

Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival Study Guide

Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival by Velma Wallis

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Plot Summary

The People are a tribe of Native Americans who live north of the Arctic Circle. This particular winter, The People are struggling to find enough food to avoid starvation. The Chief announces one day that it is time to move on in search of caribou, but this time they must leave behind two old women because they have become a drain on The People. These two old women, Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak, cannot believe that they are to be left to the mercy of the elements around them. Ch'idzigyaak especially, because she has a daughter and grandson in the tribe, is hurt beyond description. Before The People move on, Ch'idzigyaak's daughter gives her a babiche, and her grandson leaves his hatchet with her.

The People move on, and the two old women must decide whether they will try to survive or just resign themselves to a death sentence. Sa' talks Ch'idzigyaak into trying to survive or at least to "die trying." The women decide to try and return to a place they camped at many years ago because the place was fruitful and beautiful. It is quite a distance from where they begin, however. The journey takes six days of constant walking. The women pull makeshift sleds behind them with animal skins and their belongings. Because they are old, Sa' is 75 and Ch'idzigyaak is 80, their joints and muscles ache every night, and in the morning they feel they can't go on. Somehow, though, they manage to keep going, and on the sixth night they arrive at their destination.

They survive the winter, and in the spring they begin to prepare for the future in earnest. They trap muskrats, beavers, and rabbits. They smoke the meat to preserve it and make clothing and hats out of the skins of the animals. They catch great quantities of fish to preserve. They also gather firewood and stack it all around their camp for fuel for the winter.

Despite all their success, the women worry the younger generation will come back. They don't trust the younger generation at all because of what they did to them, and they fear that they will take all of their food or hurt them. So the old women move their camp to a less desirable location where there are lots of mosquitoes.

Meanwhile, The People have suffered terribly. They barely survive winter, and by the time they had found enough summer food to regain their energy and strength, winter was upon them again. Several of the children die from starvation, and the Chief still feels guilty about his order to leave the two old women behind. The People return to the camp where the two old women were abandoned and are surprised to see no traces of the women. The Chief sends some scouts out, including Daagoo, one of the older men in the tribe.

Using his tracking skills, Daagoo finds the two women. The women give the men food to eat, but they tell Daagoo that they don't want to see The People. They tell Daagoo to tell the Chief that they are fine but they don't want any contact with The People. However,

they tell them that they are willing to share some of the food they have hunted and preserved.

The People move near to the old women, and the old women furnish them with some food and clothing. The Chief comes to visit them, and he is slightly remorseful. After a while, there begins to be more contact between the two old women and The People. Ch'idzigyaak's grandson visits his grandmother daily, and this contact is most welcome to Ch'idzigyaak. She wants to see her daughter, but she is too proud to admit it, and her daughter is too ashamed to see her. Eventually, however, they overcome their hurt and shame, and Ch'idzigyaak tells her grandson to convey to his mother that she has no more hard feelings about the abandonment. They are reunited at last, and the two old women live several more years before dying happy women.

Chapter 1, Hunger and Cold Take Their Toll

Chapter 1, Hunger and Cold Take Their Toll Summary

A Native American Alaskan tribe is facing a bitterly cold winter. There isn't enough food to go around, and many of the people are hungry. They are huddled around a small campfire, wearing furs and looking worried. The People never stay in one place for very long because they must follow the animals that they eat for survival. Mainly, they follow the caribou, and they know that it is time for them to move again now because they can't find any meat.

There are two old women in the tribe named Ch'idzigyaak and Sa'. These two women have been looked after by the younger members of the tribe for a while. The younger women carry their belongings and the younger men set up their tents for them. In return, the old women tan hides for those who helped them. Although this arrangement has worked for years, the women are now a burden on the rest of the tribe.

The chief announces that they must leave the two old women behind. Ch'idzigyaak has a daughter and a grandson in the group, and she looks to them for defense, but they follow the chief's orders and refuse to help her. Sa' doesn't have any family in the tribe, so no one feels very guilty about leaving her. But Ch'idzigyaak's daughter and grandson struggle mightily over this order from the chief.

Ozhii Nelli is Ch'idziyaak's daughter. When the chief announces that the old women must be left behind, Ch'idzigyaak looks to Ozhii for help, but Ozhii doesn't respond. She is in turmoil, wondering what will happen if she defends her mother. She decides that she cannot risk being left behind as well because she has a son to raise, so she goes along with the chief's orders. Shruh Zhuu is Ch'idziyaak's grandson and Ozhii Nelli's son. He is very disturbed by the chief's orders to leave his grandmother behind. He is more compassionate and gentle than most of the boys. While many of the boys like to wrestle and roughhouse, Shruh Zhuu prefers to help his mother and grandmother with their work. However, he has been taught to obey his elders, so he respectfully heeds the chief's orders. Shruh puts his hatchet in a place where his grandmother will be able to find it, and he makes sure that Ch'idzigyaak knows where it is before he leaves with the others.

Sa' feels very angry. She is 75 years old, and Ch'idzigyaak is 80. They are old, but they are not close to dying. Ch'idzigyaak feels more despair than anger, and Sa' worries that Ch'idzigyaak will give up, so she gives her a pep talk and tells her that there is much strength left in them and that they can fend for themselves.

Chapter 1, Hunger and Cold Take Their Toll Analysis

The narrator refers to this tribe of Indians as The People. The author is an Athabaskan Indian, and the story is based on a legend her mother told her. The fact that the author refers to the tribe as The People tells readers that they are a completely isolated group. They do not need a tribal name to differentiate themselves from others because they don't encounter other groups.

The reactions of the two old women are quite different when the chief announces that they will be left behind. Ch'idzigyaak, who has a daughter and a grandson and is five years older than Sa', feels despair. Sa', who is younger and has no descendants in the group, feels angry. The difference in their feelings could be attributed to their age, but more likely, they respond differently because of the betrayal. Ch'idzigyaak feels betrayed by her flesh and blood, by her daughter whom she has sacrificed for, but Sa' feels angry at the community with whom she has spent her life. She feels more of a business relationship than a family relationship with The People, so she feels angry.

Chapter 2, Let Us Die Trying

Chapter 2, Let Us Die Trying Summary

After Sa's pep talk, Ch'idzigyaak sits for a while in the snow, trying to make up her mind about what to do. Finally, she says, "Let us die trying," and she gets up. The two women build a fire and build rabbit traps. They hear a squirrel scurrying up a tree, and Sa' throws a hatchet at it, ending its life and providing food for the hungry women. Sa' mentions that she never expected to hunt again and is surprised she was able to do it. They eat squirrel broth for dinner and then camp for the night.

During the night, their snares catch a rabbit, and they take this as a good omen because The People had not been able to find food in this area. When morning comes, Ch'idzigyaak thinks about how pampered they had been with the younger members of their tribe building the morning fires. They are so cold now. Ch'idzigyaak gets up and gets a fire going so Sa' can wake up to a little warmth.

When Sa' wakes up, Ch'idzigyaak confesses that she is worried about the future. She doesn't want to hear Sa's optimism, and Sa' lets her cry. Sa' also admits that they are like helpless babies. They admit to themselves and to each other that they complained too much when they were with The People. Perhaps this is one of the reasons they were left behind. Sa' says that despite their frailties, they will prove The People wrong, and they will also prove death wrong.

Chapter 2, Let Us Die Trying Analysis

The first night alone is difficult, and the women are worried and sad. However, they find food to eat, and this fact strengthens their resolve to continue trying to live. Chapter 2 contains very little action except for hunting squirrel to eat. The events that propel the story forward in this chapter are the inner thoughts of the women as they decide whether or not to proceed.

There are several metaphors and strong images in Chapter 2. Sa' says they are helpless babies. Of course, the women are not babies but feel just as helpless. In recent years, they have allowed others to serve them instead of taking care of themselves. They have not kept their skills strong, and this has led to a lack of willpower and independence. Hope is described several times in the chapter as a thread or a spark. When Ch'idzigyaak starts the fire in the morning, she symbolizes the spark of hope the women gain from making it through the first night.

Chapter 3, Recalling Old Skills

Chapter 3, Recalling Old Skills Summary

In order to survive, the women find that they must recall old skills from the past that they haven't used in a long time. Their first project is to make snowshoes so they can travel to a new area. Although they don't have the correct tools for making snowshoes, they improvise, and soon they have serviceable snow shoes to wear.

That night they decide that they shouldn't stay in the old camp any longer. There will not be many animals, and enemies could come upon them. They remember a place where the tribe fished long ago and think it will be a perfect place to go. They don't know why the tribe never returned to the spot before.

They pack the following morning and use their caribou hides as sleds, which they tie around their torsos and drag behind them. It is a very cold day, but they keep warm by walking all day. They walk into the night. When they finally stop and eat their squirrel meat, they sleep deeply all night. In the morning, they realize that they have pushed themselves too hard physically. Their muscles ache, and they can barely move. Nonetheless, they manage to stand up, eat some squirrel meat, and continue on their journey.

Their pain is great, but they press forward until they get to a lake. They dig a pit of snow in a nearby forest, cover themselves with skins, and then go to sleep. They continue this journey for four days, sometimes veering course but always regaining their direction. After four days they finally come to a river. They cross the river on the ice and then build another overnight shelter before going to sleep.

Chapter 3, Recalling Old Skills Analysis

The pacing of Chapter 3 matches that of Chapter 2. The women continue on their journey, exhausted but determined, pushing themselves to their limits during the day and sleeping deeply at night before continuing the next day. Toward the end of Chapter 3, the women begin conversing once more. They begin to joke with each other about their old age, and it seems that their original depression is disappearing.

Although the women feel the effects of their age in Chapter 3, they also realize that their age gives them an advantage over the younger people. They remember a good, fruitful place to go of which the younger people don't seem to know. They find great hope in this destination, and their hope gives them strength as they continue their arduous journey.

Chapter 4, A Painful Journey

Chapter 4, A Painful Journey Summary

The women are feeling very old because their joints are achy and their muscles are very sore. Sa' begins to cry, but Ch'idzigyaak feels so numb that she doesn't even respond to Sa's cries. However, Sa' finally gets up and starts to gather firewood. Ch'idzigyaak wants to die. She hopes that she will die before she has to get up out of the snow and force her limbs to move. She is surprised, therefore, when the urge to urinate gets her up and moving at a moment's notice.

Sa' suggests that they keep moving to get closer to the destination, and she feels disappointed when Ch'idzigyaak agrees with her. She has been hoping that Ch'idzigyaak would ask to stay, and she would be happy to oblige the older woman. But they tie the ropes back around their waists and press forward. The days continue, one after another, and the women get closer and closer to their destination.

On the sixth day of their journey, Sa' looks up and realizes that they've arrived at the river but they're on the wrong side. In their excitement, they don't mind walking on the ice late into the night. When Ch'idzigyaak feels that her legs can't go on, they see the remains of their old campsite from long ago. They feel happy to be there, but they also feel The People's betrayal anew because they remember the happy times they spent with their people in this campsite.

They find an old tent frame and spend the night inside it. In the morning they pile snow around the shelter and set a line of rabbit traps. They also gather wood and make preparations for the roughest part of the winter. Before this journey, the two old women did not know each other very well. Now they tell each other their stories. When Ch'idzigyaak was a girl, The People left her grandmother behind. She was ill and blind, and The People wrapped her up in blankets and left her. Ch'idzigyaak found out later that her father and brother had returned to the grandmother and ended her life and burned her body so no one could fill his belly with her flesh.

Sa' tells her friend that when she was young she was like a boy. She spent all her time with her brothers and was not interested in what the women were doing. As she grew, her mother became worried about her and tried to get her to settle down and have children, but she was not interested in that. She would go out hunting and bring home a lot of food, and then her father would tell her mother to leave her alone. Then a difficult time came for her tribe, and the chief decided that an old woman should be left behind. Sa' was indignant and argued right to the Chief's face that this should not be, so the Chief said Sa' should be left behind as well.

Sa' stayed with the old woman, whose name she never knew. It was a terrible winter, and Sa' ate anything she could find that moved. The old woman died during the winter, and Sa' became very lonely. She would talk to herself as she walked through the

woods, and one day a man came upon her and asked to whom she was talking. She explained what had happened to her, and he said the same thing had happened to him. Sa' and the man stayed together for a long time after that, until the man's death; he died fighting a bear. She loved the man. Ch'idzigyaak tells Sa' that she was lucky. Ch'idzigyaak was forced to live with a man much older than herself. She hardly knew him, and it was years before they had a child together, their only child. Sa' is sure she would have been forced to live with a man if she had stayed with The People.

The women spend their days preparing for the days ahead. They amass a large pile of firewood and begin to catch rabbits to eat. At night they make rabbit fur hats, and give them to each other as presents. After a while, the nights are not so cold, and the women realize that they have survived the long winter. One morning, Ch'idzigyaak hears something unusual outside the shelter. She is frightened at first, but upon going outside, she realizes that it is a willow grouse. Carefully and quietly, she goes after the willow grouse and catches it, and they are happy to eat meat of a different flavor. The willow grouse is also a sign that spring had arrived.

Chapter 4, A Painful Journey Analysis

Chapter 4 contains two small flashbacks in the form of conversational narrative. Until the women reach their new camp, they do not have the luxury of spending any time in unnecessary conversation, but now they can talk with each other more freely and share their pasts. At the beginning of the novel, the two women seem very similar because they are thrust into the same unfortunate situation. In fact, the reader may find that at the beginning of the novel it is difficult to tell the two characters apart. However, as the novel progresses, the women's personalities emerge, and the flashbacks in Chapter 4 illuminate their personalities and give background to the story.

In Ch'idzigyaak's flashback, a woman is left behind by her tribe. This woman, her grandmother, does not survive, but it is not the woman's fault she doesn't survive. She is actually killed by her own kin. This story represents Ch'idzigyaak's fate, though more harshly. Ch'idzigyaak feels utterly betrayed by her daughter and grandson.

Sa', on the other hand, is left behind by her tribe as a young woman because she defies the chief when an older woman is to be left behind. Her actions illustrate her fiercely independent nature and her desire to not conform to her tribe's customs. Sa' survives the abandonment well, and she actually finds love in the process when she happens upon a man who is in her same situation. These stories help to explain the two women's dispositions on the journey. Ch'idzigyaak often feels depressed because of her personal situation with her family, while Sa' feels hopeful and optimistic because she has survived and thrived in a similar situation before.

Chapter 5, Saving a Cache of Fish

Chapter 5, Saving a Cache of Fish Summary

The winter is gone, and the two women turn their attention toward hunting, gathering, and preserving food for the future. They find a cluster of lakes and trap muskrats and beavers. They smoke-dry the meat, and keep themselves so busy they don't even take time to eat some days and at night they sleep soundly.

They start to worry that they are not safe in the abandoned camp because it is such a choice place. They fear the younger generation and what they might do to them if they find them with their large stash of food. Therefore, the two women decide to move to a less-desirable area where there are lots of mosquitoes.

They collect so much fish that they have no place to store it all. They weave baskets to hold all the fish and spend their evenings making clothing out of animal skins. Behind their camp is a hill that the two women have not explored. Sa' is very curious about it and decides to set out one morning to see what she can find. She finds a great quantity of cranberries and eats many of them. Then she sees a bull moose standing and looking at her. She decides to follow it. She wants to hunt it because the food would last them a very long time. Plus, she feels young and adventurous again, following after the great beast. She follows him for the better part of the day, jogging to keep up. By the time she gives up it is nearly nightfall, and Ch'idzigyaak is worried sick back at the camp. Sa' doesn't return to the camp until very late that night.

It takes Sa' several days to recover from her adventure with the bull moose, but then she leads Ch'idzigyaak to the patches of cranberries down the hillside. They gather as many cranberries as they can carry back up the hill. They also pile wood high around their camp for winter fuel. These summer months are busy and very productive. They don't have time to sit around thinking about what has happened to them, but as the days grow shorter, loneliness creeps back into their lives.

Chapter 5, Saving a Cache of Fish Analysis

Chapter 5 is a great reprieve from the cold, hunger, and misery of the previous chapters. Finally, the women are ahead of the game. They know how to take care of themselves and have the wherewithal to plan for the future. They keep themselves busy, and the productivity lightens the tone of the novel.

They even begin to seem young again, especially when Sa' chases after the bull moose. The interaction with the bull moose is playful but serious. The author uses a literary technique called personification in this interaction when she talks about the moose playing a game with Sa'. The moose walks away and then stops and looks back at the old woman. The moose isn't really playing a game, but it seems as if he is. The

personification alludes to the fact that the women are lonely. They see the animals around them as fellow creatures in some ways.

The last paragraph of the chapter offers some foreshadowing. The chapter has been largely upbeat and positive, but in the very last line of the chapter, the author says that loneliness is creeping back into the women's lives. The foreshadowing makes the reader think that other people must come back into the novel's action.

Chapter 6, Sadness Among The People

Chapter 6, Sadness Among The People Summary

While the two old women have been thriving, The People have been struggling just to survive. Over the winter they were able to follow a herd of caribou for a while, but hunger set in and they weren't able to find much to eat until summer. During the summer, while they should have been gathering and preserving food and fuel; they tried just to maintain themselves. By the time they had enough energy to work hard, winter was on its way once more.

Several children die of starvation, and the Chief still feels remorseful for leaving the two old women behind because leaving them didn't seem to lift much of the burden. They return to the camp where the two old women were abandoned and are surprised to see no traces of the women. They expect to see some bones or at least the women's belongings, but there is nothing at all.

The Chief sends an older man named Daagoo to go find the women. He also sends four younger men to help. The Chief doesn't quite know why he is spending precious time and resources trying to find the old women but sending the tracker makes him feel more hopeful. Daagoo tracks the old women to the camp where they spent the summer. The men get there quickly because they have been trained to run long distances. Once there, Daagoo smells smoke in the distance, and he calls the names of Ch'idzigyaak and Sa'.

Chapter 6, Sadness Among The People Analysis

The action moves from the two old women to The People in this chapter. This was foreshadowed by the last paragraph in the previous chapter. What is surprising, however, is that The People have fared so poorly at the same time that the two women have done so well. The People are now desperate, and the reader begins to see that the abandoned may now be in a position to help those who abandoned them. The irony of this situation is magnified by the desperate feelings of the Chief. He feels so much guilt and is so desperate for help that he sends his best trackers to find them.

In this chapter, the reader doesn't get to know Daagoo too well, but it's apparent that he is a sort of counterpart to the two old women in the tribe. Daagoo is wiser than the four young men who accompany him to find the old women, but he is patient with them when they are impatient. He is exactly the right person from The People for Ch'idzigyaak and Sa' to first encounter if they are to meet up once again.

Chapter 7, The Stillness is Broken

Chapter 7, The Stillness is Broken Summary

Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak have settled down in their shelter for the night. They are comfortable and warm, their bellies full, but they are feeling lonely and missing The People. Then they hear a man's voice calling their names. Sa' says that they must respond but should also be ready for anything, even death. Sa' calls out, "We are here," and Daagoo finds them. He explains to them that the Chief has sent him to see if he could find them but he doesn't know why.

The two women offer food to the four men, and as they watch them eat they notice how tired and hungry they look. Daagoo tells them that the Chief and the others are sorry for what they did to them and they will want the two old women to return to live with them. Ch'idzigyaak asks them if they would abandon them again the way they did before. Daagoo tells them that he will personally protect them as long as he lives. He realizes that these two old women, whom he used to perceive as weak, had gained great strength since he last saw them.

The two women huddle together and have a conference to discuss whether or not they should trust them. Sa' convinces Ch'idzigyaak that they should share what they have with The People because now they know that they can survive and take care of themselves, even if everything should be taken from them. Ch'idzigyaak thinks about her grandson and cannot bear to let him go hungry when she has so much food herself.

Sa' tells the men that The People may come to them and camp at the original camp. The two old women will share their food with The People, but they do not want to see anyone except Daagoo. They also say that The People must not become greedy with the food because the women will fight to the death for what is theirs. The men sleep on one side of the shelter that night, and the women sleep well, unafraid of wild beasts. They know they're no longer alone.

Chapter 7, The Stillness is Broken Analysis

Because the two old women have prepared for the winter so thoroughly, they have put themselves in a position to be savior figures to those who abandoned them in their time of need. They have overcome weakness and become strong. Their final hurdle, however, is to forgive The People. Although they're willing to share, they are not quite ready to forgive.

In sharing what they have, however, and in making a friend in Daagoo, the two women find something that has been missing from their lives since they left The People. They sleep securely through the night that the men stay in their shelter because they are not alone. This feeling of companionship helps them to not feel afraid of the animals and other dangers of the wilderness.

Chapter 8, A New Beginning

Chapter 8, A New Beginning Summary

The two old women send the men back to The People with large bundles of dried fish to restore The Peoples' energy for the journey to their new camp. Daagoo and the other trackers tell the astonishing story of Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak and convey the women's wishes to be left alone. The Chief and others are ashamed for leaving them behind in the first place, but they intend to pay them back by giving them respect and obeying their wishes.

When The People arrive at the camp, the Chief meets with Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak. He is so excited to see them that he wants to embrace them, but they seem distant, so the three of them sit down on the ground to talk. They explain that they will give The People small amounts of food at a time, and they also give animal furs, hats, and mittens to The People, but The People are forbidden from going to the women's camp.

The Chief and Daagoo make daily visits to see the old women, and the rest of the tribe are very curious about Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak. The Chief asks the old women if other people can get permission to visit them. They quickly say no, but then they realize that they could use some more company. Soon, people begin visiting and relations improve between The People and the two old women.

One day, Ch'idzigyaak's grandson comes to visit and jokingly asks for his hatchet back. Ch'idzigyaak is overjoyed to see him, and they both weep as they embrace. By the time the winter is over, there is a well-worn path between the two camps, but Ch'idzigyaak still has not seen her daughter. She finally asks her grandson why she has not come to visit, and her grandson says that his mother is ashamed. Finally, though, Ch'idzigyaak asks her grandson to tell her daughter that there are no hard feelings. Her daughter, Ozhii Nalii, comes to visit, and mother and daughter are reconciled.

Everyone is reunited, and the Chief gives the two old women honorary positions in the tribe. Others want to help them, but they insist on being fairly independent. There is a greater degree of respect for the elders of the tribe now, and The People make a promise that they will never abandon any elders again. The two old women live several more years before they die happily.

Chapter 8, A New Beginning Analysis

The ending of the book is very tidy. The main conflicts are resolved and relationships are mended. The two old women overcome their weaknesses. At the beginning of the book, the two old women were lazy and whiny, and they felt utterly helpless when The People abandoned them. Along their journey, however, they acquired strength and character enough to become industrious and uncomplaining. In the end, they also overcome their humility in order to mend their relationships with The People.

Ch'idzigyaak provides the pathos in the novel. Because she has family involved in the abandonment, everything is more emotional for her. The abandonment is more emotional, and the reunion is more emotional as well. While Sa' brings strength, hope, and comic relief, the emotion of the novel belongs to Ch'idzigyaak.

Characters

Ch'idzigyaak

Ch'idzigyaak is the older of the two old women. When the novel opens, she is eighty years old. She has a daughter and a grandson in the tribe, and she is deeply hurt by their abandonment of her. Throughout the novel, she is slower to forgive and slower to be hopeful, but she does eventually forgive and press forward.

Ch'idzigyaak's past is revealed through a conversation with Sa' about midway through the story. Ch'idzigyaak's grandmother was abandoned by their tribe when Ch'idzigyaak was a child. This experience had a great impact on her life, especially as history repeats itself and she experiences what her grandmother must have felt.

Ch'idzigyaak was forced to marry a much older man whom she did not know. Because he was so much older than she, she only had one child, a daughter. This daughter has a son, of whom Ch'idzigyaak is quite fond. In the end, Ch'idzigyaak overcomes her pride enough to forgive her daughter and the rest of The People for abandoning her.

Sa'

At seventy-five years of age, Sa' is the younger of the two old women. Sa' does not have any kin in the tribe, so the abandonment affects her in a more physical than emotional way. Sa' has not been a part of this tribe her whole life because she joined it as an adult after she was abandoned by her own tribe. In this way, Sa' has been through this experience before and proves herself to be quite resilient.

Sa' tells her friend Ch'idzigyaak that as a child she was a tomboy, always following her brothers around and wanting to go out and hunt like the men. As Sa' grew, her mother worried about her increasingly, especially as Sa' got to the age when other girls were starting to bear children. Sa' was never interested in men or raising children, but she was strong and defiant.

When her chief announced that an old woman was going to be abandoned, Sa' stood up for the old woman and yelled at the chief. The chief announced that Sa' was to be abandoned as well, and the tribe, including all of her family, left. The old woman died that winter, but Sa' survived on her own. Eventually, she met a man who had met the same fate as she. They made their lives together until he died fighting a bear.

Ozhii Nelli

Ozhii Nelli is Ch'idziyaak's daughter. When the chief announces that the old women must be left behind, Ch'idzigyaak looks to Ozhii for help, but Ozhii doesn't respond. She is in turmoil, wondering what will happen if she decides to defend her mother. She

decides she cannot risk being left behind as well because she has a son to raise, so she goes along with the chief's orders.

Shruh Zhuu

Shruh Zhuu is Ch'idziyaak's grandson and Ozhii Nelli's son. He is very disturbed by the chief's orders to leave his grandmother behind. He is more compassionate and gentle than most of the boys. While many of the boys like to wrestle and roughhouse, Shruh Zhuu prefers to help his mother and grandmother with their work. However, he has been taught to obey his elders, so he respectfully heeds the chief's orders. Shruh puts his hatchet in a place where his grandmother will be able to find it, and he makes sure that Ch'idziyaak knows where it is before he leaves with the others.

Ch'idzigyaak's Grandmother

Ch'idzigyaak's grandmother is not mentioned by name, but Ch'idzigyaak tells her grandmother's story to Sa' when the two women first reach the camp by the river. Ch'idzigyaak's grandmother was abandoned by The People when Ch'idzigyaak is a young girl. The grandmother could no longer walk and could hardly see. After The People had moved on, Ch'idzigyaak's father and brother returned to the camp, ended the grandmother's life, and burned her body so no one could eat her flesh. The story of Ch'idzigyaak's grandmother explains some of the terror she feels upon her own abandonment.

The Brothers of Sa'

When Sa' tells Ch'idzigyaak about her childhood, she talks about her brothers but does not mention any sisters. Readers assume Sa' was the only daughter in her family. Sa' loved being with her brothers and followed them on all their adventures. Because she loved being with the boys so much, she was completely uninterested in settling down and having children. She also became more assertive than was proper for a girl in her tribe, and this led to her being left behind with an old woman when The People moved on.

The Man Sa' Meets

After the old woman dies, Sa' is left alone in the woods. She begins talking to herself and is in this state when she encounters a man in the forest. He has also been abandoned by his people, and Sa' and the man stay together until his death. When Sa' tells Ch'idzigyaak about this man, it is obvious that Sa' loved him very much, and Ch'idzigyaak tells Sa' that she was lucky to have been with a man she loved.

The Father of Sa'

When Sa' was a child, her father let her spend as much time with her brothers as she wanted, though her mother asks her father to make Sa' settle down and stay with the girls in the camp, but her father is pleased with the food Sa' brings back to camp, so he lets her stay with the boys. Perhaps he also indulged her independence and liked her fierce spirit.

The Mother of Sa'

The mother of Sa' is not as indulging as her father. In their culture, women are not granted the same freedoms as men, and Sa's mother can see that independence will probably cause Sa' trouble. As Sa' reaches the age when most of the girls begin bearing children, her mother grows increasingly worried. When Sa' wants to stand up for the old woman being left behind, Sa's mother tries to stifle Sa'. Sa' says that her mother seemed like a stranger, but Sa's mother was only trying to save her daughter from the fate of being left with the old woman.

The People

The People are the Alaskan Indian tribe featured in *Two Old Women*. They are led by a male chief, who is counseled by a group of men. The People have a history of leaving the elderly behind, even though the tradition makes them individually uncomfortable. The author is an Athabaskan Indian, and she bases the book on legends passed down to her through her mother. The People are nomadic and live north of the Arctic circle line. Therefore, they are often on the move because they cannot grow crops. They must follow the food they can hunt or forage.



Objects/Places

Hatchet

Ch'idzigyaak's grandson leaves her his hatchet when The People move on and abandon the old women. This act softens Ch'idzigyaak's heart and gives the two old women a valuable tool.

Babiche

Babiche is thickly stripped raw moose hide that serves a multitude of purposes. When The People move on, Ch'idzigyaak's daughter leaves a bundle of babiche for her. Ch'idzigyaak later admits that they may not have survived without the babiche.

Campfire

Ch'idzigyaak and Sa' get to know each other during the early mornings and late evenings around campfires.

Embers

The two old women carry embers inside mooseskin sacks from campsite to campsite. These embers will start the next day's fires. They symbolize the hope that the women carry with them on their journey.

Snowshoes

One of the first things the two old women do is to make their own snow shoes. They have not done this in many years, but it is the beginning of recalling old skills and being independent.

Squirrels

All through the winter, the women survive on squirrel meat and squirrel brother. They are relieved when spring comes and they can get another kind of meat.

River

The river represents older, happier times to the women. They journey six days to the river where they camped many years previously. The river provides them with plenty of food the following summer.



Grouse

Ch'idzigyaak catches a grouse at their campsite, and they are so glad to have another kind of meat. The grouse signals to the women that spring is coming.

Mosquitoes

When the two old women are afraid that the younger generation will come find them and possibly kill them, they move their camp to a mosquito-infested area where no one else will want to live. The mosquitoes represent their concessions to the younger generation.

Bull Moose

Sa' follows a bull moose all day trying to hunt it one day. The bull moose never tries to attack her but seems to play games with her. It reminds her of her younger, carefree days.

Smoke

Smoke represents life, and when Daagoo smells the smoke coming from the old women's shelter, he realizes that they are alive, and he rejoices.

Dried Fish

The two old women send dried fish back to the starving tribe to give them energy for their journey.

Themes

Respect for the Elderly

The abandonment of Sa' and Ch'idzigyaak is not the only tale of abandonment shared in the story. Ch'idzigyaak's grandmother was also abandoned many years previously, and Sa' was abandoned as a young woman when she stood up to the chief who announced that an elderly woman in her tribe was to be left behind.

Abandonment of the elderly seems to have been very common among this people, and the result of this system is that younger people do not respect their elders much. They view them as liabilities rather than assets to the tribe. The introduction of Daagoo later in the story shows the disrespect that younger people show to elder people. The three young men sent to help Daagoo track the older women do not show him much respect.

When the men hear the story of the two old women, however, they start to wonder if they have held incorrect attitudes. The old women have shown enough fortitude, intelligence, and know-how to afford them some respect from The People. In the end, the author announces that because of these two women, The People make a promise to never abandon the elderly again, and they become legends within their own tribe.

Forgiveness

The story begins with the ultimate betrayal. Under the circumstances, it seems likely that the two old women will never forgive their tribe. Ch'idzigyaak feels the betrayal even more acutely than Sa' because her own daughter and grandson did not stick up for her when the chief announced that the two old women would be left behind.

The hurt that Ch'idzigyaak carries throughout the story is evident in nearly everything she does. During the journey, when her bones and muscles ache, she just wants to die and be rid of the horrible feelings she has amassed. Sa' has to give Ch'idzigyaak pep talks to get her going. This is partly due to Ch'idzigyaak's age, but it is also due to the fact that she feels she will never forgive her daughter.

Chapter 8 shows Ch'idzigyaak finally overcoming her pride enough to forgive her daughter. It is easier for her to forgive her grandson, but when she finally forgives her daughter, the family is reunited, and Ch'idzigyaak feels she can die a happy woman.

Independence

At the beginning of the story, the two old women have become as dependent on the younger generation as children. They are accustomed to having their firewood gathered for them and fires built in the morning before they awaken. When The People move,

which they do frequently, the two old women expect the younger people to put up their tents and help them with their belongings.

When they are abandoned, they immediately realize how much they have come to depend on others. They feel miserable having to do so much work themselves and realize that their bodies are unaccustomed to work. Their muscles and joints rebel against the hard work of walking, hunting, gathering, and trapping.

However, as their bodies become used to the hard work, their spirits also become used to the independence. They begin to feel young again. This is most particularly noted on the day that Sa' chases the bull moose all day long. She practically runs after the bull moose and remembers so many pleasurable times when she was younger and enjoyed hunting. In the end, the independence gained by the two women helps their entire tribe. They are able to provide food and warmth to the younger generation that once provided them with everything they had.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third person omniscient. The author tells us the feelings of different characters. For example, when The People abandon the two old women, the author tells us the feelings of Ch'idzigyaak, Sa', and Ch'idzigyaak's daughter. Later in the novel, the author also tells us the feelings of the chief and Daagoo.

The author does narrow in on the two groups, however. While the author focuses on the two old women, she does not divulge the actions and circumstances of The People. We do not hear about the dire circumstances of The People until nearly a year has passed since the two groups have been separated.

In the end, the author pulls away from the intimate viewpoints of the characters and summarizes the results and moral of the story. She tells the readers that The People have learned to respect and care for the elderly and that the two old women have swallowed their pride and forgiven The People. She also tells us that The People keep the promise they have made to never abandon the elderly again.

Setting

The setting of the novel is northern Alaska, above the Arctic Circle. The author includes a map that shows the routes of the Gwich'in people in the area north of the Arctic Circle and south of the Ts'it Han (Porcupine River). This map shows the rivers and lakes in the area and emphasizes the rugged and cold climate of the setting.

The novel opens in the wintertime when The People are near starvation. When summer comes, the setting changes quite dramatically. The days are much longer than they were in the winter, and there is much more animal and plant life in the area. Because the change in climate is so extreme from season to season, the change in setting is a welcome reprieve. The women are more active in the summertime, and the variety in the surroundings is a welcome change to the bleakness of winter.

The setting is quite different from most settings readers will be accustomed to, and the lives led by the characters are greatly affected by the setting. Old women in most stories do not bludgeon rodents to death, but in this story they do because otherwise they would die. It isn't possible to farm in such an area, so they must depend on animal meat for survival.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple and straightforward with not a lot of metaphors or allusions. The author is an Athabaskan Indian who received her GED after dropping out

of high school. She wrote the book after moving to a trapping cabin twelve miles from Fort Yukon. She would travel to town and type her story on a computer at intervals. The story originated with tales her mother would tell her about her tribal past.

The simple language may be attributed to the author's simple education but may also be attributed to the way the tribe passed stories from one generation to the next. The vocabulary is simple, but there are some Indian words or ecological terms that may not be familiar to all readers. For example, Ch'idzigyaak's daughter gives her a babiche, which the author defines as strips of raw moose hide.

The imagery in the novel, although not complex, is vivid enough that the first several chapters give a brutally honest description of life in the Arctic tundra in the deep winter. The women are cold and hungry and desperate, and when summer finally comes, the reader feels great relief to be free of the white, white snow and the cold, cold winter.

Structure

The novel is divided into eight chapters and is structured mostly chronologically. However, as the women sit around the campfire at night, they talk about their pasts. During one episode, they reveal telling stories from their past. Ch'idzigyaak tells of a childhood experience when her grandmother was abandoned by the tribe, and Sa' tells of her abandonment when she stuck up for an old woman who was going to be abandoned. These are not genuine literary flashbacks, but they do illuminate the characters' pasts.

There is an introduction by the author explaining her background with the Athabaskans in Alaska and her mother's bedtime stories. She hopes that future generations will yearn for such stories. The book also includes an Editor's Afterword, which is quite unusual. The editor explains how the book came to be published and gives her impressions of the author, Velma Wallis.

The two women are so isolated for most of the book that it seems that The People may never enter the story again, but the author includes some foreshadowing at the end of Chapter 5 that leads the reader to believe that there must be a reunification of The People and the two old women. The reunification provides a parallel structure to the story. The two groups are together at the beginning, separated for much of the novel's action, and then together again at the end. The separation in the middle of the story provides soul-searching for both groups so the characters are sufficiently developed for a wholeness at the end of the story.

Quotes

"Far off in this seemingly dismal land were bands of people dressed in furs and animal skins, huddled close to small campfires. Their weather-burnt faces were stricken with looks of hopelessness as they faced starvation, and the future held little promise of better days." Pages 1-2

"Yes, in their own way they have condemned us to die! They think that we are too old and useless. They forget that we, too, have earned the right to live! So I say if we are going to die, my friend, let us die trying, not sitting." Page 16

"Ch'idzigyaak shuddered to think of the melting frost dripping on them in the cold weather. How had they managed before? Ah, yes! The younger ones were always there, piling wood on the fire, peering into the shelter to make sure their elders' fire did not go out. What a pampered pair they had been! How would they survive now?" Page 24

"The knowledge that a few days before The People had tried to snare rabbits in the area without success made the women feel almost superstitious about their good luck. They went back to the camp feeling lighthearted about all that had been accomplished." Pages 32-33

"She would stay exactly as she was, and perhaps death would steal her quickly away from the suffering. But her body was not ready to give in just yet. Instead of slipping blissfully into oblivion, Ch'idzigyaak suddenly felt the urgent need to relieve her bladder." Page 48

"He asked me what I was doing out there alone, and I told him my story. I felt at that moment that I could trust him. He told me that the same thing happened to him. Only he was banished because he was foolish enough to fight over a woman who was meant for another man." Page 65

"I think many more years were taken from me while I worried for you.' Despite the admonishment in her voice, Ch'idzigyaak was deeply relieved that no harm had come to her friend." Page 88

"During the months past, the women were too busy to think about what had happened to them, and if the thought did cross their minds, they blocked it out. But now that they had nothing else to do in the evenings, those unwelcome thoughts kept coming back until each woman began to talk less as each stared thoughtfully into the small fire." Pages 90-91

"As sure as the blood raced through his veins, the old tracker was now confident that the two old women were alive and at that moment, close. He could not contain his

excitement, turning to the young men and saying, 'The two old women are near.'" Pages 104-105

"After Daagoo finished his story, Sa' told him how they survived. The men sat with mixed emotions. The story she told sounded unbelievable, yet the women's very presence was evidence of its truth." Page 119

"Sa' stood with her arms around Shruh Zhuu, tearfully watching mother and daughter find the love they thought was lost forever." Page 134

"More hard times were to follow, for in the cold land of the North it could be no other way, but The People kept their promise. They never again abandoned any elder. They had learned a lesson taught by two whom they came to love and care for until each died a truly happy woman." Pages 136-137

Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast Sa's and Ch'idzigyaak's reactions to the news that they will be left behind by The People. What factors do you think account for their differing reactions?

Discuss the power of hope. When the two old women decide to die trying, what role does hope play in their plan, their actions, and their morale?

Compare and contrast the two stories told by the old women. What does Ch'idzigyaak's story about her grandmother say about her? What does Sa's story about her banishment say about her? How have these tales from the past shaped the present for the two women?

When the two women finally arrive at the abandoned camp by the river, they have mixed emotions. What emotions do they feel? Think of a time when you have returned to a place that holds many memories for you. Which emotions prevail? Happy or sad?

Is the women's separation from The People necessary to their growth as characters? Could they have grown in any other way?

How is Daagoo like the two old women? Do you see parallels between his life and theirs?

The People learn to respect their elders more fully in the end of the story. Does your culture respect elders? In what way? In what ways can your culture improve in this regard?