

Touching Spirit Bear Study Guide

Touching Spirit Bear by Ben Mikaelson

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Plot Summary

Cole Matthews is a teenager with a troubled childhood. He is routinely abused by his father and the abuse leads to a deep, constant anger that Cole can't control. His mother witnesses the abuse but generally does nothing to stop it, leading Cole to believe that no one cares for him. Cole believes that everyone is making fun of him unless he makes them afraid of him. He routinely fights and feels that he has the upper hand by his sheer ability to win.

Cole breaks into a store where he steals and vandalizes the business. He then brags about it at school and a fellow student, Peter Driscall, tells on him. When Cole finds out who turned him in, he attacks Peter. The brutal assault leaves Peter with permanent injuries and puts Cole in the legal system. Though his parents have always paid his way out of trouble in the past, Cole is now facing real jail time for the assault.

Cole attracts the attention of a parole officer named Garvey. Garvey is a member of the Tlingit Indian tribe of Alaska and a proponent of a new program called Circle Justice. The program brings together criminals, victims, court officials, and members of the community along with family members and friends of anyone involved. Cole sees the program as a way of avoiding jail but doesn't embrace the possibility of changing himself in the process.

The group agrees that Cole should spend a year on an island off the Alaskan coast. He is to spend the time alone with the exception of routine visits by a local tribe elder, Edwin, who will bring supplies. Cole agrees to go but doesn't plan to stay. As soon as he is alone, he burns down the cabin built for him by Edwin and paid for by Cole's father. Then he tries to swim off the island but goes against the tide and is forced back to land.

He plans to make another swim the following day, this time using the tide to his advantage, but he has an encounter with a large white bear, the Spirit Bear. Cole is furious when the bear isn't afraid of him and he attacks it. The bear rips Cole to pieces, breaking bones and making it impossible for Cole to even stand. Cole fears he will die but manages to live by eating worms, bugs, and a mouse, and opening his mouth to the near-constant rain. Just when he knows that death is very near, the bear returns and stands over Cole. He reaches out and touches it without understanding why the bear doesn't attack.

Garvey returns to check on Cole and takes him for medical treatment. Six months later, Cole again stands before the Circle Justice and the group reluctantly gives him another chance. This time, Cole has to pay for all his supplies and has to build his own shelter. Garvey and Edwin guide him on the first steps toward healing but as the year nears its end, Cole finds there is still something missing. When he learns that Peter is so depressed that he has attempted suicide, Cole begs for Peter to have time on the island, believing it will heal Peter as it has healed Cole.



Peter's parents agree to the plan because they fear that Peter won't get better until he faces his fears. Under Garvey's watchful eye, Peter and Cole spend weeks together on the island. Peter is bitter and often takes out his anger on Cole. One day, Peter physically strikes Cole. Cole refuses to fight back or to run away, which makes Peter furious. The beating continues until Peter is too exhausted to keep hitting Cole. As Peter sobs, Cole reaches out and the two boys are in an embrace that begins the healing process between them.

As they hold onto each other, Cole realizes that the Spirit Bear is standing a short distance away. Peter learns what Cole has already realized. The bear is only present when the humans are able to lose themselves.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

The first section is "Touching Spirit Bear." Chapter one opens with Cole Matthews seated in a skiff that is headed toward an island off the mainland of Southeast Alaska. He has traveled with a parole officer named Garvey from his home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, first to Seattle then to Ketchikan, Alaska, before arriving at Drake, Alaska. Drake is a native village of the Tlingit Indians. A Tlingit elder named Edwin is also in the boat. Cole is to live on the island for a full year. He will be alone and the banishment is an alternative to jail time.

Cole is fifteen. He is smirking as they ride in the boat though he is furious at the situation. Cole is here because of a decision by a new program called Circle Justice. He has been in trouble for most of his life but always feels that he'll have another chance to stay out of jail. Cole thinks about the situation that prompted his most recent arrest.

Cole broke in to a hardware store, taking money and vandalizing the business. A few days later, Cole bragged about it at school. Another student, Peter Driscall, reported Cole. When Cole found out, he brutally beat Peter. Peter tried to escape but Cole continued the beating. Eventually, someone held Cole back while Peter lay in a puddle of blood on the sidewalk. Cole was arrested and held in a detention center.

While being held, a Tlingit Indian who is a parole officer began to visit Cole. The man's name is Garvey and he stopped by almost every day. Cole couldn't figure out why. Garvey introduced Cole to the idea of the Circle Justice. Garvey said it's a program that offers options to help the victims and the criminals heal rather than simply punishing the criminals. Cole saw it as a way to avoid jail and pretended to want to participate though he imagined everyone involved is a fool.

In Chapter Two, Cole looks around the boat as they are traveling toward the island. There are boxes filled with necessities, including food, bedding, rain gear, cooking supplies, and an ax. There is also schoolwork that he's supposed to complete but Cole knows he won't do any of it. Cole's father, William Matthews, is paying for all of it. There is already a cabin on the island, built by Edwin.

Edwin tells Cole that he's going to be responsible for himself while he's alone on the island. He says that there are things Cole has to do in order to survive, including cutting enough wood to get through the winter. He says that if Cole doesn't do what's necessary, he'll die. Cole brags that he isn't afraid of death but Edwin says Cole would be if he was facing it right now.

Edwin also talks about the lessons Cole will need to learn during his time of banishment. He says there is a great white bear called the Spirit Bear off the coast of British Columbia. Cole says he would kill such a bear. Edwin says Cole has to learn a



lesson about treating animals and nature with respect. Edwin and Garvey finish unloading the boat and finally release Cole from his handcuffs. Edwin says they'll return in a few days to check on Cole before Garvey returns to his job in Minneapolis. After that, Edwin will return to the island only to bring supplies every few weeks.

As they are preparing to leave, Garvey gives Cole a blanket. He says it's an "at.oow," which is a blanket handed down through generations of a family. Garvey says he's giving it to Cole as a sign of trust and that Cole will in turn give it to someone else someday.

Cole makes a rude gesture at the men as they depart. He thinks back to the Circle Justice group who had questioned him. Cole knew what the members of the group wanted to hear and told whatever lies he had to in order to be believed. As soon as Garvey and Edwin are out of sight, Cole lets his rage grow. He splashes gas all over the supplies and the cabin and sets it on fire.

In Chapter Three, Cole is disappointed that he doesn't feel a sense of joy from burning the cabin. Cole remembers Garvey visiting one day while Cole was still in the detention center. Garvey brought the conversation around to Cole's childhood. Cole said that his father drank until he was so angry that he beat Cole while his mother drank so that she could ignore the situation. Garvey then used the ingredients for a cake to illustrate that Cole could take all the bad things that have happened in his life to make something good.

As the flames from the cabin begin to die down, Cole sees the at.oow. He throws it toward the fire as well then rushes toward the shoreline. Cole is a strong swimmer and believes he can swim to an island just visible in the distance, then to the next and the next, eventually making his way to the mainland.

Analysis

There are some important looks at Cole's character in these early chapters of the book though the reader won't know most of the details until later. Cole is riding along in a boat as the story opens. An Indian elder named Edwin is also in the boat along with a native named Garvey. Cole is smirking as they continue their journey. He is here only to avoid jail and has no interest in making the process work in his favor. At one point, he spits and the glob of spit hits Edwin. Cole acts as if he's surprised that it happened, but he actually did it on purpose. This lack of regard for others is an important part of Cole's character at this point.

Cole has had a difficult life. His father has always been physically and emotionally abusive and his mother hasn't seriously tried to stop the abuse. Cole has learned to meet every situation with violence and he doesn't know anything else. An important lesson he's going to have to learn is that he's ultimately responsible for his own life and has to take responsibility for his own actions. At this point in the story, he is still blaming everyone else. He says he wouldn't have been in trouble for attacking Peter if Peter had



fought back. He thinks about the people who seemed to try to help and puts it down to “fake concern.” Ultimately, he believes that everyone is afraid of him and that their fear is why they are sending him to a remote island.

Garvey is very wise and he has already begun to plant ideas of healing and change in Cole's head, though Cole isn't interested in hearing any of it at this point. Garvey realizes that Cole is trying to intimidate him and asks if Cole believes that bullying someone will buy respect and trust. Garvey says that Cole has a lot to learn about trust. Cole really does believe that he can use violence to control people, and he believes that if someone is afraid of him, Cole can trust that person to do right. Cole will later admit to being abused by his own father. Cole doesn't change his actions because he's afraid of his father's violence but he doesn't yet realize that he's acting exactly like his father but expecting different results.

A great deal of money, effort, and planning goes into making the one-year stay on the island possible for Cole. However, he doesn't appreciate any aspect of it as help. He looks at it only as punishment and believes that it was a means of getting rid of him, mainly because people are afraid of him. What Cole doesn't seem to consider is that he could have been shipped off to a jail and left there as punishment. He could have simply served his sentence in a place where he is one of many with a system in place to make certain he doesn't escape. The fact that so many people worked to give him this chance is completely lost on Cole. He spends a lot of time planning his revenge on the people he believes betrayed him.

Garvey and Edwin spend a great deal of time and energy trying to make Cole understand things about himself and life. While Cole is still in detention, Garvey visits often. One day, he brings in a bag filled with items. There's butter, baking powder, flour, and other ingredients. He challenges Cole to taste each one. Cole, angry over the lesson, takes a huge bite of everything. When he's finished Garvey asks if it all tasted good. Cole agrees that it didn't. Garvey then produces a cake, made with each of the ingredients, and Cole admits that the cake tastes good. Garvey is trying to make Cole realize that all of the bad things that have happened to him can still be turned into a good life. Cole, as always, is furious and throws everything on the floor.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the situation that culminates with Cole being sent to the island.

Discussion Question 2

What is Cole like during this part of the book? Make a list of his traits and keep them for comparison at the end of the book.



Discussion Question 3

What is Cole supposed to accomplish while on the island?

Vocabulary

feigned, banishment, omen, shrouded, brandished, meekly, mustered, spewing, barrage, barged, mimicked, ricocheted, mocked, subside



Chapters 4-6

Summary

In Chapter Four, Cole makes his way out of the bay and sees that the next island is about a mile away. He remembers the process of the Circle Justice that brought him to the island. There were a series of meetings that were led by the Keeper. The Keeper met privately with the victim and his family to let them know about the process. In some cases, the victim could be involved, but it was all aimed at helping everyone heal.

One of Cole's meetings was held in a room in the library. Those who gathered include the judge in the case, Cole's parents, Cole's lawyer, Garvey, Peter and his parents, Peter's attorney, and some concerned people from the community. His parents were divorced. His mother sat on one side of Cole while his father sat on the other. While the Keeper said an opening prayer, Cole looked up and met Peter's eyes. Cole put on a threatening face and was pleased that Peter quickly looked away, but then realized that Peter's attorney saw the action. As the meeting began, the Keeper said the goal is to meet the needs of both the victim and the offender. The Keeper warned that it would not be an "easy way out" of the court system, and that healing was often more difficult than simply serving a sentence in jail.

Cole's attorney was Nathaniel Blackwood. Cole didn't like him and said that the lawyer looked as if he wasn't real. The lawyer said that "kids will be kids" and that Cole had already spent some time in a detention facility. He said Cole should be released to go home to one of his parents.

When it was Cole's turn to talk, he said that he wanted the Circle to help him get over his anger. He didn't really want that but knows that's what the people present wanted to hear. When it was Peter's turn, he said that he was present only because he "got beat up." Cole noted that Peter had trouble with his speech. Cole felt a brief pang of guilt but knew that he wouldn't have beaten Peter up if Peter hadn't told on Cole.

In Chapter Five, Cole continues to swim but is dismayed to discover he is barely out of the bay of the island. He suddenly realizes that he's trying to swim against the tide and that he'll never make it to the next island. He gives up and returns to the bay. By the time he's there, he's literally exhausted. It's also very cold and he knows he's in danger. He's suddenly fully aware that he's all alone and that no one is going to save him from the cold. He manages to pull himself away from the water and finds a warm spot on the earth. He realizes that he's in the middle of the ashes of the burned cabin.

He finally manages to stand and discovers that he can feel a presence. He sees a large white bear at the shoreline. He realizes this is the Spirit Bear and he's instantly furious that the bear isn't afraid. Cole finds the blade of a hunting knife among the ashes from the cabin and turns to confront the bear. It's gone.



Cole still doesn't regret burning the cabin and the supplies, and he doesn't regret beating Peter. He feels that all of it is "someone else's fault." Cole remembers a meeting of the Circle Justice group. Cole's father, William, spoke. He said that he and Cole's mother, Cindy, had "devoted our lives to him." Cole interrupted. He was furious and accused his father of being an alcoholic and of beating Cole so severely that his shirt wouldn't hide all the bruises.

In Chapter Six, Cole continues to remember that meeting. He said that his father didn't care about anyone other than himself. William objected and grabbed Cole's arm. Cole and his father entered into a screaming match and the Keeper had trouble regaining control. Cindy had an opportunity to talk but took one look at William and didn't say anything. Garvey took over. He challenged the members of the group to decide how they would react in Cole's situation. He said the family and the community failed Cole. Peter's attorney countered, saying that Cole was out of control.

Peter's mother spoke up. She pointed out that Peter had co-ordination and speech issues, and that he would deal with these problems for the rest of his life, because of Cole. When it was Peter's turn to talk again, he said that "someone should smash Cole's head against a sidewalk so he knows how it feels." The meeting ended soon after that comment.

Cole goes to the nearby stream and drinks. He is hungry but determined to be satisfied with the water. He plans to try to swim away from the island again, but knows he should wait for the following day and use the tide to his advantage. He manages to build a fire from the embers of the cabin. He wishes he could witness the reactions of Garvey, Edwin, and William when they discover that Cole has vanished.

Cole continues to remember the events that brought him to the island. When Garvey presented the idea of a year on the island, several people were skeptical. The judge asked for a plan and Garvey suggested that Cole would spend the year on the island, then be evaluated before determining if he should be sentenced to time in a prison as well. Garvey told Cole that if he changes his life while on the island, he could be set free. Cole, having just spent several months locked up in a detention facility, jumped at the chance and believed it won't be difficult. Garvey says Cole wouldn't be able to cheat his own hunger or manipulate a storm into being something else.

Analysis

Cole's memories during these early chapters give important insight into his life. Cole's father is wealthy and likes to show off that money. Cole is thinking at one point about home and knows that the huge house, owned by his parents and carefully landscaped to show off their wealth, has never been a real home to Cole. This lack of stability is important because Cole is one more step in a cycle of abuse that stretches back at least two generations.



Cole confronts his father during a Circle Justice meeting. It seems reasonable that Cole might have decided on the confrontation as a means of showing the others present that he has had a difficult life, but this apparently isn't the case. This is one of the few times during the first part of the book in which Cole is honest and isn't trying to manipulate the situation in his favor. It also seems possible that Cole is lying about the abuse in an effort to refocus the attention on his parents, but this also isn't the case. Cole is truly a victim of abuse from his father and his mother's indifference has escalated Cole's feelings of being unloved. This is an important theme seen in the book and Cole's beating of Peter is one more step in the cycle of violence.

When Cole is accusing his father of abuse, he says that William has never truly cared for anyone other than himself. He says that William probably doesn't even know Cole's birthday. As the meeting is breaking up, William says that Cole isn't the center of attention here and that it's time for him to learn some responsibility. It seems to be a very mature, parental comment but Garvey has come to realize that William is self-centered and uncaring. Garvey challenges William, asking for Cole's birthday, and William can only guess that it's in July. While not remembering the date might not be a sign of serious neglect, it seems likely that this is a sign that William doesn't care that much about Cole, which gives some credence to Cole's other claims of abuse.

Discussion Question 1

What is the lesson Garvey illustrates using baking ingredients?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Cole's first sighting of the Spirit Bear and his reaction to the animal.

Discussion Question 3

Define Cole's relationship with his father.

Vocabulary

conjure, detached, lurking, taunted, rigid, unflinching, muted, retreated, manipulated, consequences, quest, skepticism



Chapters 7-9

Summary

In Chapter Seven, Cole has trouble finding dry wood for the fire and he battles thick swarms of mosquitoes. He suddenly sees the Spirit Bear again. The bear is still not afraid and Cole realizes he needs a better weapon. Using the knife blade, he makes a spear but when he returns, the bear is gone.

The next morning, Cole is hungry and knows that he'll need his strength in order to make the swim. It's raining and cold, which makes food that much more important. Cole walks to the shore and finds seagulls pecking at a fish. He shoos them away and cooks the remaining part of the fish. He continues to watch the tide level in preparation of his swim. When he goes to the bay to check, he sees the Spirit Bear again. Cole threatens the bear with his spear, expecting it will run. Instead, the bear turns to face Cole.

Cole considers moving away from the bear and knows that no one would ever know that he chose to run away. He is dealing with "a lifetime of hurt" and years spent trying to prove himself to his father. Instead of backing away, he moves forward. He knows his next action will change his life forever but he can't bring himself to back down. He aims the spear at the Spirit Bear's chest.

In Chapter Eight, the Spirit Bear deflects the spear and strikes Cole. The bear then launches an attack, mauling Cole. Cole hears bones breaking, including his pelvis, arm, and ribs. The bear bites Cole's thigh, puncturing the flesh. His claws rip across Cole's chest repeatedly. The bear is so close that Cole pulls a handful of hair from the bear's neck. Cole cries out for the bear to stop, but it doesn't. Then, when Cole thinks the bear is going to finish killing him, the bear casually steps aside and walks away.

Cole realizes that he can't move anything more than one arm and his head. He can't take deep breaths and believes that he's going to die. He begins to worry that death won't be quick, and that the seagulls might begin pecking at him even before he is dead. He is queasy and knows that it will hurt if he throws up, but he finally can't stand it any longer and manages to turn his head sideways as he vomits. He suddenly feels that he was foolish to choose this instead of jail. He feels powerless and there's no one to blame for the situation. He is bitter and lonely, and he cries.

In Chapter Nine, Cole's thoughts return to the people who put him on the island. He is again certain that none of this is his fault, letting his anger rise up. A storm begins. During a flash of lightning, Cole sees the Spirit Bear again. When lightning strikes again, the bear is gone. As the storm rages, Cole realizes that he has no control over the storm and that he is weak compared to the nature around him. He realizes that he has never really been in control of anything.



Cole knows that he's near death and that he has to make a choice. He can fight to live or simply give up. He decides he will fight.

Analysis

During his first night on the island, Cole is cold and battling mosquitoes. He has no real weapons for defense and he doesn't have anything to eat. By some miracle, the at.oow has survived and he creates a mattress of sorts from some branches. As he is trying to sleep, he thinks about what his life might have been like on the island. He says that it would have been easy to survive here, especially with the cabin and the supplies provided with his father's money. Cole still doesn't realize how much work it takes to survive in nature with no modern conveniences. This lack of respect for the life is an important part of Cole's character and it takes him a long time to come to realize the amount of work others have done on his behalf.

The relationship between man and nature is an important theme of the book. Cole's lessons about nature begin with the Spirit Bear's attack. Edwin had warned that Cole should be kind to the animals. He said that whatever Cole does to the animals, the animals will do back to Cole. Immediately after the attack, Cole sees some seagulls fighting over scraps of something. He realizes they are fighting over scraps of Cole's flesh. Cole realizes that all pieces of life are part of something bigger. He begins to process this information and it's the first step toward his own healing.

Cole pulls a handful of hair from the Spirit Bear and for awhile, he thinks about the story he's going to have. He will be able to say that he survived a bear attack, but then he realizes that he might not survive. Cole puts that hair in his pocket and he believes it will be his proof of how close he was to the bear. Later, he'll realize that he doesn't need to prove anything and he'll throw the hair away without showing anyone.

Cole's attitude begins a dramatic change as he's on the ground, helpless, following the attack. He feels certain that he's going to die and he seeks to find someone to blame, but there's no one near and that puts the blame back on Cole. A short time later, he is back to blaming others and any progress toward accepting responsibility is gone. This won't be the last time Cole wavers between accepting responsibility for himself and placing all the blame on others.

Cole sees a nest of baby birds in a tree overhead. The mother bird repeatedly goes to the nest, feeding the babies. The sight angers Cole and he knows that he could climb up the tree and knock down the nest if he wasn't injured. He thinks that is what the baby birds deserve. He is angry that these helpless birds have a mother who is caring for them and that they are safe in their nest. Cole says he wouldn't take care of the babies, even if he was their mother. This is part of the cycle of abuse and neglect Cole has known his entire life, an important theme of the story. While his father beats Cole, his mother stands by without trying to stop it. Without a positive, loving home, Cole feels no need to protect or care for anyone or anything else. However, lightning strikes the tree and it falls. Cole calls out to the baby birds but knows they have probably died. The fact



that he is so near death and helpless against the storm is the reason for his change of heart toward the birds.

Discussion Question 1

What is Cole's home life like? How might this affect his attitudes and actions toward others?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Cole angry that the baby birds' mother is taking care of them?

Discussion Question 3

What does Cole say about his chances of surviving a year on the island, if he had chosen to follow through with that plan? Do you think he's right in this assessment?

Vocabulary

passive, boughs, roiled, receding, cowered, gluttonous, brazenly, mauled, stark, tentative, harmony, fend, insignificant



Chapters 10-13

Summary

In Chapter Ten, Cole continues to cling to life. He feels helpless and that feeling is intensified when he uses the bathroom in his clothes. He no longer has enough energy to feel angry. The next morning, Cole's resolve to live grows stronger, even as he is growing weaker. He knows he needs food. He pulls up a handful of grass and chews it up. He tries to swallow but it gets stuck and he gags until he vomits it back up. He then sees the wad of grass on his chest. He picks it up and eats it, chewing it more carefully this time. He eats more grass, then eats the worms that he can reach before turning to several bugs. With each bite, he feels strength returning to his body. A mouse climbs onto Cole and he remains very still. When the mouse is right by his hand, he grabs it.

In Chapter Eleven, Cole uses his jaws to crush the mouse's head, killing it. He then eats it all, again feeling the strength it offers. Cole sees that two seagulls are eating the bits of fish from his vomit the previous evening. He scares them away and eats the fish himself.

It rains and Cole opens his mouth for water. He digs a hole in the mud beside him, smearing the mud all over his body to help keep the mosquitoes away. He then drinks from hole he's created, though it takes a lot of effort to get even a sip of water all the way to his mouth.

Cole sees that the Spirit Bear has returned. He works up a mouthful of saliva and spits toward the Spirit Bear but it falls far short. The bear begins to walk toward Cole and he feels this attack will end in his death.

In Chapter Twelve, the Spirit Bear stops and licks at Cole's spit before walking away. Later, the Spirit Bear stops just inches from Cole. Cole and the bear stare into each other's eyes. Cole is no longer afraid and he senses the bear is only curious. He plans to spit on the bear again but stops himself, though he doesn't know why. Cole touches the bear, feeling the need to know how it feels to touch the bear that is going to kill him. When Cole drops his hand back to his side, the bear seems to nod, then turns and walks to the ocean. He goes into the water and swims away.

Cole suddenly sees the world as a wonderful place. He wonders how much beauty he has destroyed and how much he has missed by seeing only the ugly side of everything. He feels himself slipping closer to death and knows he won't survive much longer. He is glad that he had the moment of trust with the Spirit Bear before facing death.

Cole hears a buzzing sound and is irritated when there are sounds of an argument. He imagines it's the seagulls. It's actually Garvey and Edwin. They move Cole to the boat and take him to the mainland.



In Chapter Thirteen, a nurse named Rosey takes care of Cole. She tends his wounds with her limited resources. She wants to get him to a hospital but the weather is bad and there won't be a flight until the following morning. At one point, Cole wakes and asks Rosey why she's helping him. She says everyone has the responsibility to help others.

Garvey says "helping others is how I help myself." He says he spent time in prison and never got to make amends, so he now tries to help other people. As Cole is preparing for the trip to the hospital, he tells Garvey that his broken arm isn't important. He refers back to Garvey's example of the cake. Cole says the events that brought him to this point are as important as the end result, and that includes being mauled by a bear. Garvey says Cole still has to face the hospital and his sentencing. He says it isn't likely he'll be allowed to return to the island. Cole assures Garvey he can handle whatever happens next without anger.

Analysis

When daylight arrives in Chapter Ten, Cole sees the four baby birds. They are all dead and he's suddenly very sad about that. He thinks that the little birds are insignificant in the grand scheme of life but he realizes that he is equally insignificant. He wonders if there's any meaning in the life, death, and insignificance.

The scene in which Cole eats grass, bugs, worm, a mouse, and his own vomit is truly disgusting. The author puts in a great deal of detail, down to the way Cole chews up the last bit of mouse fur and picks the bits of fish from his vomit. This may be disturbing to some readers but it is a harsh reality that Cole is now the only person responsible for his survival. He has decided that he wants to live and that he'll do everything in his power to survive. This will to survive is a theme of the book.

Cole is beginning to change but the changes will take a long time to fully manifest in Cole's life. When the Spirit Bear is again near, Cole spits at it. Cole spit at Edwin during the trip to the island and it's obvious that this is a sign of his hatred and distrust. However, the bear isn't put off by the action. He walks over and licks at the spit. This could be symbolic for the insignificance of Cole's action in the face of such danger. Cole believes he's being defiant but he's really just being stupid and childish. The same can be said of Cole spitting on Edwin. Cole believes he's being defiant but Edwin sees it as childish.

When Cole is in the village of Drake awaiting transport to the hospital, he tells Garvey about being attacked by the Spirit Bear. Garvey says those bears do not roam this far from their native areas and that Cole can't possibly have seen a Spirit Bear. Garvey does admit that Cole believes he saw the Spirit Bear, and that he can accept that. Cole has the hair of the Spirit Bear in his pocket and this would prove that he's telling the truth. He considers showing the hair to Garvey but decides not to. He comes to realize that he doesn't have to prove anything to anyone, not even to Garvey, and that knowing the truth himself is enough. He throws the hair onto the water and watches it float away.



Discussion Question 1

What does Cole do to survive after the bear attack? Why do you believe he goes to such lengths? Would you?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the times Cole sees the Spirit Bear and what he thinks with each time he sees it.

Discussion Question 3

How does Cole's attitude about the baby birds change between his first sighting of them and the morning he finds them dead? Why does this change take place?

Vocabulary

seeped, doggedly, utter, absolute, gaping, hallucination, spasmed, frantically, quarry, replenish, frantic, deceit, submission, penetrated, wavering, intense, resigned, garbled



Chapters 14-16

Summary

Part Two is titled "Return to Spirit Bear." Chapter Fourteen opens six months after the end of Chapter Thirteen. Cole is being released from the hospital. He no longer has full use of his right arm. About a month after the attack, Garvey tells Cindy that it's her responsibility to press charges against William for child abuse and William is arrested. He is released almost immediately on bail and doesn't visit Cole at all during his hospital stay.

After he is released from the hospital, Cole is returned to the detention facility. Garvey says the Circle Justice will probably send Cole back into the court system. Cole says he understands but pledges to someday return to the island, even if it's on his own.

Cindy says she hopes to have a home with Cole after his release. They have an honest talk about their lives. Cindy says she and William had planned to have a happy life together with Cole but that William had never dealt with his own abusive childhood.

The Circle Justice meets again. The Keeper gives an overview of Cole's experiences but Cole knows that she doesn't have all the information, including the birds that died, Cole's struggle to hold onto life, or his moment of connection with the Spirit Bear. Cole is surprised when Edwin arrives. He reverently asks permission to join the circle and is invited into the discussion. He asks Cole to explain what's happened.

In Chapter Fifteen, Cole begins by admitting that he was mad and didn't believe that the Circle Justice was trying to help rather than punish. When he's finished, others talk. Peter's lawyer says Cole belongs in the court system. She says Peter isn't doing well, physically or emotionally, and that Cole has to pay for his actions.

Edwin obviously believes Cole deserves another chance. He challenges Cole to walk along a line on the floor. Cole does and Edwin leans into him, pushing more and more until Cole is off the line and struggling to get back to it. Then Cole walks in the other direction and Edwin gives him a hard push. Cole struggles far off the line. Edwin tells the group that the two ways a person changes is through constant, steady pressure, or an intense event. Some members of the group say Cole has manipulated the group before and are skeptical that the attack has made Cole change significantly.

Edwin proposes that Cole be sent back to the island for a year. He says this time Cole will have to sell off possessions to pay for the supplies he'll need, and he'll have to do everything himself, including building a new cabin.

The Circle Justice continues to meet, but Cole is not part of the meetings. William refuses to keep paying for a lawyer and Cole's attorney quits. Cole knows that he's going to jail and tries to prepare himself for that situation. One day, Edwin and Garvey arrive. They question Cole about his feelings and the events on the island. Cole says



that he really believed he was going to die after the attack. He says he realized then that he had never trusted anyone, never been trusted, and never loved. He felt that his life would be a total loss without those things. Edwin and Garvey say the Circle Justice has agreed to allow Cole to spend a year on the island with Edwin and Garvey taking responsibility for him during that time.

Chapter Sixteen opens in Southeast Alaska where Cole is arriving on the island with Edwin and Garvey. He has sold all his sports equipment, including a snowmobile, dirt bike, skis, and bicycle. Cole admits to being upset at seeing it all go, but accepts that this is the price of returning to the island. When they arrive on the island, Garvey and Edwin make the new rules clear. They are going to remain for a few days in case Cole has problems building his cabin, but they aren't going to do any work.

Cole's duties will include making all the meals for Edwin and Garvey while they are on the island. He asks what will happen if he refuses. Garvey says he and Edwin will take Cole back to Minneapolis. Garvey then challenges Cole to cook a hot dog for himself. Cole hurriedly cooks the hot dog over the fire and eats it. Garvey says that hot dog fulfilled its purpose in taking away Cole's hunger, but did nothing else.

Garvey then cooks a hot dog of his own. He roasts it carefully, then puts it on bread along with a slice of tomato, cheese, and ketchup. He pours a glass of water for each of the three and offers a toast of friendship before giving Cole and Edwin each a portion of his hot dog. Garvey is demonstrating that a simple meal with just a hot dog can become a feast if it's shared with friends. He challenges Cole to make his time on the island a celebration. He says Cole has the power to do so, but it has to be a conscious decision.

Analysis

Cole's encounter with the Spirit Bear becomes a serious issue of contention. The Spirit Bear is known to exist but not in this area, making Cole's story seem unbelievable. Garvey says he knows Cole "believes" he saw the bear, but Garvey obviously thinks it was actually something else. Peter's lawyer says Cole is not telling the truth. She picks up this piece of information and says that Cole can't be trusted at all because he's lying about this fact. Cole had a handful of hair but it seems possible that people wouldn't have believed him, even if he had that hair. When he's leaving Drake, Cole says he doesn't need anyone to believe him and he continues to hold to that, even when it seems he might be sent to jail.

Cole's second visit to the island is much different than his first. This time, Edwin and Garvey have taken responsibility for Cole and he owes them a debt for that. When they first arrive, Edwin and Garvey wander off down the beach, leaving the boat unguarded. For a moment, Cole considers jumping in and escaping, but he resists. He later admits that and the two men say they took the spark plug from the motor so that it wouldn't start. They say they believe in Cole but that he hasn't yet earned their trust. This idea of taking responsibility and working toward specific goals is new to Cole. The fact that he



does accept this banishment and plans to make it work this time is an example of one of the important themes of the story.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe things might have been different for Cole if he had kept the hair from the Spirit Bear?

Discussion Question 2

How will Cole's second time on the island be different from his first? Which will be a better lesson for Cole?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Garvey's demonstration with the hot dog. What is the point of his message?

Vocabulary

stark, relinquish, monotonous, violated, reverently, rigid, irked, vaulted



Chapters 17-19

Summary

In Chapter Seventeen, Cole finds himself angry again that night. He knows that he will be bored and lonely after Garvey and Edwin are gone. He dreads that time. Edwin wakes him before daylight the next morning. Cole is reluctant to face the cold but gives in to Edwin's insistence. They go to the creek and follow it to a large pool. During the walk, Cole admits that he's battling anger, even now.

Edwin undresses and gets into the frigid water. Cole argues but finally gives in as Edwin says the cold water will help Cole find a calm place. The water takes his breath but he remains next to Edwin.

Edwin challenges Cole to look at a stick as if it is his life. He says the left end of the stick is anger. He instructs Cole to break off that end of the stick. Cole does but then Edwin points out that there's still a left end on the stick. Cole realizes that each time he breaks a section of the stick, there's still an end remaining. Edwin says some people spend a lifetime trying to "break off" their anger. He says the key is to learn to deal with it rather than trying to eliminate it. Edwin says Cole can learn to be happy, but it only works if he's willing to take one day at a time. He ends the lesson by saying that Cole can use the pond to help him find peace each day. Cole admits that Edwin's suggestion seems more possible than the information provided by the counselors.

In Chapter Eighteen, Edwin and Cole return to camp. Cole refuses to make breakfast, eating a bowl of cereal and preparing to work. Edwin offers Cole a pair of gloves but Cole says he isn't a "wimp" and refuses to use them. Edwin doesn't insist but begins showing Cole how to lay out the foundation of his cabin. A few hours later, Cole has accomplished some of the work but his hands are blistered and he's hungry from eating such a light breakfast.

That evening, Cole makes himself a hamburger and announces he's going to bed. Garvey insists that he cook burgers for Garvey and Edwin as well, and instructs Cole to "make it a feast." Cole grudgingly complies. He then leaves camp while Edwin and Garvey eat and then washes the dishes.

Edwin talks about nature and the whales they'd seen earlier that day. He and Garvey announce that they will do the whale dance. They go around the fire, mimicking traits of the whales and then explain what they learned from the whales. Cole is self-conscious about performing but realizes that Edwin and Garvey are going to insist that he participate. After his dance, he says that whales migrate and don't really have a home. He ends by saying that he feels like those whales.



Cole asks Edwin what a “dance of anger” would be like. Edwin says that dance is difficult because it means letting go of anger. He says Cole will perform that dance some night when he's alone.

The following morning, Edwin wakes Cole for their trip to the pool. Edwin says they'll continue to go to the pool until Cole no longer has anger, and predicts there will come a time when Cole wants to go to the pool. As they head back to camp, Edwin picks up a large round rock that he calls the Ancestor Rock. He has Cole pick it up and carry it to the top of the hill. Edwin says Cole should consider that the rock represents the generations of his family who came before him. He says Cole should carry his real ancestors with him, just like he's carrying this rock, and that he should be ready to listen to their wisdom. At the top of the hill, Edwin has Cole give the rock a shove, letting it roll back to the bottom. He says that Cole should imagine his anger in that rock, and that his anger is leaving as the rock rolls away.

In Chapter Nineteen, Cole puts lotion on his blistered hands and he puts on his gloves before beginning another day of work. They see a wolf and Garvey says they'll dance the wolf dance that evening. Cole spends his day working and doesn't talk a lot. Edwin says that Cole will have to tear down the cabin at the end of the stay, and that all signs of his visit will be removed. That evening, Cole refuses to cook supper or do the dance. Garvey says they'll leave for Minneapolis the following morning and Cole grudgingly moves to make the meal. Garvey says that it doesn't matter whether Cole cooks a meal, but is whether he is willing to do his part. Cole apologizes but Garvey says Cole is the only one who is being hurt by his attitude.

Cole continues to talk but both Garvey and Edwin make it clear that Cole is going to have to change if he wants to finish the project and spend the year on the island. Then both go to bed, leaving Cole up alone. He sits by the fire and then does the wolf dance alone. When he goes to bed, Garvey asks what he learned. Cole says that everyone needs help, just like a wolf who is a member of a pack.

Cole barely sleeps, intent on getting up for his soak in the pool before daylight. Cole also picks up the ancestor rock and makes the walk to the top of the hill. He realizes that he is focused on his life rather than his anger. As he is heading down the hill, he sees a large white shape disappearing into the trees.

Analysis

Cole is becoming more open to healing and growth in his own life. He is beginning to learn to listen to himself and to learn techniques for self-control. When Cole arrived on the island for the first time, he was rude and indifferent. This time, he is willing to listen to Edwin and Garvey, even though he is a long way from healing. Cole changing attitude is evident and foreshadows even bigger changes to come, though he will sometimes fall back on his habits of being angry. When they are leaving the pool one day, Cole asks Edwin why he and Garvey are spending so much time and energy on him. Edwin echoes what Garvey said months earlier, including that both men have hurt



people in the past and are seeking to make amends by helping Cole. Cole snaps back at Edwin on this particular morning and Edwin says they should have stayed longer in the pool.

There is symbolism in the daily ritual at the pool and of carrying the “ancestor rock” up the hill each day. Garvey and Edwin teach Cole about himself, about connecting with nature, and about understanding his emotions. These lessons are all manifested in various symbols and metaphors, including the meal of the hot dogs and the animal dances they perform in the evenings. Cole is gradually accepting these lessons and when he's alone on the island, he will continue the habits of going to the pool, carrying the ancestor rock, and the animal dances. He will also take every opportunity to provide special meals as celebrations.

It's while Cole is alone in the pool for the first time that he begins to realize that he has to stop focusing on himself in order for the pool to work on his anger. He sees a fish and thinks about reaching out for it. With that thought, the fish darts away and Cole realizes that nature is in tune to his thoughts as well as his actions. He finally understands that he has to work on his attitude as much as his actions. This is also the first morning that he doesn't have Edwin timing the length of their stay in the pool. On this morning, he decides when he's ready to get out based only on his emotions without giving any thought to whether he's cold or how long he's been there. Cole is beginning to heal, which is one of the themes of the story, but he isn't yet fully prepared to make the changes necessary.

Discussion Question 1

Cole is angry that Edwin and Garvey refuse to help. Is he right to be angry? Should Garvey and Edwin help?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Cole go to the pool alone the first time? Why does he go through the ritual of carrying the ancestor rock?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Edwin and Garvey threaten to take Cole back to Minneapolis?

Vocabulary

fester, breaching, migrate, redemption, grimacing, deliberately, exposed, flicker, dawdle



Chapters 20-22

Summary

In Chapter Twenty, Cole wonders if he's seen the Spirit Bear. He can't imagine anything else that would be that color and that large. He debates telling Garvey and Edwin but decides not to, fearing they won't believe him and will think he's making up stories. Back at the camp, he says he has come to realize that he keeps blaming others for his situation, and that he's ready to accept responsibility. He says he has learned that he isn't a bad person. Cole says he understands if they want to return to Minneapolis. They agree that he should get back to work on the cabin.

Cole works hard that day and finishes most of the work on the cabin. He cooks a special meal for supper and uses the at.oow as a tablecloth. After the meal, they dance the Spirit Bear dance with Cole going first.

The next morning Garvey and Edwin go to the pool with Cole. He jokingly asks if one of the men wants to carry the ancestor rock but neither laughs and Cole hurriedly says he plans to carry it. As they are leaving, Garvey presents Cole with a knife. He suggests that Cole carve with the knife and predicts it will be another way for Cole to heal. As they leave, Cole admits to himself that he's afraid. Edwin promises to return in a few days.

In Chapter Twenty-one, Cole stays busy. He goes to the pool and climbs the hill with the ancestor rock each morning. He spends time building things for his camp, including a table and bed. He gathers wood for his wood stove. He digs a large hole for his bathroom and admits that he isn't looking forward to going outside to the toilet once the harsh winter sets in. When Edwin leaves, Cole isn't nearly as lonely and knows that he can survive on his own.

One day, Cole finds a large, straight log. He imagines that it would make a good totem pole and rolls it to the water where he floats it back to camp. When he sees how easily it floats, Cole considers making the log into a canoe so that he can leave. He begins working on it and realizes that his anger is growing as he considers running away. He stops working and chops all around the log, ending any possibility that he'll use it for a canoe. When Edwin arrives the next time, Cole tells him the truth about the canoe. Cole then asks about the purpose of the totems. Edwin says the Cole's totem should be his own story, meaning he should carve anything he wants on it.

Edwin says Cole has had letters from his mother even though she knows Cole won't get the letters until his year is up. Cole asks about Peter and Edwin says Peter is deeply depressed.

In Chapter Twenty-two, Cole carves an eagle on his totem and plans to carve a wolf next. He comes to believe that he has to become "invisible" in order to see the Spirit



Bear. He baths, changes clothes, and spends hours sitting perfectly still in the woods, but doesn't see the bear. He struggles to figure out why the Spirit Bear had appeared to him on the previous occasions, but can't make a connection. That night, he realizes how to become invisible.

Analysis

Cole does tell Edwin and Garvey that he believes he's seen the Spirit Bear. Edwin reminds Cole of the attack and asks if Cole is afraid of the bear. Cole says he isn't afraid of the bear but admits that he's afraid of spending so much time alone. Edwin, who has also spent time alone, says he was very lonely at the beginning but that he came to feel peaceful. This loneliness is bound to be a big obstacle for Cole but it is supposed to provide him an opportunity to come to terms with himself, to learn about himself and nature, and to heal from his past.

Cole wants the healing process to hurry and be complete. By the time he's spent a couple of weeks alone, he is recognizing his strengths and weaknesses. He knows that he's better at dealing with anger but really wants to get past the healing process. Edwin tells Cole that he needs to discover something before he can finish healing. Cole wants Edwin to tell him what that one thing is, but Edwin says it won't work unless Cole discovers it. Cole hasn't yet accepted that healing is a process and that he has to be patient enough to go through all the steps in order for it to work.

Cole refers to the need to be "invisible" in order to see the Spirit Bear. He isn't literally planning to be invisible but he does realize that he has to turn the focus away from himself. As is typical of this author, Chapter Twenty-two ends with Cole announcing that he knows how, but the details of his discovery are not revealed until the following chapter. This is an important part of the structure of the book.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the animal dances Edwin and Garvey have introduced to Cole. What is their purpose?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the changes seen in Cole up to this point.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Cole say he isn't afraid of the Spirit Bear?

Vocabulary

muttered, stifled, trance, quizzically, submerged, regained, symbols, ancestry, persistence, ingenuity, jolted



Chapters 23-25

Summary

In Chapter Twenty-three, Cole realizes that he has to clear his mind in order to become invisible so that the Spirit Bear will appear. He realizes that he had been in something of a trance on other occasions of seeing the Spirit Bear. He also realizes that he misses out on many aspects of life when he isn't calm. That morning, he skips the time in the pool and goes to the bay instead. He clears his mind and allows himself to feel the drizzling rain. He closes his eyes for awhile and the Spirit Bear is standing on the shore when he opens them. The bear disappears but Cole continues to feel a close connection to the bear.

Cole realizes that he has made an important discovery about himself by becoming invisible. He also realizes that he's now ready to perform the dance of anger. He screams and relives the bear attack. He throws a large rock into the water and screams out for forgiveness. He continually slams his fist into a tree. He then falls to his knees and repeats, "I'm sorry," over and over. Then he calls out "I forgive you." The dance ends and "a large set of eyes" reflects from the edge of the trees.

In Chapter Twenty-four, Edwin arrives and Cole announces that he's done the anger dance. Cole says he knows he still has to find a way to help Peter and that he won't ever be truly healed until that happens. As the summer passes, Edwin visits only a few times and seems distracted. Cole always has his school work completed and Edwin always takes time to look at Cole's totem. By now, he has carved a seal, a sparrow in a nest, a large raindrop, a bolt of lightning, and a raven. He doesn't have anything at the bottom and still can't figure out what to carve there. Cole continues to see the Spirit Bear until the winter arrives and Cole knows the bear is hibernating.

The winter weather makes the trip to the pool too dangerous and Cole spends more time near the cabin. Loneliness is more of a problem and he sometimes cries himself to sleep. He sometimes deals with anger and worries about how he'll be able to cope once he returns to Minneapolis where there isn't a pool or an ancestor rock.

One day Edwin says that Peter is very depressed and seldom wants to get out of bed. Cole struggles with the news.

Spring arrives. Cole still hasn't carved anything on the bottom of the totem. He has only a few months left on the island. In March, Edwin says Peter tried to commit suicide. Cole asks what he can do and Edwin says Peter may be beyond help. Edwin gets back in the boat and pushes off from the shore. Cole believes that Peter needs time on the island to heal. He calls out to Edwin but Edwin just keeps going without acknowledging Cole's words.



Cole continues to think about Peter. He knows Peter must be desperate if he has tried to kill himself. He knows Peter's parents won't allow their son to stay on the island with Cole but believes there has to be a way. He's surprised to hear Edwin's motor returning the next day. Edwin says Peter has tried again to commit suicide. He says that he wasn't listening to Cole's idea the previous day, but that he's willing to listen now.

In Chapter Twenty-five, Cole says Peter should come to the island. Edwin says Peter's parents wouldn't allow it. Cole says that Edwin could stay with them. Cole says that if Peter sees that Cole has changed, he might be able to begin healing as well. Cole says he could spend the rest of his life on the island and it wouldn't help Peter. Edwin says he and Garvey can see that Cole really has changed. He points out that Cole's time on the island is drawing to a close and asks if he'd extend it in order to help Peter. Cole says he is willing to stay on the island for as long as it takes.

About two weeks later, Cole hears the boat approaching. Edwin is on his boat and he's followed by Garvey, Peter, and Peter's parents in a larger boat. Cole greets Peter but Peter refuses to come ashore or acknowledge anyone. Garvey says he is using his vacation days and is taking a leave of absence from work, and that he'll be staying on the island with Peter and Cole. Garvey reminds Cole that Peter and his parents are suffering because of Cole's actions.

Edwin says he wants Cole to tell everyone about his time on the island. Cole shows them the site of the original cabin and tells about his first day on the island, then goes on to talk about his return. He takes them to the pool and shows them other places around the area. He shows them the totem and Garvey asks why Cole hasn't carved an animal at the bottom. Cole says he hasn't yet decided what he'll carve there. He answers more questions and reveals that he's learned to forgive but knows that he can't truly heal until he helps Peter. At his words, Peter lashes out, saying he doesn't want Cole's help.

Analysis

Cole's dance of anger is a symbol of his readiness to let go of the intense anger he's felt for most of his life. As part of the dance, he screams out before saying, "I'm sorry." The final step in his dance is that he says "I forgive you." The author doesn't spell out who Cole is forgiving but it seems obvious that it refers to everyone who has led Cole down his path toward destruction, including his parents. Cole is also referring to himself and realizes that it's time for him to forgive himself. When Edwin arrives the next time, he approves of Cole's discovery but agrees that Cole has more work to do.

The bottom spot on Cole's totem remains blank for a long time. Cole has planned to carve something significant in that spot but he can't figure out what that will be. This seems to weigh on Cole as he tries to make the decision. The fact that he leaves it blank for so long is a sign of his emerging maturity which is an important part of his continued path toward healing, one of the story's themes. Cole's efforts to take this so



seriously is a positive move and is a dramatic change from his childish arguments and tantrums of the previous year.

As Edwin had predicted, Cole struggles more over the winter months. Edwin had said Cole would have more time to think, more time indoors, and would find himself dealing more with anger once the weather kept him inside. When it becomes too dangerous for Cole to walk to the pool, he does find that he has to work harder at control. This seems reasonable because Cole is unable to use the pool and the rock which have become symbolic of putting his anger aside each day. He now has to depend on himself more and it's also about this same time that he realizes that he has the power to decide to be happy.

Discussion Question 1

What do you see as one of the most important themes of the story? Give at least three examples of this theme.

Discussion Question 2

Describe Cole's dance of anger and what he learns from it.

Discussion Question 3

What does Cole plan to do with the log? What is he tempted to do with it?

Vocabulary

frantic, hectic, meandered, writhed, embers, defiant, lunged, hibernate, treacherous, pierced, stoked, shuddered, trudged



Chapters 26-28

Summary

In Chapter Twenty-six, Peter refuses to sleep in the cabin with Cole. Peter's father points out that Garvey will be with them to ensure Peter's safety but Cole interrupts, saying he'll sleep outside in a tent. As Peter's parents prepare to leave, Peter argues with them. Cole is ashamed that he could ever have felt the need to make someone afraid of him.

Mr. Driscall takes Cole aside to talk. He says he'll make sure Cole goes to jail if he hurts Peter at all. When his parents leave, Peter sits down beside the shore and refuses to move. Cole puts a candy bar near him but it's a long time before Peter gets it. Cole sleeps in the tent that night and it's cold. The next day, Cole invites Peter and Garvey along as he goes to the pool and then hikes up the hill with the ancestor rock. They go along but Peter doesn't participate.

Peter has been on the island for two weeks. One day, they all make the daily hike to the top of the hill. Peter reaches out and shoves the ancestor rock, rolling it down the hill. Cole commends him but Peter says nothing and remains withdrawn for the rest of the day. A few days later, Peter throws a rock that lands near Cole. A few days later, Peter bumps into Cole and knocks him into the creek. Peter claims it was an accident. Cole is already wet and decides to skip his morning soak in the pool. Peter strips and runs into the water. He quickly gets out again but Cole senses that Peter is more relaxed that day but he soon becomes withdrawn and angry again.

Peter has been on the island about a month. One rainy day, Cole is in the tent and everything inside is wet. He is cold and miserable, then Peter invites him to come inside the cabin.

In Chapter Twenty-seven, Cole goes inside. Cole makes hot chocolate. Peter asks why they haven't yet seen the Spirit Bear. He says an ordinary bear might have attacked Cole and says he doesn't really believe the Spirit Bear exists. Cole thanks Peter for allowing him inside but Peter says it doesn't mean they are now friends. Over the coming days, Peter acts out against Cole. He steps on Cole's sleeping bag, leaves the cabin door open, and knocks Cole's jacket to the floor. One day, Cole returns to camp to discover Peter has hacked his totem. Cole confronts Peter and Peter indicates that he's still trying to get even.

Cole suggests they go get another pole so that Cole can have his own totem. Peter becomes involved in the process. Once it's at the camp, Peter asks what he should carve first. Cole asks what animal Peter saw most recently and Peter says he saw a mouse in the cabin. Cole suggests they gather wood for a campfire and then dance the mouse dance that evening. Peter is obviously disgusted by the idea and refuses to help gather wood. Cole gathers the wood and the three sit around the camp fire that evening.



Cole does his version of the mouse dance, followed by Garvey's performance. They convince Peter to participate and Peter awkwardly prances around, then says all he's learned is that he "looks like a stupid dork." Cole tells Garvey he doesn't think Peter is ever going to forgive.

The next day, Cole begins carving on his totem. Peter soon joins him and Cole is amazed at how good Peter's carving is. That evening, Cole returns to camp to find Peter at Cole's totem. Cole is angry until he sees that Peter has completed a new bear carving. Cole is again amazed at Peter's skill and compliments him. Cole asks Peter to teach him and Peter agrees "if you want to learn."

In Chapter Twenty-eight, Summer arrives. Cole, Peter, and Garvey go to the pool each morning. One morning, Peter says he and Cole should go alone. Garvey asks if both are ready and Peter is adamant. They walk in silence until Cole says he's glad Peter is finally ready to be friends. Peter says they'll never be friends. He says Cole hasn't changed. Peter shoves Cole and begins hitting him. Cole refuses to run or to fight back even though he becomes angry. Peter beats Cole for awhile but then begins to cry. He says he's afraid all the time. Cole explains that he's learning to deal with his anger and that Peter will never have to fear Cole again.

Peter continues to cry and Cole reaches out, embracing Peter in a tight hug. Peter leans in to Cole. They are sitting like that when Cole realizes the Spirit Bear is standing about twenty feet away, watching the boys. He points it out to Peter. They watch each other until the bear walks away.

Peter explains to Cole that once they began to forgive each other, they were able to forgive themselves, making both of them "part of the big circle." Cole gives Peter the at.oow, telling Peter that it's a sign of trust and friendship. Peter says he wants to help Cole carve the bottom spot on his totem, the one he's been saving. Cole agrees.

A couple of hours later, Cole calls Garvey to see his totem. He's carved a perfect circle. Garvey asks why Cole chose to carve a circle. He suggests it's because Cole realizes that "every part of a circle is both a beginning and an end," and that everything that happens in life is also the beginning of something and the end of something else. Peter smiles and says that it's actually the only thing he has been able to teach Cole to carve. Cole smiles as well, and says he's a "slow learner" but pledges to work on it.

Analysis

Cole seems to expect that Peter is going to settle in quickly and will accept the help Peter and Garvey are trying to give. He becomes frustrated very quickly and ask Garvey how long he's going to have to sleep in the tent while Peter sleeps in the cabin. Garvey counters with a question of his own. He asks Cole how long a person remains afraid after they've been beaten as badly as Peter was. Cole accepts that but his patience is quickly at an end again. The next time he's thinking along those lines, they are gathering firewood together. Peter refuses to help. Cole tells Garvey that he hopes



Peter realizes they are gathering the firewood so that Peter can remain warm. Garvey counters, saying that Cole's actions are why they are all on the island together in the first place. Cole suggested that Peter come to the island and he swore he was ready to accept the responsibility for helping Peter begin to heal, but when it comes down to the actual work, Cole is still sometimes struggling to meet his obligations and to keep himself on track.

Cole and Peter carve a “perfect circle” at the bottom of Cole's totem. Garvey suggests that it's a sign of the circle of life and that Cole and Peter are learning their places in the world. This seems to be an acceptable assumption but Peter laughingly says that it's the only thing he's been able to teach Cole to carve. Cole agrees and it seems the boys are making an important connection, but it also seems that they are simply not sharing their own thoughts on the importance of the circle. This continued focus on the connection between man and nature is a theme in the book and this seems like another example of that theme.

The ending of the book is not a surprise. It's evident from the tone of the story that Cole and Peter will reconcile and that both will work toward healing. There are no twists and some readers may find this disappointing.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the final confrontation between Peter and Cole.

Discussion Question 2

Describe Peter's journey toward healing?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Cole's reaction to Peter's presence. Is Cole expecting too much of Cole?

Vocabulary

bluntly, coaxing, withdrawn, sprinted, pummeled, awkwardly, grimaced, nudging, ambled



Characters

Cole Matthews

Cole is a teenager who has spent his life dealing with an abusive home life. He robs a store and then brags about it, but is surprised when someone dares to tell on him. Cole doesn't have any friends and seeks to control everyone around him through violence. He brutally beats Peter Driscall, the teen who turns Cole in, and continues the beating until other students pull Cole off. Peter is badly injured and Cole later learns that he will always have trouble with speech and co-ordination because of the beating. Even with that knowledge, Cole holds to his anger and blames others for his situation.

When he's facing jail time, Cole agrees to spend a year alone on an island but really has no intention of staying. He tries to swim away but is pushed back by the tide. When he sees a huge bear, the Spirit Bear, he tries to scare it away. Cole is furious to discover the bear isn't afraid and he attacks it. The bear returns the attack, breaking several bones and leaving Cole permanently scarred. Cole almost dies but is saved by the return of one of the men trying to help him get his life back in order.

Cole spends months in rehabilitation and then, by selling his sports equipment and agreeing to do all the work himself, gets another chance to spend his year on the island. This time he feels determined to make it work but it takes time before he is able to let go of his anger. Though he begins the process of forgiveness, Cole simply isn't able to complete the process. He finally figures out that he is the one responsible for his life and his actions. With this revelation, Cole realizes that he can help Peter come to terms with his life as well.

Cole struggles often with his emotions and his anger. He worries that the process of healing isn't going fast enough but finally discovers that he has to help Peter in order to forgive himself for his past actions.

Peter Driscall

Peter is a student in Cole's school and learns that Cole has burglarized and vandalized a store. The reader never learns Peter's motivations for turning Cole in, but it seems that he is the kind of person who would simply have seen it as the right thing to do. Cole then beats Peter so severely that Peter will spend the rest of his life dealing with speech and co-ordination issues. Peter's reaction to the situation is to attempt suicide.

When Peter tries to kill himself for the second time, his parents agree to send him to the island where Cole has spent months working on his own recovery. Peter doesn't want to be there and pleads with his parents to take him away. He is obviously afraid of Cole. While Cole would once have relished this fear, he now tries to make Peter realize that he's changed. Peter doesn't trust Cole at first but soon discovers that he can strike out at Cole without retaliation.



The situation between Peter and Cole comes to a head after more than a month together. Peter begins hitting Cole and finds that Cole is unwilling to either run away or to hit back. Peter pleads with Cole to fight back, apparently still looking for a way out of the emotional and physical pain. When Cole refuses, Peter breaks down and this is his first true step toward healing.

Peter's breakdown prompts a few moments of connection with Cole and the two boys find themselves face-to-face with the Spirit Bear. Peter has doubted its existence and asks Cole if anyone will believe they've actually seen it. What Cole already knows is that Peter doesn't have to prove anything to others, and that it's only important that he believes in the Spirit Bear.

Garvey

Garvey is a parole officer who takes an interest in Cole after he is arrested for beating Peter. Garvey is a Tlingit Indian, a member of an Alaskan native group. He believes that a person can only find healing by helping others, which prompts him to work at helping Cole even when Cole fights against it. Garvey is so determined to help Cole and Peter that he gives up his vacation time and takes a leave of absence from his job in order to oversee the two boys as they spend time alone on the island.

Edwin

A member of the Tlingit tribe, Edwin lives in Alaska and oversees Cole during most of his first part of his year on the island. Edwin is wise and knows what Cole needs to do in order to find healing but also knows that Cole will have to make the journey on his own.

Cindy Matthews

Cindy, Cole's mother, is a subdued woman who drinks a lot rather than standing up for Cole when his father abuses him. Cindy sees her mistake before Cole is sent to the island for the second time. She stops drinking and says that she wants to build a home with Cole after his year away.

William Matthews

William, Cole's father, is an abusive bully who was abused as a child by his own father. William is furious when Cole calls him out in public, accusing him of the abuse. He's arrested but pays the bail without spending even one night in jail. He says he's going to petition for custody of Cole once Cole's year of banishment is finished.



Mr. Driscal

Mr. Driscal, Peter's father, is protective of his son and is obviously worried about leaving Peter on the island with Cole. As he's preparing to leave, he says that he will ensure that Cole is sent to jail for a long time if he hurts Peter again.

Mrs. Driscal

Mrs. Driscal is Peter's mother. She speaks up at one of the first meetings with the Circle Justice and says that Peter will never be the same after his attack. She obviously loves Peter and wants to protect him from more harm. She is reluctant to leave Peter on the island with Cole but is desperate, fearing that Peter will succeed in his attempts at suicide.

Nathaniel Blackwood

Nathaniel Blackwood is Cole's attorney, and he seems fake to Cole. He shows up at Cole's hearing prior to the banishment and says that "kids will be kids," as if this explains the violence of Cole's attack on Peter. He says that Cole has already been held in detention for awhile and that he should simply be sent home to one of his parents.

Rosey

Rosey is the woman who gives Cole emergency medical treatment after he is attacked by the bear. She is kind and gentle, and is proficient in giving Cole the treatments and medicine necessary until he can be moved to a hospital.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Spirit Bear

This is a huge, white bear that is not native to the area. The Spirit Bear appears to Cole first when Cole is still furious with his situation and blaming others for his failures. The Spirit Bear appears repeatedly as Cole learns that he has to let go of his anger in order to find peace.

At.oow

A blanket given to Cole by Garvey, this is a symbol of Garvey's trust that Cole will take care of it and will be open to change. Cole uses the blanket on several occasions as a tablecloth to make meals more meaningful. He passes the blanket on to Peter as Peter begins his own journey of healing.

The Totem

Cole finds a large log and sets it in the ground to be his totem. The totem is the story of one's past and Cole carves a series of animals to represent the things he's seen and experienced on the island.

Circle Justice

This is a group made up of people impacted by a specific crime for the purpose of finding a way to help everyone heal. In Cole's case, the group agrees that Cole can spend a year in banishment rather than being sent to jail in the hope that Cole will find a way to deal with his anger and to become a productive member of society.

The Ancestor Rock

This is a huge rock that Cole carries to the top of a hill on the island every morning. On the way up the hill, the rock represents Cole's ancestors. He is to remember that everything they learned has been passed down. At the top of the hill, he shoves the rock, allowing it to roll back to the bottom. During that, the rock represents Cole's anger and he symbolically lets all his anger go.



Edwin's Skiff

This is the boat Edwin uses each time he visits Cole. The outboard motor on the boat has a specific sound and Cole recognizes it from some distance. This boat represents Cole's only contact with the outside world during most of his year of banishment.

The Dance of Anger

This is one of many dances Cole performs around the fires he builds on the beach. This particular dance is symbolic of Cole releasing the final pieces of anger that keeps him from healing. After the dance, Cole realizes that he also has to help Peter heal in order to fully forgive himself.

The Hot Dog

This is the basis for the first meal eaten by Edwin, Garvey, and Cole when they return for the second banishment on the island. Cole learns that the hot dog, though a simple meal, can become a feast when someone goes to the trouble to make the meal special and is willing to share it. The lesson here is that Cole can make anything he wants of his life.

Cole's Sports Equipment

Cole has many pieces of sports equipment, including a snowmobile, and these are all sold to pay for his second chance at a year on the island. Cole notes that it's horrible to sell all the pieces off, but that he accepts it as part of his responsibility.

The Baby Birds

A nest is filled with four baby birds, and Cole first notices them when he is near death after being attacked by the Spirit Bear. He feels anger toward them at first but cries for them when he realizes that they died in the storm.



Settings

The Island

A land mass off the Alaskan coast, this is where Cole Matthews is to spend a year in banishment. He accepts it as a way to avoid jail but initially refuses to allow himself to change, which is the real purpose of his time here. There is a large bay on the island, which provides a place for the boats to land when they arrive from the mainland. The island is wooded and has fresh water in the form of a creek.

The Pool

There is a spot on a creek where water forms a large pool. The water is cold all year and Cole learns that he can spend time there to allow his anger to dissipate. The pool becomes one of the first places where the Spirit Bear routinely appears to Cole because it is the place where he is able to put his feelings aside and live harmoniously with nature.

The Cabin

The first cabin is built by Edwin and is a place for Cole to live during his year of banishment. Cole burns it to the ground and he builds the second cabin himself. The cabin is a place to escape the difficult weather and is the center of his camp during the year on the island. When Peter refuses to sleep with Cole, Cole leaves the cabin for a tent. When he returns to the cabin, he's fully aware that it's a warm, safe place, especially compared to the leaky tent.

Inland Passage

The Inland Passage is the place near the Alaskan coast where the island is located. There are several islands along the passage and when Cole is initially left there, he tries to swim to another of the islands, believing he can reach the mainland by swimming from one island to the next.

Minneapolis

Minneapolis is where Cole lives as the story opens. Cole talks briefly about the large house in Minneapolis his parents used as a means of showing off their wealth. He spends time in a detention center there and the Circle Justice meetings are held in a library there. There are not many details about the city, but it is a real place.



Themes and Motifs

The Spirit Bear and Nature

While the Spirit Bear is real in this story, it is also a symbol for Cole's quest for healing and forgiveness. He has to forgive others for their actions toward him and to forgive himself for having hurt others. Both are difficult and Cole himself stands in the way of reaching those goals. When Cole is finally able to lose his sense of self to the natural surroundings, the Spirit Bear begins to regularly show itself. With that, Cole begins the path toward healing.

Cole's first encounter with the Spirit Bear is deadly. The bear almost kills Cole before returning to stand near Cole. The bear is so close that Cole touches it. Initially, he tries to convince others that he really has seen the Spirit Bear but no one believes him. He realizes then that it doesn't matter if anyone believes he has touched the Spirit Bear as long as he knows it happened.

The Spirit Bear is a very important aspect of this theme, but there are other experiences in nature that push Cole toward healing. Cole is near death after the Spirit Bear attacks him. While he's on the ground, unable to move, he notices a nest of baby birds. He is angry at the birds because they have a caring mother. Later, a storm blows the tree down and Cole cries for the dead baby birds in his first real connection with nature. When the Spirit Bear returns, Cole is touched by his contact with the bear.

When Cole returns to the island for the second time, he is slightly more agreeable but still hates the situation. On his first morning back on the island, Edwin pushes him into two actions that will shape his coming months. Together, they sit in a pool of frigid water with Edwin urging Cole to let his anger go with the cold water. Next, Cole carries a rock to the top of a hill, then pushes the rock back to the bottom, letting his anger go with it.

That evening, Cole, Edwin, and Garvey dance the "dance of the whale." Each dances around the campfire, demonstrating their thoughts on the whales they'd seen earlier that day before telling what they've learned from the whale. This also becomes a habit for Cole, even when there is no one else present to watch and hear what he's learned from the various animals. Through these actions and time spent carving a totem, Cole begins to tune in to the nature around him.

Later, Cole discovers that by losing all sense of self, he can become "invisible." That process brings the Spirit Bear into view and Cole begins to relish these moments. He stops wondering if anyone else will believe that the Spirit Bear is present, knowing that his own connection with nature is all that's important, and he finds that he often slips back into the old habits of anger and blaming others. He discovers that he is able to leave these feelings behind by spending time in the bitter cold of a pool of water, and he discovers that the Spirit Bear routinely shows itself at those times. Cole compares his feelings at those times to being invisible and learns that is what summons the Spirit



Bear. When Peter arrives, the Spirit Bear is absent until the day that Peter's own walls of anger finally come down, leaving him open to the experience of the Spirit Bear.

The Effects of Abuse

Cole's father, William, abuses him and that leads Cole to believe that he can only control his situation by violence. When Cole confronts his father about the abuse, his mother reveals that William's father abused him as well. This is a true example of the way an abuse victim becomes an abuser.

There is not a great deal of information about William's childhood other than the fact that he was abused. Cole describes situations of abuse in his own home. William routinely yells at Cole and beats him whenever Cole disappoints his father. The biggest issue here is that William is always disappointed or angry at Cole. He seems to never be ready to praise Cole or to give any sort of positive reinforcement. Cole admits to being afraid of his father and of promising to do better in order to avoid further beatings, but he really has little incentive to behave differently. An important aspect of this cycle is that Cole's mother witnesses the abuse but steps in to try to stop it only one time. In all the other instances of abuse, she simply turns away and allows it to happen, furthering Cole's impression that no one cares about him.

The bigger issue with Cole's abuse at his father's hand is that he doesn't know how to react to any situation other than to strike out with violence. He doesn't seem to have any friends and believes he can beat others into respecting him.

Peter, by contrast, seems to be a non-violent boy but his life is changed dramatically by Cole's violence. After some time together on the island, Peter eventually strikes out at Cole. Peter repeatedly hits Cole and it takes a great deal of self-control for Cole to stand his ground without hitting back. It's only after this confrontation that the boys find themselves able to begin true healing from the effects of the abuse.

Taking Responsibility

Cole is in serious trouble after he beats Peter so severely that Peter will never fully recover. He has, by this point, made many mistakes in his life and is facing jail time. Despite all this, Cole is unwilling to admit that he's truly responsible for any part of his situation. He doesn't believe he's to blame for beating Peter. Instead, he blames Peter for turning him in and his father for setting the stage of violence. When he's taken to the island for a year of banishment, he blames Garvey. It's not until Cole attacks the Spirit Bear that he begins to accept responsibility for his actions.

Cole sees that the Spirit Bear is not afraid and that drives him into a fury. He attacks the bear and is surprised to find that the bear easily defends itself, then almost kills Cole. The bear could have finished the job and Cole is surprised that he survives. Later, he realizes that the bear is not to blame. Cole attacked the bear and it's Cole alone who is responsible for the bear returning the attack.



When Cole is again facing the possibility of spending time in prison, he pleads for another chance on the island. This time, he has to sell all his sports equipment to pay for the materials to build a cabin and for his supplies. He might have argued that he shouldn't have to pay for the banishment, but this time he accepts that it's part of his responsibility. He begins to heal during his time alone and he soon accepts that he has to take responsibility for all his decisions.

When Cole learns that Peter is suicidal, he begs for the opportunity to help Peter find his own way on the island. Though the time with Peter is difficult for Cole, he accepts that as part of his responsibility as well.

Cindy Matthews, Cole's mother, is another example of this theme. Cole's father, William, is arrested for child abuse but is almost immediately released on bail. Garvey tells Cindy that she has been silent about the abuse for years and that it's time for her to tell the truth. He says that she has a responsibility as Cole's mother, and that she'll share the blame for the abuse if she doesn't stand up for Cole now. Ultimately, she does take responsibility, though her silence has scarred Cole to the point that he isn't certain her concern is genuine.

Garvey and Edwin go to great lengths to help Cole come to terms with his anger and to begin the healing process. At one point, Cole asks why everyone is going to so much trouble. Garvey reveals that his actions hurt someone when Garvey was young, and that he never got the opportunity to make amends for that. Garvey says that helping others is a way of helping others, thereby taking responsibility for his actions as a young man.

Survival

Survival is an important part of the story and the most dramatic example of this theme is seen in Cole's attitude immediately after the bear attack. Cole is on the ground and is literally helpless. He can't even move, meaning he is unable to get food or water. He is severely beaten and realizes that he is probably going to die. At one point, he makes a deliberate decision to live and that changes the way he faces the hours until Garvey's arrival.

Prior to that decision, Cole is basically still and his thoughts are of anger and self-pity. He doesn't think about what he can or should do. After making the decision that he really wants to live, he begins to look for ways to accomplish that. He needs food and water in order to replenish his body and he can literally feel himself slipping toward death. Cole first picks some grass, chews it up, and swallows it. He gags on it and coughs it up. The pain of gagging is horrific and Cole might have taken this as a sign that he can't do it, but he is determined. He takes the half-chewed wad of grass and chews it up again, this time managing to swallow it.

Though the reader will likely think the entire scene is extremely awful, Cole eats worms, bugs, a mouse, and the chunks of fish from his own vomit. He drinks muddy water by



digging a hole by his hand and dribbling the collected rainwater into his mouth. His actions all seem incredibly horrible, but they are evidence of Cole's determination.

Cole's continued determination is seen in his second trip to the island. He builds his own cabin and is responsible for taking care of himself. He has to chop enough wood to get through the snowy months when he can't go outside. Another example of this theme is Cole's ability to deal with the loneliness. Edwin visits every few weeks to bring supplies but he often stays only a short time, dropping off items and immediately returning to the mainland. Cole finds ways to fill the time by reading, looking into himself, and learning about nature.

Another example of this theme is seen in Peter's life. Peter has injuries from Cole's beating that will remain with him for his entire life. He has slurred speech and coordination problems. He can't seem to deal with these problems and he tries twice to commit suicide. In Peter's case, his parents want him to survive and they agree to send him to the island because they are worried that he will succeed in a suicide attempt. Eventually, Peter begins the process of healing and seems to come to accept that he has a reason to live. The change in Peter is sudden and the book ends soon after, but it seems likely that Peter is now going to face life rather than longing for death.

Healing

Cole is sentenced to spend a year alone on an island. Two natives, Edwin and Garvey, offer him advice on getting control of his anger and making amends for his past actions. Cole doesn't initially respond but eventually comes to terms with the idea that he has to take control of his anger. Once he accomplishes that, he expects the healing to begin and is upset when he realizes there is still something missing from his process. He eventually discovers that he has to somehow make things better for Peter in order to complete the

healing process.

Cole's ability to look inside himself becomes an important part of the healing process. He is unable to do this prior to his time on the island and it's only when he spends weeks alone that he begins to listen to his inner self.

When Peter arrives on the island, it's obvious that he's struggling with anger of his own. He is angry at Cole and is angry at being forced to remain on the island with Cole. He's afraid of Cole and it takes a confrontation for him to believe that Cole is no longer a threat. Peter struggles to find a way toward his own healing and it seems to arrive as an epiphany after he beats Cole. Peter and Cole come to realize that each can heal only with the help of the other, though each has specific issues to work through.

At one point, Cole asks why Garvey and Edwin remained determined to stick with him throughout his healing process. Both men apparently made mistakes of their own as youngsters and were not able to make amends to their victims. They believe that helping others, like Cole, helps them with their own healing process.



Styles

Point of View

The book is written in third person from the perspective of Cole Matthews. This limited perspective means the reader doesn't know what's really going on in the minds of the other characters. The limitation is lessened by dialogue and pieces of information discovered by Cole. For example, the reader learns that Garvey and Edwin hurt someone at some point in their past. It's not clear whether this was a shared experience or if they perpetuated some crime, but both feel the need to help someone else in order to make up for what they did. Cole never learns the details, meaning the reader doesn't know the details of this past event. However, the details in Garvey's and Edwin's past are not important and the reader learns the only important fact – that the two men are driven to help Cole because of their own mistakes.

In some cases, facts are concealed by the limited perspective and it's up to the reader to decide what's true. In most cases, the truth is later revealed through actions or dialogue. For example, Cole says that his father is an alcoholic and is abusive. The reader may be skeptical because it seems Cole times the announcement to further his own cause. It seems reasonable that Cole has fabricated the story of abuse to garner sympathy as members of the Circle Justice are considering his sentence. However, the reader later learns that Cole's mother backs Cole's story and Cole's father is arrested.

Cole's thoughts and fears are revealed throughout the book, even when these put Cole in a bad light. For example, he often says what's expected to achieve the results he wants. This is true when he pretends to be open to the idea of a time of healing on the island. He has no intention of actually making use of the time and plans to escape as soon as he can. These thoughts, along with his thoughts of anger and his fear of his father, are revealed to the reader throughout the story.

The limited perspective also means the reader doesn't know Peter's innermost thoughts. Peter's actions and words indicate his fear of Cole and his hatred, and the final scenes indicate the beginning of the healing process. The limited perspective is appropriate for the story.

Language and Meaning

The book is divided between narrative and dialogue but there is more narrative because Cole spends a lot of time alone. He goes for long weeks at a time without seeing anyone and at one point notices that his voice is becoming strange because he so seldom hears it. The chapters that include interaction with other people have substantial dialogue. The conversations seem realistic and believable, given the time, people, and places.



There is a great deal of imagery throughout the book and a focus on a connection with nature. Some readers may not be open to the ideas expressed and may dismiss the idea that Cole's time spent carrying a rock, sitting in frigid water, and dancing around a fire can lead to healing. Some readers may also decide that the Spirit Bear is not real and is only a symbolic part of the healing process experienced by Cole and Peter. It's left to the individual reader to make that decision.

The native culture is an important theme in the story and impacts the language, characters, and outcome of the book. When Cole returns to the island, Edwin and Garvey teach him about their culture and about his place in nature. The three do dances to various animals they've seen. When Peter arrives, Cole suggests they will do the same but Peter is initially unwilling to consider the usefulness of the act. The reader may also be skeptical.

There are several instances of Edwin and Garvey explaining things to Cole through actions and examples. Garvey brings all the ingredients for a cake, pointing out to Cole that many of the items don't taste good by themselves. His message is that Cole can take all the things that make up his life - even the bad events - and make them into something good.

The reader with an average vocabulary will likely find few unfamiliar words in the story. The writing is clear and concise, and the action moves along fairly quickly. Cole's continued struggles with his anger may seem somewhat monotonous to some readers, but the author is obviously trying to convey that this is a lengthy battle and that Cole has to work hard at reaching the healing stage.

Structure

The book is divided into two sections with a total of twenty-eight chapters. The first section is titled "Touching Spirit Bear." The chapters are identified by number only. Chapters one through thirteen appear in the first section. These chapters include some information about Cole's life prior to the crime and his first arrival on the island. It also covers Cole's first encounter with the Spirit Bear and the anger that prompts Cole to attack the bear. The final chapters of this section focus on Cole's near-death experience and his rescue.

Part Two is titled "Return to Spirit Bear." Chapters fourteen through twenty-eight appear in this section. These chapters cover the Justice Circle that leads to Cole's second banishment and his return to the island. Cole continues to battle with his own anger and to seek healing through the first few chapters of this section. In Chapter Twenty-Five, Peter arrives on the island and the remaining chapters are devoted to their united quest for healing and forgiveness.

The book opens with a Japanese proverb that reads, "Fall seven times, stand up eight." The proverb is an attempt to make the reader aware that the coming story is one of perseverance. There is also a dedication to a bear rescued by the author. The bear's

name is Buffy and the dedication compares this bear to the Spirit Bear and indicates that the author has learned gentleness from the bear.

Many versions of the book also include information about the author and a question and answer session with the author. This author reveals personal connections with nature and a rescue bear he raised. These lessons, along with the author's own struggles to control his anger as a young man, are seen in the book.



Quotes

He would have worn a cowbell around his neck if it had meant avoiding jail.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 9)

Importance: Cole has agreed to go to the island for a year rather than facing the possibility of jail time. His comment here is an indication that he isn't serious about using the time as an opportunity to begin healing and learning to deal with his anger, but is just trying to get out of jail.

He drinks until he turns into a monster. Mom just gets drunk and pretends nothing has happened.

-- Cole (Chapter 2 paragraph 18)

Importance: Garvey has just guessed that Cole's dad beats him. Cole says that his father is brutal and that his mother ignores it all. Cole has dealt with the fact that his father is abusive and feels that his mother doesn't love him or she would step up and stop the abuse.

Stronger than any burning in his arms and belly, more haunting than the darkness that surrounded him, was the realization that he was alone, totally alone with himself. And it scared him.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 10)

Importance: Cole has lived his entire life by making everyone afraid of him. He is brutal and ruthless, and he doesn't show any weakness. It's only when he's been washed back up on the beach and is facing the reality of being totally alone that he realizes how much he's afraid.

Worse yet were the dreams he had of being alone and no one caring about him. Now he was living his worst nightmare.

-- Narrator (Chapter 8 paragraph 30)

Importance: Cole has just been attacked by the bear and is facing the reality that he might die. This passage gives the reader an important look into Cole's character. Despite the fact that he tries to appear tough all the time, he's really afraid of being unloved and alone. His parents have made him feel that way and he is now facing that fear.

Did the birds' insignificant little existences have any meaning at all? Or did his?

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 11)

Importance: Cole has just seen that the little birds have died in the storm. His first thought about the birds was that he would like to climb the tree and knock them out of their nests. He later comes to realize that they are creatures with the desire to survive,



just as he wants to survive. These lessons about nature are the first toward Cole's healing.

Your father isn't a bad person, but when he was younger, he had parents who beat him for everything he did. That's all he ever knew.

-- Cindy Matthews (Chapter 13 paragraph 57)

Importance: Cindy is explaining to Cole why William has been abusive. This cycle of abuse is among the themes of the story and Cole can identify with his father because the abuse has made Cole act out exactly as his father does.

We still believe in you and think there's hope,' Garvey said. 'Because of that, we've stuck our necks out so far, we feel like two giraffes.

-- Garvey (Chapter 12 paragraph 59)

Importance: Garvey is telling Cole that the Circle Justice has agreed to allow Cole to return to the island under the supervision of Garvey and Edwin. Cole has expected to be turned over to the justice system to face court appearances and jail time. He's promised himself he's going back to the island someday and is surprised that Garvey and Edwin have managed to arrange for Cole to have another chance to spend a year there.

You learn to be happy one day at a time. But habits change hard.

-- Edwin (Chapter 17 paragraph 52)

Importance: Garvey and Edwin are trying to help Cole find activities to help change his attitude but they are also teaching him to learn to control his emotions. On this particular day, Edwin is taking Cole to the pool and will be teaching him about focusing on something to allow his anger to dissipate.

When Cole finally left the pond, it was not because he had gotten too cold or impatient, but because he had finished his soak.

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 48)

Importance: Cole is at the pool alone for the first time and he's realizing that spending time in the pool really does allow him to let go of his anger. He had considered skipping the pool altogether but is now glad that he's working through the rituals introduced by Edwin.

To be invisible, he had to clear his mind.

-- Narrator (Chapter 23 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is the lesson Cole has learned about himself and his place in nature. The lesson is important because it's one of the steps toward healing. When Cole begins to perfect this focus, he is able to see the Spirit Bear more often.



Being angry is giving someone else control of my feelings so they own me. Forgiving gives me control again.

-- Cole (Chapter 24 paragraph 5)

Importance: Cole is talking to Edwin and is explaining his dance of anger. He has come to realize that forgiveness is necessary if he's going to heal. One of the people he has to forgive is himself.

He soaked as long as he could, his calmness shaken by how terrified Peter was of him. How could he have once wanted someone to feel that way?

-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph 10)

Importance: Cole has just come to realize that he once felt he was in control only when he made other people afraid of him. Now that he's become more in tune with himself and is beginning to control his own emotions, he can't imagine choosing that path.

And that was when it appeared. Not twenty feet away, it stood watching them: the Spirit Bear.

-- Narrator (Chapter 28 paragraph 47)

Importance: Cole and Peter have just fought their way past their anger and hurt, and are on their way toward healing. This was the step necessary for them to see the Spirit Bear, as Cole explains to Peter.