

Shadows on the Koyukuk: An Alaskan Native's Life Along the River Study Guide

Shadows on the Koyukuk: An Alaskan Native's Life Along the River by Sidney C. Huntington

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Plot Summary

Shadows on the Koyukuk is a memoir of Sidney Huntington's life as the son of a white trapper and an Athapaskan Indian mother in rural Alaska. As a child, he learns to live on the land in the Koyukuk River valley. As he grows up, he sees many changes to the lives of Alaskan Natives and becomes a respected public figure in Alaska, a businessman and public servant.

Sidney Huntington's mother Anna is renowned for, after testifying at her stepfather's trial for having shot her husband in self-defense, headstrongly insisting on walking back home over more than 400 miles to be with her children, enduring many trials on the way. At five years old, after already learning much from his parents, Sidney's mother dies, leaving him stranded with two younger siblings. Sidney and his brother and sister are finally rescued, but the traumatic event leaves Sidney emotionally scarred with trust issues.

Sidney goes to an Episcopal mission, and then later his father moves him to a Bureau of Indian Affairs school, where Sidney gets a third-grade education by age twelve. Sidney and his brother Jimmy then leave school to go learn to live on the land with their ailing father. They learn how to trap, and a major accomplishment for Sidney is building his own boat. Their father retires to a job in the village because of his ill health, and Jimmy and Sidney trap together. Eventually, both boys marry and start families. Their father starts a gold digging venture, and dies shortly after giving it up. Later, a mining company working the claim finds millions of dollars in gold near where Sidney's father was digging.

Sidney works as a miner, a trapper, a carpenter, a sheet metal worker, and an entrepreneur. He talks about the old Koyukon ways, many of which are lost as times change. Since elders do not want to be seen as braggarts and have many taboos about the tales they will tell, much oral tradition is lost. During his adventures in the wild, Sidney has several close calls with death and times when he is stuck in the wilderness. He has several children with his wife. Eventually, his marriage ends, and he remarries. He has many children with his second wife, and when their children are grown, they adopt the baby of a single mother.

Sidney loses an eye while chopping firewood. He also deals with a drinking problem that becomes most intense during his second marriage. He quits drinking cold turkey when his wife is hospitalized with tuberculosis, leaving him to care for his young children. In his old age, Sidney has to have triple bypass surgery for a heart problem. By the end of the book, Sidney is an old man. The world has changed around him, but much of the Koyukon River valley remains the same, and Sidney still loves its nature and its people.



Chapter 1, Anna and Chapter 2, Kallyhocuses

Chapter 1, Anna and Chapter 2, Kallyhocuses Summary and Analysis

Shadows on the Koyukuk is a memoir of Sidney Huntington's life as the son of a white trapper and an Athapaskan Indian mother in rural Alaska. As a child, he learns to live on the land in the Koyukuk River valley. As he grows up, he sees many changes to the lives of Alaskan Natives and becomes a respected public figure in Alaska, a businessman and public servant.

As the book begins, Schilikuk, an Eskimo trader, comes to trade with Sidney Huntington's Athapaskan mother, Anna, the oldest child of a large family. Though the Athapaskans and Eskimos are traditionally enemies, Sidney's grandfather has forged a trading relationship with Schilikuk. Every March, Grandfather loads up goods on a dogsled and meets Schilikuk in the dangerous No Man's Land between the two tribes. Later, Anna goes with her father on these trips.

In 1900 or 1901, Anna marries Vicor Bifelt, a Finnish gold prospector, and they have two children, Fred and Edith. They live in a log cabin near the Hogatza River, where Victor becomes a trapper. Old Mama, Anna's mother, and her white husband Ned Regan live nearby, with their daughter Eliza. Victor and Ned begin arguing about trap lines. One day, Victor says he will kill Ned, and Anna warns Old Mama and Ned. Old Mama goes into the woods, but Ned stays behind. When Victor comes to his cabin, Ned shoots him and then turns himself in to the police. Anna has to leave her children with Old Mama and go into Nome to testify at the trial, where Ned is found innocent on a plea of self-defense. Anna, lonely and homesick, decides to walk back home immediately, over 400 miles through the tundra. The court gives her a note explaining who she is and warning people not to harm her, saying that help would be appreciated.

Anna makes a long, difficult journey, and nears home in June. One morning she wakes to see an Eskimo boy, and she is sure she will be killed. However, the Eskimo boy is Schilikuk's son, watching for her. Anna stays with Schilikuk until the ground freezes again, and then he takes her to No Man's Land when he goes trapping. She makes the final part of the journey, to her father's cabin, where she meets her brother, Hog River Johnny. Anna's father has died, but her children are well. Ned Regan returns, but Old Mama sends him away because of the killing. Over the years, hostility between Koyukon Athapaskans and Eskimos dissipates.

Chapter 2 begins with Sidney's birth nine years later, in 1915. James S. Huntington, Sidney's father, is a New Yorker who came to Dawson mining camp during the Gold Rush and later delivered mail by dog sled. James is arrested for selling illegally trapped furs for the Indians. Two Indians, Monkey John and Chief Thomas, help him escape,



and he travels to New York to see his mother, returning a year and a half later. In the meantime, the charges have been dropped.

When Sidney is three, he takes to wandering into the bushes to watch birds. His parents chastise him for wandering off, but he does not listen. Finally, his father scares him into not wandering off with a warning about "kallyhocuses," a one-eyed bird-like monster. In the summer, the family takes apart their home and turns it into a raft, to carry them and all their possessions to Hogatza on a journey down the Koyukuk River. During the summer, Sidney travels back with his father and uncle, Weaselheart, to harvest their potato garden. During the winter, when he is four, Sidney goes trapping with his mother.

In February, Sidney goes out with his dad to take orders for supplies, and his dad becomes sick. His father sends Sidney for help, and four-year-old Sidney walks through the snow to the mining camp to get help. In the spring, Sidney goes on another trapping trip with his mother, and on the last leg of the long journey back through difficult melting ice, Sidney lets go of the lead of his pack dog, causing the dog to get in a fight with three other dogs, who eat the food in the dog's pack. Meanwhile, Dad has fixed up a small riverboat, and he takes off downriver to bring his wife's three oldest daughters back from the mission schools, where they have been living for one to three years.



Chapter 3, Three Babes Alone and Chapter 4, Anvik

Chapter 3, Three Babes Alone and Chapter 4, Anvik Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 3, Sidney is five. His brother Jimmy is three, and his sister Marion is one and a half. His mother takes them hunting and fishing, and makes whitefish for supper. As the children sleep, Anna dies from the bad whitefish. The next morning, Sidney realizes he must take care of his younger siblings. After fighting with mosquitoes and Mom's decomposing body, Sidney and his siblings make a shelter with a tarp and begin to live outside. They get canned milk from the trading store, but the children start getting ill. One night, a bear tries to pull Marion away by her diaper, and the boys pull her back while the bear runs off with the diaper. Finally, the children go off to get help from Dominic Verneti, a miner who helped Sidney when his dad was sick.

On the trail, the children are blocked by a black bear. Sidney tries moving a boat into the river. It sinks, but after the wood swells, it floats again. They start down the river, but start back by foot to get a tarp when it begins to rain. Back at the house, Sidney feels beaten. When the children hear a steamboat coming, they hide in the store cellar, frightened. Luckily the steamboat stops, noticing something is wrong. When the passengers find the kids, the children fight and struggle at first, traumatized by their experience. As they travel downriver, the steamboat meets the children's father and older sisters, and Sidney confesses that they did something awful: they stole candy and cookies from the store. Soon relatives arrive, and the family holds memorial potlatch celebrations for Anna.

In Chapter 4, Dad is struggling running his store and caring for the children, and he sends the children to the Episcopal Anvik Mission, near an Athapaskan village 500 miles away. At first, Sidney is lonely, but he slowly begins to trust Reverend John Bentley. Two more orphans arrive, Ezra and Homer Collins, and Sidney tries to become friends with the boys. Their mother's possessions were all given away by tradition after their father's death, and to avoid an unwelcome marriage to a medicine man, she hung herself. Homer becomes Sidney's close friend, but becomes ill in 1921 and dies.

One day, an old Indian nicknamed Sakeroni asks Sidney to come with him to get a salmon, buried in the ground to make a traditional delicacy. When Sakeroni gets tired, Sidney goes out ahead, and Sakeroni starts off home, leaving Sidney to catch up. The next day, Sakeroni makes Sidney try the awful-smelling salmon, leaving Sidney smelling like fish. For four years, Sidney stays at the mission and learns the importance of helping others. Sidney also becomes interested in the fishermen's clever, funnel-like spruce and willow river traps, which are already being replaced by technology from the lower states. Since Sidney has trouble trusting his father after his traumatic experience, he leaves the mission for a year in 1921 to spend time with his dad.



Chapter 5, Alatna and Chapter 6, Eklutna

Chapter 5, Alatna and Chapter 6, Eklutna Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 5, Sidney travels upriver with his father to Alatna, where his father has a trading post with John Evans. They travel in John Evans' impressive riverboat, captained by his son Charlie. They make many stops along the way, including one at Sidney's mother's grave. In the village of Hughes, Sidney sees his grandmother again. As they travel, people help get the boat over shallow riffles in the river. At one point, local Indians pole a canoe up the river to get twenty men to help the boat across a shallow area, and finally they arrive at Alatna, home of another Episcopal mission.

At Alatna, Sidney learns that his father is a good cook and a sober man, prone to worry. Sidney goes to school and begins to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. When his father is away, Edwin Simon, a Koyukon Indian, helps out. Sidney's father becomes ill, and while he is away for more than two months, Sidney stays with Kitty Oldman, whose son Abraham is Sidney's age. Sidney's father returns, but because of his recurring illnesses, Sidney goes back to the mission. In 1925, still in ill health, Sidney's dad sells his share of the trading post and sends the children to a school near Anchorage.

In Chapter 6, Sidney and his brother Jimmy head to the Eklutna Vocational School. It is exciting being on the steamboat traveling the Yukon. They see their first train at Nenana, where they transfer to a passenger train. Jimmy is sick with undiagnosed tuberculosis, and has little energy to look outside as they pass Denali, the highest North American mountaintop, known elsewhere as Mount McKinley. After spending the night in luxury at a hotel, the boys arrive at their new school.

Immediately, Sidney gets into a fight with a bully trying to pick on his brother. Then, the boys take their first shower, and at mealtime, Sidney fights another bully. After this rocky beginning, Jimmy ends up in the hospital for six months, while he recovers from his tuberculosis, helped along by good food. Sidney settles down to a life of learning, gardening, hunting, and fishing. In 1927, he takes his first trip to Anchorage, then a city of about 2,000 people, where he sees his first car and his first movie. An Indian trapper named Eklutna John teaches the boys to make snowshoes. Sidney still gets into fights, though, and often gets paddled as punishment. The harsh paddlings often turn into severe beatings. In 1927, Sidney and Jimmy's father calls them back to the Koyukuk, so they can learn how to live from the land. Sidney has finished third grade, his last formal schooling.



Chapter 7, Nulako and Chapter 8, The Batza River Trapline

Chapter 7, Nulako and Chapter 8, The Batza River Trapline Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, Jimmy and Sidney travel back to the Koyukuk on the steamship Alice, which carries fruits, vegetables, meat, and eggs, all considered fresh despite being over a month old. Dominic Verneti greets Sidney with embarrassing vigor, reminding everyone of how Sidney got help to save his sick father at four years old. Sidney walks into John Evans' store and shoplifts a pocket knife. After a day of worrying and feeling ashamed, he returns it. To his surprise, Evans praises his bravery and gives him the knife. As Sidney waits his dad's return from the trapping grounds, he helps Cosmos Mountain, a Koyukon man, fix a boat engine. When Sidney's father returns with his partner, they build a cabin on their boat for the four to live in. Sidney sees a man bringing logs down the river with a canoe, and he begins to imitate the technique and earns six dollars for six logs.

One day in Spring, twelve-year-old Sidney hears rifle shots. The Nulato people are shooting into the river to greet a raft of ten boats full of Indians from upriver, arriving to attend a funeral potlatch for old man Demoski. Sidney remembers a story Demoski told him, about Russians first arriving in the Koyukon area. The Koyukon chief Lolee-ann objected to the Russian commandant Derzhavin taking both of his daughters, and was insulted by an overheard remark that the Russians would "send for" him. The Koyukons burned down the Nulato village and then attacked the Russian fort, killing the Russian commandant, an English lieutenant, and others. Sidney goes to the potlatch celebration, though he is beginning to be aware of his status as a "halfbreed" or Siwash. Everyone brings food. Two elders speak at the celebration, in a high language that Sidney does not know, and afterward there is feasting and dancing.

In Chapter 8, Sidney and his family travel upriver toward Batza River to trap for the winter, bringing supplies for a year. They stop at Koyukuk Station and stay that night for a dance. When the wind comes up at three in the morning, they rush to their boat and fight the wind and mosquitoes. They stop at the village of Cutoff, where Anna's sister and her husband live. Their Aunt Eliza Attla convinces them to stay overnight and makes them mittens and moccasins. They stop at their mother's grave, also, before arriving at Batza River, where they build an addition to the trappers' small cabin to accommodate the boys. Jimmy and Sidney help equally with all the preparations for winter, including building small output cabins, catching salmon to feed the dogs through winter, and pulling their boat, the Vixen, out of the water.

In winter, the family traps foxes, lynx, mink, and contraband marten for fur. In March, anticipating the coming depression, Dad and Sidney travel to the 600-person town of Tanana to sell off the furs while prices are still high. They stop at relatives' homes,



including Old Mama's, during the treacherous journey, which is eased where other travelers have recently passed and broken the trail. They sell the furs, then return. Sidney hears that Chief John, his great-uncle, is hunting a moose. Sidney tracks him down and finds Chief John and his wife feasting on and preserving the freshly killed moose's meat and hide, using every part.



Chapter 9, Deep Cold and Chapter 10, My First Boat

Chapter 9, Deep Cold and Chapter 10, My First Boat Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 9, Sidney is still at Batza River. Temperatures are below -60 degrees Fahrenheit, and in that temperature, groundwater breaking through the surface can be hazardous. Once, a soldier Dad accompanied through sub-freezing temperature froze his feet walking through less than an eighth inch of water and lost both legs from frostbite, and the children are not allowed out when it is below -60 degrees. One of the family's important possessions is a thermometer that is accurate to -98 degrees.

One day, after being confined inside through a particularly cold spell, Sidney goes out to collect animals from his traps when the temperature is -58. He finds a growling wolverine in one of the traps. Both afraid and awed, Sidney manages to kill it for its valuable fur. Exhausted, Sidney heads home in the freezing cold, lucky to reach home with only minor frostbite on his cheeks and his little finger. His father chastises him for going out; the temperature has dropped to -78 degrees. The low temperatures continue for two weeks. Charlie Irish, a census taker, and his guide George Butler travel a census-taking route in the below -60 temperatures. Charlie and George stay with the family for weeks, when the temperature is below -72. That spring, George, who was sick even before the trip, dies of tuberculosis.

In Chapter 10, March arrives, and Sidney decides to build a boat. He cuts down two spruce trees and with his father's partner Charlie's help, saws them into lumber. Though Dad initially does not want Jimmy to work too hard because of his bout of tuberculosis, he lets Jimmy learn to use the whipsaw, too. Sidney carelessly hurts his aging and ill father's feelings with a remark about his strength on the saw, but then apologizes. Sidney tries to mark out the bottom of the boat, but then reluctantly accepts Charlie's help to figure out the correct measurements. With Charlie and Dad's advice, and Jimmy's assistance, Sidney finishes his boat. It has a few flaws, but it is complete three days before the ice on the river breaks up.



Chapter 11, The Flood and Chapter 12, Snaring a Grizzly

Chapter 11, The Flood and Chapter 12, Snaring a Grizzly Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 11, the Koyukuk River ice begins to break up in mid-May, 1928, and the unusually deep ice jams in the river, making a dam. The family quickly moves from the cabin, stashing items on the roof, in a bear-proof platform in a large spruce, and in Sidney's boat before the icy water rises up to rush by the cabin. The family climbs on the roof, but the water rises to the roof, as well. In Sidney's boat and a canoe, they paddle away, knowing their house will soon be afloat. After the flood, they find their cabin and bear-proof cache tree have disappeared. All their supplies and possessions are gone, and they have only the money from the furs sold earlier in Tanana.

The family travels down to their old cabin at Hog River, and Charlie decides to stay while Dad and the boys get more supplies and equipment. Dad says that Charlie wants to prospect for gold. Downriver, the family finds that Joe Stickman has salvaged the Vixen off a block of ice. They repair the boat, and meanwhile, Joe Stickman admires Sidney's boat. Sidney is reluctant to sell, but grateful to Joe, and he sells the boat for \$100. With the Vixen repaired, the family fishes for salmon using a fish wheel. By the end of July, they catch 10,000 salmon. They keep 3,000 for their dogs and sell the rest, earning \$360, for a total of \$2,000, about \$1,000 short of the money they need for supplies. Dad decides to buy only what they can without credit, but Pop Russell, the trader they sold their salmon to, insists on giving them their full equipment on credit. Their barge has also been found, and the family rejoins Charlie with full supplies for the winter.

In Chapter 12, the family hunts geese and gathers berries and mushrooms. One night, a grizzly raids their fish store, and Sidney decides to catch it. Using a steel cable he has from helping a friend repair an airplane, Sidney sets a snare. When the bear is snared, Sidney shoots it several times until it falls. Dad will not let Sidney near the downed bear until after breakfast, so they can be sure it is dead. When Sidney's aunt Big Sophy Sam and her husband Little Sammy visit, he sees the bearskin Sidney has earned. He says Sidney has earned the right to a woman.

Soon, Sidney's uncle Weaselheart brings word that the family has chosen a 12-year-old girl for Sidney's wife. Dad objects to the native custom, saying Sidney is too young. Sidney also declines, and the girl is later married to an old man, for which she holds a grudge against Sidney for rejecting her. Hunting is poor that year, and soon the country is mired in depression. The family lives from the land, and Pop Russell still gives the family whatever credit they need.



Chapter 13, On Our Own and Chapter 14, No Man's Land

Chapter 13, On Our Own and Chapter 14, No Man's Land Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 13, Charlie and Sidney go upstream in 1929 to look for better trapping prospects, and Sidney finds moose tracks. The next day, he and Charlie track down the moose: a cow with a nearly grown calf. Charlie fells the moose from 600 yards, amazing Sidney. Trapping is good that milder winter, but prices are low. Dad's health also worsens. In 1931, Dad decides to quit trapping and gets a job as a guard at a jail. Charlie Swanson leaves for Canada. Jimmy and Sidney go trapping on their own, at 14 and 16. Together they build a thirty-foot boat dubbed the Ark and also practice canoe-racing. Periodically, they go into Nulato to sell furs and visit Dad. On the Fourth of July, Jimmy surprises everyone by winning the canoe race which has been won for years by Joe Stickman.

The boys enjoy their life trapping together, living in the wilderness, and hunting bear. One October, Jimmy tracks a bear to its den. He crawls inside, and the bear knocks away his rifle. Jimmy quickly retreats. Jimmy tries to cut into the den and kill the bear with an axe, but soon he finds he has got three bears to deal with. He kills two bears with an axe, getting clawed in the arm, while the dogs occupy the third bear. Then, Jimmy attacks the third bear, which disarms him of his axe. Jimmy retrieves his rifle and shoots the bear.

Sidney decides to learn an instrument and makes himself a guitar and a violin. He studies mechanical magazines and becomes interested in making a perpetual motion machine. His machine runs for an hour before stopping. One day, after chasing after a marten, the boys lose track of the trail and end up lost. They backtrack and finally arrive home at four in the morning.

In Chapter 14, the date is 1933, and Sidney is eighteen. He explores the former No Man's Land and decides to trap there. He comes across unknown snowshoe tracks and follows them, only to find a deserted camp. That night, the sky is lit with a brilliant aurora borealis. The next week, Sidney looks for the stranger again, finding nothing, and later learns that the Eskimos heard his calls of greeting and fled, afraid of a hostile band of Indians.

Young Toby, one of the last Koyukon Indians from Kateel, once told Sidney the following story. Around 1850, Young Toby's father, Old Toby, is hunting and finds evidence of strangers. Old Toby and his partner are sent to track the strangers. They detect Eskimo hunters when the Eskimos fell a caribou. Predicting that the Eskimos will try to hunt a beaver, the two Koyukons make their plans. When an Eskimo goes to the beaver lodge, Old Toby distracts the guard, while his partner shoots him with an arrow. Old Toby goes

after the other Eskimo, whom he finds hiding in the water near the beaver lodge, breathing through a reed. Old Toby shoots him with an arrow.



Chapter 15, The Old Koyukon Ways and Chapter 16, Siwash

Chapter 15, The Old Koyukon Ways and Chapter 16, Siwash Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 15, Sidney discusses the Athapaskan Indians, the last Alaskans to come into contact with white men. Athapaskans were eager to trade, except for clothing, since their own traditional clothes were superior. Sidney relates how Edwin Simon, born in 1898, lived "three lives," embodying the changes in Athapaskan culture. First, he lived only on the land, roaming from temporary sod house to sod house. From 1930 to 1960, he had a motorboat, oil and gas, and log houses, and could buy food at trading posts. From 1960 to 1979, he lived in a permanent house with electricity, running water, and appliances.

Sidney relates the story of an Indian family in the early 1800s who returned to Hog River along with others after moving away during bad years, only to find that food was still scarce. They would need to move to where caribou had been found, and meat had been cached. However, the grandmother was too frail from starvation to travel. She gave her food to her daughter-in-law and grandchild. Now, she tells her son that he must leave her behind, so their family can survive. Finally, her son accepts it, and helps his mother hang herself before the family moves on.

Sidney also relates a personal experience when traveling with Johnny Oldman, a Koyukon elder, and a four-year-old girl. The girl's clothes were wet and were left drying in the fire, and Johnny stopped Sidney from giving the girl a blanket, saying she must get strong. Sidney visits Johnny when he is old and in the hospital, and Johnny bemoans that the weak and sick are taken care of, kept alive with medicine, instead of dying off to leave only the strong to survive. In addition to meager resources, Sidney talks about the Koyukon's attitude that people must always be modest, and the belief that animals' spirits stay with their bodies. Koyukons have many rituals to keep the spirits of dead animals from running free or being unhappy, and also to show respect to the spirits of live animals.

In Chapter 16, Sidney discusses the attitudes toward half-blooded Indians, called "half-breeds" or "Siwash" derogatorily. At thirteen, Sidney gets into a fight with a boy who calls him a half-breed Siwash and a dirty coward. The word Siwash takes on a very negative connotation in Indian culture, though "siwashing out" means living in the frozen wild with no equipment.

Sidney tells a story of getting lost in the woods after tracking and trapping a marten. Realizing he will be in the woods all night, he follows his friend Edwin Simon's life-saving advice. He cuts wood and builds up his fire, which has melted down into the snow to the bare ground, and he puts green wood near the fire to dry. Meanwhile, he



digs a hold for a second fire, starting it with coal and charred wood from the first fire, and puts the dried green branches on the spot where the first fire used to be. He sleeps on the green branches, awakened by the cold a couple of hours later when the other fire dies out. He is stiff, but rested, as Edwin said he would be. In the morning, he finds his way back to his dog team.



Chapter 17, Koyokuk Gold and Chapter 18, Sled Dogs

Chapter 17, Koyokuk Gold and Chapter 18, Sled Dogs Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 17, Sidney picks up his life story. In 1934, his father goes to the Alaska Pioneer's Home in Sitka because of his failing health, which improves slightly over the course of a year. Sidney marries Jenny Luke, a girl he meets at Koyokuk Station, and moves to Hog River. The next year, Jimmy marries Celia Olin, and lives near her family at Cutoff, joining Sidney in the winters to trap.

Before Jimmy's marriage, the boys' dad writes to them that he is bored wasting away at the home and has decided to go digging for gold at Bear Creek. Since the ground there is wet, not frozen, others have been unable to mine the gold. Jimmy and Sidney help their father build a cabin at Bear Creek, and Dad starts the difficult task of painstakingly digging toward bedrock. When he reaches wet ground, he waits for it to freeze, until after two months of digging, the wet ground gives way and his hole is drowned in water. He dies soon after. Sidney goes to work for the mining company that is drilling at his father's former claim in 1937, but he leaves to go trapping. When he returns, he learns that a prospect hole next to his father's yielded \$3 million in gold. Jimmy and Sidney each earn \$15,000 for their shares in the claim. In 1955, the mining company brings in a gold mining dredge, and Sidney works as a foreman and as a panner. One day, he realizes that all the gold he is mining should have been his father's, and he has to walk off the job.

In Chapter 18, Sidney and his pregnant wife are traveling to Clear Creek, when the sled, with Jenny on it, goes out of control down a bank, injuring Jenny severely. He gets a pilot, Herman Lerdahl to fly her to the hospital. A few days later, Sidney travels to Cutoff to radio the hospital and check on his wife, who is doing well. On the way back, his sled overturns and tosses him in the river. He tries pulling himself out with a knife, but it breaks. Slowly, he pulls himself up by sticking his bare hands into holes in the ice and crawls to the shore, where he finds the dog team has come back for him, effectively saving his life. He is able to change into dry clothes and ride home, where he slowly recovers from pneumonia.

Sidney discusses dogs and dog sleds, the main way to get around rural Alaska. Ben Derrick, a dog breeder, breeds dogs that are a quarter wolf. Sidney believes his kind treatment of his animals saved his life. He tells stories of sled dogs' strength and patient behavior. His brother Jimmy earns the nickname "Huslia Hustler" winning big-time dog sled racing, a proud accomplishment though it brings little money. Sidney tells how his pregnant wife Jenny controls a dog who has attacked Sidney and cautions Sidney that he cannot show fear of the dogs. Then he tells about bringing his five-year-old son Carl

trapping. Their dogs smell wolves and run off with the sled, but then return, happy and tail-wagging.



Chapter 19, Beaver and Chapter 20, Snarling Grizzly Bears

Chapter 19, Beaver and Chapter 20, Snarling Grizzly Bears Summary and Analysis

Chapter 19 is about beavers, and Sidney talks about their dam-building, fine fur, and desirable meat. In the mid-1930s, Jimmy and Sidney go beaver hunting. Jimmy finds a beaver house, but Sidney is sick from eating moldy salmon and cannot hunt. After eating beaver shot by Jimmy, he feels better. The brothers go after more beaver, but Sidney's sled breaks through the ice, scattering most of their supplies. They must make do on the beaver and geese they kill, and Sidney loses 25 pounds. On the same trip, a bear charges at the two, and Jimmy shoots it while Sidney struggles uncasing his rifle and learns never to carry a cased rifle in the wild.

Sidney describes the traditional method of hunting beaver by destroying supplemental houses so all the beavers go to the main den. He describes Weaselheart's wife Josie pulling passive beavers out of their lodge and passing them to Weaselheart, to kill with a club. The beavers will not bite or struggle, as long as the person shows no fear. In hunting beaver with rifles, many are lost in the water, and this practice almost wiped out Alaska's beaver. Today, beavers are only caught with traps and snares. Sidney describes the traditional way of skinning and cleaning a beaver, afterward throwing the head with internal organs attached back into the water and imploring it to make more beavers.

Chapter 20 begins in 1941, when the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor. Sidney and Jenny have six children, and Sidney tries to enlist in the army. They tell him he can be more valuable as a sheet metal worker and give him work at Fort Richardson, near Anchorage, where Sidney is homesick in the crowded city. When he decides he has to leave, the army finds him a job in the more rural Galena Air Force Base, which turns a village of 35 into a city of 3,000.

In 1939, Jimmy and Sidney build the 32-foot boat Koyukuk. On December 7, 1941, Jimmy's wife Celia dies. Later, Jimmy marries Flora Child, and after they split, he marries Marion. Their marriage also breaks up. In 1943, Jimmy uses the Koyukuk to tow fuel for military planes. After 17 months of service, Sidney takes a month off to hunt beaver, taking along a dying Koyukon elder who wants to go on a last hunt. The elder, Louis Golchik, tells Sidney about a grizzly bear hunt. Sidney describes traditional grizzly bear hunts with spears before retelling the story:

In complete secrecy, Louis and Tom Patsy prepare for their first "big animal" spear hunt. Chief Paul sends for the two, who meet up with the Chief, his son Andrew, Austin Joe, and another hunter Louis refuses to name. They travel to the bear den, waiting for the right weather, then place poles across the opening, using a pole-vaulting technique, to



hold the animals in. They dig a hole to help hold the spear, and then let the bear out, which runs into the spear. The unnamed man, who has garnered disfavor by bragging about killing a "big animal" uses the spear second, but the bear seems to sense fear, swatting the spear away when the man shows it to the bear. Austin Joe takes away the spear, telling the man he is a liar for saying he killed a "big animal." The other hunters kill the remaining bears.

Jenny and Sidney divorce in 1944, and Sidney marries Angela Pitka. In 1945, after the war, they move to Hog River. Sidney takes up trapping again, and they have their first five children.



Chapter 21, Koyukuk Moose and Chapter 22, Koyukuk Wolves

Chapter 21, Koyukuk Moose and Chapter 22, Koyukuk Wolves Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21 begins one September in the late 1940s. Sidney heads out for a solitary evening moose hunt. He spots a bull moose in the magical evening, and the moose meanders toward him. As the moose comes into range, Sidney is so taken by the majestic animal and the beautiful evening that he does not fire. The moose looks at him and walks away. Sidney later is unsure whether the animal's majesty or his knowledge that such a larger, older animal might have tougher meat led him not to shoot.

Prior to the 1900s, Sidney believes there were few or no moose in the Koyukuk. In the early 1900s, the few moose wandering into the area were hunted. Between 1929 and 1935, Sidney saw none. Heavy snows in 1937 allowed moose to migrate in. In that year, Sidney kills a moose for his uncle Hog River Johnny, who brings his family to the carcass to spend days preparing the meat and hide. Weaselheart sees a moose and tosses a stick at it, causing it to charge.

Sidney teaches his children to hunt moose, and his son Arnold shoots a bull moose with a bow and arrow. Once, the family is in a boat and spots a moose. Sidney shoots it and is surprised at its enormous size when he goes to retrieve it. It is nearly 1,200 pounds. The family skins and dresses it. Another bull comes near the camp while they are still there, and Angela shoots it. Yearly moose hunts quickly become a Koyukuk tradition, but in the 1950s, wolves come to the area and thin the moose population.

In Chapter 22, Sidney's son Gilbert mistakes a wolf in a trap for a sled dog, and lets it out. The wolf runs off. Sidney also relates hearing a wolf howl for the first time and talks about the habits of the wolves. In 1972, Sidney is appointed to the Alaska Board of Fish and Game. In 1972, the board is divided into two boards, and Sidney serves on the Board of Game until 1992. He learns about the relationships of wolves to prey animals they need to survive. Too few prey cause wolves to die off, and too many wolves can cause prey animals like moose to disappear.

Sidney tells of dressing a caribou, when two Eskimos come by and advise him to remove the hooves. The Eskimos tell of wolves coming and killing off the local caribou populations. The Eskimos hide in their igloos, to wait for the starving wolves to die off, and they subsist on the long-lasting caribou hooves. In 1956, Donald Stickman, son of Joe, discovers twelve moose killed by wolves, the meat barely touched. He finds an enormous wolf population, and over two years, 300 wolves are killed to rebalance the population. Sidney describes controversial wolf-control practices over the years, and watching with his family as a family of wolves swims across the Yukon River.



Chapter 23, Booze, Chapter 24, Galena and Chapter 25, Reflection

Chapter 23, Booze, Chapter 24, Galena and Chapter 25, Reflection Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 23, Sidney injures his eye while chopping firewood, and it has to be removed and replaced with a glass eye. He talks about Prohibition. Beginning with contact with white men, alcohol is a part of life in rural Alaska, and throughout Prohibition, people make liquor with stills, though bad liquor can cause blindness or death. Jimmy and Sidney run a still, selling alcohol. Sidney's drinking increases until in the 1940s, he is drinking excessively. Left alone in his trapline after a binge, he sees a pink elephant. Only when his wife Angela has to go to the hospital with tuberculosis, a plague that has killed Sidney's sister Ada, all fourteen of Hog River Johnny's children, five of Weaselheart's six children, and many more, does Sidney quit drinking, in 1963.

In Chapter 24, Sidney studies carpentry from books and becomes a carpenter in Galena, building and selling boats on the side. Angela makes fur clothes. When Sidney's boys cannot find work, they make a fish wheel and sell the salmon, which turns into a large family business. As costs rise, and profits fall, Sidney sells the business. He starts a salmon smokehouse, fighting a mountain of bureaucracy to make his business legal.

Sidney recounts a plan in the 1960s to, instead of paying for rural schools in areas of low population, build housing for children to come to larger cities for high school education. Sidney goes to a Board of Education meeting, but at first, he is too polite to speak. When he finally gets the floor, he voices what many others are feeling, that children need the guidance of their parents and should not be sent away. Sidney feels that the education provided by parents, who know traditional ways and skills needed to live in the wild land, is essential.

In Chapter 25, Sidney notes that he still exchanges gifts with the descendants of Schilikuk, the Eskimo trader his father befriended. He says that rural Alaska is not an unpeopled wilderness, but a place where people have lived as part of nature for many years. In the early 1980s, when he is in his 60s, Sidney goes trapping, particularly for valued lynx furs. Much has changed, including the new snow machines and expensive traps. As he is driving over a pond, the ice breaks, plunging his snow machine into the water. Again, Sidney must pull himself out of freezing water. He builds a fire, barely able to light a match. His hands are numb, and he must use his mouth. Though Sidney catches \$16,000 of furs that winter, trapping is too expensive today to be a way of life.

In 1982, Sidney has heart problems and undergoes triple bypass surgery. He has had fourteen children with Angela, and adopted a fifteenth child. He also describes helping a local teenage boy get a snow machine, giving him odd jobs at Sidney's snow machine

dealership and the salmon fishery. His brother Jimmy also writes an autobiography in the 1960s, and Sidney explains that the publishers change the ages of the boys when their mother dies, making each two years older so the story will be more believable. He reiterates that it happened when he was five, his brother three, and their sister one and a half. Jimmy dies in 1987. Sidney ends the book noting how life has changed for Koyukon people, but the Koyukuk River valley is still much the same.



Characters

Sidney Huntington

Sidney Huntington is half Athapaskan and half Caucasian. Born in 1915, Sidney grows up in the Koyukuk River area in rural Alaska. When he is five years old, his mother dies after eating some bad fish. In the morning, five-year-old Sidney is left alone with his three-year-old brother Jimmy and his year-and-a-half-old sister Marion. After surviving this ordeal, Sidney is sent to an Episcopal mission, since his father cannot care for the children. Sidney is left with trust issues, and he spends a year trapping with his father to develop their relationship.

Sidney respects the Koyukon Indians and is interested in their traditional ways. Throughout the book, he tells of Koyukon Indian traditions, methods of hunting, beliefs, and lifestyles. He sees many of the traditions being lost and forgotten and seems to want to make sure they are preserved by including them in the memoir.

Sidney is independent and determined, from childhood through adulthood. He is instilled with the belief that he can do anything, once he sets his mind to it. As a young boy of four, he goes for help by himself, in the frozen Alaskan wilds, when his father is sick. At five, he must care for his younger siblings when his mother dies. When he is a little older, he decides to make a boat, and sets about it with adult determination. As a man, he teaches himself carpentry to make enough of a living to support his growing family. Later, when Sidney is told that he cannot legally sell smoked salmon, he determinedly sets about making his salmon smoking facility legal.

James S. Huntington

Jim Huntington is Sidney's father, a New Yorker who comes to Alaska during the gold rush. He works as a trapper and as a mail sled driver. He is plagued by illness throughout most of his life. While Sidney's father is away, Sidney's mother dies, and he is left alone with two younger siblings. Afterwards, Jim cannot take care of his young children while making a living as a trapper and trader, which requires him being away for long periods of time. Jim sends his children to an Episcopal mission. Since Sidney feels abandoned by his father, Jim takes Sidney out of the mission and brings Sidney with him for a year while he traps.

Jim is concerned about educating his children. He sends Sidney and his brother Jimmy to a Bureau of Indian Affairs school, where Sidney gets a third grade education. Jim is also interested in educating his children to live off the land, as Jim has lived. He sends for Sidney and Jimmy because he knows his health is not good and he wants time to teach his children how to care for themselves. Jim tells his children that they can do anything they want. When Sidney wants to build a boat, Jim tells him to go ahead. He



gives Sidney advice, but he does not give him any help. He wants Sidney to learn by doing.

Jim is a gold prospector at heart, and when he is growing old and even more ill, he goes prospecting for gold at Bear Creek. He is restless. He does not want to die in a rest home, bored and confined, and would rather die in the wildlands he has spent most of his life in, going after the gold that is his passion. Jim digs a hole through the difficult terrain, trying to reach bedrock. At about 11 feet down, his prospecting hole floods, and Jim must give up his mining attempt. He dies shortly after, never knowing that he was less than two feet away from millions of dollars in gold.

Anna

Anna is Sidney's strong-willed, small-of-stature mother. She is married to Victor before Sidney is born, and when her husband is killed by her mother's husband, Anna must travel to town to testify at the hearing. Since travel is so difficult, she is gone for a year. When the trial is over, she insists, stubbornly, against all advice, on walking the more than 400 miles back to be with her children. Anna walks through unknown, dangerous territory, getting assistance along the way by virtue of a letter given to her by the court. Anna is renowned throughout the area for her months-long journey. When Sidney is five years old, his mother Anna dies from eating bad fish, leaving Sidney alone to care for his two younger siblings.

Jimmy Huntington

Jimmy is Sidney's younger brother. Sidney and Jimmy are two years apart in age, and they become trapping partners after their father retires to a job in the village.

Schilikuk

Schilikuk is an Eskimo trader who forges a friendship with Sidney's trader grandfather and later trades with Sidney Huntington's mother and helps her on her long journey home.

Old Mama

Old Mama is Sidney's name for his maternal grandmother, who had fifteen children, eight of whom survived to adulthood.

Grandfather

Sidney's grandfather was a Koyukon Indian trader who forged a trade relationship with Schilikuk, a member of the unfriendly Eskimos.



Victor Bifelt

Victor is Anna's husband, a Finn who travels to Alaska in search of gold and later becomes a trapper. He says that he will kill Anna's mother's husband Ned over trapping rights, and Anna warns Ned. Ned kills Victor, and Anna must testify at the trial, hundreds of miles from home.

Ned Regan

Ned Regan is Old Mama's husband. After Anna warns him that her husband Victor will kill him, Ned waits for Victor with a shotgun and shoots him. Ned turns himself in to the police and is acquitted on a plea of self-defense, but Old Mama will not take him back because of the coldness of the killing.

Dominic Verneti

Dominic is an Italian miner who works in Alaska and is friends with Sidney's father. Dominic helps Sidney at different times in his life, and he is reputed to be an excellent Italian cook.

Sakeroni

Sakeroni is an old Indian man whom Sidney helps while he is staying at the Episcopal mission. Sakeroni gives Sidney some traditionally prepared salmon, which makes Sidney smell awful.

Charlie Swanson

Charlie Swanson is Jim Huntington's trapping partner while Jim's sons are still young, a man Jimmy and Sidney look up to like an uncle.

Charlie Irish

Charlie Irish is a census taker who travels through the Koyukuk district gathering census information during a particularly cold winter that Sidney is spending trapping with his father.

George Butler

George Butler is Charlie Irish's guide, traveling through the Koyukon area. George and Charlie stay with Sidney's family during a cold spell, when it is too cold to travel.



Joe Stickman

Joe Stickman is a trader, who salvages the Vixen after it is damaged in a flood. Joe buys Sidney's first boat for \$100.

Pop Russell

Pop Russell is a trader. He buys salmon from Jim Huntington, and he gives the family credit to buy supplies after their equipment is all destroyed in a flood.

Weaselheart

Weaselheart is Sidney's uncle. His name is an English translation of his Alaskan name, and Sidney attributes great bravery to him.

Jenny Luke

Jenny is Sidney's first wife, a girl he meets at Koyukuk station. Sidney and Jenny have six children before they split up.

Louis Golchik

Louis is an Indian elder Sidney takes with him hunting while on leave from working as a sheet metal worker for the military. Louis tells Sidney a story about a spear hunt for a grizzly bear, obliquely referred to as a "big animal."

Angela Pitka

Angela is Sidney's second wife, whom he marries in 1944. Angela and Sidney have fourteen children and adopt a fifteenth.

Hog River Johnny

Hog River Johnny is one of Sidney's uncles. He has fourteen children, all of whom die of tuberculosis.



Objects/Places

The Koyukuk

The Koyukuk is a river in Alaska, which flows south into the Yukon River. The Koyukon Indians live in the valley around the river.

Hogatzakaket

Hogatzakaket is Hogatza River, or Hog River, a tributary running into the Koyukuk River.

No Man's Land

No Man's Land is the mountainous area between Eskimo and Athapaskan lands, a dangerous place for people of either tribe during the time of enmity between the two.

Anvik Mission

Anvik Mission is an Episcopal mission where Sidney, Jimmy, and their young sister Marion go after their mother's death. The mission takes in many orphaned Alaskan Natives.

Alatna

Sidney's father brings Sidney with him to Alatna, where Sidney spends a year with his father working the trapline.

Eklutna Vocational School

The Eklutna Vocational School is a school for Alaskan natives run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Jimmy and Sidney go there for schooling in 1925.

The Pocketknife

When Sidney is a young boy, he steals a pocketknife from a local store. When he feels guilty and goes to return the knife, the store owner gives it to Sidney for his honesty in returning it.



The Vixen

The Vixen is Sidney's father's and his trapping partner Charlie's boat. During a flood at the breakup of ice, the Vixen is washed away, along with all the family's possessions. The Vixen is later found, damaged by the flood, floating on ice. Sidney's father recovers and repairs the Vixen.

Sidney's First Boat

Sidney builds his first boat while he is trapping with his father and his father's partner Charlie. Jim and Charlie give Sidney advice on building the boat, but they will not help him with the construction, wanting him to learn by doing.

The Thermometer

The Huntingtons have a thermometer that is accurate to -98 degrees Fahrenheit. When the temperature is below -60 degrees, it is too dangerous to go out in the cold.

The Ark

The Ark is a thirty-foot cabin boat that Jimmy and Sidney build for themselves while they are trapping on their own.

Bear Creek

Sidney's father goes to Bear Creek to dig for gold when he is older and ill. He digs to within two feet of gold-rich bedrock before his hole is waterlogged and he must give up. Sidney later walks off a mining job at Bear Creek, realizing all the gold being mined should have been his father's.



Themes

Tradition and Family

Sidney is interested in preserving Koyukon traditions. He talks about traditional methods of fishing, making spears and hunting grizzlies with spears, and making clothes. He discusses how the Koyukon Indians lived with nature and viewed the spirits of animals. Sidney sees that many traditions, handed down orally through generations, are being lost in modern times. While life is constantly changing, through many means, Sidney wants to preserve the past.

An important part of tradition is family. The family unit is the center of Koyukon society, and Koyukons have family relationships with many people throughout the land. People are nomadic, and they travel to wherever the food is that winter, in the harsh environment. Families let each other go easily, because of this difficult style of life. Even before Sidney's mother's death, his older sisters were sent away to school. Sidney himself is separated from his father at a young age. He travels his own path. However, he maintains a network of family relationships that will always welcome him back at any time. Family, in Sidney's life, is not possessive, but is supportive.

Family, however, is the way that traditions are passed down. Parents teach their children the traditional methods of living in the wilds of Alaska. Sidney believes that children should stay with their parents, to learn the very traditional ways of life that give those children independence. This is why Sidney opposes sending children away to school. This role of the family is essential to Sidney.

Independence and Determination

Throughout Sidney's life, he is independent. His family begins teaching him to do adult work at a young age, when he is just a toddler. As a result of the harshness of the environment, people need to be independent, so that they can take care of themselves. Sidney is independent enough at the young age of five to help his four-year-old brother and one-and-a-half-year-old sister survive after their mother dies. Sidney continues to show both independence and a determination to finish what he sets out to do throughout his life.

Sidney is in several harrowing situations while he is alone in the wild. Once, when he flies off his dog sled into the icy river, he pulls himself out of the water. Again, in his sixties, he pulls himself out of the icy river again after his snow machine breaks through the ice. Alone, he relies on his own intelligence, knowledge, skills, and physical ability to survive difficult situations.

Sidney shows his independence and determination from building his first boat, with advice but no assistance from his father, to getting his salmon smoking plant approved by the federal and state governments to allow him to sell local smoked salmon. At every



point in his life, he makes a decision about what he will do, and then he goes out and accomplishes it, relying on himself and his own capabilities. Sidney believes in instilling self-reliance in others, by teaching important skills for life. His belief that parents should give children a "bush education" is part of Sidney's belief in the importance of self-reliance.

Man's Relationship with Nature

Sidney grows up living in the midst of nature and relying on the river, the land, and wildlife for subsistence. In his life, man lives in close companionship with nature, dependent on nature. As a result of this, nature must be understood and treated with respect. It is a matter of survival. This is reflected in Koyukon beliefs in animals' spirits. Animals must be respected, in word and deed, before the hunt and after the hunt. Sidney carries with him this need for respect, as he shows by following the Koyukon custom of throwing a beaver's innards into the river after cleaning it, asking the beaver to make more beavers.

Sidney is very aware of the changes in animal life over time. Snowshoe rabbits have a cyclical existence, where their numbers raise and lower over the years, causing changes in the abundance of food. Overfishing causes a lack of salmon, and in turn, this can cause starvation. Moose and wolves travel into the Koyukuk River area, where they have not been seen for many years, and perhaps have never lived in any great numbers. The existence of moose changes the balance of wildlife, allowing the wolves to subsist as well as the humans.

The overabundance of wolves wreaks havoc with the wildlife. Sidney describes measures taken in Alaska to control the wolf population, just as he describes a story from the Eskimo culture where wolves destroy the moose population and then the Eskimos must hide while the wolves leave or die off. He also tells stories of starvation among the Koyukon, during periods where wildlife was scarce. Sidney knows the complex balance of nature, and the cyclical changes in animal populations. He works on the Alaska Board of Fish and Game, and the Alaska Board of Game, in order to help make wise choices about the treatment of animals and wildlife. He is also concerned with being frugal, not wasteful, in hunting animals. One goal of his salmon smoking plant is to utilize the salmon that is wasted in fishing for roe, and he realizes the unhealthfulness of the waste in hunting beaver with rifles, since many of the beaver are lost in the water.

Style

Perspective

The memoir *Shadows on the Koyukuk* is told from a first person perspective. Though the memoir is written by Jim Rearden based on Sidney Huntington's recollections, it attempts to be truly Sidney Huntington's story from Sidney Huntington's point of view, without the interference of thoughts or commentary by Rearden. Rearden becomes a passive instrument, putting Sidney's thoughts, memories, and ideas on paper.

Sidney has seen many changes in the lives of the Alaskan people of the Koyukuk River valley. He seems to regret the past slipping away, though he has become part of a new world, shaped by the white incursion into Alaska. In fact, Sidney's father is part of that incursion, which shaped the new Alaska. As half white, half Athapaskan, Sidney's very existence straddles two worlds, and as time moves forward, culturally, Sidney finds himself straddling two worlds more and more. He sees the white world becoming the dominant force, and the Koyukon culture, with its oral traditions and nomadic ways, slipping away.

Sidney values the Koyukon culture and wants to preserve the ways and values of his mother's people. He spends many parts of the book detailing Koyukon culture, such as the making of snowshoes, or preparations for bear hunts, or methods to prevent angering the spirits of animals. He fights to have rural Alaskan youth stay with their families, where they can learn a "bush education" from their parents. He wants to preserve the relationship of man and nature that Athapaskan people developed over many years.

Tone

The tone of *Shadows on the Koyukuk* is that of an oral tradition, being handed down from an elder to the community. The Koyukon Indian culture relies heavily on oral tradition to maintain its culture and teach its youth. In *Shadows on the Koyukon*, Sidney carries on this tradition, giving his own oral history of the Koyukon people as well as his own life. The memoir has three elements. One element is Sidney's retelling of his own life story, which takes on a nostalgic tone, one that recalls the past with great affection and fond memories.

A second element in the memoir is the recounting of tales of the Koyukon people, including the story of Sidney's mother's journey over more than 400 miles of frozen wildlands by foot. Sidney retells what has been told to him by Koyukon elders and friends, and the cultural knowledge he has accumulated through a varied life of living in the wild. These portions of the memoir are both instructional and filled with admiration. They describe the Koyukon people and the Koyukon way of life with deep love, while giving detailed information about Koyukon craftsmanship and society.



A third element in the memoir is Sidney Huntington's interpretation of and commentary on elements of life in rural Alaska. He praises the work of Episcopal missions during Sidney's childhood. He reveals his attitude toward the poaching that he and his family took part in, during his youth. He complains about the limiting bureaucracy he faced in getting his smoked salmon business legally licensed, and he gives his views on the education of children. The tone of this third element is that of an elder giving advice on how to live, and what is right and wrong, completing the oral tradition style of the memoir.

Structure

Shadows on the Koyukuk is a memoir, and it is basically chronological, though it does move around in time while relating the course of Sidney Huntington's life. The book begins before Sidney's birth, with a legendary story about his mother Anna making a trek over more than 400 miles to rejoin her family. This story is important, because it sets up elements of man's relationship with nature, the Koyukuk Indian culture, the importance of family, and self-reliance. Anna embodies the Koyukon backdrop against which Sidney's life takes place. The memoir then tells stories of Sidney's younger years, when he learns much about the way of life in the Alaskan wildlands, and when his life is changed forever by his mother's death.

Sidney's youth is classified into periods he spends in different places: the Episcopal mission at Anvik, Alatna where he traps with his father, Eklutna where he attends school, and Nulato and the Batza River trapline where he rejoins his father to learn about trapping and self-reliance. Several chapters are spent on the formative time with his father, as Sidney gets his "bush education" about living in Alaskan wilds. His father becomes more ill and retires, and Sidney and his brother Jimmy become adults.

After Sidney reaches adulthood, the memoir becomes less chronological, as in each chapter Sidney reveals stories related to different aspects of Alaskan life, such as sled dogs, moose, and the alcohol that plagues him through much of the 30s and 40s but appears confined to one chapter in the memoir. However, the memoir still loosely follows Sidney's journey through two marriages and rearing many children, ending in his older years, where he goes into the wild for one more hunt, undergoes heart surgery, and in the end is a "modern" man in his 70s, still subsisting mainly on the abundance of Alaska's wilds.



Quotes

"She stopped and forced herself to eat, because she wanted to walk to her father with her head up, strong and proud, not tottering as if exhausted from her long trek." —Chapter 1, Anna, p. 21.

"I remember saying, 'Dad, we did something bad. We stole candy and cookies from the store.'" —Chapter 3, Three Babes Alone, p. 40.

"It was clear that I still had trouble trusting anyone, and in my mind my dad had abandoned the three of us when my mother had died." —Chapter 4, Anvik, p. 50.

"I wanted to attend the Demoski potlatch, but one of the younger boys of the village told me, 'They don't allow halfbreeds from the Koyukuk in the hall.'" —Chapter 7, Nulato, p. 72.

"I knew that I had to keep moving because no amount of clothing would keep me warm if I stopped. Yet I moved slowly, knowing that if I overexerted and started to sweat, the perspiration would freeze on my clothing and allow the cold to penetrate." —Chapter 9, Deep Cold, p. 91.

"No respectful Koyukon ever spoke directly of a 'grizzly' or 'brown bear.' It was always 'that big animal.'" —Chapter 12, Snaring a Grizzly, p. 109.

"I realized then that my yells had been heard, and like me, the Eskimos had remembered the stories of danger in No Man's Land and had fled." —Chapter 14, No Man's Land, p. 126.

"Do I get upset if someone calls me a half-breed Siwash? I haven't let anything like that bother me for years." —Chapter 16, Siwash, p. 145.

"About this ceremony, an Indian friend once commented, 'It doesn't bother a person who doesn't know about it, but I know the traditional beliefs, and it bothers me if I don't observe them.'" —Chapter 19, Beaver, p. 164.

"That was the old Koyukon way. When a hunter killed big game, his family moved to the animal." —Chapter 21, Koyukuk Moose, p. 182.

"When I first started living at Hog River, I remember returning to the Yukon River in the spring to discover that many of the pretty young girls I had known and danced with the previous fall were dead from tuberculosis." —Chapter 23, Booze, p. 200.

"But, modern or not, about seventy-five percent of the food we live on still comes from the wildlands along the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers." —Chapter 25, Reflection, p. 218.



Topics for Discussion

How does Sidney feel about the changes to Koyukon culture, from first contact with white Europeans to today?

Why does Sidney give detailed information about traditional ways to build traps, spears, and other traditional Koyukon items?

Sidney believes that Episcopal missions were important, positive forces for Alaskan Natives during the time of his youth. Why does he believe this? Do you agree?

How does Sidney view animals and ecological conservation? How does he treat animals throughout his life?

Why does Sidney describe in detail what he goes through to create a legal salmon smokehouse, to sell smoked salmon? How does he feel about the regulations governing production of smoked salmon?

Do you agree with Sidney's beliefs that rural Alaskan children need a "bush education" from their parents about life in the wild, as well as a modern education in school? What different functions do these two educations fulfill?

What effect does Sidney's mother's death have on him throughout his life?

What is Sidney's relationship like with his father? How does it change throughout the book?

What is Sidney's viewpoint on families? How does his own background affect his views on family?

What is the role of modesty in Koyukon culture? Does Sidney break from the Koyukon tradition of modesty in his memoir?