Watership Down Study Guide

Watership Down by Richard Adams

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Watership Down was first published in 1972, when Richard Adams had almost given up on having it published at all without resorting to paying for the publication out of his own pocket. The book, which originally began as a series of stories Adams told to his two young daughters on long car trips, was originally published by a small press, Rex Collings, and then reprinted by Penguin as a juvenile title, and by Macmillan as an adult title. Surprisingly, Adams's tale of a band of adventurous rabbits became a huge success, and eventually won the Guardian Award and the Carnegie Medal. The book's success led to a great surge in the publication of other fantasies set in animal communities. Adams was not the first writer to use animals as his main characters, and noted that the animal stories of Ernest Thompson Seton served as inspiration for the book. However, *Watership Down* had the rare distinction of being read by both children and adults and of receiving wide critical acclaim. In the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature,* Peter Hunt called the book "the most successful single postwar [World War II] animal story."

Watership Down is not a sweet fable about bunnies; it's a gritty, often frightening tale, in which characters die or become injured and these facts of life are not disguised. Hunt quoted an interview with Adams, in which Adams said of his writing style, "I derived early the idea that one must at all costs tell the truth to children, not so much about mere physical pain and fear, but about the really unanswerable things—what [writer] Thomas Hardy called 'the essential grimness of the human situation.'" Paradoxically, Adams chose a tale about rabbits to do just that.

Overview

Watership Down portrays the issues of survival and trust from a variety of perspectives. The story begins in the threatened rabbit warren, Sandleford. It is an ordinary society, pleasant but imperfect, neither an Eden nor a tyranny.

Its doom comes from without, not within; only a half-dozen rabbits, sensing some ill-omen, flee the warren and survive its destruction. Now in a hostile environment, the band, led by Hazel, must rebuild the rabbit community even as it travels. To survive, the group pools its wisdom, and each individual takes responsibility for what he does best: the fastest scouts ahead, the biggest confronts enemies, the most cunning chooses a place to rest.

Author Biography

Richard George Adams originally began telling the story of *Watership Down* to his two young daughters, Juliet and Rosamund, during long car trips. A civil servant in Britain's Department of Environment, Adams was interested in nature and concerned about the environment, and these interests are strongly apparent in the book, which tells the story of a group of rabbits who are forced from their home by real estate development.

Adams's daughters insisted that he publish the book, which took two years to write, but it was rejected by thirteen major publishers. Discouraged, Adams considered paying a publisher to print the book, but then heard of Rex Collings, a small publisher who had just produced a book about animal characters. Rex Collings accepted *Watership Down* and agreed to print 2,000 copies. From this modest beginning, the novel's merits spread by word of mouth among avid readers, and it was later reprinted by Penguin and Macmillan, with huge success. The book won the Guardian Award and the Carnegie Medal, and it is regarded by many as a classic of fantasy.

Richard George Adams was born May 9, 1920, in Newbury, Berkshire, England, where the book is set, and attended Bradfield College in Worcester. He received a B.A. in modern history there and earned an M.A. at Worcester College, Oxford. He served in the British Army from 1940 to 1945, and then obtained a post as a civil servant in the Ministry of Housing and Local Government in London, and was assistant secretary of the Department of the Environment until 1974, when he became a fulltime writer. He has been a writer-in-residence at the University of Florida in Gainesville and at Hollins College in Virginia. In addition, he has served as president of the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He and his family have lived in London and in a cottage near the Berkshire Downs, where the events in *Watership Down* take place.

Since writing *Watership Down,* Adams has written many other books, including Shardik, *The Plague Dogs, The Girl in a Swing, Maia, Traveller,* and many other titles, including nature guides and collections of fables. He has also written an autobiography, *The Day Gone By.*

About the Author

Richard Adams was born May 9, 1920, in Newbury, Berkshire, England. After earning a degree from Worcester College, Oxford, he married Barbara Elizabeth Acland on September 20, 1949; the couple subsequently had two children. At the age of fifty, Adams, who worked as a British civil servant and had never published anything, produced a bulky typewriter manuscript.

His story about rabbits had delighted his daughters and he was anxious to have it published. Unfortunately, his animal fantasy was turned down by four publishers and four literary agents.

Finally a small publishing house, Rex Collings, accepted the manuscript. The 2,000 copies printed by Collings sold surprisingly well. When Penguin reprinted the book in paperback and promoted it as a novel for children, it sold over a million copies. In the United States Macmillan then printed a hard cover edition which became a best seller, selling over 700,000 copies. Adams's unwanted manuscript turned out to be the best-selling Watership Down.

Watership Down is that paradox of commercial publishing, an instant classic. Adams's subsequent novels have been eagerly awaited by editors and readers alike. In addition, he has compiled, introduced, or written several non-fiction works. By the age of sixty Adams had his name on the title pages of ten works and an established reputation as a writer of distinctive fantasy.

In its triumphant passage to classic status, Watership Down won the Guardian Award and the Carnegie Medal, but did not meet with unanimous critical acclaim. Many reviewers were confused because the book was marketed in Britain as a juvenile book and in the United States as an adult novel. Is Watership Down then an adventurous animal fantasy for children in the tradition of The Wind in the Willows (1908), or is it a political commentary for adults like the animal allegories of George Orwell (Animal Farm, 1945) and Karel Capek (War with the Newts, 1937)?

The timing of the book also made some reviewers uneasy. Three years before Watership Down made rabbits chic, a Robert Merle novel popularized dolphins 2648 Watership Down as anthropomorphic characters; two years before Richard Bach made Jonathan Livingston Seagull a household name. Critics wondered whether Adams's rabbits were part of a literary fad.

Reviewers who smelled an allegory lurking beneath the surface disliked Watership Down for not making its allegory more explicit. Those who suspected an attempt to capitalize on the novelty of rabbit protagonists were quick to point out Watership Down's literary flaws and obvious lineage. But such reviewers proved to be a minority; most hailed the book for its imaginative creation of a rabbit world, complete with mythology, history, and government, and for its evocation of nature.

Adams's subsequent novels have not achieved the same commercial or critical success. His second novel, Shardik (1974), also created a whole new world, although a human rather than an animal one. With its long and at times gruesome narrative, the novel proved somewhat of a philosophical puzzle.

Adams's third novel, The Plague Dogs (1977), returned to animal protagonists and, like Watership Down, created a convincing imaginative world, this time from a canine perspective. Many critics thought that The Plague Dogs saddled its narrative with excessive preaching against the mistreatment of animals; the combination of story and sermon proved less appealing. Adams's fourth novel was a surprise; The Girl in a Swing is an intriguing love story but lacks the exotic characters and locales that Adams's readers had come to expect.

Adams has established himself as a serious author. Watership Down appears on numerous school reading lists.

Literary critics are attracted to Adams's use of mythology; his creation of alternate worlds have made researchers anxious to trace his sources. Adams's use of realism in animal fiction challenges the central tradition of sentimental anthropomorphism in children's literature.

Plot Summary

A Vision of Blood

Watership Down tells the story of a small group of rabbits who leave their home, Sandleford Warren, at the urging of Fiver, a young, small rabbit who has the gift of clairvoyance and who has a vision in which the entire field where the warren is located is covered in blood. His vision is correct: the area is soon to be bulldozed and developed, and the warren will be destroyed by humans. Although most of the rabbits think they are safe and ignore Fiver's warning, a few believe him, and they set out, led by Fiver's brother Hazel, a calm and modest yearling. They head south, toward the far-off hills Fiver says will be a safe home.

Dangers along the Way

They face various hazards posed by predatory animals, such as a badger, a dog, crows, and foxes; by terrain, as they cross the Enborne River; and by humans, who have guns and cars. At a temporary rest stop, they are digging rough shelters in a meadow near the river when a well-fed, aristocratic rabbit named Cowslip appears and invites them to join his warren, which is not far off. This invitation is strange and contrary to rabbit ways, and they are initially suspicious, but eventually decide to go with him to the warren.

Too Good to Be True

The new warren is a strange place: the rabbits there are all as sleek and rich as Cowslip, and they provide the wanderers with comfortable burrows and good food, but they also all seem vaguely sad, and none of them will ever answer a direct question. This secrecy is disturbing to Hazel, Fiver, and the others, but since they can find nothing obviously wrong with the warren, they are tempted to stay there. The temptation lasts until they find out that the warren's apparent safety from predators and its abundant supply of food are the work of a nearby farmer, who leaves food out for the rabbits and shoots predators that would hunt them, but who also occasionally kills some for his own use. The rabbits in the burrow have chosen safety and wealth in exchange for their freedom and perhaps their lives, but when Bigwig, a strong and capable member of the wanderers, is caught in a snare, the wanderers realize the danger they are in and head out. Strawberry, a member of the new warren whose mate has been recently snared, also decides this price is too great to pay, and joins them.

A New Home on Watership Down

At Fiver's urging, the group climbs a high hill, known as Watership Down, and within a grove of beeches, begins digging the warren that will be its permanent home. The site is ideal: high and remote, so the rabbits can see predators from far away, and at some

distance from the dangerous humans. Although these male rabbits are not accustomed to digging warrens—a task usually undertaken by female rabbits—the work makes them realize that they have become a strong team and that Hazel is a compassionate, intelligent, and capable leader. Shortly after they move in, two straggling survivors show up—rabbits who did not follow Hazel's initial warning and who stayed in the original warren, and who were there when humans poisoned and bulldozed it. These survivors are Holly, former captain of the Sandleford security force, or Owsla, and Bluebell, a young rabbit with a never-ending supply of bad jokes.

Plans for the Future

lthough the rabbits now have a new home, they soon realize that their community will not last long without female rabbits and future generations to sustain it. They discover Kehaar, a wounded seagull who is lingering in the neighborhood until his wing heals, and make friends with him. In gratitude, when he is healed he agrees to fly around and reconnoiter the landscape, then come back and tell them where they can find female rabbits, or does. He reports two locations: Nuthanger Farm, where tame rabbits are kept in cages, and Efrafa, a large wild rabbit warren to the south.

The rabbits decide to send Holly and some others to that warren so that he can ask for does. While they are gone, Hazel and a small rabbit, Pipkin, go to the farm. Although they succeed in liberating two tame does there, Hazel is wounded and lost in a drainage pipe, and is only found and healed through Fiver's second sight.

Efrafa

Holly and his group return, badly shaken by their experiences at Efrafa, the large warren. The warren is a totalitarian dictatorship, run by General Woundwort, a strong and ruthless rabbit who refuses their request for does and also tries to trap and keep them in Efrafa, which is a closed society.

Hazel, undaunted, devises a plan. Bigwig goes to Efrafa, pretending to be a loner who is looking for a new home in a strong society. He infiltrates the Efrafa secret police and is accepted by Woundwort, and meanwhile works to find does who are dissident and who would be willing to leave Efrafa. These are not hard to find, because it's such an oppressive society, but getting them out safely is the challenge, as the warren is highly regulated and every move is watched. With Kehaar's help, the rabbits pass news and strategy back and forth between Bigwig and Hazel, and plan the escape from Efrafa.

A Valiant Escape

With the help of a thunderstorm, Kehaar, and a boat that a human has left on the river, Bigwig and the others run a frightening and nick-of-time course away from Woundwort and his ruthless security officers. Even after they arrive home, they find that Woundwort and his forces are still pursuing them and plan to lay siege and battle them until they are

dead, in order to get the dissident does back. The enemy rabbits start digging into the new warren, and Bigwig leads the fight against them valiantly; he is almost killed by Woundwort. Hazel and other rabbits run to Nuthanger Farm, where they gnaw through the watchdog's rope and then lead him back to the warren, where he attacks Woundwort and his minions. Woundwort is killed, although his body is never found. Hazel, who was wounded back at the farm, is found by a little farm girl, nursed back to health, and brought back to the warren in a car by the girl and a local doctor who advises her that he is a wild rabbit and will be happier in the wild; thus, he returns in triumph.

The Efrafan survivors of the raid are allowed to join the Watership Down warren, and the group of rabbits, now safe, grows and prospers. By the end of the book, future generations of rabbits listen in awe to the tales of their forebears, mingled with frightening stories of General Woundwort and the rabbits' age-old mythologies.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Notice Board

Fiver is the smallest rabbit in the warren. He is Hazel's brother and the best at finding cowslip, which is a delicacy among rabbits. Fiver finds a partially hidden cowslip, but Toadflex claims it for his own. Toadflex is one of the chief's Owsla, the ruling class in the warren. The Owsla enforce rules and punishment on behalf of the chief. They discover wood, nails, cigarette butts and a hammer by the brook. They find a sign, but cannot read it. Fiver has a premonition that something bad will happen and thinks the sign is the source of his bad feelings. He has visions of blood all over the warren. Hazel takes Fiver back to the burrow.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Two of the book's major characters, Hazel and Fiver, are introduced in this chapter. Fiver has visions that allow him to predict the future and sense danger. The society in the warren has a class system. Size is one determining factor of a rabbit's place in that society. Because Fiver is small, he is lower in the class system than other rabbits.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The Chief Rabbit

Hazel is awakened by Fiver's kicking. Fiver is having a nightmare about the coming danger. Fiver wakes from his dream and insists that they leave the warren immediately. A bad thing is coming, but he does not know what it is. Hazel suggests they go speak to the chief rabbit, Threarah. They reach the chief's burrow and convince an Owsla named Bigwig to let them into the burrow. The chief listens to Fiver's story, but does not believe him. To pacify Fiver he tells him he will think it over. As they leave the burrow, Hazel hears the chief reprimanding Bigwig for allowing them access to the burrow.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The chief does not believe Fiver's story because there is no specific information, just visions and bad feelings. The chief has nothing to gain and everything to lose by leaving the burrow. The balance of power could be disrupted and he could lose power. The chief thinks of most issues in terms of how his decision will affect his own position, rather than the welfare of all his subjects. Each warren in the book represents a form of government. This warren is most like a monarchy, with Threarah as the king.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Hazel's Decision

Hazel and Fiver are eating with two other rabbits, Blackberry and Dandelion. Hazel believes Fiver because he is aware of his brother's gift of prophecy and has seen his visions come true in the past. Bigwig visits unexpectedly. He has been relieved of his duties and is no longer an Owsla. Bigwig makes the decision to accompany the rabbits as they leave the warren. They will search for a new warren. The rabbits decide to find other rabbits to leave with them. Bigwig tells the others some Owsla are not happy and he thinks he can recruit a few to join them.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The chief disregards Fiver's warning because he has nothing to gain in leaving the warren. Hazel believes his brother because he has seen his power first hand. Unlike the chief, Haze, Blackberry and Dandelion have nothing to lose in leaving the warren. They are not part of the higher class. Bigwig has been ousted from the Owsla and no longer has a reason to stay. It takes more than a few rabbits to build a new warren, which influences their decision to recruit others to join them.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The Departure

By nightfall, the group has recruited two more rabbits: Hawkbit and Pipkin. They are waiting for Blackberry to arrive. Dandelion tells the other rabbits about a confrontation he had with Toadflax. Blackberry returns with three more rabbits willing to join them: Buckthorn, Speedwell and Acorn. Bigwig returns with Silver, an Owsla and the chief's nephew. They begin to have second thoughts about leaving the warren until Captain Holly comes to arrest Silver and Bigwig. The rabbits resist and are able to overcome the guards. Hazel knows they will return with reinforcements and they must leave before they get back.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The rabbits are able to find others that are unhappy with the present society. Two Owsla join them, which enrages Holly. He tries to stop them by arresting the Owsla because this could demoralize the others and prevent them from leaving. Without leadership, the others will submit. Hazel shows his leadership qualities in the struggle and they are able to overcome the Owsla and escape the warren. They no longer feel safe in this home and long for a new home that will provide the security they desire. Hazel is non-violent and chooses not to harm them, but only to chase them away.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In the Woods

The smaller rabbits are tiring, and Hazel decides to stop to allow all to rest. He asks Dandelion to tell the story of El-ahrairah, a rabbit folk hero. He is said to control the weather and provide the dew and wind that help rabbits escape predators. El-ahrairah used tricks, rather than violence to carry out his feats.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Hazel shows his developing leadership skills when he is able to anticipate the smaller rabbits' need for rest. He fills this need by finding a safe place to rest. The story of El-ahrairah gives the rabbits courage and determination, just as folk heroes in human stories have done.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The Story of the Blessing of El-ahrairah

Dandelion tells the story of El-ahrairah. He angered Frith, the sun god; because Frith thought, he had too many children and did not control them well. Frith decided to punish El-ahrairah and gave other animals gifts to allow the animals to kill El-ahrairah and his children. On his way to see Frith, El-ahrairah is warned of the gifts Frith has bestowed on the other animals, so he hides head first in a hole. Frith comes looking for him and El-ahrairah tricks Frith into blessing him with the gift of his white tail, speed and hearing. The rabbits now have the qualities they need to escape predators. Dandelion refers to El-ahrairah, "the prince with a thousand enemies."

Chapter 6 Analysis

This story is the first tale heard in the book of the rabbit folk hero, El-ahrairah. Their hero uses trickery to get out of many sticky situations. While rabbits consider trickery deceitful, they believe it is sometimes necessary for their survival. It is used whenever possible over violence in solving problems and escaping death.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The Lendri and the River

The rabbits see a lendri, which is a badger, and are afraid for their lives. Bigwig leads them along the Enborne River bank to find safety. To maintain peace, Hazel thanks Bigwig for saving them and lets Bigwig think he could not have done it without him. Fiver has a feeling they should cross the river to the open fields to escape the lendri. As morning approaches, the other rabbits are skeptical of the plan and fear they will not survive to find a new warren.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Fiver's intuition saves the rabbits from harm by the lendri. Hazel shows trust in Fiver's sixth sense by following his suggestion and looking for a way across the river. Hazel's leadership skills are seen in his handling of the situation with Bigwig. He lets Bigwig think he has saved the rabbits, thereby keeping the peace between himself and the Owsla.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The Crossing

The rabbits are afraid to cross the river. To calm their fears, Hazel and Fiver ask Bigwig to cross the river to make sure the field is safe. When Bigwig returns, he tells the rabbits there is a dog in the woods near the field. Fiver and Pipkin are too tired to swim across the river. Blackberry sees a floating piece of wood they can use to push the small rabbits across the river. The rabbits swim across and Bigwig and Silver push the log with Fiver and Pipkin. They reach the other side of the river safely.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Hazel shows he is a true leader when he uses the other rabbits to help the group reach its goal. Bigwig is strong and as an Owsla, he is accustomed to protecting others. He is also brave. Because of these qualities, Hazel uses him to scout the other side and ensure the rabbits' safety. In giving Bigwig a purpose, Hazel helps him feel important to the group. As an Owsla, Bigwig needs to feel important. Blackberry is smart and finds a way to get the weaker rabbits to the other side safely. Hazel follows Blackberry's plan and they use the stronger rabbits, Silver and Bigwig to push the rabbits across the river. A good leader uses the best qualities of all his subjects for the good of the group.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The Crow and the Bean Field

When they reach the other side, the rabbits rest under hedges in the field. Hazel goes to find a spot where he can sniff their surroundings. He follows the scent to a bean field, which is filled with flowering bean plants. He tells the others they will be safe because the scent of the beans will mask the scent of the rabbits. As they reach the field, a scream is heard. A crow is attacking Fiver and Pipkin. Hazel, Bigwig and Silver rescue them, but Pipkin is injured. They get the rabbits to safety, and Hazel stays up to keep watch for danger. He finds a thorn stuck in Pipkin's foot. Hazel removes the thorn and tells Pipkin to lick the wound and go to sleep.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Hazel again shows his leadership skills when he turns to Bigwig for help. They work together to save the smaller rabbits and lead the group to safety. Bigwig begins to accept Hazel's leadership.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The Road and the Common

When Hazel awakens, Acorn is standing watch. Hazel goes to check on Pipkin and a gunshot is heard. The rabbits scatter to different areas of the field. Later, they regroup and Bigwig fids a road. Bigwig teaches Hazel about roads and cars, which are called hrududil, in rabbit language. Bigwig thinks cars are not dangerous, until they find a dead animal in the road. Later, Speedwell, Acorn and Hawkbit articulate their apprehension about the journey to Hazel. They tell him it is foolish to travel this far. Bigwig reprimands the rabbits for their dissent. Fiver thinks the place they are looking for is about four miles away. Hazel disagrees with Fiver because of the dismay of the others. Fiver thinks they will encounter trouble and need to pass through the area to get to the hill.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Hazel makes a mistake in his leadership when he bows to the pressure of Speedwell, Acorn and Hawkbit. A good leader will listen to dissenting opinions, but follow the course he feels is best. He has done well in listening to his brother and needs to continue to follow Fiver's advice. Bigwig shows that he stands behind Hazel's leadership when he reprimands the dissenting rabbits.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Hard Going

The rabbits reach the bottom of the hollow. Blackberry informs Hazel of a fight between Bigwig, Hawkbit and Speedwell. The fight occurs when the two rabbits demand that Bigwig tell them who is the Chief Rabbit. Bigwig bites Hawkbit in the throat. Hazel reassures the others that they have nearly reached their destination. They travel through the night and reach a field of lush grass in the morning. The rabbits praise Hazel and declare that he is the chief rabbit. Hawkbit and Speedwell do not respond, but run into the meadow to eat the grass.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Hazel is established as the chief rabbit of the new community. He has calmed the potential rebellion peacefully. The difference in Hazel and Bigwig's styles is seen. Hazel uses diplomacy and convinces the rabbits to continue peacefully. Bigwig is prone to using violence and threats to get the rebels to comply.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The Stranger in the Field

While the rabbits are digging scrapes for shelter, the rabbits see a man's footprint in the ground. Fiver sees a strange rabbit in the field. Hazel and Blackberry greet the rabbit and they are invited to stay in the warren. The rabbits discuss the invitation and decide to check out the new warren. Fiver thinks they should stay away; his instincts tell him not to trust Cowslip. The others want to stay.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The rabbits think they may have found their new home. Fiver does not trust Cowslip nor does he feel safe in these new surroundings. Home is more than just a shelter; it must provide safety and comfort. The others do not listen to Fiver's feeling because they are tired of traveling and are eager to settle in a new warren.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Hospitality

The rabbits follow Cowslip to the new warren. They meet two new rabbits: Strawberry and Nildro-hain. Hazel stays in front of Pipkin to keep him safe from any potential danger. They find that Cowslip's warren has several empty burrows, so there is room for all. They see strange structures and Hazel questions Strawberry about the origin of a brick structure. Strawberry tells them it is a well, which used to belong to man. He is evasive and avoids answering Hazel's questions about the warren.

Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter is foreshadowing of problems with the new warren. Fiver is not comfortable and wants to leave right away. He does not trust these surroundings. While Hazel chose not to follow his brother's feeling, he does sense that something is wrong. Strawberry confirms this suspicion by being talkative, yet not offering any real information about the warren or the structures built by men.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Like Trees in November

Hazel and Blackberry go off to discuss the new rabbits. They realize there is something wrong with the rabbits, but they do not understand the cause of their sadness. They seem preoccupied and make strange laughing sounds. In the morning, Strawberry wakes them to feed in the meadow. The man has gone by and they want to get the food. They feed on carrots that have been scattered by the man. Fiver will not eat the food or enter the burrow. He is angry that Hazel is ignoring his feeling. He knows Hazel feels it too, but he chooses to ignore the feelings and stay in the warren. The other rabbits stuff themselves and praise Hazel as their new leader. The rabbits convince Fiver to return to the burrow. They try to loosen up their new friends with a story, which Dandelion tells.

Chapter 14 Analysis

More evidence is given that something strange is happening in the new warren. Fiver feels there is something wrong with the man who scatters the food. He does not trust it and instinctively knows that something bad will happen. This new warren offers food and shelter, but not safety. Without security, it cannot really be called a home.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The King's Lettuce

In the story, El-ahrairah and his followers are forced to live in the marshes of Kelfazin because Prince Rainbow, ruler of the sky and hills, thinks they are dishonest tricksters. The marsh has little grass. El-ahrairah gets Prince Rainbow to agree to multiply El-ahrairah's people all over the world if he can steal King Darzin's lettuce from the garden. King Darzin is the most powerful king. Yona, a hedgehog, overhears the conversation and warns the king, who doubles the guards around his gardens. El-ahrairah sends his chief Owsla, Rabscuttle, to make friends with the king's son. He is able to enter the palace, where he finds the stored lettuces and poisons them. The king and his followers become ill from eating the lettuces.

El-ahrairah comes to the palace disguised as a doctor sent by Prince Rainbow to cure the king. The king is suspicious, so El-ahrairah feeds some of the lettuce to Rabscuttle to prove the lettuces are deadly. Rabscuttle puts on an act by falling to the ground and acting sick. King Drazin has the lettuces sent to El-ahrairah and his people with the intention of poisoning him. Prince Rainbow sees that they have successfully acquired the lettuce and he is forced to keep his word. El-ahrairah's people are multiplied and they can enter any vegetable garden they want from then on.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The rabbits in the new warren think this is an amusing story, but it actually parallels their own existence. The vegetables the men feed these rabbits could be considered poison because the rabbits are fattened up, become lazy and lose their ability to trick enemies and escape danger.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Silverweed

The warren rabbits are not enthusiastic about Dandelion's story. They prefer stories about their lives and do not believe in El-ahrairah. One of their storytellers, Silverweed, recites a poem. For some reason, Fiver is terrified by his smell. He feels an overwhelming need to escape and he runs out of the burrow in fear. Hazel and Bigwig follow in anger. They feel he may have compromised their position in the new warren. Fiver is babbling about his bad feelings and the need he feels to leave this place. Hazel and Bigwig coerce him back into the burrow, where he goes to sleep.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The reader again sees evidence that something is wrong with this new home. Hazel and Bigwig disregard his feelings and convince him to return to the burrow. They are charmed by the easy life of the new warren. Fiver is not, he sees that life there is unnatural and wants a home where they can live in peace. Fiver's feelings and panic foreshadow future events, which will prove his feelings are right.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

The Shining Wire

Hazel wakes in the morning to find that Fiver is missing. He and Bigwig search for him and find him feeding alone by the brook. Fiver tells them he is sand and wants to leave right away. Hazel asks Bigwig to give them time to talk alone. Bigwig leaves and is caught in a snare with a copper wire wrapped around his neck. Fiver is sent for help and returns with Blackberry, Dandelion, Silver, Pipkin and Buckthorn. Cowslip refuses to help and warns Fiver not to speak of the snares. The rabbits join together and set Bigwig free, but he appears to be dead.

Bigwig recovers from the snare and wants to go back to the burrow and kill the others, whom he considers cowards. Fiver objects and begins to explain the truth about the warren. Men control the rabbits' lives. None of them answers questions because they do not speak of the snares out of fear. They accept their fate and take the food the farmer offers. When the farmer wants meat or fur, he snares a few rabbits.

The rabbits prepare to leave the warren. Just then, Strawberry arrives and asks if he may join their group. Hazel agrees and offers to take Strawberry's doe, Nildro-hain, as well. However, a snare has already killed her. They leave the warren of the snares to search for a new home.

Chapter 17 Analysis

On the surface, life in the new warren seems to be comfortable and easy. In fact, the horror of the snares is not worth the availability of food. Cowslip appears to be the leader of this warren, but in reality, there is no leader. A true leader offers protection and there is no protection from the snare. Rather than helping, they accept their fate. The structure of this warren is reminiscent of a socialist form of government. Everyone is equal and food is distributed equally from the farmer's rations. The rabbits become lazy and weak. They have no drive to create a better, more satisfying life. The theme of man's inhumanity is seen in the farmer first feeding the rabbits, and then killing them when he has gained their trust.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Watership Down

Three miles and two brooks later, the rabbits have come to trust in one another. They reach the hills Fiver wanted to find. They have found Watership Down. From here, they have a view of the world in all directions. Dandelion, Hazel and Hawkbit go to explore the top of the hills. The other rabbits are hungry and tired. They stay at the bottom to feed and rest. Before leaving, Hawkbit discovers some deserted holes where the rabbits can spend the night.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The rabbits are forming a true community. Through their hardships, they have learned to trust in, and depend upon each other. The others no longer doubt Fiver's instincts and believe him. They learn that each rabbit has special talents to offer the group. By drawing on each other's strengths, they will build a better community.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Fear in the Dark

Hazel and Pipkin begin digging burrows in the woods. A few of the others come to help. Hazel, Bigwig, Dandelion and Speedwell go to graze at the bottom of the hill. Hazel and Bigwig discuss building a large burrow like the one they had in the warren of the snares. They decide to have Strawberry help because he is from that warren. They hear a loud and unfamiliar noise and run into a covered ditch. The noise continues and they realize it is a rabbit screaming. He is screaming, "All dead, and all destroyed!" The rabbit is yelling for Bigwig, but Hazel tries to prevent him from going. Bigwig and Dandelion investigate and find a rabbit hunched over. It is Captain Holly, the Owsla from their original warren.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Although the warren of the snares was not fit for a new home, the rabbits realize there were some good elements of that place. The large central burrow with tree roots as a roof was good and they want to duplicate the design. They break free of their old roles to create their new home. Bucks do not dig holes, but they do have the ability. Captain Holly arrives screaming for help. Something horrible has happened in their old home, as Fiver predicted.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

A Honeycomb and a Mouse

Holly smells of blood and is crying uncontrollably. A second rabbit comes limping out of a hedge. It is Bluebell; he is the rabbit that arrested the other rabbits as they left their original warren. He has been injured. The rabbits put Holly and Bluebell in an empty hole to rest. The next morning, Dandelion tells Hazel that Holly cried all night. The rabbits are interested in hearing what happened to Holly, Bluebell and the others.

Strawberry shows the rabbits how to use tree roots as a roof to create the great burrow, which the rabbits refer to as the honeycomb. The rabbits see a hawk flying overhead and a mouse cowering on the ground. Hazel rescues the mouse and brings him into the burrow. The others think he is crazy for helping a creature other than a rabbit. The mouse thanks Hazel and promises to return the favor and help the rabbits in the future.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The rabbits continue to work together, under Hazel's leadership, to build a new home. The theme of home is central to the story. Holly and Bluebell arrive and something horrible has happened, but the situation is unknown because he is too hysterical to speak. This gives evidence that Fiver's premonition was correct and the rabbits had made the right decision in leaving the warren. Hazel befriends a mouse despite the objections of the other rabbits. This foreshadows a change in attitude toward other animal species that will be seen again in the book.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

For El-ahrairah to Cry

Holly reveals the fate of the Sandleford rabbits. The day after they left, men came and covered most of the holes. The men injected poisonous gas into the holes to kill the rabbits. Most of the rabbits died of the gas, but some escaped through the holes near the edge of the woods. The men shot most of these. Holly was out feeding and was able to avoid most of the poison. He was delirious from what was in the air, but did not die because he was far enough away from the burrows. Toadflex and Pimpernel escaped through a secret tunnel, but were sick from the gas. Toadflex died later that night. Construction of a housing development had begun and the men were trying to rid the area of the rabbits.

Holly, Bluebell and Pimpernel began traveling and reached Cowslip and the warren of the snares. When they mentioned Bigwig and Hazel, Cowslip ordered the others to attack and kill them. A battle followed during which Pimpernel was killed. Holly and Bluebell pinned Cowslip down and made him tell them where their friends had gone. When he had given them the information, they let Cowslip go.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The reader learns from Holly's story that Fiver was right, a horrible thing had come to Sandleford warren. Fiver believed the sign he had found in the field was the source of his bad feeling. The sign advertised the new housing development, which is the reason for the slaughter of the rabbits. The theme of man's inhumane treatment of animals is seen in detail in this chapter. Cowslip tries to kill the rabbits because he cannot face the idea that a better life can be found. He does not want to hear news of other warrens or rabbits living naturally. He has accepted his fate and he is threatened by evidence of rabbits living freely.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

The Story of the Trial of El-ahrairah

The rabbits experience feelings of fear and sadness at Holly's story. Hazel looks at Holly's ear and is annoyed because Dandelion has not cleaned the wound properly. It looks as if his ear has been torn to shreds. Hazel and Sliver clean the wound. Silver asks Hazel why he chose to help the mouse and Hazel explains that because they are in new land, they need new friends. Mice and rabbits have common enemies and they may be able to help each other. Silver doubts a mouse can be of much help due to their small size.

Hawkbit and Speedwell tell Hazel they have spoken to another mouse that tells them of a field with good grass. The rabbits listen to Bluebell tell the story of the *Trial of El-ahrairah.* Prince Rainbow would not allow El-ahrairah and Rabscuttle share a hole because of their trickery, so Rabscuttle lived on the other side of the warren. El-ahrairah shared his hole with a rabbit named Hufsa. Hufsa was sent by Prince Rainbow to keep El-ahrairah in his place. He tells Prince Rainbow of El-ahrairah's plans. El-ahrairah suspects the rabbit is a spy, so he decides to get rid of him. El-ahrairah convinces a hedgehog and a pheasant to help carry out his plan. The hedgehog sings on a stump and the pheasant swims in the water. Rabscuttle dies his tail red, ears green and jumps into a well carrying a cigarette.

He steals Prince Rainbow's carrots and hides them in a hole. The prince accuses El-ahrairah of stealing his carrots. They have a trial with a jury consisting of animals that are considered enemies of rabbits. Hufsa tells them of the singing hedgehog, swimming pheasant and odd rabbit in the well. He shows the prince the hole where the carrots have been stashed, but they had been moved by this time. Everyone thinks he is insane and El-ahrairah asks the prince please to take the crazy rabbit away.

Chapter 22 Analysis

This story illustrates the idea that rabbits can work cooperatively with other animals. After hearing the story, Hazel helping the mouse begins to make sense. The theme of trickery as a way to escape a bad situation is modeled in the story of their great folk hero. The rabbits realize they have the ability to use that trickery to gain the help and support of animals.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Kehaar

Bigwig and Silver discover a wounded bird while out grazing. When they attempt to help the bird, the bird snaps its beak and nearly breaks Silver's leg. The rabbits call to Hazel, who tries to speak to the bird. They do not understand much of the bird's language, but realize it must be hungry. The rabbits find insects to feed the bird, whose name is Kehaar. Bigwig does not understand the importance of helping the bird. Hazel tells Bigwig he will explain later.

The rabbits return underground to complete work on the Honeycomb. When it is finished, they return and offer to bring Kehaar to a safe place until his broken wing mends. They explain that rabbits do not eat birds, so he will be safe. Kehaar accepts the invitation and they bring him to a spot near the entrance to a tunnel. Bigwig talks to Kehaar and discovers that he is from a far away land across the water. He has come here to mate and then plans to return to his home.

Bigwig tells Hazel that since the bird will leave, it is pointless to make friends with him. Hazel explains to Bigwig and Blackberry that the warren will not exist in a few years because they have no does. Without does, there can be no kittens. The rabbits ask Kehaar to search the downs for warrens where they can find does. Several days later, Kehaar returns and tells the rabbits he has found others. He found some rabbits in a hutch living with men. He also found a large rabbit warren on the other side of the woods.

Hazel, Blackberry and Bigwig agree to send four rabbits to the new warren to ask permission to bring some of their does to the new warren. Captain Holly leads the expedition. Silver, Buckthorn and Strawberry accompany him.

Chapter 23 Analysis

The rabbits show their changing attitude toward other animal species in this chapter. The wounded bird is the second animal they have befriended. They bring him insects and find a safe place for Kehaar to recuperate. The theme of home is explored in this chapter. They have created the Honeycomb, but it cannot be a home without does. To create a lasting community, the rabbits will need to reproduce. They ask the bird to help them find does so they can establish their society.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Nuthanger Farm

Hazel remembers the box about which Kehaar spoke.. He decides to talk to the rabbits, and takes Pipkin with him. When they reach the farm, Hazel discovers a small shed where the rabbits are kept. Pipkin stands guard while Hazel speaks to the rabbits. There are four rabbits, two bucks and two does. He explains that they can all leave with them. The rabbits are domesticated; therefore, they cannot make up their minds. They are interested in Hazel's description of living in freedom without humans. Hazel tells them he must return home and promise to return. On the way out, they encounter a cat. The rabbits escape and hide under a bank for the night.

Chapter 24 Analysis

The lives of these domesticated rabbits are not much different from those in Cowslip's warren. Having been cared for by humans all their lives, they do not know how to live in the wild. While humans do not murder them, they are denied a natural existence. They are enamored with Hazel's story, but their domesticated life has weakened their ability to make decisions.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

The Raid

Hazel and Pipkin return to the Honeycomb. Fiver tries to convince Hazel to leave the domesticated rabbits because they will not be able to adjust to life in the wild. In addition, Fiver is afraid because he has an uneasy feeling regarding Hazel. Bigwig is excited about the possibility of raiding the farm and bringing the rabbits to the warren. Bigwig, Hawkbit, Dandelion, Speedwell and Hazel return to the farm. When they reach the farm, they have a run in with the cat.

The rabbits reach the shed and are able to open the hutch with a little difficulty. The rabbits are afraid to move when they hear the dog barking and see the cat. The other rabbits take off and reach Hazel in the lane. Only two of the caged rabbits have reached the lane. The other two are still frozen with fear near the shed. Hazel and Dandelion return to the farm to find Laurel and Haystack.

The men return and Laurel remains motionless. They cannot get him to move and they are forced to leave without him. As the rabbits were escaping, Hazel was shot in his hind leg. The other rabbits thought him to be dead because all they found was blood. When they returned to the warren, Bigwig tells Fiver about Hazel. Fiver had already seen a vision of a limping, blood-covered rabbit. Later the same morning, Holly, Buckthorn, Silver and Strawberry return wounded. They have arrived with no new rabbits.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Again, one of Fiver's premonitions proves to be correct. His bad feeling about Hazel going to save the rabbits comes to be true. He has seen his injured brother. The theme of man's inhumanity to animals is seen in the farmer shooting at the rabbits. Fiver is becoming more confident in his visions. He argues with Hazel and tries to stop him from leaving. Hazel cannot be stopped because he wants to prove he is as brave as Holly. He ends up being injured by the farmer's bullet.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Fiver Beyond

Fiver has visions of Hazel alive and injured in a hole. Blackberry wakes Fiver to tell him that Holly and his group has arrived without new rabbits. He convinces Blackberry to take him to the spot where Hazel was shot. Fiver tells Blackberry that Hazel is alive. Finally, he persuades Blackberry to take him and Hazel is found in a hole; he is alive.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Fiver trusts his visions as truth. He is becoming bolder in his attempts to get others to listen. He convinces Blackberry to take him and Fiver is again proven correct when Hazel is discovered alive.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

You Can't Imagine It Unless You've Been There

Bigwig and Acorn awaken to discover Blackberry and Fiver are gone. Holly tells them of their trip to Efrafa, the big warren. When they arrived, three rabbits asked to see their marks and took them to Efrafa. They are brought to a burrow and told to make themselves at home. Holly meets a doe named Hyzenthlay and she tells them about the warren. She tells them that the warren is overcrowded and that all rabbits are marked at birth. There are strict rules in the warren, which is ruled by a vicious rabbit named Woundwort. All rabbits are marked and sorted according to their marks. The rabbits are brutally punished if any rules are broken. Overcrowding has resulted in the does ceasing to reproduce.

The rabbits are taken to a council meeting. They propose to take a few does and point out the overcrowding of the warren. The council will not listen and makes them stay in the warren. One night when they are ordered outside to feed, Holly comes up with a plan to trick the captain and is successful. The rabbits fight their way past other guards and escape. The Efrafan Owsla chase the rabbits and almost catch them. The rabbits fall over a bank and they believe Lord Frith sent a flaming messenger to save them. In fact, a train has come down the tracks, stopping the Efrafan Owsla from following them any further.

When the light disappears, the Efrafan Owsla have gone. The rabbits find a ditch to spend the night and return to their warren in the morning. All the rabbits think Hazel has died. They ask Holly to be their new leader, but he declines. He feels done in by the experience and unable to lead the others.

Chapter 27 Analysis

The Efrafa warren is completely different from the warren of snares. There the rabbits could leave if they wanted to, but most chose to remain out of comfort and the enjoyment of an easy lifestyle. Efrafa is tightly controlled and the rabbits fear their fellow rabbits. Life in Efrafa offers protection without freedom. This warren represents a government similar to a military dictatorship. Its citizens are offered protection, but must follow orders and are discouraged from original thought.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

At the Foot of the Hill

Holly teaches Clover about life in the warren. Blackberry returns and tells the others that Hazel is alive. Fiver and Hazel are resting in the ditch at the foot of the hill. Bigwig goes to spend the night with them in case Fiver needs help. In the morning, Kehaar arrives and tells them about guns. He asks if Hazel got the black stones out of the wound, but Hazel does not know what about what he is talking. Kehaar gets two shotgun bullets out of the wound.

Hazel stays three days at the foot of the hill. Hazel and Holly discuss the doe situation. Hazel thinks the two does will not be ready to mate for a while. Hazel wants to try to get some does from the Efrafa warren. Fiver and Hazel think it can be done. Holly is not happy with the plan because he has seen Efrafa and knows it will be difficult.

Chapter 28 Analysis

The rabbits receive help from their new friend, Kehaar. Hazel recovers and resumes his role as leader of the warren. The lack of does is a serious problem and Hazel is seeking to solve their problem. The only solution he can see is to return to the Efrafa warren. He assigns Blackberry the task of coming up with a trick because Blackberry is the most intelligent of the rabbits. Fiver thinks they can be successful. Hazel and the others have come to trust in Fiver's instincts. Fiver is usually apprehensive, but he thinks they can succeed, which is a good omen for the plan.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

Return and Departure

Hazel returns to the Honeycomb. He receives a warm welcome from the other rabbits. Hazel goes outside to sit with Strawberry and Boxwood. He tells them he wants to go to Efrafa to find does. Strawberry is against the idea because he knows the conditions in that warren. Later, in the Honeycomb, Hazel tells the others of his plan to go to Efrafa. He tells them not to worry; he has a plan. Kehaar will assist with the plan. All the rabbits offer to accompany him, with the exception of Strawberry, Holly, Buckthorn and the domesticated rabbits.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Fiver has risen in status in the warren. Initially, the rabbits had little faith in his premonitions. Since finding Hazel alive, he has proven his worth. For the first time the others seek Fiver's opinion of the plan to go to Efrafa. The combination of Hazel's leadership skills, Blackberry's cleverness and Fiver's intuition will help them plan and execute their strategy.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

A New Journey

Early in the morning, the rabbits begin their journey to Efrafa. The rabbits are afraid, but they trust Hazel and Fiver. Kehaar accompanies the rabbits on their journey. On the way, Hazel tells them his plan. They will travel around the warren and enter from the other side. Kehaar tells them of a safe place on the other side of the river where they can stop to rest. Dandelion agrees to tell a story. Bigwig requests the story of El-ahrairah and the black rabbit of Inle.

Chapter 30 Analysis

The rabbits show their faith in Hazel and Fiver in this chapter. They are afraid of going to Efrafa because they have heard stories of the warren. They go in spite of their fears because they trust in Hazel's leadership and Fiver's intuition. Listening to a story relieves the tension and can help calm the rabbits' nerves.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

The Story of El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inle

After El-ahrairah stole the king's lettuces, the king was determined to get him back. He locked Rabscuttle in a prison hole, which he was only allowed to leave for work. El-ahrairah and four does dug a tunnel and freed Rabscuttle. King Darzin found out and was determined to start a war to rid himself of El-ahrairah. El-ahrairah and his people had to hide underground and could only come out for an occasional mouthful of food.

Soon the rabbits became ill from living underground. Dandelion tells them that the Black Rabbit is where rabbits get their foolishness. The Black Rabbit also brings sickness. He represents death to rabbits. El-ahrairah decides to seek out the Black Rabbit and trade his own life for that of his people. Pipkin becomes frightened by the story and Fiver takes him outside to eat. Bigwig urges Dandelion to go on with the story.

El-ahrairah and Rabscuttle find the Black Rabbit and he agrees to take E-ahrairah's life if he can win a game of bob stones. If he loses, he must give his tail and whiskers to the Black Rabbit. El-ahrairah loses the game and the Black Rabbit takes his tail and whiskers. He stays the night in the Black Rabbit's burrow and Rabscuttle gets him food and a grey tail to fix himself. The next day, El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit make anther deal. They will tell stories and if El-ahrairah's story is better, the Black Rabbit will accept his life in place of his people's lives. He lost again and the Black Rabbit took his ears.

El-ahrairah concludes that he will never be able to beat the Black Rabbit. He finds a dark hole and climbs in, hoping to be infected by white blindness. He is hoping to spread the disease to King Darzin's warriors and save his people. The Black Rabbit visits and tells El-ahrairah that the white blindness is spread through fleas entering the ears of rabbits. Since he has no ears, he cannot be infected. The Black Rabbit tells him that his warm heart has saved his people and he should return home. El-ahrairah and Rabscuttle get lost and do not get home for a long time. When they arrive, the rabbits that fought in the war are long gone and the others tell them what happened. The Black Rabbit decided to save the people and large red eyes were seen all over the field, scaring the king's rabbits away. El-ahrairah goes to sit on a hill and Lord Frith gives him a new tail, ears and whiskers. As the story is finished, Pipkin returns and warns the rabbits of a fox in the valley.

Chapter 31 Analysis

El-ahrairah's famed trickery fails him this time. One cannot trick death. The loss of his ears and tail are not enough to ensure the safety of his people. When the Black Rabbit sees that El-ahrairah is willing to sacrifice his life for his people, he saves them. He tells

El-ahrairah that his heart is too warm for the darkness of the hole and sends him home. Rather than trickery, honest love has saved El-ahrairah's people.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

Across the Iron Road

Bigwig pushes past the other rabbits and pretends to be hurt, so the fox will chase him. The fox follows him into the woods and the rabbits hear a squeal, which they think came from Bigwig. Though he returns unharmed, Hazel scolds him harshly for taking a chance when the rabbits could have easily outrun the fox. He asks why Bigwig squealed as if he had been attacked. Bigwig tells him that he was not hurt, but had inadvertently led the fox to another group of rabbits. The fox attacked one of these.

The rabbits reach the iron road, or railroad tracks, when Kehaar warns them of Efrafa patrols nearing the tracks. The Efrafa Owsla are looking for Hazel and his group. The rabbits move into the woods on the opposite side of the track. Kehaar tells them the patrols left without crossing the tracks. Hazel and the others find a place to spend the night.

Chapter 32 Analysis

Hazel leads with confidence. He is now willing to assert his authority and does so by scolding Bigwig. Bigwig and the others accept Hazel's authority without question. On the surface, Bigwig's actions seem foolish. However, his stunt allows the Efrafa to become aware of his presence without knowing he is part of Hazel's warren.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 Summary

The Great River

When Hazel awoke the next morning, he realizes his injury had not fully healed and he is again in pain. He goes to find Kehaar to inquire about the distance to the river. Kehaar returns with the news that no patrols have been seen and the river is a short distance away. Hazel becomes nervous when they reach the river, but Fiver assures him that they are not in danger. Hazel tries to trick the rabbits into crossing, but they are afraid. Fiver coaxes them into following.

The next day, Hazel decides it is time to get the does. He and Blackberry discuss the plan in detail and discuss how they will escape the Efrafa Owsla. They go through the woods and find a bridge. They come across a door, which they decide to use to reach some lettuce to feed the rabbits. Blackberry comes up with a solution to escape the Efrafa. They will use a boat, which they find tied to a piece of metal. They will jump on the boat and chew the rope. Hazel sends Bigwig to Efrafa and tells him to send a message through Kehaar to give them instructions when he is ready.

Chapter 33 Analysis

Hazel asserts his leadership again in this chapter. Fiver has earned the trust of both Hazel and the group as a whole. When Hazel becomes nervous about traveling to the river, Fiver assures him that there is no danger. Hazel has learned to trust his brother's intuition and he is calmed by Fiver's assurances. Fiver is able to coax the others across the bridge when Hazel cannot. They now trust him to keep them safe by following his instincts.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 Summary

General Woundwort

General Woundwort was born three years ago, and was the strongest of five kittens. His father was a carefree rabbit who enjoyed eating from the garden. One day, his father was shot and killed. The cottager proceeded to dig out his mother and the kittens. She escaped, but she was shot. Woundwort was the only kitten to survive. An old schoolmaster found him and took him in. Woundwort grew larger and more savage. He tried to kill the schoolmaster's cat. When he got large enough, he broke out of his hutch and escaped into the open country.

Woundwort found a small warren. He killed the chief and a rival to become Chief Rabbit. General Woundwort wanted to make his people powerful. They left the small warren to create one where they could live concealed and safe from extermination. Woundwort worked the rabbits to exhaustion, and eventually completed it when they could not. He kept close watch on new litters and took the largest to form his Owsla.

No rabbit was allowed to leave the warren, and the Owsla brought any that tried back. Rabbits were marked and separated into groups. The groups fed separately and did not interact with other groups. This was done for control and to stop diseases from spreading throughout the entire warren. The Owsla had privileges in feeding and mating. When the warren got large, the council was formed of Owsla members and Woundwort's most loyal rabbits.

The warren became overcrowded and some of the does began absorbing their litters before birth. This is a natural occurrence among rabbits when there is little chance for the litter's survival. A group of does requested to leave and their offer was refused. The other rabbits began to lose respect for the Owsla.

A few days earlier, four rabbits had arrived at the warren. Woundwort had been meaning to find out where they came from, but the rabbits tricked and attacked Captain Bugloss. The officer was demoted after the incident. Recently, they had picked up the scent of a group of rabbits. They were unable to find the rabbits. While a group of Owsla was following the group, a strange rabbit came bursting out of the bushes; a fox was chasing him. A member of the Owsla was instantly killed.

Captain Campion asked to speak to Woundwort about a rabbit requesting to join Efrafa. The rabbit introduces himself as Thlayli, but he is Bigwig. He tells Woundwort that he is strong and a good fighter. He was once a member of the Owsla of another warren. The next day, the council swears him in and he becomes a member of Woundwort's Owsla. He is marked, and he becomes a member of the Near Hind Mark Sentry.

Chapter 34 Analysis

This chapter gives the background of Woundwort and the formation of the Efrafa warren. Humans traumatized Woundwort as a kitten. The theme of man's inhumanity to animals is shown in the cottager. He was not content just to kill the rabbit eating his cabbages, but tried to kill the mother and her babies as well. This caused the anger and hatred to swell in Woundwort and caused a fear of humans.

Woundwort leads through intimidation and punishment. His people have protection, but no freedom. He is like a brutal military dictator and punishes any attempt to leave harshly. He is not a true leader because his people do not follow him willingly.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 Summary

Groping

Captain Chevril teaches Bigwig about the warren. He explains the rules, and Bigwig begins to think his plan is hopeless. Bigwig notices a horribly mutilated rabbit in a cave and learns the rabbit is there as an example to others because he had been caught trying to escape. They see four does walk past and Chevril explains that the council had split up a group of does and some had been sent to their mark. Chevril wants Bigwig to get to know one of the does, Nelthilta, and help her learn her place.

Bigwig feeds and tries to form his plan. He decides he will take the mutilated rabbit, Blackavar, with him when he leaves the warren. He comes to a hollow and sees four does sitting with their backs to him. One has the attention of the others. She is telling a story. Bigwig listens from a distance and knows it is a poem about her. She is in despair. He starts to talk to them and they ask to leave because there are too many Owsla present. He realizes one of the does is the one Holly spoke of, Hyzenthlay.

Bigwig hears a group of Owsla talking and joins the group. He finds out that in a few days, he will be taken out on patrol. Bigwig returns to his burrow and considers his plan. They would wait until Chevril was sleeping and get one of the sentries to leave the entrance of the hole. The only flaw would have to leave Blackavar behind because he is well guarded. He calls Hyzenthlay to his burrow to help him plan the escape. He tells her about knowing Holly and their situation at the new burrow. She tells him she has premonitions like Fiver and thinks they can succeed. She tells him not to talk of the plan because there are spies all over the warren. She tells him she will find does. Bigwig will find a way to rescue Blackavar. Hyzenthlay is excited at the though of joining Bigwig's warren.

Chapter 35 Analysis

The warren has recently lost several Owsla: one killed by the fox, another run over on the road and the one killed by Holly and his group on their escape. The shortage makes it easy for Bigwig to be accepted. He shows his strength in forming his plan and shows compassion in wanting to rescue Blackavar. Hyzenthlay has Fiver's inner vision and she thinks they can succeed. This is a good omen for Bigwig.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 Summary

Approaching Thunder

Bigwig is awakened by Avens, who asks about Fiver. Bigwig had been saying, "ask Fiver" in his sleep. Bigwig explained that Fiver was a rabbit he once knew with the ability to predict the weather. A storm is approaching, but the rabbits are still sent out to feed. Bigwig goes outside and meets Chevril, Blackavar and a feeding escort. Avens asks about Hyzenthlay being in the burrow. They assume she was there to mate, but Bigwig tells them she is not ready and he spent the night talking to her. Bigwig explains that he had kept her there because Chevril had requested that he get to know the awkward one and put them in their place.

Bigwig takes the opportunity to scout around for the quickest way to enter the burrow where Blackavar is being kept. He sees Kehaar while feeding and gets close. He tells Kehaar that the others need to be waiting near the arch at sunset to meet him and the does. He needs Kehaar to attack the guards to allow him to rescue Blackavar.

Chevril asks Bigwig why he is not afraid of the bird. Bigwig makes a wuffing sound and tells him that is why. Chevril tells Bigwig they need to report it because it is unusual to see them at that time of year. Bigwig finds Hyzenthlay to tell her the plan will happen that evening. As evening approaches, Bigwig goes out to feed. He sees Kehaar flying above and hears a voice behind him. The General asks to have a word with Bigwig.

Chapter 36 Analysis

Chevril is amazed to see Bigwig near the bird. Rabbits are afraid of birds and Chevril cannot believe Bigwig is brave enough to approach one. Hazel and his warren have befriended this bird and he is helping them in return. This is an unusual concept for rabbits because they normally do not befriend any animals other than rabbits. The appearance of General Woundwort marks the first time he is directly seen interacting with one of the rabbits in the book. Showing up as Bigwig is preparing to escape adds a sense of foreboding and serves as a hook to keep the reader's interest.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37 Summary

The Thunder Builds Up

General Woundwort asks Bigwig if he knows Groundsel because the rabbit remembers him from somewhere. This rabbit had been there when Bigwig had led the fox to the Owsla, resulting in the death of one of the members of that group. He questions Bigwig about any knowledge he has about the rabbits they had been trailing. When he finished his questioning, Bigwig was allowed to leave. Kehaar was nowhere to be found and the mark had returned underground.

Hazel and the others are worried because Bigwig has not shown up. Fiver assures them there is nothing about which to worry. Hazel decides if Bigwig does not come by tomorrow, he will enter Efrafa and Pipkin offers to join him. Meanwhile, Bigwig feels his secret is leaking. He cannot go near Kehaar because he is afraid of arousing suspicion. Hyzenthlay is afraid because Kehaar had attacked the sentries. The does were ready, but nothing happened.

Bigwig swears that if he is arrested he will fight, even if he is torn to pieces. He will not meet the same fate as Blackavar. He wakes alone and assumes Hyzenthlay has gone back to her burrow. As the mark goes out to feed, a doe named Nethilta almost blows their cover. Kehaar comes back and Bigwig tells Chevril gulls will go away if he says, "O fly away great bird so white and don't come back until tonight." Kehaar flies away.

Later, he pushes past sentries to go to the bathroom in the ditch. He sees Blackavar and tells him the plan. On his way back to the burrow, a sentry tells Bigwig he will be reported. Bigwig, having ignored authority three times, must be reported.

Chapter 37 Analysis

Bigwig is afraid his plan is falling apart. Woundwort is beginning to get suspicious and he questions him about Hazel and the others. Bigwig shows his bravery several times in this chapter. He shows his cleverness when he finds a way to get a message to Kehaar. He shows both bravery and cleverness when he pushes past the sentry to speak to Blackavar. They do not suspect his plot, but think he has no regard for authority.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 Summary

The Thunder Breaks

Hazel is not sure that Bigwig will show up. Silver suggests going to the river and having Hazel wait in the boat due to his injuries. They decide to send Kehaar to fight the sentries.

Hyzenthlay awakens Bigwig. She tells him that Nethilta has been arrested, and she will probably tell Woundwort all she knows of the plan. They need to leave now. Bigwig tells her to wait in the burrow. He finds Chevril who tells him there will be no evening feed and no one is to go outside. He tells Bigwig to tell the sentries to double the guard on the holes. Bigwig tells the guards to start feeding early due to the storm.

Bigwig goes back to the does and tells them to follow him when they hear him attack the guards. He then goes to Blackavar's guards, tells them he made a mistake and there will be no feed tonight. They look out at the rain and Bigwig gives the signal to attack. As they are leaving the hole, they run into Avens and he tells Bigwig that Chevril wants to see him. The rabbits take off across the field.

The does and Bigwig are separated. Bigwig sends Blackavar to round up the does and meet him by the hedge. As they run, the other rabbits begin stamping the alarm. Meanwhile, Woundwort is questioning Nethilta and she tells him everything she knows of the planned escape. Woundwort tells Avens to lead the way and they find a trail of blood to follow.

Bigwig reaches the railroad tracks, but does not see Hazel or Kehaar. The rabbits head toward a field and see Captain Campion telling them to stop. One of the does notices the General close behind and is frightened. Bigwig will not allow them to be taken and fights with Woundwort. The struggle ends and Bigwig manages to get up. As he does, he sees Kehaar attacking Woundwort. Kehaar warns them of the others approaching and sees Woundwort urging his patrol into the ditch. He sees Blackavar fighting Campion, but Campion runs away.

Silver appears and tells Bigwig how to get out. Kehaar tells them the Efrafans are in a watery meadow behind them. Kehaar flies back and forth with messages between Hazel's rabbits. Kehaar sees Woundwort's rabbits by the bridge because they think there is no other escape for Bigwig and his group. Fiver comes running from some hedges and tells Bigwig some of the does are on the boat, but most are afraid and want Bigwig. He tells Thethuthinnang to get all the does on the boat. One doe runs for a bush and Woundwort knocks her down. The doe runs to the boat. They see Dandelion in the undergrowth. Bigwig distracts Woundwort and Dandelion gets in the boat. They sail away to freedom and safety.

Chapter 38 Analysis

Bigwig shows several admirable characteristics in this chapter. He shows he has leadership abilities. In addition, he has the ability to think on his feet and change the plan to accommodate the changing situation. He shows compassion by rescuing Blackavar, who turns out to be useful in fighting off Campion. He seems weak, but has strength and is able to help in the escape. The rabbits work together with both the other rabbits and Kehaar in planning their escape. Bigwig uses trickery reminiscent of El-ahrairah when he tricks Woundwort into thinking the bird is behind him. This gives Dandelion a chance to escape onto the boat.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 Summary

The Bridges

The rabbits are drifting down the river in the boat. Kehaar tells them a bridge is coming and they may not clear the bridge. Hazel moves the rabbits to the bottom of the boat, but one is knocked into the river. Kehaar tries to stop the boat, but is unable to stop it. He tells the rabbits another bridge is coming.

When they reach the second bridge, the boat knocks into the bridge and comes to a stop. Kehaar tries telling the rabbits to swim through the arches to the other side. They do not understand, so Kehaar demonstrates. The does hesitate, but finally jump in and reach dry land. Once all are safe on land, they find some bushes where they can safely sleep.

Chapter 39 Analysis

Kehaar demonstrates his friendship again by guiding the rabbits to safety. He warns them of the low bridge. He gets discouraged when the rabbits do not understand the concept of swimming through the arches. He persists with his explanation and then demonstrates to help them understand. Blackavar again proves his usefulness when he follows Hazel through the tunnel.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 Summary

The Way Back

The next morning the rabbits discover the doe that fell off the boat. She has drowned. Kehaar leaves to catch up with his flock and tells the rabbits he will see them the following season. The rabbits begin their long walk home, but they are exhausted and do not make it very far. Hazel considers stopping to dig out a few holes and resting for a few days. Blackavar thinks they are in fox country, but Bigwig tells him they are not. Fiver feels uneasy, but thinks it will probably be fine. Hazel makes the decision to stop and rest.

Two days later, a fox attacks and kills a doe. The rabbits move on, but soon run into Campion and a few other Owsla from Efrafa. They are outnumbered and let Hazel's group pass. Blackavar warns Hazel that they must kill the Owsla or they will return. Hazel does not heed the advice and leaves quietly. They arrive back at the warren, but do not see Campion quietly watching from a distance.

Chapter 40 Analysis

Hazel prefers to lead without violence. Ignoring Blackavar's warning is a mistake. He inadvertently leads the enemy to the location of the warren. This information will be taken back to Woundwort. While it is better to live without violence, it is not always wise or even possible.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 Summary

The Story of Rowsby Woof and the Fairy Wogdog

The rabbits get along well and live peacefully in the warren. Dandelion tells a story of El-ahrairah and Rabscuttle tricking a dog. They were hungry and the only food available was vegetables in a nearby farm. A dog guards the farm. El-ahrairah finds some rotted meat and comes up with a plan to trick the dog. He chews a piece of rubber in the shape of a nose and sticks it in the meat. He puts this near the fence to the farm. El-ahrairah disguises himself as a Fairy Wogdog and goes to find the dog. The rabbits find the dog, tell him the queen is planning to honor him, but he must first track down and eat the meat. The dog falls for the trick and goes to eat the meat.

The next night, the rabbits return and tell the dog he is to meet the queen on the road for his reward. When he leaves, the rabbits enter the house and eat as many vegetables as they can. The farmer has put the vegetables in the house to protect them from the frost. The farmer comes along and finds the dog on the road. They arrive back at the house, but the rabbits are so busy eating that they do not hear them approaching. They are trapped in the house.

They hide and later that night El-ahrairah goes to the dog and tells him the queen did not come because a rat spirit has released a horrible disease. The dog's master will die unless the dog goes outside and runs around the house four times to break the spell. The dog wakes the farmer and the farmer opens the door. When the dog starts running around the house, the farmer follows to see what is wrong. The rabbits take their chance and escape through the open door.

Chapter 41 Analysis

The rabbits again enjoy a story of rabbit trickery. El-ahrairah's tricks cause no harm to the dog. The dog is not even humiliated because he truly believes he has saved his master. The dog and El-ahrairah are both happy. The dog feels like a hero and the rabbits get their much-needed food.

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 Summary

News at Sunset

One of the does, Clover, gives birth to a litter of six kittens. Hazel and Bigwig run into the mouse that Hazel saved from the hawk. The mouse tells them a large group of rabbits is gathering near the warren. Bigwig dismisses the mouse, but Hazel sends two rabbits to check it out. They find out that a large group of Efrafa is gathering and preparing an attack.

Hazel orders the rabbits to fill in all the holes, so the Efrafa will have to dig them out. He instructs them to leave one hole open for escape. Hazel decides to seek out Woundwort to see if he can stop the invasion. He makes Bigwig the chief in his absence.

Chapter 42 Analysis

Everything the rabbits have gone through to find does is shown to have been worth the effort. Clover has given birth to the first litter of babies born in the new warren. The warren will live on with these babies. The warren is now a home. Hazel will do what he has to do in order to protect this home and its people.

Hazel understands the importance of friendship among rabbits and other species. He listens to the mouse and takes his warning. He shows that he is capable of leading under pressure and that he can think quickly to protect his people. Hazel understands that Bigwig has shown leadership skills, which is why he leaves Bigwig in charge when he goes to find Hazel.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43 Summary

The Great Patrol

Woundwort has had patrols out looking for the new warren. He finds the warren and plans a surprise attack. Hazel shows up and offers the General a compromise. He points out the overcrowding in Woundwort's warren. Hazel suggests building a new warren between the two and creating it with rabbits from both warrens. The General briefly understands that the idea is a good plan, but his pride and brutality will not allow him to consider accepting the offer. He tells Hazel that if the does, Blackavar and Bigwig are not immediately returned; his patrol will kill Hazel and all the bucks in the warren.

Chapter 43 Analysis

The difference in leadership abilities between Hazel and Woundwort are seen in this chapter. Hazel is a fair leader and a diplomat. He offers an acceptable alternative to both sides and a way to ease the overcrowding of Woundwort's warren. The General is not a true and fair leader. He is full of pride and power. He is used to giving orders and governing with fear and brutality. This is why he cannot allow himself to consider Hazel's offer and resorts to making threats against the other rabbits. He is sure Hazel will bow to his wishes and return the does.

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 Summary

Message from El-ahrairah

Woundwort's patrol moves in, but the patrol is bogged down by fights with several of the bucks from Hazel's warren, including Blackavar and Bigwig. The General tries a few tactics, but is not successful. Woundwort then orders his rabbits to begin digging out the Honeycomb from the top.

Hazel is gathering the rabbits to move them deeper into the burrows. He can hear the sounds of digging and is trying to get the rabbits as far away as possible. He comes across Fiver; he is in a trance. In his vision, he discovers a solution. They must find the dog and chew its rope to free the large animal. Hazel understands and tells Blackberry and Dandelion that they must return to the farm.

Chapter 44 Analysis

Hazel is a good leader and knows how to use his men to their best abilities. He sends the strongest to fight off the approaching Efrafa Owsla. The others are moved deeper into the burrows. He must protect the weaker and the new kittens. Fiver again shows his unique talents by seeing the dog in the woods. Hazel goes to free the dog, knowing this will help get rid of the Efrafa.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45 Summary

Nuthanger Farm Again

Woundwort's rabbits dig through the Honeycomb, but find that the rabbits have filled it in from below. They become frightened at Fiver's scream and think another animal may be in the burrow. They are ordered to continue digging and they follow their orders. Meanwhile, Hazel, Blackberry and Dandelion escape out the back of the burrow.

When the rabbits reach the farm, they chew the rope to free the dog. A cat attacks Hazel, while the dog chases Dandelion.

Chapter 45 Analysis

Woundwort shows no concern for his people when he forces them to keep digging in spite of their fear. He does not know they are not in danger, nor does he care. His only goal is to retrieve "his" does. To Woundwort, they are merely possessions.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46 Summary

Bigwig Stands His Ground

Woundwort and two of his Owsla break through the Honeycomb. The other rabbits have retreated deeper into the burrow, but had to leave Fiver behind. When Woundwort sees Fiver, he thinks the rabbit is dead and does not bother him. They see a freshly dug wall and break through. Bigwig has dug himself into the ground behind the wall. He jumps up and bites the General's leg as he enters the room. They struggle and ultimately, Bigwig gets the advantage.

Chapter 46 Analysis

Woundwort is determined to prove he is the strongest rabbit. He makes a fatal mistake when he underestimates Bigwig. Bigwig again shows that he can be a worthy leader and come up with a plan at the last minute. With Holly's help, he carries out his plan. Like Hazel, he is able to work with others to formulate and carry out a plan.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 Summary

The Sky Suspended

Blackberry and Dandelion get the dog to chase them. The dog gets distracted and stops chasing the rabbits. They go back, get the dog's attention and run at high speed toward the Honeycomb.

Bigwig is blocking Woundwort's entrance to the burrow. He plans to block the entrance, whether it is dead or alive. Woundwort tries to entice him out by telling Bigwig that he can have charge of the mark of his choice if he returns to Efrafa. The two rabbits fight fiercely and Bigwig injures Woundwort with a bite to the nose. Woundwort is forced to retreat and he sends Vervian down to fight Bigwig. Vervian defies the order.

Woundwort returns to the surface as Campion runs toward the Honeycomb to warn of the approaching dog. The rabbits flee, but Woundwort stands his ground. He yells that dogs are nothing to fear. The rabbits hear from Woundwort these last words.

Chapter 47 Analysis

Bigwig shows both his strength and inner courage in his battle with Woundwort. He is willing to die, if necessary to protect the rabbits. This makes him a much nobler leader than Woundwort. The General only cares about winning at any cost. He has no concern for lives lost.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 Summary

Dea ex Machina

Hazel is rescued from the cat. The help comes not from a rabbit or even another animal, but from a little girl living on the farm. Lucy takes Hazel and shows him to the doctor. The doctor checks the rabbit over and assures Lucy that his injuries are not life threatening. He offers to help her find a place where they can set the rabbit free. They let Hazel go at the entrance to Watership Down.

Chapter 48 Analysis

The theme of man's inhumanity to animals has been seen several times throughout the book. This chapter shows a different side of humans. Hazel has been helped several times by other animals, but never has he received help from a human. His entire experience with humanity has been negative. For the first time, he learns that humans can be caring. Not all people want to harm rabbits. Some actually love animals.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 Summary

Hazel Comes Home

Woundwort tries to fight the dog, but he is killed in the fight. While the dog is tied up with Woundwort, all but one of the Efrafa manages to escape. Campion leads most of the rabbits back to Efrafa. A few take this opportunity to disappear, rather than returning to Efrafa. These are never seen again.

The rabbits of the new warren think that Hazel is dead. He returns and tells them that he was rescued by humans and returned to the down in a car. They doubt his story, but Hyzenthlay saw them and she confirms the story.

Chapter 49 Analysis

In the end, Woundwort ends up saving most of his rabbits from the attack. This was not his intention, but ironically, he saved them with his own life. The rabbits doubt Hazel's story because, like Hazel, they have never witnessed human kindness. They only believe him after Hyzenthlay confirms the story.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50 Summary

And Last

Many of the does rescued from Efrafa give birth to new litters of kittens. The new warren is thriving. Some of the former residents of Efrafa have joined them, and they live in peace and harmony. Hazel decides to rekindle his idea of building a new warren between the Honeycomb and Efrafa. He will send Kehaar to bring a message to Efrafa when he returns. They pass the winter in the burrows listening to stories about El-ahrairah. Bigwig becomes chief of the new warren.

Chapter 50 Analysis

Hazel and his rabbits have finally found the home they have been searching for since the beginning of the book. This warren has all the elements of a true home. Their warren has a democratic system of government. They welcome the survivors of Efrafa that seek to join their community. Hazel still wants to build the third warren, and Bigwig has been chosen as its leader. He has proven his worth and leadership abilities and he will make a strong, but compassionate leader.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

Years pass and the new warren between the Honeycomb and Efrafa is thriving. All three warrens are doing well. General Woundwort has become a legend. Some say he still lives. Mothers trying to entice their children to behave often use him as a threat. Hazel lives longer than rabbits normally live. One day, a rabbit with shining ears meets him. His time has come. He leaves his body behind and as he rises above the earth, he sees that everything is well.

Epilogue Analysis

The story has a happy conclusion. Hazel and the others have successfully built the home they desired. Hazel can leave the earth in peace, knowing his people will be fine.

Characters

Bigwig

Bigwig is a large, powerfully built rabbit, originally a member of his home warren's "Owsla," or police force. His name, Thlayli, literally means "furhead," a reference to the distinctive thick growth of fur on the top of his head. At first, the other rabbits are wary of him; when Hazel brings up his plan to leave the home warren, he is taken aback when Bigwig volunteers to come along. Adams writes, "The last thing Hazel had expected was the immediate support of a member of the Owsla. It crossed his mind that although Bigwig would certainly be a useful rabbit in a tight corner, he would also be a difficult one to get along with. He certainly would not want to do what he was told—or even asked—by an outskirter."

Although Bigwig is used to being respected and has a tendency to throw his weight around, as the rabbits' adventure progresses, he proves that he certainly is "a useful rabbit in a tight corner." In the new warren, the rabbits realize that they need female rabbits to carry on, or their community will not live beyond one generation. Bigwig's major role in the book involves his leadership of an expedition to an enemy warren to get doe rabbits, during which he shows not only great courage and physical strength, but also quick yet calm thinking. In the expedition, he goes alone to the warren, called Efrafa, pretending to be a loner looking for a new home in a disciplined community. Having ingratiated himself with the secret police there and pretending to be an enthusiastic member of their group, he makes friends with a dissident female rabbit, Hyzenthlay, and uses the cover of a thunderstorm and the help of a seagull, Kehaar, to lead a group of ten discontented does to safety. The escape is fraught with danger, but the group makes it to the new warren.

Arriving at their new home on Watership Down, Bigwig and the does settle in to recover from their exhausting trek, but soon find that General Woundwort, leader of Efrafa, has followed them and intends to battle over the does. Laying siege to their burrow, he sets his forces to work digging into the Watership Down warren, and Bigwig comes to its defense. He is almost killed in a personal fight with Woundwort, but in the end, with the help of all the rabbits and a dog, the Watership Down rabbits win the battle.

By the end of the book, through all these adventures, Bigwig has matured into a fair but still powerful figure in the new warren, under the leadership of Hazel. Described as "a hulking veteran, lop-eared and scarred from nose to haunch," in the final pages of the book he is teaching the new young rabbits of the warren how to deal with cats and other hazards, as a sort of benevolent old soldier.

Blackberry

Blackberry is a very clever rabbit, whose mind is quick and inventive. When the group has to cross a river, he notices an old sign on the bank and realizes that it must have drifted downstream: therefore, it must float. He also realizes that if a rabbit stands on it, the rabbit will float too: the wood can serve as a raft. Most of the other rabbits are not able to understand this, but they trust his intelligence and are able to use the wood to cross the river. Later, they use a boat in a similar manner to escape pursuit by General Woundwort and his forces. Blackberry also figures out how to open a cage that holds some does on a farm, and later participates in a dangerous quest to release a dog tied on a nearby farm and lead it to attack Woundwort and his forces.

Cowslip

Cowslip offers the wandering group shelter at his warren. When they meet him, they see that he is "a big fellow, sleek and handsome. His fur shone and his claws and teeth were in perfect condition. . . . There was a curious, rather unnatural gentleness about the way in which he waited for them to come nearer. . . . He had the air of an aristocrat." Despite this, he also has an aura of sadness about him, which puzzles the wanderers. They are further puzzled by the inhabitants of his warren, who are all equally well-fed, equally sad, and who produce art, architecture, and poetry, all of which are foreign to the rougher, traveling band of rabbits. He invites them to stay in his warren, saying that there is plenty of empty space in it, and they will be welcome there.

This puzzles them, since rabbits are usually more territorial, and eventually they discover that the good food and safety from animal predators come at a price. A nearby farmer, noticing the warren of rabbits, puts out food for them and kills predators, thus ensuring their safety, but periodically he also snares and kills some of them to sell in the market. The rabbits in the warren are aware of the price they pay, but are too comfortable to want to change it; the farmer only takes a few, and each rabbit hopes and assumes it will be someone else. Cowslip, in inviting them, knows that they will probably be killed, since they don't know about the snares—so his invitation is a death sentence in disguise. Fiver feels the menace, but his vision of the danger is not clear enough to prevent Bigwig from being caught in one of the snares.

Fiver

Fiver is an undersized rabbit, the "runt" of a large litter, whose rabbit name, "Hrairoo," literally means "Little Thousand," or "the smallest of many." Although stunted in size, Fiver is large in spirit and has a prophetic gift: he is clairvoyant, and often sees events at a distance or in the future. Because of this gift, he is often high-strung and sensitive; Adams writes, "He was small, with wide, staring eyes and a way of raising and turning his head which suggests not so much caution as a kind of ceaseless, nervous tension."

As the reader finds out, Fiver has a reason to be tense: he has had horrible visions of destruction. He sees the field where their warren is located covered with blood, and feels an overwhelming sense of death and danger all around them. He tells his brother Hazel about these visions, and urges that all the rabbits immediately evacuate the warren and go elsewhere. Because rabbit society is hierarchical, they must go see the Chief Rabbit and try to convince him; without his support, little can be done. The Chief Rabbit is reasonably fair, but has grown complacent in his leadership and is not inclined to listen to the ravings of a runt, especially since there is no concrete evidence of danger. The rabbits are content, there are no predators, the weather is good—in his mind, Fiver is to be pitied and patronized, not believed.

However, of course Fiver is right, and Hazel, who knows him well, believes him. With a small group of other rabbits, they leave the old warren at Sandleford and set out across country looking for a new home. Fiver has seen it in a vision, and it is a high, clean hill, known as Watership Down, from which they can see predators long before the predators see them, find abundant food, and be far from the developments of humans. As the rabbits travel, Fiver urges them on, even when they're reluctant, led astray, or attacked by enemies. Fiver's prophetic gifts, and his storytelling ability, save them more than once; his visions lead them to safety, warn them of danger, suggest new ways of coping with trouble, and offer hope when, rationally, there is none.

Fiver's gift is passed on to one of his offspring, a young rabbit who shows signs of his clairvoyance. Hazel, who has become leader of the new warren largely because of his faith in Fiver's gifts, says that as long as there are rabbits with this gift in the warren, the community as a whole will do well.

Hazel

Hazel is the leader of the rabbits who escape from Sandleford Warren after his brother Fiver warns that it will soon be destroyed; although other rabbits, including the Chief Rabbit of Sandleford, are skeptical about Fiver's warning, Hazel believes his brother and makes plans to leave. Hazel is a yearling and has not yet become a strong figure in the warren, although, as Adams writes, "He looked as though he knew how to take care of himself. There was a shrewd, buoyant air about him as he sat up, looked around and rubbed both paws over his nose." Hazel is calm, steady, and modest, as well as compassionate and fair, and as leader of the group, he encourages democratic discussion and listening to all the members of the group before making a decision. He does not always make good decisions—one that leads to trouble is his decision to get female rabbits from a nearby farm—but in general, he has balanced judgment. Eventually, he becomes the muchloved and respected leader, or Chief Rabbit, of the new warren on Watership Down.

At the end of the book, an epilogue shows Hazel lying half-asleep in his burrow when a shining stranger appears and summons him out into the spring sunshine. Although Adams does not state this explicitly, the text implies that this stranger is Lord Frith, the rabbit god, summoning him to the next world; evidently Hazel, having lived a long,

eventful, and good life, has a peaceful death. As he passes some does and young rabbits on his way out, Adams writes, "he stopped for a moment to watch his rabbits and to try to get used to the extraordinary feeling that strength and speed were flowing inexhaustibly out of him into their sleek young bodies and healthy senses."

Holly

Holly is the captain of the Owsla, or security force, at the Sandleford Warren, under the leadership of the Chief Rabbit. He does not leave with the original group of rabbits, and in fact tries to arrest Bigwig and prevent him from leaving. When the bulldozers come and humans pipe poison gas into the warren, Holly escapes with one other survivor, a jester named Bluebell, and eventually finds the wanderers and joins Hazel's warren. He was originally deeply against their leaving Sandleford, but once he sees that they were right, he becomes an equally strong supporter of the new warren and Hazel's leadership in it, and even apologizes to Bigwig for trying to arrest him. He leads the initial expedition to Efrafa to get female rabbits, and barely escapes—without the does—but despite this experience is a strong fighter and leader throughout the book.

Hrairoo

See Fiver

Kehaar

Kehaar is a seagull who has been grounded by an injured wing near the Watership Down warren. When the rabbits find him, they are afraid of him at first, because most large birds prey on rabbits, but he is weak from starvation, and Hazel decides that they will help him and thus make an ally of him. Eventually, Hazel hopes, the bird can fly far and wide, find female rabbits, and tell the Watership Down rabbits where they are so that they can go get them and bring them back to join the warren. Kehaar is tough, blunt, intelligent, and social, and he is lonely now that the rest of his flock has migrated far away; although he has never socialized with rabbits before, he is happy to have others to talk to and perfectly willing to help them. He eventually finds does—at nearby Nuthanger Farm and at Efrafa. In their later confrontation with the rabbits of Efrafa, Kehaar acts as scout and spy, telling them of the enemy rabbits' movements and whereabouts as well as the layout of the terrain and carrying news back and forth from Bigwig, who is living undercover at Efrafa, and the other rabbits. He also attacks General Woundwort during his epic chase of Bigwig.

Strawberry

Strawberry is a large buck rabbit, a member of the highly civilized warren kept by a local farmer, and until his mate is killed by the farmer's snare, is a supporter of its system. When the Watership Down rabbits decide to leave, he comes with them, having realized

that the price of food and safety— his mate's life—is too high to pay. He would rather live free, in the wild, and later proves to be a useful scout and fighter and a dependable member of the community.

Thlayli

See Bigwig

The Threarah

Also known as the Chief Rabbit, he is the leader of Sandleford Warren, and he has grown complacent in his power. When Hazel and Fiver come to him and tell him of Fiver's vision that the warren will be destroyed, he patronizes them and ignores their warning. "These rabbits," he says later, "who claim to have the second sight—I've known one or two in my time. But it's not usually advisable to take much notice of them." When he finds out that several rabbits have left, he sends the Sandleford security force after them, but when they come back empty-handed, he says there is no point in looking further. When Fiver's prophecy comes true and the warren is destroyed, two rabbits escape and eventually meet up with the Watership Down rabbits, but the Chief is not one of them; he does not survive the disaster.

General Woundwort

General Woundwort is the totalitarian dictator of the evil warren of Efrafa, a closed society which rabbits may enter but never leave. Like similar human societies, it has a repressive force of secret police and elaborate, brutal laws, and punishes infractions of them with torture and death.Woundwort was orphaned in infancy, grew up without love or community, and ended up savage, brutal, and with a lust for power and control. He is "almost as big as a hare and there's something about his mere presence that frightens you, as if blood and fighting and killing were all just part of the day's work to him." Woundwort forced himself into a small warren, quickly took control of it, and in time organized it into the feared warren of Efrafa. Supposedly, the elaborate repressive system of this warren is a method of keeping the rabbits from being detected and killed by humans and other enemies, and the members of the warren at first accepted this rationale. Woundwort established a ruling Council and strong-handed Owsla, both of which obeyed his commands without question. However, by the time the rabbits from Watership Down arrive, Efrafa has become overcrowded, and some rabbits are chafing against Woundwort's repressive regime.

After lengthy battles, Woundwort is finally defeated when the Watership Down rabbits lead a dog to attack him. His death is as brutal as his life was; at the end, as the dog bears down on him, he screams to his forces, "Come back, you fools! Dogs aren't dangerous! Come back and fight!" His body is never found, and eventually he becomes a sort of "bogey-man" to the local rabbits. Adams writes, "And mother rabbits would tell their kittens that if they did not do as they were told, the General would get them—the

General who was first cousin to the Black Rabbit himself. Such was Woundwort's monument: and perhaps it would not have displeased him."

Setting

Adams pays particular attention to the landscape in Watership Down. By providing a detailed map of the land around Nuthanger Farm and frequent descriptions of the countryside and climate, Adams creates a tactile, three dimensional setting, so convincing that eavesdropping on the conversation or thoughts of rabbits seems natural. All of the places in the novel, including Watership Down itself, are actual locations in England. By using specific geographical details, Adams adds a sense of reality to his fantastic tale. In addition, he ends the book with a "Lapine Glossary" which further recognizes the rabbits as having a culture and language all their own.

Social Concerns

Watership Down tells how a handful of male rabbits escape from a warren (doomed by developer's plans), travel across a hostile countryside, and establish their own warren by stealing females from a neighboring community. After the novel became a best seller, Adams explained in interviews that he intended his novel to be a good cliffhanging tale, to pay tribute to the beautiful English countryside (Watership Down is a real place), and to describe the qualities of leadership.

Adams's last two intentions suggest how he touched upon issues important to readers of the early 1970s. His tribute to the English countryside is less pastoral than ecological. Adams's account of rabbit habitat reflect the ecosystem of a rural landscape where all living things are part of a balance which must be respected. If one part of the ecosystem is carelessly destroyed, the whole environment suffers. Adams's account of leadership offers a positive image to a society that seems to have lost its ability to accept direction from anyone other than a media celebrity, a well groomed politician, or an ideological bully.

Social Sensitivity

Adams's tribute to the English countryside is less pastoral than ecological.

His account of rabbit habits and habitat reflects the ecosystem of a rural landscape where all living things constitute a delicate balance. If one part of the ecosystem is carelessly destroyed, the whole environment suffers. Adams's offers a positive image of leadership to a society that seems to have lost its ability to accept direction from anyone other than media celebrities, well-groomed politicians, or ideological bullies.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The success of Watership Down results from several stylistic features.

The first is Adams's attention to the landscape of the novel. By providing a detailed map of the land around Nuthanger Farm and frequent descriptions of the countryside and climate, Adams creates a tactile, three dimensional setting so convincing that eavesdropping on the conversation or thoughts of rabbits seems natural.

Another technique is the use of epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. These epigraphs demonstrate Adams's wide reading: They are drawn from the Bible, classical literature, English poetry, science, and folklore.

These epigraphs serve the narrative function of hinting to the reader which direction the action will take. They also serve the thematic function of suggesting the seriousness of the action: If passages from Shakespeare, Blake, and Saint Paul illuminate the tale, then this rabbit story is more than an idle fiction. The epigraphs, too, place Watership Down in the tradition of the nineteenth-century English novel, which frequently used such epigraphs as a sign of seriousness.

A third technique is a plot structure that possesses suggestive parallels to the Roman epic, the Aeneid. The rabbits' escape from doomed Sandleford, their temporary sojourn at Cowslip, and the battle with Efrafa warren recalls Aeneas' flight from besieged Troy, his dalliance with Dido at Carthage, and his warfare against Turnus in Latium to found a city for the surviving Trojans. Like the epigraphs, the epic suggestiveness establishes Watership Down as a serious literary work.

Animal stories are as old as imagination. Fables use animals to represent human behavior, and fairy tales often employ animals with magic powers to change human destiny. Novels with animal characters are almost as old as novels themselves: Pompey the Little (1751) appears just eleven years after Samuel Richardson's Pamela, usually designated the first English novel.

Classics in the genre include Anna Sewell's Black Beauty, Jack London's The Call of the Wild (1903), Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book (1894), and Marjorie Rawlings's The Yearling (1938.

In these stories the animal characters' interactions most importantly are with human beings, and are described in sentimental language. Watership Down is distinguished by the remoteness of the human world and by Adams's ability to have his animals' dialogue in human speech yet remain rabbits in their behavior, instincts, and knowledge. Another strength of Watership Down is that its author avoids the didactic tendency of animal fiction; that is, the explicit teaching of human ethics or morals.

Literary Qualities

The success of Watership Down results from several stylistic features. The first technique is the use of epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter. These epigraphs, drawn from the Bible, classical literature, English poetry, science, and folklore, serve the narrative function of indicating the direction the action will take. They also serve the thematic function of suggesting the seriousness of the action. If passages from Shakespeare, Blake, and Saint Paul illuminate the tale, then surely it is more than an entertaining story about rabbits. The epigraphs also place Watership Down in the tradition of the nineteenth-century English novel, which frequently used such epigraphs as a sign of seriousness.

In plot structure Watership Down has suggestive parallels to the Roman epic, the Aeneid. The rabbits' escape from doomed Sandleford, their temporary sojourn at Cowslip, and the battle with Efrafa warren recall Aeneas's flight from besieged Troy, his dalliance with Dido at Carthage, and his warfare against Turnus in Latium to establish a city for the surviving Trojans. Like the epigraphs, the epic suggestiveness establishes Watership Down as a serious literary work.

Animal stories are as old as human imagination. Fables use animals to represent human behavior, and fairy tales often employ animals with magic powers to change human destiny. Other animal stories, such as Anna Sewell's Black Beauty (1877) and Jack London's The Call of the Wild (1903), relate the animal's interactions with human beings, often in sentimental language. Watership Down is distinguished by the remoteness of the human world and by Adams's ability to have his animals' dialogue in human speech, yet remain rabbits in their behavior, instincts, and knowledge. Adams also avoids the didactic tendency of animal fiction; that is, the explicit teaching of human ethics or morals.

Thematic Overview

The concern for the environment and the focus on leadership combine to form the central theme of the novel, which is the formation of community.

In the lapine world of Watership Down, community results when a group of individuals share a common purpose in life, realize that cooperation is essential to survival, and trust the complementary talents of others.

The plot allows these issues to be surveyed from a variety of perspectives. The story begins in the threatened warren, Sandleford. It is an ordinary society, pleasant but imperfect, neither an Eden nor a tyranny. Its doom comes from without, not within; only a half-dozen rabbits, sensing some ill-omen, flee the warren and survive its destruction. Now in a hostile environment, the band, led by Hazel, must rebuild community even as it moves.

To survive, the group pools its wisdom, and each individual takes responsibility for what he does best: The fastest scouts ahead, the biggest confronts enemies, the most cunning chooses a place to rest.

The wandering escapees of Sandleford encounter two other societies.

Cowslip warren at first seems delightful: Its rabbits are well fed and uncrowded. Its bounty is deceiving, however; the warren survives only as a farmer's colony, well fed in order to provide an occasional, inevitable stew to the man's table. The Cowslip rabbits understand their plight, but lack the will or wisdom to combat it.

If Cowslip warren is pampered and imprisoned, Efraf a warren is fiercely independent. To preserve itself, however, Efraf a has developed a militaristic, fascist state under the rule of a ruthless, ever vigilant leader. Efraf a lets no native rabbit leave and enslaves outsiders who wander into its territory.

When the Sandleford refugees establish their own warren at Nuthanger Farm on Watership Down, they preserve the freedom that Cowslip surrendered in exchange for ease, and they find the solidarity that Efraf a could impose only by force. Adams remarked once that he strives to portray an "animality" which corresponds to "humanity" — i.e. those ground rules which harmonize the competing interests of the individual and the group. Watership Down argues that cooperation, selfcontrol, and self-sacrifice are as crucial to animality as to humanity.

Themes

The Natural World and Development

A major concern in the book is the devastation of the natural world that results from human development of the land. The book's action begins when humans post a notice in the field where the rabbits live; it reads:

THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING
SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING
LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH
CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH
AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY,
BERKS.

In a harrowing chapter, one of the two survivors of the poisoning and bulldozing of the rabbits' home warren tells of the cold destruction, and the rabbits' realization that the humans killed them, as another rabbit said, "just because we were in their way. They killed us to suit themselves."

Throughout the book, the rabbits are keenly aware of humans and their disastrous effects. When they cross a road, Adams vividly describes the disgusting smells of cigarettes, tar, gasoline, and exhaust, as well as the rabbits' nauseated response to them. The cars on the road can run faster than any rabbit—something highly unnatural—and when they pass a rabbit, they don't seem to notice the rabbit at all. Machinelike, they stay on the road, and machinelike, they don't slow down for animals. This lesson of human senselessness and lack of connection or care is borne out by the presence of a smashed piece of roadkill—a hedgehog that is now "a flattened, bloody mass of brown prickles and white fur, with small black feet and snout crushed round the edges."

Humans are associated with this senseless, machinelike response to the world, which leads to callous death; they are also associated with some of the worst enemies of rabbits: cats and dogs. In contrast, Adams lovingly and vividly describes the natural world in great detail. Almost every page of the book contains passages on nature that are as vivid as those written by any naturalist and that allow the reader to step into the rabbits' world. In fact the book begins, "The primroses were over. Toward the edge of the wood, where the ground became open and sloped down to an old fence and a brambly ditch beyond, only a few fading patches of pale yellow still showed among the dog's mercury and oak-tree roots. On the other side of the fence, the ground was full of rabbit holes. . . ."

Throughout the book, descriptions of natural beauty and rabbit life are contrasted with the disastrous effects of humanity. The first warren is utterly destroyed by development. Cowslip's warren, where the rabbits are fat and leisurely, is owned by a farmer, who kills rabbits to sell for meat. Efrafa, the totalitarian dictatorship, became that way partly in

response to hazards—if humans didn't know the rabbits were there, they couldn't kill them, so General Woundwort instituted an increasingly repressive series of controls to keep the warren a secret. Kehaar the seagull is wounded by a farmer's pet cat, and so is Hazel.

The rabbits' only chance for permanent safety lies in getting as far away from humans as possible —to the remote, high country of Watership Down. What Adams does not bring up is the question of whether increasing development will eventually reach even there—if the rabbits' safe home will one day, like the first warren, be destroyed to make way for human building.

Democracy versus Totalitarianism

The book clearly contrasts two forms of leadership —democratic versus totalitarian. Under Hazel's leadership, discussion, openness, and equal participation among all members of the warren is encouraged. In the closed warren of Efrafa, General Woundwort's word is law, and any discussion is immediately punished.

In Efrafa, each rabbit is "marked," and its behavior is strictly regulated; as Holly explains, "They bite them, deep, and under the chin or in a haunch or forepaw. Then they can be told by the scar for the rest of their lives. You mustn't be found above ground [to feed or excrete waste] unless it's the right time of day for your Mark." Each Mark has a captain who oversees this and punishes infractions, and if a Mark can't go aboveground because a man or a predator is near, it must wait until the next day. To prevent the spread of infection—and dissension—rabbits are not allowed to visit another Mark's burrows without permission, which is seldom granted.

The warren's Owsla, or police, patrol the countryside, watching out for predators. When they find strange rabbits, they bring them back to Efrafa or, if they won't come back, kill them so that they don't attract the attention of humans or other predators to the area.

Supposedly, this system arose because General Woundwort, who took control of the warren, wanted to ensure its safety from predators. However, in exchange for safety from outside enemies, the rabbits now are constantly threatened and oppressed from within, by those in power. As a result, most of the rabbits in the warren can't do anything but what they're told to do; they've never been out of the warren, never smelled an enemy, and never learned to think independently.

Those who do think independently are severely punished. In a chilling incident, Bigwig meets Blackavar, a rabbit who tried to leave Efrafa. Guarded by rabbit officers, he stands at the entrance to a burrow, where all can see him. As Adams writes, "He was dreadfully mutilated. His ears were nothing but shapeless shreds, ragged at the edges, seamed with ill-knit scars and beaded here and there with lumps of proud, bare flesh. One eyelid was misshapen and closed askew." He has been held here for a month, forced to explain to all who ask that this torture and mutilation was his punishment for attempting to leave, and thus instilling fear and obedience in other possible rebels.

Style

Style

Myths and Tales

A most unusual feature of the book is its depiction of rabbits' mythological and spiritual life. Throughout *Watership Down,* chapters telling tales of rabbit adventures are interspersed with stories of another kind—legends from the rabbit mythology. The rabbits tell each other tales of how the first rabbit, El-ahrairah, received a white tail and strong back legs from Frith, the sun god, and at the same time, was marked as prey for many other animals. "All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning." Other stories tell how El-ahrairah stole the king's lettuce; how he was put on trial for stealing Prince Rainbow's carrots; how, when his people were under siege, he went to the Black Rabbit of Inle (Death personified) and offered his own life in exchange for the safety of his people; how he outwitted a huge dog, and other tales. All these stories serve to reinforce the rabbits' sense of a shared heritage. They also reinforce the rabbits' view of themselves as fast, cunning, compassionate, and community-minded. Traditional rabbit virtues are like old-fashioned human ones: the hero Elahrairah is ready to help his companions, give up his own life for them, and fight for what he believes in. At the same time, he is quick, cunning, has a bright sense of humor, and is a consummate storyteller, all traits the rabbits value highly. These myths help bond the rabbits together in times of trouble, and also inspire them with ideas to use in their own difficulties.

Naturalistic Detail

Another feature, as notable as Adams's use of myth and exactly opposite from it, is his use of closely observed, factual details of rabbit life and nature. Many of the epigrams preceding chapters are drawn from the naturalist R. M. Lockley's book *The Private Life of the Rabbit,* which Adams also cites in his acknowledgments. Adams clearly used this book to inspire and inform his descriptions of rabbit behavior and "customs." He was also a keen observer of many other aspects of natural phenomena, including weather, flowering times, the movements and appearance of insects, and the habitats of various birds and plants. A list of all the birds, plants, animals, and insects he mentions would probably comprise a relatively complete field guide to the part of England where the story is set.

As the rabbits travel across country, Adams also keenly observes and describes the smells, textures, and fauna of the different territories they cover, from the damp river bank to the mysterious and dangerous forest, to the peaty, boggy, rocky upland, to the high, clean height of Watership Down. All these places are real—though of course the characters are not—and these rich details serve to ground the reader in Adams's

setting, give the story authority, and encourage the reader to believe in the "truth" of the tale.

Animal Communication

Another interesting feature of the book is that in Adams's world, rabbits can communicate with each other and with other animals, although communication with other animals takes place through a sort of universal pidgin, or primitive language, which all the animals use when talking to other species. The one "animal" who cannot understand the rabbits, and whom the rabbits can't understand, is the human. In Adams's world, humans are outside the natural order and even in opposition to it— their presence almost invariably leads to death and destruction. (The one exception to this is Lucy, the farmer's daughter, who saves Hazel and insists that the doctor bring him back to the warren in his car; perhaps this is because she is a child, and therefore still innocent and perhaps closer to the animals than adult humans are.) The book reverses the usual perception of animals as "dumb" creatures that cannot feel or communicate; in it, humans are the senseless, speechless ones. They kill without thinking, and unlike natural predators such as foxes who kill to survive, they simply roll on in their cars, or build their developments, without even noticing the devastation they've caused.

Historical Context

Watership Down is set in the larger human world of Berkshire in England, but the historical time in which it takes place is vague. The events clearly take place sometime in the second half of the twentieth century, since cars and trucks are commonplace, and age-old fields and farms are threatened by development. However, Adams is not interested in the human world or in human history. The rabbits are the focus of the story, and of course don't know of historical events in the human world, so this aspect of the story is deliberately left vague. This gives the book an immediacy and refreshing lack of datedness that it would not have if Adams had identified the time period: the book could be taking place now, or in the 1970s, when Adams wrote it.

The rabbits do have a history and a culture of their own, although their immediate history is not as detailed, since they don't write anything down. Rabbits may have heard stories of their grandfathers or grandmothers, but their history seldom goes back farther than that; events taking place any time earlier than that gradually become part of the mythic age of El-ahrairah, the rabbits' clever, trickster hero.

The book is set in an actual area in England; Adams writes in a note at the beginning that "Nuthanger Farm is a real place, like all the other places in the book," but that the few humans mentioned in it are fictitious. In addition, Adams's close observation of place makes it evident that the places mentioned are real. Since the book was written almost three decades ago, it would be interesting for a reader, or for Adams, to go back now and note whether the landscape has changed—whether Watership Down is still safe from development, or whether the real farms, fields, and forests the fictional rabbits traveled through have changed through human intervention.

The culture of the Watership Down rabbits is similar to some traditional human cultures, with an emphasis on oral tradition and on tribal/community values such as heroism, self-sacrifice, community, family, and compassion, as well as democracy. Like human societies, however, rabbit culture and government differ from warren to warren, and as the rabbits discover, Efrafa is a physically and spiritually oppressive dictatorship. At the time Adams wrote the book, many nations lived under this type of system, most notably the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, on which Efrafa seems to be modeled. The Cold War was still a very important factor in European and American consciousness, and people outside those countries were well aware that torture, killing, and imprisonment of dissidents was commonplace. Like Efrafa, these countries justified this oppression of their citizens with the rationale that their tight control was for the ultimate security and safety of all. Since Adams wrote *Watership Down,* the governments of many of these countries have become more democratic, but dictatorships still exist in many places in the world and the example of Efrafa is still relevant. Just as in Efrafa, history has shown that in these countries there will always be dissidents, attempts to escape, and discontent.

Critical Overview

People have probably been telling stories about animals since time began. Some of the earliest known animal stories are the fables of Aesop, a slave who lived in Greece around 500 B.C. He told stories about animals, which had morals illustrating lessons and aspects of human life. Since then, many authors have told and written stories in which animals could speak and talk, and in which they have their own societies. Some early, and still well known, animal stories include Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* and *Jungle Book,* Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* stories, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows,* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm.* However, these stories were not realistic in the sense that they did not take into account the actual biology and behavior of the animals: the characters were basically humans in animal form.

The first realistically told animal story was *Bambi,* by Felix Salten, a Hungarian journalist. Unlike the more famous Disney film, the book is not sentimental, but is, as Cathi Dunn MacRae wrote in *Presenting Young Adult Fantasy Fiction,* "a sensitive study of a deer's natural life. Joy and fear are basic expressions for Bambi and his forest companions; death is part of life. Salten's respect for animals' experience was revolutionary."

Like Salten, Adams bases his rabbit society on many real characteristics of the biology and behavior of rabbits, particularly as they are described by naturalist R. M. Lockley in his classic The *Private Life of the Rabbit,* whom Adams often quotes in the epigraphs of chapters in the book.

In A *Reader's Guide to Fantasy,* Baird Searles, Beth Meacham, and Michael Franklin wrote that *Watership Down* "caused a sensation" when it came out, mainly because, unlike previous works such as Bambi, the book tells the rabbits' story in an epic context, and includes excerpts from the rabbit mythology. They also write, "There is also a healthy dose of satiric allegory, which fortunately does not dominate the novel."

Adams's success led to many others following in his footsteps and writing what have since become known as "animal fantasies." According to MacRae, this type of writing has several characteristics, including: (1) language and the ability to communicate with other species; (2) a culture that is not based on human values; (3) a visionary leader who senses dangers and leads the group toward change; (4) an underlying sense that animals are superior to brutal humans; and (5) a struggle for survival against a force, often of human origin, that threatens their way of life. As MacRae noted, *Watership Down* has been so successful, and incorporated these traits so completely, that "few animal fantasies escape comparison."

Critics have differed, however, on how effective the use of these typical conventions really is. In *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide,* Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski, and Robert H. Boyer wrote that the main reason for the success of the book is that people are charmed by stories of animals that can talk. "This

charm," they wrote, "as well as the spell of a well-told tale, is what has made [the book] so popular."

Peter Hunt wrote in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature,* "Its intricate depiction of a rabbit community and the characterization of its (mainly male) protagonists have enough contact with realism to make the book seem entirely credible."

However, in *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature,* Kathryn Hume wrote that in her opinion, the book starts out attempting to enter rabbit minds, "but quickly lets the lapine [rabbit] vocabulary . . . substitute for real strangeness, while the plot degenerates into the adventures of animals with human brains. . . . The novelty and strangeness which entering a rabbit's mind should entail quickly disappears. The fantasy of this adventure is only skin deep; the minds and characters of these furry humans are but little touched by newness or originality."

In *National Review,* D. Keith Mano wrote in response to another critic's comment that the book did not fit any known formula, "Nonsense: it fits five or six. This bunny squad could be a John Wayne platoon of GIs. The foresighted, tactful rabbit leader. The fast rabbit. The clever rabbit. The blustery, hard-fighting noncom rabbit. . . . *Watership Down* is pleasant enough, but it has about the same intellectual firepower as *Dumbo*. . . . This is an okay book; well enough written. But it is grossly overrated."

Despite the criticisms of Mano and others, readers loved the book, sending it to the best-seller lists and leading it to be regarded as a classic of modern fantasy. In the *New York Review of Books,* Alison Lurie wrote that the reason the book was so successful and so loved was that unlike many contemporary novels, which feature sad, cynical, or nasty characters, *Watership Down* celebrates characters "who have honor and courage and dignity, who will risk their lives for others, [and] whose love for their families and friends and community is enduring and effective."

The book's popularity has endured, and since its publication, there has been a surge in the publication of animal fantasies; readers can now read books starring sentient horses, foxes, cats, and many other animals, thanks to Adams's groundbreaking work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and editor and has written for a wide variety of academic and educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses themes of the hero's journey in Richard Adams's Watership Down.

Throughout prehistory and history, people have told stories of wanderers who, seeking a better life, travel through adversity, danger, and hardship to a new home. Richard Adams's *Watership Down* is a classic example of this "quest" story, and in his epigrams to the chapters, Adams pays homage to previous literary quests, citing John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress;* Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* about the quests of noble knights; the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* one of the earliest quest stories known; Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* which examines quest myths and stories worldwide; and Walter de la Mare's poem "The Pilgrim," and in the text, he mentions that "Odysseus [the mythical Greek wanderer] might have borrowed a trick or two from the rabbit hero."

In the classic quest, according to Joseph Campbell in *Hero with a Thousand Faces,* the hero, in this case Hazel, is called to leave home and begin a new life. Fiver's prophetic vision, which is sparked by the human scent of a cigarette butt lying in the grass, is of the field where they live, covered with blood. This sense of the imminent, violent destruction of their old life leads Hazel, Fiver, and a few other rabbits to leave their comfortable warren—where no danger is yet evident—in search of a new home, which Fiver intuits will be a high, clean hill, far from humans and other dangers. Joseph Campbell calls this stage of the journey "the call to adventure," and writes that this call "signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown."

This means that the journeyers can no longer count on things they previously did, and that once they leave home, they must contend with a variety of dangers, both seen and unseen, some physical, some psychological. Like other wanderers, the rabbits must break out of their accustomed patterns of thought and try new things—such as crossing a river on a raft made of an old wooden notice board, digging a home for themselves, and making friends with a mouse and a seagull; must escape from predators such as dogs and foxes, and must contend with subtle, hidden dangers. When the sleek, ultracivilized rabbit Cowslip invites them to his wealthy warren, at first they are lulled by its prosperity and peace, and by the physical health and ease of its inhabitants. They are in great danger, but none of them know it except Fiver, whose intuition tells him this is a dangerous place and that death is near. They finally discover, almost too late, that a nearby farmer is snaring the rabbits, but not before Bigwig is snared and almost killed. Campbell calls this phase of the journey "the road of trials," and tells of the tests, ordeals, and dangers that other heroes faced in dreams, literature, and myths from all over the world.

The rabbits finally leave the treacherous warren and make their exhausted way to Watership Down, where they begin digging a new home. No quest is that easy,

however; as Campbell wrote, "The original departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path." The rabbits realize that it's not enough to find a home; they must also secure a future for themselves, and without families and offspring this is impossible. They need to find female rabbits, and this need sparks two perilous expeditions: one to a nearby farm where humans and dangerous cats and dogs lurk, the other to Efrafa, a repressive, totalitarian warren from which no rabbit has ever escaped alive. Like the larger journey to Watership Down, both of these journeys are fraught with perils, ordeals, and trials involving predators, treacherous terrain, doubt, and fear. In the end, both expeditions succeed, but not without great cost; rabbits are injured and changed forever, and some are killed. Like many heroes of the great quest myths, the rabbits face the presence of death, and although they survive, they are never the same.

They also grow through their adventures. Hazel matures from a yearling with potential into a calm, wise, balanced, and beloved leader. Bigwig mellows from a rather overbearing type into a seasoned, compassionate, and protective old soldier who is loved by the young rabbits, and Fiver's prophetic and intuitive gifts are respected as the ultimate source of guidance and safety in the warren. "As long as we've got some of that," Hazel says of this gift, "I dare say we'll be all right."

Journeyers in all ages will recognize this pattern. Even in modern times, those who take to the road undergo these same phases of leaving home, facing trials and dangers, and sometimes even death, and of being buoyed up by intuition, a connection to mystery, and coincidence. In *The Archetype of Pilgrimage,* Jean Dalby Clift and Wallace B. Clift quote Alan Nichols, who rode a bicycle through Central Asia and was lost in a blizzard: "I accepted the fact that I was going to die. . . . I told myself I would fight to survive as long as I could. I prayed. After a time, the first of my miracles occurred. The snow storm stopped, the wind died down, and the sky cleared leaving only a huge full moon in the sky. I took that to be a sign that I would survive."

This is remarkably similar to the tale of the rabbits in *Watership Down,* who tell stories of their gods and heroes and draw upon their strength in dangerous times. When Holly, Silver, Buckthorn, and Strawberry escape from Efrafa, they experiences a miracle in the form of a train that thunders down the track they have just crossed and cuts off the rabbit soldiers pursuing them. When Hazel is shot by men and left bleeding to death in a drainage ditch, he is found and saved only because Fiver, in a vision, sees where he is and summons help.

At Efrafa, the danger is both physical and mental —rabbits are tortured and killed, and they are also deprived of free speech and the right to think independently. In a harrowing scene, the dissident Blackavar is exposed for all to see, his ears ripped to shreds, as he pathetically mumbles his crime: wanting to leave Efrafa. Bigwig courageously goes to Efrafa and, with the help of the other rabbits and the seagull Kehaar, manages to escape, bringing female rabbits from Efrafa with him. A very similar, but true, story of an escape from a totalitarian prison is told in Slavomir Rawicz's gripping book, *The Long Walk: The True Story of a Trek to Freedom* in which Rawicz describes his and his companions' three-thousand-mile trek across Siberia, through

China and the Gobi Desert of Mongolia and across the Himalayas to India in the early 1940s, after their escape from a Siberian prison camp in the Soviet Union. Like the rabbits in Efrafa, Rawicz learned early on that "the prisoner was left in no doubt that a deviation off course to right or left would mean death from the carbine or pistol of the guards marching two paces behind him." Blackavar, who likewise is always accompanied by two burly guards, tells Bigwig what he has been taught to say: "Every Mark should see how I have been punished as I deserve for my treachery in trying to leave the warren."

Another aspect of the classic journey is that when the journey is over, the journeyer must share the story with others, thus inspiring them. At the end of the book, the rabbit Vilthuril tells the young rabbits the story of the wandering rabbits' adventure, except that now it has been incorporated into the rabbits' body of myth; Hazel and the others have become the rabbit hero El-ahrairah and his people, and Cowslip's wealthy, civilized warren is now a place where all the rabbits "were in the power of a wicked spell. They wore shining collars round their necks and sang like the birds and some of them could fly." Likewise, Kehaar the seagull has become "a great white bird which spoke to [El-ahrairah] and blessed him."

Just because the rabbits' true story has become amplified into myth, however, does not mean that it is now distorted. As Gregg Levoy wrote in *Callings,* "myths may not be literally true, but they are psychologically true. The pattern of breaking away from home, undergoing trials, and experiencing change and growth as a result is something that everyone, in every age and culture, can relate to and learn from. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the success of *Watership Down.*" Levoy wrote that two similar stories, the Odyssey and The *Wizard of Oz,* are not just the stories of Odysseus and of Dorothy, and in the same way, *Watership Down* is the story of everyone who struggles to find the way home. Above all, Levoy noted, these and similar quest stories are "stories of transformation: from chaos to form, from being lost to finding our way. They describe the stages of life, the initiations we all go through as we move from one level to another: child to adult, young to old, single to married, cowardly to courageous, life to death, death to life."

Source: Kelly Winters, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Thomas explores the limited, stereotypical portrayal of the female characters in Watership Down.

Writers of fantasy enjoy the incomparable opportunity to create the world anew, but they suffer from the same problem as Archimedes, who said he could move the world with a system of levers if only he were given a place to stand apart. In creating the new world of *Watership Down* (Macmillan), Richard Adams stands squarely in the old one. His novel draws upon not only epic and picaresque literary traditions but also an anti-feminist social tradition which, removed from the usual human context and imposed upon rabbits, is eerie in its clarity.

Watership Down well deserves the Carnegie Medal and the praise it has won from critics and reviewers, for Adams has created a splendid story, admirable for its originality as much as for its craft. Since the stereotype to which the female characters conform dictates their colorlessness and limits their social range, they are so peripheral they are scarcely noticeable. Its anti-feminist bias, therefore, damages the novel in only a minor way.

A literary work may survive such flaws as peripheral prejudice or cruelty or racism. It is important that the soldier in Andersen's "The Tinderbox" gratuitously murders the old woman and does so with impunity; it is important that the elephants in the Babar books sometimes seem more human than the "savages." But despite what may be viewed as ethical lapses, these stories still merit qualified praise. Just so, it is important that in *Watership Down,* Richard Adams has grafted exalted human spirits to the rabbit bodies of his male characters and has made the females mere rabbits. The males are superhuman and the females subhuman, creatures who occupy only a utilitarian place in the novel's world. That fact is important, notwithstanding the artistic merit of the work as a whole.

Adams' band of rabbit refugees who escape the poison gas and bulldozers of a housing project are not the sweet bunny rabbits that have accompanied the treacle into the nursery ever since imitators first bowdlerized Beatrix Potter's miniature hair-raisers. No. The refugees are literal rabbits, subject to the dictates of biology, to the compulsions of their reproductive impulses, their hunger, and their need for shelter. So they recognize and name every plant they encounter, or they feel inborn terror when they smell a dog approaching.

The refugees owe their survival and the establishment of a new warren to the variety of their talents. They exhibit admirable human traits—bravery to support their daring; the common-sense kind of wisdom; originality; reverence for history tempered by flexibility; compassion. The group includes a bard, a politician, a seer, a soldier, and even an intellectual. As they travel together, they improvise a new community which not only accommodates but values their great differences. Thus, it seems an enormously

civilized and humane society, an association of equals whose personal gifts are recognized. But the members of this civilized society are all males.

To my mind, a just community is a cooperative venture which enriches individual lives instead of restricting them for the supposed good of the group. Even when membership is exclusive, one can admire fictitious community where one finds it—in a rathole with Mole and Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows* (Scribner) or on a journey through Mirkwood in *The Hobbit* (Houghton)—if one ignores any deprived class. So Kenneth Grahame and J. R. R. Tolkien wisely avoid the intrusion of females into the fraternity, just as cultivated gentlemen lock the massive doors of their oak-and-leather clubs. The illusion of civilization, of equalitarian warmth and respect, could hardly be maintained in the presence of a declassed group.

Richard Adams himself avoids that problem throughout the first half of *Watership Down,* which describes the itinerants' perilous journey. Like Grahame and Tolkien, he simply omits females from consciousness. However, when the rabbit troupe settle down, they begin to long for female companionship, a longing based on afterthought.

For one thing, they'd like to have some females around to do the work: In established warrens, nubile females do all of the serious digging. Adams has so skillfully bridged the distance between rabbits and people that, whoever digs the burrows in rabbit reality, one easily draws conclusions from Adams' rabbit fiction about the appropriate roles of men and women. The girl who rescues chief Hazel from a barnyard cat's jaws receives her orders from men with a lapine docility that reinforces this rabbit/human connection.

Additional considerations also bring females to the refugees' minds. As Hazel observes, "We have no does—not one—and no does means no kittens and in a few years no warren." The narrator further explains the need for females after Hazel kidnaps two does from Nuthanger Farm:

> The kind of ideas that have become natural to many male human beings in thinking of females—ideas of protection, fidelity, romantic love and so on—are, of course, unknown to rabbits, although rabbits certainly do form exclusive attachments. . . . However, they are not romantic and it came naturally to Hazel and Holly to consider the two Nuthanger does simply as breeding stock for the warren. Although the males are rarely called bucks but are individually designated by name and collectively referred to as rabbits, the females are usually called does, a distinction analogous to the classifications people and women with reference to human males and females. For all its subtlety, that is a psychologically charged distinction, as Simone de Beauvoir suggested when she wrote that there are two classes of people, human beings and

women. When women try to be human beings, she said, they are accused of acting like men.

Furthermore, the narrator makes it clear that only two alternatives exist in relations between sexes, the human way of romantic idolatry or the rabbit way of animal husbandry. In either case, the female is deprived of anything like the participation granted male members of the brotherhood by virtue of their maleness. Consorting with females seems to be an onerous necessity.

Eventually the refugees act on their longing and raid Efrafa, a neighboring rabbit police state. Of the ten does who willingly escape the totalitarian rule of General Woundwort, only two are even superficially characterized. One is a scatter-brained youngster who reveals the escape plan by chattering uncontrollably to Efrafan officers. All of the others, except Hyzenthlay, are powerless to act on their own initiative—paralyzed by fear at every critical turn.

Only Hyzenthlay possesses courage or dignity. She is a seer, gifted like the male Fiver, with prophetic vision. And like Dandelion, the refugees' bard, she is an artist, a poet whose lament resembles primitive poetry. But her artistic energies, like her determination to escape, are biologically directed, for what she laments is lost opportunities for reproduction. Although the males' sex makes demands upon them, as do their needs for food and shelter, sex does not dictate every form and detail of their lives. But Hyzenthlay is first and only a female, with her poetry seeming merely an aspect of her femaleness. Indeed, since her talents are neither admired nor even noticed, the rabbits of Hazel's warren consult her only as mate, not as prophet or bard. With motherhood, her poetry apparently ends.

A male victim of Efrafan violence says without correction when a fox kills one of the females, "What's a doe more or less?" He accepts the leader's decisions automatically, even forgetting his own opinions if they differ from those of the chief. Asked if her thought processes are like those of the Efrafan male, Hyzenthlay cryptically replies, "I'm a doe." After her brief heroism in the run for freedom, Hyzenthlay turns, in accordance with her sexual definition, to the roles of mate and mother. Her presence on stage is so brief, though, it hardly matters.

Watership Down survives the flawed characterization and the discrepancy between the richness of the male rabbits' lives and the spiritual penury of the females'. Although it seems odd that Adams counters an ugly totalitarian society with a system where females are merely interchangeable ciphers, one easily ignores that discrepancy too, because the females are unessential baggage, present only to motivate the male characters, not necessary to the story for their own individual sakes.

All of this is important, like the murder of Andersen's expendable old woman and like the beastiality of Babar's black neighbors. Within the framework of an otherwise delightful story, Richard Adams has embodied an anti-feminism which deprives his female characters of the spiritual fruit of community.

Source: Jane Resh Thomas, "Old Worlds and New: Anti- Feminism in *Watership Down,*" in Horn Book, Vol. 50, No. 4, August 1974, pp. 405-08.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Chambers discusses the origin of Watership Down, *and deems the novel deeply moving and vividly memorable."*

Watership Down is presently a name to conjure with. An extraordinary feat of sustained narrative, the novel appeared in England towards the end of 1972. The coterie critics got excited before it was even published, the reviewers duly raved, and everyone who bothers at all about children's books (and some who don't) have now formed extreme opinions—this being one of those books about which it is not easy, if at all possible, to be neutral. I've no doubt that, as with Alice, the hobbits, and Batman, there'll be cultishness to cope with before long.

I gather Macmillan is bringing it out in the States, and I shall be fascinated to discover the kind of response this quintessentially English book stirs in American commentators. As I wouldn't want to steal one rumble of their thunder, my instinctive impulse to launch into a detailed revelation of all that makes this epic novel so unusual is as instinctively frustrated. Nevertheless, I cannot possibly report on children's books in this country without saying something about it, however tantalizing, however premature it might be.

Watership Down was written by Richard Adams, who, it turns out, is an official in the Department of the Environment—a biographical nicety not without ironic overtones, as may become clear in a moment. He is new to the ranks of published authors; has, I fancy, spent years on his novel; and hawked the bulky manuscript round numerous reputable houses—all of which turned it down and must now be suffering agonies of belated regret—before finding his way to the desk of Rex Collings.

Mr. Collings is one of a new breed. Until recently an editor with a monolith firm, he decided to opt out from literary factory production dominated by accountants and to set up on his own in faith and hope, if not on—or even in—charity. There are a number of people trying the same optimistic gambit just now, and one cannot but applaud their efforts to revivify literary publishing.

According to his own somewhat sugary publicity, Mr. Collings was forced at bowler point to read the daunting manuscript by its desperate author, found himself hooked by the end of the first chapter, and thereafter took the undoubtedly courageous step (for such a young firm) of publishing the fat volume. Unfortunately, his courage was not matched by his production skills: He designed an ugly edition, with cramped typography and dressed in an appallingly inept dust-jacket. The outward and visible appearance doubtless turned off more readers than were turned on.

The hardback edition is, in fact, four hundred and thirteen pages thick, fifty chapters and one map long, and is all about rabbits. Now, lapine fantasy is not my literary cup of tea—be it for children or not, and I question whether *Watership Down* was ever really intended for children until the question of publication arose. Rabbits, to my mind, are best left to their own rodent activities. And had I not had to review the tome, I would

certainly have given it the go-by. (Will one ever learn to judge books, like people, only after listening a while! For sure, first impressions were utterly deceptive in this case, and ugliness only jacket deep.)

What next took me aback was that a quotation from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* stood sentinel at the head of Chapter One, a lost Victorian device made the more startling because it was quoted in the original Greek. I flipped the pages. Quotations sprouted like thorny, protective hedges at the beginning of every chapter, taken from sources as disparate as the aforementioned classic to bits from R. M. Lockley's erudite treatise on your true and living bunny.

Disconsolate, a reviewer in professional straits, I set to work. But work it remained for only a page or two. Thereafter, I was an addict. I could have stayed on *Watership Down* (which, incidentally, is a real and visitable part of chalky Hampshire, as are all the places named in the book) as long as Mr. Adams wished to keep me there. Four hundred and thirteen pages seemed, when they were finished, a less than generous amount. Absorbing, sensational, staggeringly unexpected, flawed to the point of critical disaster, brilliant, exciting, evocative (the sense of place and atmosphere, climate and season is beautifully achieved), English to the last full-stop, tough, gentle, bloodshot, violent, satisfying, humorous. The list of epithets, superlatives, qualifiers, paradoxes, and blazoned blooming nouns could cover the rest of the space allotted me.

In sum, *Watership Down,* though not a comfortable nor even a lovely book, is deeply moving and vividly memorable in the way that all "good" books, all works of true art, are: They implant themselves—some by main force, others by subtle injection—into the living tissues of your being, to remain there, illuminating your view of life ever after. Most obviously and least importantly, rabbits will never be the same again for me, a warren never again be simply a collection of messy holes in the ground. But to say that is to say little. There are some who speak of allegory and hint at many hidden and profound meanings burrowed beneath the surface of the narrative. They may well be right. But I suspect there are as many different tunnels of meaning as one cares to dig. So, to return for now to the pleasantly simple and obvious: I shall never again watch a bobbed and white-lined tail stub its way across a field in pursuit of a hedge without believing it belongs to a lapine guerrilla from the warren Mr. Adams biographs in such rich and intimate detail.

The story is what one might expect had *Wind in the Willows* been written after two World Wars, various marks of nuclear bomb, the Korean and Vietnam obscenities, and half-a-dozen other hells created by the inexhaustibly evil powers of Man. In fact, the tale begins with a deliberate act of demolition, when human beings destroy an ancient warren in order to clear a building site, inadvertently leaving alive a handful of ill-assorted rabbits to wander the countryside as refugees. Despite all the calamities that befall luckless Toad, no one ever dreamt Toad Hall would be bulldozed. And putting the pick into the medieval rooms inhabited by Badger would have been unthinkable. But that was 1908. And 1908 is gone, *Wind in the Willows* with it. *Watership Down,* if none the wiser than that wise and lovely book, is a great deal better informed.

But I must stop. To go on would be to spoil things for your own reviewers. Let me finish by mentioning that Puffin paperbacks will soon be publishing the book in better and more attractive clothes. Then we shall very soon discover how much it is a children's book children will read, and how much it is enjoyed by adults only.

Source: Aidan Chambers, "Letter from England: Great Leaping Lapins!," in *Horn Book,* Vol. 49, No. 2, June 1973, pp. 253-55.

Media Adaptations

Watership Down was adapted as an animated motion picture, produced by Martin Rosen of Nepenthe Productions and directed by John Hubley and Martin Rosen, in 1978. Voice actors included Joss Ackland as the Black Rabbit, Richard Briers as Fiver, Michael Graham-Cox as Bigwig, Micheal Hordern as Frith and the narrator, and John Hurt as Hazel.

Topics for Further Study

How is General Woundwort like other dictators in human history? What methods does he use to control his community, and how are these similar to methods that have been used in repressive regimes throughout history? Do you think that his experience of an unhappy youth fully explains his actions?

When the Watership Down rabbits meet Cowslip, they find that his community has highly developed art, poetry, and architecture, and that these rabbits look down on the religious beliefs and mythological tales the less-sophisticated Watership Down rabbits share. Are there parallels between these rabbit societies and others in human history? For instance, when Europeans first met native people throughout the world, how did they view the spiritual beliefs and customs of these people in comparison to their own

The rabbits in Cowslip's warren pay a price for their high standard of living: they have lost their freedom. If someone offered you all the wealth and comfort you ever dreamed of in exchange for your freedom (and perhaps someday, your life or that of someone you love), would you take it? Why or why not?

Watership Down speaks strongly against development, and strongly for the preservation of the environment and the habitat of animals. In the book, the animals are the heroes and humans are shortsighted and greedy. Is there a place near you that has been destroyed by development, as the rabbits' home warren was? What was it like before, and what is it like now? Are shopping malls, suburban developments, parking lots, golf courses, and other places worth the price of losing wild land?

Adams creates a whole world for his rabbit characters, with its own language, customs, mythology, and spiritual beliefs. These are based loosely on real, observed characteristics of rabbits as described by naturalist R. M. Lockley, whom Adams often quotes in the book. Choose an animal of your own and invent a language and society for it, basing these on real characteristics of the animal as described by naturalists.

What Do I Read Next?

Tales from Watership Down, by Richard Adams (1998), continues the story of *Watership Down* and includes new tales from the rabbit mythology.

Richard Adams's *The Plague Dogs* (1978) tells of the adventures of two dogs who escape from an animal experimentation laboratory.

In Richard Adams's heroic saga of a mythical past, *Shardik* (1975), people worship a giant bear.

Traveller (1988), by Richard Adams, tells the story of the Civil War from the point of view of General Robert E. Lee's horse, whose name was Traveller.

In Brian Jacques's *Redwall* (1998), the one-eyed rat warlord, Cluny the Scourge, is hell-bent on destroying the tranquillity of Redwall Abbey as he prepares to fight a bloody battle for its ownership.

Mossflower, by Brian Jacques (1998), is the story of how mouse Martin the Warrior and his woodland friends fight ruthless wild cats for leadership of the abbey and Mossflower Woods.

In Brian Jacques's *Marlfox* (2000), when marlfoxes steal the precious tapestry of Martin the Warrior, the children of warrior squirrels must follow in their fathers' heroic footsteps to recover it.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do the rabbits believe that it is necessary to leave Sandleford Warren?

2. Which is your favorite rabbit? Which is your least favorite? Why?

3. Do you feel that the epigraphs at the beginning of the chapters enhance the novel?

4. One of the last chapters in the book is entitled "Dea ex Machina." What does this phrase mean? Why is an appropriate title?

5. What purpose do the myths of Elahrairah serve?

6. What is the Owsla? Is it similar to any governmental office in the United States?

7. What role do humans play in this novel?

8. Compare the warrens, Cowslip and Efrafa. Why do the Sandleford rabbits find them unacceptable?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Watch the movie Watership Down and compare it to the novel.

2. Pick several of the epigraphs and explain how they relate to their chapters.

3. Trust and survival are two primary themes in Watership Down. Explain their relationship. Which rabbit do you think best exemplifies each of these attributes?

4. Compare the rabbit community to human society in terms of power, class, and social structures. Has Adams portrayed the rabbits in only human terms, or does he give them rabbit characteristics as well?

5. Critics have compared Watership Down to Virgil's Aeneid. Read Virgil's work and compare the two.

6. Read another novel that features animals. Is Watership Down more or less realistic? Why?

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's“For Students” Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of “classic” novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as “The Narrator” and alphabetized as “Narrator.” If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name “Jean Louise Finch” would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname “Scout Finch.”
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

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Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535