

# **The Wild Muir: Twenty-two of John Muir's Greatest Adventures Study Guide**

**The Wild Muir: Twenty-two of John Muir's Greatest Adventures by John Muir**

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# Plot Summary

John Muir is a Scottish-born American mountaineer, author, naturalist, and early conservation advocate. Muir spends most of his life living in the Sierra Nevada mountains in California, where he engages in a number of athletic feats that are so extraordinary that many have doubted their veracity. Muir takes copious journal notes during his travels which later evolve into widely read essays, a large number of letters, and over a dozen books. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, millions of Americans read his books and essays.

Muir's efforts led to the creation of the Sequoia National Park and Yosemite National Park which he encourages by lobbying Congress to pass the National Park Bill. He pursues later conservation efforts by taking Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Taft on hikes. He founds the Sierra Club and serves as its first president up to his death.

The Wild Muir is a compilation of twenty-two of Muir's essays and letters that span the period from his childhood up to his last few excursions. Most of the essays are tied to Muir's extraordinary achievements and his rather nonchalant descriptions of them. Muir's physical strength must have been incredible if the reports of the Presbyterian Minister whose life he saves by pulling him up a mountain ledge with his teeth are to be believed.

Muir seems wholly unafraid of activities that would terrify any ordinary human being, such as charging grizzly bears to see how they run. In some stories, Muir comes almost to death but this is unclear from his own descriptions and those of others. After days of terrible and often life-threatening conditions, Muir still has enough strength to save experienced hikers who accompany him.

Rather than focus on himself, Muir spends nearly all of his time describing the plants, animals, and geology of the areas he explores. His descriptions are far from mundane as he gives almost spiritual descriptions of nature and deliberately seeks out beautiful scenery. In fact, one reason that Minister Young's life needs saving is that he falls down a ledge while Muir is busy running around a mountain ledge to get the best view of the sunset. The book is full of descriptions of beautiful scenery high in the mountains, far away from any human life, except traders and American Indians.

The essays in The Wild Muir are short and are largely arranged chronologically. They tend to have themes that typically focus on the particular area that Muir is exploring. Muir is not out to make an ideological point, at least not directly in any event. Instead, he is simply interested in nature, natural beauty, exploration, and physical challenges for their own sake. The reader will find a stark disconnect between Muir's activities and his description of those activities which give rise to the nickname of "the wild Muir."



# Chapter 1, Good Scoochers, Chapter 2, Near Drowning

## Chapter 1, Good Scoochers, Chapter 2, Near Drowning Summary and Analysis

John Muir is born in Scotland on April 21st, 1838. As a young child, Muir engages in many risky activities, although they are typical of high-spirited boys in Dunbar on the North Sea. Muir refers to the games as "scootchers." One of his favorite playgrounds is in the old Dunbar Castle, which he often climbs and explores with his friends.

Most Scottish youth at the time believe in ghosts. The Muir's house once belonged to a physician and a servant girl tells the children that a ghost of the physician haunts it. After being tucked in to bed, John and his brother David play a "schootcher" or game of daring by going into the ghost room. Another scootcher involves climbing the roof.

Chapter 2 begins in 1849 and introduces Daniel Muir, John's tyrannical father who has taken his family into the Wisconsin wilderness to Fountain Lake. Daniel employs his eight sons and daughters seventeen hours a day to grow wheat and corn that is sold to support missionaries. Recreation is alien to him and other Scottish immigrants but there is a lake on their homestead that offers a tempting swimming area.

Daniel has decided that David and John should learn how to swim and encourages them to imitate frogs, which they do. John tries for deep water but is embarrassed by a brush with drowning. Feeling humiliated, John punishes himself by going back to the lake, getting into his boat, paddling to the center with the lack, and swimming to shore. He then does it several times and claims that he has never lost control of himself in water since.

John notes that he had taken the risk in order to punish himself, which is characteristic of Scottish children who are taught "grim self-denial" and to keep themselves in subjection to the laws of the Bible.



## **Chapter 3, At the Bottom of the Well, Chapter 4, Blind!**

### **Chapter 3, At the Bottom of the Well, Chapter 4, Blind! Summary and Analysis**

Muir's family live on Fountain Lake for awhile but due to its poor soil, Daniel takes the family to a new farm called Hickory Hill in 1857. John is then nineteen and his father has forced him and his siblings to work hard to shape the land.

To hear Muir tell it, Daniel buys the new land out of spite to double his children's workload. The land is high and dry so a deep well has to be dug, which John is responsible for finishing. One day after his father lowers him into the well, he starts to drift to sleep under the influence of carbonic gas. Luckily he awakens just in time to have his father pull him out. After a day, John is back in the well.

In a note many years later, John proclaims that city life is unnatural to man because he desires pure air and recounts his experience with carbonic acid poisoning, noting that he does not know how people can put up with city air. He stays in the city for a summer and finds himself wasting away.

Chapter 4 explains that John spends his little free time before dawn inventing machines. After receiving his degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Muir uses his machine-building talents in Canada and then Indiana. He has an accident in March of 1867 that leads Muir to commit again to wilderness life so as to focus on God's inventions rather than his own.

Muir notes that he works in a factory and is paid well to make labor-saving improvements to the machinery. But soon after he starts work, a nail pierces his right cornea and he goes blind in that eye. His other eye follows soon after. His teacher, Professor Butler, upon learning he is in Indianapolis, has him brought to an eye doctor who fixes his sight but tells him that the sight in his right eye will never be perfected. When his eyes heal, John commits to wilderness life to study nature all across the Western Hemisphere and says goodbye to his family and friends.



# Chapter 5, Fever!, Chapter 6, The Brink of the Yosemite Fall

## Chapter 5, Fever!, Chapter 6, The Brink of the Yosemite Fall Summary and Analysis

After Muir goes south, he heads to the Amazon but decides against it because he is concerned about coming down with a disease. The sickness described in this chapter, is the worst Muir experienced.

The chapter opens as Muir makes his way south across the country when he comes across an area he could not pass through. A proprietor told him that a schooner which is carrying lumber to Galveston Texas might take him along the coast from Cedar Keys, so Muir sets out to find the owner, Mr. Hodgson. Hodgson accepts but Muir will have to work for him for two weeks while they wait for the next trip. Muir lives with Hodgson during this time. The first day that Muir starts work however, he becomes sick, growing feverish, and numb. After fainting on a trip to the market, Muir passes out for days and after he awakens, he has to be taken care of by the Hodgson's for three months.

By Chapter 76, the year is 1868 and Muir arrives in San Francisco. He quickly goes to Pacheco Pass to see the lights of the Sierra Nevada. He then goes to Yosemite Valley and leaves after a week to work as a shepherd in San Joaquin Valley. The next year in early summery, Muir agrees to move a flock of sheep along the Sierra's western flank. On the way, he is able to investigate the Yosemite Fall for the first time.

The sunshine in the Indian Canyon is among the most beautiful John had ever seen. Along his way, admiring the beauty of the landscape, Muir meets a cliff between the canyon and Yosemite Falls. Muir then moves around the valley. After a mile of cliff work, Muir finds his way to Yosemite Creek and continues to work his way towards the fall. When he reaches the base of the fall, he is amazed by its "tremendous grandeur." That night, John is too excited to sleep. When he finally sleeps, he dreams that he is flying in the air above water and rock. When he awakes, he exclaims that a mountaineer could find no matter way to die than in this place.



# **Chapter 7, An Interview with a Bear, Chapter 8, In the Midst of the Yosemite Fall**

## **Chapter 7, An Interview with a Bear, Chapter 8, In the Midst of the Yosemite Fall Summary and Analysis**

Muir does not care for shepherding because the "hoofed locusts" ate the meadows. To lift his spirits, he studies the plant and animal life of the area. He has an "interview" with a bear in this chapter, which displays his connect to animal life. It is a Sierra Bear, which Muir calls the "sequoia" of animals. Muir admires the bear's strength and ability to avoid going hungry due to his utter dominance of his territory.

In their first "interview," both Muir and the bear are frightened of each other. Upon first seeing the bear, Muir rushes at him to scare him and to study his gait when he ran. In fact, the bear does not run away. Muir feels bad. In the days after their first meeting, Muir travels to the top of the North Dome in the Indian Canyon to draw the flora and fauna of the area. One day, Muir runs into the bear again and indeed runs at him again. The bear seems not to mind. The interview becomes a bit strange and seems to last a long time.

After the second interview, Muir decides to give bears respectful notice of his coming. They also typically stay away from him. He has only one more direct and close encounter with a bear.

In 1869 in the fall, Muir has unsteady work in the Yosemite Valley. He helps to build cottages and a sawmill, along with helping tourists interested in hiking. He explores the Sierra Nevada for the following six years and builds a cabin along the way. Muir is impressed by the sheer power of the Yosemite Fall and finds the rainbows that it produces overwhelming. He observes the fall routinely and discusses various perspectives from which to view it.



# **Chapter 9, Climbing the Ice Cone, Chapter 10, The Snow Avalanche Ride**

## **Chapter 9, Climbing the Ice Cone, Chapter 10, The Snow Avalanche Ride Summary and Analysis**

Those who live in Yosemite Valley tend to like Muir, although they think he is eccentric and risk-seeking due to his excursions. In this chapter, his risk-seeking behavior is on display when climbing an ice cone. By this time, it is cold in the valley and frosty morning sounds can wake him up. The frozen spray of water that erupts in the morning produces a cone of ice at the foot of Yosemite Fall about four hundred feet high. Muir describes how it forms. It tends to grow higher and wide in the cold weather and appears to be a pure-white and smooth hill.

Muir wants to learn about the cone and tries to climb it. He faces only a little difficulty, although one day he was nearly hit by some frozen spray. He nonetheless goes back again and peers into the crater-like opening of the cone, seeing about one hundred and forty feet down within it.

In Chapter 10, the author notes that Muir hikes during the winter to view weather across the valley. The side canyon Muir climbs in this chapter has not been identified unlike many of Muir's mentioned landmarks. Muir notes that great snow-storms replace the snow on the Yosemite before November. Many animals and people withdraw to warmer places or hibernate. Snow often piles up ten or fifteen feet. Sometimes avalanches occur after storms. Muir has seen several avalanches unlike most Yosemite visitors. Muir has even ridden one of them, something Muir shares with a very small number of others. Sometimes Muir will climb all day to watch one, which leads to his only ride. He finds it exhilarating.





# Chapter 11, Rattle Snakes, Chapter 12, The Earthquake

## Chapter 11, Rattle Snakes, Chapter 12, The Earthquake Summary and Analysis

Muir is initially prejudiced against the rattlesnake but he comes to respect them over time. He finds out that the snakes are important for farmers in central California because they eat rodents. Most snakes in Yosemite are harmless and only the rattlesnake has venom that is dangerous. Muir kills the first two rattlesnakes he meets. After a few minutes of moves and counterattacks, Muir brings his heel on to his first snake, ultimately killing him. Muir feels degraded by the process. He also thinks his second kill could have been avoided.

A third encounter near his cabin ends in the snake retreating without any tension at all. At the time of writing, Muir has seen about one hundred of them and leaves them alone. At one point, Muir throws his camping back on a rattlesnake by accident and takes his things to another area. Another similar event occurs that leads him to move his camp area entirely.

Chapter 12 occurs on March 26th, 1872, when a major earthquake occurs in California on the Sierra Nevada's east side. Muir is taking care of a hotel in the winter. The chapter opens with Muir wondering how to track down the origin of some taluses that had formed during an avalanche. He thinks they came from an ancient earthquake. That night an earthquake occurs and in the midst of it Muir is excited to learn from it. The earthquake produces an avalanche that creates a terrible but beautiful spectacle and makes enormous noise. After the tremors have calmed down, Muir goes out to survey the land beyond his sleeping area.

Muir finds that a lot of the indigenous Yosemite tribe think that angry spirits are trying to kill them and so they flee the area. The next day he speaks with some white settlers. They feel after effects of the earthquake after they start talking. Muir is not disturbed but the other settlers are unnerved. Aftershocks continue to come through. The earthquake is now called the Inyo Earthquake and is relatively gentle with respect to the earthquake that produced the Range. Muir admires such phenomena.



# Chapter 13, The Ascent of Mount Ritter, Chapter 14, A Geologist's Winter Walk

## Chapter 13, The Ascent of Mount Ritter, Chapter 14, A Geologist's Winter Walk Summary and Analysis

Muir makes many ascents up the Sierra Nevadas but his climb up Mount Ritter in 1872 ranks among his most difficult. This chapter also introduces a young Scotch artist, William Keith, who later becomes an important California landscape painter. The two become lifelong friends. During the hike, Muir wishes that he could be the artist instead of Keith but he is content to just look. They then spend several days at a camp site due to its beautiful view. When they leave, they make their way to Mount Ritter. Keith and another artist start to paint and Muir begins to climb.

The first day of climbing is fairly straightforward and the evening is so beautiful that it carries an almost religious significance. Mount Ritter is still miles away. After camping for the night, Muir sets off again and encounters some hard snow on the way. Eventually he reaches the base of Mount Ritter and has to move around the base to find a scalable point. Muir begins to climb on the eastern edge and is careful of missteps. Once he reaches the half-way point, he comes to a dead stop, unable to move up or down and realizes that he has to fall. When he lets go, his instincts take over and he survives relatively unscathed.

Muir picks himself up and went on. Eventually he reaches the top. Looking south, Muir sees a number of spires and wilderness of mountains behind it. Again, the beauty strikes him and he can see for miles, including the Sierra Crown, Mounts Ord, Gibbs, and the like. The sun however is setting and Muir has to build a fire. Muir moves safely and quickly. Before night, he reaches the bottom of the mountain. He then camps and sleeps. In the morning he makes his way home. The artists are "unreasonably" glad to see him, for they have no idea whether he survived.

Chapter 14 takes Muir to the winter of 1872 in San Francisco, where he spends two weeks. He describes himself as feeling dazed and confused by the city dust and din. He eventually runs to the lowlands and then to Yosemite Valley in December to explore Tenaya Canyon, which no one has ever done.

Muir is happy to reach Yosemite and quickly starts up the canyon. Only mountaineers can access it and Muir is excited to be the first. But after creeping quickly between the mountains, he falls off a canyon wall and is knocked unconscious. Muir feels worthless and degraded and blames his lack of ability on the city air. Muir spends the next day on the gorged portion of the canyon. He again reaches a beautiful view and records it in his journal, which he reprints. That night he sleeps on the boulders. The next morning Muir sketches, makes notes and climbs. On the way up, he finds a frozen

lake and many beautiful water flowers. He then makes his way to Tenaya canyon and goes home feeling invigorated by the sun.



# Chapter 15, The Tree Ride, Chapter 16, A Perilous Night on Mount Shasta

## Chapter 15, The Tree Ride, Chapter 16, A Perilous Night on Mount Shasta Summary and Analysis

This chapter occurs in December, 1874 and has been reprinted many times. It is the first occasion where Muir decides to place himself as the main topic of his writing. It also helps to establish Muir as a major nature writer.

The chapter opens with Muir in the middle of an "exhilarating" storm in the Sierra that he goes into the forest to enjoy. Muir easily survives the night and enjoys the early morning. The glens and trees are beautiful and Muir describes them at some length. At midday Muir decides to climb a tree to get a good look at the territory. However, some trees are weak and at risk of falling down. Muir chooses to climb a tall Douglas Spruce that seems steady. At a hundred feet tall, Muir easily scales it. The view is wonderful. The storm is beautiful as well and Muir is not at all afraid. He encourages those who experience such a storm to focus on the wind.

Muir sees trees as travelers through the universe, just as men. Trees make journeys through waving. After the storm, the forest seems, "so fresh, so joyous, so immortal."

Chapter 18 occurs in 1875. Muir has only been a mountaineer for six years but he is deeply confident in his ability and demonstrates it by climbing to the top of Mount Shasta several times at 14,142 feet. On the night described, Muir contemplates the stars. He also receives frostbite that made him limp in old age.

On 28th of April, 1875 Muir leads a party up Mount Shasta to make a survey. Jerome Fey accompanies him. The ascent is somewhat wearisome and while no storm appears to be on its way when they startup the mountain, clouds are assembling. Often small rains and snows come unexpectedly and are not really storms. However this storm appeared to be a small snowstorm with the potential to get out of control. If a storm is coming, Muir assures Jerome that they can easily make their way down.

The storm comes quickly and hits. The temperature falls from 50 degrees to 22 degrees in a few minutes. Darkness comes quickly as well along with the wind. They quickly find shelter and have to find a way to avoid the cold. Muir suggests that they lie in the mud and warm themselves with the stem, although they might have to deal with acid gases and if they become wet, they will freeze when they went back down.

The snow falls without stopping for over an hour. Then the storm breaks suddenly. The two mountaineers lay still to let the snow drift pass over them. The heat of the mud increases gradually and they are scalded with carbonic gas. They escape to a colder area and make it through the night, but the next day they are blistered, famished, and

frozen. They watch the stars to pass the time. It ends up taking thirteen hours. On the way back to camp, they fear that they will lose energy. By 10 am they reach the timber and thirty minutes later, they hear Sisson shouting for them to take them to the hotel. Their feet are terribly frostbitten. The next day the two men seem so refreshed that it appears like they have risen from the dead.

The next section involves an independent account of Muir's struggle on Mount Shasta provided by Augustus Frederick Rodgers who hired Muir and Fay to climb the mountain. Muir neglects to mention in his account that he has no coat on the mountain and that his beard freezes to his instrument box. Muir and Fay climb the mountain at 7000 feet in four hours and ten minutes.



# Chapter 17, Mono Lake Windstorm, Chapter 18, Thirst

## Chapter 17, Mono Lake Windstorm, Chapter 18, Thirst Summary and Analysis

The next chapter's events probably occur in 1875 in the summer. The three friends Muir mentions are probably the artist William Keith, and two teachers, John Sweet and J. B. McChesney. Mono Lake is known for frequent storms that begin quickly. In this chapter, Muir's judgment seems to have been obscured by the demands of his friends who want to stay on the water longer.

Mono lake is about two and a half miles long, composed of hard lava and loose ashes. They find the island and explore. Heavy clouds gather around the mountains and at noon a quick wind comes down. The party then quickly leaves to return to the mainland but the storm comes while they were in the water, which forces them to return to the island. His companions are frightened so they try to return to the mainland again at night while the storm continues. Eventually they make it back and stay in an old hut with wood rats.

Chapter 18 takes Muir through June 1878. He is now in the Nevada wilderness helping the government with a survey lead by Captain A. F. Rodgers. In this piece, he claims to have suffered as he never has before. This indicates that the difficulties he faces are terrible. Muir writes the piece as a letter to the parents of Louie Wanda Strentzel, who is a woman he has started to court. In two years they are married. Muir notes that he climbs Lone Mountain with insufficient water. Muir's companions almost die of dehydration. Muir is able to get them water after two days and one night.



# Chapter 19, The Rescue of Glenora Peak, Chapter 20, Stickeen

## Chapter 19, The Rescue of Glenora Peak, Chapter 20, Stickeen Summary and Analysis

John Muir is among the first to argue that glacial activity had a major impact on the shape of the Sierra Nevadas. He energetically explores sixty-five small glaciers. In 1879, his interest takes him to Alaska, which would be the first journey there of seven. A young Presbyterian minister, S. Hall Young, who is assigned to evangelize the Thlinget Indians of Alaska's Southeast area, meets Muir on a steamboat carrying mail. They become instant and close friends.

The journey begins at the old Hudson's Bay trading-post at Gelnora. Mountains lie eight miles away and Muir is determines to climb them. Mr. Young insistes on coming with him despite Muir's caution. Early on, Young almost falls down to his death and dislocates both of his arms. Muir saves him. When Muir has to return to the trading post to get supplies, Young will not let Muir leave him alone. He does his best to convince Muir to let him go with him. This takes some time. Muir eventually gives Young over to the steamboat captain Nat Lane, the son of Senator Joseph Land, who transports the other missionaries.

In future mission lectures, Mr. Young often tells the story but Muir notes that he does not record it in his notebook. He only writes about it to undermine a ridiculous caricature of the story that appears in a respectable magazine.

The second part of the chapter is Reverend Young's version, which adds a great deal of detail. It mostly describes Muir in more detail as "that wild Muir." Muir's Scottish accent is described, as is his utter absorption by local botany. Young describes Muir as "sliding" up the mountains due to his incredible skill. He notes that he is in quite a bit more pain than he has told Muir and could barely keep up. The view Young sees with Muir is among the most beautiful in his life. In his struggle to get the best view of the sunset, Muir runs around the mountain edge. While lagging behind, Young falls down, as Muir described. Young claims that Muir carries him up the mountain literally held in his teeth. According to Young, Muir "did the work of three men" getting Young back to camp. Young regrets never seeing the full sunset.

Chapter 21 concerns a small dog called Stickeen owned by Young and is among the most well-known and beloved of Muir tales. Stickeen, a funny, black, short-legged, toy-dog helps Muir understand the connection between humans and nature. The trip occurs in 1880 on Muir's second Alaska trip near Glacier Bay.

The chapter opens with Stickeen and Muir preparing to hike the glacier. They trace the glacier for several miles and find it a reasonably easy climb at first. The travel continues



with Muir making observations of beauty all the way. Eventually he finds a number of crevasses that can be climbed and crossed. Stickeen follows him all the way. They have some difficulty making it off the glacier before nightfall. They have a particularly difficult time crossing the last of the "silver bridges" between parts of the glacier. The crevasse they encounter are forty feet high. Muir has to dig steps to find his way down the glacier face to cross the gap. Stickeen is not happy about it and cries terribly. Initially he will not follow Muir at first but Muir convinces him to come down. Eventually they return to camp.

In a small note, Young notes that Muir hikes with Stickeen on a glacier for seventeen hours with only a bit of bread and does not rest at all. He still rises up at daylight the next morning and takes another hike.





# Chapter 21, A Sled Trip on Muir Glacier, Chapter 22, Nearly Crushed by an Iceberg

## Chapter 21, A Sled Trip on Muir Glacier, Chapter 22, Nearly Crushed by an Iceberg Summary and Analysis

In 1890, Muir is fifty-two years old and has spent the last ten years raising a family and running a fruit farm in Martinez, California. He finally has raised the funds to keep his family comfortable and this permits him to write a series of articles that defend the creation of Yosemite National Park. All of his future articles are drawn from his journals, one of which records his discovery of Glacier Bay in 1880. Bad weather prevents him from exploring the Muir Glacier.

Muir's trip begins on July 11th as he makes his way to Nunatak Island. On July 13th, the mountain trip begins with sled and pack in hand. Muir then describes local flora and views the Muir Glacier as he approaches it. On July 14th, he looks for goats he has with him and continues forward. July 15th leads Muir up the dome to plan a path to the glacier in case of storms. The day has been beautiful and full of sunshine. July 16th has Muir leave camp early to cross the main glacier, making his way to the seven grand tributaries surrounding the Muir Glacier. On July 17th, Muir experiences another cloudless and beautiful day. His heavy shoes have to be resoled but Muir is refreshed. He reaches the great basin and notes that the drainage there must be vast. On July 18th Muir intends to rest but he decides to sketch the view and the tributaries on top of Quarry Mountain.

July 19th follows with Muir feeling nearly blind. He sees double with a snow poultice over his eyes. There is too much sunshine on the glacier and it is blinding him. Muir only hikes a few miles. On July 20th, Muir feels better, keeping wet bandages on his eyes, but he still sees double. Luckily the weather is a bit cloudy. In a day or two, Muir must signal a party to take him over to the steamer Queen to hear from home, write, rest, and eat.

July 21st is a rainy morning but Muir's eyes feel better. Muir examines the old forest of spruce nearby. As he is going to bed, he sees Professor Reid coming over to him across the moraine along with Mr. Loomis and the cook. They come to pick him up and Muir is glad to go.

In the final chapter, the editor notes that Muir survives the adventure described and lives for twenty years. This appears to have been his last life-endangering activity, but he stays healthy afterward. In 1892, Muir founds the Sierra Club and serves as its first president, staying in office until he dies. During this period, he fights to preserve the wilderness. Muir dies in 1914 in LA after writing three hundred articles, ten books,



escorting President Roosevelt and Taft to Yosemite, traveling around the world twice, and discovering and exploring the Black Forest in Arizona.

The chapter opens with Muir setting out with Professor Reid's party to visit some large glaciers to see the changes in them since October 1879. They make their way up along the mountains and Muir pushes ahead with a hard struggle. At one point however, he finds himself between glaciers and notices that the gap between them is narrowing. Muir fears for his life but escapes, making a bed with two boulders. For two more days Muir explores and reached his cabin and food on the third day. Professor Reid and his party pick him up. When he returns, the party admires the night sky, with Muir staying up after the others went to bed. He stays up until morning watching the sky with a particularly vast purple aurora.



# Characters

## John Muir

John Muir is born in 1838 in Scotland in Dunbar to his strict and religious father Daniel and his mother Ann. Muir has seven siblings and has a scrappy childhood that is full of backbreaking work and strict religious education. In 1849, Daniel Muir takes his family to the United States in Wisconsin where they create the Fountain Lake Farm. Muir is forced to have orthodox beliefs and while he never loses his spirituality, he loses any orthodox Christian commitments. Muir goes to college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when he is twenty-two years old and studies botany. He also takes a wide range of courses. He never graduates.

In 1864, Muir moves to Canada for a short period to collect plants and then takes a job at a sawmill in Ontario until 1865. After the Civil War, Muir becomes an engineer in Indianapolis and while he is effective at improving machines, he is blinded by an accident. After this event, he swears to study only "God's inventions" rather than those of men. Muir then decides to travel to South American but he catches Malaria while on Florida's Gulf Coast and decides not to go further south. By 1868, Muir moves to San Francisco and quickly leaves to visit Yosemite Valley. Muir is overwhelmed by its beauty and starts to live in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. At this time he begins his several decade-long explorations of the area.

Muir quickly becomes a legendary mountaineer, taking many people on arduous hikes but engaging in most of his travels alone, while taking absurd risks. He acquires the name "wild Muir" due to his solitary nature and extraordinary physical prowess. Muir is completely drawn in by the beauty of nature, its geography, plants, and animals. He writes of the scenery constantly and rarely talks about himself.

## Rev. S. Hall Young

Almost all of Muir's travels are solitary. The extraordinary scenes he witnesses and the amazing feats of physical strength he engages in are witnessed by few. In fact, Muir's journals include few personal details about himself or anyone else. However, there is one major account of Muir's journeys and adventures in the book that is described by another individual, a Presbyterian Minister named Samuel Hall Young. When Young first travels with Muir, he is just out of college. He meets Muir at a trading post stop on his way to evangelize the Thlinget Indians of Southeastern Alaska. Young is one of Muir's greatest admirers and later writes extensively about him.

Chapter 19 contains Young's extensive account of "The Rescue on Glenora Peak" when Muir saves his life. From the Hudson Bay trading post, Muir takes Young on a trip to Glenora peak after Young asks his permission. Muir advises Young to not go and Young later reports that Muir's pace nearly kills him. Young says that Muir is so adept at



climbing that he literally seems to "slide" up the rocks. Young and Muir reach the top of Glenora Peak near sunset. As the sun sets, Muir runs off along the mountain's edge to try to get the best view of the sunset. While Muir is gone, Young slips and falls down a ledge. He holds on for dear life, dislocating both of his arms in the process.

When Muir returns, he finds Young about to fall. So he quickly climbs down the ledge and picks Young up with his teeth, by biting onto his clothes. He then proceeds to bring Young to safety. When Young recounts the story, he does so in great awe and in full detail.

## **Stickeen**

This is Reverend Young's dog that Muir takes on a glacier exploration. Stickeen offers good company for Muir and by and large an excellent companion. Muir and Stickeen develop a deep connection on their dangerous hike.

## **Daniel Muir**

This is Muir's exceedingly strict Presbyterian father who makes his children work eighteen-hour days. He enforces rigorous and extensive Bible instruction upon them.

## **American Indians**

When Muir lives in the Sierra Nevadas, he often encounters local American Indians.

## **Professor Reid**

This is one of Muir's associates that provide transport for him after hikes from time to time.

## **William Keith**

An artist and good friend of Muir's, this individual often accompanies him on hikes to create sketches of the territory.

## **John Swett and J. B. McChesney**

These are two of Muir's other good friends that hike along with him.



## **City Dwellers**

Muir spend as little time in cities as he can and often grows sick there due to polluted air. He cannot nderstand why anyone would live in cities and makes several comments to this effect.

## **Muir's Childhood Friends**

In the first chapter, Muir describes his rough Scottish childhood and the childhood friends that he played with.

## **Grizzly Bears**

In "An Interview with a Bear," Muir has several encounters or "interviews" with grizzly bears. Muir often rushes at them to see them run.

## **Louie Wanda Strentzel**

This is Muir's wife who he sometime contacts in his letters prior to their marriage.

## **The Sierra Club**

This is the conservation organization the Muir founded. He serves as its first president until his death.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Scotland**

This is Muir's country of origin. He maintains a thick Scottish accent for most of his life.

### **Fountain Lake and Hickory Hill Farm**

This is the area near Wisconsin where Muir's father begins a farm and raises his eight children, including John.

### **The University of Wisconsin - Madison**

This is where Muir went to college and studied mostly botany. He never graduated.

### **The Sierra Nevadas**

This is the mountain range in the Western United States where Muir lives and spends most of his time during his mid-life. He engages in some major and early explorations of the area.

### **Yosemite Valley**

Muir specifically spends most of his time in this area. He lives near the Yosemite Valley.

### **Yosemite Falls**

This natural area falls in Yosemite Valley. Muir visits this area several times in the book and is generally mesmerized by its beauty.

### **The Muir Glacier**

This is a major glacier named for Muir because he is the first person known to have explored it.

### **Mount Ritter and Mount Shasta**

These are two the enormous mountains that Muir climbed.



## **Glenora Peak**

This is the peak where Young nearly dies and where Muir saves him.

## **Frostbite**

On one trip, Muir receives severe frostbite on his feet that in later years leaves him with a limp.

## **Sunsets**

Muir is particularly mesmerized by sunsets in the Sierra Nevadas.

## **Natural Beauty**

Muir's spirituality is deeply connected to the natural beauty of nature, which he believes that all forms of life connect to.

## **City Air**

Muir despises city air and claims that it often makes him ill.  
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# Themes

## Life-Threatening Activities

There is a reason that John Muir is often called "the wild Muir." He routinely engages in hikes and exploratory treks that are clearly life-threatening. For instance, in "An Interview with a Bear," Muir rushes bears just to see how they will run. He seems to be wholly unafraid of the bears and cautions the reader not to be concerned. In "The Snow Avalanche Ride," Muir actually rides an avalanche and survives. While he does not intend to ride the avalanche, he puts himself in a position where that is a viable option. Muir kills several rattlesnakes with just his foot in another shockingly risk action.

Perhaps Muir's most perilous activity comes in "A Perilous Night on Mount Shasta." On the few days in question, Muir and two of his fellow mountaineers decide to climb Mount Shasta, which has an elevation of over ten thousand feet. The sky is clear when they begin and the temperature is perfectly fine. However, a storm comes upon them quickly before they reach the bottom. The temperature quickly drops thirty degrees, from around 50 degree to 22 degrees.

Muir and the others cannot risk moving down the mountain and so have to wait out the night. Muir has no jacket and all the three men receive severe frostbite since they have to stay up all night in the freezing cold in order to survive. In fact, in order to stay warm, all three men lay in the mud heated up by mountain gases, which threaten to poison them.

## Exploration

John Muir is one of history's great mountaineers. He single-handedly explores many mountain territories that have never been explored before. He carefully explores the Yosemite Valley and Yosemite National Park is created due to his efforts. Muir often engage in exploratory ventures simply to see new things. For instance, he climbs an ice cone just to look hundreds of feet into the open core. He engages in two very dangerous climbs of some of the tallest mountains in the area, Mount Shasta and Mount Ritter. The desire to climb Mount Shasta almost kills him.

In another situation, exploration nearly causes Muir and his companions to die of thirst. In a third situation, Muir's desire to explore Glenora Peak nearly leads his companion to fall to his death. Of course, this is not to say that Muir is to blame for the risks that his fellow mountaineers took upon themselves.

Muir's fascination with the flora and fauna of the Sierra Nevada is enough motivation to lead him into wholly unexplored areas of the wilderness. He is unafraid of any animal threats and can survive or avoid any weather conditions. Often when Muir reaches his desired destinations, he makes detailed journal notes on what he sees and makes a number of sketches. In fact, most of his essays come directly from his journals.





## Natural Beauty

While the reader might be most impressed by Muir's climbing prowess, his unusual ability to survive extreme weather conditions, and his enormous risk-appetite, Muir is much less interested in himself than he is in his surroundings. Almost all of the Wild Muir is filled with records of Muir's observations. He rarely focuses on himself but is always stunned by nature. When Muir quits working as an engineer in Indianapolis after an accident, he spurns "man's inventions" in favor of "God's inventions" in nature. He comes to develop a deep spirituality based upon Muir's profound sense of connection to animal and plant life as well as the geography of the world.

Muir's desire to find beautiful places and have beautiful experiences in nature border sometimes on the extreme. Reverend Young reports that Muir is almost entirely focused on the plant life and geography on their climb to Glenora Peak. Muir often comments about animals and expresses a deep sense of kinship with them. This comes out most in his description of the deep connection he feels to Young's dog, Stickeen. His kinship with bears is clear and his guilt over killing rattlesnakes unnecessarily is just another illustration of this.

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of Muir's sense of connection to nature and his love of its beauty is his constant descriptions of experiencing the "most beautiful" this or that which he had ever seen. Muir stays up all night to watch an extraordinary display of the Aurora Borealis. When he climbs Glenora Peak, he is so desperate to get the best perspective on the sunset that he leaves Reverend Young behind.



# Style

## Perspective

John Muir's perspective is a complex mix of naturalist, conservationist, and spiritualist. Muir's naturalism is obvious. He is deeply interested in taking note of different forms of plant and animal life. He is a major nature lover. In fact, for several decades, Muir spends most of his time alone in the wilderness taking significant risks to encounter nature in new and beautiful ways. He takes extensive notes and sketches of the geography and life he encounters. Muir often prefers nature to anything man-made and relies on very little human technology. He hates cities and thinks that both city air and life have a deleterious effect on his health.

Muir's conservationism grows out of his love of nature. At a few times in the book, Muir expresses a deep desire to preserve nature uninterrupted by human life. He enjoys and even loves pure natural scenes and interacts with only a small number of individuals either by necessity or who are close friends. Muir starts one of the greatest conservationist organizations in the world, The Sierra Club, and serves as its first president until his death.

As for his spiritualism, Muir is raised in a strict Presbyterian household where religious beliefs appear to have shifted over time from orthodox Protestantism to a generic form of theism. He sometimes speaks of God and later talks about the deep connections between all of life within nature. Muir expresses clear spiritual sentiment in his experiences of the beauty of nature and in fact seems to engage in explicitly spiritual exercises when he engages in new explorations.

## Tone

Muir's tone is unusual for one who lived such a wild, risky, and unusual life. Most of Muir's articles are taken from his journal entries but unlike many journal entries, Muir's entries are not very personal. He only sometimes makes observations on his own conditions and sometimes his mental states, but mostly with respect to bodily sensations, fear, and exhilaration. Muir says little about his internal dialogue and in fact, focuses very little on anything but what he senses and observes.

When describing his physical achievements, Muir is typically brief and declines to compliment himself in any way. This tone is brought out with particular strength when Muir's description of the climb to Glenora Peak is compared with Young's description. Young is effusive about Muir's extraordinary abilities and includes incredible details that Muir declines to mention.

Muir's tone of writing is also effusive, despite lacking any effusive quality to anything that is personal. Muir describes nature in great detail and while the tone is a bit flat at times, the reader gets a deep sense for Muir's profound love of nature. In many cases,



Muir's description of beautiful scenes expresses a profundity, which not come out strongly in his tone. This however may simply reflect his belief that such experiences cannot be properly expressed in words.

This is not to say that Muir's tone is never personal. Muir is particularly personal when he talks about the close emotional bond he developed with Young's dog Stickeen on their travels among some glaciers.

## Structure

The Wild Muir: Twenty-two of John Muir's Greatest Adventures contains, unexpectedly, twenty-two short chapters that are not tied to a single story. They are arranged almost entirely chronologically save for those essays and entries that cannot be accurately dated. The chapters rarely exceed ten pages and the book contains a number of illustrations as well. The longest chapter is "The Rescue on Glenora Peak" and this is only due to the fact that the chapter contains two accounts of the rescue, a short one from Muir and a long one from Reverend Young.

Lee Stetson, the editor, includes a brief introduction where he speaks about Muir with great admiration. In the beginning of each chapter, Stetson provides brief contextual notes and makes some comments about the events that occur in the chapter. He sometimes provides geographical information but always, if he can, lists the year and order of the chapter in Muir's life. The book ends with an account of one of Muir's last excursions. Stetson notes that Muir then transitioned into family life, conservation activism, worldwide travels and extensive book and article writing.

The internal structure of the chapters is always straightforward. Sometimes it tells a simple chronological story that is continuous. Other chapters divide up by the day. Muir's descriptions are always clear and down-to-earth. He focuses most of his attention on describing the geography and wildlife of the area he is exploring. Again, only occasionally does Muir talk about himself.



## Quotes

"Dinna greet, Davie, dinna greet, I'll help ye doon. If you greet, fayther will hear, and gee us baith an awfu' skelping." (Chapter 1, pg. 6.)

"Never again from that day to this have I lost control of myself in water." (Chapter 2, pg. 12.)

"Tell me what you will of the benefactions of city civilization, of the sweet security of the streets—all as part of the natural upgrowth of man towards the high destiny we hear so much of. I know that our bodies were made to thrive only in pure air, and the scenes in which pure air is found." (Chapter 3, pg.18.)

"I bade adieu to all my mechanical inventions, determined to devote the rest of my life to the study of the inventions of God." (Chapter 4, pg. 23.)

"This time it is real—all must die, and where could mountaineers find a more glorious death!" (Chapter 6, pg. 38.)

"He came on within a dozen yards of me, and I had a good quiet look into his eyes." (Chapter 7, pg. 41.)

"In all my mountaineering I have enjoyed only one avalanche ride, and the start was so sudden and the end came so soon I had but little time to think of the danger that attends this sort of travel, though at such times one thinks fast." (Chapter 10, pg. 64.)

"Elijah's flight in a chariot of fire could hardly have been more gloriously exciting." (Chapter 10, pg. 65.)

"A noble earthquake! A noble earthquake!" (Chapter 12, pg. 74.)

"My doom appeared fixed. I \*must\* fall." (Chapter 13, pg. 92.)

"We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones, it is true; but our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings-many of them not so much." (Chapter 15, pg. 116.)

"Two of the three nearly lost their lives. I suffered least, though I suffered as never before, and was the only one strong enough to ascend a sandy canyon to find and fetch the animals after descending the mountain." (Chapter 18, pg. 143.)

"How he did it, I know not. The miracle grows as I ponder it. The wall was almost perpendicular and smooth. My weight on his jaws dragged him outwards. And yet, holding me by his teeth as a panther her cub and clinging like a squirrel to a tree, he



climbed with me straight up ten or twelve feet, with only help of my iron-shod feet scrambling on the rock. It was utterly impossible, yet he did it!" (Chapter 19, pg. 163.)

"Anyhow, we were nearly killed and we both learned a lesson never to be forgotten, and are better man and dog for it-learned that human love and animal love, hope and fear, are essentially the same, derived from the same sources, and fall on all alike like sunshine." (Chapter 20, pg.171.)

"Excepting only the vast purple aurora mentioned above, said to have been visible over nearly all the continent, these two silver bows in supreme, supernal beauty surpassed everything auroral I ever beheld." (Chapter 21, pg. 209.)



## Topics for Discussion

Which of Muir's stories do you find the least believable and why?

Does Muir seem mentally unstable to you? Why or why not? Why might someone think that he is?

John Muir is obviously a deeply spiritual man. Explain his spirituality to the best of your understanding.

Name two of the scenes that Muir regards as the most beautiful he has witnessed.

Describe the differences between Muir's and Reverend Young's accounts of the Rescue on Glenora Peak. What do the differences indicate about Muir's personality?

Why does Muir not like cities? How do they affect him?

Why does Muir give up working on machines? What are his alternative?

Describe two of Muir's most impressive achievements in exploration.