

The Snow Leopard Study Guide

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen

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



Contents

The Snow Leopard Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue, Part 1: Westward.....	5
Part 2: Northward.....	8
Part 3: At Crystal Mountain.....	13
Part 4: The Way Home.....	16
Characters.....	18
Objects/Places.....	21
Themes.....	23
Style.....	25
Quotes.....	27
Topics for Discussion.....	29

Plot Summary

"Snow Leopard" by Peter Matthiessen is a non-fiction book detailing the author's trip into the Himalayas to search for the elusive and mystical mountain cat known as the snow leopard.

The author's journey is both personal and professional, as a group of porters and sherpas joins the author and the preeminent field biologist Dr. George Schaller on a trek through the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau in search of the snow leopard. In addition to the snow leopard, Matthiessen and Schaller intend to obtain and record data on the Himalayan bharal, a rare blue sheep that is a cross between a traditional sheep and a goat. The animal lives high in the mountains, and little is known about its mating rituals and social habits. The bharal is almost an obsessive subject with Schaller, who arranged the trip with the recording of the bharal's behavior as one of the main objectives. The other main objective, although one that is less likely to be attained, is the search for the snow leopard, an elusive and almost mystical mountain cat. Schaller is one of the only two westerners who have seen the snow leopard in its natural habit, twenty-five years earlier.

The snow leopard is known for being cagey and being able to camouflage itself in the deep white snows of the region. There are supposedly only six leopards on the Nepal side of the Himalayas, making the objective to capture one on film very unlikely. Still, the expedition is willing to try, facing a great deal of bitter and harsh weather including snowstorms, monsoon rains, the serious illness of one of the porters, and treacherous conditions.

Schaller and Matthiessen succeed in seeing several herds of bharal at the beginning of the rutting season. Schaller is ecstatic at the turn of events and obsessively records all he can regarding the animal's mating and social habits, of which little is known throughout the western scientific community.

The book gives detailed insight into the conditions of the Himalayas from the rugged terrain to the unpredictable weather. The group encounters a number of people, mostly Nepalese, as they journey over the mountains beginning at Kathmandu and ending in Jumla.

Matthiessen, as a devout Zen Buddhist and also sees the trip as one of personal and religious enlightenment. The author is struggling with grief from his wife's sudden death from cancer the previous year. The couple had a tumultuous relationship that ended in a complete commitment shortly before she died. Matthiessen thinks of his wife and four children a great deal, although he does not cloud the relationships with unrealistic images.

In the end, Matthiessen and Schaller part company, with Schaller remaining on Crystal Mountain even though the weather conditions are increasingly unpredictable.

Matthiessen returns to Kathmandu where he receives communication from Schaller detailing an encounter with a snow leopard.



Prologue, Part 1: Westward

Prologue, Part 1: Westward Summary and Analysis

The story begins in September 1973, when Peter Matthiessen and George Schaller begin their journey to Crystal Mountain in search of the snow leopard. The men walk nearly 250 miles to the Land of Dolpo, located on the Tibetan Plateau. Matthiessen explains his relationship with George Schaller and how both men are interested in locating the snow leopard, which Matthiessen refers to as "the rarest and most beautiful of the great cats." Schaller says that only two human beings have laid eyes on the snow leopard in the last 25 years, and he is one of those people. The snow leopard is so rare that it is almost considered to be mythical.

Matthiessen and Schaller meet at a hotel in Kathmandu. The men haven't seen each other in more than a year, and Matthiessen has some reservations about taking a journey with a man he does not know well. The men are forced to spend three days at the hotel in Kathmandu due to heavy rains. Schaller begins to worry about the delay since winter occurs early in the Himalayas, and the rain could bring heavy snows. On the last day, final arrangements are made including the discarding of unnecessary clothing, posting mail, and obtaining small rupee bills, because the hill people have no use for large bills. Together with their sherpas, the men pack the necessary gear and start on their journey.

The men arrive in Pokhara and are greeted by the rest of the sherpas and porters who will take them up into the mountains. The local people are fascinated with Matthiessen and Schaller because the villagers do not see white people often, if at all. There is a great deal of misery in the village, yet there remains some hope, something that is obviously missing in the streets of Calcutta. Matthiessen describes the people and atmosphere as the party ventures toward the Himalaya. Matthiessen is curious about one of the porters, a sherpa named Tukten.

The start of the journey is peaceful because the track is too rough and steep to handle anything but foot traffic. The party passes paddies, black cows, and teahouses. Matthiessen shares a great deal about Tibetan history and his experiences as a Zen Buddhist. The author has great admiration for the yogas, disciplines instituted by Buddha. One of the Vedas that Matthiessen subscribes to is the fact that in the state of highest being there is no place for desire, since desire implies lack, and all one needs throughout life is spiritual rebirth.

The party starts off in high spirits until they see a crippled child crawling up the side of the hill in the mud, stones, and goat dung. The child is not a beggar. Matthiessen learns from Schaller that there are parents who will break the knees of a child in order to improve business. The child greets the party with a bright smile. The group is reminded of mortality. Matthiessen can picture the ancients dying outside Pokhara and hears, once again, the last breath of his wife Deborah.



Matthiessen learns much about Nepal during the trip. The country is plagued by the worst erosion problem in the world. It is becoming worse as the forests are cut down in search of food and fuel. In eastern Nepal, firewood is a precious commodity, and peasants walk for many miles to sell kindling. With the lack of wood, many people burn cakes of livestock dung. The burning of the dung takes it away from the soil, which becomes malnourished. Without manure or fertilizer gleaned from the byproducts of the forest, the soil compacts and turns to dust. Schaller says that Asia is behind East Africa by 15 to 20 years regarding conservation efforts. Scientists feel that this lack of action may prove fatal.

On the first day, the party walks for 10 hours. Matthiessen is having problems with his boots. The boots had been taken to a cobbler to be stretched, because they were too narrow, but the cobbler had no tools. Instead, the cobbler had sewn patches onto the boots which did not ease the problem; it only made them less rain proof. Because of blisters and the narrow boots, Matthiessen chooses to walk barefoot. Even Schaller, who is a seasoned hiker, has blood in his shoes. Matthiessen claims to be relieved to discover that Schaller is mortal.

The next day the party walks for 11 hours over rough terrain. The trail leads up the Kali Gandaki, the site of the deepest river canyon in the world. Throughout the night there are monsoon rains which reduce the humidity, yet do not delay the journey. The party must make a small detour on their journey due to the Nepalese government's protection of its northwestern wild region. The new route to the north reduces the chances of encountering Nepalese nomads known for raiding travelers. The new route will last for six days, and the party enters regions in which the police are "suspicious and aggressive."

The daily rain begins to test the party's patience. The weather affects Matthiessen in particular because his tent is cramped and leaks. Matthiessen learns more about Schaller, even though the man tends to be quiet and somewhat solitary. By the next morning, heavy rains have rendered the trails impassable. The party is resigned to remain in an old cow shed. One of the sherpas gets some local wine. Neither Matthiessen nor Schaller is in the mood to celebrate. Schaller goes off on his own while Matthiessen stays behind thinking about his family. Three of the Matthiessen children are in college, while the youngest, eight-year-old Alex, remains at home with friends.

Matthiessen remembers some of his earlier experiences as a writer and his travels around the world, including Paris, Peru, and Thailand. Matthiessen describes these journeys and the people and experiences he encountered while traveling. There have been many trips taken with LSD and one negative experiment with a raw form of heroin, supposedly opium. It was during this time that Matthiessen met Deborah Love, the woman who would become his wife. Although Matthiessen has many stories of the drug culture and his experiences with Deborah, the author proclaims he does not miss the psychedelic drug years.

The party starts to travel upward; when they reach the Jaljalha Ridge, Schaller informs Matthiessen that they are at 11,200 feet above sea level. As Matthiessen walks he



observes the valley filled with yellow maple and fir trees. There are signs that the wilderness will be gone by the end of the century and signs of rock slides that are caused by deforestation and erosion. The group encounters villages of nomads which are guarded by brindle mastiffs. The dogs are huge and fierce. Fortunately, during the day the dogs are chained, while at night they are allowed to roam acting as sentinels. One of the dogs breaks its chain and comes after Matthiessen. Matthiessen hears the dog coming and is able to defend himself with a stick. Schaller steps in and eventually the dog goes away.

Half the porters have left the party, and Schaller and Matthiessen are told that there are no available replacements due to the potato harvest. Tukten remains with the party, who continues to raise Matthiessen's curiosity. For some reason the other porters dislike Tukten and avoid him. Matthiessen surmises it may be because Tukten drinks too much, swears too much, or for some unknown reason is not to be trusted. In the eyes of the other sherpas, Tukten has demeaned himself by taking this job, which is apparently beneath him. Regardless of the attitudes of the sherpas, Matthiessen still feels some sort of deep connection with Tukten.

The party is delayed for another day by rain. Matthiessen is grateful to have the rest, as his feet, legs and back are tired and nearly every piece of clothing and gear is wet. Matthiessen begins to adjust to the journey and begins to remove excess items such as a watch, a bracelet and his long hair. During the day of rest, Tibetans visit the party. Matthiessen makes the comparison between Native Americans and the Tibetans.

A Tibetan visits the party and delivers the news that Jang Pass is treacherous and snow is knee deep. Additionally, the police at the opposite end of the Pass are making it difficult for travelers, often refusing government permits issued in Kathmandu. This is the first time Matthiessen and Schaller fear that they may not be able to enter Dolpo. Matthiessen realizes they may not be able to cross through the pass both ways before winter, and that his promise to Alex to be home by Thanksgiving will not be kept. The party is disappointed to learn that yet another day of rain will delay their trip. The conversation between Matthiessen and Schaller turns to various religions from Zen to Christian mystics. This inevitably turns toward science and the conflict between the two subjects.

Eventually the sun comes out and leads the party to believe they will be able to continue into the Jang Pass the next day. Time is against Matthiessen and Schaller, and both men begin to realize this trip would best be undertaken in spring or summer, where it could be completed in two weeks. At this time of year, the party will be lucky to arrive at all.



Part 2: Northward

Part 2: Northward Summary and Analysis

It is October and the weather is perfect for travel and for harvesting potatoes. There is no need for all the sherpas, but the new ones refuse to leave and will not give up the money paid in advance to buy food. The party starts to climb toward the White Mountains. The group finally reaches snow at 12,400 feet. The snow is gray and lies atop slushy scree, which makes the climb difficult. Matthiessen has blisters on his feet and is wearing sneakers so his feet are wet and numb.

Matthiessen speaks about his relationship with Deborah. The marriage had begun to come apart five months before she died. The cancer was sudden and didn't begin until late autumn. By January, Deborah was consumed with cancer and barely lucid. Matthiessen and Schaller wait by a stone hut for the rest of the sherpas to arrive. Matthiessen sits and relaxes in the sun while Schaller hikes upriver with his telescope to scan the mountains for blue sheep. Many of the porters refuse to go farther, and Schaller attempts to bargain to hire five ponies. While the ponies are necessary, Matthiessen has no idea what they will do with the animals once they reach the Jang Pass.

The monsoon rains are supposed to be finished by the first week of October, but they continue and cause delays. In the morning, the ponies break loose during the storm and the owner must go searching for them in the mountains. The party fears that the rain will have turned into snow but it is too late to stop and they must forge ahead. Schaller tells Matthiessen, "We have to get across that pass, even if it takes a week-otherwise, we're finished."

Matthiessen talks about the sherpas and how some seem to be loyal despite the weather conditions. Early one afternoon, the man with the ponies has decided to return home. Schaller has an outburst and is angry because the lack of animals means that they are stranded. Matheson begins to have hallucinogenic dreams and is concerned that many Tibetans consider hallucinations to be a precedent to the Bardo, or the transition between two existences. Matthiessen is unsure what this means but just in case decides to read his copy of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The party reaches 12,000 feet and the climb becomes more difficult. The paths on the mountainsides are narrow enough not to allow for any misstep. Matthiessen has learned how to acclimate to this part of the journey by walking lightly and being careful not to succumb to vertigo from lack of oxygen.

As always, the sherpas are 1 to 1 1/2 hours behind Matthiessen and Schaller. Upon reaching the top of a peak, the sherpas put down their packs and sit down to eat their meal. Schaller is losing patience and is afraid this latest delay will cause him to miss the rutting of the blue sheep. As annoyed as Schaller and Matthiessen are, the sherpas know the conditions that lie ahead and are not willing to walk farther that afternoon.



As the sherpas cook and Schaller goes on about not being able to go farther, one of the men calls attention to a rise, which overlooks a valley. The man announces that below is the bharal, which is the Himalayan blue sheep Schaller and Matthiessen have longed to see. Schaller is finally happy by this find. Matthiessen finds a footprint that resembles that of a dog, although dogs are not common in this part of Tibet. Schaller thinks it is probably the print of the snow leopard. Tukten says that the snow leopards do not live on the Nepal side, only on the Dolpo side of the mountains. Matthiessen can't help being excited and spends much of the night lying awake. It never occurs to anyone that the print could belong to a large mountain fox.

The party sets out before daybreak and must cross treacherous ice as they hike up the canyon. Schaller gives Matthiessen advice on how to walk up the canyon, yet the climb is still difficult as the air grows thinner and the climbers suffer from snow blindness. After a grueling four-hour climb, Matthiessen joins Schaller on top of a ridge where he discovers there is no pass and the loads are sent down the mountain. Schaller is pleased, however, because there are several herds of bharal in the area.

The weather is starting to take a serious toll, particularly on the porters. Some of them return home, unable to handle bloody feet and snow blindness. Many of the high altitude sherpas are born southwest of Mount Everest and are generally used to the conditions. Schaller is disgusted by the lack of adaptation by the sherpas. The result is that the party is stuck in the snow for another day or more. Eventually, the group gets underway and the journey consists of deep snows and in the lower elevations, lush greenery. As the group walks and the sherpas continuously perform a Buddhist chant, Matthiessen recalls services that he and Deborah attended in New York during the early years of their Buddhist training.

One of the most faithful porters goes off in search of assistance. Rather than wait for his return, Matthiessen and Schaller decide to forge ahead. The trek becomes more difficult when the men begin to carry their own gear, since the previous load only consisted of rucksacks. The men feel a sense of liberation by carrying their own gear and realize they could have made much better time if this had been the plan from the start.

Matthiessen considers the existence of the yeti. The general description is that the creature is reddish-brown and hairy and has a ridged crown that makes its head appear pointed. Although the tracks of the creature tend to be oversized, it has been reported that the yeti is generally the size of an adolescent boy. Before the party started off on their journey, Matthiessen and Schaller had a conversation with the young biologist who had taken a plaster cast of footprints found outside his tent six months earlier. The man spoke of the creature as the abominable snowman. Madison waited for Schaller to express his skepticism about the existence of the snowman but he simply nodded in agreement. Schaller believes that 95% of the information regarding the yeti is nonsense. However he does believe that there is a creature in the Himalayan that is unknown to man. Oddly enough, Schaller still has doubts about the existence of Sasquatch (yeti).



The Nepalese government has strong feelings about the yeti and there are strict laws to prevent the creature from being killed. Matthiessen asks one of the local scientists what he would do if confronted with a yeti. The scientist doesn't reply, either because he hadn't thought of such a scenario or was uncomfortable with his answer. The man responded by asking a question of Matthiessen. It is understandable why Schaller would be willing to walk hundreds of miles to collect data on the bharal but why is Matthiessen in the party? Although Matthiessen is interested in the bharal and the snow leopard, he has to admit to the man that he doesn't know.

The group must stop at Dunahi to be cleared by government officials. The party is concerned after hearing stories of the difficulties of other travelers, but the experience is pleasant and the party continues on before something can go awry. Matthiessen is surprised by Schaller's ease in the mountains, even on sharp ledges, while Matthiessen can barely look over the side. Matthiessen is starting to adapt yet it is still not as easy for him as it is for Schaller. Along the way the group passes several villages that tend to be curious and cordial to the white men.

At this point, Tukten is the only remaining porter, and because he is too valuable to let go, the men decide to keep him on as a sherpa. Tukten stays by Matthiessen's side as he explores towns while Schaller climbs the mountainsides searching for more bharal. It is apparent to Matthiessen that the towns were much more refined at one time, as revealed by ancient frescoes and ceiling mandalas. Although the men enjoy the village and the surrounding area, it seems that it would be wise to leave before the government officials have changed their minds about allowing them to continue on journey.

Tukten and one of the other porters leave during the last week of October to obtain sugar and rice as well as to post letters for Schaller and Matthiessen. If the trip goes well the men are expected to meet up again around November 10. Matthiessen and Schaller begin to scale cliffs that jut out over treacherous precipices. The sherpas walk straight ahead, with no fear, as if their center is the guide. Meanwhile, Matthiessen is having difficulty and in some parts must move forward on hands and knees. Many times during this portion of the trip, Matthiessen thinks it would be very easy to push Schaller off the side of the mountain.

At night, the men sit around a fire and discuss the snow leopard. Schaller says the animal is rare and elusive and tends to blend in so well with its surroundings that a person could sit mere yards away and not see it. Even people who are used to traversing the mountainsides rarely come across a snow leopard. Typically, the snow leopard has pale frosty eyes and its coat is a pale misty gray, decorated with black rosettes. An adult cat usually weighs less than 100 pounds and is less than 6 feet long, including its tail. It has large paws, almost like those of a puppy, which has not yet grown into the size of its feet. For many reasons the snow leopard is considered to be one of the most mysterious and magical of all the great cats. Unlike other wild cats that have been studied, there is nothing recorded about the social environment of the snow leopards. It almost always travels alone but nothing more is known about the cat.



The journey has already taken almost 2 weeks longer than was expected. The party has been on the expedition for one month, and the delays have incurred extra expenses, ones that the party cannot afford, such as the payment for extra porters. Although the party now has more porters to help with carrying the loads of food and gear, Schaller tells Matthiessen that it is wise to carry his own sleeping bag due to quickly changing weather and high winds. Additionally, both men are aware that any type of sickness or injury could be a rather serious affair, since there is no way a doctor could get to them at this point in the expedition. Schaller makes the comment that compound fractures are not a problem since they can be reset. However, if one of the party should have a ruptured appendix... Schaller does not need to finish the sentence. All members of the party are beginning to become sick of each other and long for solitude.

As the party continues to climb upward, Matthiessen notices that the porters and the Sherpas are all unhappy, and he can't blame them for not wanting to continue with such heavy loads. Schaller goes off to check out a potential path and does not return. As night begins to fall, Matthiessen becomes worried, afraid that Schaller has had some type of accident. As it grows darker, Matthiessen tries to ease his mind by taking small comfort in the fact that Schaller has taken his sleeping bag. Matthiessen and one of the porters decide to walk down the other side of the ridge, hoping to find Schaller on the way down. Not long after the pair set out Schaller returns.

The next day, Schaller moves ahead. As Matthiessen catches up, he finds a note from Schaller. The note says that Matthiessen's instincts were correct, and the route Matthiessen suggested to get to the pass could have taken them to their destination in two hours rather than two days. Matthiessen is annoyed. As the day begins to fade, the rest of the party has no choice but to camp until daybreak. The trek continues to be difficult with deep snow drifts and more snow blindness. Matthiessen and the porters find the steps made by Schaller the day before, and although Matthiessen takes the advice to mark his path, snows will most likely obliterate any markings. The altitude is getting to be too much for Matthiessen as the group reaches 17,000 feet. Carrying 60 pounds worth of lentils on his back makes the trip only more difficult and breathing becomes nearly impossible.

Matthiessen begins to consider what will happen if Schaller does not return. There will be hard decisions that will have to be made considering the descent will require the group to cross icy boulders; the fuel is almost gone, and there is no shelter in case of the storm. The next morning, the party continues and Matthiessen realizes that the ascent, heavy load, and thin air bother him less than snow blindness. The author claims that after being in the elements for so long the glistening snow has cooked his eyes, brains, and head. The porters are also suffering from the same ailment. When the group finally reaches their destination where Schaller is waiting, they are disappointed to discover that there are no more porters.

The last entry in this section is from October 31. Matthiessen claims he is extremely tired. The descent into the next canyon is treacherous, and Schaller warns Matthiessen to move only one thing at a time for fear of avalanche. Something begins to fall, and Matthiessen scrambles to save himself. He slips and starts to slide down the side of the

mountain, but his stave is pushed firmly into the snow and it holds. The porters go ahead to the next village, but Matthiessen and Schaller are too exhausted to go any farther and set up camp.

Part 3: At Crystal Mountain

Part 3: At Crystal Mountain Summary and Analysis

The party stops at Black Pond Camp, just below the Kang Pass. After the sun sets, the party's wet boots turn to blocks of ice. Just before they reach Shey, Matthiessen spots the monastery perched like a fort on top of a bluff. Everything around the monastery is what Matthiessen refers to as "treeless waste." In the West, the group can finally see Crystal Mountain. As the trek continues, Matthiessen realizes that they have crossed the Himalayas from South to North. Fatigue begins to set in. It is November 1.

The group decides to stop at the monastery where they will stay for several days. Many of the buildings are locked as the inhabitants are fearful of strangers. Jang-bu, one of the porters, manages to find the only unlocked building where people could sleep. The building has a small door, which leads into one tiny room. The ceiling is so low that Schaller and Matthiessen must stoop over. The hostess tells Matthiessen that before the snows came there were almost 40 people on the mountain. The woman's husband has the key to the monastery, but will not return for five to 20 days. The group is disappointed that the lama has moved on due to the weather. The men are glad most of the porters have gone and wonder if Tukten and Gyaltzen will remain.

Matthiessen describes Shey and its reclusive inhabitants. The people who live in the area are native Tibetans and Matthiessen notes that their language is reminiscent of the original nomads that settled the area. The writer also talks about Shey Gumpa, the 11th century monastery that is home to the Kagyu sect. The author gives history about the ancient religion and its effect on the region and the residents.

The group spends another day at the monastery. Some of the sherpas are still suffering from snow blindness, but Jang-bu and another go off in search for scraps of firewood. Schaller goes up the side of one of the mountains to observe the bharal. Matthiessen joins Schaller in his search for the blue sheep, and they begin to see tracks of other animals, such as the marmot. Schaller finds droppings of an animal and tries to determine what it is while ruling out mountain foxes. Schaller tells Matthiessen that he sees two snow leopards and then realizes that the animal's tails are too short. As the two men try to decide what they are seeing, Schaller realizes that the animals are wolves. The men are surprised to see wolves in this part of the country and determine that they are timber wolves, which are commonly seen in Alaska. Matthiessen comments that the wolves are surprisingly tame, and although they watch Matthiessen and Schaller the wolves do not approach.

Matthiessen and Schaller watch as the wolves attempt to capture six of the blue sheep and fail. Matthiessen describes a rare species of the blue sheep called Caprini. Much of what is known about this particular sheep has been uncovered by hunters. Much to Schaller's delight it appears the rutting season has begun. It is extremely rare to witness the sheep's behavior during this time of year. Unlike many animals, the sheep tend to



stay in packs and the rams are sociable. Schaller can't help wondering about the scarcity of the juvenile sheep, as it is known that only 50% of the lambs will survive; just over 30% will grow into maturity.

Because of the conditions, the party is forced to spend 12 hours per day in their tents on the monastery's campus. The activity of the Caprini has made Schaller completely happy. Matthiessen agrees that Shey has been worth the journey. As night falls Matthiessen grows concerned about the possibility of snow across the mountains at the Kang Pass. It appears to be snowing, yet Schaller does not seem to be concerned.

The sherpas return from getting food and firewood and tell Matthiessen and Schaller that the path they created coming up the mountain has disappeared, and the locals say that their planned route is blocked by snow drifts. There is a trail open to the east of the Shey Pass, but the party does not have permits to travel through the region. Schaller talks of passing by the police post during the night, but everybody knows that it would be too difficult to get past the post and remain unnoticed by the dogs that are routinely present. Matthiessen talks about the small game, groups of birds and yaks that live in the area, although they remain mostly unseen.

The group begins to hike around Crystal Mountain and has a good view of the Black Canyon. For some reason, the site of the Black River makes Matthiessen uneasy. Schaller stumbles on the ledges and comments that the atmosphere is causing depression and clumsiness. Schaller believes he might be coming down with a cold. Matthiessen is on the opposite end of the spectrum, and steps easily and lightly. Jang-bu brings great news that the group will not have to encounter any police as they travel to the next station. As Matthiessen spends more time on the mountainside, he realizes that he has great love for Crystal Mountain and does not want to leave. Matthiessen claims to be bewitched by Crystal Mountain and begins to believe that in some other lifetime, these mountains were his home.

Matthiessen and Schaller remain at the monastery, while Tukten and Gyaltzen go into the village to get mail and supplies. The men return early having had the benefit of good weather. Gyaltzen arrives first and tells the men about "bad trouble" on the journey. Along the way Tukten gets drunk and devised a plan to take off to India with money that was most likely in the party's mail. The two men get into a fight. The sherpas had warned Matthiessen and Schaller about Tukten from the beginning. Yet when Tukten reappears, all is well and nothing is said about the incident. Matthiessen stows away his mail and waits to read it until he gets to the next destination or back to Kathmandu.

Jang-bu and Matthiessen go to meet the lama of Shey. The lama seems glad to meet Matthiessen and Jang-bu, although they arrive without the traditional gift of a white ceremonial scarf. Jang-bu translates as the lama tells of the history of the area. Matthiessen and Schaller continue to watch the bharal closely every day. Schaller decides to camp outside in hopes of photographing a snow leopard. Because the leopard is so aware of its surroundings, Schaller must go alone. After Schaller leaves, the sherpas gather round and have lengthy conversations. The men tried to include Matthiessen in their circle but after a while, Matthiessen returns to the notes he has



taken over the last several days. The author comments that there are very few times when he looks at Tukten that the sherpa is not watching him. Tukten has yellow Mongol eyes, and there's something about him that leads Matthiessen to believe that perhaps in a former life the sherpa has been a snow leopard, or one of the blue sheep that live on the slopes of Shey.

Schaller returns from his night of tracking the snow leopard. There are fresh footprints in the snow that seemed to disappear shortly before the location of Schaller's camera. Schaller tells Matthiessen that although they cannot see the snow leopard, there is no doubt that the great cat is watching them. As Matthiessen watches the blue sheep, he begins to feel restless and thinks about the letters in his rucksack. The author feels homesick and begins thinking about many things, such as being clean and warm. As the author walks around, his foot slips on the ledge. Matthiessen reminds himself that when he is on the mountainside, there must be complete attention and focus on the activity at hand.

Matthiessen and Schaller seem to be putting an end to the journey in their minds. Schaller is worried that the data he has collected will be insufficient.

Part 4: The Way Home

Part 4: The Way Home Summary and Analysis

Matthiessen and Schaller part company. Neither man knows what to say as the experience has been indescribable and is something that will be remembered for the rest of their lives. Matthiessen, Tukten and Dawa stop in a small village, where they are to spend the night. For the first time since September, the men have meat in the form of goat stew. As Matthiessen and the sherpas travel toward Raka, the weather becomes bitterly cold. Matthiessen wants to keep going, as there is plenty of daylight left, but one of the new guides insists that the people in the region are hostile and the journey must wait until the next day.

Along the way Dawa becomes sick and Matthiessen learns that the man has been suffering from dysentery as well as internal bleeding. Matthiessen is worried and knows that Dawa should rest, although being in the mountains does not allow it. The group finally reaches Murwa where Dawa can rest. Near the party's campsite there are several red tents belonging to a Japanese mountain climbing expedition. Matthiessen is ambivalent about the presence of the other group. Although the author is glad to see other people in that it may provide help for Dawa, part of him is not prepared to reenter the modern world. There is a doctor among the expedition who examines Dawa. The condition is dysentery, which is highly contagious. The doctor gives medication to Dawa and a lesser dose to the others to prevent the spread of the affliction.

Matthiessen knows that as they descend the mountain there will no longer be a chance to see a snow leopard. The local people tell a story of how a snow leopard has killed a yak. Matthiessen begins to feel revived as the party reaches lower altitudes. Matthiessen goes ahead and waits for Tukten to catch up and worries about the absence of the sherpas, but Tukten arrives at nightfall. The party stops and stays in a village. Matthiessen is beginning to feel the effects of the altitude change and becomes annoyed by the lateness of the sherpas. Matthiessen remembers the importance of not moving too abruptly or speaking too much as the body re-acclimates to the altitude and conditions. Dawa is feeling better and is taking advantage of the fact that Tukten has relieved him of much of the heavy gear.

Although the descent is on the most gradual path the party has been on since the beginning of the journey, Matthiessen begins to have strange aches and pains in his knee. As the author tries to accommodate the injured knee, more pains appear elsewhere. Traveling alone, Matthiessen is worried about the presence of dogs as he approaches the next campsite of small huts. Without any ceremony, Tukten is waiting for Matthiessen to take him the rest of the way.

At night around the fire, Matthiessen, Jang-bu, Dawa and Tukten discuss the yeti. Tukten claims to have heard the sound of the yeti. Tukten claims that the yeti is more of a man creature than a monkey creature. Tukten claims he has never seen a yeti, but



that his grandfather had seen one. Matthiessen thinks it is strange when Tukten says, "I think yeti is a Buddhist." Tukten offers no explanation for strange remark.

Tukten and Matthiessen walk the last few miles into Jumla, where they will catch a plane the next afternoon that will take them into Kathmandu. Once in a village, Matthiessen and Tukten stock up on food and drink. Matthiessen is surprised at the large number of people who approach Tukten to renew his acquaintance. In spite of the sherpa's odd behavior and Matthiessen's impressions of him, it seems Tukten has made a great number of friends. The altitude continues to wreak havoc on Matthiessen, who feels like he is falling and can't catch his breath.

Once at the airport, the men feel a sense of awkwardness and shyness with each other now that they are back in civilization. The inspection by the police is done quickly and easily because the man is a friend of Tukten. Matthiessen pays the sherpas for their hard work and loyalty, giving Tukten an extra bonus as he had evolved into the role of head sherpa. Matthiessen and the sherpas part company. There is some strange thread that runs between Matthiessen and Tukten, although it cannot be defined. It is snowing and Matthiessen wonders if Schaller is still on Crystal Mountain. Tukten and Matthiessen make plans to meet in four days at the home of Tukten's aunt. Matthiessen checks into a hotel where he will stay until his flight out of Nepal. The room the author has been waiting for turns out to be cold and there is no hot water. Matthiessen also discovers that India Airlines is on strike and no one knows when a flight will be available.

Matthiessen shares notes from letters that he receives from Schaller, dated December 8th and 9th. There is a blizzard and the porters have abandoned Schaller. One porter has offered to stay but has demanded to be paid in advance. Schaller is suspicious but has no choice. Shortly after, the porter purposely injures himself so he cannot go on. Although the group has thrown away almost everything except that which is absolutely necessary, Schaller claims that the packs are still extremely heavy. At one time Schaller falls into the water and is soaking wet from the chest down. As the Schaller and his group emerge from a canyon at one of the places the party had been in late October, a snow leopard appears in Schaller's path. The paw prints of a second leopard are found nearby, and because there are only supposed to be six leopards in the entire region, Schaller assumes that the animals are breeding and is pleased.

Schaller arrives in Kathmandu in mid-December. There is news of a conflict between the Nepalese and the Kham-pas. As a result, the Land of Dolpo is once again closed to foreigners. While Matthiessen is making his way through the city of Patan, he encounters Dawa and some of the other porters. There is a short-lived but joyous reunion. Matthiessen goes to the Kathmandu Valley to meet Tukten as the men had arranged. Tukten said he would be staying in his aunt's house in the village. Because Matthiessen has no idea which house belongs to Tukten's aunt, he walks through the streets shouting Tukten's name. No one in the area has ever heard of a sherpa named Tukten.



Characters

Peter Matthiessen

Peter Matthiessen (1927 -) is a well known writer from New York City. Matthiessen is a novelist; however, is best known for non-fiction works, particularly those detailing Native American history including "In the Spirit of Crazy Horse." Matthiessen's career is long and varied. In 1953, the author was one of the co-founders of The Paris Review, a noted literary journal. Matthiessen was also the Official Author of New York State from 1995-1997. It is generally assumed that Matthiessen's research work on oceanography, titled "Blue Meridian," was the impetus for Peter Benchley's mega-hit "Jaws."

The inspiration for "Snow Leopard" came from Matthiessen's journey through the Himalayas with noted scientist George Schaller. Schaller was intensely interested in recording data on the rarely seen mating rituals of the bharal, the Himalayan blue sheep that was actually a cross between the traditional sheep and goat. Additionally, Schaller sought to capture data and photographs of the snow leopard, a rare and mystical cat that he had seen more than twenty-five years previously.

Although Matthiessen was interested in the bharal and the snow leopard, the author's reasons for taking the two-month long journey were unclear. Matthiessen and Schaller barely knew one another, and Matthiessen professed that even he did not know why he chose to take the journey. Perhaps the author's Zen nature, added to the grief caused by the loss of his wife, spurred him onward.

Matthiessen and his wife, Deborah, had a tumultuous relationship that was finally resolved in a staunch commitment to each other shortly before her death in 1972. Throughout the journey, Matthiessen speaks of Deborah, remembering places and events while struggling against melancholy. The journey over the Tibetan Plateau and over the Himalayas was exhausting and exhilarating for both Matthiessen and Schaller. Matthiessen never managed to see a snow leopard but still embraced the trek completely.

George Schaller

Dr. George Schaller (1933 -) is considered to be the world's preeminent field biologist and naturalist. Born in Germany, Schaller moved to the U.S. as an adult and settled in Missouri. Not long after, Schaller began his life-long series of journeys to remote lands to study the habits of various animals in the world, recording data heretofore unavailable to the scientific and modern communities. Schaller's subjects include the Himalayan bharal, the snow leopard, Giant Panda, and the big cats of Africa. Among other places, Schaller has lived in Tanzania on the Serengeti, in central Africa, Tibet, Laos, and Brazil, where he performed much field work on various animals including the jaguar and the



Tibetan red deer. In Central Africa, Schaller lived among the famed mountain gorillas, laying the groundbreaking research for other biologists such as Dian Fossey.

Schaller's list of accomplishments is long and illustrious. In "Snow Leopard," Schaller was the organizer of the trip to Nepal where he and author Peter Matthiessen traveled over the Himalayas and into Dolpo in the inner part of the country. Schaller had a lifetime fascination with the Himalayan bharal and was determined to get data on the rare animal's mating rituals during the autumnal rutting season. Additionally, Schaller hoped to repeat his performance of seeing the elusive snow leopard. Schaller is one of only two westerners to have seen the snow leopard in the wild.

Tukten

Tukten is one of the porters that accompanied Matthiessen and Schaller on the trip. Tukten is a mysterious man who seems to have a fluctuating personality and is deemed suspicious by the other porters and the senior sherpas. However, Tukten proves himself to the party and becomes head sherpa, remaining on the dangerous journey until the end.

Dawa

Dawa is a young man who serves as one of the porters.

Jang-bu

Dawa is one of the porters.

Gyaltsen

Gyaltsen is a young man who serves as one of the porters.

Siddhartha Gautama

Siddhartha Gautama is the ancient holy mendicant who became the Buddha.

Sherpas

Sherpas are men usually barefoot, who make their living by carrying loads of up to 80 pounds into the Himalayas.



Mongols

The Mongols are the predominant inhabitants of the villages along Matthiessen and Schaller's trek.

Lama

A lama is a holy man of the Hindu religion.

Deborah Matthiessen

Deborah Matthiessen is Peter Matthiessen's wife who died of cancer in 1972.



Objects/Places

Nepal

Nepal a country where the Snow Leopard is located. The expedition treks into the Himalayas which sit in the northwest corner of the country. The country is located in Southeast Asia, bordered by China and India. The majority of the highest mountains in the world are located in Nepal, including Mt. Everest.

Matthiessen and Schaller are fascinated by the culture of Nepal, particularly the diversity of its people. There are various religions in the country, predominantly Hindu and Buddhist. Nepal has a deeply-rooted religious history that forms much of its culture. The country was home to Siddhartha Gautama, an ancient holy mendicant, who eventually became the much revered Buddha.

There is a definite caste system and the ranking of the peoples often leads to conflict. At the time the book was written, Nepal was ruled by a monarchy. This often made the attainment of government travel documents difficult and non-negotiable. Steep fines or imprisonment were consequences of violating the required travel permits and were a cause for concern for the party when snow drifts blocked their planned route.

The terrain of Nepal is also quite varied, from the mountainous regions to the lush plains and valleys. The temperature is unpredictable, ranging from hot and humid with monsoon rains to snowy, bitter cold.

Kathmandu

Kathmandu is the capital city of Nepal, as well as being its largest city. Kathmandu is by far the country's most developed city and has the largest population, with approximately 700,000 residents. The city is located in a valley far below the peaks of its highly celebrated mountains. Kathmandu is also the center of government for Nepal and houses the royal palace. Because the palace is no longer home to the country's monarch it holds slightly less significance, although all the ancient architecture in Kathmandu is celebrated for its beauty and history.

Nepal is well known as having one of the worst problems with erosion in the world. The country is often plagued by high winds, snows, monsoon rains, and pollution. Although the city itself is quite ancient, having been first written about as early as 185 A.D., many of its structures and landmarks have been damaged or destroyed due to harsh weather.

In Snow Leopard, Kathmandu is the starting point of the journey and the location where Matthiessen and Schaller meet. Although the city is modernized, it is still below the standard of much of the modern world. When Matthiessen returns to the city after spending two months in the Himalayas, he is surprised to be put into a hotel room with



little heat and no hot water. Regardless, the city holds its own charm in its individual sectors with interesting houses and streets filled with vendors selling their wares.

New York City, New York

New York City is home to Peter Matthiessen.

Serengeti

Serengeti wildlife reserve in Tanzania is one of the many places in which Schaller has lived and studied animals in the wild.

Crystal Mountain

Crystal Mountain - The final stop on the journey and most likely the home of the snow leopard. Also the location of the remote Crystal Monastery.

Pokhara

Pokhara - one of the main stops early in the journey. Pokhara is located in the foothills in Nepal.

Crystal Monastery

Crystal Monastery - location of the lama and place where the party camps for several days on Crystal Mountain.

Varanasi

Varanasi - village in Nepal that offers human misery, spicy food, Hindus in white turbans, and extreme poverty. An ancient city that was once the home of Siddhartha.

Kusma

Kusma - a large Hindu village near the Kali Gandaki River.

Darbang

Darbang - the main village in the Magyandi valley.



Themes

Zen Buddhism

Matthiessen and his wife Deborah were devout Zen Buddhists. Zen Buddhism is an ancient religion dating back to the 7th century in China. A great deal of the doctrine is ascribed to the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama an ancient, holy mendicant who became the Buddha.

In Zen Buddhism, there is much focus on the practice of meditation, which is said to bring enlightenment, peace, and the fulfillment of one's connection with the greater good. Buddhists believe each person has its own God source and is capable of attaining enlightenment. Unlike many traditional religions, Zen Buddhism does not distinguish between birth, life, death, and the hereafter. All things are related and cyclical. The transition between the various stages of life is simply a move between planes of existence and seemingly negative experiences, such as death, should be no cause for sorrow.

Additionally, unlike traditional religions, the spiritual leader never truly dies. The enlightenment attained by the Buddha is transferred upon death, much like that of the Dalai Lama. Matthiessen's practice of Zen Buddhism gives him a great sense of peace even during the most difficult times in the journey. It is Matthiessen's belief in the cyclical nature of existence that allows him to believe that he once lived in the Himalayas.

Rare creatures

A great deal of "Snow Leopard" revolves around the location and data regarding rare creatures. Of these rare creatures, two are in the forefront - the snow leopard and the Himalayan bharal. The snow leopard is a great white cat that resides mainly in the Himalayas on the side closest to Nepal. The cat is extremely wily and rarely seen, even when it is obvious that it is in the vicinity. George Schaller is only one of two westerners who have ever seen the snow leopard in its natural habitat.

The Himalayan bharal is also known as the "blue sheep," although it is technically a rare cross between the sheep and the goat. The bharal tend to live in the highest part of the Himalayas and are amazing agile on the slippery cliffs and ledges, a fact which makes them difficult for predators to catch. Schaller is intent on capturing data of the bharal in rutting season, as there is little known about the animal and its social habits.

Schaller has a life-long dedication to studying rare animals in the wild, such as the great cats of Africa, the Giant Panda of China, the jaguar and alligators of Brazil, the warty pig of Laos, and the mountain gorillas first recorded and made famous by Dian Fossey.

Naturally, the Himalayan trip pays homage to the Yeti, the mythical creature that is also referred to as the Abominable Snowman. Surprisingly, Schaller gives credence to the



existence of the creature, although not the myth that surrounds it. The animal is said to be the size of an adolescent boy. Tukten claims his grandfather has seen many yetis in his lifetime and claims that they are more like monkeys than men. Schaller claims that while the rumors are most likely nonsense, it is quite possible that a creature unknown to modern man does live in the mountains.

Nepalese people

The Nepalese people's heritage tends to lean toward the Mongols. In general, the people are relatively poor and live in villages that offer little in the way of what is considered to be as modern comfort. Although there is extreme poverty, Matthiessen says that the people still manage to maintain a sense of happiness and hope, unlike those in similar conditions in Calcutta. This may be due in part to the great number of people who practice Buddhism or Hinduism, as those religions do not believe in acknowledging lack or mortal desires.

The most experience Matthiessen and Schaller have with the Nepalese people are with the porters and sherpas hired to accompany them on the trek through the Himalayas. The porters are guides that hire themselves out to take mountain expeditions into the Himalayas. The porters tend to be young men who are capable of hauling gear and serving as scouts. Sherpas are an interesting group. Sherpas are people raised in the high altitudes of the Himalayas and who make their careers by serving as guides and senior porters. The sherpas are trained to be able to carry loads up to 80 pounds over the treacherous mountain paths and can survive in the most frigid and brutal conditions. They also have a genetic adaptation that enables them to easily adapt to high altitudes.

Porters and sherpas tend to be very poorly equipped for the treks according to western standards. The men often wear layers of tattered and ragged clothing and are commonly barefoot, despite the bitter cold and unpredictable terrain.



Style

Perspective

Peter Matthiessen is able to offer a great deal of objective perspective on the trek in "Snow Leopard" due to his illustrious background and scientific experience. As an avid hiker, Matthiessen is less likely to succumb to some of the rigors of the trip, although the bitter cold and rugged terrain take a definite toll, even on the sherpas and porters who make their living by making these journeys on a regular basis.

Matthiessen's take on the journey shows his background as a prolific novelist and non-fiction author. The descriptions of the scenery, terrain, weather, people and wildlife give a clear picture to the reader about the crux of the trek and how it affected each of the people present during the journey into, over and out of the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau.

Matthiessen is well known for his work on tribal cultures such as the Native Americans and offers rare insight into every aspect of the Nepalese culture, from the lives of the villagers to those of the lamas and residents of holy institutions such as the Crystal Mountain Monastery.

Matthiessen does turn to subjectivity when it comes to his personal experiences on the trek. The previous year, Matthiessen lost his wife Deborah to cancer and grief often colors the author's perception of his surroundings.

Tone

The tone of "Snow Leopard" is quite varied. Because the book is written in the first person from Peter Matthiessen's point of view, the tone exhibits a combination of the author's expertise as a researcher and his personal experience and observations gained throughout the trip.

The prologue has an air of accomplishment and objectivity regarding the experience, one which clearly changed the author's views on many things from grief to personal triumph to the attainment of enlightenment.

The first part of the book, "Westward," details the impetus and the beginning of the author's trek from New York to Kathmandu and beyond. Matthiessen exhibits an air of excitement and anticipation.

The second part, "Northward", begins to show the wear and tear that the trip is taking on the author and other members of the group, and the tone reflects a slight waning of enthusiasm.



The third part, "At Crystal Mountain," has a tone that shows the depths of the personal changes in Matthiessen as he deals with grief and the presence of mind found in the mountains.

The fourth and final part, "The Way Home," is decidedly different in tone. In some ways, the author is grateful to return to civilization, warmth, and a real bed. In most ways, however, Matthiessen is saddened by having to leave the mountains.

Structure

"Snow Leopard" by Peter Matthiessen is a non-fiction book detailing the author's trip into the Himalayas to search for the elusive mountain cat known as the snow leopard.

The book is separated into four parts plus the prologue. The shortest part is the Prologue, which is 7 pages in length. The longest part is "Northward," which is 112 pages in length. The average length of all the parts is 64 pages. The total number of pages in "Snow Leopard" is 322 pages plus an additional 9 pages in acknowledgments, field notes, and an index.

The first section, "Westward," is dedicated to the beginning of the trip from New York to Kathmandu and into the first part of the journey toward Crystal Mountain. The second section, "Northward," is dedicated to finding a new path northward after snows block the intended path of the expedition. The third section, "At Crystal Mountain," details the arrival and stay at the Crystal Mountain Monastery, the main destination point on the trip. The fourth section, "The Way Home," recounts the last leg of the journey, Matthiessen's personal reflections on the experience and the return to Kathmandu. Overall, the text in the book is easy to read for the layman and refrains from using scientific or metaphysical terms.



Quotes

"Through a shaft of sun moves a band of Magar women, scarlet-shawled; they wear heavy brass ornaments in the left nostril."

13

"Down mountain fields, a path of stones flows like mercury in the sunlight; even the huts have roofs of silver slates."

24

"How easy it feels to be superfluous on this expedition, in no haste and without gainful destination - gnaskor, or "going around places," as pilgrimages are described in Tibet."

27

"These simple and uneducated men comport themselves with the wise calm of monks, and their well-being is in no way separable from their religion."

34

"Most poets know about these pangs of loss, and here and there in my prose readings, strange passages would leap like unicorns out of the page."

43

"That year I was a new student of Zen, expecting nothing, and almost another year had passed before something said by an older student made me realize what had happened."

108

"All but the porters have lost interest in us quickly, now that it's clear just how and where money will be made."

145

"Now, halfway around the world, as tears freeze at the corners of my eyes, I hear strange sounds, a yelping like a lonely mountain fox, and a moment later burst out laughing, thinking how D herself would laugh at an idea so delicious as wailing with lost love in the snow mountains."

169

"In a dream, I am walking joyfully up the mountain. Something breaks and falls away,



and all is light. Nothing has changed, yet all is amazing, luminescent, free."
176

"Sunrise, illuminating my thin tent, transforms it from an old refuse bag of brown plastic to a strange womblike balloon. True, it remains a wretched tenant, stained, raggedy, and sagging, yet I find I have grown fond of it, for it is home."
219

"I meditate for the last time on this mountain that is bare, though others all around are white with snow. Like the bare peak of the Koan, this one is not different from myself."
257

"Without ever attempting to speak about it, we perceive life in the same way, or rather, I perceive it in the way that Tutken lives it."
316

Topics for Discussion

Do you think Matthiessen ever figured out the true reason for going on the journey with Schaller?

Would Matthiessen have gone on the trip if Deborah was still alive? Discuss.

Why do you think the other sherpas had such distrust of Tukten?

Do you think it was a difficult decision for Matthiessen to leave his young son to go on the journey?

What might have happened to Dawa if the group hadn't met up with the Japanese doctor?

Was Schaller justified in being angry with the sherpas for their lack of dedication? Explain.

Why do you think Tukten gave Matthiessen false information on their planned meeting after arriving in Kathmandu?