

Spencer's Mountain Study Guide

Spencer's Mountain by Earl Hamner Jr.

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



Contents

Spencer's Mountain Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-3.....	5
Chapters 4-6.....	8
Chapters 7-10.....	10
Chapters 11-14.....	12
Chapters 15-18.....	14
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	20
Themes.....	22
Style.....	24
Quotes.....	26
Topics for Discussion.....	28



Plot Summary

Spencer's Mountain is a novel by writer Earl Hamner, Jr. In this novel, Clay-Boy Spencer has finally reached an age at which he is allowed to go hunting with his father and eight uncles. It is a moment of great change in Clay-Boy's life as he kills the mythical white buck that his grandfather has spent his whole life telling stories about. Therefore, when Clay-Boy gets the chance to go to college to make his life better than his parents', it seems to be fate. However, it takes great sacrifice for a poor family to send their eldest child to college. Spencer's Mountain is a wonderful novel of family, of love, of hope. This novel will continue to inspire readers even more than fifty years after its publication.

Clay-Boy is excited as each of his uncles arrives at his family's home for the Thanksgiving holiday. Clay-Boy is especially happy to see his favorite uncle, Virgil, who lives in Richmond. As the evening unfolds, Clay-Boy listens to stories of hunting and other family glories, hoping that he might be able to sneak past his mother in the morning to join his father and uncles in their annual hunting trip. The following morning, Clay-Boy ignores his mother's call as he slips out of the house and joins his uncles on Spencer Mountain. Left alone, Clay-Boy thinks about his grandfather's stories of hunting. Then a white buck, straight out of those stories, appears in the woods in front of Clay-Boy. Acting on instinct, Clay-Boy kills the buck, bringing home to his family meat that will satisfy them for months.

A harsh winter unfolds in the mountain community following Clay-Boy's dramatic first kill. In the spring, Clay-Boy turns his attentions toward his final months of school. Clay-Boy, at fifteen, will be the first of the Spencers to graduate from high school. As the weather changes, Clay begins to once again work on the house he has dreamed of building on his small section of Spencer Mountain for more that sixteen years. Clay-Boy goes with him on this first day and helps him shore up the foundation he has dug time and time again. Clay-Boy knows, as his mother also understands, that this house is a dream that will never be fulfilled.

Shortly before Clay-Boy's graduation, his teacher, Miss Parker, and the Baptist preacher, Mr. Goodson, come to the Spencer house and inform Olivia that her son is smart enough to go to college. Miss Parker says that Mr. Goodson has found a scholarship for which Clay-Boy might be eligible, but it would require him to become a Baptist minister. Olivia insists they not tell Clay this when they inform him of Clay-Boy's chances of attending school since Clay dislikes the Baptists. When Clay arrives, he agrees quickly to sign the application for Clay-Boy's scholarship.

While waiting for graduation, Clay-Boy begins looking for a job. Since his father refuses to allow Clay-Boy to work at the same soapstone mine where he works, along with everyone else in town, Clay-Boy has to look elsewhere for work. Clay-Boy goes to Miss Parker with the suggestion of opening a library in town. Miss Parker immediately jumps at the idea, reaching out to her many friends for books. Miss Parker even goes to the Company and gets them to pay Clay-Boy a salary.



As the summer passes, Clay-Boy finds himself involved in a love affair with a demanding, controlling young lady who has been his friend for many years. This love affair progresses quickly, leaving Clay-Boy unsure about his future. At the same time, Clay-Boy learns that his scholarship has been denied, leaving him without the hope of college. However, Clay refuses to take no for an answer and he goes to the Dean of the university to learn exactly what Clay-Boy has to do to get in. The Dean instructs Clay to have Clay-Boy learn the equivalent of a semester of Latin and he will be accepted, but he will not be eligible for a scholarship until the following school year. Clay-Boy learns the Latin, but Clay is left with finding a means to pay the tuition. In the end, Clay sells his small parcel of land on top of Spencer's Mountain.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

Spencer's Mountain is the novel that inspired the television show, The Waltons.

Chapter 1. All nine of the Spencer sons, and their families, gather at Clay Spencer's house the night before Thanksgiving. Clay-Boy, Clay's eldest son, ushers the cars to parking spots, and is thrilled when his favorite uncle, Virgil, arrives from his home in Richmond. Virgil is the only Spencer who had remained in Richmond where most of the sons had gone in search of jobs during the Depression. Clay-Boy tells Virgil that he is going on the hunt with the men the following morning even though his mother had refused to allow him the year before and more than likely will stop him this year if she learns his plan. To this end, Virgil gives Clay-Boy a brand new hunting knife later in the evening of which Olivia disapproves. Elizabeth, Clay's mother, tells Olivia that she will have to let Clay-Boy grow up eventually. Later, Clay-Boy sits in the living room and listens to the men tell stories about past hunting trips. Clay-Boy pays particular attention to his grandfather's story of the white buck that has become something of a mythical creature over time. The grandfather asserts that whoever finally kills the buck will be marked for something great.

Chapter 2. At dawn, Clay-Boy sneaks out of the house, ignoring his mother's call. Clay-Boy follows the nine brothers up Spencer's Mountain. When the men find a good stand to wait for the deer to come out to feed, they give it to Clay-Boy. Clay-Boy sits on a log and listens as the other men slowly find their own stands. Clay-Boy is nearly nodding off when something wakes him. Clay-Boy is suddenly alert and he sees a buck standing not too far from his stand. Clay-Boy acts on instinct, shooting the deer and then killing it with his new knife. When Clay-Boy's father arrives, they are both shocked to see that the buck Clay-Boy has killed is the mythical white buck of the grandfather's stories. The other men are quite impressed with Clay-Boy's actions.

Chapter 3. After Thanksgiving, a harsh winter settles on the mountain community. Toward spring, Clay-Boy wakes early one morning and hears his parents discussing whether or not they should pay the outstanding balance on a class ring for Clay-Boy. Clay does not think Clay-Boy needs it, but Olivia thinks it is an important symbol that will aid Clay-Boy when he goes looking for work. Later, Olivia calls the children, all nine of them, to breakfast. Clay is quite proud of his children, referring to them all as thoroughbreds.

The Spencer family has lived on the mountain for multiple generations; therefore, when Zebulon Spencer married Elizabeth, he brought her to the family homestead at the summit of the mountain. They raised nine sons there and each took a small parcel of the land upon reaching the age of majority. As the youngest, Clay got the parcel where the family home sat. When the Depression hit and Clay moved to New Dominion to work at the soapstone quarry, he took his parents with him to the Company house.



However, Clay, unlike his brothers, held on to his parcel of land on the mountain and has always planned to build a house there for Olivia and the children. It is important to Clay to have a home of his own.

On a Saturday in early spring, Clay decides to go work on the house. First, however, he plans to take the cow, Chance, to be mated with a neighbor's bull. Olivia does not want Clay to take Clay-Boy to the neighbors, but Clay wants Clay-Boy to help him with the house. Clay-Boy is shocked when he sees the bull mount the cow, leading to questions he asks of his father. Clay is gentle, but direct when he describes the act of sex to his son.

Later, Clay-Boy and Clay go to the site of the new house and the foundation Clay has dug over and over again over the last sixteen years. This time Clay is determined that it will not collapse again, so he has Clay-Boy collect rocks they can use to fortify the walls. When they return home late that evening, Clay tells the children a story about a homing pig he once attempted to own. Later, Olivia tells Clay that Colonel Coleman, the foreman of the quarry, stopped by. Clay and the Colonel are friends and Clay trusts that the Colonel will keep his word and never allow the quarry to be built under his land.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The novel begins with Clay-Boy, a fifteen year old child of a quarry worker and his wife. Clay-Boy is the eldest child of nine and eager to grow up even as his mother, Olivia, fights every step of his becoming a man. The reader can sense from the very beginning that this novel will be a coming of age story, that Olivia will eventually have to let her son go. The first step is not fighting Clay-Boy's determination to go on a hunting trip with his many uncles. This trip turns out to be deeply important to Clay-Boy because he kills a mythical white buck that his grandfather has been telling stories about for many years. Everyone says that Clay-Boy is marked by killing this buck, suggesting that great things are in store for the young man.

Clay-Boy's father, Clay, comes from a large family. This family has lived on top of Spencer's Mountain for many generations, beginning with an explorer who brought his family to the area long ago, which is why the mountain is called Spencer's Mountain. All of Clay's brothers were given a section of the family property, but each sold his section when soapstone was discovered in the area and the mining company made them offers. Clay is the only one who has held out and he plans to use his land to build his wife a large house, a house that they can call their own rather than living in the house owned by the Company. However, Clay has been promising to build this house for more than sixteen years, but he has made no more progress than digging out the foundation. Olivia knows this house is just a dream, but she allows Clay to indulge in it because she knows it makes him happy.

It is important to note at this point in the novel that Clay is the only private owner of land on Spencer's Mountain, that everyone else has already sold their land and there are quarries all over the area where the Company, for which Clay and his brothers all work



as well as all their neighbors, are digging for soapstone. The foreman of the Company is a friend of Clay's and has promised to never open a quarry near or under Clay's land. However, the reader wonders if this promise can be kept and what might happen to this land if Clay ever comes to terms with the idea that he cannot finish the house.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

Chapter 4. Clay has not been able to work on the house all week and knows he should spend the weekend on it, but on Saturday he gets an itch to go fishing. Clay meets his mother-in-law, Ida Italiano, in town as he is going to the river and learns that the ladies of the Baptist Church are preparing the new preacher's home for his arrival. Clay goes to the river where, just as he puts his line in the water, a car stops and a man asks how the fishing is going. When Clay sees the man is a serious fisherman, he invites him to join him. The two men enjoy the fishing, and a bottle of whiskey Clay hid near the river the last time he was there. Soon both men are very drunk. Unbeknownst to Clay, the man, Mr. Goodson, is the new preacher at the Baptist Church. Much to the shock of the ladies' aid society, Clay delivers Mr. Goodson to the rectory passed out drunk. This causes no one to show up for church services the following day. When Clay learns this, he feels it is his fault, so he visits the homes of the Baptists for whom he has done free work on washing machines and other appliances, and asks them to return to church or prepare to pay his bill for the work. The following Sunday, the Baptist Church is overflowing.

Chapter 5. Clay-Boy is nervous because his teacher, Miss Parker, and the Baptist preacher, Mr. Goodson, are coming to his house to discuss the possibility of Clay-Boy going to college after his high school graduation. Clay-Boy is made even more nervous when he realizes it is payday and his father is more than likely drinking some of the check away at The Pool Hall. Over dinner, Olivia is just as nervous as Clay-Boy and instructs him to go in search of his father when he is done eating. However, the baby, Donnie, falls from his high chair and Olivia sends Clay-Boy in search of the doctor. When Clay-Boy returns, he discovers the baby has recovered. Before Clay-Boy can express his annoyance, Miss Parker and Mr. Goodson arrive. They tell Olivia their plan of having Clay-Boy apply for a scholarship, except the only scholarships left are for training to be a Baptist minister. Olivia immediately shuts Mr. Goodson down, aware that Clay's dislike of the Baptist will prevent him from allowing Clay-Boy to do such a thing. However, when Clay finally arrives at the home, no one mentions the purpose of the scholarship and Clay agrees to the plan. Later that night, Clay has Olivia write a letter to Virgil to ask that he allow Clay-Boy to live with him while going to school

Chapter 6. Shortly before graduating from high school, Clay-Boy begins thinking about getting a job to help pay for his books and things. However, Clay will not allow Clay-Boy to get a job with the Company and that is just about the only employer in the area. Instead, Clay-Boy gets the idea to open a library. When Clay-Boy tells Miss Parker his plan, she goes to Mr. Goodson to ask his help with the plan. Mr. Goodson agrees to help get donations for the books, but his church cannot afford to pay Clay-Boy a salary as librarian. For this, Miss Parker goes to Colonel Coleman and gets him to agree to pay Clay-Boy five dollars a week. Clay-Boy and Miss Parker clean up the little building the Company has allowed them to use and stock the books as they arrive from friends



of Miss Parker's and Mr. Goodson. The library receives two customers the day it opens. At the same time, Clay-Boy is reunited with an old friend, Claris Coleman, Colonel Coleman's daughter. Claris' parents are divorced and she lives in Washington, D.C. with her mother, but comes to New Dominion in the summers to see her father. Each summer Claris picks a family whom she spends most of the summer around. Last summer she chose the Clay Spencers, creating a bond with Clay-Boy that promises to blossom into something more this summer.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

The reader gets to see a better snapshot of Clay Spencer's personality in Chapter 4. Clay has a reputation for being a wild one, someone who likes to cuss and drink. While these things are true about Clay, he is also a good man with a big heart. When Clay unknowingly ruins the reputation of the new Baptist minister, despite his dislike of all things Baptist, Clay calls in a number of debts to force people back into the church. This shows the reader that Clay is not a bad guy, but is a good hearted sort who simply has a distaste of the straight-laced attitudes of the Baptist.

When Clay-Boy learns that he might have a chance to go to college, he is excited. However, his mother is wary because she knows the family cannot afford to send Clay-Boy to college; they can barely afford to allow each of the children to finish high school. However, with the idea of a scholarship, the family begins to dream. This dream is similar to the dream Clay has of building a house, but has a little more substance. Clay is immediately behind the idea because he knows that education will be key in giving his children a better life than the one he has lived.

To help him get to college, Clay-Boy knows he needs a job and he is delighted when members of the community work to help him get the perfect job, that of librarian. Clay-Boy has access to more books than he has ever seen before and he begins to read like a hungry animal set before a feast. At the same time, a girl from Clay-Boy's past comes back into his life, all grown up and looking for trouble. The reader must wonder what this girl will mean to Clay-Boy's future and if he might miss his chance at college due to a love affair that should have waited.



Chapters 7-10

Chapters 7-10 Summary

Chapter 7. One night Clay-Boy waits up late with his mother for Clay to return from work. Olivia is afraid that Clay has gone drinking, spending all of his pay check. However, when Clay returns home he tells Olivia that he has been gone making a deal on a saw with a neighbor, John Pickett, the only rich man in the area. Clay has purchased the saw to help him build the house at a cost of forty dollars, to be paid out five dollars a month. Olivia is unhappy with the purchase, but grateful there is only six dollars missing from Clay's pay. Clay's words, and actions, remind her of the night they sneaked away from her parents and convinced the Baptist minister to marry them even though he knew it was against her mother's wishes. She also remembers how he promised her a house that night.

Chapter 8. The next morning, Clay and Clay-Boy walk up to the house. Clay decides to cut down a tree to begin preparing lumber for the structure of the house. Clay-Boy helps all he can until his father orders him to move a safe distance away. They spend the rest of the day cleaning the branches off the tree. Late in the afternoon, Olivia and the children join them. Olivia has brought a letter from Virgil that they hope will contain his answer as to whether he will take in Clay-Boy while he is in college. Instead, the letter informs them that Virgil intends to visit with a young Jewish woman he is considering marrying.

Chapter 9. Claris has begun spending a great deal of time at the Spencer home, but her persistent questions about Olivia's pregnancy makes Olivia uncomfortable. A few weeks into summer, Claris plans a party at her house. When rumor of the party is printed in the newspaper, Claris' father is outraged over the proposed invitation list. Instead, he arranges to invite young people from the next town over who are from more respectable families. Claris insists that Clay-Boy be invited. Clay-Boy is excited until he dresses for the party in knickers that have been carefully repaired by his mother and realizes he looks nothing like the other boys who will be there. Clay-Boy goes anyway, but is very nervous until he is instructed to tell a story. Clay-Boy tells his father's story of the homing pig and is surprised when everyone listens raptly.

Chapter 10. A postcard comes warning Clay and his family that Virgil plans to visit on Sunday. The entire town is excited to meet the young woman Virgil has announced he might like to marry, particularly since they have never seen a Jew before. Olivia is nervous because she does not know yet if Virgil will be willing to take Clay-Boy while he attends college and she worries that if he marries this girl he will not want the burden of Clay-Boy. When Virgil and his wife, Lisa, arrive, Lisa is overwhelmed by the attention of the family. Virgil and his brothers go to get Clay from the mountain where he is working on the house, leaving Lisa at the mercy of Zebulon. Zebulon then whisks Lisa off to meet two of his dear friends, Miss Etta and Miss Emma Peabody, two elderly ladies who make and sell moonshine. When the brothers return to Clay's and learn about this, they



follow to the Peabodys where they all become very drunk. When they finally return home, the brothers fall asleep in the car while Lisa assures Olivia that she is looking forward to taking on Clay-Boy in the fall.

Chapters 7-10 Analysis

Clay continues his work on the house, going much further in the work this year by cutting down a tree and preparing it for lumber. Clay has also purchased a saw. It appears that Clay's intentions are finally strong enough that he might finally see the completion of his dream. It is a sweet idea to the reader, as Clay talks to Clay-Boy about how he plans to finish raising his kids there and then give the place to Clay-Boy to carry on the Spencer traditions. Not only is Clay trying to complete his own dream, he is trying to create a legacy for his beloved children and this is quite touching to the reader.

Clay-Boy continues to look forward to going to college. At the same time, his friend Claris is becoming more and more than a friend. Olivia dislikes Claris, and this could cause trouble for Clay-Boy in the future. At the same time, Claris lives in a world Clay-Boy does not fully understand, a place of money and privilege. However, when Clay-Boy attends a part at Claris', he discovers that rich people are just like everyone else and this makes him feel better about the future.

Virgil and all of Clay's brothers come for a visit and end up getting very drunk and silly. At the same time, Virgil's new wife is introduced to the family. Lisa is a Jew, therefore an oddity to the whole town and she quickly finds herself under a microscope. However, Lisa and Olivia hit it off, especially when Olivia learns she is willing to take on Clay-Boy when he goes to college. It seems everything is falling into place, making the reader hope that perhaps Clay-Boy's dreams will come true.



Chapters 11-14

Chapters 11-14 Summary

Chapter 11. Things at the library are slow, so Clay-Boy has had time to read almost every book they have. It also gives Clay-Boy plenty of time to visit with Claris on her frequent visits. However, Clay-Boy is deeply embarrassed one day when he kisses Claris for the first time and is caught by his younger sister. The sister, Becky, goes straight to Olivia and tells her what has happened. However, Olivia has gone into labor and does not have time to deal with such things. Olivia sends the children to her parents' home while she cleans up the house and prepares her bedroom for the birth. At the same time, Clay-Boy worries because he was supposed to go to a carnival with Claris, but now must care for his younger siblings. Clay-Boy sneaks out to tell Claris he cannot go and they have harsh words. Claris later comes to the grandparents' home and tells Clay-Boy how sorry she is. She also announces that Olivia has had twins, a boy named Franklin Delano and a girl named Eleanor.

Chapter 12. Clay-Boy is at work when his Aunt Frances brings him a letter from the university. The letter informs him that he has not been selected for a scholarship. Clay-Boy is devastated. The following Sunday, Clay drives to the university to speak to someone about this situation. Clay speaks with the Dean of Men who tells Clay he remembers Clay-Boy's application, but they turned him down because he had not taken a foreign language in high school. The dean tells Clay that if Clay-Boy takes the equivalent of a semester of high school Latin, he will be accepted as a student, but must pay his own tuition until he might qualify for a scholarship the following year.

Chapter 13. Clay speaks to Miss Porter about teaching Clay-Boy Latin and she agrees to arrange a tutor. However, Mr. Goodson has taken Latin and he agrees to teach Clay-Boy. Rather than accept payment for his services, Mr. Goodson asks Clay to attend church services. It is widely known that Clay dislikes church, especially the Baptist, therefore a large crowd shows up to see Clay attend services. Not only does Clay attend, but he agrees to join the church choir. At the same time, Clay-Boy studies hard for most of the remainder of the month. When he reaches the end of the textbook Mr. Goodson has, Mr. Goodson writes him a letter of accomplishment. Clay and Clay-Boy immediately take this to the dean and Clay-Boy is accepted to the University of Richmond.

Chapter 14. Clay-Boy sits near the frame of the house and watches as his father prepares to cut down a rotting tree that would otherwise fall on the house. At the same time, Zebulon is down at the family cemetery visiting his old relatives. Zebulon makes his way to the house and is standing under the tree Clay is cutting as it unexpectedly begins to fall. Clay runs to save his father and both are trapped underneath. Clay-Boy quickly runs for help, bringing back as many men as he can. Clay is pulled out from under the tree with a broken leg, but Zebulon has broken so many bones the doctor does not believe he will survive. While resting at Clay's house, Zebulon has Elizabeth



write out his will. After his funeral a short time later, Elizabeth reads it to her sons. Zebulon has left his life's savings to Clay-Boy to pay for college, a sum of thirty-seven dollars that Clay-Boy immediately entrusts to his mother.

Chapters 11-14 Analysis

The Clay Spencer family already numbers eleven, with nine children and the parents. Their family also includes the care and keeping of Clay's parents. Therefore, when Olivia gives birth to twins, the burden on the family only becomes that much greater. The family is poor, but they live a good life because of the hard work of both the mother and father as the reader can clearly see not only in Clay's work but also in Olivia's selfless actions in the moments before giving birth to her twins. This foreshadows a moment when the parents will have to pay dearly for the good of their children.

The relationship between Clay-Boy and Claris grows everyday. They share kisses that are both chaste and passionate, a moment that only brings guilt down on Clay-Boy when they are caught. However, their small fight brings Clay-Boy to the edge of despair and it is quickly obvious that he cares as deeply for Claris as she does for him. Therefore, the reader knows that Claris, or Clay-Boy's feelings for her, will play a heavy role in his future.

Clay-Boy does not get the scholarship he wanted, but his father pushes until Clay-Boy is assured a place in the school. This leaves the family with the burden of finding a way to pay for Clay-Boy's first year of college. Clay refuses to tell Clay-Boy how he plans to get the money, except to say he plans to approach John Pickett. This leaves the reader wondering if Clay plans to mortgage his land for Clay-Boy.

When Zebulon dies, it is tragic but not surprising since the man is over ninety. It is sad, however, and leaves his wife grieving. Zebulon is an uneducated man, but it is easy to see where Clay gets his love of family. With his dying breath, Zebulon leaves his few possessions to Clay-Boy to help pay for college. Zebulon hopes his thirty-seven dollars will pay for all of Clay-Boy's tuition, but it will not even place a dent in it. However, it will help with Clay-Boy's books and other necessities and it is a kind gesture.



Chapters 15-18

Chapters 15-18 Summary

Chapter 15. While Clay is recuperating from his broken leg, he begins to worry about his tools and supplies on the mountain and asks Clay-Boy to go check on them. Clay-Boy invites Claris to go with him despite Olivia's disapproval. Clay-Boy shows Claris the house and then takes her up to a field where there is an Indian mound. Claris suggests they strip to enjoy the summer heat on their bodies. Clay-Boy moves away from Claris and strips, feeling silly at first, but then enjoying the feel of the sun on his skin. Then he sees Claris. Back at home that night, Clay-Boy is caught putting cream on his sunburn. A few days later, Claris leaves early to return to her mother's, leaving Clay-Boy with the idea that she is going home to await signs of a pregnancy. Claris reinforces this idea by sending Clay-Boy a letter vaguely reflecting this idea.

Chapter 16. Clay grows tired of the cast on his leg and soaks it off while fishing in the river one Saturday. The following day, Clay dresses all in white in preparation of visiting John Pickett to ask for a loan. When he milks the cow, Chance does not recognize him and tries to gouge him with her horns. Later, Clay takes the whole family up to John Pickett's to ask for the loan. John wants to give them the loan, but he has recently married a young girl from a local farm and she threatens to leave if he does. Clay spends the rest of the day thinking over the dilemma and then goes for a walk. Olivia thinks he has gone drinking, but instead Clay walks to the first quarry where he worked as a twelve year old boy. Clay remembers his fear of climbing down into the quarry. Clay never wants one of his kids to have to do such a thing. Clay then walks up the mountain to his house and tears it down with his bare hands.

Chapter 17. Clay stops at the Spencer cemetery on his way down the mountain. Clay talks to his father's grave, apologizing that he cannot keep the family land. Clay explains how important it is for Clay-Boy to get an education. He explains this again later to Olivia, explaining that he sold the family land to the Company so that Clay-Boy can go to college and then he can help the next child do whatever he wants to do and so on. Clay believes that his kids can be something, that he has a houseful of doctors, lawyers, nurses, and musicians. Clay needs each one to help the next succeed in a way no one ever helped him to do.

Chapter 18. As the summer comes to an end, Clay-Boy lives in fear of getting a letter from Claris announcing her pregnancy. Therefore, when Claris sends a note telling him she plans to come for another visit, he knows she is pregnant and they must run away. Instead, Claris tells him that she went home later to ask her mother to allow her to change colleges so that she might go to the women's college across the lake from the University of Richmond so she and Clay-Boy can be together. This makes Clay-Boy very happy. A few weeks later, on the day he is to leave for college, Clay-Boy finds that his mother has bought a brand new suit for him to take to school. This is an exceptional



thing and Clay-Boy is brought to tears. Then the whole family drives Clay-Boy to the train and says a tearful goodbye.

Chapters 15-18 Analysis

Clay-Boy and Claris consummate their relationship, but rather than being a happy thing to bring them closer together, it drops Clay-Boy into a pit of despair as he worries that Claris might be pregnant. Clay-Boy has been raised in the Baptist Church and it is part of this Baptist disapproval that his father dislikes so much that mars the rest of Clay-Boy's summer. However, it all turns out for the best and Clay-Boy finds himself happily going off to Richmond to spend the next nine months not only studying at the university, but sharing his days with Claris.

While Clay-Boy lives in a bubble of happiness at the prospect of an education, Clay has had to sell his dream to make another come true. Clay has always wanted to build a house that will be his, that he can pass down to his children. Instead, Clay has to exchange this dream to give Clay-Boy an education in the hopes that Clay-Boy will be able to help the next child and then that child can help the next, all the way down so that Clay and Olivia's children can be more than what they are. This is even more ambitious than building a house, but it is a sacrifice that is much deeper and means so much more than a house. Clay has given up his own dream to make his children's lives easier, something many modern parents would never dream of doing. Clay is a remarkable man. Although he is uneducated, he is better than many of the educated people around him.



Characters

Clay-Boy Spencer

Clay-Boy Spencer is fifteen when the novel begins. Clay-Boy is the oldest of nine children when the novel opens and his mother continues to be very protective of her children, not allowing Clay-Boy to go hunting with his uncles because she is afraid of losing him once he begins to do man things.

It is unusual for people of Clay-Boy's time to finish high school, let alone go to college. However, Clay-Boy's parents are very determined to make sure each of their children are allowed an education to pursue whatever dreams they might have. For this reason, Clay-Boy is encouraged to remain in school instead of getting a job like most young male children. When Clay-Boy prepares for graduation, his teacher suggests to his parents that he be allowed to go to college. Clay-Boy's mother is unhappy with the idea because it will mean that Clay-Boy will have to leave the family, but his father is very happy with the idea because it means a chance for Clay-Boy to make a better life for himself.

As Clay-Boy falls in love and begins to have hopes about a future, he finds himself in a situation that could go two ways. Clay-Boy fears he might have made his girlfriend pregnant and this will mean they will have to disappear, forget about furthering their education, and live in poverty like his parents. However, Clay-Boy also has the chance to go to college, to become something more than his parents ever dreamed for themselves. Therefore, when the obstacles to college disappear one after the other, Clay-Boy emerges as the hope of his family, becoming their only chance at making a better life for themselves.

Clay Spencer

Clay Spencer is something of a heathen to the people of New Dominion. The Spencer family has always had a reputation for causing trouble, but Clay is known for his dislike of the Baptist Church, his drinking, and his non-stop cussing. This normally would cause Clay to be disliked in this small community, but Clay also has a big heart. Clay will help anyone who comes to him and often finds himself unable to pursue his own activities on the weekend because of all the appliance repairs he makes for free for his friends and neighbors.

Clay owns the last section of Spencer Mountain that once belonged to his family. Everyone else on the mountain, including Clay's eight brothers, have sold their farms and property to the Company so they can mine soapstone that is copious under the mountain. Clay holds on to his property, right on the summit of the mountain, with the hopes of one day building a house there for his wife and kids. Every spring Clay goes up there and begins work anew on the house, but every year there is not enough time



or money to make much progress. However, Clay has decided that this year will be different. He even buys a saw to help shape the lumber he uses to frame the house.

Clay loves his children and wants more for them than he has had for himself. For this reason, Clay will do almost anything to make sure his children receive a good education. When Clay-Boy graduates from high school and the teacher tells Clay he could do well in college, Clay does all he can to make sure Clay-Boy gets in, even going to speak to the dean of students when his son is turned down for a scholarship. Clay does all he can to get Clay-Boy into school, even agreeing to pay the tuition himself for the first year. To do this, Clay asks for a loan, but it is denied. Clay then sells his property on Spencer's Mountain to pay for Clay-Boy's tuition.

Olivia Spencer

Olivia Italiano Spencer is Clay's wife. Olivia is a hardworking, religious woman. Olivia supports Clay's desire that all their children receive at least a high school education. However, when the teacher comes to ask permission to arrange for Clay-Boy to go to college, Olivia underestimates Clay's determination that their children be educated and tells the teacher that Clay will never agree. However, Clay is more determined than anyone to see Clay-Boy succeed because he sees Clay-Boy's education as a stepping stone for all the other children. Olivia supports Clay's actions, no matter what decision he makes. Olivia is a strong character, a typical woman of her time who quietly struggles with the burdens of daily life and does all she can to care for her family.

Claris Coleman

Claris is the daughter of the Company foreman, Colonel Coleman, and a friend of Clay-Boy's. Claris is interested in sociology and for this reason she likes to befriend the families of New Dominion during her summer visits to her father. The year before the novel begins, Claris befriends the Clay Spencer family and becomes good friends with Clay-Boy. This year, they have both matured and Claris begins to seduce Clay-Boy despite his naivety and his inability to see how Claris is manipulating him a great deal of the time.

During the summer, Claris seduces Clay-Boy and then teases him by convincing him she is pregnant. Claris keeps this ruse up for several weeks, nearly giving Clay-Boy a stroke with her refusal to admit or deny a pregnancy. When the truth finally comes out, that she is not pregnant, Clay-Boy is so relieved that he cannot breathe. Clay-Boy loves Claris, but a pregnancy would mean the end to not only Clay-Boy's dreams, but his father's as well.

Miss Parker

Miss Parker is the spinster high school teacher in New Dominion. Miss Parker often becomes frustrated with the families in New Dominion since the children often quit



school before they reach high school in order to go to work to help support large families. Therefore, Miss Parker is thrilled to have Clay-Boy in her class, to teach him through high school and watch him go on to college. Miss Parker is of great help in arranging for Clay-Boy to go to school, as well as helping him begin a library in New Dominion.

Mr. Goodson

Mr. Goodson is the new Baptist preacher in New Dominion. On his first day in town, Mr. Goodson runs into Clay Spencer while he is fishing. An avid fisherman himself, Mr. Goodson stops to fish with Clay and quickly becomes drunk. Clay delivers Mr. Goodson later to the rectory where his arrival becomes a scandal among the good Baptists of the area. Clay then finds himself forced to call in favors from his friends and neighbors to get them back to the church. In return, Mr. Goodson becomes a great help to the Clay Spencer family by helping all he can when Clay-Boy prepares to go to college. Mr. Goodson actually teaches Clay-Boy Latin.

Zebulon Spencer

Zebulon Spencer is the patriarch of the Spencer family. Zebulon is in his nineties when the novel begins. Zebulon is full of stories about the past and is the source of the white buck story that begins the novel. When Zebulon dies after a tree falls on him, he leaves his worldly possessions to Clay-Boy to aid in his attempts to go to college.

Colonel Coleman

Colonel Coleman is the foreman of the Company, the soapstone mining company on Spencer's Mountain, and is the main employer of the men in New Dominion. Colonel Coleman is a wealthier man than most of his neighbors, a divorced man with a teenage daughter. It is the Colonel's daughter with whom Clay-Boy falls in love in this novel and who creates great fear in Clay-Boy when he thinks he has gotten Claris pregnant.

Virgil Spencer

Virgil Spencer is one of Clay's eight brothers. Virgil is the only one of the Spencer brothers who remained in Richmond after the depression was over. Virgil is a favorite of Clay-Boy's because of his exotic city stories. When Clay-Boy arranges to go to college, Virgil, who has recently gotten married, agrees to take Clay-Boy in to help with his expenses.

Ida Italiano

Ida Italiano is Olivia's mother. Ida is a very religious woman who was not happy that her daughter married Clay Spencer. However, Ida has come around, convinced that Clay is a good man despite his love of whiskey and cussing. Ida is a good woman, but not as strong as her daughter.



Objects/Places

Books

When Clay-Boy, Miss Parker, and Mr. Goodson decide to open a library, Miss Parker and Mr. Goodson ask for donations of books from friends, family, and church goers. They are soon overwhelmed with the number of books donated to the library. By the end of summer, Clay-Boy has read all the books in the library.

New Suit

Olivia uses some of the money Zebulon left for Clay-Boy to buy him a new suit. This suit is one of only a few pieces of clothing of which Clay-Boy has the honor of being the first owner since the family is so poor that most of their clothes are homemade or hand-me-downs.

Electric Saw

Clay buys an electric saw from John Pickett to help him prepare lumber to build his house. The saw is a table saw that connects by a band to a small car engine.

Virgil's Car

Zebulon steals Virgil's car when Virgil comes to New Dominion to introduce his new wife, Lisa, to the family. Zebulon takes the car and Lisa to drink at Miss Etta and Miss Emma's.

The Commissary

The Commissary is the store in New Dominion run by The Company where many of the families buy their food, clothing, and other household supplies.

Company Houses

Most of the people live in houses built and owned by The Company. The Company can force people to move at a moment's notice if the house they are currently living in sits over a vein of soapstone they want to mine. This happens to the Italianos in this novel.



The Company

The Company is the mining company that owns the land around and on Spencer's Mountain. This company mines the area for soapstone.

University of Richmond

Miss Parker and Mr. Goodson attempt to arrange for Clay-Boy to go to the University of Richmond on scholarship. Although Clay-Boy does not get the scholarship, his father arranges to pay for him to attend for a semester without a scholarship.

New Dominion

New Dominion is the name of the small mountain community where the Spencers live.

Spencer's Mountain

Spencer's Mountain is the mountain that rises above New Dominion under which runs rich veins of soapstone. The mountain is named after a member of an exploration party who so loved the area that he brought his family there and claimed much of the land on the mountain. This land was passed down through several generations until Zebulon Spencer split it up among his nine sons. When soapstone was discovered there, eight of the sons sold their parcel of land. Clay Spencer held on to his in the hopes of having a home no one could take from him. In the end, Clay sells the land to pay his son's college tuition.



Themes

Family

Family is the main theme of this novel with family being a key part of the characters' identities and their motivations. The Spencer family is a very large family, consisting of nine brothers all of whom, except Virgil, have gone on to marry and have children of their own. Clay Spencer has nine children and his wife gives birth to twins as the novel develops. This is a large family that only adds to the scope of the already large Spencer family.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear how much these families depend on one another. Clay Spencer is close to his brothers and they often have a wonderful time when they get together for holidays and other occasions. At the same time, Clay is incredibly proud of his own family and determined to see his own children have a better life than he ever did. Clay is also a good son, taking in his parents and caring for them in their old age.

Family is clearly an essential theme to this novel not only because of the things already mentioned, but because family is the one thing that really matters to people who face each day unsure of what danger might unfold, or who might or might not be coming home that night. Family is what matters to these characters, what drives them to do what they do, which establishes family as the main theme of the novel.

Parental Sacrifice

Clay Spencer is a good man who knows that education is the best way for his children to avoid living a life like his own, working a job they will not like and having no way to care for their ever growing families. For this reason, Clay Spencer makes his children go to school all through high school even though it is common for most kids to quit school the moment they are old enough to get a job with The Company.

It is an amazing sacrifice for Clay to give his kids an education because his family is so large and so poor that they could really use the income of one of the kids working at The Company. However, Clay loves his children and he desperately wants a different life for them. It is with this in mind that Clay gives up his dream of owning his own home and sells his land on Spencer's Mountain in order to pay for Clay-Boy to go to college.

Parental sacrifice takes on new meaning in this novel as compared to the sacrifice modern parents make for their children. In this novel, Clay Spencer has to give up his land, the last of his family's legacy on Spencer's Mountain, in order to help his son succeed. Not only this, but Clay's wife, Olivia, gives up a great deal of freedom and sanity in order to successfully raise eleven children on what little money Clay is able to make at The Company. Both Clay and Olivia work hard so that one day their children will not have to do so and this shows parental sacrifice as a theme of the novel.



Poverty

All of the families in New Dominion are poor, making poverty emerge as an important of this novel. The novel takes place in the years before World War II in a world that is still untouched by modern conveniences. These families live in homes without electricity, without refrigerators and electric stoves, without the things most modern readers take for granted. They have no credit cards, no banks offering mortgages or loans, no means of buying the things they need if they do not have the cash to do so.

Poverty impacts these families in many ways. Most of the families grow the majority of their own food, hunt for meat, and make their own clothing. Therefore, when there is a little bit of money, it usually goes for things like shoe leather, chickens or cows, or household necessities. Therefore there is not a lot of money for books or college tuition. This is why most children from this town do not go beyond a few years of elementary school. However, Clay-Boy has the opportunity to go to college, to make himself better than his parents; therefore his father is determined to make this happen. Clay does not want his children to suffer poverty the way he always has. Zebulon did not know any better when Clay and his brothers were young, but Clay does and he is determined to lift his kids out of poverty.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view with an authorial voice. The novel is told, not with a character as narrator, but with the author as the narrator. While the author knows the thoughts and feelings of each of his characters, he does not write in such a way that the reader feels as though the characters are telling their own story. The author keeps the reader at something of a distance in order to tell not only the characters' story, but to tell the story of New Dominion and the culture in which these people live.

The point of view of the novel is a little unusual as compared to modern literature. However, the author has a storytelling style that is laid back, that is down home, just like his characters. The author tells his story from many points of view, moving from character to character as the plot progresses, including information of which some of the characters more than likely are not aware but that is important to the reader's overall understanding of the plot of the novel. For this reason, the point of view works well with the plot of the novel.

Setting

The novel is set in the mountain community of New Dominion in the hills of Virginia within a tight knit community where everyone knows everyone else and is always in everyone's business. Most of the community is made up of families that lived on Spencer's Mountain and moved down to its base when a mining company came in and bought up their land. Almost all the people of New Dominion have a male family member who works for the Company, since The Company is the primary employer in the town.

The setting of the novel is important because it becomes the backdrop for the themes of poverty and community that propel much of the novel. New Dominion is a place filled with former farmers who have become miners out of necessity. This community is very poor, but most of the people are good, honest people who attend church regularly and are willing to help their neighbors. Most of the people have their own problems, but they are more than willing to help out a neighbor in trouble. It is a quaint, old-fashioned setting that works well with the overall themes of the novel; therefore the setting is perfect for the plot of the novel.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. Having been written in the sixties and set in the thirties, the novel's language tends to be a little more formal, a little more sophisticated than that to which most modern readers are probably accustomed.



However, the language of the novel is not terribly difficult for most readers to comprehend.

The language fits the setting of the novel very well and remains authentic to the main characters. No slang appears and there is little use of foreign phrases or profanity. In fact, the language of this novel tends to be very proper as compared to some modern novels. There is a great deal of detailed description, but it is not written in a way that impedes the overall beauty of the novel. Therefore the language of the novel works well with the plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into eighteen fairly long chapters telling the story in a linear sequence without a great deal of flashback or backstory that might impede the pace of the novel. Written using both narration and dialogue, the author both tells and shows a story to the reader.

One main plot and several subplots comprise the novel. The main plot follows Clay-Boy as he comes of age and prepares for the possibility of going to college. A subplot follows Clay-Boy's relationship with Claris Coleman. Another subplot describes the relationship between Clay and his wife, Olivia and another deals with Clay's relationship with the new Baptist preacher and his dislike of all things Baptist. All the plots comes to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Watching his father and his uncles, Clay-Boy was impatient to be one of them."
Chapter 1, pg. 6

"'It wasn't no boy killed that deer, Clay,' he said. 'It took a man to do it.'" Chapter 2, pg. 19

"Once only came the saddest sound in the world, the single unanswered voice of a whippoorwill, but there was no one to hear it." Chapter 3, pg. 45

"The thought of leaving saddened the boy." Chapter 5, pg. 67

"'I've said it all my life,' vowed Clay. 'Not one of my babies will ever work in that sump hole and my word still holds.'" Chapter 6, pg. 90

"Men are strange creatures, thought Olivia as she yawned and rolled her head against the pillows; they really believe all the things they promise women." Chapter 7, pg. 114

"'Them city people ain't no different from the rest of us.'" Chapter 9, pg. 134

"He consumed more books during that summer than probably the entire population of New Dominion had read in a lifetime." Chapter 11, pg. 153

"For Clay-Boy a window had been briefly opened into a world he had only dared to dream of and all he could see at that moment was that the window had been slammed shut in his face and would never open again." Chapter 12, pg. 168

"There had been times when he had feared that Clay might follow the other boys' examples and sell his part of the mountain, but now that the house was well under way, the old man was sure that Clay would never let the land go, had indeed promised his father that he would never let it go, and the knowledge that at least part of the mountain would always remain in the family had been a comforting thought to Zebulon."
Chapter 14, pgs. 194-195

"The horrible guttural cries of a man unaccustomed to tears forced their way through his throat, and tears and sweat rolled down his face together as he seized a sledge hammer and splintered each hand-hewn stud of the framework. Each blow he dealt the house fell as if on some living part of himself and Clay cried aloud with the pain."
Chapter 16, pg. 231

"As the truck pulled out of the yard, Clay-Boy looked for as long as he could back at the house. He wished for one moment that the truck would turn around and take him back and that he could relive every moment he had known in that house, but then the house

was gone in a turning of the road, and the only memory of the warmth and happiness and love he had known there remained in his mind." Chapter 18, pg. 247



Topics for Discussion

Who is Clay-Boy? Why does he want to go hunting with his uncles? Who does not want to allow this? For what reason? How old is Clay-Boy? What story does Clay-Boy hear the night before the hunt? How does this story impact Clay-Boy the following day on the hunt? How does Clay-Boy respond when faced with his first deer? What does this hunt say about Clay-Boy's future?

Who is Clay? What does he mean when he calls all his children thoroughbreds? Why does Clay want his children to finish high school? Why is this a struggle for a family such as the Spencers? Why does Clay not want Clay-Boy to get a class ring? What does Olivia say the significance of such a ring is? What is Clay's argument? What impact does this have on Clay-Boy?

What has Clay promised his wife all through their marriage he will build for her? Why is this important to Clay? How does Olivia feel about this? Why has it taken so long for Clay to fulfill this promise? What does this say about Clay? About his lifestyle? Why do people think of Clay as a heathen? What is a heathen? Is Clay a heathen?

Why does Zebulon want to see Clay finish his house? What steps does Clay take in this novel to finish the house? How does this impact the family? How does this impact Clay-Boy? What does Clay tell Clay-Boy about the legacy of this house? How does this house represent the legacy of the Spencer family on the mountain? Why does Clay want this house so much? Why does he give up this dream?

Who is Olivia? Why did Olivia's mother not want her to marry Clay? Why did Olivia marry Clay? How does Olivia feel about Clay's opinions on the Baptist Church? Why does Olivia continue to go to church? How many children does Olivia have? Why does she have more? What does it say about Olivia when she prepares for the birth of her twins so calmly? Why is Olivia's father less than impressed by the news of the twins? What burden do these babies represent to the family?

What is Clay-Boy's relationship with Claris? How does Clay-Boy feel about Claris? How does Olivia feel about Claris? For what reason? What is unusual about Claris as compared to the other girls in New Dominion? Why does Clay-Boy seek out Claris? Why does Clay-Boy become convinced that Claris is pregnant? What does Clay-Boy decide to do about this situation? How would this situation impact Clay-Boy's future? His family's future?

What is the significance of college to the people of New Dominion? Why is Clay so determined that Clay-Boy go to college? What does it mean to Clay for his son to go to college? Why does Clay say that Clay-Boy going to college will be a better legacy for his children than their property on Spencer's Mountain? Does Olivia agree? Did Clay do the right thing for his kids, for Clay-Boy?