

Shaking the Nickel Bush Study Guide

Shaking the Nickel Bush by Ralph Moody

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Plot Summary

Shaking the Nickel Bush is a novel by acclaimed author Ralph Moody. This novel follows Ralph, a young man who has recently been diagnosed with diabetes in a time when there was no treatment for the disease. Ralph is encouraged to travel back west where the climate is warmer in hopes that sunlight and a modified diet will prolong his life. As Ralph travels, he befriends a young drifter like himself and the two have many adventures as they search for a way to make a living in an economy still reeling from the First World War. *Shaking the Nickel Bush* is a fictionalized narration of author Ralph Moody's young adulthood, a story that inspires even as it amuses the faithful reader.

Ralph was unable to go to war due to his position as the head of his family; therefore, he spent the war years working in a munitions plant. When Ralph returns home after the war, his mother is so alarmed by his extreme weight loss that she sends him immediately to the doctor. In the hospital, Ralph's doctor tells him that he has diabetes and that the specialists all believe he has less than six months to live. However, Ralph's doctor tells him if he follows a special diet and goes back west where he can expose himself to lots of sunshine, he should live a good life. Ralph's mother immediately packs his things and sends him to Arizona on the train.

When Ralph arrives in Arizona, he has hopes of getting work on a cattle ranch. However, with all the soldiers returning home from war, there are few jobs to be had. Ralph meets a young man named Lonnie who is also looking for a job. Together Ralph and Lonnie move to another town, hoping for better luck, but find the same story. Then Ralph hears about a movie set that is hiring cowboys to take falls off of horses. Having been a trick rider as a young child, Ralph feels he could do well at this. Ralph goes to the movie set and runs into a man who he knew when his family had a ranch in Colorado. This man takes Ralph under his wing and teaches him all he needs to know to survive the horse falls without hurting himself too badly. With this help and some ideas of his own, Ralph completes thirteen falls, leaving the movie set with more than three hundred dollars in his pocket.

Ralph returns to Phoenix and hooks up with Lonnie again. A kind railroad conductor told Ralph that he would have better luck finding work if he bought a car and checked out some of the ranches further from the railroad. Ralph tells Lonnie his plan and finds Lonnie deeply excited by the idea. Ralph originally only wants to pay fifty dollars for a used car, but finds himself talked into buying a Ford for eighty-five dollars. To get it running, Ralph has to pay nearly fifty more dollars when it turns out the entire engine needs to be rebuilt.

Ralph and Lonnie head out in search of jobs in the country beyond Phoenix. Lonnie insists they head into the hills. However, this causes more trouble with their car. They break a half-moon key that connects the floor brakes to the engine, forcing Lonnie to walk nearly eighty miles to the nearest town. Later, they have a flat tire and discover that the tires have been patched so many times they are useless. When this happens, Lonnie takes a clay horse Ralph has carved and trades it for a new tire. This gives



Ralph an idea. In the next town they stop in, Ralph takes a clay horse's head to the bank and offers to make a bust for the banker. This leads to more than six artistic jobs for Ralph at twenty-five dollars a piece. In time, Ralph finds himself working from town to town as an artist, saving up more than a thousand dollars.

Ralph and Lonnie end their business as artists and go to Kansas City where they plan to separate, Lonnie going home to Wyoming and Ralph to his old hometown in Colorado. When they arrive in the city, Ralph learns that Lonnie is out of cash. Ralph pushes Lonnie to sell the car, which is now legally his. Afraid that Ralph will force Lonnie to part with his beloved car, Lonnie leaves town without warning. When Ralph returns to the hotel, he discovers that Lonnie has taken the bulk of his savings from the artist business when he accidentally packed the wrong pair of overalls.



Chapter 1, In a Bad Way, and Chapter 2, Land Rolling!

Chapter 1, In a Bad Way, and Chapter 2, Land Rolling! Summary

Ralph Moody is a writer who began his career late in life and writes mostly about his own personal history, including his adventures as a farmer.

In a Bad Way. Ralph was not able to serve in the military during World War I because he was the head of his family after his father died, so he spent the war working at a munitions plant. When he returned home, Ralph had lost so much weight, his mother forces him to go to the doctor. In the hospital, Ralph learns he has diabetes and that the experts do not expect him to live more than six months. However, Ralph's family doctor, Dr. Gaghan, places him on a special diet and encourages him to move to the west where he can get plenty of healing sunlight. That night, Ralph's mother bakes him several loaves of the gluten bread the doctor recommends and prepares him to travel to Arizona on the morning train.

Ralph hopes to find a job on a ranch when he arrives in Arizona. Ralph visits some of the employment offices, but discovers that the returning soldiers are being given preference over men like himself who were unable to serve for one reason or another. Ralph begins to worry when after a week he is not able to find a job. Ralph is quickly running out of money and his special diet is becoming harder and harder to maintain without extra cash. Finally, Ralph is forced to leave his hotel and sleep near the stockyards as he continues to hope he will find a job.

Land Rolling! Ralph meets Lonnie, another drifter like himself, at the stockyards in Tucson. Together they decide to go to Phoenix, hoping there will be more jobs there. Lonnie and Ralph ride the freight trains, jumping on as they roll. Several times they are chased off by the brakemen. On Thanksgiving, Lonnie steals a chicken for them to eat. When Lonnie and Ralph reach Arizona, Ralph meets a man in an employment office who just returned from a movie set in Wickenburg where he was paid to fall off a horse. Although everyone else thinks this is a crazy idea, Ralph decides to go to Wickenburg and check it out. Ralph talks a kind conductor into allowing him to ride a freight train to the small city.

In Wickenburg, Ralph finds the movie set to be a curious mixture of western culture and Hollywood phony. Ralph signs a contract and has his first real meal in days. When Ralph goes to find the tent and group he has been assigned to, he discovers that his group captain is Ted Hawkins, a man he knew when his family lived in Colorado.



Chapter 1, In a Bad Way, and Chapter 2, Land Rolling! Analysis

The first chapter introduces the main character. The point of view is first person and the narration is written in such a way that the reader is aware that the story is being told after the fact. Ralph is a young man who has been the head of his family since he was a young child. Ralph has recently learned he has diabetes. The reader knows from Ralph's talk of the First World War that there was no treatment for the disease at the time. This offers a sense of foreboding to the story, leaving the reader wondering if Ralph will be alive at the end of the book and also wondering how the illness will affect his ability to live a normal life.

When Ralph arrives in Arizona, he is unfairly refused jobs because of his inability to serve in the military. This causes Ralph to run out of money quickly, one way in which his illness affects his life. However, Ralph is not the only one with this trouble and he quickly joins forces with another young man with the same problem. This friendship is prefaced by the comment that the narrator is not sure if this friendship was a good or bad thing, suggesting to the reader that this friend will be as much trouble as he is companion.



Chapter 3, Movie Location, and Chapter 4, Horse Falls

Chapter 3, Movie Location, and Chapter 4, Horse Falls Summary

Movie Location. Ted takes Ralph around the set and shows him the places where the crew has set up the horse falls. Ted shows Ralph how the falls are simulated with a trip wire attached to the horse's shoe and discusses with him how a man should react as the horse falls. Ted also shows him a new location that includes a fall down a hill that the movie people are having trouble finding cowboys willing to do. Ted tells Ralph if he would be willing to fall on the small hill he could get paid as much as thirty dollars a fall.

The night a group of new fall riders come in from Wyoming and get drunk, promising to be better than all the other fall riders. The next morning the Wyoming riders are all hung over, but still spoiling for a fight. Ted decides to use them first and advises Ralph to hide on the set and watch the day's filming.

Horse Falls. Ralph watches the first set of riders and analyzes their hard falls, figuring out what they did wrong to lead to their terrible injuries. When the second group of riders come out, Ted shows them specifically how to take a fall, but again the men disregard his advice and fall hard, leaving them all with broken bones. By then Ralph has a good idea of how to take the falls. Ralph goes out to a small hill and practices falls on gravel. Before long, Ralph is confident he knows how to fall without injuring himself. The following day Ralph is able to make a deal with the movie people for thirty-five dollars a fall. In the next week, Ralph makes more than four hundred dollars after thirteen falls.

Chapter 3, Movie Location, and Chapter 4, Horse Falls Analysis

Ralph has found a way to make some money. However, everyone who has come before him has broken a bone purposely falling from horses. In these chapters, Ralph shows the reader how smart he is. Not only does Ralph find a legal way to ride the train for free, he studies the fall riders and learns how to fall in such a way that he does not hurt himself too badly. In fact, Ralph is able to complete thirteen falls where most of the men have completed only one and come out of it with broken bones. Ralph is highly intelligent and brave man, encouraging the reader with his courage.



Chapter 5, Friendly Phoenix, and Chapter 6, Outfitting

Chapter 5, Friendly Phoenix, and Chapter 6, Outfitting Summary

Friendly Phoenix. As Ralph waits for the train to Phoenix, he decides to repay the conductor for his kindness. Ralph buys the man a box of cigars and gives it to him, telling him he won the box in a poker game. In return, the conductor tells Ralph that if he ever has to jump a train again he should jump a mail train because they rarely stop and the men on board cannot open the door to the car where the mail is stored, so they cannot check for jumpers. The man also suggests that if Ralph wants a job on a ranch he should buy a car and travel to places where the railroad does not go.

Ralph returns to Phoenix and befriends a couple who run a small restaurant and are willing to cook him items from his special diet. This couple also sends Ralph to a doctor to care for his soreness from the horse falls. The doctor orders Ralph to stay in bed for a week. To entertain himself, Ralph buys some clay and spends the week making clay horses the way his roommate, Ivon, taught him during the war.

Outfitting. Ralph reunites with Lonnie and tells him about his plan to buy a car and travel the country in hopes of finding a job. Lonnie knows a lot about cars, so Ralph allows him to search for the right used car, but puts him on a tight budget. When Ralph finds a Ford that he really likes, he drags Ralph to look at it. Ralph dislikes it at first glance because it has flaky paint and a broken spring. However, both Ralph and the mechanic selling the car insist it is mechanically sound. When Ralph balks at the idea of buying the car, Lonnie continues to push the issue, showing Ralph how deeply he wants the car. Finally Ralph agrees to paying eighty-five dollars for the car when Lonnie assures him that the mechanic has agreed to allow them the use of his garage and tools to fix it up. However, when Ralph tells Mr. Larsen, the restaurant owner, about the car, Mr. Larsen tells him he has been duped.

The next day, Lonnie spends the day working on the car while Ralph goes around to pawn shops to find a saddle and other items he and Lonnie will need when they find work on a ranch. Ralph finds a saddle he wants immediately, but drags out the bartering until he gets a good deal for two complete outfits.

Chapter 5, Friendly Phoenix, and Chapter 6, Outfitting Analysis

Again Ralph shows himself to be a kind-hearted man when he goes out of his way to thank the conductor who helped him when he had no money to get to Wickenburg.



Ralph also shows his generosity when he allows his friend Lonnie to help him pick out a car and then buys him an outfit so they can both go in search of jobs together. However, when Lonnie picks the car and it turns out to be a lemon, the reader begins to wonder how difficult Lonnie is going to make life for Ralph.

While the reader knows how kind Ralph can be, they also learn there are other people out there who are just as kind. The narrator introduces the Larsens, a kindly Swedish couple who take Ralph under the wing and provide for him the meals he needs to survive his diabetes. The narrator paints a kind, gentle world that the modern reader might not recognize, making this novel seem as though it is of another world.



Chapter 7, Shiftless, and Chapter 8, Back Country

Chapter 7, Shiftless, and Chapter 8, Back Country Summary

Shiftless. Ralph goes to the garage and asks the mechanic a few questions about the car based on what Mr. Larsen told him the night before. Ralph is not happy with the answers he gets, afraid the mechanic is trying to hide something. That night, Ralph takes Lonnie to the Larsens' restaurant, where he encourages Lonnie to talk to Mr. Larsen about the car. By the end of breakfast the next morning, Mr. Larsen has convinced Lonnie to rebuild the engine. The mechanic refuses to help the boys anymore, so Ralph helps Lonnie rebuild the engine, buying most of the parts from a local junk yard. When they are done and ready to take the car, the mechanic refuses to allow them to have the car until they pay fifty dollar for using his tools. Mr. Larsen calls a lawyer who is able to reduce the bill to thirty-five dollars. The mechanic helps the boys start the car by pulling it around the street until they are able to get the engine going. The boys then drive to Mr. Larsen's restaurant where Mr. Larsen makes some minor corrections to the engine before sending the boys off with a car load of groceries and supplies.

Back Country. Just a few miles outside of Phoenix, Lonnie accidentally drives the car off the side of the road and into a dry lake bed in his excitement after Ralph agrees to give Lonnie half ownership of the car when he begins making payments of five dollars toward its cost. The boys spend most of the day getting the car unstuck and decide to camp there for the night. The next day the boys pull into Mesa and discover that not only had the car run out of water, it is also out of oil, adding the expenses Ralph has to pay for the car.

Lonnie suggests that they might have better luck with the car overheating if they go toward the mountains. However, the car cannot make it up the hills, so Ralph has to get out and push. When they reach one particularly high hill, Lonnie insists that the car can make it. However, the car loses momentum halfway up the hill and begins rolling backward. The car runs into a rubbish pile, leaving minor dents in the car's back end. Lonnie tells Ralph they have broken a half-moon key that connects the floor brake to the engine. Lonnie promises to walk back to Mesa the next day to get a new one. That night, Ralph accidentally breaks the windshield when he hears a noise in the night and believes it to be a bear. Lonnie leaves the next day and Ralph remains behind to prepare the car to replace the half-moon key. Lonnie returns quicker than expected because he borrowed horses all along the way. They are back on the road by afternoon.

Chapter 7, Shiftless, and Chapter 8, Back Country Analysis

The car Ralph has bought turns out to be more trouble than it is worth. Ralph ends up putting most of his remaining horse fall money into the car before they can even leave town. After leaving town, the car begins to have so many troubles that Ralph is beginning to wonder if it was a good investment. However, Lonnie loves the car and acts out of character on several occasions when it comes to caring for the car. This suggests to the reader that Lonnie has a deep sense of attachment to this car, despite all its faults. The reader wonders if this might cause trouble for Ralph later down the road as the plot continues to unfold.



Chapter 9, Christmas Eve, and Chapter 10, Rice Pudd'n

Chapter 9, Christmas Eve, and Chapter 10, Rice Pudd'n Summary

Christmas Eve. Ralph and Lonnie stop in Globe where Ralph goes to the doctor for his weekly report card to Dr. Gaghan and stocks up on groceries. While there, Ralph also buys Lonnie a pair of overalls and a new shirt for a Christmas gift. The next morning, the boys drive through the Indian reservation and have yet more trouble with the radiator boiling over. By Christmas Eve, the boys reach Fort Thomas. Just as they near the town, the front tire on the car blows. Lonnie walks into town to get a patch set and some food for Christmas dinner. When he returns, Lonnie gives Ralph a pocket knife he bought him.

Rice Pudd'n. Ralph wakes early and begins preparations for Christmas dinner. When Lonnie wakes, Ralph sends him into town for stale bread and sage for the stuffing. Lonnie asks for rice pudd'n as well, so Ralph gives him more money to buy rice, nutmeg, and milk. When Lonnie returns, he shows Ralph that he traded a clay horse Ralph made the night before for a used tire and some gas. Lonnie also tells him he was unable to get the milk, but he had seen some cows in a nearby field. The boys work together most of the afternoon trying to catch a cow that they manage to milk. Ralph makes a nice meal and they spend the rest of the night singing old Christmas carols.

Chapter 9, Christmas Eve, and Chapter 10, Rice Pudd'n Analysis

The car continues to give Ralph and Lonnie fits. However, they do not allow it to dampen their spirits or stop them from having a nice Christmas. In fact, the boys have a nice dinner despite lack of experience and a lack of conveniences. This shows the reader that both boys are able to adapt to difficult situations and make the best of them. This is underscored by Lonnie's ability to get a new used tire for a horse Ralph made out of clay the day before. It also shows that Ralph is a talented artist and foreshadows a time when he might be able to make money with his artistic talents.



Chapter 11, Little Clay Horse, Chapter 12, We're in the Dough, and Chapter 13, Cowboy Artists of the Southwest

Chapter 11, Little Clay Horse, Chapter 12, We're in the Dough, and Chapter 13, Cowboy Artists of the Southwest Summary

Little Clay Horse. As Ralph and Lonnie continue on, they stop at every ranch they find but continue to have little luck. Lonnie is offered a job on one ranch, but he refuses to take it because the rancher will not hire Ralph too. When the boys reach Safford, Ralph takes a horse's head he has molded out of clay to the local bank. Ralph shows it to the receptionist and offers to make a bust for the banker. The banker likes the idea and the receptionist tells Ralph she could more than likely find several other bankers in the area who would pay to have a bust made.

We're in the Dough. After telling Lonnie about their good luck and showing him the ten dollar down payment the banker made, Ralph spends the rest of the day working on the clay bust to show to the banker the following day. Ralph then accepts the rest of the money, fifteen dollars, and collects supplies he will need to cast the clay bust in plaster. As Ralph works on his bust, Lonnie works stripping the old paint off of the car in order to repaint it.

Cowboy Artists of the Southwest. Ralph encourages Lonnie to clean up before they go to town and meet another banker who wants a bust made. Ralph and Lonnie return to camp where Ralph breaks the mold away from the first clay bust. Lonnie is fascinated by the process, but Ralph has to restrain him from helping in fear that he will ruin the mold. The next morning they go back into town to show the new banker his clay bust.

Chapter 11, Little Clay Horse, Chapter 12, We're in the Dough, and Chapter 13, Cowboy Artists of the Southwest Analysis

As foreshadowed in a previous chapter, Ralph and Lonnie begin making a good living selling busts that Ralph makes from clay and plaster. Lonnie focuses on fixing up the car as Ralph does the majority of the work, but somehow Lonnie manages to force himself on the new business and take credit where credit should not be given. This again shows what a kind person Ralph is by including Lonnie in on his business even though Lonnie does little to help out but a lot to get in the way. Ralph does not believe himself to be highly talented and worries that the bankers will not want the finished art,

but the reader sees how he underestimates himself when the bankers always fall in love with his work. Ralph is a modest, kind man.



Chapter 14, Leave Me Try It!, Chapter 15, City Slickers, and Chapter 16, Two of a Kind

Chapter 14, Leave Me Try It!, Chapter 15, City Slickers, and Chapter 16, Two of a Kind Summary

Leave Me Try It! Ralph takes the second bust to be seen by the new banker and ends up adding a mustache to it. On the way back to the car, Ralph finds Lonnie bragging to a crowd of people how the two of them are artists. Back at camp, Ralph begins removing the horse's head for the receptionist from the mold. Lonnie wants to help and begins working on the first banker's mold, but misjudges his strength and drives the chisel into the banker's head. Ralph is able to fix it, however. As Ralph gets more jobs, Lonnie finds himself bored and with little to do. Ralph begins giving him money to fix up the car. By the time Ralph has finished all the busts he has been asked to make, Lonnie has turned the car into something close to new.

City Slickers. Ralph and Lonnie move on, leaving Arizona to complete busts in three towns, ending up in El Paso, where Ralph has promised to do a bust for the son-in-law of one of his previous clients. Lonnie has gotten into the habit of getting five dollars from Ralph and taking a girl out each night, cutting dangerously into their funds. When Ralph arrives in El Paso, he has to buy new supplies and then he decides to also buy a new suit and to rent a fancy hotel room to do the bust for the lawyer son-in-law of his previous client. When Lonnie sees the suit, he insists on one of his own; therefore, Ralph's money quickly begins to disappear. Despite this, Ralph continues to send fifty dollars or more a month to his mother, with letters filled with lies of a good ranching job, and spend two dollars a week on doctors for his diabetes.

Two of a Kind. When Ralph goes to see the lawyer who is to be his next client, he finds him waiting with a contract. Annoyed by the lawyer's attitude, Ralph refuses to sign the contract until the man agrees to pay him fifty dollars and to attend sittings on Ralph's schedule. Ralph dislikes the man so much, however, that he finds it nearly impossible to place his mouth in any expression other than a scowl. Ralph dislikes the final product, but the lawyer likes it well enough. When Ralph and Lonnie leave town, they are poorer than they were when they came, forcing Ralph to decide they should stay away from big cities in the future.



Chapter 14, Leave Me Try It!, Chapter 15, City Slickers, and Chapter 16, Two of a Kind Analysis

Ralph makes a good amount of money making busts for bankers, but finds it difficult to work with Lonnie hanging around all the time. Ralph is able to remedy this by focusing Lonnie on the car, but eventually Lonnie has done all to the car that he can. By this point Ralph has spent more than two hundred dollars on this car, a significant investment in this time period.

Ralph and Lonnie go to El Paso to do a bust for a lawyer. While they are there, Ralph finds himself paying a great deal of money to ensure himself a good image and to keep Lonnie happy. Lonnie has discovered how much fun it is to spend money on women; therefore, he spends a great deal of money each night he and Ralph are in the city. In the end, Ralph realizes that Lonnie is just bleeding him dry, but instead of dumping his friend, he resolves to keep Ralph from the city. This again shows the reader what kind of person Ralph truly is.



Chapter 17, Ladies Man Lonnie, Chapter 18, End of the Trail, and Chapter 19, So Long, Buddy

Chapter 17, Ladies Man Lonnie, Chapter 18, End of the Trail, and Chapter 19, So Long, Buddy Summary

Ladies' Man Lonnie. Ralph has trouble finding work in the small towns outside of El Paso, so he comes up with the idea that they will copy what they did in Safford and find a town with other towns within a fifty mile radius so they might get five or six artist jobs at a time. Ralph then makes a bust of Lonnie to use as a sample when looking for jobs. Lonnie becomes a problem, so he and Ralph begin making frequent trips to the movies. At the same time, Ralph has been paying Lonnie five dollars a bust, so Lonnie used the money to pay Ralph the eighty-five dollars for the car. When he is all paid up, Lonnie insists they go to El Paso to register the car in his name. In El Paso, Lonnie spends the rest of his money on girls while Ralph refreshes his art supplies.

End of the Trail. Ralph and Lonnie continue making their way northeast in order to keep Ralph's mother from learning he has lied to her about his great ranching job. Ralph has decided he would like to save up a thousand dollars so he might buy a small ranch when he reaches Colorado in the summer. By the time they near Kansas City, Missouri, Ralph has more than a thousand dollars. Ralph sends five hundred dollars to his sister, Grace, with a letter that explains his lies and the source of the money. Ralph also sends sixty dollars to his mother. When they reach Kansas City, Lonnie tells Ralph he is broke and asks for some money. Ralph refuses and then encourages Lonnie to sell the car. Ralph then takes Lonnie to a movie, but Lonnie sneaks out halfway through. Ralph thinks Lonnie is sneaking off to meet up with some girls.

So Long, Buddy. When Ralph returns to his hotel room, he finds a note from Lonnie saying goodbye. Ralph assumes Lonnie is embarrassed about his lack of money and a need to pawn his outfit. However, Lonnie is still not home the next morning. Ralph gets dressed and discovers that Lonnie took his overalls on accident. Ralph does not panic even though all his money, more than seven hundred dollars, is rolled into the cuff of the pants. Ralph goes in search of Lonnie but cannot find any sign of him until he goes to the garage where they parked the car. The garage attendant tells Ralph Lonnie took off the night before alone. Assuming Lonnie is headed home, Ralph jumps a freight train to St. Joseph where he learns Lonnie stopped the night before for gas headed for home, but no one knows where home is for sure. Finally Ralph decides to just go to Colorado as planned with the hopes that when Lonnie finds the money he will send it there for Ralph.



Chapter 17, Ladies Man Lonnie, Chapter 18, End of the Trail, and Chapter 19, So Long, Buddy Analysis

Ralph makes a great deal of money for his busts and makes plans to buy a small ranch in Colorado. Lonnie gives most of his money to Ralph in order to buy the car from him. When they reach Kansas City, where they plan to separate, Ralph learns that Lonnie has spent all his money. Instead of giving him money, Ralph lectures Lonnie about his spending money and encourages him to sell the car. By this time, the reader is aware of how much Lonnie loves that car. Therefore, it is no surprise to the reader that Lonnie immediately leaves town with the car. Ralph, however, misinterprets Lonnie's actions and assumes he will return, only to discover Lonnie has left with all his savings.

This novel is about a friendship that appears to be one sided. Ralph makes all the money and does all the work while Lonnie spends money frivolously. However, the reader takes note of all the work Lonnie does on the car and sees his deep affection for the car despite Ralph's apparent ignorance of this situation. In the end, the reader is not as surprised as Ralph by Lonnie's actions, but has to agree with Ralph when he realizes that he is still alive despite what the doctors told him and he still has the five hundred he sent to his sister. Life is not as bad as it can sometimes appear.



Characters

Ralph

Ralph is only nineteen when he learns he has diabetes at a time when there is little to no treatment for the disease. Ralph goes out to Arizona to be in a warmer climate with the hopes that this climate will be beneficial to his health. This leads to many adventures in the west, beginning with Ralph's inability to get a job because of all the returning soldiers from World War I.

Ralph goes to work on a movie set falling off of horses on purposes. This job is a difficult one that leaves most of the other fall riders to leave the set after one attempt with broken bones. Ralph is able to study the moves he will have to make and make the falls thirteen times with practically no injury. This nets Ralph enough money to buy a car and travel the back country in search of a ranching job.

Still unable to find a ranching job, Ralph uses his skills as an artist to make busts for bankers. This nets Ralph a large amount of money, enough to turn his sites on buying a piece of land to begin a small ranch. Unfortunately, Ralph's traveling companion takes his money by mistake, leaving Ralph as penniless as he began.

Lonnie

Lonnie is a young drifter who was honorably discharge from the military during the war because of a dangerously virulent bought of the flu. Lonnie is a simple guy who is looking for a job just like Ralph. The two hit it off and begin hunting for work together. When Ralph gets the money from the horse falls, he buys a car and allows Lonnie to fix it up. Lonnie knows how to drive where Ralph does not, therefore Ralph agrees to join a partnership in the car with Lonnie. In time, Lonnie buys the car from Ralph. Ralph underestimates how deeply Lonnie loves the car. When Ralph tries to talk Lonnie into selling the car, Lonnie disappears with the car, leaving by accident with the pair of overalls in which Ralph has hidden all his money.

Ted Hawkins

Ted Hawkins is an old cowboy who once worked in the same Colorado town where Ralph's family once had a ranch. Ted is working on the film set in Wickenburg as a gang leader for the fall riders. Since Ted knows Ralph, he helps him out by showing him how the film crew causes the ponies to fall and giving him tips on how to make the falls without hurting himself too much. By listening to Ted, Ralph is able to make thirteen falls and make a good amount of money.



Dr. Gaghan

Dr. Gaghan is Ralph's doctor in Boston. Dr. Gaghan is the doctor who originally diagnoses Ralph's diabetes and gives him the diet he must follow the rest of his life. Ralph is also instructed to move out west to get plenty of sunshine. Each week that Ralph is in the west, he is to send postcards to Dr. Gaghan from the various doctors he has visited. By doing this, Dr. Gaghan is able to tell Ralph's mother where he is while he travels through the west.

Ralph's Mother

Ralph's mother is a widow who has several children to raise on her own. Ralph is her oldest son, and it falls to him to make the majority of the money for the family. However, when Ralph is forced to go west for his health, he leaves his mother with only a younger brother to pay the bills and that brother is doing an internship that will not pay for several months. Ralph finds himself sending his mother long letters filled with lies about a new job he has gotten in order to protect her from the truth—that he cannot find a good job.

Grace

Grace is Ralph's older sister. Ralph and Grace have always been close and shared the truth with one another. When Ralph comes to realize that he has to tell the truth to someone so that he can send a large amount of money home, he turns to Grace. Ralph writes Grace a letter that explains the truth about what he has been doing and where he has gotten all his money. Ralph then sends Grace five hundred dollars to help pay the family's bills.

El Paso Lawyer

Ralph promises to do a bust for the son-in-law of one of the Arizona bankers he made a bust for. When Ralph arrives in El Paso, he feels he must buy a suit and rent a suite in a fancy hotel to present the proper image to the lawyer. However, when Ralph meets the lawyer, he dislikes him and the contract the lawyer wants him to sign. Ralph quickly refuses to sign the contract and convinces the man to pay an extra twenty-five dollars for the bust. In the end, Ralph is unhappy with the bust because he wants to present a kinder image but cannot find a way to do the lawyer's mouth in any way but a scowl.

Mr. and Mrs. Larsen

Mr. and Mrs. Larsen are a couple who own a restaurant in Phoenix. This couple befriends and cares for Ralph while he is there, especially when they learn about his special diet. After Ralph buys the car, Mr. Larsen helps him and Lonnie figure out how to



repair the engine on the car. The Larsens then give Ralph and Lonnie a load of groceries and supplies to help them survive while they are on the road.

Mabel

Mabel is a young woman who works in the bank at Safford. Mabel likes Ralph's horse head and the bust of her boss so well that she calls other banks all around the area and arranges for Ralph to do many more busts. If not for Mabel's help, Ralph might not have been able to make a go of his art business.

Jim Magee

Jim Magee is the conductor who allows Ralph to ride for free on one of his freight trains. When Ralph makes his money with the horse falls, he decides he wants to pay Jim back for all the kind things he has done for him and other men like him. Ralph buys a box of cigars for the man and convinces him it is a box that he won during a card game.



Objects/Places

Gluten Bread

Ralph is required to eat gluten bread as a part of the special diet he needs to eat to treat his diabetes.

Levis

Ralph has a pair of Levi overalls that are too long for him. Ralph keeps the majority of his money in the cuff of his Levis in order to hide it from thieves and his partner, Lonnie. However, Lonnie accidentally takes Ralph's Levis when he splits town with the car.

Postcards

Ralph is required to see a doctor weekly and to send a report card from the meeting to his doctor back in Boston in order to keep track of the progress of his diabetes.

Outfits

Ralph buys two outfits—saddles, chaps, and blankets—for himself and Lonnie so that they might find it easier to find a job on a ranch.

Suits

Ralph buys himself and Lonnie suits in El Paso for their work with the lawyer.

Clay Busts

Ralph makes busts out of clay first so that he can make a mold out of the clay busts and pour plaster into the molds to make the plaster version.

Plaster Busts

Ralph makes plaster busts of bankers in order to make money while on the road in the southwest.

Shiftless

Shiftless is the car that Ralph buys and allows Lonnie to buy from him.



Movie Set

Ralph goes to work on a movie set falling purposely off of horses for thirty-five dollars a fall. This allows Ralph to earn enough money to buy a car in Phoenix.

Boston

Ralph's family lives in a small suburb of Boston in Massachusetts. It is here that Ralph is first diagnosed with diabetes.

Tucson, Arizona

Ralph first goes to Tucson when he is told to move out west for his health. However, Ralph cannot find a job in Tucson.

El Paso, Texas

Ralph and Lonnie go to El Paso to make a bust for the lawyer son-in-law of a previous client.



Themes

Illness

The novel begins with Ralph being diagnosed with diabetes. In 1919, diabetes did not have a treatment. The specialists at the Boston hospital where Ralph was diagnosed tell him he will die within six months. The family doctor, Dr. Gaghan, however, tells him that if he gets lots of sunshine and follows a special diet he has a good chance of living much longer. Dr. Gaghan gives the diet to Ralph's mom who immediately goes out and buys a large number of the items Ralph will need to eat, including gluten flour. Ralph's mother makes several loafs of bread and then puts Ralph on a train to Arizona with a basket full of food.

Ralph is forced to search out restaurants that serve the kinds of foods he can eat on his new diet. This proves to be quite difficult for Ralph because most restaurants at the time served few vegetables and fish. Ralph even hires a restaurant cook to make him gluten bread out of his mother's recipe and his own flour, but the cook ruins the bread and makes it too hard.

At first Ralph worries about his illness and the diet he must follow. However, as time passes and he begins to feel stronger, Ralph stops worrying about it and starts focusing on the future. When eight months pass and Ralph is feeling much better, he learns to count his blessings and not allow the illness to color his life.

Friendship

Ralph meets Lonnie while looking for work in Tucson. Lonnie is a drifter like himself, but simpler than Ralph and easily led. When Lonnie decides to look for work in Phoenix, Ralph goes along with him and learns a great deal about jumping trains with Lonnie. Later, when Ralph makes money on a movie set, he enlists Lonnie's help in buying a car. Lonnie falls in love with a Ford and convinces Ralph to buy it despite its many problems. Over time, Lonnie manages to make the car almost new.

In time Ralph and Lonnie become close friends and eventually become partners in an art business together. However, when Ralph encourages Lonnie to sell the car, Lonnie chooses the car over Ralph. Ralph only regrets that he did not see how deeply Lonnie loved the car. This friendship teaches Ralph a great deal about humanity and friendship, leading to a lesson that will serve him for years to come.

Kindness

Kindness is a rare thing in the modern world. There are often random acts of kindness, but not as many in reality as there are in this novel. Ralph proves himself to be the kindest person of all when he takes Lonnie in and buys a car because he knows how



much Lonnie likes it. Over and over again Ralph bails Lonnie out and provides him with all the money he might need to survive and to make him happy.

When Ralph learns he is ill, he is told to follow a special diet. Many times while looking for work in Arizona, Ralph finds himself in situations where it is impossible to find the type of food he needs for his new diet. However, Ralph befriends a couple in Phoenix who provide him with all the food he could need without charging him extra for the trouble of ordering the special food. This act of kindness continues when Ralph buys the car and discovers how bad of shape it is in. Mr. Larsen, the restaurant owner, provides Ralph and Lonnie with all the information they need to get the car working properly again.

Kindness is a simple thing, but sometimes it can be one of the hardest things to come by, especially in a time of war. However, by being a kind, respectful man himself, Ralph is able to find kindness in others very easily.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The narrator of the novel is Ralph, a young man newly diagnosed with diabetes. The narration is written as though the events have already taken place, therefore there are often comments in the narration that foreshadow events to come. The narration is consistent first person, never wavering from Ralph's point of view, giving the reader an intimate relationship with the main character of the novel.

The point of view of this novel works well because the novel is a fictionalized narration of events that supposedly happened to the author in his young adulthood. The narration is almost like an autobiography that tells a fascinating story of coming of age. The point of view creates an intimate relationship between the reader and the main character. For this reason, the reader deeply cares about anything that might happen to the main character. This makes the first person point of view the perfect point of view for this novel.

Setting

The novel begins in 1919 just after the First World War. It begins in Boston but quickly moves to Arizona as the narrator is diagnosed with diabetes and instructed to move to a warmer climate for the health benefits. The remainder of the novel takes place in many locations throughout Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Missouri.

The setting of this novel is important because the time period in which the novel takes place is a time when diabetes did not have a treatment and soldiers were still trickling home from the First World War. These two things are important because the illness forces the main character to move to Arizona and the second prevents the main characters from getting jobs. In this way, the setting impacts the overall plot making the setting highly appropriate to the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is a simple English. The novel is about a couple of cowboys, so there are a lot of slang words that are common to that lifestyle. The novel also includes many words in the dialogue that seem grammatically incorrect to modern readers. However, the author has attempted to capture the true speech of the people of this time period.

The language of the novel is simple enough for the youngest readers to comprehend. The language also includes odd grammar in the dialogue that is used because the author is attempting to be authentic to the speech patterns of his characters. The



language reflects this perfectly. Although some of the dialogue might be difficult for the reader to understand, it is authentic to the character and therefore seems appropriate to the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into nineteen chapters that are titled by a name unique to the events and characters represented in each chapter. The chapters are fairly long, most more than ten pages in length. The novel is written in both exposition and dialogue, presenting much of the story in scenes that tell the story rather than show it. However, there are also parts in the novel in which the narrator tells background information and makes statements about the plot that are clearly sections of authorial voice that tell rather than show.

The novel contains one main plot with several subplots. The main plot follows Ralph and his friend, Lonnie, as they travel the southwest looking for jobs on a ranch. One subplot follows Lonnie's fascination with the car Ralph has purchased to help find a job. Another subplot follows Ralph's relationship with his mother and the many lies he tells her to keep her from worrying about him. All the plots and subplots come together to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Nobody likes to go back to his home town dead broke, but I'd made up my mind to do it anyway."

Chap. 1, In a Bad Way, p. 11

"Ted was my friend right from that minute, and if it hadn't been for him I don't think I'd have made it."

Chap. 2, Land Rolling!, p. 35

"It was because of my telling Ted I'd be at the Littleton roundup that I was lying flat in the ditch in the St. Joseph freight yards the night before the Fourth."

Chap. 4, Horse Falls, p. 59

"As I walked down the carpeted hall I felt about as much out of place as a catfish in a goldfish bowl."

Chap. 5, Friendly Phoenix, p. 71

"Even though I knew that Lonnie was sort of a lazy bum, I wished he'd show up again."

Chap. 6, Outfitting, p. 76

"In the four days it took us to put that engine back together the money leaked out of my pocket as if it had been water."

Chap. 7, Shiftless, p. 95

"I watched him dip two or three biscuits and stow them away, then decided that I might as well die of diabetes as starvation, so I dipped one myself."

Chap. 9, Christmas Eve, p. 119

"It's funny how happy you can be over just little things, and how quickly you can forget all about your troubles."

Chap. 9, Christmas Eve, p. 125

"If I hadn't been the cowboy artist, I'd have run all the way back to camp with that ten dollars, but it wouldn't have seemed very dignified so I walked as slowly as I could make myself."

Chap. 11, Little Clay Horse, p. 144

"My biggest trouble was with Lonnie."

Chap. 14, Leave Me Try It!, p. 175

"If the little man's pomposity hadn't been so ridiculous as to be comical, I'd have become furious, told him for the benefit of his wife, children, and parents that he was a



fourflusher, and got out of there."
Chap. 16, Two of a Kind, p. 189

"Less than eight months ago the specialists at the Boston hospital had given me only six months to live, but I was still alive, and had never felt healthier in my life."
Chap. 19, So Long, Buddy, p. 234



Topics for Discussion

Who is Ralph? Why did Ralph not fight in the First World War? What did he do instead? Who was his roommate during the war? What did this man teach Ralph? Why does Ralph's mother force him to go to a doctor? What does the doctor tell Ralph? How does this change Ralph's life? Is this change a good or bad thing?

Why does Ralph go to Arizona? What does he hope to do there? Why does Ralph run out of money so quickly? Why does Ralph have trouble finding a job? What does he decide to do about his lack of job? Who does Ralph meet at the stockyards? Why was he at the stockyards?

Who is Lonnie? What is Lonnie doing in Tucson? How do Lonnie and Ralph meet? Why do they go to Phoenix together? How do they travel? What does Lonnie steal with gristle on Thanksgiving Day? For what reason? Why does Ralph continue to travel with Lonnie? Is this a good partnership for Ralph? Explain.

Why does Ralph decide to go to Wickenburg? What does he find there? Who does Ralph meet in Wickenburg? How did they know one another? What does this man help Ralph do? How much money does Ralph make? What does Ralph plan to do with this money? For what reason? Who does Ralph enlist to help him? Does Ralph make a good deal? Explain.

Why does Ralph have to go to the doctor once a week? What happens if he does not go? What does his mother learn from these visits? How does this upset Ralph? How much does Ralph send his mother every month? For what reason? To whom does Ralph send five hundred dollars? For what reason?

Why does Ralph take a horse's head made of clay to a bank? What does he hope will happen? Does it? How does this lead to a business? How much money does Ralph make from this? How much does he share with Lonnie? What does Lonnie do with his money? For what reason? How does this eventually lead to Lonnie taking off with the car?

What does Ralph think when Lonnie first disappears? Why does Ralph believe Lonnie will be back? Why does Ralph go looking for Lonnie the next day? What happens? Why has Lonnie left? Why does Ralph want to find him? What does Ralph finally decide at the end of his search for Lonnie? Do you think Ralph is right about his assumptions? Explain.