

The Tracker Study Guide

The Tracker by Tom Brown (naturalist)

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Plot Summary

As a young man, Tom Brown, Junior, loves to be out in the woods. He especially loves finding clues to what is going on with the wildlife in the woods. He is blessed with the perfect opportunity to learn everything he wants when he makes a best friend in grade school, a boy named Rick who has a wonderful grandfather called Stalking Wolf, an Apache Indian. Rick and Tom both call Stalking Wolf "Grandfather," and the elder has a wonderful way of teaching the boys how to understand the woods, and how to survive and even thrive in conditions that many would call hostile.

The story takes place in the Pine Barrens, a wild and desolate area in New Jersey. As Brown points out, most people consider the Pine Barrens to be dangerous and frightening territory, mainly because it is so unpredictable and wild. However, with Grandfather's training, Tom and Rick learn to navigate the Pine Barrens as easily as many people move around in their own homes. Even when threatened with severe weather, packs of wild dogs, or hunger and thirst, the boys learn to use excellent wilderness skills to master the challenges of the Pine Barrens. To Tom Brown, it is the ideal way of growing up. He admits that if his parents were to know how far he travels during these years, and through what risks, they will have been horrified.

Stalking Wolf teaches the boys how to walk invisibly and silently in the woods, how to build warm, cozy shelters in the worst of weather, how to capture, dress and prepare game, and how never to get lost. This book reveals so many of Grandfather's lessons through Tom Brown's eyes and experiences. Some of the stories are almost impossible to believe, as when Tom hunts and kills a deer with only a knife, tracking and sneaking up on the animal undetected. Finally, when as a young man Rick leaves, Tom spends a whole summer by himself in the woods, just like Thoreau.

After this summer, Tom realizes that he has transformed into a man with powerful tracking skills. He undertakes the great challenge set forth early in the book, where Grandfather describes sneaking up on a bear, smacking it in the tail, and escaping unhurt. Tom survives attacks from wild dogs, evidently a terrible risk in the Barrens, several times in the book. Finally, Tom emerges as a compassionate man who uses his skills to help track people who have been lost or hurt in the Barrens.

The Ultimate Track and Go and Ask the Mice

The Ultimate Track and Go and Ask the Mice Summary

The Ultimate Track

Tracking is compared to following a string. The first clue is at one end, and at the other end a creature leaves clues. Following the "mystery" along the string is what draws the tracker along. Brown has been interested in such mysteries since childhood; he never goes in a straight line, but follows the lure of tracks. Brown has been an observer since he was eight, but he begins to study tracking seriously when he meets Stalking Wolf, the grandfather of Brown's best friend Rick.

Stalking Wolf teaches Brown and Rick incrementally, and in doing so, teaches them how to learn, rather than just giving them information. Stalking Wolf feels that Brown has a gift for stalking, but it will take him twenty years to learn the nuances of tracking. Brown learns how tracks dissolve, how time passes by watching tracks. He and Rick are also interested in the skulls of animals, skulls being the last track a creature leaves.

Brown's family lives near the Pine Barrens, an area is so wild and remote that there are parts of it where no human has set foot. Brown meets Rick early in his wanderings as both seek fossils. They know they are going to be friends and eventually, brothers.

Stalking Wolf is very old, and at first Brown thinks he may be senile because he seems to lose track of the present. However, Stalking Wolf listens with all his heart and soul, and that can take him away from the present. He does this "to see better," as he says to the boys. He teaches the two boys to harmonize themselves with nature, as for example learning to be so still that birds come and peck seeds out of their hands.

The two boys learn to patiently observe the world around them. They know how to track so well that by the time they are in their mid-teens, they can find their way easily and never get lost in the complex Pine Barrens. They learn to watch the tracks of people who pass and to make inferences about them. The boys make footprints themselves and watch as they age. Their education is fascinating and unique.

Go and Ask the Mice

Stalking Wolf teaches little by words. He teaches the boys that if they pay attention to just the little details, they will miss a great deal. Stalking Wolf tells them about the various reactions of the animals around them to the recently hardened track they've been watching. When the boys question how anyone can know how other animals feel about a particular track, Stalking Wolf tells them that they really don't look.

Stalking Wolf knows everything that's going on, even when he is asleep. Brown feels that Stalking Wolf is spiritually attuned as well as physically attuned, but he has, as well, an incisive intellect and an amazing ability to see and remember details, even peripheral details.

Brown points out that even in learning the patterns of mice helps you know "the spirit that moves through all things" and that it is "good medicine." Stalking Wolf shows Brown that in tracking, he can be tracked if he doesn't pay attention, teaching him to be aware of all things going on, all things at once. In this way, they can even track at a run or even from a vehicle.

During tracking trips, Grandfather will sometimes purposefully remove food, matches, or knives so the boys can learn to survive without tools. Grandfather also teaches them to build the warmest sleeping structure imaginable out of pine boughs and old, dry pine needles. He tells stories of tracking deer; not to eat, but to be able to brush the deer as it passes by. He tells them of bear smacking, where a young warrior sneaks up on a bear and smacks it on the tail, running hard to escape afterward. Brown wants to try it, and hints that he gets close later in life.

The Ultimate Track and Go and Ask the Mice Analysis

This first chapter reveals the essential nature of Tom Brown's character, that he is curious about things he calls "mysteries." The most interesting mysteries for Brown growing up exist in nature. Even as a little boy of seven or eight, he likes to go outside and see things. He loves to find animal skulls and he wonders about the creatures. As a child, Brown roams the creek bed looking for fossils, and this search brings him one of his greatest gifts, his best friend Rick. Brown knows that this boy is an Indian. Brown catalogs Rick's great strength as a patient observer and stalker, and he also notes that he himself, Tom Brown, is less a stalker than Rick but is more a tracker.

At first, the reader must think that the stories even in this first chapter cannot be true. Tom Brown has almost unlimited freedom as he grows up roaming the woods. He points out that he tells his parents that he is spending time with Rick, but that if his parents could know the real truth about his venturing, they would be afraid and would not allow him to roam. Perhaps Brown's wanderings are more possible during the time he grows up, while now, in the present, times are more dangerous and such lengthy adventures in the woods would not be permitted to the modern child.

This chapter gives a strong sense of the extensive time and patience, the unending diligent observation, it takes to follow creatures in the wild. Brown himself admits that it takes about twenty years to become a good tracker, even though he also admits that he has a natural gift for it. The most prominent characteristic of being such a tracker is an insatiable curiosity. Where some people might enjoy having a look at a Junco in winter, Tom observes the tracks and wing marks at length, making conclusions, and then following what he knows to see if his conclusions are correct. He likes to look at various Juncos to add to his understanding.

Grandfather already knows deeply about these things, but he does not lecture or explain to the boys. He just casually mentions that a rabbit or raccoon has passed by, and the boys are consumed by passion to know, and astonished that they missed these things. They voraciously follow every hint that Grandfather gives them. Grandfather comes across as the ultimate wise Indian parent and grandparent, using humor and restraint to train young trackers and hunters.

Brown and Rick like to look up animals and birds in nature guides, and they like to sketch the skulls they find. This reveals a strong intellectual aspect to their training. The boys believe they need to be strong and heroic to be trackers, and they engage in personal training as well as long hours running around in the woods, so they are strong, as they believe an Indian warrior should be. This is a healthy way to grow up not only physically but also emotionally.

The anecdotes about watching footprints fade again gives that seamless, timeless view into a childhood that seems unhampered by time constraints. Although Brown mentions going to school, it is clear that his nature school with Grandfather is his real education.

Go and Ask the Mice

This chapter links the important physical skills of tracking with the less-obvious spiritual awareness necessary to be a good tracker. The chapter shows how Grandfather Stalking Wolf is spare and restrained in speaking to the boys, but he is very committed to their education. He often goes out with the boys to teach them various skills, and even takes away essential tools for camping so the boys can learn to survive without bringing along anything, even a knife.

With the simple command, "Go and ask the mice," Grandfather Stalking Wolf helps the boys understand that everything is connected to everything else. Grandfather Stalking Wolf wants the boys to know that they can understand much about the Great Horned Owl by learning what it feeds upon, and knowing about the mice will teach the boys about the many other creatures interrelated to the mice. Brown starts his interpretation of Grandfather Stalking Wolf's teachings as spiritual in this chapter. Here he mentions good medicine, and that everything is made up of spirit as well as matter.

In this chapter, Grandfather Stalking Wolf's sense of humor is revealed. He receives the funny story of Brown being followed by the very deer he was tracking and furthers it by actually sneaking up behind Brown when the boy thinks the old man is still ahead of him. The boys learn to set snares and catch food when there is nothing to eat, but eventually Grandfather Stalking Wolf shows them how to set a snare that is so good, it will catch an animal first try. Grandfather Stalking Wolf can see animals to hunt when the boys cannot, but he never kills anything unless it is absolutely necessary for food. He prefers to stalk things and just look or maybe touch, showing great skill. This reveals the spiritual nature of his respect for all life.

With the story of smacking the bear, Grandfather Stalking Wolf presents an almost unattainable challenge, that of sneaking up on a bear, which can be very dangerous

when angry, and smacking it, then running away. Grandfather Stalking Wolf says that a friend did it when Grandfather Stalking Wolf was young, but that he was killed. Brown hints that he will get his chance later in life.

Good Medicine Cabin and Quick Mud

Good Medicine Cabin and Quick Mud Summary

Good Medicine Cabin

In order to go out in the woods tracking, each boy tells his parents that he is at the other boy's house, which usually works. They sneak out to go tracking in the Pine Barrens, which they use as a gigantic schoolroom. They find insects, animal parts, skulls, and so on, and compare them against resource books in the library. Eventually Brown earns some money to buy the Peterson Guides to nature, and carries a lab kit wherever he goes.

Stalking Wolf is there on the day they discover the eventual place for the cabin they build, the Good Medicine Cabin. Brown concludes that good medicine is anything so memorable that it just has to come from a holy source, which he terms the spirit-that-moves-through-all-things, an American Indian term. With rudimentary tools, the boys finish the cabin when they are about eleven years old. The cabin keeps them safe when they are once attacked by a pack of wild dogs.

At age ten, Brown is attacked by a dog, which he kills with a knife. He strings the dog's backbones into a necklace, to remind him of the power of the experience, but still will flash back to that horrible attack.

Quick Mud

The Good Medicine Cabin is located by a swamp and a stream, where the boys build a bridge and observation platform. The boys find great enjoyment observing their environment. The railing once breaks as Rick leans on it, dropping him into a pocket of thick mud. The boys try everything they can think of to get him out. Brown finally figures out how to break the suction and Rick goes free.

Stalking Wolf has told the boys that nature will never hurt them as long as they stay calm, do not panic, and go with the flow. The boys reenact the scenario and free themselves from the sucking mud. Covered with mud and twigs, they return to town, but hardly anyone pays them any attention because they are also trapped, but not in mud. The people in the world are trapped by lack of curiosity, trapped by life circumstances. Brown thinks it is better to be trapped in mud than in such a life.

Good Medicine Cabin and Quick Mud Analysis

This story chronicles a child's favorite dream, building a special house and shelter far out in the woods, a special place just for boys, although of course Grandfather Stalking Wolf is welcome anytime. The boys choose the site for this hut/shelter/cabin by seeking an omen, a sign of good medicine, which Tom carefully defines in this chapter by calling



it something that is so good, so beautiful, and so meaningful, that it must be from a higher source, which he called the spirit-that-moves-through-all-things. It takes a long time for these boys, ten and turning eleven, to build the house, and they insulate and strengthen it well. They build a round door, after the American Indian symbolism of the circle of life. When it is done, they sit around and celebrate the occasion, but they have forgotten to keep an eye out on all things around them, as Grandfather Stalking Wolf has taught them.

The Pine Barrens are full of wild dogs that follow their own special trails, just as deer follow a deer track. These dogs may have strayed from homes or even have been abandoned in the barrens by thoughtless masters. They most certainly have inbred with each other. There is not a lot to eat out in the wilderness, so the dogs are always hungry, and they are lean, powerful, and muscular. They are also huge, and seem almost bigger than boys themselves. The dogs have sneaked up on the boys as they eat meat sandwiches in celebration of finishing their cabin. Tom figures out what to do, grabbing a burning firebrand and throwing it at the dogs. The boys run full speed into the house, sealing the door shut as the dogs fling themselves at the cabin, trying to get to the boys.

This experience causes a flashback for Brown, who a year before has been attacked by a wild dog, when he is only ten. He wants to gather a perfect skull specimen that lies on a dog track. He knows it is a dog track but does not pay enough attention to the tension in the air, indicating that a dog is lying in wait. The dog attacks him and bites him right through the lip. Tom has a knife and eventually fights off the dog and kills it, but the experience causes fear and nightmares for a long time after.

Brown and Rick must always pay attention to wild dogs, especially those that are fed intermittently by a local, Mr. Blanchard. He does not tame these dogs but by feeding them, he keeps them hanging around his house. The dogs will chase the boys a certain distance but always go back to the house. The boys are afraid but devise ways to get around those dogs, which are on the way to their cabin. They are also afraid of another house along the way, a house they say belongs to a witch. Brown acknowledges that their fear may have been just normal childhood fear, but when the boys stalk up to the house one night, the witch surprises them with her seeming magic. They never go back there again.

Quick Mud

This is a very short chapter. The first couple of paragraphs talk about the platform near the stream, how relaxing it is to sit near the stream, and how interesting the wildlife is near the stream. One exciting day, seeing a frog eaten by a pickerel, Rick accidentally breaks the railing of the platform and goes into the water of the stream, which is located near a swamp. The swampy, thick, black mud captures him and he's stuck. It is somewhat like quicksand. No matter what he tries, Rick cannot dislodge himself.

The boys do not give up, even after an hour of trying to get Rick loose. Finally, Brown remembers something he learned from a firefighter who removes a victim from thick

mud. One must break the seal of the mud and then you can get loose. The firefighter uses a fire hose, but Brown figures out that he can use the running stream water to make it work. There are plants, roots, and general muck in the water, which is cold and fast moving, making it risky and difficult to loosen Rick. At last, with perseverance and hard work, Brown gets Rick free.

Contrary to logic that would say to avoid such a circumstance again, the boys realize that they must learn how to handle this situation for later challenges. The next day, they jump right into the very mud hole that traps Rick the previous day. They practice breaking the suction by running a hand down the side of the pants till the suction breaks. They are covered with mud and, as boys will do, they leave the mud on, add to it with some leaves, and wear the mud out to the highway where cars are passing by.

Almost nobody responds to two boys covered in black mud and leaves. Brown points out that these people are lost souls. They cannot see new things, and they do not care to see new things. They are trapped by worldly cares and responsibilities. They live soft. The boys go back and wash themselves off in the cold creek, but Brown says he would rather be cold than numbed by the luxury of a hot tub.

Cold Training and Night Crawl

Cold Training and Night Crawl Summary

Cold Training

Rick and Brown used to bundle up, wearing many layers. To enjoy the beauties of the Pine Barrens, one cannot mind being cold. The boys want to see nature in the winter, and grow used to the cold.

Stalking Wolf invites the boys one New Year's Day to undergo a Rite of Passage for the cold. Clad only in sneakers and cutoffs, the boys go out into the cold. They suffer till they realize one of Stalking Wolf's teachings, that nature will not hurt you if you do not resist it. Brown stops resisting the cold and immediately doesn't suffer from the cold for the rest of his life.

Night Crawl

The summer woods are lively, especially at sunset, and one day the boys observe a Great Blue Heron in the swamp. They begin a walk in the woods and find the tracks of a large rabbit that they want to track, as it gets dark. Stalking Wolf has taught them that tracking an animal in the dark is done by feeling rather than looking. The boys use their skills and come face-to-face with the rabbit, which sets them to laughing, then they decide to follow a deer track by feeling. They find a deer grazing field and lie down in the field. Brown goes into an altered state where he is almost asleep, but still aware of every sound, movement, and activity. This miraculous experience opens a whole new world of other-worldliness as well as "feel tracking." However, feeling a track destroys it, and the boys decide they will not do it so often.

Once, when Rick is away, Brown becomes so focused on tracking a fox that he gets stung in the eyes by blowing snow and becomes snow blind. Although he can't make his way back home while blinded, he provides for himself, including making a fire, until his vision returns and he finds his way home.

Cold Training and Night Crawl Analysis

This is a short and very simple chapter. At first, it is hard to believe that Stalking Wolf can subject the boys to brutal New Jersey weather on New Year's Day. However, the boys have been spending much time in the cold already, and Stalking Wolf turns this experience into ceremony, into a Rite of Passage. Stalking Wolf no doubt went through the same sort of thing as a boy, and he believes that the boys are ready for the experience.

It is easier to believe that the boys venture into the wilderness in the middle of brutal, eastern U.S. winters with several layers of clothing, than to believe they will be sent out

with only cutoffs and sneakers with no socks. However, the boys do it. At first, they walk along trying to be brave, and the image and metaphor of the Cold Wind as their brother, touching their backs, is powerful as it follows through the story. The boys try to be brave but they are getting numb and sore from the cold. Finally, they apply the teaching that Stalking Wolf has given them, that you can thrive in nature if you do not resist it. Their minds change. They do not feel the cold anymore, and Brown comments that they never feel the cold after that.

Night Crawl

This chapter chronicles a potentially lethal situation. Brown is camping by himself because Rick must be away. He is so fascinated, overwhelmed with curiosity, by tracking a fox, which is quite rare to see in the woods, that he allows himself to go snow blind. He thinks this is because snow has blown in his eyes, but in reality, it is like sunburn of the eyes, when the retinas are exposed to too much sunlight, especially ultraviolet light. It is excruciatingly painful.

Brown has never experienced this before but he knows he cannot even open his eyes to travel. He forces himself to crawl around with eyes mostly shut, to gather wood to get through the frozen night. He finally gets enough healing in his eyes, about midnight, to be able to open his eyes in the mild night light and get home.

Most people would be very frightened in this situation, but Brown knows enough about survival to know that he can make it through. He thinks that someone must eventually come looking for him within a few days. He is able to wait it out, having enough food and supplies, as long as he can gather wood to keep warm. However, this is an adventure that most people would like to go without, including Brown.

The Dog Tree and Omen

The Dog Tree and Omen Summary

The Dog Tree

Rick is away for Easter vacation. Brown discovers a tree later known as the Dog Tree. Brown notes that in hindsight he should have seen something was wrong. As Brown is out alone, he makes plans to trap a bass in the river, enjoying all the nature he sees around him. However, he does not notice that dogs are coming up on him. The dogs chase him to a big tree, which he climbs to safety. The dogs do not leave. Although Brown is trapped, he takes the opportunity to examine all that is around him, including ants climbing on the bark, always staying in line. The ants never diverge from their line. Brown thinks that many people are depressingly the same way, then realizes he's the same too, in following established trails.

Brown is trapped on the tree all night by the dogs. In the morning he observes the Alpha dog, trying to figure out how to defeat the dog. However, when he does try to come down, the Alpha dog bites him in the leg. He tries numerous ways to get the dogs to leave, including throwing branches at the dogs, trying to pit the Alpha dog against the Beta dog. After spending another night in the tree, Brown figures out how to escape. He makes a break for it and enters the stream. The current is too fast for the dogs to maneuver. They chase him on the bank, and surround him. He throws rocks at them but they refuse to leave. Finally he floats downriver to the town and takes a bus back home. The boy has won, though it cost him a lot.

Omen

A heroic boy, Brown knows he must go back to his original camp and defend it. He and Rick prepare to fight the dogs. Stalking Wolf observes that Brown looks triumphant, and that there is hope for the boy to become someone "special." He warns the boys to watch for omens.

The boys are ready to fight "the last great battle of the Pines, the Dog Wars," but no dogs show up during the week they wait at the campsite and the Dog Tree. They decide to leave to hunt for fossils in a pit. After finding fossils, they are surprised when the dogs come and jump into the pit with them. With the boys having escaped the pit, but the dogs now trapped, the boys realize that the dogs are simply hungry. They give the dogs their lunch.

Stalking Wolf has said that the dogs are Guardians, keeping away pleasure seekers who might defile the woods with garbage, four-wheeler noise, and over-hunting. The boys figure out how to rescue the dogs by providing them a ledge to jump out of the pit. When the dogs get out of the pit, the boys run, expecting to be attacked. However, the dogs just trot alongside the boys like "nice house dogs." Brown and Rick consider the

dogs' apparent change of heart as an omen, a good-medicine message, something important to notice and learn from.

The Dog Tree and Omen Analysis

This extended adventure of fighting off wild dogs, which are big, strong and hungry, is frightening. It would be enough to make parents forbid boys to wander the woods. Brown learns much in this adventure, but the most interesting lesson is his patience. He uses his wits to outwit the dogs, but they are running in a pack and they are very strong. It takes many ploys, much time, and lots of patience to defeat the dogs. This is a rather long chapter, but it is an exciting one, reading about how one young boy defeats a pack of fierce, strong, wild dogs.

Omen

This chapter illustrates an important change for the two boys. Grandfather Stalking Wolf has told them to look for an omen, which he means to be something important that can teach them. Right after Brown's extended battle with the Wild Dogs in The Dog Tree, the two boys are geared up for an all-out dog war. These wild dogs are famous in the Pine Barrens for marauding, killing, and destruction. Brown certainly has first-hand knowledge of their fierce and stubborn attacks. However, in the week after the attack, although the boys go out in the Barrens, well-prepared for battle, the dogs never show up.

The boys, in the manner of young boys everywhere, forget all about this anticipated battle and go exploring at a dump, where a new excavation promises fossils that may have been uncovered. Just as they rock-climb up the soft, packed dirt cliff-like wall, here come the dogs. They jump right into the pit, jumping and snarling up at the boys. Indeed, Rick barely makes it to the top, assisted by Brown, who barely can haul him up, since he has neglected attaching the rope to a stable object. As the boys consider the dogs, their point of view changes. They realize that these are very hungry animals, almost hungry to death. They share their sandwiches with the dogs, tossing down bits, and finally giving those hungry dogs everything they have.

With their change of heart, the boys also realize that they must help the dogs, the very enemies that they wanted to fight and destroy just minutes before. In a moment of what they consider real risk to themselves, they push a junked refrigerator over to give the dogs a way to climb out of the pit. They turn and run as fast as they can, but the dogs catch up. However, the dogs run alongside the boys in a friendly way. Later, the dogs join the boys in their camp as friends, not as enemies. Those dogs will attack other invaders in the Barrens, but they are friends with the boys.

This is a powerful teaching for the boys, who realize that things can change, depending on circumstances and on our attitudes.

Chickadee Survival and Jersey Devil

Chickadee Survival and Jersey Devil Summary

Stalking Wolf respects chickadees because of their stout spirit. Like the chickadee, Rick and Brown love cold stormy weather. Storms offer no threat to a person who is in the flow of nature.

The boys are Boy Scouts, but the Scouts don't have much to teach them. They attend the Boy Scout winter camp. A snow storm begins, and when the snow comes in, they move gently through the woods, like chickadees. The Scouts have built a big lean-to and prepare for the storm. The leaders are panicked, certain the big storm will kill them. Rick and Brown reassure them, and build a fire for the Scouts. Brown and Rick laugh at the Scouts, because they are missing all the excitement from the storm. Someone finally does come and rescue the Scouts. Rick and Brown feel good from helping the Scouts, and they resolve to do more helping with the skills they have.

When people get lost, the two boys help, including finding a lost five-year-old by tracking him, and a lost and terrified family in a car. The father had been driving in circles in the woods, Brown notes later, having tracked the car tire tracks. Brown states that a person may not know exactly where he is, but as long as he can find water and food, and can track, he is never truly lost.

Jersey Devil

Stalking Wolf gives tests to the boys to see how they find ways to succeed. Rick and Brown are always more interested the process of solving problems rather than just getting through. They learn the limits of their abilities and the limits of their wills.

Brown dislikes one area in the Pine Barrens because of the folk tales about the Jersey Devil, a terrible monster that robs graves and kills people. He believes in the folk tale and is terrified of the Jersey Devil. He and Rick name the area Hell. Stalking Wolf says that if the boys will camp alone in Hell for a week, armed with a knife only, they will never be afraid of anything again.

Brown fears the Jersey Devil, but after catching food for a meal and making a fire, he sleeps. He is awoken by what he thinks is the Jersey Devil and panics, attacking the thing with a knife. In the morning, exhausted, he goes to trace the tracks of the fight. He is surprised to see only his own tracks, not those of the Devil he thought he fought. What he chased was his own fear. He is never afraid outdoors at night after that, and is secure in the wilderness ever after.

Chickadee Survival and Jersey Devil Analysis

This is a wry commentary on the Boy Scout system that purports to train children wilderness skills, but usually fails in really educating anyone about it. When Brown and Rick easily start a fire and warm up the Scout troop during an unusually fierce blizzard, they help everyone settle down and overcome their panic. However, the boys enjoy the experience while the others curl up in sleeping bags to wait it out. When rescuers come, the boys tell them they are fine, but the Scout leader loudly insists that they do need a rescue.

This experience turns the boys' lives into service, helping people who are lost in the woods. They easily find lost children and even help lost travelers in cars find their ways back to the highway. They realize that you're never really lost if you have good skills. In fact, like the symbol of the chickadee from the beginning of the book, you can have a great time in circumstances that others may consider horrible.

Jersey Devil

This chapter deals with a common fear, a local folktale that everyone believes. The Jersey Devil has no definite shape, but he is said to be hairy and huge. Like lots of children, Brown and Rick believe in the tales with all their hearts. Brown particularly is terrified by the stories. When Grandfather Stalking Wolf challenges the two boys to camp alone in a barren area called Hell, which is thought to be home for The Jersey Devil, Brown is terrified. He even thinks he has been awakened by the monster, and he sees it in the darkness, glowing with evil. He chases it, screaming and thrusting with his knife, but in the morning, he sees no Devil tracks. He realizes that he has been personifying his fear in the Jersey Devil. After that, he is no longer afraid. He thrives in Hell, the one hostile place in the barrens, never fearful after that.

Invisible Walking and True Lostness

Invisible Walking and True Lostness Summary

Invisible Walking

At the end of their week-long solo camp, neither boy rushes back to Grandfather Stalking Wolf, wanting to seem unafraid. Brown has enjoyed his week in Hell. He knows that he will never again be consumed by terror. However, part of staying the week in Hell was to have been on a vision quest, and Brown hasn't yet had a vision.

While he and Rick search for Stalking Wolf, Brown finds that perfect, life-altering scene: a moment in a cedar swamp, where the light shines through an icy waterfall onto a baby fawn. It makes Brown cry with its beauty. The boys track Stalking Wolf, who finally joins them, and tells the boys they have transformed from boys to men. He then teaches them invisible walking, where you can erase your footprints as you go. After a while, the boys master invisible walking.

Stalking Wolf teaches them the principles of being invisible, including blending in and placing oneself above eye level. In addition, a person must blend his energy with surroundings so he is impossible to detect.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf performs a blood brother ceremony, binding himself and the boys together to celebrate their ascension into maturity as men. The three blend in so well that they can move among a family of deer undetected.

When he is perfectly blended, Brown can catch a glimpse of that perfect vision he has seen at the waterfall, seeing it spiritually.

True Lostness

True lostness is not having the relationships and connections that are most valuable in this world. Skulls, at first, are part of Rick and Brown's outdoors education. However, the boys begin to collect the skulls competitively, which leads them to fight over a particular skull and stop speaking to one another. But when Brown finds three intact beaver skeletons, he knows he has to swallow his pride and find Rick, because only Rick will really understand how profound it is.

He and Rick formally end their fight, and examine the beaver den, finding six more skeletons. The beavers have been killed by hunger when a construction company has cut down all the aspens, their only source of food, to place a sewer pipe for development. Brown and Rick ineffectively protest the destruction by spray painting messages all over the sewer pipe, but realize that no one can see the words because the pipe is below the level of the road.

Invisible Walking and True Lostness Analysis

This is a chapter about how Grandfather Stalking Wolf instructs the boys to become invisible by obscuring their tracks and by blending into the landscape. In the chapter, the boys transform themselves from being curious, excited, insatiably learning boys into the higher realms of spiritual life in the wilderness. Grandfather Stalking Wolf teaches the boys that they can place themselves physically where most creatures and people do not look. They can erase their footprints in the wilderness. Most importantly, they can spiritually blend in so that they are undetectable by sensing or feeling. The boys get so good at this that they drive family and friends crazy with not being seen, then suddenly being seen.

When Brown blends himself in this way, he feels the spiritual beauty nearby.

True Lostness

This is a chapter about friendship, lost and found, and the true worth of things. Like many boys, Rick and Brown can be competitive in an immature way. They have always loved animal skulls, and they turn their appreciation for the skulls into a kind of obsession and competition. The competition becomes so fierce that the boys get mad at each other and refuse to speak to each other, except to taunt one another with tales of better and better skulls they have found and added to their collections.

When each boy makes a discovery so wonderful that it's too great to have to oneself, they race toward each other to share the good things. They make up, and in the process join in healing laughter. Rick shows Brown a superior find, some robin eggs in the process of hatching. Then Brown takes Rick to his find, the beaver's mound with three perfect skeletons. The boys' joy turns to horror when they realize that the beaver mound contains a whole family of beaver, killed by hunger when their food source is obliterated by a construction company's building of a huge sewer pipe where the aspen grove used to be. All the beavers have died.

The boys express their outrage by writing fierce messages all over the new, huge sewer pipe, using black spray paint. When the writing is done, they realize that no one can really even see their words because the pipe is below the level of the road. In retrospect, Brown realizes that no one might understand it anyway because the words are misspelled, a wry reference to the fact that the boys' amazing education is not very academic.

Predator and Thaw

Predator and Thaw Summary

Predator

Deer are the hardest animals to stalk and track, as their hearing is the sharpest in all the animal kingdom. This makes them the perfect test for a predator. Stalking Wolf tests Brown, having him stalk and kill a deer. Brown tracks and stalks the deer for many days. He senses where the deer will go, and hides in a tree. When the deer pauses under the tree, Brown finally attacks it. The deer fights back, and takes a long time to die. Brown and Rick dress the deer out, using every bit of the animal, including making a cloak with the hide and salting the meat to bring some of it home to their parents.

Brown will never take life again except in extreme need. He mostly hunts with a camera. This experience teaches him what it feels like to be a predator in the woods.

Thaw

The two boys have been men for a long time, and are camping on the slope of the Forked River. However, something about the feeling of the day puts them on edge. After walking along the road and into the forest, talking about times in their past when they've been frightened, they observe deep tire tracks, possibly a Buick. Later, they make camp and brew coffee. Then, with the heat of the fire, the frozen mud eases apart and a human hand emerges. Rick says that it's getting a little crowded around there and hangs his coffee cup on the thumb.

The two boys anonymously call the police, who come to the site. It is determined that the corpse has been in the ground about a week. The police ineffectively use house dogs to try and track the killer. The boys observe this while being invisible to the police and their dogs.

Predator and Thaw Analysis

This very short chapter might seem unbelievable to conventional hunters. Brown takes down a full-grown, powerful buck with only a knife. Brown himself expresses astonishment at how powerful the animal is, and how long it takes the animal to die. Up till then, Brown has hunted other creatures but none so big, strong, and hard to capture as the deer. He believes that the deer is sent to him to kill, because otherwise it is so hard to get near to one. Brown also believes that there is an overall spiritual pattern in the woods, and that the deer will not have come near him unless it was appropriate to kill him. The lesson from the experience is the powerful sense of predation, the ability to hunt and kill. This is the pattern of the woods, and Brown learns it for himself this day. However, he does not want to repeat it unnecessarily because taking life is such a solemn thing. Most of the time, Brown says, he hunts with a camera.

Thaw

The two boys are fourteen at the time of this incident. They are going out during late afternoon and into early night to set up a camp, but they feel so uneasy. They are not scared of anything by this time, having long since conquered their fears, but they are captured by an eerie mood. They recall ghost stories and Jersey Devil stories from their youth as they sit around a campfire drinking coffee. However, the unanticipated emergence of a human hand would be enough to scare anyone, especially on a day where the mood is strange and eerie. Rick doesn't reveal any fear, however, even hanging his coffee cup on the thumb that has emerged with a casual comment that it is getting too crowded around the area.

As the two are so young, they know that there will be no way to explain their presence at a murder dump. They decide to hike two miles to the nearest pay phone and call the police. They then decide to stalk back to the scene so no one will see them, a difficult stalk. They find a large group having dug up a corpse. They have search dogs but they are mostly untrained and they cannot even find the two boys hiding.

It is funny that when the boys get home, they only tell their parents that they enjoyed a routine campout without incident.

The End of the World, Guardian, Thoreau Summer, and Journeyman

The End of the World, Guardian, Thoreau Summer, and Journeyman Summary

The End of the World

Rick's family is moving. Brown cannot imagine the woods without Rick, or even life without Rick. Their friendship is so profound that they cannot find words to speak at parting. Brown gives Rick his favorite skull, and Rick returns the favor. They also divide up the plaster casts of tracks they've made.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf, Rick and Brown meet one last time at the Good Medicine Cabin. Stalking Wolf reassures the boys they will all meet again. The boys cannot speak, and the silence is strange and awful. Finally, they return to Brown's room and take down the box of plaster prints. It falls, crashes, and breaks all the casts. This symbolizes the breaking up of the lifelong friendship of the boys. They laugh and laugh, because they are too old to cry.

Guardian

Brown suffers long when Rick leaves. When the miracles of spring unfold, Brown cannot truly enjoy them because he does not have Rick to share them with. Brown is overcome with apathy and depression, even self-pity.

A huge Virginia White Tail deer comes through the swamp, leading Brown to three deer, slaughtered unspeakably. Poachers must have done this, taking only the antlers and leaving the bodies to rot. Brown follows tire tracks and discovers the poachers have horrifyingly slaughtered and wasted many deer. He tracks the poachers to an abandoned railroad shed a quarter of a mile away.

Brown thinks he should have not been depressed and then he could have felt that something horrible was going on in the woods. Perhaps he can have stopped it. He leans against the wall of the shed and sobs, the crying takes care of his hidden grief at losing Rick and Walking Wolf. When he is finished, he is overwhelmed by rage and attacks the four men inside. He is so angry that he could become a murderer, but he stops himself. Instead, he kicks down the walls of the shed as the men crawl away, begging for their lives. He lights the truck on fire and it explodes as he walks away. He's cleansed his soul of the grief and depression, and has taught the poachers an unforgettable lesson.

Thoreau Summer



When Brown turns eighteen, he decides to spend the summer alone in the woods. He watches a storm as he sits naked in the rain. Time passes unnoticed. Brown only eats when hungry and sleeps between adventures in the woods, heedless of time passing, day or night. It takes him weeks to stop feeling the passage of time and being in the pattern of the world, but finally he does so and becomes part of the woods.

For a while, he watches the tame and wild dogs; the dogs symbolizing for him the nastiness of civilized life, how unnatural things cannot thrive in the wild. He notes that the woods are changing, becoming populated. Sometimes the drunks get lost in the woods and come out, sobered and changed. He hopes to keep these drunks from finding the Good Medicine Cabin, but the tracks of the drunks get closer and closer.

Most animals will flee when in danger, except if they are cornered. Then they will attack. Brown feels cornered at the Good Medicine Cabin as the drunks and other people encroach on the territory. One night he encounters drunken men, who see him. As he is naked, they assume there is a naked woman with him, and plan a gang rape. Brown scares the men, as he's covered in mud and pine needles, is waving branches, and growling. The men are so afraid they leave.

Brown laughs for joy at the experience, and suddenly, this simple act of laughing transforms him back to human again. His solo summer experience is over and won't be repeated for a long time.

The Journeyman

A journeyman is one step above an apprentice, but in the final analysis, a journeyman must go on journeys. Brown stops being an apprentice at age 12, under Grandfather Stalking Wolf's tutelage, and becomes an independent journeyman at age 16. Now at 18, he needs to travel to become a master. He goes to the Grand Tetons, the Dakota Badlands, and the Grand Canyon.

His journey begins one day in the Barrens. He finds a body by a broken jeep. The man had been running and had a heart attack. The man tried to stay safe, even making a shelter and seeming to prepare to live off the land.

The End of the World, Guardian, Thoreau Summer, and Journeyman Analysis

This sad chapter reveals, in brief words and images, the breakup of the constant lifelong friendship of Rick and Brown, as Rick's family must move. They give each other something most precious, their favorite skulls. Grandfather Stalking Wolf tries to help heal the wound of the breakup, but the fix is only temporary. The symbol of the breaking plaster casts of prints works beautifully to reveal how the two lives are never to be the same.

Guardian

In this chapter, something has gone terribly, horribly awry in the woods, but Brown has been too depressed by losing Grandfather Stalking Wolf and Rick to notice it. Poachers on the look out for easy trophies, being the antlers of deer, have been killing deer in the woods, taking vicious pleasure in the killing and leaving the bodies behind. Brown tracks them down to a crumbling railroad shack. He bursts through the wall and in ferocious anger, beats some of them but does not kill any of them. They try to shoot him but he is too powerful for that. They run away but cannot drive because Brown blows up their truck. Brown is certain that these men on foot will be found and punished for their bad acts.

This great rage purges Brown's anger and grief at losing the dearest companionship of the friends of his youth and childhood. He is finally at peace.

Thoreau Summer

This chapter is easy to believe when Brown states that it takes weeks to transform his feelings and attitudes civilized humanity to wild woods thing. He sheds his clothes sometime during the summer. He eats and sleeps whenever the moment seems right, oblivious to night and day. He is fascinated with the actions of animals and the rhythm of the woods.

However, he is also devastated by the encroachments of humanity, particularly since it seems that only drunks, people not in possession of their faculties nor self-discipline, are ranging through the woods in the Pine Barrens. This upsets Brown deeply. One day he comes upon a group of them. They see him and conclude that he must be having sex in the woods, since he is naked, and therefore they will do anything to locate the girl he would be with, so they can rape her. Finally, Brown lets himself be seen, in full glory, all naked, covered with sweat, mud, and pine needles, flourishing pine branches. He growls and the drunks become certain that he is the Jersey Devil. They speed out of the area as fast as they can.

This is so funny to Brown that he just stands and laughs. The laughter somehow miraculously pulls him back into humanity. However, the experience of seeing drunken people maraud the woods has been so upsetting that Brown will not spend much time in the woods, during the summer, anymore.

The Journeyman

This chapter is so short that it almost seems insignificant, but it is important because it reveals to Tom Brown that he can help people using tracking.

Bear Smacking and Outlaw Dogs

Bear Smacking and Outlaw Dogs Summary

Brown spends the next ten years exploring America's wild lands, eventually making it to California and back. He goes to the Dakota Badlands to see he can survive. He seeks Indian elders and other elders to teach him. He loves the beauty of the colorful Badlands, but there is sometimes no water. He learns to adapt himself to the desert patterns so well that he has a hard time leaving the place.

Next, Brown tries Death Valley, which is hotter and hungrier than the Badlands. He spends eight weeks in Death Valley and wishes he could have spent more. He says he learns so much there. The day is brutal, but the night is gorgeous, blue and eerie, with bright stars. He goes to the Grand Canyon with a pack mule and horse. He loves that place, learning about all the different levels. He visits a tribe of Indians, and meets a man much like Stalking Wolf. He next visits the Grand Tetons, which he finds astonishingly beautiful.

He tubes the Snake River in dangerous conditions. He tries Bear Smacking a grizzly, who chases him to a tree. After Brown climbs the tree the bear knocks the tree down. Brown runs to the jeep, hiding underneath the car. The bear tries to fish Brown out from under the jeep. Brown becomes so fascinated with watching the bear that he forgets to keep himself safe. Finally, it gives up and shambles away.

Brown is fascinated with how the bear has behaved. He has survived, but he remembers that he has overreached his limitations. It is not the last time he is close to death.

A week after that, he is climbing a rock dome and begins to slide down the front slope. He cannot get a handhold. He barely catches the rim and just hangs there, looking at the Snake River far below. He counts himself lucky to have seen the beautiful view below, just as lucky as he is to see that bear at work.

Outlaw Dogs

Wild dogs in the Pine Barrens have begun to go increasingly bad, even killing livestock. These dogs have learned to kill for pleasure, like humans. Brown helps local lawmen control these dogs, even killing them when needed, though he does not like to do so.

On one farm, the dogs terrorize the family, never leaving the family or farm alone. Brown knows these dogs will be diseased, starved, covered with ticks, miserable, and some probably rabid. Brown follows their trail and finds them. Although he does not want to kill them, he and some men fire at the dogs, killing most of them. When he gets out of the woods, he finds he is being sued by the SPCA for killing the dogs. The world of men is often madness.

Brown knows it is only a matter of time till those crazed dogs kill a child or a baby, and that night he hunts the dogs, killing them all. As he suspected, they are terribly diseased, covered with sores, chiggers, maggots, and abscesses. He knows that in the morning, he will probably get a summons, and drives away before dawn.

Bear Smacking and Outlaw Dogs Analysis

This chapter chronicles the trip of a journeyman, a wanderer, as Brown tests his skills against the most difficult terrains in the world. Sometimes he is at terrible risk, such as when he nearly tumbles into the Snake River from a mountain rock dome high above, or when he is attacked by a bear he foolishly tries to track. Whether challenging these fearsome things, or surviving alone for weeks in the Badlands or in Death Valley, Brown is continually interested and fascinated by everything he sees and comes upon. He loves to talk with Indian elders in tribes, finding deep communion with them because of his training with Grandfather Stalking Wolf. He is grateful for everything he gets to see and learn. This is an attitude of a person truly at peace, who appreciates all his experiences, difficult or not.

Outlaw Dogs

This story infers a relationship between people making the Pine Barrens go bad, and the dogs within it going bad. Brown and others in the community are asked to kill wild dogs that are harassing people and their farms. These dogs are even attacking people, especially children, and it is only a matter of time till the dogs kill a human being. Brown hates this task. It is antithetical to his entire training, but he wants to help people. He hypothesizes that the dogs are sick and diseased, starving to death, and later he finds out it is true. Still, the madness of society turns this brutal task into something illegal, and Brown is going to be sued for cruelty to animals. He feels he cannot face a courtroom, and he leaves town in his jeep.

Search

Search Summary

Following a trail becomes a matter of focusing all one's concentration on just one thing, the tracks of the animal or person. This becomes a reflex, and time seems to stand still. Brown has begun to help track people, especially children, who are lost.

In 1977, Brown is questioning his unorthodox education. He has no job, no house, no family, no life insurance, and no accouterments of modern life. He begins to wonder if he has taken the wrong trail in life, but then he is asked to help find a lost person, a handicapped man with a five-year-old mind. A SWAT team, a helicopter, two dog packs, and a thousand soldiers and policemen search for him. The weather gets cold, then freezing, and people are giving up. Brown agrees to track the man. It starts to rain. This is the most most difficult tracking he has ever tried, because of vines, shrubs, and wild hedges, and because this is a child's trail, one without logic, a mixture of "reason and whim."

Brown finds tracks at a chicken coop, where Tommy has slept one of the days. With the pouring rain and setting sun, Brown can hardly find prints. Brown finds a solid track at the top of hill, and notes that Tommy is eating the fiddleheads as he goes, so he is not starving.

Brown brings items Tommy has dropped back to the father, and shows how Tommy is surviving. Next day, Brown Tommy's footprints near a swamp, and sees Tommy, finally, lying down but alive. Tommy is terrified and thinks the big men are going to hurt him, but everyone is just glad that Tommy is alive. Brown admires his resourcefulness and is relieved and grateful that Tommy has survived.

Search Analysis

This is an exciting narrative chapter about a search that later develops into a life service for Brown. A handicapped man with the intellectual capacity of a five-year-old has been lost. Searchers give up, but Brown never gives up, even when the terrain is so full of thorns that Brown is torn to bits. The man, Tommy, is clever and resourceful as he wanders through the countryside. Somehow, he has the idea that someone will hurt him so he tries hard not to be caught. When everyone gives up on the search, Brown persists. When there seem to be no clues, Brown finds many. When tracks seem to disappear, Brown finds them. Finally, Brown is filled with respect and wonder about how such a person, any person, could survive so well for five days in that rough land. Luckily, Tommy is safe and brought home.

Characters

Tom Brown

This is the author and main character of the book. He speaks in first person. He chronicles his childhood, trained by Grandfather Stalking Wolf, who is the grandfather of Brown's best friend Rick. Brown eventually grows up to be a famous tracker. This book creates a portrait that is almost unbelievable, about Brown. For one thing, it hardly seems possible that a little boy of eight, ten, and twelve could be allowed to be gone from home, unaccounted for as much as he is. Perhaps it could have happened years ago when Brown was a child, and not so much today. Brown is intensely curious about the world around him. He is naturally gifted to be a tracker. Even before he meets his best friend Rick and his adopted grandfather, Stalking Wolf, Brown spends as much time outdoors as he can. He wants to know just everything about the outdoors, about animals, animal bones, plants, birds, and the tracks that everything makes, even himself.

He finds an instant kindred spirit in his friend, Rick. Together, they roam wild woods that have a reputation for killing people very quickly, of being very easy to get lost in. Rick and Brown never get lost, once they are trained by their Grandfather. They spend endless hours in contemplation of tracks, animals, and locations. Brown has an ideal childhood with plenty of time for these explorations. When Brown tells stories, he always reveals a certain contemplation and self-evaluation. He knows his skills and he knows when he has done well, and when he could have done better. As he grows into a man, Tom Brown devotes his skills to helping other people by tracking down those who are lost.

Rick

Brown meets Rick one day when they are little boys. Both are on a stream bed looking for fossils. Rick is Native American, and has a wonderful grandfather called Stalking Wolf. This grandfather adopts Brown and gives both boys the education of a lifetime. Rick is smaller than Brown, more compact. Brown says that Rick is a better stalker, while he is a better tracker. Eventually Rick leaves to go into the military, a great sadness for Tom Brown.

As the book progresses, not much specific information is revealed about Rick. Brown mentions that Rick is the better stalker while he himself is the better tracker. Brown describes Rick's smaller, stockier build. He mentions when Rick is gone, as when he must be out of town for something, presumably family commitments. Brown points out the different roles that the two boys play in the adventures and learning.

Yet at the same time, Rick's character is not fully delineated. This may be because this is a childhood remembrance and children do not always pay close attention to

characteristics, motivations, and other aspects of each other's characters. It also may be because this is a first-person narrative, and the focus is mainly on Tom Brown Junior. It may be because the two boys are so closely aligned in their feelings, responses and interests that there is no easy delineation between the two of them.

A most important contribution of Rick's character, of course, is the presence of his grandfather, Stalking Wolf. The grandfather has come to New Jersey because of his grandson. Therefore, we may assume that Rick is in a special academic setting or some other assignment. Stalking Wolf's presence makes it possible for the boys to experience their unusual and life changing education.

Rick demonstrates wry humor when a human hand emerges out of thawing mud, and Rick casually says, "I think it's getting crowded around here." He hangs his coffee cup on the dead hand's thumb.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf

This is Rick's real grandfather. He is an Apache Indian, one of the last warriors trained in the ancient ways of the tribe. Grandfather Stalking Wolf has mastered the physical challenges of tracking and stalking, but more importantly understands and has mastered the spiritual ways of the wilderness. He is a master teacher, using few words but many examples, gestures, and challenges.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf is an elder who teaches in small increments. One gesture of his hand teaches volumes, and the boys crave these teachings. The boys are so happy when Grandfather Stalking Wolf joins them for a campout, offers them a manhood ceremony of blood brothers, or perches in a tree to teach them observation and tracking. Grandfather Stalking Wolf is a spiritual teacher, a person who has skills outside the everyday world. He is living in New Jersey to be with the family of Rick, his grandson, whom he wishes to protect and teach. He adopts Tom Brown Junior as a son as well.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf is a type of person who has mostly vanished from this modern world. He is taught in the old ways as a youth, knowing how to stalk, track, kill kindly, do ceremonies, and understand many unspoken things that others may not know or see. He is the great hero of the two boys, and when he and Rick must leave, it is a loss that Brown barely survives.

Jersey Devil

This is one of those myths that often grow up around places, just as Sasquatch is a myth in the western Rockies. The Jersey Devil is a wild creature of indeterminate qualities, a scary creature that captures and kills people and animals.

Tom Brown's Parents

Brown mentions his parents frequently, though they rarely show up as actual characters. Brown's father teaches the boys how to prepare logs for their cabin. The parents talk to Rick's parents, so it is understood that the boys are well-taken care of even though they are given amazing freedom.

Rick's Parents

Again, there are only a few brief references to Rick's parents, just as there are with Brown's parents. This may be a natural expression of children growing up in a world peculiar to them. Of course, Grandfather Stalking Wolf stands in the parental and instructor role throughout the book.

Tommy

Tommy is a handicapped man who gets lost near Brown's house. It takes all of Brown's resources to track and locate him, and this finding sets Brown on his life's journey and life's work.

The Grizzly Bear

Brown, as a grown man, finds the courage to stalk a grizzly bear, with the intention of smacking him. The bear gets the better of the situation, though does not kill Brown.

The Alpha Male Drunk

A group of drunks, led by this Alpha male, has brutally killed deer throughout the Pine Barrens. Though Brown admires the drunks' courage and leadership, he is furious with the actions of the group and drives the men out of the Barrens.

The Indian Elder

Brown meets an American Indian Elder in the Grand Canyon. The elder teaches Brown many stories of the tribe, and Brown feels more at home with this elder than with many of the younger Indians near his own age.

Objects/Places

The Pine Barrens

The Pine Barrens is an immense track of woods in New Jersey. Although they are more built up now, in Brown's childhood they are immense and provide a splendid area for a nature tracker to receive his education.

Back Yard

Back Yard is a friendly, familiar term that Brown uses to refer to the Pine Barrens that stretch out for hundreds of miles past his actual back yard.

Wild Dogs

Wild dogs, either abandoned or lost, roam through the Pine Barrens. They provide a real danger to the boys, who are young and small enough to be eaten alive. Many of the boys' adventures center around evading these dogs.

The Good Medicine Grounds

The Good Medicine Grounds is a special place selected for the boys by the visit of a huge, beautiful eagle. It is located deep within the Pine Barrens. They build their Good Medicine Cabin here.

Good Medicine Cabin

The Good Medicine Cabin is the dream of all Boy Scouts and other outdoor wandering children, a beautiful cabin the boys build by hand by notching logs and reinforcing the structure. The boys love it when Grandfather Stalking Wolf comes and visits them there. They love to camp out there in their hand-built cabin.

The Dog Tree

At the Dog Tree, Brown is captured for a day and a night by the fierce, hungry wild dogs of the Pine Barrens.

The Garbage Dump

At the garbage dump, the two boys learn that circumstances change. They go fossil hunting and are followed by dangerous wild dogs, who change their attitudes when fed. Now the boys know that things that seem dangerous may not always be so.

Hell

Hell is a dry, bare area in the Barrens that seems lifeless and dangerous. The boys do a solo camp in these barren miles and find themselves in a deep, spiritual way, including a remarkable vision of perfection and beauty that is the end result of this vision quest.

Tom Brown's Buck

In Chapter 13, Brown stalks and kills a deer with his own two hands. In this way he learns how powerful it is to kill, so he avoids being a predator unnecessarily in the future.

The Beaver Mound

Brown and Rick open a beaver dam mound, which reveals a whole family of beavers starved to death when a big sewer pipe destroys their food source. The boys are deeply outraged and pained by this discovery.

The Hand

On a camp, when the frozen ground is nearly thawing into mud, the boys' campfire thaws the ground enough to reveal a human hand, part of a murdered corpse. The boys handle the situation with humor and ease.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf's Gestures

With a subtle gesture of the hand, Grandfather Stalking Wolf can teach many things. Often he need not speak, only gesture, and the boys understand volumes of information.

The Dakota Badlands

The Dakota Badlands is the first place that Brown visits and survives in on his journey in the United States. He actually thrives there.

Death Valley

Although even the local Indians think that Brown can't survive in Death Valley, he does very well, learning to collect water and to roam at night. He loves the place and would stay longer if he feels he has the time.

Grand Canyon

Brown explores the Grand Canyon, including tracking tourist groups and being taught by local Indian tribal elders.

Grand Tetons

Brown says no one can really describe the beauty of the Grand Tetons, where he wanders next in his trip as a journeyman.

Themes

Tracking Requires Physical and Spiritual Strengths.

From the beginning, Brown is clear that Grandfather Stalking Wolf wants the boys to know more than simply being able to identify tracks and animal habits. Stalking Wolf often smiles wryly, though saying little, when the boys look only at tracks. This quiet smiling reveals Grandfather Stalking Wolf's own spiritual strength. He does not talk on and on like other people. Saying little shows the boys the inner strength it takes to be a true leader.

Grandfather wants the boys to look everywhere at once, and the only way you can do this is to use "fuzzy looking" and using your "spiritual eyes" to see things all around. Spiritual understanding helps you know what animals are feeling and seeing for themselves, and spiritual compassion makes it necessary that you only take life in extreme circumstances of hunger and need. Grandfather Stalking Wolf always stretches the boys past their literal understandings of things into spiritual things.

At the same time, Grandfather Stalking Wolf demands that the boys be physically strong, and of course, the boys want to be strong. They do kung fu, lots of hiking, lots of building and running and climbing. They are very strong physically, including withstanding the rigors of cold and harsh weather, water and thirst, all the of the wilderness challenges that a person might undertake.

The American Indian philosophy of harmony and acquiescence to a higher power reigns throughout, however, and this is what makes Brown become a superior tracker physically and spiritually, able to find things that others cannot find, because of Grandfather Stalking Wolf's teachings. In fact, Brown becomes a good protégé of Grandfather Stalking Wolf, who is old, and so Brown can carry on his spiritual tradition as well his physical teachings.

The Wilderness Teaches us Many Things.

Tom Brown Junior mentions frequently that most people consider the Pine Barrens to be very hostile territory. It is confusing, and there are many stories of how hikers, hunters, and other types of people have been lost in the area, and many of them eventually die. The Pine Barrens is certainly located in a hostile climate, very cold, snowy in the winter, warm, and muggy in the summer. Brown's family lives right on the edge of the Barrens, but like many people who live near to wilderness, the family does not venture out much. Most people who do venture into the Barrens do not go far.

However, Tom is a unique child consumed by an innate curiosity about nature. Even as a youngster just seven years old, he spends his time looking for animal skulls and for fossils. His educational opportunities begin when he meets his friend Rick at this young age. Ricks' grandfather is called Grandfather Stalking Wolf, an Apache elder who has



come to the Pine Barrens to be near his grandson. Grandfather Stalking Wolf takes on the education the two boys, adopting Tom Brown, and guiding them through experiences in the wilderness till the boys are experts at understanding the wild and surviving in it.

Both are driven by a passion to understand what is going on out in the wild. The Pine Barrens is a particularly good place to learn, because it is challenging. In fact, common lore says that nobody survives being lost out there. It is tangled and thick and goes for many miles. The boys learn much on their own, exploring the Pine Barrens close to their real back yards. Sometimes they call the Pine Barrens their back yard. It grows bigger and bigger as the boys venture further.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf sets up learning experiences for the boys, teaching them to observe tracks throughout the day and under many weather conditions. He teaches in increments, letting the wilderness instruct the boys as they go. They learn to stalk game without being seen, and they learn to track game and people. Grandfather Stalking Wolf is a master tracker, who can spiritually find things as well as physically tracking them.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf loves these boys. Although his tests may seem difficult, Grandfather Stalking Wolf knows how far he can trust the education the boys have had. They learn to master their fears and to use what is at hand to stay safe in the wild. Even later in life, when Rick and Grandfather Stalking Wolf have been gone, and Brown faces frightening challenges, as when a grizzly bear tries to kill him at almost all costs, Brown is safe, because of the wonderful things he learns as a child and youth in the wilderness.

When Brown questions the direction his life has taken, learning and living in the wilderness, he receives direction for the meaning of his life when he uses his skills to help save human lives.

Self-education is Powerful.

Brown wryly refers to school as compared to the self-education that the boys undertake in the wilderness. They do go to school, but their thoughts are outside, rehearsing the many things they've learned together. They can tell when a creature has passed, what the condition of the creature is, how the weather is affecting the creature and its tracks, and many other things. It is true that the boys cannot spell well enough to even communicate their fierce anger at construction companies who destroy habitat in the wilderness, but of course, it is assumed that later they do get a good academic education, because Brown's vocabulary is eloquent and varied. Rick later goes into the military, where it is assumed that his formal education takes him far.

However, the two boys learn much from their experiences in the Pine Barrens. They can find their way around even though most people get hopelessly lost. They know how to understand the weather, and they can find things to eat when others are sure that they will starve.

Even more importantly, they learn the true natures of the creatures around them. They even overcome their dread of wild dogs, which have the capacity to tear them apart, when they learn harmony with the dogs. However, later, when people's bad actions have incurred damage in the wilderness, the wild dogs reflect this badness. The dogs go so bad that Brown has to go kill them, something that goes directly against his nature and against everything he has learned in the wilderness. Where before Brown has hesitated to kill anything unless he is dreadfully hungry, now he must go out and destroy creatures that themselves have been destroyed by the incursion of men and their bad practices.

Brown is self-assured by the time he has completed his self-education. He takes himself to places that most people avoid, even the Dakota Badlands and the dreaded Death Valley. Even the local Indians think that Brown cannot survive the extreme conditions in these places. However, Brown's self-education, assisted by excellent learning situations provided by Grandfather Stalking Wolf, makes it possible for him not only to survive but actually to enjoy the lands that other people think are deadly.

It is certain that most people will never undertake the extensive outdoor education that Brown has received. He admits that there are few people as driven by tracking and animal habits as he is. However, his example of self-education, and that of his friend Rick, is what is important here. Yes, school is important, but a person may never ascend as high as s/he would like without the intellectual and personal drive that the boys demonstrate in this book.

Style

Point of View

Description

Setting

Description

Language and Meaning

Description

Structure

Description

Quotes

"A skull is the ultimate track a creature leaves. When everything else has been unshaped by time, when every scratch and print is gone, the skull remains." Page 7.

"I asked him once why he was so still at times, and he said, 'To see better.'" Page 11.

"He never gave me a direct answer, and when he had something to teach us, he arranged it so that it was something we suddenly needed desperately to know." Page 20.

"I carried my lab kit with me everywhere. A three inch magnifying glass, a test tube for samples, tweezers, and my knife. We took specimens like a landing party from Venus." Page 33.

"Good medicine is any experience so memorable that it just has to be a gift from the spirit-that-moves-through-all-things." Page 34.

"As long as we were in tune with nature, we were invulnerable. The whole of our belief system depended on the truth of that statement." Page 48.

"You cannot sit watching the Pines thicken with snow, or stand in the middle of a frozen lake at ten below watching the stars like kernels of frost forming in the frigid depths of the sky, if you care about being cold. You cannot see the sun burning gloves of frost off the pine needles as it rises in a January sky or understand the slow perpetual motion of the deer when even the soft brown pine needles are slivers of ice unless you have developed an indifference to cold." Page 50.

"All the way, we prepared to fight the last great battle for the Pines, the Dog Wars. We hefted our bats and had Tom Sawyer fantasies of ourselves back to back in the middle of the Alpha pack, making them pay dearly for our lives. But when we got there, the dogs were gone. . . " Page 91.

"I came to the conclusion that what I had seen had been my own fear which had given ground and fled entirely when I confronted it. I have not been truly afraid since." Page 122.

"The light came in slantwise through the cedar skeletons in long flat blades. A short steep waterfall dropped like a shaft of ice and beside it on a bed of moss, invisible in a semicircle of bushes, was a small tan fawn. The light came down on it like a spotlight and some of it hit the waterfall and burst into star-shaped rainbows." Page 127.

"Be still. Be silent. Conform to the shape of what surrounds you. Take advantage of the shadows and places where the light makes things uncertain. Stand above whenever possible; most things do not look up, deer rarely do." Page 132.

"All the way in, I could feel the terrible force of predation driving my hand and I understood how it was to be part of the dancer of eater and eaten that made up so much of the flow of the woods. I thanked the spirit of the woods for sending me such a strong and noble adversary to teach me my lesson."
Page 144.

"I hunt with a camera now because I believe that the forest had a twofold purpose in bringing my deer and me together. Human beings are the predators, and that is a fact that can be understood in the way I came to understand it. But the agonies of the kill stayed with me, and I believed that the forest had made me a present of death so that I would avoid inflicting it in the future." Page 145.

". . . a human hand emerged from the ground. All I could think of was it was reaching out and grabbing us to drag us down into the ground, the Jersey Devil striking back at non-believers." Page 150.

"Or maybe, we laughed so hard and long, because we were too old to cry." Page 160.

"You killed my deer! You killed my deer!" Page 166.

"I went to the Dakota Badlands to see if I could survive. I had ten dollars in my pocket when I left and after living off the land for three months and working my way as I went, I came back ten pounds heavier and ninety dollars richer." Page 189.

"The most difficult part of my stay was the water. At the end, I was on my knees praying for rain. I got rewarded with torrential downpours that almost drowned me in a flash flood. Thereafter, I did not seek divine intervention. . . ."Page 190.

". . . I hadn't even achieved the commonplace. I had no job, no house, no family, no life insurance, and no sit-on lawn mower. I began to wonder what my purpose in being alive was, and where I fit in the scheme of things. The trail of a person I will call Tommy changed all that." Page 213.

Topics for Discussion

Tom Brown Junior is allowed to roam freely in the woods, even when he is at some risk. Considering the stories in this book, and considering the lessons that Brown learns, is this appropriate? Should his parents have let him be so free?

Rick and Tom Brown Junior become best friends, so much so that in this book, their motivations and feelings seem much the same. Discuss several aspects of true best friendship.

Grandfather Stalking Wolf uses a teaching technique of few words but many gestures and provisions for learning situations. What is good about his teaching technique? What do you think might not be good about it?

This book promotes an American Indian way of life, of being master of oneself in nature by submitting to it, of honoring nature and taking care of the earth. Do you think this is possible for modern people today?

During the experience with the Boy Scouts, Brown and Rick learn that even adults may not know what is needed to survive. During that time, they decide to devote themselves to helping people, especially helping find those that have gotten lost. How does this decision shape Brown's life? What is your own response to a life of service such as this?

Discuss Tom Brown's discoveries regarding fear.

Tom Brown learns to eat a very unusual diet in the woods. What are some components of this diet? What is your response to this type of eating?

Auto-didacticism, or teaching or educating oneself, is central to the growing up of Tom Brown and his friend Rick. Discuss how they did this self-instruction. What is the value of this type of education?

Tom Brown Junior seems to have a direct course to his life, a pattern that leads to his life's work or life's mission. Detail the journey to finding this mission. Is it your belief that people are born with a life's mission? Explain your point of view.