourteen years old, having come to the mountain at the age of twelve to live off the land. He succeeds wildly. His family tries to follow suit, but cannot make a living from the land, and so returns to New York City. Alice stays behind, which annoys Sam. She has been living with Sam for a year when the events of the novel begin.

Sam has a pet peregrine falcon named Frightful, which is confiscated by a man professing to be Leon Longbridge, the conservation officer. Sam is heartbroken, and ultimately explains what happened to his friend and neighbor, Bando. Sam is later stunned when he finds a note in Alice’s treehouse, saying she has left the mountain. Sam is worried for her, and sets out to find her, accompanied by Bando.

The journey that Sam and Bando embark on takes them through mountains and small towns, along waterways, valleys, and old farms. Sam’s annoyance at his sister for suggesting he rig the sawmill to generate electricity ultimately give rise to worry and fear that something may happen to Alice. As Sam and Bando follow Alice’s trail, they discover that she has changed plans, but then reverted to her original plan, as explained by Alice’s pretty new friend, Hanni.

Sam and Bando ultimately uncover a poacher’s plot to illegally sell falcons to an Arab sheik, and help conservation officer Sean Conklin to apprehend the criminals – including the man who impersonated Leon Longbridge, and stole Frightful from Sam.

Sam later discovers that Alice is safe, and her disappearance – the original plan and the new plan – had been to find Sam a new pet falcon, and to breed Crystal the pig. Sam also learns that Frightful is alive and safe, having been freed by Alice the night before. But Sam comes to recognize that Frightful deserves to be free in the wild, and so does not call her back to him when he sees her flying in the sky. It is a decision that both makes him sad and happy, for he knows that Frightful will be better off with her own kind.

## Alice Gribley

Alice Gribley is the younger sister of Sam Gribley, and lives with him on Bitter Mountain. Alice comes to Bitter Mountain with her family the year before the novel begins, and is the only member of the family to stay on with Sam. Alice is about eleven or twelve years old, is incredibly kind, and incredibly resourceful. For example, it is her idea to build a plumping mill which leads to Sam and the other mountain community members to build



the sawmill. Alice also has Sam build a house for her in an oak tree in the woods, so she can have her own space. She attends school by correspondence, and enjoys leaving Sam notes about what she likes, is doing, or is thinking about – such as waterfalls.

Alice is very friendly with the neighbors on the mountain, including Mr. Reilly, who gives Alice the gift of a pig named Crystal. When Alice learns that Frightful has been confiscated, she feels horribly for her brother, and decides she will provide him with a new one, and visit waterfalls along the way. She then journeys with her pig to the Helderberg Mountains to the northeast, leaving a trail of clues –including compasses and directional stones –for Sam to follow and find her, signing them with an acorn. Along the journey, Alice meets and befriends a girl a little older than her, named Hanni Von Sandtford. It is through Hanni that Alice decides to breed Crystal, and then asks Hanni to tell Sam that the original plan – for Sam to follow her – is still on.

While camping out near a waterfall, Alice discovers a poaching operation – though she does not realize it as such – in which Frightful is tied to a perch. Alice cuts Frightful free, but is unable to free the other birds because the poachers return. Alice ultimately secures a baby goshawk for Sam just as he finds her on the Helderberg Escarpment. She is saddened by, but understands, Sam's reasoning for not being able to keep the bird, including that it is against the law. Alice is likewise saddened, but still understands when Sam refuses to call Frightful to bring her home.

## **Bando**

Bando, whose last name is revealed as Zackary, is a neighbor and friend of Sam and Alice, and the husband of Zella. Bando originally meets Sam in the previous novel (“My Side of the Mountain”), where Sam originally mistakes him for a bandit, giving rise to the name “Bando”. In reality, Bando is an English professor, has some knowledge about the land, and is immensely kind and loyal to Sam. He lives in an old cabin during vacations down the mountain, which he is fixing up for his wife, having most recently installed floors.

When the novel opens up, he is beginning an Adirondack furniture business, and is dismayed to hear of Frightful's confiscation, and of Alice's disappearance. He agrees to help Sam track down Alice to make sure she is okay, and the journey takes them to the Helderberg Mountains. While Bando is pretty hearty, he ends up preferring to eat in town restaurants than off the land as they travel, and seeks out a good night's sleep in a hotel along the way instead of sleeping in the woods on the ground. Bando ultimately comes across the personals ad which reveals a poaching plot, and helps Sam guide Sean Conklin, the conservation officer, to arrest the poachers.

## **Frightful**

Frightful is a female peregrine falcon that Sam has raised from a baby and trained to be a hunter and companion. Frightful is of an endangered species, and is confiscated by a





poacher impersonating a conservation officer at the beginning of the novel. Frightful is terrified of the experience, and ends up being part of a collection of falcons to be sold to an Arab sheik. Fortunately, Alice comes upon the group of birds and sets Frightful free. Frightful spends the night and the morning flying around trying to find Sam and Alice, and is unaware that they are at the Escarpment below her. Sam does not whistle for her, and so Frightful continues on. Her future is uncertain at the end of the novel, though it is imagined she integrates back into the wild. She will form a major component of the sequel to “On the Far Side of the Mountain”, in the form of the novel “Frightful’s Mountain”.

## Hanni Von Sandtford

Hanni Von Sandtford is beautiful girl a bit older than Alice, who meets and befriends Alice early in the novel. Alice tells Hanni all about what she is doing and where she is going, and speaks very well about her brother, Sam. She asks Hanni to tell Sam to go back to the original plan following the trip to the Monroe Farm to breed Crystal, and Hanni agrees. Hanni is quite taken with Sam when he shows up, and dutifully delivers Alice’s message. Sam is clearly mesmerized by Hanni’s beauty and kindness, and the possibility for a future romance or friendship is left open.

## Zella Zackery

Zella Zackery is the wife of Bando Zackery. She is a professional lawyer, is well-respected, and very successful. She spends vacations with Bando in his cabin, commuting to trial when she needs to in Poughkeepsie. She is incredibly kind and intelligent, and very patient, being very glad when Bando installs an actual floor in the cabin. When the novel begins, Zella heads off to handle a trial, and hopes that her cabin will one day have electricity generated by the sawmill. It is also Zella who explains on her way out that Crystal’s accompanying Alice is a good thing, for pigs are very good at finding food, and so Alice will not have to worry about food.

## Mrs. Strawberry

Mrs. Strawberry, whose real name is Mrs. Thomas Fielder, is a woman in her late nineties who lives near Bitter Mountain, and heading toward Delhi. She owns a farm and a horse named Slats. She is incredibly kind and sweet, and cares for Alice and Sam deeply. She first meets Sam in the novel “My Side of the Mountain”, and earns the nickname “Mrs. Strawberry” for her love of picking and eating strawberries. It is Mrs. Strawberry who first gives Sam tantalizing clues about Alice’s intended path, telling Sam she was headed toward Bitter Mountain when last seen – and this leads Sam to find the first compass.





## **Bate**

Bate is a thuggish man with one brown and one blue eye, and impersonates conservation officer Leon Longbridge in order to steal Frightful from Sam. Bate and an unnamed accomplice are kidnapping endangered falcons to sell to the Arab for tens of thousands of dollars. Their operation is exposed by Sam and Bando, who follow clues to their crime in the newspaper and the Rensselaer library, ultimately tracking them down and having them arrested by Sean Conklin.

## **Arab**

The Arab is a man from the Middle East who is seeking a falcon, and is willing to pay fifty-thousand dollars for it. He arranges for such an exchange with Bates, but is ultimately arrested by Sean Conklin.

## **Sean Conklin**

Sean Conklin is a brave and kind conservation officer who handles the area around Rensselaer. Sam and Bando make him aware of the poaching operation being run by Bates and his associate, as well as the intentions of the Arab to illegally buy a bird, so Conklin puts all three under arrest, ending the transaction and the poaching operation.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Birch bark notes

Birch bark notes are left for Sam by Alice during the novel. The bark of birch trees serves as an excellent medium on which to write, and Alice uses the bark for her notes. Alice's notes are often composed of her plans, thoughts, or ideas. For example, one such note Alice leaves for Sam at the beginning of the novel, which helps him to figure out what her intentions are, has to do with Alice thinking about waterfalls.

## Leather-bound journal

A leather-bound journal is given to Sam as a gift by the Delhi town librarian, Miss Turner, when she discovers that Sam has been writing on birch bark. She believes he needs a better place to write, and so purchases the journal as a gift for him. Sam uses it diligently, both to record events and to reflect on the past by reading old entries.

## Adirondack furniture

Adirondack furniture is composed of unpeeled branches, and forks of trees, cobbled together to create tables, chairs, and other sorts of furniture. Bando's own Adirondack chairs are sold for a hefty profit, which encourages Bando to begin building Adirondack furniture to sell. He finds an amazing example of such furniture at the writer John Burroughs' summer cabin, and it inspires him. Bando offers Sam the chance to get in on the business, but Sam wants no part of the business end of things, agreeing to help Bando, however.

## Acorns

Acorns are collected by Sam and Alice in the novel for eating, and for grinding into flour to make things like pancakes. Acorns also become Alice's signature mark in nature, allowing Sam to see things deliberately left behind by her, or to let Sam know where she has been. For example, she leaves an acorn at the Monroe farm with a split bush to let Sam know her direction; and she leaves an acorn with a directional stone at the Burroughs lodge to let Sam know which way she has gone.

## Compasses

Compasses in various forms are used by characters in the novel to gauge direction and plot courses of travel. Sam and Bando use a handheld compass in conjunction with a map to plot their course in pursuit of Alice. Alice creates compasses using sticks,



sunlight and shadow, and pine needles to plot her course, and leaves these compasses behind as clues for her brother to follow and find her.

## Directional stones

Directional stones are left by Alice at the former lodge of John Burroughs, the nature writer. They consist of three stacked stones, and a single stone beyond it to demarcate direction. They are signed with an acorn, and this reveals to Sam that Alice has changed course, and is now headed to Manorkill Falls.

## Maps

Maps are carried and consulted by Alice as she sets out on her journey away from Bitter Mountain. Maps are also carried and consulted by Sam and Bando in their quest to find Alice and make sure she is safe. Indeed, Sam and Bando carry numerous maps with them, from topography maps, which show elevations, to quadrangle maps, which not only show topography, but are limited to a particular area of land.

## \$40

\$40 is carried by Sam from New York to Bitter Mountain during the events of the novel, “My Side of the Mountain”. Ironically, the \$40 – crucial to survival in the civilized world – becomes useless and valueless in the natural world. But in the events of “On the Far Side of the Mountain”, the \$40 becomes important when Sam uses some of the money to have Alice replace a thermometer she took from Mr. Reilly for use in a project. As civilization creeps up to Bitter Mountain, the need for money becomes pronounced, and more common. For example, Bando is going to begin an Adirondack furniture business so he can sell his wares for money. While Sam is horrified by the use of money, he knows he may need it as a last resort to buy food at a grocery store if his plans to continue living off the land do no work out.



# Settings

## Bitter Mountain

Bitter Mountain rises over the valley town of Delhi in upstate New York, and is a part of the Catskill Mountain range. It borders the Helderberg Mountain range, and a swath of Bitter Mountain is owned by the Gribley family. It is on this swath of land that Sam and his sister, Alice, live and survive from the land. Bitter Mountain consists of open meadows, very old-growth forests, streams, and rocky terrain. Bitter Mountain is home to Sam's tree-cave, and Alice's treehouse, and is also host to a wide array of wildlife, from weasels and raccoons to falcons and deer. It is also the site of a sawmill constructed by Sam and his friends, and a root cellar that Sam has built to store foodstuffs. Sam is very much at home on Bitter Mountain, but must leave in order to find Alice when she leaves Bitter Mountain. Sam can only wonder why anyone would ever want to leave Bitter Mountain, and resists most attempts to transform the mountain into anything akin to the civilized world – wanting not even to bring electricity to the place.

## Rensselaer

Rensselaer is a town in Albany County, New York, that rests in the Helderberg Mountains. The town is quaint and inviting, has numerous restaurants and a library, and is regrettably often used as a base camp for hawk poaching operations. Rensselaer is named for the Von Rensselaer family, a Dutch family that was first to settle in the area with a land grant given by the Dutch King. It is in Rensselaer that Sam and Bando uncover a poaching plot, and help conservation agent Sean Conklin to break it open and arrest the poachers.

## Helderberg Mountains

The Helderberg Mountains, composed of limestone and shale, make up the mountain range that falls between the Catskill Mountains to the south, and the Adirondack Mountains to the north. The Helderberg Mountains are known for numerous underground water systems, caves, and waterfalls, as well as for the Helderberg Escarpment, from which comes a massive waterfall. The Helderberg Mountains are Alice's ultimate goal, with the Escarpment being her particular final destination.

## Helderberg Escarpment

The Helderberg Escarpment is a massive cliff of rock and dirt that towers far above the surrounding landscape, and is part of the Helderberg Mountain region. The Escarpment is the specific final destination of Alice, who has gone there not only to see its waterfall, but to find a baby hawk to give to Sam, for she feels bad that Frightful has been confiscated. Is it there that Sam finds Alice, and is there that Sam decides to return the

baby falcon Alice has obtained for him, and to let Frightful go back off into nature on her own.

## **The old church**

The old church is an abandoned, nearly-forgotten church near the town of Rensselaer, up from Tenmile Creek, where rebels against the Rensselaer family would meet. Now, it is the meeting place for Bates's poaching operation, and it is at the old church that Conklin apprehends Bates, his accomplice, and the Arab. In many ways, the location of the apprehension – the church – is symbolic of justice, the greatest judge being God. It is in the church that the tenants meet to rebel against the Rensselaers, seeking justice against corruption and taxes. God watches over David in his struggle against Goliath, and God watches over the righteous on earth, having evil brought to justice in a church.



# Themes and Motifs

## Mystery

Mystery is a major theme in the novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Mystery involves the unknown or the unexplained, and the pursuit of answers in that which is unknown or unexplained. Mystery appears in two distinct forms in the novel, involving Sam, Bando, and Alice. One mystery becomes overarching through the novel; the second mystery becomes just as important as the novel comes to a conclusion.

The first mystery of the novel is faced by Sam, and involves Alice’s disappearance from her treehouse one day. She leaves a note, saying she is moving on, and thanks Sam for teaching her how to survive in the wild. Sam worries for Alice, and decides to follow her, with Bando coming along to help. The mystery of Alice’s disappearance involves three questions Sam needs to answer: Where did she go? Why did she leave? Is she alright? As Sam and Bando follow Alice’s tracks, Sam realizes that Alice actually wants Sam to follow her. The mystery deepens when Alice changes directions, and her plans change, which cause Sam to wonder what is going on and why – before her path returns to its original trajectory. Sam ultimately comes to discover that Alice’s true purpose was to find him a new pet falcon to replace Frightful, and to visit waterfalls along the way, but that she always intended to return home. She is happy and healthy, and happy to see Sam when Sam shows up. She reveals that her change of plans was to breed her pet pig, Crystal, and to spend time with her new friend, Hanni.

The second mystery of the novel involves the illegal poaching operation run by Bates, impersonating conservation officer Leon Longbridge, and attempting to sell hawks illegally to an Arab sheik. Sam and Bando come across this by way of a mysterious personal ad in a newspaper regarding a hatching to be held near Rensselaerville, one that is not publicly advertised or described legitimately. The Rensselaerville librarian explains to Sam and Bando that there has been a lot of poaching going on lately, and when Sam discovers that Bates is an impostor, everything makes sense to him. He is able to find out where the exchange is going down, and alerts Conklin to this. Conklin ultimately arrests Bates and his associates, explaining he has been after Bates for a very long time. As such, the poaching operation – a new mystery to Sam and Bando, but an ongoing mystery for Conklin – is solved.

## Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George, and concerns primarily the friendship of Sam and Bando. Indeed, the two form an impressive pair that work together and encourage one another in their attempt to find Alice. All of the hallmarks of friendship are on display between the two –



from loyalty to having things in common to sharing knowledge and caring for one another.

Sam first meets Bando in the novel “My Side of the Mountain”, during which time Bando, lost, ends up at Sam’s campfire outdoors. The two quickly bond, and Sam teaches Bando how to live off the land while Bando teaches Sam how to make clay pots, blueberry jam, and helps Sam to build a raft – all things which Sam later comes to use. Between “My Side of the Mountain” and into “On the Far Side of the Mountain”, Bando provides a source of information and physical power to help Sam construct a sawmill, and to continue living off the land. The two enjoy one another’s company, and often enjoy traipsing around the mountain to explore and collect edible plants and small game. When Bando begins his furniture business, though Sam doesn’t want any pay, he agrees to help Bando make furniture – out of loyalty of friendship. When Alice goes missing, Bando puts his new business on hold to go and help Sam find Alice without hesitation.

Throughout their journey, Sam and Bando live off the land, with Sam cooking meals for Bando, and Bando buying meals for Sam in towns. They share knowledge with one another – from history to natural science – and encourage one another in the quest to find Alice. For example, Bando is frequently impressed by Sam’s survival skills, and compliments him on these as they travel. This encourages Sam to keep going to find his sister. Together, Sam and Bando not only track down Alice, but manage to bust open a poaching ring, watching the poachers be arrested by Sean Conklin. Bando ultimately returns to find Sam and Alice after helping Conklin escort the criminals. Bando returns not only to make sure both Sam and Alice are alright, but out of a sense of loyalty, once more, through friendship with them.

## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Thematically, family includes the unconditional emotional, physical, and even spiritual support of, and loyalty toward, people who may or may not be blood-related, but still behave and carry out their relationship in accordance with the traditional family. In “On the Far Side of the Mountain”, the strongest illustration of the theme of family occurs between Sam Gribley, and his younger sister, Alice Gribley.

In “My Side of the Mountain”, Sam has grown tired of his crowded family, so leaves for upstate New York. When his family comes to stay with him at the end of that novel, Sam is overjoyed and does not realize how much he has missed them. His family leaves three weeks later, but Alice decides to stay on. Sam cares for Alice, making sure she has a treehouse in which to live and stay safe, and makes sure she has enough food to eat. As much as Alice annoys Sam by trying to get him to get the mill to generate electricity, he loves her, and will not let any harm come to her. It is why he is especially surprised when Alice suddenly leaves the mountain home they have built for themselves.



It is out of Sam's love for his sister, and his loyalty to her as his sister, that he decides to go after her to see where she has gone. Along with Bando, Sam tracks down Alice to the Helderberg Escarpment. He is incredibly angry at first, believing Alice has been selfish by getting Sam to follow her, and by wanting to breed pigs. Sam, however, softens his anger toward her at once when he learns her primary purpose was to get Sam a new pet falcon. When he reflects on how worried he was for his sister, especially when he realized how close she was to the poaching operation, he is no longer mad at her at all, but absolutely relieved, and touched. He is so happy with his sister's safety that he agrees to stay with her for a few days to see the waterfall at the Escarpment, and to rig the sawmill to generate electricity.

## Civilization

Civilization is an important, underlying theme in the novel "On the Far Side of the Mountain" by Jean Craighead George, that eventually becomes overt by the end of the novel. Thematically for this novel, civilization involves the world of human beings: of houses, cars, cities, electricity, money, businesses, and so on. This is best exemplified by New York City, which Sam leaves behind for the rugged primal nature of Bitter Mountain. Sam wants no part of civilization, including to even be around people if he can help it. Yet, by the end of the previous novel, "My Side of the Mountain", Sam has accepted that people are not necessarily a problem, so long as things aren't crowded. By "On the Far Side of the Mountain", civilization is creeping up on Sam.

Bitter Mountain is now populated by both Sam and his sister. Down one end of Bitter Mountain is the cabin now owned by Bando, and his new wife, Zella. In the other direction are the farms of Mr. Reilly and Mrs. Strawberry. While the latter two live rugged compared to most, they still have houses and electricity, and get along using money. Sam, though he has built a sawmill, resists attempts to convert the mill to generate electricity for use by Alice and Zella. Indeed, Alice calls Sam an "old fogey" for this at one point. He describes even the construction of the sawmill as advancing him from the Stone Age to the Industrial Revolution – too fast for Sam.

When Frightful is taken away, Sam loses a vital source of food, but does not want to have to resort to using a gun to hunt – which to him is even too civilized. Instead, he decides to use a sling to hunt. Sam also balks of the idea of buying food from a store, and having to earn money to do so. Indeed, he considers money to be too civilized, and though he agrees to help Bando's furniture business, Sam does not want any money. However, by the end of the novel, all options must be on the table for Sam as he decides to let Frightful go, and knows he will have to feed himself and his sister moving forward. He makes the monumental step of agreeing to convert the sawmill to generate electricity, which makes Alice incredibly happy.





## Nature

Nature is an important theme and motif in the novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” by Jean Craighead George. Nature is essentially the opposite of civilization: nature is the land in its wild state, and includes the ecological system of plants, animals, birds, fish, and environment in general, or in a given place. Nature, specifically in this novel, appears in both forms: local nature, and general nature. Sam lives on Bitter Mountain, where he does his best to live in accord with nature, and to keep civilization – from money and guns to electricity – at bay. He prefers the natural world to the civilized world, going through great lengths to survive without the need of anything civilized, from telephones to cars.

Nature, in its most local sense, includes the mountain wilderness on and around Bitter Mountain, of the Catskill and Helderberg mountain ranges. These ranges are replete with wildlife, from weasels and deer to hawks and raccoons. Indeed, there is a variety of wildlife, both fauna and flora, from which Sam and Alice use to survive off the land. Sam collects meat and deerskin from road kill whenever he can find it, and he traps small game and collects nuts and berries to survive. He is careful about being a predator, seeking not become a dominant predator, for Sam realizes he must share the mountain with the natural population, and must not misuse or abuse it, though he must live from it in order to survive.

Sam’s living with nature brings nature in general into the fold. Sam’s experiments with living in the natural world reflect how the natural and civilized worlds sometimes life in accord with one another, and sometimes clash. This is especially clear when it comes to the hawk poaching operation. The civilized world, largely through the use of the insect repellent DDT on crops, has caused a decline in the bird population, especially among hawks, causing them to be listed as endangered and a crime to own, sell, or buy. When Frightful is confiscated, Sam is angry, hurt, and confused, and thinks the laws protecting the birds are hurting him and Frightful. Only through seeing the illegal poaching operation does Sam come to realize that nature must be left to itself, that Frightful belongs among her own kind, and nature is not to be mistreated, but that people are to be good stewards of the earth.

# Styles

## Point of View

Jean Craighead George tells her novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” in the first-person limited-omniscient narrative, from the point of view of her main character and principal protagonist, Sam. This is done for several reasons: the first reason is the sake of consistency, to keep the narrative mode the same as her prequel, “My Side of the Mountain”. The second reason is that much of the novel occurs in Sam’s mind: Sam is a deeply introspective character, whose reflections on events, and desire to keep much of what he feels to himself, means that he will not willingly vocalize these thoughts and feelings, but allows the reader to be the one who truly sees what Sam is thinking and feeling by giving the reader a glimpse into his mind. Because the events of the novel are largely mysterious, the limited-omniscient perspective allows the reader to learn, know, and understand things only as Sam comes to know, learn, and understand them. This creates suspense and adds to the level of mystery.

## Language and Meaning

Jean Craighead George tells her novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two primary reasons: the first reason is that the novel is a young adult novel, the narrating character of which is approximately thirteen or fourteen years of age, and so his vocabulary and use of language must accurately reflect his age group. This also lends an air of believability, and convincingness, to his formulation as a character. Secondly, the simple and straightforward language is important because George’s audience is primarily that of young adults and youths, so the language of the novel must be accessible to them in order for the plot and messages of the novel to be accessible to them.

## Structure

Jean Craighead George divides her novel “On the Far Side of the Mountain” into fifteen linear, chronological, and unnumbered, named chapters that span the course of several days in late June. Each chapter is appropriately titled to the events that transpire within it, with each chapter revolving around one specific event, or a series of events related to one overall important aspect of those events. For example, the chapter “The Population Shrinks” has to do with the departure of the Gribley family from Bitter Mountain, except for Sam and Alice. The chapter “I Am On the Track” deals with Sam being on the track not only to finding Alice, but also helping Conklin to find and apprehend Bates. This straightforward structuring of the novel helps readers to pay attention to the plot, and to follow it, which is important given that the audience intended for the novel is that of young adults, and youth.



## Quotes

The first year I lived here I had only a tree, a bed, and a fireplace. But one idea led to another, and the next thing I knew, I had built myself a habitat. Things just kept evolving.

-- Sam (A Storm Breaks paragraph 3)

**Importance:** When Sam first arrives on Bitter Mountain, he struggles to survive from one meal to the next, then from one day to the next, and then finally is able to stock enough food and supplies to last an entire season. As Sam's food stores evolve, so do his living arrangements, which grow to include everything from a writing desk to a water-powered sawmill. It is a sign of the encroachment of civilization onto the mountain, and while Sam can tolerate some of this, he cannot tolerate all of it – as evidenced by his later refusal to allow the mill to generate electricity.

I needed a little sister like Frightful needed vegetables.

-- Sam (The Population Shrinks paragraph 27)

**Importance:** When Alice decides she will stay on the mountain when the family leaves – and their parents let her – Sam is beside himself with annoyance. He does not want his little sister living with him, and compares his need of Alice to that of Frightful needing vegetables – not at all.

Bando has just showed me another solution to my problem. I can make Adirondack furniture and sell it.

-- Sam (A Trade Comes My Way paragraph 24)

**Importance:** With Frightful being confiscated, Sam worries about how he is going to be able to provide enough food for both he and his sister to eat. When Bando decides to go into the Adirondack furniture business, Sam realizes that his last-ditch resort will be to do the same, to work to earn money.

I'm leaving. Don't worry about me. I'll be just fine thanks to all you have taught me.

-- Alice (I Am In For a Surprise paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Alice's note of departure gives way to the mystery that will haunt Sam until he finds her: Why does Alice leave? Where is she going? Is she alright? It also annoys Sam that Alice would just leave without saying goodbye – but then he realizes that he essentially did the same thing to his family nearly two years before.

I glance up at my mountain. It's strong and beautiful, with the sun rising behind it... No matter from which direction you look, it's an inspiring sight. Why on earth would Alice want to leave?

-- Sam (I Am Sent East by Northeast paragraph 6)

**Importance:** When Sam first sets out to see if any of his neighbors knows what may have happened to Alice, Sam finds it difficult to believe that anyone would want to



willingly leave so beautiful a place as his mountain. But therein lies part of the problem: Sam considers it his mountain, and not something necessarily shared with Alice, which may explain in part why Alice left.

I never leave my mountain without food and gear for a week.  
-- Sam (Zella Makes Sense paragraph 89)

**Importance:** Sam is all about planning in advance, and preparing for any situation he may encounter. Even leaving his mountain is something he plans for, for he never knows when he may be back. He explains to Bando, as they set out, that he always keeps a week's worth of food and gear given any unforeseen circumstances that may prevent him from quickly returning to his home. It demonstrates just how far Sam has come from surviving meal to meal.

We're not only going to have to think like Alice, but also like a pig.  
-- Sam (I Learn to Think Like a Pig paragraph 69)

**Importance:** As Sam and Bando travel along, they come to realize that part of the path that Alice chooses to take, her pig is responsible for, rooting for food as he goes along. Sam and Bando realize they must think like a pig as well as a person if they are to accurately track and find Alice. This helps them to find Alice's various campsites, always located near significant sources of food.

Since she's not at this falls, she's doing something radically different.  
-- Sam (I Become Royalty paragraph 17)

**Importance:** As Sam and Bando follow Alice, they travel to the one spot she is mostly likely to be, and then discover she is not there at all. They realize she must be doing something very different than what she originally set out to do, and this alters the path that Sam and Bando take as well. They later learn that Alice's deviation has to do with meeting Hanni, and wanting to breed Crystal.

Ain't no fairgrounds in Livingstonville.  
-- All-Purpose Store customer (I Get News of Alice paragraph 13)

**Importance:** Sam and Bando stop for food and for information at an all-purpose store, and learn that there are no fairgrounds in Livingstonville, which is where Alice was supposedly headed next. They learn, instead, that there is a farm owned by the Monroes where a hog show is occurring, and Bando discovers the unusual hacking ad in the paper that will ultimately crack a poaching ring.

This is it, I say to myself, this has to be where Alice is.  
-- Sam (The Dawn Breaks Over Me paragraph 10)

**Importance:** As Sam arrives at Manorkill Falls, he believes he must have discovered the place where Alice has gone. He discovers her shelter and a stone wall she has constructed, and decides to wait around for her, but she never shows up. Instead, Sam



comes across a coyote with a dead falcon, which he later follows to discover a failed poaching meeting.

Some things become clear as I run. Frightful was stolen from me. And Bate, who must be that blue-and-brown-eyed man, is going to sell her to Skri at Beaver Corners. Hacking is just a code word that means Bate has birds to sell.

-- Sam (I Am On the Track paragraph 3)

**Importance:** As Sam makes his way towards the old church, he comes to realize several important things, most notably that Frightful was not actually confiscated from him, but stolen. Frightful is now part of the group of birds that stands to be sold, and Sam is racing against time to try to save Frightful.

Some humans think we have the right to be the only predators on earth.

-- Sam (A Bird Talks to Me paragraph 108)

**Importance:** Sam learns with sadness from Alice that the poachers have killed a coyote and her pups, and in addition to the poaching operation, Sam's opinion of people is dramatically lowered. He says, sadly, that people think they have the right to dominate all others, to be the only predators on earth, to conquer nature. Sam, however, believes that man must live in accord with nature, must be good stewards of nature, and must not misuse or abuse nature.