

# **The Old Man and the Boy Study Guide**

**The Old Man and the Boy by Robert Ruark**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Old Man and the Boy Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-6.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7-9.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 10-12.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13-15.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 16-18.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-21.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 22-24.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 25-26.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 27-28.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>

# Plot Summary

Bobby is a young boy growing up in South Carolina in the 1920s. He spends as much time as he can outdoors, and his grandfather teaches him how to hunt, fish, and be a gentleman. Over the years, Bobby becomes obsessed with hunting, and learns a lot of life lessons.

When Bobby is six, he gets an air rifle for Christmas, to learn to shoot with. This is taken away after he shoots a mockingbird. A few years later he is given a real 20-gauge rifle, and the Old Man, his grandfather, teaches him how to hunt quail with it. A few years later, the 20-gauge is upgraded to a shotgun, and Bobby hunts all over the county with his grandfather. Most of the local landowners will allow no one but the Old Man and Bobby to hunt on their property, and Bobby and the Old Man always share some of their catch with their hosts. Bobby also loves fishing, and since they live on a marshy coast, there is different fishing almost all year round.

The Old Man teaches Bobby that it is very important to be a gentleman. By this he does not mean that he wants Bobby to know about dinner party etiquette, or not to drink or swear. The Old Man wants Bobby to put others before himself and always respect the rights of others, whether they are an animal or human. The Old Man teaches Bobby that when duck hunting, all he has to do is follow the dogs, and let them do the hunting. Bobby hates school, but the Old Man wants him to know about the world around him, and tells him that he can not hunt if his grades do not get better. Bobby realizes, to his surprise, that he loves reading, and once he starts, his grades get a lot better. The Old Man also stresses the importance of conservation, seeing his prey as something which must be maintained, if it is to be harvested every year.

When Bobby is in high school, the Old Man realizes that he is dying, and he tells Bobby that he is proud of him. The Old Man has done what he could, and Bobby has grown up to be a gentleman who respects others, and takes care of the earth. Years later, Bobby fights in World War II, and then ends up hunting a lot on safari in Africa. He never forgets the lessons he learned from the hunters and fishermen who surrounded him in his youth, especially the wisdom of the Old Man.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

Bobby, a boy growing up in the 1920's, talks about his experiences with the Old Man, his grandfather. The Old Man shares the experiences of being a man with Bobby, while lecturing him on subjects from gun safety to ancient Greek history. The boy is overjoyed as the Old Man teaches him how to hunt quail, turtle eggs, and ducks.

Bobby spends the summers and holidays at his grandparents house in rural South Carolina. The boy is so interested in the lessons that he learns from the Old Man, that he rarely mentions other family members. When Bobby is eight years old, the Old Man gives him a gun, a little 20-gauge that the boy is intensely proud of. The Old Man tells Bobby that he must practice gun safety because Bobby's mother does not think he is old enough to be trusted with a gun, even a little one. In order to teach him lessons about gun safety, the Old Man does things like taking the gun away from the boy, and secretly reloading the gun, to teach Bobby to always check. The Old Man compares one's attitude in life to the way a bird dog behaves. He says that it is very important to train a bird dog to be a gentleman, and to act like a gentleman when hunting, or in life. When Bobby manages to bring down a quail, he is overjoyed. Afterward, the Old Man teaches him about cleaning and putting away his gun, and cautions him to never drink until after the hunting is over.

One day, the Old Man and Bobby are taking a walk, and Bobby suggests that they drive up to their shack and try to hunt a turtle laying eggs. They drive to a secluded beach where they have built a small cabin so close to the sea that the waves lap the door. Walking along the wet sand, the Old Man explains to the boy about Aphrodite, and cautions him not to mix up his mythologies. Soon they come to a set of turtle tracks, and follow them to a huge female turtle, weeping and laying eggs in the sand. Bobby decides to call her Aphrodite, to show that he was listening. Aphrodite deposits over a hundred eggs into a giant hole she has dug, and when she has buried her eggs, the Old Man tells Bobby to ride her back to the ocean. Bobby climbs on to the turtle's enormous, barnacle-encrusted shell, and rides her out to sea. Later, the boy and Old Man dig up a few of the eggs and cook them and eat them.

When Bobby is eleven, one day the Old Man takes back his little gun, infuriating the boy. Then Bobby finds a beautiful 16-gauge double-barreled gun with his name on it, a gift from the Old Man for going three years without shooting anyone. One evening, when the weather is cold and miserable, the Old Man suggests that they go duck hunting in the morning. He cautions Bobby that while hunting quail is all reflexes, shooting ducks involves ballistics. Bobby does not understand, so the Old Man tells him he will have to miss a few ducks before he will understand.

The boy and Old Man wake up in the frigid, late-night air, and eat a hearty, warm breakfast, to fortify them against the intense cold outside. They row a little skiff to a



good spot in the reeds, and hunker down, making a blind out of the reeds. It seems to Bobby like it will be forever until it is light enough to try shooting anything, although there are many ducks around them. Bobby is surprised that the ducks are falling for the Old Man's decoy's which seemed so fake to Bobby. Finally, it is light enough and the boy tries shooting at a huge mallard, but he just can not hit it. The Old Man explains that ballistics is why Bobby missed, and compares it to Bobby trying to squirt his cousin with the hose on a windy day. Then he tells him to aim far ahead of the duck, and the boy manages to finally hit one, although he falls out of the boat in the process. By the time the ducks stop coming at mid-morning, they have gotten many ducks, and Bobby is very proud of himself.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The Old Man treats Bobby like an adult who has not yet experienced many of the events of life. He does not talk down to him, but instead treats him like a man, so that Bobby will feel inspired to act like one. The Old Man knows that Bobby must learn certain lessons at some point, and sees no point in hiding the truth from the child, or sugar-coating things. Instead, he tells Bobby honestly about life and death, teaching him to be responsible by giving him responsibility. Just the same, the Old Man is a taskmaster, insisting that the child interact sensibly and respectably with the world around him. He watches Bobby to make sure that he is being safe with his gun, and when Bobby swears, the Old Man tells him that he must earn the right to swear by acting like a grown-up.

The experience with the turtle symbolizes Bobby's growing awareness of sexuality. Before going to see the turtle, the Old Man is telling him about squirrels in love, and warning him that the same principles apply to human love. The Old Man tells him never to lose his head over a woman. The Old Man says that Bobby has looked at enough things and immediately forgotten them. The Old Man wants to teach him to see things. Later, when they see the turtle laying her eggs, it does not seem strange to the child that he is watching something reproduce. The Old Man does not hide things like this from Bobby, and so Bobby sees the magic of the natural world. Although Bobby is too young still to experience sex, it is very symbolic that he climbs on top of Aphrodite and rides her out to sea. This symbolizes that he will soon hit puberty, underscoring the coming-of-age theme, as the Old Man passes on the wisdom of his many years.



# Chapters 4-6

## Chapters 4-6 Summary

The Old Man tells Bobby that summertime is not the time for hard work, or serious fishing. Instead, they should do easy fishing. They can get out of the women's way, and get outdoors, and maybe even catch some supper. They take out a cast net in order to catch some live shrimp for bait, and the Old Man teaches Bobby to use a cast net. After casting the net all morning, they go out in the boat and use the shrimp as bait, lazily trailing their lines in the water. The Old Man takes the opportunity to teach Bobby about life, telling him that it is important to come out and fish once in a while, because it makes it easy to think. After they have caught a whole boatload of fish, they go home, very tired and hungry. After they wash their hands and eat supper, the Old Man tells Bobby he must clean all the fish before going to bed, so they will not be wasted. When Bobby is ready to drop from exhaustion, having finally cleaned all the fish, the Old Man calls out that he had better take a bath before bed, since he reeks of fish.

In September, after all the summer tourists leave, the Old Man takes Bobby fishing for bluefish on weekends. The Old Man first takes him fishing the easy way, so that he will appreciate the good way. First, they go out on a fast-moving boat, trailing lines behind them, and the fish flock to the boat, soon dying from the speed of the boat. Although they catch a lot very fast, there is no sport in it. Later, the Old Man takes him to some shallow tide-pools to fish for bluefish on foot. They have to wrestle the large fish all the way to the shore, and it is an exciting fight. Bobby loves going to the little fishing cottage on the beach that they rent. Sometimes, they fish along with various international characters, who all like to fish together in the same cove. The boy gets something of an international education through his association with these fishermen, although none of them are cultured enough to be accepted in polite society.

The Old Man's friend Mr. Howard comes to visit from Maryland. He and the Old Man love to sit on the porch smoking, and laughing about old times. They put great effort into planning a hunting and camping trip, and as Bobby listens to their preparations, he desperately tries to be good so that they will want to take him hunting with them. When he can stand it no longer, Bobby asks if he can go with them, and the Old Man admits that he has been planning to take Bobby all along. They load up the old car with five people and six dogs, and go off for a week of roughing it and hunting. Bobby tries not to speak, in case they decide that he can not stay. They arrive at the campsite and set up tents and pine needle beds which are surprisingly warm and comfortable. Bobby can hardly believe how good the camping food tastes.

In the morning, they take Bobby on his first buck hunt. All he has to do is wait quietly for the dogs to flush out the deer, and then make sure it is a deer he his shooting and not another hunter. The boy freezes and watches the buck go by, and is ashamed that he did not even shoot at it. That afternoon, he goes squirrel hunting with one of the Indians who have come hunting with them, and they catch a dozen squirrels. This helps Bobby



feel better. Later that afternoon, they decide to try to get a deer again. The boy is waiting, and out of the blue comes a gigantic buck. When it is practically on top of him, Bobby shoots it, right in the heart. It is a huge, beautiful deer, and when the others come and see it, they all admire his wonderful catch. Then they slit open the belly of the deer and push the Boy's head into the deer's entrails, covering him in blood and goo. He is grossed out, but they tell him that this means that he is a man now. On the way back to the campsite, Bobby cries.

## Chapters 4-6 Analysis

Bobby, in retrospect, says that when the Old Man would lecture him, he eventually got pretty good at separating the philosophy from the meat, and ignoring the philosophy. The strange thing is, that as an adult, he remembers primarily the philosophy. This is similar to the way he says that he does not remember any specific fish from fishing with the international set, but he clearly remembers fishing with them. When he is a child, Bobby notices and cares about physical, sensory experiences of the world around him. As a man, he cares more about the life truths which are revealed through nature's patterns.

The narrator foreshadows a day far removed from his childhood, when he is living an exciting life, undreamed of in his young days on the Carolina beach. He comments that the Old Man is long dead. He also refers to a day, twenty-five years after killing his first buck, he experiences a similar feeling after shooting a buffalo on the African savanna. It seems that the Old Man, through his lessons of nature and hunting, has been trying to prepare the Boy for a day when he can use those skills in any environment, even without his grandfather.



# Chapters 7-9

## Chapters 7-9 Summary

Thanksgiving and Christmas are coming, and meat is expensive, so Miss Lottie, Bobby's grandmother, suggests that the menfolk go hunting for some turkeys. Bobby is very excited when he is allowed to go along on the hunt, along with their two Indian hunting buddies. They go along the road bordering the property of a rich man, who never hunts on his land. There are signs all over the property saying "No Hunting," so the group hunkers down directly across the street from the property. They do a turkey call, and soon enough, a large group of turkeys shows up. Bobby shoots the huge, dominant male, and all the other men also shoot various hens. The male that Bobby shoots turns out to be very tough, but there are enough hens to make everyone sick of eating turkey.

Bobby loves spending the holiday season with his grandparents. Miss Lottie and the cook make all kinds of delicious holiday foods, and Bobby goes hunting just about every day. He loves going on expeditions to get oysters, or fetch a Christmas tree, or get mistletoe from high in a pine tree.

One afternoon, the Old Man tells Bobby that he thinks Bobby is old enough to go hunting on his own. He sends Bobby to get some quail for dinner, and tells him to just do what the hunting dogs tell him to. The boy goes along with two old dogs, and sure enough, the dogs have good instincts, and he catches a lot of quail that day. The Old Man talks to him about the importance of training a dog just right, and also of disciplining a child when necessary. One day, the Old Man presents Bobby with an ugly, mangy puppy. The Old Man says that the puppy has an excellent pedigree, so they make medicine to get rid of the mange. All spring long, the Old Man has Bobby train the puppy, whom they name Tom, in the backyard, so that he will be obedient and useful. Finally, in late summer, they take the puppy hunting for the first time. Having never seen a quail, the dog excellently finds the quail, and instinctively knows how to be a good bird dog. Only once does Tom chase off after a rabbit, and then Bobby beats him with a switch, so that he will always be a quail hunting dog, not a rabbit hound.

Bobby hates spending time in school, and his grades reflect it. He wants to spend all his time outdoors, enjoying the wild natural world. He plays hooky a lot, and whenever he is outside is like a wild man. Finally, one day the Old Man tells him he needs to settle down some. The Old Man says that all young colts are crazy in the spring, and it is the same way for boys like him. The Old Man thinks that the thing to calm Bobby down is a boat. He and Bobby work on building the boat all spring long, and when summer comes, Bobby has a tiny, cheap but seaworthy boat named the Charlotte Morse. He spends the summer going around the islands off the coast of Carolina, exploring everywhere, and experiencing adventure every day. He hunts and fishes, and sometimes he even sells what he catches. He sees some scary things that summer too, that he does not tell the





Old Man about. By fall, Bobby has managed to mellow out a little, and his grades are better.

## Chapters 7-9 Analysis

The Old Man sees the boat as a sort of gateway to becoming a man. More than just the physical brutality of killing his first deer, the boat is a chance for Bobby to get to know himself, with no one around to tell him who he is. The Old Man knows that the Boy needs a chance to make decisions without asking anyone's permission, to go wherever he wants, and explore the world around him. Through finally being able to burn off some energy and listen to the stillness, Bobby learns to calm down and trust the wisdom inside himself. It is the wisdom that comes of observing the world around him, and taking the time to think about what it means. The Old Man is slowly but surely leading his steps to becoming a man.



# Chapters 10-12

## Chapters 10-12 Summary

One summer day, all the women in the house are in a flurry of cleaning, and this makes Bobby nervous, so he heads off to find the Old Man. He finds the Old Man sitting on the decrepit Cedar Bench with other old men, all of them sitting quietly on the dock. The Old Man wants to have a chance to talk with Bobby without disturbing the meditation of his friends, so he gets up and goes a little ways farther down the dock. He explains to Bobby the difference between true laziness, and meditative loafing. He points out that to a casual observer or a woman, he appears to be so lazy he might as well be dead. In reality, though, he is recovering from what he has been through, and storing up for what may come in the future. Laziness, on the other hand, is when a man has some work he is supposed to be doing, and he finds any and every excuse not to do it. The Old Man considers his loafing time to be a very special, valuable activity, and he understands that to do it correctly, with no one distracting him, he must do it away from the company of the women in his family. Bobby complains that no one seems to think it appropriate for boys to loaf, and that every time he gets a good loafing session started, Miss Lottie comes along with some chore she wants him to do, since he is sitting idly. The Old Man suggests that now that he is rested up, they should really get out of the women's hair, by going to their beachfront shack and repairing the damage done from some hurricanes. Bobby goes down to Uncle Jimmy's store to get some nails, and the sight of lazy Uncle Jimmy dozing on the job fills him with energy and motivation to get to work.

As Bobby gets older, he is filled with the sort of energy that makes him feel like he is going to pop. The Old Man takes him fishing, and lectures him a little before they hunker down in the required silence. The Old Man has been hearing about Bobby, how he and his friends like to ditch church to play dice in the basement, and he figures Bobby will get in trouble soon if he doesn't straighten his grandson out. The Old Man tells Bobby to just sit quietly, and think about how everything got there, and where Bobby will end up some day. As the boy sits in silence, he thinks about the universe and life and God and Heaven and Hell, and he starts to feel very lonely and very small. He feels that since God took all the trouble to make this beautiful world, even Bobby himself, Bobby had better show some respect. The Old Man explains to him that now he has learned humility.

In addition to the constant hunting and fishing, Bobby also loves to spend his summers playing baseball and going to camp revival meetings. The Old Man and boy participate in the white meetings, with their confessions of sins, and square dancing, but Bobby prefers sitting on the sidelines at the black revivals. He loves hearing the loud music, and watching people get the Spirit. The Old Man and Bobby like to go fishing on Sundays, but only the kind of fishing that is not any work, since it is the Lord's Day. The Old Man says that the fish don't know what day it is, and it beats driving around the countryside, with the whole family crammed into the car in their church clothes.



Now that Bobby is almost old enough for high school, he has a crush on his young teacher, Carrie Mae Knight. Carrie Mae is an impressive, effective teacher. Even though some of the men in her class are older than she is, Carrie Mae is not afraid to punch a student who gets fresh with her. She reads aloud exciting books to the students, and tells them about how she is taking flying lessons. One day, Carrie Mae tells Bobby that he has an important visitor, the Old Man. The Old Man has explained to her that it is the first day of dove hunting season, and he really wants to take Bobby hunting. The Old Man invites Carrie Mae to dinner to make up for it. She lets Bobby go, and after missing many birds, he manages to get a decent number of doves. The next evening, Carrie Mae eats three whole doves.

## Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Although the Old Man often lectures on morality, in these chapters especially a picture of the Old Man's moral code emerges. He considers good manners to be very important, especially when doing activities which seem far removed from polite society, like hunting. For instance, the Old Man can not stand hunting with someone who tries to hog all the birds. To the Old Man, it is not a competition to get the most birds, and besides, he usually shares what he catches with anyone who can eat it before it goes bad. The Old Man also frowns upon excessive swearing, and thinks it is socially acceptable to punch someone for swearing in front of a lady. The Old Man has learned over many years to respect nature and the One who made it, and so he sees the natural world as a kind of holy thing, for which he and all hunters, are the stewards. This does not keep him from doing his best to poach, but he only poaches in areas where the animals are overpopulated.

When Bobby remembers back to how he loved the music of the black revival meetings, he compares it to African music he hears years later. It is clear that his wild childhood will lead to an adulthood that craves adventure, finding an even bigger backyard to explore.



# Chapters 13-15

## Chapters 13-15 Summary

Bobby talks about how much he loves the month of October, when the weather is just starting to get cold, and Christmas seems just around the corner. The Old Man and the boy hunt squirrels, and give them to various folks around the county who have a lot of children to feed. The Old Man carefully cultivates long-standing friendships with all the landowners, black and white, bringing them meat, and giving them grain on credit, and in return, they all give him exclusive hunting rights to their land. The Old Man makes sure that he never hunts a single group of animals too much, so they will always be there the next year. He also does what he can to help take care of the property he hunts on, bringing any vermin to the landowner for supper. Sometimes rich hunters from outside the area try to come quail hunting, but the farmers always tell these hunters that they have no quail. They do not want someone thinning out the flock too much. Bobby also loves the oyster roasts the people have around Christmas, eating as many oysters as they possibly can. Bobby reminisces some more about all the food he likes so much. On bigger camping trips, the men even take an ex-con with them as a camping chef.

Once, when Bobby is six years old, he gets an air rifle to learn to shoot with. He loves killing any birds he can hit, and he also plays recklessly in the woods with his friends. He notes that it is a miracle that he does not shoot his eye out. One day, Bobby kills a mockingbird that has always sung at night. To teach him that hunting is not just about killing anything he can, the Old Man tells him to think about the dead mockingbird, and then the Old Man breaks Bobby's gun in half. This teaches the boy to have some caution, and not just shoot at anything that moves.

Bobby remembers the happiest month of his entire childhood, when an epidemic of measles and whooping cough closes his school down for a solid month in December. Bobby spends all day, every day hunting by himself, with one dog. He gets ducks, doves, squirrels, and rabbits, each day cleaning and dressing his kills, and although he tires himself out each day, he feels like he is in heaven. When the Old Man asks him what he wants for Christmas, Bobby says that this month has been better than any Christmas present he could ever get, and the only thing he needs is more shotgun shells. On Christmas morning, Bobby is so excited about hunting that he forgets it is Christmas, and goes hunting instead.

One day Bobby tells the Old Man that he needs to get a horse, since all the cowboys in the adventure stories he reads have them. The Old Man tells him that a horse is far more responsibility than he can handle, and besides, he already has a bike. Bobby is not convinced, so the Old Man tells him that they will get him a goat to practice on, and if that goes well, he can think about getting a horse. They go buy a goat for five dollars, and build a cart for him to pull. Bobby quickly discovers that Billy (the goat) is the most ornery, stubborn creature to ever walk the face of the earth. The first thing the goat does is attack the cow. When Bobby and the Old Man wrestle Billy into the harness for the



cart, the goat lies down. Since the goat is too stubborn to go through the gate of the cow pen, Bobby just throws the goat over the fence every day. They try for three months to break the goat, and Billy never for a second lets go of his true hatred for the humans. Finally, they take Billy back to where he came from, and the Old Man asks Bobby if he still wants to get a horse. Bobby answers that he is far too exhausted from the goat for anything like that, and that instead, he will go fishing now. The Old Man says that there is wisdom in a man recognizing that he can not be an expert in everything.

## Chapters 13-15 Analysis

As much as the Old Man believes in enjoying things, he stresses the importance of not overdoing it. While overeating simply leads to indigestion, overdoing other activities can have serious consequences. The Old Man many times has to explain to his grandson that they must not over-hunt one group of animals, because then there will be none left for next year. This is the same reason why the local landowners will not allow other hunters on their land. They know that the big city hunters may have no concept of hunting animals to extinction. When Bobby lives his heavenly month of epidemic vacation, the Old Man tells him that it is a good thing that he is running out of shotgun shells. The Old Man points out that if Bobby doesn't go back to school soon, there will be no animals left in the county. Just as too much hunting can lead to no more hunting ever, so also trying to specialize in too many things can spread a person out so that they do not accomplish anything. The Old Man knows, that despite Bobby's boundless energy, he is not yet ready to take care of a horse. He uses the goat to teach Bobby the lesson that some projects are just bound for failure, and that he should know when to walk away. By concentrating on what he can do well, Bobby can act with excellence.

It is interesting to note that, in this book written in the 1950s, certain cultural ideas were prevalent, which have made their way into the common consciousness of the modern generation. This book was published long before Harper Lee told everyone that it is wrong to kill a mockingbird in her famous novel. In "To Kill a Mockingbird," a child learns that it is wrong to kill simply for the sake of killing. Bobby is also excited about trying to be a cowboy like those he has read about in books. He comments that he is surprised that he and his friends did not shoot an eye out with their air rifles. This will seem familiar to any readers who have seen the movie "A Christmas Story," in which the main character desperately wants a Red Rider air rifle, but is warned that he will shoot his eye out. In the modern era, most children learn more about popular culture from movies and television than from books, and such readers may note with surprise that they recognize some of the ideas in "The Old Man and the Boy."



# Chapters 16-18

## Chapters 16-18 Summary

In the late spring, all the children go crazy waiting for summer to arrive. The world is ripe with the promise of summer, and Bobby loves the way everything smells. The Old Man tells him that this is the time of year for walking in the woods and just watching, rather than hunting. The Old Man says that if Bobby listens carefully, he may hear an ancient god, like Pan. The Old Man tells Bobby about all kinds of myths from around the world, and though Bobby hates school, he thinks that the Old Man probably knows just about everything. Bobby and the Old Man put several days' effort into maintaining a network of caves that Bobby likes to play and hide in. Each summer, Bobby thinks about going to camp, but he worries too much about what he will miss here in Carolina. There are too many wonderful expeditions to go on, so he feels no need to go find out about roughing it at summer camp.

One day the Old Man asks Bobby if he wonders why the Old Man spends so much time and effort educating him. Bobby does not know how to answer, and the Old Man goes on to ask him what he wants to be when he grows up. Bobby does not know that either, but instead offers to show his grandfather something that he has not showed to anyone else. Bobby warns him first that it is silly, and he will probably laugh at it, then takes the Old Man to a big tree, where he has built a great tree house high in the tree. He has stocked it with everything he thinks he might want, complete with furniture and weapons he has made himself. Instead of laughing, the Old Man is very impressed, and says that he wishes he had a tree house like this. Then he tells Bobby that this answers his earlier question, about why he bothers to educate Bobby in the ways of life. This makes Bobby feel very good.

Bobby grows up in the company of various rough men around the town, and he feels that they do a wonderful job teaching him about the world, and about how to be a man. He thinks that the best part is that they treat him like a man, while taking care of him like he is a boy. Sometimes the men of the Coast Guard take Bobby out in their boat to chase down bootleggers and confiscate their whiskey. Bobby loves to fish with the locals, and they all breathe a sigh of relief after Labor Day, when the tourists finally go home, and they have the whole beach to themselves for fishing. The Old Man and Bobby also hunt for various birds in the marshes together.

The Old Man says that November is his favorite month, because it is like his phase in life. He figures that he has gotten old enough that he doesn't have to try so hard anymore, and he has already learned all that he is going to learn, but he has a few years left in him to enjoy life, much like November leads to December. The Old Man feels that he has learned to pace himself now, and knows what to expect in life. To Bobby, however, the best part about November is quail season. He can hardly stand the breathless anticipation of waiting to shoot the first quail of the season, and thinks it is worse than waiting for Christmas.



## Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Bobby's experiences as a youth with the Coast Guard whet his appetite for exciting adventures on the ocean. Hearing stories of faraway ports and sailors' brawls makes Bobby eager to go with them on their patrols. He foreshadows that years later he will be a seaman in Europe, as a result of the preferences he develops as a child. Conveniently, Bobby's cousin Victor is an executive on a big shipping line, so he watches out for Bobby. It is only natural that he wants to be a man by boating, because he is allowed to really feel like a man in the company of these fishermen and Coast Guard officers.



# Chapters 19-21

## Chapters 19-21 Summary

The Old Man tells Bobby that February is the best time of year to hunt quail. Bobby is surprised, since the weather is absolutely miserable, and the best quail hunting is always in November. The Old Man says that this is something that separates the men from the boys, whether one does something when it is easy, or does something when everyone else says that it cannot be done. He tells Bobby that in wet February, the quail are unhappy enough to stay in one predictable place, and easy to shoot. Bobby does not want to go out in the rain, but he does, and goes to the place that the Old Man suggests to him. Not only does he find a covey of quail right away, but with his first shot, he brings down six birds! That day, he ends up getting far more quail than he expends bullets, and he has to concede that the Old Man is right about hunting quail in February.

March is the month when there is no hunting to do, and too early for fishing, and the weather is not nice enough to enjoy. Bobby has cabin fever, but the Old Man tells him to calm down and think back on his experiences. The Old Man likes to spend March reminiscing, so he tells Bobby to tell him about a day he was really happy. Bobby talks about how the geese quickly learn to stay out of reach until the legal time of day for hunting them is over, and then go feed in the corn, knowing that no one can shoot at them until the next day. Bobby is sure that one day the geese will come early, so he waits, day after day, in a blind he makes near the cornfield. Finally, one day the geese come early, and Bobby shoots both of his shotguns in a row, bringing in four geese almost simultaneously. He is so proud of what he has done, that he drives the Old Man crazy with bragging. He considers this to be way better than getting six quail in one shot, because the quail are an accident, and the four geese are planned, and executed with skill.

Bobby likes hunting so much that he even likes duck hunting. The Old Man says that one has to be crazy to be a duck hunter. The meat is not that good, and the weather for good duck hunting is terrible. The birds can easily see the hunters in clear weather, but in bad weather, their sight is not so good, so it is easy to get the ducks. When they see a forlorn young duck that has lost its mother, the Old Man makes noises like a mother duck, and the orphaned duck comes straight for them. The Old Man always insists that if they can tell the males from the females, they never hunt female animals.

## Chapters 19-21 Analysis

It is evident that Bobby is an excellent hunter. Even though he is still a child, he hunts in circumstances where others would say it can not be done. His six quail in one shot sounds like something out of a Paul Bunyan tale. Bobby has not gained such skill by being lazy. When he shoots the four geese, the only reason he is there to shoot them is because he has been sitting silently in a blind for hours each day, waiting for the geese.





While it seems that he has shot all the geese in an extremely short period of time, it has really taken him many days. These lessons, about hard work, perseverance, and patience, will serve him well throughout his life, but as a young boy, he thinks only of the rush and of his bragging rights.



# Chapters 22-24

## Chapters 22-24 Summary

When Bobby gets his report card one year, his family is very disappointed to see his bad grades. Bobby just can not seem to apply himself to Chaucer and Algebra. Bobby finds the old English of Chaucer to be nonsense, and he does not see how algebra has any real-world application. The Old Man tells him that when he is in college, he can decide what he wants to study, but for now he has to finish high school. Bobby answers that he would be happy working on a fishing boat all his life. The Old Man says that a person never knows what knowledge will come in handy in the future, so he should try to cram as much knowledge into his head as he can. The Old Man also says that if Bobby's grades do not get better, they will not be hunting quail in the fall.

Bobby thinks quite a bit about the Old Man's threat. He hopes that he is a person who is smart enough to handle life, and he starts thinking about all the things he already knows. He realizes that he knows quite a bit about the world, and most of it is his grandfather's wisdom. However, Bobby realizes that he learned a lot of this knowledge on his own. He starts to think about it, and he wonders what would happen if he put as much effort into schoolwork as he does into hunting and fishing. He decides that Chaucer and algebra can not possibly be any harder than some of the hunting feats he has accomplished. After this, Bobby has a transformation. He throws himself into his schoolwork, and to his surprise, he finds that he likes knowing about all those things. He also discovers the fun of reading, not just children's adventure stories, but all kinds of books. He even memorizes parts of the "Canterbury Tales." Now that Bobby's mind has been opened, he can not get enough of education. He wants to know not just when and where, but how and why.

The Old Man and Bobby like to go coon hunting once in a while with a group of men, and they run around in the woods acting crazy all night. The men get drunk, and the hounds run around willy-nilly, and rarely does the hunting party bring back a raccoon. After finally catching a possum, the group heads back to a hunting cabin to talk and eat and brag all night long. They often break out in fights, and they talk about other exciting hunting trips they have been on. The men make a lot of noise, and Bobby starts to hear music in everything around him. From the sounds that men make while they are working hard, to the little noises of the animals, all is music to Bobby's ears.

Since the weather is nasty and Bobby's grandmother is busy cleaning the house, the Old Man and Bobby flee to the pool hall, just to get away. It seems that all the women in town are also cleaning, for the poolroom is crowded with refugee men. While they watch men play pool the Old Man explains to Bobby that it is necessary to use reverse psychology on women. He says that women so love to go against a man, that they will find something to complain about any plan a man makes. Since the rain has stopped, Bobby suggests that they go fishing for the weekend, and that they repair their fishing shack. The Old Man agrees, but tells Bobby not to say anything.



When they go back, Miss Lottie scolds the Old Man for taking the boy into a poolroom, with all those bad influences. The Old Man apologizes, then gets out his fishing gear and lays it out all over the clean carpet. When Miss Lottie asks him what he is doing, he tells her that he is cleaning his fishing equipment, and he might as well have Bobby clean the guns too, while he is at it. Miss Lottie tells him to get that stuff off her clean carpet, and please just go off and fish and repair his shack or something. The Old Man says that he does not think it is such a good idea, what with the nasty weather and everything, and so Miss Lottie packs a picnic basket for them, and pushes them out the door to go fishing. As they leave, she winks at Bobby, and he realizes that she wanted fresh fish all along.

One year, the Old Man finally decides to invest in a small commercial fishing boat, which he captains. The boat fishes for pogie, greasy fish that are no good to eat, but make great fertilizer or animal feed. Bobby's job is to stand in the crow's nest of the ship, and search for schools of fish. The Old Man tells him to imagine that he is Captain Ahab looking out for Moby Dick, and the boy loves it. In addition to pogie, they catch various other ocean creatures like sharks, dolphins, and porpoises. The Old Man tells Bobby that he comes from a long line of sailors, and it looks like Bobby has the love of the sea in his blood too.

## Chapters 22-24 Analysis

The Old Man tries to use reverse psychology, thinking that he can out-think his wife, but it is she who fools him. The Old Man thinks that he has fooled Miss Lottie into allowing him and Bobby to go fishing for the weekend, and that he has even gotten her to bribe him with food. In reality, Miss Lottie knows all along what their plan is, and fully intends to get them out of her way, by sending them away for a few days. Another time, Bobby remarks that the Old Man has owned his pipe as long as he has owned Miss Lottie. Then the boy corrects himself, saying that more likely, Miss Lottie owns the Old Man. The Old Man and Lottie have been married long enough that they have learned all of each other's habits, and know just how to handle one another.



# Chapters 25-26

## Chapters 25-26 Summary

One Sunday morning, the Old Man tells Bobby that the time has come for Bobby to start teaching the Old Man about life. Bobby answers that everything he knows, he learned from the Old Man. The Old Man asks him what sticks out the most of everything over the years, and Bobby bashfully tells him that politeness is the message that sank in the best. The Old Man laughs and asks him what he means. Bobby explains that he is not talking about saying the right words, or following intricate rules for dining. Instead, he points out that the Old Man has always taught him never to yell at someone else's dog, never to hog all the birds when hunting with others, and to respect the dignity of all people, regardless of their race or station in life. The Old Man tells him that there is a time and a place for every sort of behavior. He says that the only thing that is important to him is that Bobby not turn out to have a noble character. By "noble character," he means someone who thinks he is better than others, and can tell them what to do. Finally, the Old Man suggests that they go fishing, and pretend that they were in church. Bobby sneaks off to get the fishing gear without Miss Lottie catching him. He and his grandfather agree that fishing is better than going to Sunday School, and also that graveyards are better than Sunday School, because they are more cheerful.

One beautiful day, the Old Man tells Bobby that he resents him that day, because he is a boy. The Old Man remembers being a boy, and sees what it is like for Bobby, and envies what he can never have again. The Old Man tells him not to look forward to next Christmas, because he will be six months older by then, and it will be six months he can never get back. The Old Man tells him to make sure he pays attention to everything he experiences, even bad things like detention or being sick. The Old Man feels death is on the way, and so he tells his grandson to enjoy life as it comes, because he can never get the time back.

Bobby thinks about what the Old Man has said, and it really troubles him. He sees the Old Man walking down the street, shoulders slumped, and he realizes that the Old Man is getting really old, and then Bobby realizes that he, too, is aging, and is nearly a man. He thinks about the way he lives his life, always waiting for hunting season or Christmas or fishing season or summer vacation, and he starts to feel that he is going through life without noticing it, without looking around himself. Since the Old Man always advises him to go fishing when he needs to think, he gets out his fishing supplies and heads off to the marsh. The marsh is beautiful and teeming with life. Bobby loves the rich smell of it, a combination of earth, rotting vegetation, and sea. The song of the birds is like a symphony, and the boy fishes all afternoon. Bobby forgets all his troubles and grill himself a meal of fresh fish and clams right on the beach. When he gets home, he goes for a swim, and then carries his tired body up to the porch, where the Old Man is smoking a pipe. The Old Man tells him to wash up for supper, since he knows that the boy is constantly hungry. The Old Man says that he got to thinking about it, and he



changed his mind. He does not want to be a boy again, because growing up is too much work.

## Chapters 25-26 Analysis

When Bobby is thinking about how he goes through life, always waiting for the next exciting phase of his life, he remembers how his grandfather says that some people go their entire lives with their eyes open, but unable to see a thing. He says that there are wonderful things worth looking at in any specimen of nature, from a bird to a clam, but many people would never know that. Later, when Bobby is enjoying fishing in the marsh, he is looking at the different kinds of birds. Although as a small child he would kill any songbird that came within range, he points out that now he does not even bother to kill certain species of birds anymore, because they are not good meat, and he likes to watch them walk around in the water. This shows that the Old Man's teaching has really sunk in. Bobby has gone from a bloodthirsty child, wanting to catch and kill as many animals as possible, to a young man who catches enough for food, but can appreciate the value of simply watching the glory of nature around him.

When the Old Man asks Bobby to teach him something, it marks a turning point in their relationship. The Old Man finally sees Bobby as a person mature enough and wise enough to have something worth saying about the world, and the Old Man wants to know that wisdom before he dies. Bobby is wise enough to go fishing and enjoy nature for what it is, and although the Old Man sometimes wishes he could go back and live it all over again, he knows that his life is coming to a close soon.



# Chapters 27-28

## Chapters 27-28 Summary

One day in September, the Old Man is complaining about how things are not the way they used to be. These new-fangled flappers and kids in their cars, dancing the Charleston, smarting off to their elders, remind him of the way things used to be. He hates Prohibition, and thinks that the bootleg liquor and moonshine have a more negative effect on people than real wine and good alcohol. He especially talks about all kinds of foods that people used to be able to get for cheap, which now are unavailable or illegal due to over-hunting. As an example, the Old Man points out how terrapins used to cost five cents apiece back in the day, and so every important dinner party and political event had terrapin stew as the main course. As a result, terrapins are rare in the area, and hard to find. Terrapin stew is ten dollars for a quart, and three-fifty a bowl in a restaurant. It is also hard to make since one of the ingredients is cooking sherry. Another food that is hard to get these days is buffalo hump, since the buffaloes have been hunted so much for their hides. Birds that have become rare, like the canvasback, have become illegal to buy and sell, and so have quail. The Old Man also bemoans the death of the free lunch in bars, offered to get patrons to come buy drinks.

The Old Man is not feeling very well, and so he suggests to Bobby that they take a road trip up to Maryland. The Old Man needs to go to Johns Hopkins Hospital for some examinations, and they also plan to visit Mr. Howard, the Old Man's friend, who lives in Maryland. Bobby is very excited, because he gets out of school for a week, and because he has heard so much about Maryland, and can not wait to see this exotic land to the north. Bobby drives the old car, and when they get to Maryland, they go to eat dinner at a hotel. The Old Man tells Bobby that money works just as well as friendship, when one is in a strange land, and he whispers his order to the waiter, slipping him some money. The waiter smiles, and soon comes back with wine disguised as tea, and some terrapin stew. It is Bobby's first real drink, and when the canvasback is served, they have another glass of wine. The Old Man drives the rest of the way to Mr. Howard's house, and puts the boy to bed.

The next morning, Bobby wakes up with his first hangover, and the old men make fun of him for passing out the night before. Bobby looks around at Mr. Howard's house, decorated everywhere with guns and horses and dogs, and thinks that this is one of the most wonderful places in the world. There are also all different kinds of animals outside in pens, and Maryland is truly beautiful. It is exactly the opposite of the terrain he has grown up with. They decide to go pheasant hunting. Bobby is shocked by the first pheasant he encounters, and totally misses the bird when he shoots at it. Soon he gets better, and his first pheasant is a great source of pride. They spend the week hunting with Mr. Howard and some friends.

On the way back to Carolina, the Old Man keeps asking Bobby to stop at creeks that have special memories for him, and he wants to look at all his familiar trees again. He



tells Bobby that he is dying. He tells Bobby that now Bobby will be the Old Man, because he will have no one to steer him, and will have to steer himself. The Old Man promises his grandson that he will not die on the opening day of hunting season.

## Chapters 27-28 Analysis

Bobby says that he knows that Mr. Howard's house remains in his memory, just as it was when he and the Old Man visited it. In his memory, the dream house never rots, never has pipes burst, never has a mortgage, and is never repossessed by the bank. He does not clarify whether or not these things really happened, or whether he is just referring to the fact that all things get old and pass away. This imagery is a metaphor for the Old Man dying. Bobby and the Old Man both seem to know that it is the Old Man's last autumn, and they try to cherish the time, even though the doctor has not yet given the diagnosis.

In his trip to Maryland, Bobby has finally crossed the threshold of manhood, and he symbolically drinks to show it. Now he is old enough to get along without his grandfather's guidance, and the Old Man knows that he has done a good job educating his grandson. The Old Man is proud of how Bobby follows in his footsteps, living respectfully toward people and nature, and hunting and fishing whenever he gets a chance. He is leaving behind a legacy.



# Characters

## The Old Man

Bobby calls his grandfather "the Old Man," but never to his face. The Old Man will not put up with being called old, so Bobby calls him "Sir" to his face. The Old Man has been through a lot in life, including World War I, and he has seen a lot of the world. He takes it upon himself to educate Bobby in the ways of the world, but he always stresses that they must act like gentlemen. He teaches Bobby careful gun safety, and he does not put up with any foolish mistakes concerning guns. The Old Man is filled with philosophy, which he attempts to inflict on Bobby when Bobby is a captive audience. The Old Man sees a lot of value in drinking and smoking and swearing, but only in appropriate circumstances. The Old Man likes to do others a good turn, because he knows that people will be kind to him in return. He often enjoys teasing Bobby, for instance by getting him an obstinate billy goat when Bobby wants a horse. The Old Man considers loafing to be an important activity in life, not a sign of laziness. He thinks loafing is for recovering from what he has been through and storing up for later.

## Bobby

Bobby is the narrator and main character. Since Bobby is a nickname for Robert, it is likely that Bobby is Robert Ruark, the author, and this is simply an account of Ruark's memories of his grandfather. Early on, Bobby is desperately excited to start hunting and fishing, and using a real gun. The Old Man comments that Bobby is a bloodthirsty savage, but then he says that all boys are bloodthirsty savages, so there is hope. Although Bobby would happily kill every animal in sight, the Old Man makes him hunt conservatively, and tells him to go fishing to quiet his thoughts. Once he settles down and thinks about things, Bobby learns some humility, and gains a reverence for the wonders of nature. Bobby loves being outdoors, even in miserable weather, and after a day's hard work in the sun, his body is worn out, but his appetite rears its head and roars. Bobby loves soul food so much, and he comments many times on how much better everything tastes cooked over a campfire. Eventually, Bobby calms down a little and remembers all the philosophy taught him as a child by his grandfather.

## Miss Lottie

Miss Lottie is Bobby's grandmother, married to the Old Man. The Old Man thinks he can fool her, but really she just fools him.

## Mr. Howard

Mr. Howard is an old childhood friend of the Old Man. He lives in Maryland and Bobby and his grandfather go visit Mr. Howard just before the Old Man's death.





## **Tom the Indian**

Tom and his brother hunt with the Old Man and Bobby a lot, and in their spare time they make moonshine, and drink moonshine.

## **Pete the Indian**

Pete is Tom's brother, and the two seem to be interchangeable. They are great for hunting and Bobby appreciates that they treat him like a man.

## **Uncle Jimmy**

Uncle Jimmy runs the general store in town. He is so lazy that he just sends customers into the store, and tells them to leave the correct money on the counter.

## **Carrie Mae Knight**

Carrie Mae is Bobby's teacher in high school, and he has a crush on her. Carrie Mae is pretty, but not afraid to punch an unruly student.

## **Joe**

Joe is another hunter that the Old Man does not want to hunt with anymore, because Joe always hogs all the birds.

## **Abner McCoy**

Abner is a poor farmer with fourteen children to feed. He is happy to let the Old Man and Bobby hunt on his land, because they always share the meat with him.

## **Cousin Roy**

Roy is Bobby's cousin, and almost the same age. Bobby is surprised that they did not shoot each other as children.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Rural South Carolina**

The whole book takes place in rural South Carolina, by the ocean. Bobby loves hunting in the marshes and coasts.

### **Maryland**

Mr. Howard is from Maryland, and the Old Man goes there for his last hunting trip.

### **Crabcake Shack**

Bobby and the Old Man have an old shack that they use for camping when they want to fish on the beach.

### **Fishing Cottage**

Sometimes the Old Man rents a cottage next to the beach, where they go when they are dead tired from fishing all day.

### **Bobby's Tree House**

Bobby builds an amazing tree house, and the Old Man is very impressed with it.

### **Aphrodite the Turtle**

When Bobby and the Old Man get to see a giant sea turtle lay her eggs, Bobby names her Aphrodite, because she came out of the sea.

### **Billy the Goat**

When Bobby wants to get a horse, the Old Man suggests that he practice taking care of a goat first. Billy is so stubborn and hateful that Bobby changes his mind about the horse.



## **School**

Bobby hates going to school, because he wants to be constantly outdoors. However, when he finally learns to read for enjoyment, and puts some effort into his schoolwork, his grades get a lot better.

## **Bobby's Air Rifle**

The Old Man breaks Bobby's first gun in half after the child kills a mockingbird.

## **Bobby's 20-gauge Rifle**

Bobby is ecstatic when he gets his 20-gauge rifle, and the Old Man teaches him gun safety with it.

## **Bobby's Shotgun**

Bobby gets the shotgun after going three years without shooting anyone with his 20-gauge rifle.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

The book starts out focusing on Bobby's early childhood, and although it is not told in strictly chronological order, it generally progresses toward adulthood. The first symbol of Bobby's increasing maturity is that he gets more powerful guns as he shows that he can handle them, and not kill someone in an accident. At the beginning, Bobby thinks that the Old Man knows everything about the world, yet Bobby wants to ignore the philosophy, and just concentrate on what he can learn about hunting and fishing. As he grows, Bobby is trusted with hunting on his own, and he starts doing some of the jobs that his grandfather typically does. His coming of age is especially symbolized when he climbs on the back of Aphrodite, the sea turtle, and rides her out to sea. Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of sexual love, and Bobby rides the turtle right after she lays her eggs. This represents that he is no longer in the same category as the babies, but can join the ranks of the parents. When Bobby is talking with the Old Man about the passage of time, the Old Man says, "Time just seems to fly away for a boy. That, I s'pose, is why one day you wake up suddenly and you ain't a boy any longer" (Chapter 16, p. 191). At the end, when the Old Man finally dies, he tells Bobby that now is the time for him to take his role as a grown-up, to pass on his knowledge some day to another boy. The title represents this dichotomy, as though there is no intermediate ground between "Old Man" and "Boy."

## Things that Pass Away

Toward the end of the book, the Old Man starts focusing on things that pass away, or things that no longer exist. This represents how he knows he is dying, and that he, too, will pass away soon. He wants Bobby to know that he must appreciate things while he has them, because they will not be around forever. To illustrate this, he tells Bobby how popular terrapin stew used to be, and how cheap. So many people made terrapin stew that now there are very few terrapins left, making the price of terrapin stew skyrocket. In addition, terrapin stew is made with sherry, which was made illegal in the days of Prohibition. Yet even Prohibition passed away. The Old Man spends some time reminiscing about old things that are no longer available, and says, "Boy, you know you're getting old when you start saying, 'Things ain't like they used to be'" (Chapter 27, p. 284).

Bobby's restlessness also manages to pass away eventually. Once he gives in to education, he finds that he loves reading the thoughts that other men put on paper long ago. The Old Man says to him, "If they keep exposing you to education, you might even realize some day that man becomes immortal only in what he writes on paper, or hacks into rocks, or slabbers onto a canvas, or pulls out of a piano" (Chapter 17, p. 196). The Old Man wants Bobby to understand that all of this wisdom must be passed on, either by transmitting the knowledge to a younger ear, or by writing it down so many people



can learn from it. This is exactly what Bobby end up doing, by becoming a writer. It is valuable to the reader that Bobby decided not to let his grandfather's wisdom pass away, but instead held on to it so many people can learn from it. Although the Old Man dies at the end of the book, life continues, and Bobby shares the Old Man with each of his readers.

## Respect for Nature

The most important lesson that the Old Man imparts to Bobby is respect for nature. Living in the country, they are surrounded by nature, but they do not take it for granted. The Old Man is always telling Bobby how important it is not to kill too many animals from any one group, and he is richly rewarded when the next year brings even more babies. Because of the Old Man's careful stewardship, most of the landowners in the county will allow no one except the Old Man to hunt on their property. The Old Man always makes sure that Bobby understands how dangerous nature can be, and then lets him loose to enjoy it.

In South Carolina in the 1920s, "It was kind of a point of honor to go somewhere to spend several days living off the land" (Chapter 13, p. 159). Everyone in the area understands how important nature is, and even those who are less obsessed than Bobby enjoy roughing it. Bobby's love for nature is apparent in the many times when he refers to how cold, or tired, or wind-burned he can get, and still be having the time of his life. Bobby's grandfather teaches him how important it is to not kill for fun, on one occasion going so far as to break the boy's gun. After Bobby knows all about fishing and hunting, the Old Man tells him to try just sitting and watching, to see all the wonderful things that emerge. Bobby is enchanted by the way the woodland animals approach them when they sit quietly for long enough. It is obvious that Bobby will never let go of his love and respect for nature.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told from a first-person point of view, probably the author's. Ruark does not reveal until about halfway through the book what the name of the boy is, and when he does make a reference to "Bobby," it becomes apparent that Bobby is Robert Ruark himself. Other details, like the fact that Bobby wants to be a writer some day, indicate that this is autobiographical, but it is never obvious. The revealing of the identity of the narrator goes along with the narrator growing and becoming more aware of the world around him, so it is almost as though he gains the identity as he ages. As a small child, there is no need to identify the narrator as "Bobby" or "Robert Ruark," because to a small child, the entire world revolves around them. It does not even occur to childish Bobby to identify himself, because all that the reader needs to know is that he is the Boy in the story. As the boy gains more awareness of the world around him, individuals are given names, and as Bobby comes to understand their relationship to himself, the relationships of the characters are slowly revealed, reflecting the child's consciousness. For instance, the Old Man and Miss Lottie are introduced as characters long before the reader knows that they are Bobby's grandparents.

Although Bobby is describing his childhood, the narration indicates that he is telling his memories as an adult, because he often makes reference to something that happens later in his life. He comments that the singing of the black church revivals reminds him years later of African groups singing, and he talks about how his childhood experiences with the Coast Guard prepared him for sailing in Europe. Most importantly, Bobby knows from the beginning that the Old Man is going to die at the end of the story.

## Setting

The book is set in rural South Carolina, in the 1920s. Although there are some parts that happen indoors, the important action is all outdoors, because Bobby and his grandfather so dearly love hunting and fishing. There are farm fields and muddy country roads, and forests, marshes and beaches. They live along the coast, so they all eat seafood year round. Bobby has the entire world (within walking distance) as his playground, and he uses it with abandon. He has a network of caves to play in, and he builds a great tree house high in a tree. Although the weather gets cold enough to freeze, there is not much snow, and it does not get too hot there, because of the ocean. When Bobby gets the chance, he likes exploring the sea as much as he likes exploring the land, and he goes around all the coves and islands in a tiny boat. Since alcohol is illegal in the 1920s, sometimes Bobby gets to tag along as the Coast Guard chases down rum runners. Bobby loves the outdoors so much that he is made happier by all the physical hardships of storms, sleet, and hurricanes.



Later in the story, Bobby and the Old Man take a trip to Maryland, and Bobby sees Maryland as a sort of exotic fairy tale place, utterly different from Carolina. He is impressed by the different architecture, and the crisp, cool air. This represents that now Bobby will have to go out in the world on his own soon, because the Old Man is dying.

## Language and Meaning

Bobby and the other characters speak with a rural dialect, which gives a certain charm to the stories. Sometimes Ruark writes in a very professional manner, but there are more colloquial phrases scattered throughout. These speech patterns reflect the differences between what the Old Man calls "noble" and what he considers to be "gentlemanly." In the Old Man's opinion, people who are noble worry about how to say things in a nice way, with the correct grammar, and they worry about seeming respectable. The Old Man is more concerned with the good manners of putting others before oneself. He also thinks it is just fine to swear, but only in moderation. According to the Old Man, swearing is the privilege of adults, and should only be done for real emphasis. He says that if someone swears every other word, the words lose all their power, and the person is just left with a filthy mouth.

Ruark dedicates his most poetic language to describing the beauty of nature in the country. He uses words to paint vivid pictures of the various fields, woods, marshes and beaches of Carolina, wanting the reader to have some idea of how wonderful it was to grow up in such a setting. In one minute he sentimentally recalls some amazing piece of scenery, and in the next makes a joke, poking fun at the characters foolish enough to place themselves in such a scene.

## Structure

The book is divided into twenty-eight chapters. In general, they move forward chronologically, starting when Bobby is eight years old, and ending when he is in high school, when his grandfather dies. However, it is not in strict chronological order, since later chapters refer to experiences at the age of six, and he sometimes makes references to things which happen when he is an adult. Instead of just moving forward in time, it is like the book moves in the cycles of the year, sometimes passing a spot a second time, and moving on. In chapters one through seven, Bobby is a young child, who thinks that his grandfather knows everything. The Old Man teaches him how to hunt and fish, and why it is important to be a gentleman. In chapters eight through fifteen, Bobby is a wild adolescent, enjoying every possible moment of free time by tramping around the countryside. In chapter sixteen through twenty-five, Bobby starts to learn that there is something to life besides playing outside, and he starts to really get into his education. In chapter twenty-six through twenty-eight, Bobby realizes that he is going to have to let go of the Old Man, and be a man himself. Fortunately, so many good roughnecks have taken Bobby under their wings to educate him, that he is ready to take the reins from his grandfather.



## Quotes

When you are as old as the Old Man, you know a lot of things that you forgot you ever knew, because they've been a part of you so long. (Chapter 1, p. 4)

You always got to remember that when the gun is loaded it makes a potential killer out of the man that's handling it. (Chapter 1, p. 9)

When the Old Man has an attack of philosophy coming on, all you can do is hold still and listen. (Chapter 2, p. 16)

He said curiosity was necessary to intelligence, and that curiosity never killed the cat. (Chapter 3, p. 24)

Summertime was when I went to say with the Old Man, and got loose from my ma and my pa. (Chapter 4, p. 41)

Fishing gives a man some time to think. (Chapter 4, p. 42)

"One thing you will learn," the Old Man said, talking at me, "is that you must never be lazy in front of anybody." (Chapter 4, p. 43)

As I remember the Old Man, he never said anything at all that you couldn't walk away from three ways and still find a fresh idea in it. (Chapter 5, p. 46)

It's sort of like the twenty-third of December—Christmas isn't quite here, but it's close enough to ruin your sleep. (Chapter 5, p. 52)

"I heartily disapprove of drinking in the morning," he said. "Except some mornings." (Chapter 6, p. 67)

Seven wild turkeys doing a death dance in a quiet forest glade before sunup make any pictures I ever saw of the poor souls in hell look like a quiet pastoral. (Chapter 7, p. 87)

Women are generally a bother to a boy or a man, but around the holiday season they sure earned their keep. (Chapter 7, p. 91)

I didn't know then who I was, but it was a cross between Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Tarzan, Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill, and all the heroes of Ernest Thomson Seton. (Chapter 9, p. 110)

Work is doing what you don't like to do because somebody tells you do to it. (Chapter 10, p. 121)

I reckoned for most of his days the Old Man figured he was a kind of overgrown boy himself. (Chapter 11, p. 138)





"There ain't anything," he said, "that'll settle an argument as fast as a punch in the nose if you know you're right and the other feller knows he's wrong." (Chapter 12, p. 148)

I raised you as best I could and now you're the Old Man, because I'm tired, and I think I'll leave. (Chapter 28, p. 302)

A man who takes pleasure in death just for death's sake is rotten somewhere inside, and you'll find him doing things later on in life that'll prove it. (Chapter 13, p. 165)

A smart man knows when he has a few things he can do well, and he's wise to do 'em, especially when he's failed at something. (Chapter 15, p. 184)

If Christmas came on the Fourth of July and it also happened to be your birthday, you might have some idea of what a first pheasant is like on a clear, crisp Maryland day. (Chapter 28, p. 300)

Don't look forward to next Christmas. You'll just be six months older, and you can't get those six months back. (Chapter 26, p. 278)

There is a time in the life of every Lilliputian when the gigantic grown-ups around him are very important. (Chapter 17, p. 199)

Youth is for making mistakes, and old age is for impressing the young with your knowledge. (Chapter 19, p. 231)

You taught me that there isn't anybody who doesn't feel like he's a person too. (Chapter 25, p. 272)

And there are days when an old man looks at a boy and realizes what it is like to be a boy. And that makes the old man mad, because he can't ever be a boy any more. (Chapter 26, p. 278)



## Topics for Discussion

What is the difference between killing for fun and killing for sport? Where does one draw the line?

How do hunting and fishing affect Bobby's life?

Do you think Bobby is correct to stay home from summer camp? Which is more valuable, good things that are familiar, or good things that are new?

Why does Bobby talk so little about his parents?

Who is really in charge in the marriage between the Old Man and Miss Lottie? How can you tell?

What are some of the life lessons the Old Man wanted Bobby to learn from his experiences?

Which provides a better education: school or experiencing life outdoors? Are there certain areas of knowledge that work better with one or the other?

Examine the ethics of Bobby tagging along on a Coast Guard rum chasing ship.