

# **A Place in the Woods Study Guide**

**A Place in the Woods by H. M. Hoover**

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# Plot Summary

Adrian and Helen Hoover, anxious to get away from civilization, purchase a log cabin on the wooded shore of Lake Superior. No sooner do they purchase the property, however, then a terrible storm hits, seriously damaging the structural integrity of the dwelling. The Hoovers find a local man willing to repair the damage while they, their vacation now over, return to Chicago. Helen convinces her employer to allow her two months leave, whereupon they immediately return to their cabin.

The Hoovers, needing more room to work on the log cabin, buy a second, larger cabin nearby. In the process of making the log cabin livable, the Hoovers run across an injured mouse and her young. They keep the mouse as a pet until it finally passes away, while her young are left on their own. Instead of returning to Chicago, the Hoovers decide they would rather stay in their wilderness home. They quit their jobs.

The Hoovers find themselves unexpectedly short on funds when the moving bill proves more than expected. The larger cabin lacks insulation. With winter approaching, the Hoovers must return to the smaller log cabin. Coming back from town one day, their car full of supplies, the Hoovers are involved in a car accident. The automobile is totaled and they do not have the money to fix it in any case. After giving shelter to a wayward trapper, the Hoovers are rewarded with a tip for cheap firewood. They are thus set for the winter.

Winter brings heavy snowfall. The Hoovers entertain themselves by watching and feeding wildlife. Ade makes some money by doing mail-order woodwork. Helen tames a small weasel frequenting the cabin but the creature is nearly killed by one of the larger weasels known as a fisher. Winter slowly recedes and spring animals return. The Hoovers again entertain themselves by feeding the animals. With spring arrived, the Hoovers find that they are again short on funds but this is remedied when Helen's family unexpectedly sends money.

The Hoovers begin buying food wholesale through the local lodge. They also begin raising chickens. Ade makes money by selling stationery decorated with his artwork. Helen sells a story to a naturalist magazine, finally becoming a published author. Ade wires the log cabin for electricity but a stray spark starts a fire in the ice house. The Hoovers, using a two-man bucket-brigade, spend several hours fighting the fire on their own. They manage to extinguish the blaze but are unable to save the generator.

In the aftermath of the fire, Ade and Helen discuss their reasons for fighting the fire. It was apparent that the fire would not spread but Adrian was under the impression that Helen misses electric lights, radio, and television. Helen explains that such things no longer matter to her. Adrian, surprised, admits that he also no longer craves these things. The Hoovers realize that something in their life has ended and that something new has begun. They are, at long last, free of civilization in their hearts.



# Chapter 1, The Place

## Chapter 1, The Place Summary and Analysis

Adrian Hoover, an art director for a Chicago-based textbook publisher, and his wife, metallurgy researcher Helen Hoover, are vacationing in a guest cabin on the north shore of Lake Superior. Spring has just begun. The Hoovers, hoping to purchase woodland property far from civilization, follow a lead provided by the U.S. Forest Service. They drive a long treacherous road, finally arriving at the lodge. Although the lodge is still closed for the season, the proprietors, Sven and Hilda Peterson, prove hospitable.

Following a tip from the Petersons, the Hoovers look at a log cabin for sale two miles up the road. Carl Johnson, the cabin's owner and builder, shows them around. The Hoovers find the cabin to be small, weathered, and rustic but figure that they can polish it up. After a day's consideration, they decide to purchase it.

Section two opens with the transfer of title. The snow is nearly gone. The Hoovers are pleased with their new woodland paradise but quickly turn their attention to the task of making the cabin livable. Ade unloads groceries from the car while Helen prepares dinner over a wood stove. That night, with only one small bed between them, Ade takes the couch.

The Hoover's take stock of the cabin's many features and furnishings. Ade finds some latches for the windows. Helen finds a cache of very old novels. While investigating a faulty trap door, Helen nearly takes a nasty spill into the basement. Ade grabs her just in time. Discouraged by the work they have ahead of them, the Hoovers decide to take a walk out to the lake.

The next day, the Hoovers look around the basement. Helen slips and falls in mud, nearly upending a bench lined with jars of sulfuric acid. Ade quickly steadies the bench and then moves to secure the jars. He explains that the muddy floor is caused by an underground spring. The Hoovers dig a channel for the water to drain out the basement door. Ade demonstrates that they can now use their "brook" as a seasonal source for water.

Encouraged by their success with the brook, the Hoovers go to work on the cabin. Ade goes into town for supplies while Helen remains behind to clean. Helen realizes, with some fear, that she is alone and self-dependent. Thunder heralds the coming of a storm. Within moments, the cabin is pelted with rain. Helen notes a jarring sensation, accompanied by a heavy crunch. The floor sags. Helen struggles to gather her wits. She realizes that one of the basement walls must have given way.

The windows rattle and the walls shake. There is a bright flash and a sharp electric snap. Helen, now a nervous wreck, stumbles into the kitchen to make coffee. Suddenly,



there is a loud scratching at the trap door. Helen sees a pair of black claws trying to rip the door open from below. Somehow a bear has gotten into the basement! Frantic, Helen pushes a junk barrel over the door. The bear, discouraged and frightened, flees into the night. Ade returns some time later, dry and smiling.

Section 4 opens with Ade assessing the storm-damage. The basement is flooding. A tree has also fallen on the roof, opening seams which now admit rainfall. When the rain lets up, Sven arrives to check on the Hoovers, finding them depressed. He and Ade survey the damage. The wind generator has been struck by lightning, ensuring no electricity. The walls forming the building's foundation have been seriously compromised. Sven, very concerned, suggests that the Hoovers seek assistance. The Hoovers visit a local builder named John Anderson who agrees to repair the damage while the Hoovers, their vacation over, return to Chicago.



# Chapter 2, The Decision

## Chapter 2, The Decision Summary and Analysis

Back in Chicago, Adrian falls ill, requiring an unspecified operation. Concerned for Adrian's health, Helen asks her boss for a year's leave to live in the woods. He sends her to speak to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist is skeptical that such a plan would prove beneficial to Adrian's well-being. Helen admits that since she started reading about national parks as a child, she has wanted to write about nature in an experiential manner. Agreeing that isolation will free Adrian from the pathogens delaying his recovery, the psychiatrist gives Helen leave for two months. She has to return before winter.

The Hoovers drive back to their cabin, making slow progress due to treacherous conditions, roadwork, and rain. At the cabin, they exorcise the stench of mildew by opening the windows. After a bout of homemaking and a subsequent short rest, the Hoovers examine John Anderson's repairs to the cabin. The basement is now filled with dirt, reduced to a mere crawlspace. Ade wheels the new light power-plant into the icehouse. The Hoovers dine near the lake, marveling the sight. That night, Helen considers how their mouse infestation might be humanely dealt with.

Section two opens with Ade working to seal the roof while Helen cleans the walls in preparation for painting. They are soon exhausted and frustrated by their efforts, finding it difficult to live and work in the same space. Following a tip from Hilda Peterson, the Hoovers visit one of their neighbors, the Larimers, in the hopes of renting their cabin while they work. When the Larimers refuse to rent, the Hoovers buy the property outright, along with some furniture and other amenities. The Hoover's spend a romantic night in the new cabin, dining on a makeshift dinner of the Larimers' leftovers.

With the bed moved to the new cabin, the Hoovers have much more room to work inside the smaller cabin. One day, they come across an injured deer mouse with engorged teats. A quick search turns up her litter. The Hoovers reunite mother and children. In the days that follow, they feed and care for "Mrs. Mouse" and her young. The babies eventually mature and strike out on their own. Mrs. Mouse, her rear legs now paralyzed, lives out the remainder of her days with the Hoovers.

Section four opens with the Hoovers when their vacation is over and they are beginning their drive back to Chicago. The Hoovers, in discussing their future during the car ride, realize that they do not wish to return to their old lives. Rather than continuing on, they stop in the Village, where Helen calls her boss in Chicago to tender her resignation. Helen looks to the future with optimistic concern. Without an income, life will prove difficult.



# Chapter 3, The Unexpected...

## Chapter 3, The Unexpected... Summary and Analysis

The Hoovers work on their log cabin as they discuss the logistics of their lifestyle transition. Without an income, they must carefully budget their expenses. The delivery truck arrives with their Chicago possessions, affirming the Hoovers' fear that they are, even with two cabins, short on space. The moving bill proves twice as large as expected and Helen's retirement check is to be delayed until January. It is already November, and the Hoovers' do not yet have wood for the winter. Helen plans to sell her metallurgy books. Ade has a plan for making money as well but will not say what it is.

Helen wakes to near-freezing temperatures in the larger cabin. The Hoovers bundle up and try to conserve wood by huddling near a single heat source. Ade explains that the larger cabin, being a summer home, isn't insulated. They'll need to winter in the log cabin. Ade also plans to buy stoves and oil via mail-order but until then, they must rely on wood. Adrian suggests that they use Carl's old barrel-furnace.

The Hoovers move their furniture from the summer home to the log cabin, preparing to settle in for the winter. Hilda brings over a begonia and a bread recipe, also reporting that she and Sven will be away for the winter, leaving the Hoovers to fend for themselves. Ade plans to buy wood from the workers widening the trail. He has borrowed a trailer hitch from Sven and bought a chainsaw from Sven on credit. Since loading wood is a two-person job, Helen must assist.

Section two begins. On their way to the pick-up site, the Hoovers nearly collide with a construction truck. Helen and Ade, after much strenuous work, finish the first load. Ade leaves to deliver the wood while Helen remains behind to rest. Four young, red squirrels take an interest in Helen. She remains still, carefully observing the squirrels' behavior, marveling at how each of them reacts differently. One squirrel climbs on Helen, but runs in fear when it's tiny claws draw blood.

Section three begins with the Hoovers returning to the cabin, still warm from the sun, to read by lamplight. Later that night, Helen wakes, feeling sick and dizzy. The cabin is filled with smoke. Carl's barrel-furnace is burnt out and spewing toxic fumes. With money still tight, the Hoovers resign themselves to continually gathering wood and subsisting on the meager warmth of the fireplace. Soon, the check arrives for the sale of Helen's metallurgy books. Helen orders several items to be delivered by mail, including warmer clothing, sleeping bags, two stoves, and a log-roller for burning logs that have not been split.

The first snowfall comes on the very day that the Hoovers are to pick up their shipment. This, Ade fears, means they'll only to move on stove at a time. They drive into town, pushing their way through the snow. Helen is surprised that everyone already knows who she and Ade are, having already heard by word of mouth. Helen does some

shopping. Later, their car loaded with cargo and working its way down the trail, the Hoovers are involved in a head-on collision.





## Chapter 4, ...and its Aftermath, sections 1-2

### Chapter 4, ...and its Aftermath, sections 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Helen is disoriented, pinned against the dashboard. Ade and another man free her, dislodging the weight at her back. The driver of the other car, his bloodied spouse nearby, is in a state of near panic, fearful that he will be sent to jail. Helen fades in and out of consciousness. The Hoovers spend the night with the Petersons. After a short nap, Helen finds that her knees are injured. Ade complains of a pain in his chest. Helen marvels at the way the locals have rallied around she and her husband in their time of need

Ade is examined by a doctor while Helen joins the other driver, George Wilson, in giving an accident report to the sheriff. The sheriff decides that no one is at fault. Ade is diagnosed as having a few detached ribs but is otherwise healthy. Later, over a meal, the Hoovers discuss the accident with the Petersons. Ade has liability insurance but not collision insurance. Since Wilson does not have any insurance, the Hoovers have to pay for their own repairs.

The Hoovers wake up feeling sore and battered. The damage to the car is severe, costing more to repair than the car is worth. The Hoovers have less than \$200 to their name. The Petersons give the Hoovers advice on weathering the coming winter. Sven helps the injured Hoovers who are stranded without an automobile to get their supplies to the log cabin. Their oil is being delivered.

The Hoovers discover that what they thought was oil is actually varnish. The oil is delivered but the driver does not bring it to the door. With Ade's injury, he cannot lift the drum. Helen goes out with her injured knees and slowly and painfully pushes the oil up to the cabin. In the coming days, Ade cannot do any lifting and Helen can scarcely walk. Ade finally reveals his plan for generating income. He is to meet a man in Duluth to sign a contract with an ad agency. A local mechanic offers to fix their car for a small fee. Helen is thrilled.

The car cannot be fixed. Ade has no way to get to his meeting and, since a storm has knocked out phone service in Duluth, he cannot call to reschedule. Ade must miss out on a ten-thousand dollar contract. They have eighty-three dollars to make it to January and it will be necessary to ration food. A nasty letter arrives in the mail from the man whom Ade was to meet. The Hoovers' indignation snaps them out their self-pity.



# Chapter 4, and its Aftermath, sections 3-6

## Chapter 4, and its Aftermath, sections 3-6 Summary and Analysis

The snow comes down heavily. On Thanksgiving, there comes a knock at the door. Jacques Plessis, a local trapper, needs shelter against the cold. The Hoovers oblige him, offering food and rest. The trapper relates the story of how he came to be stranded out in the snow. He broke camp, but upon hiking back to his vehicle, was unable to locate the car keys that he hid nearby. Walking back to civilization, and nearing exhaustion, Jacques was pleased to see the Hoovers' homestead.

Next morning, just after breakfast, Jacques gives the Hoovers a tip on where to purchase inexpensive firewood. If the tip does not pan out, he adds, Jacques would be happy to get some wood for the Hoovers. Jacques bids them farewell. Helen is inspired by the trapper's tenacity, determined to follow Jacques' rugged example.

Section four begins. The Hoovers receive word that the grocer is prepared to take their order, offering to sell by the case. Ade reasons that, since it will be so cold, they can use the old barrel-stove as an outdoor freezer, allowing the Hoovers to stock up on meat. While Helen writes the order, Ade creates a makeshift toboggan to haul the food up the path. Later in the week, as the Hoovers are settling into bed, they are interrupted by the raucous delivery of their firewood.

Lead by a manic sleep-deprived foreman, lumberjacks unload the Hoovers' shipment. Ade writes the foreman a check for eighty-one dollars. Some time later, a man visits to announce that George Wilson, the man driving the other vehicle in the recent accident, will be suing the Hoovers. Helen is scared, fearful that they might lose their property. Ade is dumbfounded. The Hoovers' have their lawyer file a counter suit. Later, Sven visits to ask the Hoovers why they are suing George Wilson. They explain that Wilson sued them first. Sven thinks something strange is going on.

The Hoovers visit the lodge, where George Wilson waits to discuss legal matters. Wilson knows nothing of the suit he supposedly filed. He just wants his driver's license back. Ade agrees to sign a release so Wilson can get his license back and everyone can put the issue behind them.

The Hoovers struggle to balance heating against wood consumption and stove-wear. Helen finds that she has redefined her understanding of cleanliness, ignoring ever-present tracked dirt in favor of unhealthy germs. One night, the Hoovers wake to find their air-tight stove severely overheating. Since the stove is white hot and about to melt, the Hoovers frantically cool the device with snow. With their primary heat source out of commission, the Hoovers light the log-roller to fight off the 35-below temperatures.



The following morning, the Hoovers wake to a world covered in beautiful hoarfrost. The log roller is being doused by snowmelt flowing down the chimney. Ade thinks to create a makeshift cap using a tin can. The result is impressive, vastly improving the log-rollers heat efficiency. The Hoovers feel foolish for not realizing this earlier. Ade and Helen ponder their place in the wilderness and the profoundly different life they've discovered.

As Christmas approaches, Helen finds that she misses the city. With Ade gone to retrieve the mail, she feels alone and isolated in the wilderness. She walks out into the snow, feeling one with the land and animals. Helen realizes that she is not alone but is part of something greater than mere humanity and its civilization.



## Chapter 5, Snow Scene, sections 1-3

### Chapter 5, Snow Scene, sections 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Ade builds a woodshed just outside the cabin door, providing the additional unintended benefit of shielding the entrance from wind and snow. Helen's pension check finally arrives along with the grocery bill and a dearth of Christmas cards. Helen says she'd type of a New Years letter if she had a mimeograph. Ade suggests that they might make a living via mail, using a mimeograph for advertising. Later, Helen makes some old-fashioned and low-materials bread that reminds Ade of his grandmother's baking. Preparing for a mail-run, Ade cannot find his razor. Helen suggests, to Ade's surprise, that he might consider growing a beard.

The snowfall is heavy. Helen watches the squirrels scamper about and squabble over food, only to be scattered by the sudden appearance of an ermine. A group of jays dive-bomb the ermine in an attempt to scare it off. The small weasel finally leaves of his own accord, a large mouse in his jaws. Later, the ermine finds a piece of bacon-rind that the Hoovers left for him, but is unable to dislodge the meat from the bench to which it is nailed. Helen takes the rind and offers it to the creature who, after some hesitation, snatches the morsel and runs away.

The next day, the Hoovers again put food on the bench. This time they watch as a large assortment of birds come down to feed, only to be scattered by a group of red squirrels. A group of nine deer walk by. Helen notes the relationship between different members of the herd, each acting in a manner befitting its age and station.

The snowplow finally reaches the Hoovers' cabin, opening the road to the Village. Helen prepares an order for a mimeograph, including pencils, ink, paper and styluses. Ade, wishing to decorate the mimeographs, and realizing that a mimeoscope would prove too costly, builds a mimeoscope from scratch. In the days that follow, the snow comes down harder than ever, again closing the road. The Hoovers begin to worry. Their prosperity and survival depends on the mail getting through.

After several days without plowing, the Hoovers are about to resign themselves to being snowed in when the plow finally makes its way through. With the arrival of the mimeograph, Ade gets to work, creating a lovely picture of deer that Helen then cuts into a stencil. The Hoovers send out a flood of letters bearing Ade's artwork. Everyone compliments Ade's artistry. Encouraged by Helen, Ade makes several designs for notepaper, which would become the Hoover's first source of income.



## Chapter 5, Snow Scene, section 4

### Chapter 5, Snow Scene, section 4 Summary and Analysis

The Hoovers, stretching their money to make ends meet, have limited options for evening entertainment. Rather than divide their few books between them, Ade reads aloud while Helen does needlework. They receive a letter from Hilda asking the Hoovers whether or not they would like some chicks to raise. Ade makes some money doing woodwork which the Hoovers use to buy ground beef and bacon. The butcher throws in some suet so the Hoovers can hopefully attract and domesticate a fox.

As before, the meat attracts birds and squirrels. Eventually, the Hoovers decide to encase the suet in a cage. To their surprise, they wake to find that something large has upended the cage by detaching it from the bench. One night, while Helen sits watching the suet, she sees the tiny weasel that she will come to know as a Walter. Over a matter of days, by degrees, Helen earns the weasel's trust. Soon he is eating from her hand and crawling all over her. Walter uses much of the food he is given to create caches near the cabin.

One night, Helen notes the tracks of a much larger weasel, the same tracks she saw on the day the cage was upended. She fears that this larger weasel is hunting Walter. One night, Helen spots the predator: a large, black "fisher" weasel. She observes as the fisher struggles to access the dangling suet-balls that she had hung as bird food. One night, Ade takes pity on the fisher and cuts down a piece of suet that the creature can't reach. When the Hoovers run out of suet, the fisher devours all of Walter's food caches. Helen fears that Walter will be next.

Some days later, Helen wakes to find Walter, injured and bloody, beside her bed. She feeds the famished ermine intruder. In the days that follow, Walter would return regularly, his wounds gradually healing. The fisher continues to hunt for Walter. Walter takes to sleeping indoors, curled up in the pot of Hilda's begonia.

The snow continues, but at a reduced pace. A nearby cedar collapses under the weight of frozen water. The Hoovers see that a young doe, whom they call Blondie, has found herself a buck. Walter now routinely comes indoors for dinner. One day, Helen finds a fisher inside of the cabin. It hisses at her, and she at it. Frightened, the animal flees. Apparently the animal managed to open the door. Ade replaces the door's thumb latch with a knob and adds slide bolt.

The Hoovers determine that there are two fishers, a male and a female, frequenting their property. They leave food out for the animals. The fishers eventually grow tame enough to beg for food and trusting enough to accept food from Helen's hand. The fishers soon begin breaking into the Hoover's outdoor breadbox. This escalates to the barrel-stove freezer, with one of the fishers squeezing down the stovepipe and making



off with meat. Ade secures the freezer with a spring and bolt latch, ending the midnight raids.

The Hoovers receive mail from the man who has been cutting ice cakes from the lake. He would like to know whether or not they want large slabs of ice. Ade reasons that he can haul the ice cakes on the toboggan. Later, Helen is dumbfounded when Ade, huffing and puffing, arrives pulling two huge chunks of ice. Exhausted, Ade goes back for another load. Ade does this for four more days, twice a day, dragging four-hundred pounds with each trip. Helen finds that, while she has lost track of the month, she has come to be more in tune with the seasons.



# Chapter 6, Time of Thawing

## Chapter 6, Time of Thawing Summary and Analysis

One morning, Helen wakes feeling hot and sweaty. The wind has changed, bringing the night temperature up from zero to forty-five degrees. The time of thawing has begun. Helen talks of growing a garden, but Ade reminds her that there's still plenty of winter left. Ade suddenly realizes that the warmer temperatures mean that their winter-frozen meat will spoil. Ade thinks to move the meat next door, where cold air remains trapped.

The temperature drops once more. Worried that the new, harder snow will cause the roof to collapse on the summer house, Ade climbs up and removes the packed snow one block at a time. With that finished, Ade discovers that water is leaking into the cabin. He climbs up to the roof of the log cabin and chisels away the ice behind which water has collected. Ade, accidentally caught in the path of the drainage, releases a string of profanity. Later, Ade and Helen laugh about the incident over dinner.

Just when Ade thinks he can relax, the chimney catches fire, shooting flames ten feet above the roof. Helen closes the drafts on the cook stove, suffocating the fire. For several hours the Hoovers open and close the drafts until the fire finally burns itself out. Ade reasons that the flare-up was caused by a buildup of creosote distilled from green wood. There is a knock on the door. It's someone from the FBI wanting to ask Helen about her former colleagues. He complains of having had a hectic day. Helen laughs at the irony.

Section two begins. Helen notices a change in animal behavior. Birds have begun nesting. Squirrels are pairing off. Walter comes around less often to be fed. Seasonal animals have returned. Cars return to the road. A photographer visits from a magazine, following up on a writing contract for which Helen earlier applied. He takes several photographs. Helen is embarrassed by the dinginess of the cabin. A blizzard blows in, but in its wake, it leaves the smell of spring. The Hoovers work to welcome the changing season.

Section three opens in early May. Helen, tired of eating corn cakes and syrup, wishes she has a grapefruit. Later, Hilda visits, coincidentally bearing a gift of pink grapefruit. A man comes by offering to sell gas and oil, and is surprised to learn that the Hoovers don't have an engine for the boat sitting at their dock. Looking at finances, Helen discovers that she and Ade have much less money than she realized. Determined to help support the household, Helen resolves to write something she can sell. The Hoovers briefly consider selling one of their two homes. They have only \$20 left to their names.

With the days getting warmer, the Hoovers move to the summer house. Helen spots a woodpecker pecking at a tree near the house. Later, she discovers that the tree is infested with insects and soon will fall, potentially on top of the house. The tree does



fall, but thanks to the bird's pecking pattern, it falls away from the house. The Hoovers are running short of everything but shelter and wood. They eke by on Ade's woodworking jobs until they receive an unexpected gift, three \$100 checks from Helen's relatives. The Hoover are grateful and relieved.

The Hoovers receive their chicks much sooner than expected. Unprepared, they are forced to wake periodically throughout the night to ensure that the chicks are kept warm. A man from the weather bureau visits. The Hoovers agree to monitor a weather gauge in exchange for a modest monthly emolument. With the weather warming, the Hoovers are tormented by black flies. Sven gives the Hoovers a second-hand engine for their boat. They take the boat out on the lake.





# Chapter 7, Transition

## Chapter 7, Transition Summary and Analysis

The Hoovers' chickens, having outgrown their tub, are placed in their chicken-run. With the weather improving, the summer-home people have returned to the area. Helen does her best to socialize with the locals but somehow repeatedly says the wrong thing. The Hoovers discover that their deliveryman is going out of business. With supplies running low, Ade considers the possibility of buying food wholesale through Sven and Hilda's lodge. Hilda agrees. Through the lodge, the Hoovers make a tremendous order for food.

While they wait for their order to arrive, the Hoovers supplement their remaining foodstuffs with edible plants growing near their cabin. At last the order arrives. Looking at the invoice, Ade suddenly realizes that he will need to put braces under the kitchen floor: The order weighs in at over two-thousand pounds.

Section two begins in August. Thundershowers are frequent. Helen takes delight in watching the squirrel and chipmunks. Ade works to convert the ice house into winter quarters for the chickens. He also wires the log cabin for electricity. Ade's notepaper, bearing his nature-themed artwork, proves very popular at the Village gift-shop. Taking a tip from Ade, Helen submits a nature-themed article to a magazine. After some revision, the article is accepted in September, right as the Hoovers prepare for winter's return. Helen is paid fifty dollars and is now a published author.

Section three begins. An oddly-behaving hunter is creeping around the Hoovers' cabin. Ade humorously scares the hunter off by using a pistol shot to topple snow on him from an overhanging branch. Later, a small, plump bear, which Helen calls Little Bear, occupies a tree near the Hoovers' cabin. The Hoovers leave out food for the bear, but are careful not to reveal that they are the source of the food. Helen fantasizes about taming the bear, but decides it would be ill-advised. The bear leaves for the winter, but returns briefly in the spring. The Hoovers haven't seen him since, and miss him.

Section four begins with talk of chickens. The Hoovers have reluctantly been forced to eat them. Thanks to an ad placed by Helen, Ade's notepaper continues to sell. Helen publishes a story about Mrs. Mouse. Ade has built a new heated chicken house. He introduces Helen to their new chickens: Crown Prince, Tulip and Bedelia. Sven and Hilda, who once again will be gone for the winter, bring over some extra food for the Hoovers. Helen prepares a tomato omelet. Helen considers how inexpensive the meal was to make and reasons that a poor family could eat cheaply with sufficient creativity.

It is November. Helen, now accustomed to hearing the Crown Prince's crow, notes its absence one morning. A frantic investigation reveals that the chicken house is filled with smoke. All three chickens are unconscious, but Ade manages to revive them. All three chickens are brought into the house.



Section five opens with convalescing chickens now situated in the house under the watchful eyes of Helen and Ade. The animals prove problematic, making racket and getting into things. Ade returns the chickens to their repaired habitat. With the first snow of the season, Helen and Ade discuss the satisfactions of their new life. Their sense of time is no longer measured in clocks and calendars, but by sunlight and seasons. As the winter animals return, the Hoovers prepare strategies to feed them. Helen has several encounters with squirrels, both inside and outside the cabin. They climb on her, steal food off her person, and play with her typewriter as she writes.



# Chapter 8, A Beginning

## Chapter 8, A Beginning Summary and Analysis

Ade creates a new series of notepaper while Helen creates a mailing list based on replies to their advertisements. After a short trial run, Ade declares his power plant fully functional. One the first of December, just as the Hoovers are preparing to sleep, they discover, to their alarm, that Ade's work building is on fire! They both run outside, prepared to fight the fire. Ade continually douses the fire, exchanging his empty bucket for one freshly filled by Helen.

The Hoovers spend hours fighting the fire, with an occasional exploding bottle of turpentine demanding their redoubled effort. Eventually the flames subside. At the end of the ordeal they are chilled and wet but too tired to feel it. Ade reasons that the fire might have been caused by a spark from the generator's exhaust. Helen is mildly alarmed by the bumps and burns that her husband has sustained, but goes on to hunt down any stray sparks smoldering in the wood. Later, in considering the tragedy, the Hoovers realize that they do not need electricity. This marks the true end of their old life and the beginning of a new one.



# Characters

## Helen Hoover

Helen is the wife of Adrian Hoover and in addition to being the protagonist, is also the author and narrator. A scientist by trade, Helen begins the novel as a Chicago-based metallurgy researcher. Early on in the story, Helen reveals to a psychiatrist that she has, since a very young age, dreamed of writing about nature while living in a natural setting such as a state park. It is this dream, in part, which spurs Helen to give up civilization in favor of the "simpler" life and to eventually become a writer.

Helen enjoys watching woodland creatures, often setting out food so that she might observe them from the safety and comfort of her cabin. She is, however, cognizant of the risks associated with feeding non-domesticated animals, taking care that certain animals, such as bears, do not realize that people are the source of its food. Curiously, although she herself is a scientist and understands the ways in which science cannot be applied to animal behavior, Helen appears limited in her understanding of how feeding wild animals might impact the local ecosystem.

Helen seems to have some difficulty relating to her neighbors. Throughout the novel, she speaks of several incidents in which she accidentally offends someone or says the wrong thing. This is due, in part, to ignorance; Helen is unused to the social dynamic of the area and, unlike her husband, has limited exposure to the locals. Helen, however, confesses that she is more accustomed to the anonymity of city-life. In the few instances that she accompanies Ade to the Village, she is uncomfortable and slightly awkward. It would appear that Helen is a bit shy.

## Adrian

Adrian or Ade is the husband of Helen Hoover, the author. He is a man of many talents, many of which are ideal for maintaining a home far from civilization. Ade begins the novel as an artist in the employ of a Chicago-based advertising agency but also learned electrical engineering during his stint in the Navy. In addition, Ade appears to be a skilled carpenter and woodworker, well enough that he could be employed in either field. Adrian is the artist responsible for the many line drawings found throughout the book.

Although Adrian is not particularly large or strong, he is also not one to shy away from hard work. Over the course of five days, Adrian hauls two-thousand pounds of ice on a toboggan made by his own hands. He also builds a woodshed, wires the log cabin for electricity and designs a heated chicken-house capable of supporting chickens through the winter. Adrian also implements dozens of smaller innovations that serves to repair or improve the Hoovers' homes.

Despite his working man's exterior, Ade has a soft side as well. He is won over by the plight of Mrs. Mouse and her young and eventually forms a strong attachment to the



rooster Crown Prince. Ade also demonstrates a healthy sense of humor, laughing at himself when he loses his temper on the roof, teasing his wife on numerous occasions, and even playing a practical joke on a clueless hunter.

## **Sven Peterson**

Sven Peterson, along with his wife Hilda, is the owner and proprietor of the lodge near the Hoovers' property. He proves a helpful friend to the Hoovers.

## **Hilda Peterson**

Hilda Peterson, along with her husband Sven Peterson, runs the lodge near the Hoovers' property. She is helpful to the Hoovers, particularly with her advice concerning food preparation.

## **Carl Johnson**

Carl Johnson is a log carpenter. He is the original owner and builder of the Hoovers' log cabin.

## **John Anderson**

John Anderson is the workman responsible for repairing the foundation of the Hoovers' log cabin.

## **Mrs. Mouse**

Mrs. Mouse is a partially crippled kangaroo mouse that the Hoovers' rescue, thus allowing her to tend to her little of baby mice.

## **Little Bear**

Little Bear is the small and twitchy-tailed bear that sleeps atop a tree near the Hoovers' log cabin.

## **Dr. Jones**

Dr. Jones is the physician who treats the Hoovers' wounds after their car accident.



## **George Wilson**

George Wilson is the driver of the other vehicle in Hoovers' car accident.

## **Jacques Plessis**

Jacques Plessis is a hungry and exhausted trapper. Seeing that he is in need, the Hoovers offer him food and rest.

## **Walter**

Walter is the ermine that the Hoovers' gradually domesticate over the course of several months.

## **The Fishers**

The fishers are, like Walter, a kind of weasel. They are large and aggressive and prove capable of manipulating simple mechanisms like door handles.

## **Hippity**

Hippity is squirrel, so named for his hopping gait, who is fascinated by Helen Hoover's typewriter.



## Objects/Places

### The Log Cabin

The log cabin is the building where the Hoovers spend their winters. It is smaller than the summer house but insulated against the cold.

### The Ice House

The ice house is a large structure northeast of the log cabin that is used for storing ice. Ade also uses it as makeshift office.

### Chicken Coops

The Hoovers maintain two chicken coops with one outside the summer house and another outside the log cabin. The chickens are moved seasonally.

### Storage Building

This large building is used for storing extra materials and non-perishable foodstuffs.

### The Bear Tree

The bear tree is so-called because "little bear" is often seen sleeping atop it. The tree lay west of the log cabin.

### The Summer House

The summer house is, as the name suggests, where the Hoovers spend their summers. It is roomier than the log cabin but is not insulated against the cold.

### The Hoovers' Dock

The Hoovers' dock rests on the shore of Lake Superior, just north of the Summer House.

### The Bridge

The bridge crosses a brook just west of the summer house. This is where the Hoovers draw fresh water.



## **Woodpecker Tree**

The woodpecker tree is home to a mated pair of woodpeckers. It lay just south of the summer house.

## **The Hoovers' Car Port**

The car port is an open but covered structure some distance south of the summer house.

## **The Small Plant**

The small plant is miniature generator. Ade intends to use it to wire the log cabin with electricity.

## **Log Roller**

The log roller is a device that the Hoovers use to burn logs evenly by rotating them across their length.

## **Junk Barrel**

The junk barrel is a barrel full of refuse that Helen pushes over the basement door to keep a bear from coming up into the log cabin.

## **The Hoovers' Boat**

The Hoovers' boat is the craft the couple uses to go out on to the lake.

## **The Log Cabin's Foundation**

The log cabin's foundation, early in the novel, is comprised of the basement walls. Once the walls begin to crumble, however, the basement is filled with dirt.

## **The Barrel-Stove**

The barrel-stove is a large furnace made from a fifty-five gallon oil drum. The Hoovers, realizing that it is no longer suitable for its intended purpose, use it as a winter-time ice-box.





# Themes

## Independence

A Place in the Woods presents independence as a lost human virtue. The Hoovers hope to find in moving to the deep woods a natural way of life that was lost a hundred years in the past. Living as Americans once lived, without access to advanced technology and public services, the Hoovers are free to exist as they choose, separate from the will of a corporate, mechanized society. This also means that the Hoovers must accept sole responsibility for their own lives and livelihood. Should disaster strike, they cannot easily call upon the assets of civilization.

For achieving independence, certain skills are more useful than others. Helen's expertise in metallurgical research is of limited value in the wilderness. Research, useful only in context, is not a fundamental survival skill. Ade's skill in carpentry, on the other hand, is far more beneficial. In knowing how to work with wood, Ade is able to build and repair structures that can then provide shelter and warmth. Helen develops, over a time, a knack for a kind of minimalist cooking. This allows her to prepare meals that make the best use of whatever ingredients are available.

Living independently allows for a kind of self-satisfaction that civilization offers in short supply. The Hoovers do not, as they did in Chicago, spend most of their time working for symbolic compensation like dollars and cents. Rather, Ade and Helen see the fruits of their labor reflected in their security, shelter, and warmth. The Hoovers expend less energy for the sake of an employer and more for the sake of their own survival. What Ade creates, he creates for use in his own life.

## Interdependence

Outside of civilization, hospitality becomes a necessity. Were it not for the quick and unquestioning support of their woodland neighbors, the Hoovers' car accident might have proven disastrous. Virtual strangers come to their assistance, seeing that their injuries are treated, their stomachs filled, and their property recovered. The Hoovers repay this debt by assisting the wayward trapper, providing him food, shelter, and a place to rest. The implication is that life in the woods is too difficult to turn down a request for aid; today's needful could be tomorrow's benefactor.

Interdependence begins with independence. If the Hoovers had not achieved sustenance and shelter for themselves, they couldn't have offered it to the wayward trapper. In becoming self-reliant, the Hoovers also become dependable. This proves to their neighbors that they are capable of pulling their own weight, that the Hoovers are no longer one of the "summer people," who stay only while the weather is nice and then leave when things become difficult. The Hoovers belong in the woods.



The Hoovers never complete their separation from civilization. They still order food through the post. This strategy requires currency, which necessitates that the Hoovers interface with civilization. Ade markets stationery decorated with his artwork. This is a supply which interlocks with a civilized demand. Helen, meanwhile, becomes a writer for a naturalist magazine. This is a magazine likely incorporated and headquartered in a city. The Hoovers may no longer be urbanites but they still contribute to and depend upon civilized society.

## Calamity

In the transition from urban to country life, the Hoovers cannot seem to catch a break. Days after purchasing their log cabin, the basement floods, lightning strikes the wind-generator, the foundation is ruined, a tree falls on the building, and a bear crawls into the basement. The Hoovers persevere despite these obstacles, establishing them as heroic figures. The height of their achievement is measured by the magnitude of their ordeal. Had things been easy for the two of them, Helen might never have become an author. There wouldn't have been a story to tell.

With disaster comes adaptation. The Hoovers experience a series of calamities which force them to adapt to changing circumstances. When the barrel-stove fails, for example, the Hoovers learn that they need warmer clothing in the event of such failure. They also learn that they can use the barrel-stove as a kind of winter refrigerator. The barrel-stove's failure teaches the Hoovers that they need two stoves in the event that one fails. This insight proves prophetic. Ade and Helen learn through a series of trial and error, learning with each new disaster what they ought not have done.

With failure comes insight. By the end of the novel, the Hoovers realize that they no longer want or need the trappings of civilized society, such as electric lights, radio or automobiles. They learn this by losing these luxuries to a series of unforeseen disasters. First they lose their car in a "crack up." Next they lose electricity when lightning strikes the wind-generator. With each disaster, the Ade and Helen learn something about themselves. Once they lose the small plant to fire and electricity for a second time, the Hoovers finally realize that their priorities have changed.

# Style

## Perspective

Hoover's perspective is that of a world-weary urbanite-turned-naturalist, who has thrown off the shackles of a mechanized and clock-and-calendar world. There is a sense that she has not chosen a new lifestyle so much as she has escaped her old one. The early portions of the novel concern themselves with the Hoovers' gaining a foothold in their new lifestyle with the perspective being inflected by the need for safety and stability. As the story evolves, the focus shifts to one of cleansing as the Hoovers rid themselves of the last vestiges of their previous mindset.

Naturalism is presented as a more genuine way of being, something more akin to how mankind was intended to live. Civilized life is characterized as having a once-removed quality that insulates mankind against negative consequences. In Chicago, the Hoovers functioned as cogs in a machine as their talents serve as means to a corporate end. The story seems to suggest that the worst consequence that urbanites face is a loss of livelihood. As naturalists, however, the Hoovers must toil for their own day-to-day survival, taking nothing for granted. The author's perspective, therefore, is that of someone dealing with the fundamentals of existence.

Hoover is righteous. She clearly sees her new naturalistic lifestyle as superior to what she's left behind in Chicago. While she never speaks poorly of her civilized brethren, it is clear that she finds urban life dehumanizing. Conversely, she depicts her rustic counterparts in heroic terms, the people of the wilderness being strong, vital and resourceful. It is not difficult to extrapolate urban life as a kind of childhood, where consequences are never "real" and conversely, natural life as a kind of adulthood where responsibility is a necessity.

## Tone

Hoover employs a conversational tone. She writes in the manner of a letter, even occasionally lapsing into the second person perspective as if addressing a recipient. This quasi-epistolary quality extends to her intended audience. The book was inspired, Hoover explains, by the many questions that friends and family had of her new life. The book reads as one who has gone ahead, writing to those who have remained behind. Since Helen begins as part of the civilized world, the story is also one of growth and discovery, an experience which she shares with the reader.

The author's love of animals comes across in her tone. She is sympathetic to injured, frightened, or hungry creatures. She often personifies these animals, names them, and even attributing to them thoughts, feelings, and ideas. When Mrs. Mouse is reunited with her young, it is touching. When she dies, it is tragic. As Walter is hunted by the

fisher, the tone is tense and worrisome. The animals of *A Place in the Woods* are as much characters as the human beings themselves.

The narrative's tone is heavily influenced by the Hoovers' separation from the civilized world. When Ade makes his first mail run, Helen is aware that she is alone in the wilderness. The tone is one of loneliness and isolation. Later, the Hoovers are snowed in together but with enough supplies to last. The tone then becomes one of security and privacy. In general, the Hoovers' remoteness from the civilized world serves as a tonal intensifier. Small accomplishments become great achievements. Mistakes potentially become disasters.

## Structure

The book is broken up into eight chapters with each one numbered and thematically named after a noteworthy feature of the chapter. The book reads as a continuous narrative. The earliest chapters pertain to the Hoovers' quest for a forest home. The subsequent chapters address their adjustment from urban to country life as they face a series of challenges and setbacks. Each chapter is subdivided into different sections, with each section telling a different subordinate story.

The narrative reads sequentially but with a fair amount of foreshadowing. In the earliest chapters, the author notes her foolishness in assuming that she does not need flour. Later it is revealed that what she thought was flour turns out to be corn starch. Similarly, in describing a woodpecker, the author mentions as an aside that such a bird would one day prove helpful. Later in the story, such a woodpecker calls the Hoovers' attention to an infested tree that could potentially fall on their cabin. This dynamic reinforces the anecdotal feel of the narrative, sounding as though it is written with the wisdom of hindsight.

The book is punctuated throughout with a kind of intermittent naturalist proselytism. This usually takes the form of Ade and Helen conversing about the benefits of their new lifestyle, comparing it to what they had previously known as Chicago urbanites. Sometimes it takes the form of Helen explicitly lecturing on the subject, extolling the advantages of her new life and using it as an example of what might be achieved by others in similarly difficult circumstances.



## Quotes

"If we grab Johnson's place now, we'll go back a hundred years and have some privacy-for awhile, anyway" (Chapter 1, pg. 11.)

"You could only sweep at it because rough boards supply fresh dirt from their cracks as soon as you have removed a dustpanful" (Chapter 1, pg. 28.)

"When I could think clearly, it was all too plain to me that if something wasn't done to help him get well I was going to lose the only husband I ever wanted" (Chapter 2, pg. 44.)

"The cabin was warm from the sun when we got home and the warmth stayed on after we finished our dinner" (Chapter 3, pg. 97.)

"'This moccasin telegraph business startles me' I said 'I am used to comfortable anonymity'" (Chapter 4, pg. 104-105.)

"I began to tremble as I saw my smallness and inadequacy against the vastness of the natural world" (Chapter 4, pg. 156.)

"I was linked to them, not only by our common flesh and blood, but by the very earth from which we had sprung" (Chapter 4, pg. 159.)

"Through the years many have asked the same ones and those questions were the springboard for this book" (Chapter 5, pg. 108.)

"This wasn't the 'simple life.' It was the natural life, lost to urban man for many centuries" (Chapter 5, pg. 205.)

"All this was far less convenient than turning on a faucet, but it was certainly more interesting" (Chapter 6, pg. 230.)

"It had been a good day - and our tomorrows were waiting. What kind of days they would be depended on us" (Chapter 6, pg. 241.)

"You feel safe... secure. I suppose we shouldn't, not with our uncertain future, but security is an illusion anyway, except for something in yourself" (Chapter 7, pg. 277.)

"As far as I'm concerned, winter is snow that stays - and I am ready to bet this is it" (Chapter 7, pg. 277.)

"I've a feeling we'll always have bears in the basement" (Chapter 8, pg. 292.)



## Topics for Discussion

If the Hoovers had not bought the summer home, how might the story be different?

The narrator claims that Adrian has no love of mice. If this is true, why is he willing to help the ailing Mrs. Mouse?

Compare and contrast the Hoovers and the Petersons. How are they different? In what ways are they the same?

The Hoovers decide to feed the woodland animals. Is this a wise decision? Why or why not?

If the Hoovers wish to get away from civilization, why don't they hunt, trap or fish for their food?

Suppose the Hoovers had not shown hospitality to the hungry trapper. How might the story be different?

At the end of the novel, the Hoovers realize that something has ended and that something else has begun. What does this refer to it? What has ended? What has begun?