

# Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era Short Guide

## Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era by Sterling North

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## Overview

The story line of *Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era* stems from the basic idea that humans and nature should develop a mutual respect that would allow them to live together and to develop fulfilling bonds of love. North paints a believable picture in *Rascal* that avoids unreachable idealism, and the essential realism of his work is its primary merit. Living in a time of crisis in American life, young Sterling North, along with his constant friend Rascal, faces a personal crisis that accompanies his emergence into manhood. He confronts, with the easygoing encouragement of his father and the more disciplined shove of his sister, his need to grow when he is forced to cage his pet raccoon and to move his half-built canoe from the living room.

Although minor incidents in comparison to the larger picture of life during World War I, these confrontations with responsibility shape North's response to his evolving maturity. Throughout these difficult times, he takes great comfort in his pet raccoon, whose tenacious and daring personality mirrors that of his master. Their ultimate separation highlights the significance of the time they have spent together and points to the greater theme of this work. Any reader of *Rascal* will understand the significance of the subtitle "A Memoir of a Better Era," which refers to both a better time in America and a better time of life, when longer summer nights and fresh breezes seem sufficient to engender hope.

## About the Author

Sterling North was born on a farm overlooking Lake Koshkonong in Edgerton, Wisconsin, on November 4, 1906, to David and Elizabeth Nelson North. His mother was a gifted linguist and biologist, and his father was an amateur naturalist and a specialist on Native American culture. In 1913 North's mother died; but his memory of her and his sense of loss at her death emerge as constant influences in his writing. On June 23, 1927, North married Gladys Dolores Buchanan while a student at the University of Chicago, where he developed his literary skill as editor of the campus literary magazine.

In 1929 he graduated with a bachelor of arts degree.

Between 1929 and 1956, North was a reporter and literary editor for newspapers and periodicals. He joined Houghton Mifflin to edit the North Star Books, a series of history books for children and young adults. After completing this project, he devoted himself to his own writing. North died in Morristown, New Jersey, on December 22, 1974.

North's first significant publication was a volume of poetry published by the University of Chicago Press in 1925; he was nineteen years old. In 1929 his concern with values and with education surfaced in *The Pedro Gorino*, a sea story that initiated his career as a writer of fiction. Throughout his career, North received praise and awards for his works of poetry and prose, most of which were children's books. The public recognized him as a writer whose belief in basic moral principles shaped his craft. North won his most notable awards for *Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era*, which received the 1963 Dutton Animal Book Award and a 1964 Newbery Honor Book citation.

## Setting

The action of the novel takes place at the end of World War I, the point at which America was losing its innocence and developing a mature awareness of its international role. Set in a rural Wisconsin town, Rascal draws parallels between events in the world at large and the experiences of an eleven-year-old boy who shares his own loss of innocence and developing maturity with a devoted companion, his pet raccoon.

North most directly signals the parallel between the American experience and that of his youthful self when the autobiographical narrator puts away his muskrat traps on Armistice Day: I burned my fur catalogues in the furnace and hung my traps in the loft of the barn, never to use them again. Men had stopped killing other men in France that day; and on that day I signed a permanent peace treaty with the animals and birds. It is perhaps the only peace treaty that was ever kept.

## Social Sensitivity

Rascal never concentrates on the experiences and feelings of young people at the expense of adults. Mr. North may be a distracted, possibly even an irresponsible, parent, but his primary appearance in the book occurs when he realizes the pain his son feels over caging Rascal, and he tries to relieve that pain with a two-week camping trip. Even the neighbors, whose insistence on Rascal's imprisonment makes them the villains in the work, find Sterling obedient despite his reluctance. In this regard, Rascal is especially responsible and sensitive to important matters of maturity in young people.

## Literary Qualities

On one level, *Rascal* is a simple story about a boy and his pet. The story's primary appeal lies in its realistic depiction of the relationship between Sterling and Rascal, his pet raccoon. In the literary tradition of *Julie of the Wolves*, *The Yearling*, and *Incident at Hawk's Hill*, North's narrative presents a child and an animal who, because they both lack a conventional family structure, become family to one another. Rascal lives in relative isolation from raccoons and other wildlife, and Sterling is raised, without a mother, by an often preoccupied father. In the course of a year, these two characters share affection, adversity, and adventure, and North's description of their experiences together emphasizes Sterling's growing awareness of the world around him. Through his relationship with Rascal, Sterling learns to defend his beliefs and to accept inevitable change. North explores the classic theme of man versus nature as he depicts Sterling's coming of age; the boy emerges from his encounter with nature prepared to live as a courageous, resourceful adult.

The literal maturation of Sterling in *Rascal* can also be read, in a symbolic sense, as a type of allegory about the loss of innocence in post-World War I America. North's subtitle "Memoir of a Better Era" seems to encourage such an interpretation. In this reading, the harmonious relationship between Rascal and Sterling might represent the innocence of the pre-world war era in the United States.



## Themes and Characters

The parallels between emerging America and young Sterling North enhance the significance of the year that the boy and the raccoon spend together.

Their conflicts with Sterling's sister Jessica and the townspeople, especially the Reverend Thurman and Slammy Stillman, precipitate a loss of innocence.

Sterling tries to maintain his ties with Rascal during their several wilderness outings, but nature's call proves too strong and Rascal's desire for a mate outweighs his wish to remain with the companion of his first year. As they separate, the boy displays an ability to come to terms with change and to face the future: "And I paddled swiftly and desperately away from the place where we had parted."

Sterling and his pet raccoon Rascal are two of the most memorable figures in literature written for young people. Sterling, without the guidance of a mother and subject only to the lenient supervision of his distracted father, is an independent youth with a remarkably mature sense of responsibility. Yet he takes joy in youthful activities such as fishing, swimming, and tramping through the woods.

Sterling's resourcefulness is striking.

The many tasks and the constant concern over money that fill his life bring out qualities that will serve him well as an adult. He does not fret about wanting a canoe; he builds one himself. He does not complain at having to cage Rascal; he finds ways to make the captivity more bearable.

Rascal proves as resourceful as his owner. Able to break time-honored instinct, he forgoes his food-washing ritual at one point so as not to lose a second sugar cube. Rascal's discoveries lend a sense of adventure to the book.

Each new food, each new treasure that enchants the raccoon gives the narrator an opportunity to demonstrate the intelligence and fascination of young creatures.

The relationship between Rascal and Sterling provides the basis of the plot and sets the theme. The author's memories of their shared adventures— from catching fish side by side to standing up to the threats of the bully Slammy Stillman—convey a keen appreciation for the harmony that can be found in nature.





## Topics for Discussion

1. At several points in *Rascal*, the narrator parallels his experiences with the larger events in America during World War I. How important are these parallels, and what do they add to the work?

2. Sterling has an unusual family life, largely because of his mother's death.

How does this affect him? Does he appear to suffer as a result? How does he compensate for the lack of a tightly structured family?

3. Other than master and pet, how would you characterize the relationship between the narrator and *Rascal*?

4. *Rascal* introduces several animal characters. What do we learn about animals from the work? Do you feel that North is trying to educate his reader about animals in general and raccoons in particular?

5. We might look at the narrator's taking a baby raccoon from its mother as a cruel act. How do we reconcile this apparent cruelty with what we learn about the narrator in the story?

6. Explain the many meanings that the subtitle "Memoir of a Better Era" might have.

7. Think about other animal stories you have read. What do they have in common with *Rascal*?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. After conducting research on raccoons, discuss the accuracy of North's descriptions of Rascal's behavior.
2. Describe ways in which Rascal fills a void left in the narrator's life as a result of his family's fragmentation.
3. The narrator of Rascal has several animals. Discuss the community they form and how members of that community coexist.
4. How many episodes in the novel show the narrator and Rascal doing the same activities? How important are these parallels to the development of the theme?
5. Describe how the narrator views nature. Are these the thoughts of a boy or of a man remembering his boyhood?
6. Write a short paper describing an experience in your life with a pet that reading Rascal reminds you of.

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 45. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. The entry on North, expanded from that presented in volume 1 of this series, provides a complete and valuable review of his career with an emphasis on the extent of his literary production and the popularity of his work.

De Montreville, Doris, and Donna Hill, eds. *Third Book of Junior Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1972. Contains an autobiographical sketch by North.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. This source presents an excellent bibliographical review of North's career and a short but insightful analysis of his literary achievements.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

In 1965 North adapted Rascal for young children and published it as *Little Rascal In Raccoons Are the Brightest People*, he continues to pursue his interest in raccoons and his desire to educate young people about them. In a similar vein, *The Wolfling* reflects North's interest in young animals and their development.



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