

# **Where the Red Fern Grows Study Guide**

## **Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls**

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## Overview

Where the Red Fern Grows is a love story about Billy Coleman and two redbone coonhounds during the Great Depression.

Ten-year-old Billy was consumed by a desire to possess such hounds and hunt the Illinois River bottoms for Mr. Ringtail near his home in northeastern Oklahoma. Just any old dog would not do. They had to be good redbone coonhounds. Since his parents were unable to grant his request for dogs, Billy prayed and felt God surely would help him and give him heart, courage, and determination. He found an ad for the kind of dogs he wanted in a sporting magazine left at a campsite by some fishermen. He dug a K. C. Baking Powder can out of the trash and cleaned it up to use as a bank for his money and set about earning the necessary fifty dollars, a nickel and a dime at a time. He caught crawdads and minnows, dug worms, and gathered vegetables, which he sold to the fisherman who drove into the Ozarks to vacation and fish. In berry season, he picked berries and sold them to his grandfather for his general store for ten cents a bucket. In the winter he trapped small animals and sold their skins.

Billy's mother was concerned for her children growing up with no formal schooling, only what she provided for them at home. She was dismayed at the thought that they would feel out of place among people in town and longed to move so her children would grow up with the benefits of an education.

After two years, Billy had the necessary money to order the pups. He took his K. C. Baking Powder can of money and the ad to his grandfather's store and asked for help ordering the pups. Grandfather was astonished by what Billy had accomplished and consented to order the pups. After what seemed an eternity, the pups arrived at the freight station thirty miles away. Billy walked the distance to bring his pups home.

A lengthy time of training ensued. With the help of a raccoon skin, Billy spent hours teaching his pups, Old Dan and Little Ann, every trick he knew a raccoon could pull on a dog. His training and devotion to his pups paid off with night after night of hunting in the hills and river bottoms surrounding his home. Pure joy filled those days and nights.

Pelt after pelt adorned the barn wall. As he took the pelts to his grandfather's store, he and his grandfather regaled coon hunters, gathered at the general store, with tales of the miraculous things his dogs could do.

Life is not without problems and neither was Billy's life. The Pritchard family has two boys, one older than Billy and one his age, Rubin and Rainie, respectively. They are mean and always pick fights. They challenge Billy and his dogs to a coon hunt.

Unable to resist their insults, Grandpa puts up the two dollars to meet their wager and threatens to come after them if they harm Billy in any way. After Old Dan and Little Ann tree the "Ghost Coon" that no one has been able to tree, the night turns ugly.



Rubin and Rainie jump Billy when he refuses to kill the coon. Rubin falls on the ax that Billy always carries hunting and dies.

Billy is riddled with guilt and cannot forget the sight for a long time after.

Shortly after that incident Billy's grandfather enters Billy and his dogs in a prestigious coon hunting contest staged in an area near their home. By now Billy is fourteen. Grandfather provides the entry fee, food, camping equipment, and transportation and takes Billy and his father to the contest.

Twenty-five pairs of the best coonhounds in the country converge to determine which dogs are the best in the country. On the fourth night when it is Billy's turn to hunt his dogs, a sudden sleet and snow storm sets in. Conditions are treacherous, but Old Dan and Little Ann do not let the dangers of freezing or getting lost in the unfamiliar territory deter their determination to hunt.

In a blinding storm, they tree the most coons and win the contest, a gold cup, and three hundred dollars.

Billy cares little for the money he receives each time he sells pelts to his grandfather. He turns it over to his father thinking that he is contributing to the family income. However, his father has saved all of it and after the coon hunting contest, gives it to his wife. She believes God has answered her prayers to move her children to town but knowing they cannot separate Billy and his dogs, they make arrangements for Billy to stay with his grandfather. However, this scenario never happens as one night Billy's dogs chase and tree a mountain lion who is too much for them. Old Dan is horribly injured in the ensuing fight and dies. Little Ann loses her will to live without Old Dan and also dies. The loss is tragic for Billy and his family.

The story ends on a positive note as the family prepares to leave their home for a home in town. Billy goes to visit the graves of his beloved dogs one last time. There he finds the legendary "red fern" growing up between their graves and arching over them.

## About the Author

Wilson Rawls was born September 24, 1913, to Minzy and Winnie Rawls.

He grew up on a small farm near Scrapper, Oklahoma. He was introduced to reading and its attendant joys by his mother. She read aloud from books purchased by his grandmother. For a long time he thought that all books, in his words, were "girl books." This mind-set ended when his mother brought home a book that changed his life. It was the story of a man and a dog, Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. This book changed Rawls' life. After reading it, he carried it around wherever he went, read it aloud to his dog, and considered it to be his first real treasure. Being the treasure that it was sparked an idea in Rawls that he, too, could be a writer. He decided that one day he would write a story that would affect others as *Call of the Wild* had affected him.

Rawls was born into a poor family. He was unable to attend school because there was no school where he lived. His mother taught her children to read and write. When a school was built, he attended two to three months in the summer. Later, his family moved to Tahlequah where he attended regularly but dropped out before he completed eighth grade because of the Depression. His ambitious dream never faded. He often talked to his father about his plan to write. Although his family was too poor to buy pencils and paper for him, his father's response gave Rawls hope and advice which he followed, "Son, a man can do anything he sets out to do, if he doesn't give up."

He kept his writing ambitions private from his peers and spent his teen years working as an itinerant carpenter. He worked for an oil company and later he worked construction in Mexico and South America.

Other jobs included working on the Alcan Highway in Alaska, helping to build parts of five major dams in the United States, working in various West Coast shipyards, and serving as a crew member in the Oregon State Navy. Rawls worked jobs wherever he could find them. During all this time he wrote stories. In fact, he wrote on every scrap piece of paper he could get.

On August 23, 1958, at the age of fortyfive, he married Ann Styczinski. Just prior to his marriage, Rawls opened the trunk, which he used as storage for all his writings, and proceeded to burn his dreams which had become reality written on paper.

Included in the manuscripts which Rawls burned were five full-length novels, including *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Only after his wife persuaded him, Rawls rewrote the story which was based on his boyhood life.

*Where the Red Fern Grows* appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* as a serial under the title, "Hounds of Youth." Then Doubleday published it in book form. Later it ran again in two other newspapers.

Rawls declared himself a full-time writer in 1959 and lectured to students in elementary schools, secondary schools, colleges, and universities throughout the western part of the United States. He began traveling the eastern half of the United States in 1975. During these years Rawls encouraged youngsters to keep reaching for their goals.

"As long as [you] are honest and truthful and don't hurt anyone along the way, [you] will have help in reaching [your] goal," he told them. When asked by children for some advice, Rawls always responded by saying, Do a lot of reading. Do not worry about grammar and punctuation on your first draft. The important thing is to get your story down on paper. Your first work will probably need a lot of rewriting. You can worry about grammar and punctuation then. Remember, the more you write and rewrite, the better you will get. And most important of all, do not get discouraged. If you keep trying and don't give up, you will make it some day. The road can be rough, but the day you see your work in print will make it all worth it. Best of luck!

Rawls died of cancer on December 16, 1984, in his hometown, Marshfield, Wisconsin. Rawls was a member of the Authors Guild, Authors League of America, International Platform Association, and, among other things, a lifetime and honorary member of the Idaho PTA. Honors and awards bestowed on him include a nomination for the "Gold Star List" and the Evansville Book Award for *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

*Summer of the Monkeys* was awarded the Sequoyah Children's Book Award, the William Allen White Children's Book Award, and the Golden Archer Award.



## Plot Summary

An older man on his way home breaks up a dogfight and discovers a courageous redbone hound that has been jumped by several other dogs. Taking the hound home to feed him and tend to his wounds, the man begins to reminisce about two redbone hounds that he recalls from more than fifty years ago. As he speaks, he takes down from his mantel a gold cup and a silver cup and settles by the fire to relate his story.

Ten-year-old Billy lives in the Ozarks of Oklahoma, the finest hunting country in the land. Billy longs for a pair of coonhounds, but he must settle for the three traps his father brings him. Trapping soon loses its excitement, though, and Billy cannot get the hounds out of his mind. Over the next two years Billy saves \$50, having read in a magazine ad that a pair of hounds from Kentucky costs that amount. His grandfather, a storeowner, orders the pups for Billy and lets him know, two weeks later, that they are waiting for him at the depot in Tahlequah. Billy walks the twenty miles to town, where he has many surprises and adventures, including his first taste of soda pop. He gets his pups and heads for home. He and the pups spend their first night together in a cave, frightened by a prowling mountain lion. He then proudly starts home with his dogs, stopping on the way at the sycamore log where he had first prayed to God for them. There he names them Old Dan and Little Ann.

When Billy relates his Tahlequah experiences to his family, his parents tell him that living in town is their goal, for they want their children to have an education. This makes no sense to Billy as he goes about the task of building a doghouse and making collars for Dan and Ann. Now he needs a coonskin to train his hunting dogs, and he manages to trap one in a creative trap made according to his grandpa's instructions. Using the coonskin and the help of his oldest sister, Billy carefully begins training his pups. The comprehensive training process, including swimming lessons for the dogs, lasts until late fall.

At almost fourteen years of age Billy takes his hounds out for their first hunt. The first coon they "tree," however, goes up into the largest sycamore in the area. The only way Billy can get the coon and then sell its hide is to chop down the tree. This process takes him several days and involves the support and assistance of his entire family. At one point Grandpa helps him make a scarecrow at the foot of the tree to keep the coon in place while Billy rests. Ultimately Billy is about to give up when, after a hurried prayer, he sees a strange wind blow the sycamore down. Billy's mama makes that first coonskin into a hat for him.

Through the "fur season" Billy and the hounds hunt successfully, and Billy sells the hides to his grandfather, who keeps a record of all the skins. He is thrilled to join the men in hunting conversation at the store. Billy hunts by night and sleeps by day now, giving his father the money the hides earn him. Following a five-day blizzard, Billy and the dogs resume hunting in icy, slippery conditions. Tracking a coon across the partially frozen river, Little Ann falls into the frigid water and nearly freezes to death. Billy tries in vain to rescue her and finally goes behind a giant sycamore and cries. He whispers a





quick prayer and then his lantern handle falls with a clang, giving him the idea he needs to save his dog.

Billy is now "famous" as a local coon hunter. One day at the store, two local hooligans bet Billy that his dogs cannot tree what they call the "ghost coon." Grandpa calls the bet and gives Billy the money to pay, should he fail. Keeping his plans secret, Billy takes his dogs to the Pritchard property the next night and proceeds to hunt with the boys. The ghost coon is wily, and when his dogs seem ready to give up, Billy pays the two-dollar bet. The coon emerges again, though, and is now successfully treed, but Billy does not have the heart to kill it. A fight ensues, Rubin Pritchard beats on Billy and Pritchard's dog, Old Blue, takes on Ann and Dan. As Dan and Ann get the upper hand, Rubin releases Billy and grabs Billy's ax, threatening to kill Dan. As Billy calls his dogs off, Rubin accidentally trips and falls on the ax, killing himself.

A few weeks later Grandpa announces that he has entered Dan and Ann in a big hunting competition. Billy agrees to enter the contest with them, and Papa will go, too. The three hunters and two dogs head for the contest in Grandpa's buggy, hoping to win the gold cup for treeing the most coons. In the crowded, boisterous tent-city of the competition, Billy is respected like any other hunter. As the festivities open, Little Ann takes a silver cup for "best looking dog," and then Billy waits for his assigned night to hunt. His little family group goes out with a contest judge, and his dogs tree three coons, enough to tie the current leader. In the run-off competition, their hunting begins successfully, but a sleet storm blows in and the group has trouble staying in touch with the dogs. As the storm rages, Grandpa is temporarily lost, having sprained his ankle. Through the night the storm turns to a blizzard and the dogs never return to the campfire.

In the morning a search party finds Billy's group. They carry Grandpa out of the woods and lead Billy to the tree where his dogs, nearly frozen to death, have kept a coon treed all night. That is the final coon Billy needs to win the contest. He wins the gold cup and a \$300 jackpot! Grandpa is taken to town for medical care and Billy and his father return home in triumph. When Mama sees the money, she declares that her prayers have been answered.

After three weeks of pleasant hunting, the dogs track a mountain lion. When the lion attacks the dogs, Billy tries to save them but falls and is himself, attacked by the lion. As the cat springs, though, the two dogs jump as one and sink their teeth into the lion's throat, giving Billy a chance to kill the lion with his ax. Within hours Old Dan dies of his wounds and Billy finds Little Ann curled up next to his body. Billy buries Dan, but Ann is inconsolable. Within a few days she has gone to Dan's grave where she lies down and dies. Billy cannot understand why God would give him the two dogs he prayed for and then take them away.

Billy's parents, unable to console him, explain that with the money his dogs won in the contest, along with all the money saved from his coon skins sales, they can now afford to leave the farm and move into town where the children will be educated. Billy goes to say goodbye to his dogs at their graves and finds them shaded by a beautiful, mythical

red fern, said to be planted only by angels. Billy now realizes that the awful pain of loss has been removed. He is ready to move on with his life. Finally we return to the old man, whom we now know as the grown Billy, and he tells us he's never been back to those hills since.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

An unnamed man leaves his office on a beautiful spring day, happy and apparently heading home. He hears the unmistakable sounds of a dog fight and discovers an old redbone hound fending off "quite a few" other dogs who are growling and snapping. One by one the dogs attack the redbone and he bravely sends them reeling. Finally the man, now fighting angry, takes off his coat and swings it into the mass of snarling dogs, sending them running. He gets down on his knees and coaxes out the redbone hound, discovering that the dog is mud-caked and scrawny, and obviously hungry. His footpads have been worn down, showing that he has made a long journey. This explains what a hound is doing in town.

The man takes the hound home, bathes and feeds him, and lets him rest. Late the next day the hound leaves willingly, heading east, and the man likes to think he might live in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri or Oklahoma, "a long way from the Snake River Valley in Idaho." The speaker assumes that the hound will find his home and return to a happy master. Still, he leaves his gate open, just in case the dog returns.

The man realizes that this hound has stirred up memories more than fifty-years-old, of his boyhood, a baking powder can, and two little red hounds. He carries in firewood, lights a fire in the dark, and pulls up a chair. The flame dances off two cups on his mantle, the larger gold and the smaller silver, and he takes them down, caresses them, and drifts back in memory to his boyhood.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

We assume that we have met the main character as an older man, probably about sixty, and that we will next see him as a little boy in his childhood realm. The man is clearly a dog lover, a compassionate man who lives in an alley in town, apparently alone. He has free time to care for the dog and takes great pleasure in doing so, yet he lets the dog leave without a second thought, knowing he could have penned him up in the backyard. This is clearly a man with a respect and appreciation for a fine hunting hound. His childhood memories rekindled, he takes us back to his childhood (possibly in the Tetons of Idaho, but we can't be sure), and are two red hounds. Somehow the cups on the mantle, which appear to be trophies of some sort, are connected to the dogs. The addition of these two cups enhances the "hook" that will pull us into the story.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

At the age of ten, Billy is stricken with puppy love, the real kind, terribly in need of a dog. To make matters worse, he insists that he must have two dogs, and they must be "coon hounds." His father offers a collie puppy, but that offer is rejected. The family cannot afford to buy hounds, however, and his mama confirms Papa's decision.

Billy lives in the best hunting land in the country, though, in the Ozarks of Oklahoma. The family lives in a log house on the Illinois River, a wonderland to a ten-year-old boy. Billy roams the hills and tracks coons like a "young Daniel Boone." Finally his desire for two hunting hounds makes him cry and lose his appetite, and Mama insists something must be done. Overhearing his parents' discussion of their cash shortage, Billy opts for one hound only, but even this is more than they can afford.

Papa brings Billy three traps instead, and Billy is thrilled with the chance to begin trapping. His early attempts catch the pet cat, Samie, over and over until Samie has four wounded legs and becomes wary of the family. After Billy cleans out all the rats, his trap catches a favorite hen. Moving his traps to the canebrakes, he catches opossums, rabbits, skunks, and squirrels, which he skins proudly. He never traps a raccoon, though. When the newness of the traps wears off, Billy's longing for hounds returns, but his request is again turned down. He runs away from home, until he hears a timber wolf howl and runs back again.

During hunting season Billy is unable to sleep, hearing the bay of hunting hounds in the night. He tries to bribe his mother for a hound, and she cries out of desperation. By the end of the season, as he nears his eleventh birthday, Billy is again losing weight. Papa says he will put him to work in the fields, come spring, and build him back up. Billy is delighted!

### Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter we are introduced to the little boy, "Billy," as narrator, and we see what kind of a storyteller he will be: naive and innocent, viewing all things from his childish perspective. The scene is set in the Ozarks, giving us the flavor of Billy's lifestyle. We discover that he has some sisters and that the family is poor. His parents are emotionally responsive to his needs, if not financially able to fulfill them. Billy's life is serene and uncomplicated, but his need for the hunting hounds is critical. In addition, the raccoon emerges as a significant target in this young hunter/trapper's life.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

In the spring, at the age of eleven, "the dog-wanting" still nags at Billy as he helps his father in the fields. One day, exploring a recently abandoned campsite, he finds an old sportsman's magazine. He reads in the classified ads a notice for redbone coon hound puppies for sale in Kentucky, \$25 each. After a quick prayer perched on a sycamore log asking God to help him get those pups, he heads home, scheming about how he will raise the \$50.

The next day Billy finds an old K.C. Baking Powder can for a bank and drops in the 23 cents he already has. All summer he picks berries to sell at his grandpa's store and harvests minnows, crawfish, and fresh vegetables to sell to fishermen. His grandfather promises to order the pups when Billy has enough money, and he will keep Billy's secret. All winter he traps animals with his three traps and sells the hides in Grandpa's store, saving every cent. The following summer he returns to his summer fund raising methods. By age 12 he has \$27. One year later he cries as he counts out \$50!

When Billy dumps the coins out in his grandfather's store, Grandpa is astonished. Realizing how long and hard his grandson has worked to earn the money, he gets tears in his eyes. He promises to help Billy get the dogs. He gives the boy a twenty-five-cent bag of candy, telling him to pay the bill when he sells his first coon skin. At home, Billy keeps quiet about the hounds, knowing Grandpa is going to contact the kennel to see whether it is still in business, but he shares his candy with his three little sisters.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Billy's tenacity and focus are evident in this chapter, demonstrating the singular importance he places on the two redbone hounds. We are introduced to Billy's loving grandfather, now an accomplice in a scheme that lasts a full two years. We also learn that Billy has three young sisters. The plot is nearly set in motion now as the possibility exists to actually purchase the coveted hounds.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

After a short, impatient waiting period, Billy learns that the kennel has responded and Grandpa has ordered his two hounds. He even gets \$10 back, as the price of the dogs has gone down. The dogs will be delivered to the depot in Tahlequah where Billy will have to pick them up. At dinner that night, when Billy asks his father how far it is to Kentucky, the family is incredulous. Mama wonders where he gets his ideas and how he spends his time, too busy even for a haircut. He promises to get one next time there is a "cutting."

Two weeks later the notice arrives; the dogs are at the depot. Grandpa arranges a ride into town for Billy in about one week. Unable to bring himself to tell his father the whole story, that night Billy takes some food and matches and sets out for Tahlequah, walking twenty miles, barefoot, through the night. Arriving in the town of 800, he is overwhelmed by the stores and buggies and his first view of a real gun-toting lawman. In a store window he gets his first look at a double-barreled gun, and he also sees for the first time in his life the full reflection of his own image. Then he goes inside and spends his extra \$10 on overalls for his father, a bolt of cloth for his mother and sisters, and a large bag of candy. He passes up the offer of a pair of shoes.

Following directions to the depot, Billy sees a man mowing a lawn, which is also a new sight, and then he comes upon a school playground. He is entranced by a group of boys sliding down a large pipe, but they make fun of his bare feet and call him a hillbilly. After the bell rings and the children leave the playground, Billy climbs the pipe and shoots out, splattering on the ground. A little old lady hoeing her garden next door laughs at him until she shakes. He cannot understand why town folk either stare or laugh at him.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Billy's walk into town all by himself offers the reader an opportunity to look at him the way he is seen by townspeople and to better understand him through his interpretation of his Tahlequah experience. We now understand that he is schooled at home, having never been to town in his life, and that he is terribly naive about the world and its people. He demonstrates tremendous dedication to his purpose, however, along with intense independence and courage, though not necessarily good sense. He is a considerate son and brother, insatiably curious, and most resourceful. Billy's look at his own reflection in the store window is a clever technique by the author to give us a little more information about the character's appearance, especially in contrast to the appearances of the townspeople.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Arriving at the depot, Billy does not have the courage to enter until he sees through a window that the stationmaster is taking good care of a caged canary. Then he enters and walks around until the stationmaster starts a conversation with him, even telling him right out that he has a pair of puppies for a boy named Billy Colman. When Billy displays the gunny sack in which he intends to carry the pups home, the stationmaster opens the box and releases two very young puppies who immediately waddle over to Billy and lick his dirty, sore feet. His heart does cartwheels. Finally he gathers the puppies to his face and cries. When he recovers, he puts the pups in the sack, with openings for them to stick out their heads, and strides through town, toward home.

Billy is amazed that the townspeople stare and laugh, sure that having two puppies to carry home should be a source of great pride. When two old ladies who had earlier snubbed him again declare their displeasure, he insults the feathers in their hats, to the great fun of all around. Suddenly he is surrounded by taunting children, the leader of which stomps on his bare foot with an oversized cowboy boot. When the boy pulls his puppy's ear, Billy can take no more. He sets his puppies down and takes on the mob, fighting one after another until they drag him down and pummel him.

The gun-toting marshal breaks up the fight, and Billy is afraid that he too is now going to trounce him. The marshal pets his dogs and is impressed that Billy worked two years to save the \$40 to buy them. He offers Billy a soda pop, the first of his life. When the marshal discovers the boy has twenty miles to walk home, he is concerned because Billy cannot make it back that night. Billy is confident he will camp safely, and so he walks out of town.

As he walks, the sack is gets heavier, and night overtakes Billy. He camps in a cave by a river, sharing his food with the pups and building a good fire at the cave's mouth. He observes the pups, noting that the male dog is bigger than the female. Billy is impressed with the "boy dog's" courage and wits, as well as his strength. The girl dog, he notices, is smaller but smarter. They will be a perfect pair. The boy and pups drift off to sleep on a bed of leaves but in the middle of the night, when the fire is only a glowing ember, Billy hears the terrifying scream of a mountain lion. After each scream, the male dog runs to the mouth of the cave to bawl back. The puppies are alert and engaged, giving Billy courage. He keeps his fire blazing and gets no more sleep as the night wears on.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The plot now has the inciting incident: Billy has taken possession of his dogs. His life will move in a new direction that would have been impossible without the dogs. We learn that his last name is Colman, and we get a second view of the townspeople, this



one very disconcerting. Billy is the brunt of jokes and even has to take a beating for the love of his dogs. The fight he gets into clearly reminds us of the brawl of the first chapter from which the older man rescues a redbone hound who has fought one assailant after another. The man of chapter one parallels the marshal in this chapter.

Billy's naivety is reinforced as the reader sees him interact with the townspeople and when he is unable to say what flavor soda pop he wants, having never tasted it before. Of two things we are absolutely sure, however: Billy is most courageous and he loves his dogs. This is our first glimpse of the dogs that are sure to become central "characters" in the book. The description given provides us with a most endearing image. In addition, it has now been established that the male will be the stronger and braver of the two but the female will be smarter.





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

In the morning Billy and his puppies continue their journey. When they approach the campsite where he had first found the sportsman's magazine offering puppies for sale, he rests to contemplate his situation. He decides to simply tell his parents the truth about the whole matter, and then he realizes that he has not yet named his dogs. Seeing two names carved on a tree, he decides on "Dan" and "Ann." Suddenly Billy sees how all the pieces of the puzzle have come together at this campsite: the magazine ad, the prayer on the sycamore log, the puppies frolicking in the sun, the names on the tree, and even the generous fishermen who bought his bait and vegetables. He decides it has all been ordained by "an unseen power."

Delaying until dark, Billy finally heads home to face his parents and feed his puppies. He sees his lamp-lit home in a new way now, clean and neat and peaceful. Seeing the pain and worry leave his mother's eyes as he enters, he buries his face in her lap and weeps. His father has spoken to Grandpa and so has presumed Billy went for his pups. The family's pleasure with the gifts helps him recover his composure. Then he and his father engage in a long talk about life in town. When Billy recounts all the distasteful things about town, his father tells him that the day will come when they will be living in town so he and his sisters can get an education and see the world. Billy cannot imagine any benefits of town living.

The next day Billy constructs a doghouse. Using the ends of his father's check lines, he fashions leather collars for his dogs, securing the ends with bailing wire. He and his mother chat about his prayer to God in which he asked for the pups, and the coincidences associated with the abandoned campsite. He affirms that he is sure God answered his prayer, and he will always be grateful.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Billy returns home in some ways like the bible's prodigal son. He is swept into a safe, loving home where his sore feet are bathed and his stories of adventure given great respect. The reader senses, in this chapter, the deep love of two parents for their four children and their commitment to work hard and provide the very best they can for them.

When Billy fashions collars for his dogs using check line and bailing wire, we cannot help but think of the redbone hound of the first chapter who wore the very same type collar. No wonder the man guessed that he might have traveled from the Ozarks of Missouri or Oklahoma and that he felt such a strong bond of affection for that dog.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Billy must have a fresh coonskin with which to train his hounds. For three weeks he tries to trap a coon and simply cannot. In exasperation he returns to Grandpa's store to discuss his problem. Grandpa retrieves a brace and bit from his tool shed and explains to Billy how to make a coon trap by drilling a hole in a log. Drive in four horseshoe nails at an angle, he explains, and bait the bottom of the hole with a shiny piece of tin. The coon will reach for the tin out of curiosity, and the nails will hold his clenched paw in the hole, trapping the coon. Billy thinks this is ingenious until he realizes that the coon need only open his paw and drop the shiny disc to escape. When he explains this to his grandfather, the man laughs until Billy feels he has been made a fool of. Then Grandpa relates his childhood story of his own pet coon, telling how he learned that a coon would absolutely not open his fist, once he had grabbed an intriguing object, even if it meant being trapped. Impressed, Billy takes the materials and heads home to create his own coon trap.

That evening Billy's father confirms that such a trap is likely to work. In the morning Billy finds a shiny tin can in the same junk pile in which he had found his K.C. Baking Powder can two years earlier. He uses his mother's scissors to cut the tin, for which he gets quite a whipping. He proceeds to the river and makes fourteen traps, just as his grandfather has instructed. In the morning he is disappointed to find no coons in the traps. Papa explains that he must wait for his scent to dissipate in the area, but a week later he still has no coons in the traps. One morning he refuses to get out of bed and check on the traps; he is still in bed when the family sits down to breakfast. After a pep talk from his father, Billy gets up, eats breakfast, and heads to the river with his pups. He has caught a raccoon!

With the coon in the log trap, the pups instinctively rush their prey, the boy pup displaying the greater strength but the girl pup ultimately saving him with her intelligence. Billy has to intervene to save them from the coon's vengeance. With a pup under each arm, Billy runs for home, shouting so that he alarms his mother. She is sure he has been bitten by a snake. When everyone calms down, the entire family treks to the river to see the coon. On the way, Papa discovers that the boy hound's nose has been split open in his tussle with the coon and is bleeding. "This dog is going to be a coon hound," he says. Papa clubs the coon to death as Billy's little sisters wail, and Mama turns and takes them home. Papa pulls the nails from the trap to free the dead coon's foreleg. Then he instructs Billy to remove the nails from all the other traps, relying now only on his hounds to catch coons. That would be more "sportsmanlike," he explains, and Billy agrees readily.

The next morning, with the help of his oldest sister, Billy starts training his hounds. He uses the skin of the recently killed coon to make trails, running it along fence rails and up trees, even through the river. His dogs do not disappoint him, and Ann immediately



shows her superior intelligence, never overrunning a trail as her brother does. Billy is disappointed to find that the dogs are afraid of the water, but he works hard to help them overcome their fear, and they are soon swimming the river. Billy is careful to teach his dogs every trick in the book, including how to split up when the trail has grown cold, how to find the trail on the other side of the river, and how to be sure a coon really is treed before bawling. Then he goes to Grandpa's store and listens, enthralled, to the coon hunting tales he hears there.

By late fall Billy is "worn to a frazzle," but he feels he and his dogs are ready for the coons. He lets the hounds rest a few days before hunting season opens. He enjoys heart-to-heart talks with his dogs, asking them questions and recognizing the answers in their eyes, tail-wag, whine, or tongue's caress.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter is all about the dogs' training program and the obstacles both Billy and the pups must overcome to be ready for hunting season. All three demonstrate focus, tenacity, and great enthusiasm. Billy's character deepens as we see his determination in conducting swimming lessons and exposing Dan and Ann to every eventuality of the hunt. We also witness the strong backing he has from his entire family, and his sister even helps with the training. Although his sisters have never yet been named and we can only guess at their ages, they play a supporting role in nearly every scene. Mama's love for Billy is displayed in her tender concern as well as in her firm discipline. It is Papa and Grandpa, though, who speak to Billy's heart and teach him the ways of the woods and the wild things, helping him grow as a country boy must.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Almost fourteen-years-old as hunting season opens, Billy readies his gear and his dogs, planning to hunt through the nights and sleep during the day. He has a man-to-man talk with his father, which makes him feel very grown up, and he assures both his parents that he knows the hills and will be perfectly safe. Still, Mama is worried, insisting he's still a little boy.

The first night of hunting is a gorgeous Ozark night, and Billy feels exhilarated. When his hounds bay for the first time, signaling they have found a trail, he sheds tears of utter joy. Soon, however, his dogs are fooled by a coon's tricks and seem to have forgotten all their training. Just when Billy is about to despair, Little Ann remembers the lesson and begins to swim the river. As soon as she signals that she has found the trail again, Old Dan jumps into the river and swims to join her. Billy feels that no one has ever been so proud of his dogs. Then the coon pulls several tricks that halt hunting progress for a few hours, fooling the dogs completely. Just as Billy gathers his equipment to move the hounds to a different site, Little Ann catches the trail again and off they go. Finally the two dogs successfully tree a coon.

The tree in which the dogs have treed the coon is, unfortunately, the largest sycamore in the area, the one Billy has named "The Big Tree." It is one tree he can never climb, and "it would take days to chop it down." The lowest branch is sixty feet up! The dogs, however, refuse to leave the treed coon as Billy urges them to come away. In loyalty to his dogs, he takes out his recently sharpened ax and begins to chop the giant tree down. It is such an overwhelming job that, by sunup, Billy sinks to the ground at the base of the tree, stiff, sore, and exhausted, and falls asleep. Soon his father rides up on a mule, looking for the boy, concerned because he has not returned. Papa offers to chop the tree while Billy rides the mule home to have some breakfast, but Billy will not accept help. His dogs have held up their end of the bargain, he says, and he must hold up his, alone. Papa finally agrees that Billy must keep his word, even if it is only to his dogs. Papa rides off and Billy resumes his chopping with a lighter heart.

Billy's oldest sister walks through the woods to bring him some lunch along with food scraps for the dogs. She declares that he has lost his mind if he intends to cut down such a large tree, but he shoos her away and gets back to work with his dogs watching him carefully.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Now that Billy has elected to take his life down a new path, having purchased and trained his dogs, he must live the life of a coon hunter. He is maturing, and he is up to the challenges, including spending the night in the woods even though his mother



cannot believe he is old enough for such an activity. His hard work is rewarded as his dogs perform beautifully, and Billy exhibits tremendous patience, clearly more interested in working and teaching the dogs than in actually bringing home a coon this first night.

Once again we witness the Colman family dynamics. Papa trusts Billy's skills and good judgment, but he is still concerned. Mama, of course, is overwrought, probably with good reason. The traditional tension between the generations surfaces and resurfaces as Billy assumes more responsibility, stretching his boundaries a bit more in each chapter. Billy's little sister is faithful to her brother but, like any normal sibling, fails to view his activities from the same romantic point of view that he has adopted.

Billy is undergoing his rite of passage to manhood in this book. His first night alone in the woods, his challenge in patiently teaching and reteaching his dogs, and, most specifically, his confrontation with the giant sycamore, are all hurdles he must overcome to demonstrate his growing maturity. The dogs, for their part, are growing and maturing right alongside him.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

By evening Billy has despaired of ever managing to cut down the giant sycamore. As he tearfully tries to explain this to his dogs, Grandpa arrives in his buggy with news that he knows how to keep the coon up in the tree long enough for Billy to get the food and rest he needs to finish the job. Grandpa helps Billy construct a scarecrow at the base of the tree, and they both get a good laugh at their clever trick. When they get in Grandpa's buggy to ride home for dinner, Little Ann joins them but Old Dan refuses to leave, hiding behind the sycamore. Grandpa puts Dan on the truck and Billy holds his collar all the way home. On the way, Grandpa talks to Billy about the determination and will power this project is going to require, but he does not seem convinced that it's a good idea.

Over a dinner of chicken and dumplings, Grandpa tells of the amazing tricks coons can pull on a hunting dog. He is confident, however, that Little Ann is going to be a great coon hound. He also adds that he expects the price of a coonskin to go up soon as there is a fad involving coonskin coats. Mama makes Billy take a hot bath and then rubs his aching body with liniment. He falls asleep and, before he knows it, breakfast is ready. His body aches so that he can hardly move. Papa tells him that a hound was baying through the night, and it turns out that Old Dan is missing. Billy soon hears Dan baying in the river bottoms, probably at the base of the giant sycamore. Even Mama now realizes the importance of getting that coon for the two dogs.

Back at the tree, Dan and Ann are so excited they're trying to climb up and get the coon. Billy praises Dan for his hard night's work, but he admonishes Ann, telling her she had a nice night's sleep in a warm doghouse while Dan did the work. Then he notices two beds in the leaves at the base of the tree, one smaller than the other, and he realizes that Ann also kept watch over the coon all night. She just came back for Billy in the morning. Billy gets a lump in his throat.

Chopping away at the tree again, Billy endures excruciating pain until his muscles warm. He sees that his cuts are not the quality of his father's, but they are good enough. Like his father, he yells "Ha!" after each blow. By mid-afternoon Billy's hands are severely blistered and he explains to his dogs that he just cannot continue. The tree is so severely cut now that it cannot live, but Billy is unable to finish the job and get the coon down. He prays for strength to go on chopping rather than leave the big tree ruined for no purpose. Just then a strong breeze sways the sycamore, although every other tree is motionless. Billy hears the tree begin to pop and crack. Like a cyclone it comes crashing down.

The coon runs, and Old Dan, in pursuit, runs into an oak tree and stops. Little Ann gets the coon, but it strikes out at her. Old Dan joins in and, together, they kill the coon. Carrying the dead coon home, Billy stops to apologize to the giant sycamore. Arriving home, he discovers the whole family awaiting his victorious return; they heard the old



tree fall. As they skin the coon together, Billy tells his father about the strange wind that touched only the giant sycamore. He wonders if it was God's answer to his prayers? Papa is unsure, but Billy is confident that he "had help."

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Now Billy achieves his heart's desire. Even though getting his hounds was a burning desire that occupied his attention and efforts for several years, the larger goal was always to successfully hunt raccoons. Getting and training his dogs made him ready, like a warrior gathering his arms to do battle, but actually killing a coon and hanging its hide on the smokehouse wall is the ultimate prize. This is what hunters do, and real hunters are men. Bringing home the coon, with his dogs at his side, is Billy's first act as a man. Like the old admonishment women supposedly told their departing warriors long ago, "Return *with* your shield or *on* it," Billy returns with his shield (the well-trained dogs) and his hunter's bounty, the dead coon. This chapter represents a great stride in Billy's rite of passage to adulthood.

The passage does not come easily, though. The tender care of a loving, concerned mother who rubs his aching body with liniment and cooks a special dinner for him signals the importance of family support in the maturing process. The advice and assistance of father and grandfather demonstrate the need for a growing, maturing youngster to learn from his elders, who are not always sure Billy is doing the right thing. They sometimes express reservations or fail to see things the way the young boy sees them. This interplay between the generations is one of Rawls's main themes.

Another theme that has been visited once before is made very plain in this chapter, which is reliance on a higher authority or God. Billy again prays when it seems he cannot overcome the obstacle facing him, and again his prayer seems to be answered, although the answer is always subject to interpretation. Was it just luck? The whims of nature? Is it the simple fact that the tallest tree is likely to catch the strongest breeze, or has God answered Billy's prayer?



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Mama turns Billy's first coonskin into a hat for him, and he goes "coon crazy," hunting every night and having the time of his life. The price of coon hides rises to as much as \$10, and Billy keeps the smokehouse plastered with hides. He gives all the money he makes to his father, feeling that he has what he wants in his dogs and his freedom to hunt. Billy does not question what Papa is saving for. The dogs are now Billy's life. They accompany him everywhere but to Grandpa's store where other dogs lurk and try to pick a fight with Dan. Still, he can hardly outsmart them well enough to carry his hides to the store; they seem to read his mind. Sometimes he has to scold a little, but he "could no more have whipped one of them than I could have kissed a girl."

Taking his hides to the store, Billy can now join in the coon hunters' talk, holding the men spellbound as he relates the wonderful accomplishments of his dogs. The men tease him about the small size of his hounds, and he just smiles, but it makes his blood boil. Billy's dogs are small, he admits, especially Little Anne, but she is as smart as he says she is and very sweet. In fact, she is his sisters' pet and his mother's helper. Unfortunately she will go through life without ever becoming a mother. Old Dan is a short, well-muscled dog who struts around with a tough attitude. He's friendly, but he will not hunt with any hunter other than Billy, nor will he hunt at all unless Little Anne is by his side. When Anne cuts her foot, Dan insists on staying with her rather than enjoying the hunt.

During "fur season" Billy is excused from all chores so he can hunt every night. When he comes home in the morning, his first priority is to take care of his dogs, especially their feet. Old Dan gets into many predicaments, but Little Anne always displays her intelligence and helps him out. On one particular hunt, Old Dan, swimming after a large raccoon, follows his prey into an underwater muskrat den. When he is unable to escape, Little Anne barks and digs until Billy understands the situation and rescues Dan. The dogs know the coon is still in there, though, and they continue to work until the coon is brought out and killed. On another hunt Old Dan climbs into a hollow tree and ten feet up the trunk, emerging through a hole and onto a limb to bay at the coon he has treed, another eight feet up. Eventually Billy must climb the tree and force Old Dan back through the hole to get him down. He has to repeat the process several times and finally plug up the hole with rocks and chunks. They get their coon, though.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter, Billy simply celebrates. This is a glorious time in his life, free of all household and farm chores, allowed to hunt to his heart's content. His bond with his dogs becomes stronger than ever, and his admission into the ring of hunters signals another step in his progression to maturity. Both Billy and his dogs display remarkable





intelligence and resourcefulness, not to mention unquestionable loyalty to each another. Old Dan will not hunt at all unless he is with both Billy and Little Anne. For her part, Little Anne will never give up on Old Dan until he is safely rescued from his predicaments. Although some of Billy's stories at Grandpa's store stretch the truth, this chapter allows us to see for ourselves what remarkable dogs he does indeed have. The reader cannot help but cheer for Billy who, after two long years of quietly earning the money for the dogs, now has the life of which he has dreamed.

Grandpa continues to play an important role in Billy's life, buying the hides from him, which is Billy's source of revenue, allowing him to participate in the hunting talk at the store, and even signaling to him when his stories are going overboard and it's time for him to be quiet. Grandpa is, as he has always been, the voice of reason and a source of compassion for his grandson.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

A northern blizzard blows for five days, keeping Billy cooped up in the house. When it finally ends with a three-inch snowfall, he alerts his dogs that there will be good hunting that night. Papa warns him that the slippery, frozen surface beneath the snow can be treacherous, causing a twisted or broken ankle, and there will be fog, too. Even Grandpa has told him that, in these conditions, a coon can play fatal tricks on hunting dogs. Carefully Billy makes his way to the bottoms, and there his dogs pick up a trail. They chase the coon up into the mountains and right back down again, straight toward Billy. The coon runs right up to the Colman house, where Billy's sisters scream and his father whoops. Billy swells with pride to think that his whole family is out on the porch "listening to the beautiful voices of my little red hounds." Then the wily old coon leads the hounds back toward the river, and suddenly all goes silent. Billy senses something is missing, and he discovers what it is when he gets to the river and finds it frozen over. It is the river sound that he has missed. Then he hears the gurgling of the swift current in the middle of the river where the ice has not formed.

The dogs are downriver, so Billy walks that way, wishing to hear his dogs' voices. Suddenly Old Dan begins to howl, but it is not a hunting bay. He seems to be calling for help. Billy finds him out on the ice pack. When the dog comes to Billy's call, his head is down and his tail between his legs. He signals Billy to come out on the ice, and then Billy hears the whimper of Little Ann, apparently in the freezing water and unable to get out. The popping, cracking ice will not hold Billy's weight, however, and Little Ann continues to cry for help. Billy himself breaks down and cries.

Billy finds a stand of cane and hangs his lantern on one end of a long cane limb, easing it out onto the ice so he can see his dogs in the fog. The pole is too short, though, and Billy tries to walk out on the ice. He falls through close to shore and grabs a root, his feet and legs already growing numb from the cold. He finally gives up, hiding behind a large sycamore so he doesn't have to see the end come for his little dog. He recalls praying to get his hounds on a sycamore log, and he now prays for help in saving Ann. Suddenly he hears metal clank on metal. Sure there is a boat on the river, and he calls for help, but there is no answer and no further sound. When he looks at his lantern, out on the ice, he realizes that the handle has simply fallen over, clanking against the lantern body; there was never any boat.

Now Billy is seized with an idea. He pulls the lantern back and removes the handle, bending it into a hook which he ties to the cane pole with a shoelace. Using a stick to measure, he discovers that the water is shallow enough for him to stand up. He removes his clothing and wades out into the frigid water up to his chin, extending the pole across the ice and trying to snag Ann's collar with the hook. When he can no longer feel any part of his body and Ann sinks even farther, the hook catches and he is able to drag her stiff body to him. She first appears to be dead, but when she moves her head,



Dan starts licking her face and head. Billy pulls her to him and staggers out of the water on numb feet, wrapping Ann in his shirt.

In a large piece of driftwood Billy builds a fire, using oil from his lantern. He lays Ann by the fire to warm up, quickly dresses, and massages the lifeless body while Dan licks at her face and head. Soon Ann is moving and crying, and Billy makes her walk, wobbly as she is. Billy returns the handle to the lantern and realizes what a miracle the lantern has performed, thanking it aloud. Then he returns to the sycamore and says a heartfelt prayer of thanks.

Upon returning home, Billy takes the lantern directly to his room and sets it in a corner with the handle standing up. He comes down with a terrible cold that keeps him in the house for three days and three nights. His sisters play until they shake the house, but the lantern handle never falls. Billy asks his mother whether God answers every prayer, and she responds, no, only those that are heartfelt. When she starts kissing him, calling him her little Daniel Boone, he squirms away and goes out to check on his dogs.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

This is certainly the point of highest tension and suspense so far, a climax of sorts, if not *the* climax. Nature is not so good to Billy and his dogs this time. In fact, the entire chapter is in great contrast to the previous chapter of unbridled joy and celebration. We suspect danger lurks in the bottoms, since it is foreshadowed by both Papa and Grandpa. We even suspect that the danger will involve one of the dogs, based on Grandpa's warning. Still, the horror of watching Billy nearly lose his beloved little dog, helpless to intervene, is most stressful for the reader.

Once again we see Billy respond in a mature and reasonable fashion. Although he breaks down and cries and hides behind a tree because he is not all grown up yet, he does what needs to be done and manages to save both the dog's life and his own. The hounds have become his vehicle for learning and for demonstrating his growing sense of responsibility, loyalty, and resourcefulness. What of the clanging lantern handle? Surely this phenomenon suggests a little miracle. After Billy returns home, the lantern handle never falls again. The clang comes right after his prayer behind the sycamore. Rawls is reminding us of the higher power to which Billy turns in his moments of greatest need. This time, however, Billy displays greater maturity as he returns to the sycamore to offer a prayer of thanks afterward, and, once again, the prayer and its answer all start with a sycamore tree.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Billy is now a "famous" coon hunter in the area, thanks in part to Grandpa's bragging (and even a bit of exaggerating). That fame causes a great problem, however. One day Billy has to take a sack of corn to Grandpa's store to have it ground into meal for his mother. As he waits, the mean, low-life Pritchard boys come in to buy some chewing tobacco. They taunt Billy and insist on betting that his hounds cannot tree the "ghost coon" from their area. During the conversation, Rainie Pritchard says that Grandpa is "crooked" because he is a store owner. Billy and Grandpa both bridle at this, and Grandpa grows so furious that he takes two dollars from his wallet and calls the bet, warning the Pritchards not to play a dirty trick and jump Billy when he arrives for the hunt. Billy agrees to meet the Pritchard boys at dark near their place the next night, with his two dogs. Grandpa asks him to please win the bet.

Having told his parents nothing of the bet, Billy waits at the appointed place with his dogs. The Pritchard boys are taunting as usual when the hunting starts. The dogs soon find the trail and, by its behavior, the coon demonstrates that it is, indeed, the "ghost coon." It takes the dogs on quite a journey, but Ann nearly catches it in the water. Without Dan's help, she is unable to stop the coon. Soon Ann bawls that it is treed, and then Dan joins her, but Ann falls silent. Billy is worried, but they discover that Ann simply is not convinced the coon is trapped. He seems to have gone into a hollow, fallen tree, partly submerged in the river, but Ann continues to look for him on both banks. The Pritchard boys insist that Billy give up on his dogs and pay up, but he will not quit until the dogs quit. Ann tracks the coon down the slanted tree trunk and into the water, all around the drift created by the branches.

The coon emerges, the biggest one Billy has ever seen, and the dogs are challenged as they trail him. He leaves the river and runs right between the boys, the dogs on his trail. Billy becomes so engrossed in the chase that he gets knocked down by Old Dan. Even Rainie Pritchard is excited by the chase, which goes on and on. Finally the coon heads for an old field, and the Pritchards say that he is heading for the ghost tree; that's what the ghost coon always does when he tires. Shortly Old Dan barks it is treed, but there is no sound from Little Ann. The boys run toward the special tree, Billy curious to see it.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter is very intense and full of suspense. The intensity is built upon with several examples of foreshadowing. Billy tells us early on that his local fame will cause something terrible to happen. Then the menacing Pritchards show up with their taunts and their bets, heating up the plot. After Billy and Grandpa call the bet, Rainie teases "Sucker!" as he leaves the store, suggesting that Billy is heading for trouble. Billy decides not to tell his parents where he is going, which adds to the tension. Then, when



the coon finally goes into the particular tree, of which Billy knows nothing and the Pritchards know something, we cannot help but expect foul play.

With the introduction of the Pritchard boys, a new conflict is introduced. Up until now Billy has been at odds with the forces of nature and with the facts of his own family's social status. Now, for the first time, he is in a man-against-man conflict, facing peers who wish to challenge and even defeat him. Following on the heels of another very intense chapter, this scene creates a sense of dread in the reader. Interestingly, it is the only chapter so far that ends before its problem is resolved. We will apparently continue the hunt for the ghost coon in the next chapter.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Arriving at the tree, which stands alone near an old barbed wire fence and a broken gate, Billy sees that it is short and squat and still in full leaf. He climbs the tree and can find no coon and no hollow in which the coon might be hiding. He tells Dan to quiet down, and then he notices Ann over by the fence, still seeking the trail. Billy knows that the coon has slipped from the tree. He climbs one more time and convinces himself the coon is not there. His dogs appear to have given up, so he pays the two dollars to Rubin, saying Rubin has won them, fair and square. They turn to leave, Billy and the dogs quite sad.

At that moment the wind blows and Ann picks up the scent again. In just a few minutes she tracks the coon to the old gatepost and bawls that it is treed. Dan joins her. The coon has jumped from a tree branch down twelve feet onto the gatepost. It is hollow, and Billy pokes inside with a stick. The coon comes boiling out, right in Billy's face. The dogs pounce on the coon and terrible fight ensues, eventually allowing the coon to get free and return to the tree. Billy has never before seen a coon get away from Old Dan. Billy climbs the tree and corners the old coon, and now it cries the cry of a human baby, the sound Billy has heard when a coon knows it is the end of his life. His heart goes out to the coon, and he announces that he cannot kill him.

The Pritchards think Billy is crazy, of course, and Rubin begins to climb the tree. Billy says he will not allow the dogs to kill this coon, who has fooled so many dogs and hunters, but the Pritchards threaten to beat him if he holds his dogs back. Just then Old Dan growls at an animal emerging from the woods. It seems to be lurching sideways, and the boys are afraid. It turns out to be the Pritchards' hound, Old Blue, growling and mean-spirited, dragging a length of rope and a good sized log in which it has become entangled. Billy fears a dogfight, but the Pritchards are now ready to watch Old Blue kill the coon. Billy wants no part of it and simply asks for his money back; he plans to go home. They refuse, saying Billy's dogs haven't killed the coon. Billy reminds them that the bet was on treeing, not killing, the coon. They threaten to bloody Billy's nose, and he reminds them of his grandpa's warning. Furious, Rubin throws him to the ground, pins him, and makes Billy agree not to say a word to Grandpa.

As Rainie urges Rubin on the beat Billy, Old Dan and Old Blue begin fighting. Billy wants to stop the dog fight, but this is Rubin's chance to whip Billy. He just gets started when Rainie yells that Billy's dogs are killing Old Blue. The boy fight stops and Billy sees that Ann has come to Dan's rescue. Rubin grabs Billy's ax and threatens to kill Dan and Ann, running for them. Billy follows and sees Rubin trip on a stick and fall, but he runs on past. Old Blue is nearly dead, and Billy has a hard time pulling his dogs off. He turns to the Pritchards and sees Rubin on the ground, motionless, and Rainie frozen in fear. He ties his dogs to the barbed wire fence and goes to Rainie, touching his



shoulder. Rainie begins to scream and runs into the woods. Now Billy sees that Rubin has impaled himself on the ax; it is buried several inches in his stomach.

Rubin is alive and begs Billy to pull the ax out. Billy does, and the blood gushes out. Rubin dies and Billy does not know what to do. He thinks of his mother and wishes he were home. He uses a piece of barbed wire as a lead to control his dogs, picking up the lantern but leaving his ax near the body. Billy looks up and sees the eyes of the ghost coon, but he knows this is not the coon's fault, although it all happened on account of him. Despite the gore all around him, Billy is not sorry he let the coon live. Billy arrives home and awakens his parents, telling them every detail of the story, beginning with the bet at Grandpa's store. Mama cries and Papa gets ready to go to Rubin's body. He must summon Grandpa, "the only man in the country that has authority to move the body." Billy is sent to round up some of the neighbors and send them to the store.

The next morning the family still awaits the return of Papa. A cold, hard drizzle is falling and the day is gray. Finally Papa rides in, soaked and exhausted, and Billy offers to take care of the mule and do the chores so his father can go to the fire immediately. Papa reports that the group was carrying the body back when the Pritchards met them. The family took it hard, but they were civil. The father and the other men were kept out in the barn, and they never saw any of the womenfolk, a strange bunch, Papa says. Rainie, he reports, never got over the shock and will have to see the doctor. Mama feels sorry for Mrs. Pritchard, but the Pritchards are planning to bury Rubin on their own plot and do not expect any neighbors to participate. Papa tells Billy never to associate with the Pritchards again.

Billy now mopes and has bad dreams, not wanting to hunt and trying to determine what he can do to make things better. Mama says there is just nothing they can do. Billy recognizes the danger of carrying an ax on the hunt and announces that he will save for a gun. Mama makes it clear that he will have no gun until he is twenty-years-old. Billy goes to his room to sulk.

Spying the artificial flowers his sisters once made him, he puts them in his shirt and leaves the house. The dogs insist on accompanying him as he walks to the Pritchards. He looks down on the graveyard, seeing the fresh mound, and tries to slip down quietly to the grave, laying the flowers down. As he hurries up the hillside, a rock comes loose and rolls down, disturbing Old Blue, who begins to bark. Mrs. Pritchard comes out and sees the flowers. She quiets the dog and arranges the flowers on the grave, looking up several times to the hillside. She cannot see Billy and his dogs. She returns to the house, wiping her eyes, and Billy feels better for what he has done. He promises his dogs a hunt that night.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

By this point the reader has reached the climax of the story and the point of highest tension. When Billy got his dogs, his life started on a new course, and no one could determine how the new course would play out. We have followed Billy through



wonderful hunting experiences, the thrill of pride in his dogs' performances, and even fame. Never did we expect that his hunting would take him to such a horrific place. As the main character, his ability to handle this moment of terror characterizes him. Has he grown up enough to conduct himself like a man? Will he lose his senses, as Rainie does, or lie to his parents or try to keep the entire occurrence secret? Billy acts responsibly, honestly, and even calmly in the face of this greatest test in his rite of passage to manhood.

There is a measure of "poetic justice" in this chapter. The Pritchard boys have treated Billy poorly and ridiculed his dogs. In addition, although Billy paid his debt as soon as it was clear that he had lost the bet, Rubin does not reciprocate. The Pritchards continue to threaten and abuse Billy. When it looks like their dog might hurt Old Dan, reader sympathy for the Pritchards is at an end. We want Billy and his dogs to "win," but we never imagined that this would be *the end* for Rubin and Rainie. Rubin has lost his life in his attempt to kill Billy's dogs with the ax, and Rainie has lost his senses and identity, temporarily or permanently. The justice the boys are served is far more severe than the reader would have expected, lending a seriousness to the story not hinted at in early chapters.

Having played a role, however innocently, in the death of one of his peers, Billy must seek his own solace. Each individual deals with death and trauma in his or her own way. Billy is unable to rest, hunt or resume his normal life until he makes peace with his haunting memories. When he reaches out to bring comfort to the Pritchard family, he is released from his own mourning and able to feel whole again. What Billy mourns is not Rubin, for Rubin Pritchard never brought anything but displeasure into Billy's life. Billy has lost his innocence, and that is what he mourns. The death of Rubin is the most serious tragedy a young boy might face, especially knowing that his own actions, however unwittingly, played some small role in the death. Never again will Billy be the little boy he was at the start of the book. He has seen too much of the reality of life. His innocence is gone.





# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

A few days later Billy is summoned to Grandpa's store, his two dogs following. He doesn't want to talk about Rubin's death, but, sure enough, Grandpa wants to know all about it. Grandpa feels responsible, in a way, and insists that Billy must never feel guilty and should try to forget about it. Then Grandpa shows Billy an announcement in the newspaper of a big championship coon hunt that will be starting in six days. He has already paid to register Dan and Ann and asks Billy if he will take his dogs and enter the contest. The prize is a gold cup. Grandpa explains that being selected for this contest is very competitive. He has reported how many coons Billy's dogs have successfully hunted in order to get them qualified. Billy is ecstatic; of course he wants to go, and he feels like a winner already. They will travel in Grandpa's buggy and take a tent along, leaving early the day before the contest starts. Grandpa tells Billy he need bring nothing but his hounds, and then he urges the boy to invite his father also. With a complimentary bag of candy, Billy is on his way home, all smiles.

His feet hardly touch the ground on his way home, and the familiar sounds of nature are more glorious than ever, "God-sent," as Billy says. He counts his blessings as he goes, thinking he is the luckiest boy in the world, with his family, his dogs, his grandfather, and now a championship coon hunt. The family is just about to sit down to dinner when Billy enters with the bag of candy. He excitedly tells them all about the contest and begs his father to go. Papa says he can't leave his work, but Mama encourages him to consider it. "I won't need help for a couple months," she adds, and then Billy notices that her tummy has begun to swell with a baby. He has been too busy to notice. Finally Papa agrees to go, to cheers from the whole family, and declaring that they will bring the gold cup home. Billy cries tears of joy, which Mama wipes away with her apron. He promises the gold cup to his littlest sister, should he win it.

For the next few days Billy works hard to see that everything is ready for Mama to manage the household and livestock by herself. Finally he finds himself walking along next to his father, following his dogs, on the way to Grandpa's store. He tries to match his father's stride but cannot. Then he confides to his father that he has discovered that Little Ann is gun shy. Papa seems to think this is not something to worry about, but Billy declares that, if he had a gun of his own, he is sure he could break her of the fear. Papa reminds him that Mama has no intention of allowing him to have a gun any time soon.

The team is hitched and the buggy loaded as they arrive at the store. Billy sees his ax, all cleaned up and not looking so bad after all. Grandpa had held it as evidence and now wished to have it on the hunt. Grandpa sends Billy to the barn to get hay for a bed for his dogs, and he whispers to bring along the jug of corn liquor, covered with hay so Grandma won't see. Just before they leave Grandma comes out with a few last-minute items and kisses Billy goodbye.



## Chapter 14 Analysis

With Rubin's accidental death behind him, Billy is ready for new challenges, and the coon hunt competition will set him on a positive path again. Just as Grandpa got Billy into the heartbreaking situation with the Pritchards, he now offers his grandson a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate his dogs' skills. Now we know why Grandpa was writing on a paper every time he paid Billy for a coon hide. He was keeping track to qualify the dogs for the contest. This championship contest will be an important step on Billy's path to manhood. It is for men, not boys, and he is joined by both his male mentors, father and grandfather. His ax is cleaned of blood now, symbolizing his fresh start on a new path with no need to feel guilt or regret. The gold cup that will be at stake in this contest is surely the same gold cup that the old man takes down off the mantel in Chapter One as he reminisces about his own redbone hounds.

It is important to note that, when Billy feels utter joy and gratitude, the things that come to his mind are nature's beauty, God's abundance, his family, particularly Grandpa, and his dogs. This gives us insight into his developing value system. Mama's pregnancy in this chapter, which Billy has failed to notice because he is too busy with hunting and the heartbreak of the Pritchard affair, is another sign of good things to come. This chapter is in stark contrast to the three that precede it. Once again our main character's fortunes are on an upswing.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

The threesome and their dogs travel as far as Bluebird Creek and then stop to make camp. Grandpa surprises Billy yet again by producing a can of corned beef hash for each of the dogs for supper. Grandpa is astounded to see that Old Dan will not begin eating his food until Little Ann gets hers. Billy explains that they share everything, never take something away from the other one, and never eat until both are fed. Papa reports seeing Dan carry a biscuit to Ann one day so they could eat together. Both Papa and Grandpa comment on how unusual the two dogs are in many ways, including how keenly they watch Billy's every move.

Supper is ready, and Grandpa pours three mugs of coffee instead of two, and Billy has his first cup of coffee. At bedtime Billy lies awake listening to the night sounds. When he hears two screech owls, he is worried, as that is a sign of bad luck. In the morning Papa and Grandpa try to dissuade him from worry, but Billy can't shake the feeling of bad luck. They ride into the afternoon and then see the signal flag telling them where to turn. Numerous wheel tracks on the trail and voluminous smoke in the distance tell them the contest is well attended. All three are dumbfounded at the vast number of tents, buggies, cars, and horses. They pitch their tent and Billy ties the dogs to the buggy and walks through the camp. He is impressed by the beautiful dogs against which his will be competing, noticing as well their fine collars and leashes, in contrast to the cotton rope and old check-line leather collars of Ann and Dan. He even hears someone mention him as the owner of the two fine redbones. He is a bit nervous, but Little Ann seems ready to win. Grandpa asks which dog Billy will enter in the best-looking dog contest, and he has to think it over, unsure that either should compete, as small as they are.

Seeing the other men brushing oils into their dogs' coats to ready them for the contest, Billy is unsure what to do. He is alone in the tent and sees Grandpa's bone handled hair brush in the suitcase. It seems to be his only option. In place of hair oil he uses butter. When Ann is perfectly groomed, he sets her on the competition table. As the elimination proceeds, Little Ann is among the top two contestants, and then she must walk down the table to Billy. She walks like a queen and lays her head on his shoulder. Ann wins the silver cup for beauty and Billy breaks into tears.

That night the head of the contest explains the rules. There are twenty-five pairs of dogs in the contest, and the hunters line up to draw a number designating their assigned hunting night. Billy feels a bit out of place, as the other hunters are dressed so beautifully, but they treat him like one of the group and talk to him like a man. Billy draws the fourth night. The first night the winning team trees three coons. Grandpa asks whether Billy's dogs have ever treed three coons in a night, and Billy answers that they have done so on four occasions only. The three hunters discuss where they ought to hunt on the fourth night, and Papa goes to discuss a point with the judges. Grandpa decides to shave while Billy washes dishes. Grandpa notices the short red hairs in his



hairbrush and starts to speak, but Billy scoots out the door of the tent and crawls under the buggy with his dogs.

On the third night the three-coon record is tied. Billy is a nervous wreck and Grandpa is roaming around, bragging about Billy and his dogs. Billy tells a hunter that his grandpa "has a little steam" in him, but he's the best grandpa a boy could want.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

There are three major themes woven throughout this chapter, which are the camaraderie of hunting men, the excellence of Billy's dogs, and the signs that Billy is becoming a man. To have both his father and grandfather with him on the trip is very special, but to be in the company of throngs of men who appreciate fine dogs and know all about the hunt is almost like being in heaven. Here the men live like men and do "man things." Perhaps the corn liquor grandpa has squirreled away is a symbol of the totally "male" atmosphere of the hunt, as Grandma would never approve. There are no women here, though, and the men enjoy a fellowship known only to men who are also hunters.

Old Dan and Little Ann surprise Grandpa when they refuse to eat unless both are served, and Papa says he has noticed many unique qualities in these two dogs. That is only the beginning. Upon entering the camp, Billy overhears a man praising his two dogs. Then, the next day, Little Ann wins the cup for "most beautiful dog." As the hunt progresses, Grandpa spreads (and embellishes) the rumors about Billy's dogs. We have never seen the two hounds so well appreciated and praised as in this chapter. Finally, Billy has some truly grown-up experiences now, starting with his first cup of coffee. Taking a prize in his first adult competition is certainly a promising sign, and he notices too that the men treat him like one of them, not like a kid, despite his rough country clothing.

The reader should note that all three of these motifs - the camaraderie of the hunt, the excellence of the hunting dogs, and the maturity required to participate - work together to advance the plot. This contest is Billy's first full acceptance into the world of adult men, and he brings solid qualifications (his dogs and their reputation) along with an ability, learned gradually over the course of the novel, to behave as an adult man. His mentors are by his side, weaving in the motifs of family and ancestral leadership as well.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

It is Billy's night to hunt now, and he and Papa and Grandpa all pile into the buggy along with the dogs and the judge. It seems the other hunters are also trying to move out of the already-hunted area. The dogs strike out immediately and the hunters follow. When the dogs bawl that they have found a trail, Billy lets Grandpa give the answering whoop. As they wait for the dogs to run the coon their way, the men hear a loud roar and discover that the coon has run into the camp and is being "whooped" by many men. Soon the dogs bawl that it is treed and Papa stings the coon with his special pistol. The coon drops from the tree and the dogs kill him. They skin the coon and start all over again.

The dogs tree another coon across the river, and Grandpa falls in the cold water as he tries to cross. Once the coon is killed and skinned, they build a fire to dry Grandpa and his clothing. While he is still wet, the dogs jump at another coon trail. Everyone tries to get Grandpa dressed, laughing hysterically. Billy momentarily forgets his two coon skins and has to run back for them. This coon eludes the dogs though, by walking on a rail fence. Dan and Ann are confused and Grandpa suggests that they give up on this coon and go somewhere else. It is nearly daybreak, though, and they might not have time to find another one.

Just as dawn is breaking, the dogs tree the coon in a tall sycamore. Billy manages to get it down and skin it; Grandpa kisses Little Ann. Now the judge wants to return to the old rail fence and investigate how the coon tricked the dogs. The judge figures it out and is astounded that Billy's dogs were able to finally find the coon. He assures Billy that he has a good chance of winning the cup. At daylight the group returns to camp amid cheers. The other men tell what a beautiful sight it was to see Ann and Dan run that coon right through the camp. After taking care of his dogs, Billy tries to get some sleep, but Grandpa's snoring keeps him awake. He ends up napping under the wagon, between his dogs.

On the contest's fifth night, no one gets three coons. Now the runoff will include Billy and his dogs, along with two other hunters and their dog pairs. Men are talking animatedly all day and making bets on the outcome. One man comes to the Colman tent, taking up a collection to create a jackpot for the winner. He tells Billy that everyone is rooting for him, but he's up against some of the finest hounds in the country. One pair he'll be competing with has won four gold cups.

Billy chooses to return to the swamp where the dogs got their last coon, as it seems like a good place for many other coons to hide. His dogs give him a significant look of understanding before they set off for the final night of competition. Billy predicts the first coon's actions perfectly. Treed, he comes out of the treetop and makes it to the river where Ann and Dan give him a hearty fight in deep water, helping each other along the



way. The grown men fear that the dogs will drown, but Billy has faith in them. They get their first coon of the night. Then, to the amazement of the men, the two dogs tend to each other's wounds before continuing the hunt.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Once Billy's dogs are allowed to join in the competition, the story is all about the dogs and their intelligence and other fine qualities. This is the chance Billy has waited for. His dogs show what they can do and are roundly appreciated for it. Surely this is the most exciting event of Billy's young life. Not only does he get to demonstrate his dogs' prowess to the public, but he has his own father and grandfather as eye witnesses too. All of Billy's instincts are right, and he displays a keen understanding of the hunt and the behavior of both his dogs and their prey. Particularly striking is the way the two dogs clean each other's wounds after they have done battle with a coon. As the chapter closes, suspense is rising steadily. The reader has no choice but to go on and read the next chapter to find out how the competition ends.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

The sky darkens and a sleet storm begins just as the dogs are heard baying another trail. The ground quickly turns white as the wind picks up. The judge is worried about getting lost, as none of them is familiar with the area, and soon Billy can no longer hear his dogs. When the judge suggests returning to the buggy, Billy pleads to go on, unwilling to leave his dogs alone in the storm. All three men are opposed to moving further toward the dogs, sure they will give up and come in, but Billy knows Old Dan will never leave a treed coon. Finally Papa agrees to go with Billy and the other two join them.

Now the sleet is stinging their faces and the ground is dangerously slippery. The wind carries Old Dan's voice all around, and they are unsure which way to go. Grandpa says he cannot take much more. When even Papa is ready to give up, Billy says a quick prayer. A large branch breaks and falls noisily, giving Billy an idea. He asks his father to shoot the gun, thinking it might bring Little Ann to his side. The gunshot does just that, and Billy attaches a lead to Ann. They all begin to follow her to find Dan, but the men fear that they will be lost or freeze to death. Just then Dan bays again and Little Ann leads the group directly to him.

Billy and Ann try to clean the frost from Dan, but he is interested in the coon up in the tree. Meanwhile Papa and the judge have lost contact with Grandpa. They try shooting the gun, but there is no answer. Then Little Ann tears into the woods and soon begins a mournful howl. Billy knows what this must mean. They follow her sounds and find Grandpa, face down in the sleet, unconscious, his ankle caught and badly twisted. They bring Grandpa around and carry him to the gully where they left Old Dan. There the wind is less fierce and they can build a fire. Papa determines that the ankle is either broken or badly sprained, but it is not safe to go for help until daylight. Grandpa gets reasonably comfortable near the fire and then reminds them that there is a coon up in a tree that they need to capture. Billy has totally forgotten the hunt.

Everyone but Grandpa join the dogs at the tree, discovering that it is small and hollow. Papa easily chops the tree down and Billy is astounded when three big coons come running out of the hollow trunk. Dan kills one and Ann gets into quite a fight with a second. Finally, Dan helps her kill it. Billy points in the direction that the third coon escaped to and, before he realizes what he's done, his dogs are on the trail. They immediately disappear into the storm again, and Billy sinks down by the fire and cries. The judge declares that the dogs have read Billy's mind. Grandpa calls Billy to him and encourages him to just wait until daylight and hope for the best, but Billy knows that, if the coon leads his dogs into the river, they might freeze to death. There is nothing he can do, so he helps skin the coons. Then, for the final hours of darkness, he intermittently heats the coonskins and wraps them around Grandpa's sore ankle.



## Chapter 17 Analysis

Once again fortune turns to misery and nature deals Billy a surprising blow. The hunt has been so promising until the storm sets in, and now the characters experience one misfortune after another. Loyalty plays a prominent role in this chapter as, one by one, the characters must evaluate their loyalty to another. Billy's loyalty is firmly with his dogs, even if that means searching for them alone and risking his life. However, when he hears that Grandpa is lost, he forgets all about the dogs and the hunt and starts to tear into the underbrush wildly until his father restrains him. Once Grandpa is safe, he can return to his hounds and the hunt.

Papa would prefer to turn back in the face of such a storm, but, when it is clear that Billy will not leave without his dogs, Papa decides to accompany him. Grandpa knows that moving further from the buggy during such a storm is foolish, but loyalty to his son and grandson bring him along. The loyalty of each main character is tested in this chapter. Foreshadowing is again at work when Billy mentions that the ground has become slippery, we are prepared for someone to slip and fall. A bit later, when Grandpa says that he needs a rest and will not be able to stand much more of this, the reader is alerted that something is likely to happen to Grandpa. Sure enough, he has slipped and fallen and is nearly frozen to death.

Other motifs surface again in this chapter, including prayer and faith in God, the unusually strong bond between the two dogs as well as between the dogs and Billy, and the wisdom of Grandpa in Billy's time of need. Although we have seen Billy mature and take his place among men, he displays a mixture of mature loyalty and childish recklessness in this chapter. He is still on the brink of adulthood, not yet over the threshold.





# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

As dawn breaks, the storm blows itself out and the snow begins to fall silently. Billy cannot hear his dogs, but now he hears a search party whooping for the lost hunters. Mr. Kyle, the head of the competition, reports that Grandpa's horses broke loose about midnight and came back to camp. The men have been searching ever since. Now they gather around Grandpa and assure him that there's a very fine doctor among the hunters back at camp. Someone inquires about Billy's dogs and he states that they have treed a coon somewhere and he will need to find them. Mr. Kyle cannot believe the dogs would stay with the tree through a storm, but he tells Billy that he'll need that final coonskin to win the competition. The judge who accompanied Billy's team remarks on the amazing qualities he has seen in Dan and Ann.

Now the rescue party notices that a Mr. Benson is not with them, so they start whooping for him and he answers. Soon he joins them, breathless as if he has been running. He immediately starts jabbering about two white figures he has seen that he thought were ghosts. He calms down and explains that he saw two hounds, frozen solid. Billy runs to his father at this news and faints. When he comes to the man adds that the dogs are alive, and he apologizes for the frightful way he reported his experience. Mr. Kyle calms everyone down and supervises the making of a stretcher to carry Grandpa. One group, including Papa, carries him out. The other group, given Papa's pistol, joins Billy, and Mr. Benson leads them to the dogs, explaining more of what he saw. Billy now concludes that the coon led his dogs into the river and they were soaking wet when they treed him, thus frozen on the outside.

Approaching the tree, the men see that the dogs have remained alive through the night by running around and around the tree, continually, which they are still doing. The men build a fire and melt the ice from the dogs' coats, still puzzling over why the dogs remained with the treed coon instead of returning to camp or to Billy's fireside. Mr. Kyle explains that some dogs are capable of more than loyalty; they are capable of love. When the dogs are thawed out, Billy realizes that they will be fine. A man shoots birdshot at the coon to make him jump and, together, Ann and Dan kill him.

Back at camp, all the tents have been taken down but Grandpa's. Inside Grandpa is bandaged up but in need of further medical attention in town. He tearfully greets the two little dogs. The man who collected the jackpot for the winner presents \$300 to Billy. Billy hands the box of money to his father and then is awarded the gold championship cup. Two tears roll down Billy's cheeks as the men cheer. Billy is given an opportunity to turn the cup in for engraving but, thinking of his littlest sister, he knows he must bring it back with him. He says his grandfather can send it in for engraving later.

Papa agrees to take care of Grandpa's store and livestock for as long as necessary, and then the doctor escorts Grandpa into town to cast his ankle. Papa drives through the



night, hoping to reach home before another storm. Billy and the dogs sleep in the buggy. They stop for breakfast and then move on, making it to Grandpa's store well before dark. Then father, son, and dogs walk home to be greeted by all three little girls. Billy gives the silver cup to the two older girls and the gold one to his littlest sister, as promised. They take them to their mother who is amazed and proud of her son. Papa then admits that he's never had such a great time in his life. Saying that he has a gift from Old Dan and Little Ann, he hands the box of money to Mama who nearly faints. Struggling not to cry, she buries her face in Papa's chest and says, "Thank God, my prayers have been answered."

Dinner is a feast of celebration as Billy tells all about the hunt. Later, as Billy is getting ready for bed, he sees his mother carry two huge plates of food out to his dogs. As they eat, she kneels in prayer. Then she pets the dogs and they respond joyfully. Papa joins Mama outside and they look at the dogs for a long time. As they walk toward the house, Mama is dabbing at her eyes. Billy overhears his parents talking about Grandpa and saying that he'll now need help around the store. Billy assumes they want him to be Grandpa's helper, which will still allow him to hunt at night. He goes to sleep happy.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Old Dan and Little Ann are elevated to legendary status in this chapter and portrayed as having a unique spiritual power. Although Billy gets the winning coonskin and receives a huge jackpot as well as the gold cup, this is really a chapter about the inexplicable qualities of the two hounds. What surprises everyone else, though, seems only natural to Billy. Through the sequence of events, Ann and Dan are cloaked in increasingly greater power and looked on with deeper awe and respect.

First the men are amazed that the dogs would stay with the treed coon through a blizzard. Then they discover that the hounds have done this while wearing coats of solid ice. Even more astounding, they have been intelligent enough to keep moving so as not to freeze to death, and yet they have done all their running around the tree rather than giving up the coon. After all they have been through, they still work as a team to kill the coon so Billy can win the cup. As Billy hands the box with \$300 to Papa, his father gives the dogs a strange look. When Mama receives the money won by the dogs, she states that her prayers have been answered, taking the reader completely by surprise. Even more surprising is the spiritual scene played out in front of the doghouse. We are not surprised that she brings a generous plate of food to the dogs, but why does she kneel in prayer? It almost seems that the dogs have some sort of spiritual significance. When Papa joins her, he seems to see it, too.

We can only read on now to find the answers to our questions. We have witnessed the point of highest tension long ago, when Rubin falls on the ax and dies. We have witnessed the point of justice and celebration as Billy wins the competition and receives the reward. What is left now is the resolution of all the unanswered questions, and another very intriguing one has been added.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

Three weeks later, Billy and his dogs have continued their usual hunting pattern. Tonight the dogs are hot on the trail of some wily animal, and Billy decides, by its behavior, it must be a bobcat. When they tree the cat for the fourth time, Little Ann runs to Billy and whines as Dan sits under the tree, looking up. Now Dan does something he has never done before. He curls his lip, bares his teeth, and growls deeply at the animal up in the tree. Billy is afraid, but Dan will not leave, so Billy picks up his ax and walks toward Dan, hoping to grab his collar and drag him away. The creature in the tree moves, and Billy recognizes "the devil cat of the Ozarks, a mountain lion." Old Dan bawls a challenge and the huge cat leaps at him. The dog and lion struggle and Little Ann joins in. She is quickly mauled by the cat though and releases her grip.

Billy has no choice but to fight for the lives of his dogs, screaming and swinging his ax at the cat. But he slips and falls to his knees. Infuriated, the lion springs at Billy as he cowers on the ground, and he knows he is trapped. Instantaneously both dogs leap at the cat as it springs, getting between Billy and the predator. A terrible fight ensues as all four tumble down the mountainside. When the cat gets Dan in a death grip and Little Ann is clinging to the cat's throat, Billy sinks his ax into the cat's back. The cat releases Dan, who is bleeding profusely, and the cat's blood rains down on the mountainside. Staring with hatred at Billy, the cat slowly dies.

Billy loses his grip on reality for a few seconds. When he becomes clear again, the bloody ax has fallen from the dead lion's body and it reminds him of Rubin Pritchard's death. The dogs still have their teeth sunken into the lion's throat. Little Ann lets go and Billy inspects the deep gouge on her shoulder. Dan, however, refuses to release his grip until Billy pries his jaws open. He discovers Dan is slashed over his entire body, bleeding to death, so he mixes Dan's blood with mud to form a paste, which he uses to stanch the bleeding. He leads his dogs away from the kill and thanks them for saving his life.

As they head for home, Dan falls behind and cries pitifully. When Billy and Ann go back, Billy finds the entrails of his dog tangled in the underbrush. Crying, Billy cleans the dog's entrails and carefully stuffs them back into the wound. He drives his ax into a white oak, blows out his lantern and hangs it on the protruding ax blade, wraps Dan in his coat, and carries him home. There he wakes up his parents who help him care for the dogs. Mama washes Dan's entrails and puts them back in; they stitch up the wounds. Billy's little sisters awaken and become upset. The littlest one asks whether God will let Old Dan die, and Mama says she doesn't think He will. However, Old Dan lives for only a few minutes, taking one last look into Billy's eyes before drawing his last breath.

Mama and Papa go back to bed, but Billy sits by the fire, unable to think clearly but unable to sleep. Eventually he hears noises on the back porch, where Papa has laid Old



Dan's body. He thinks that, perhaps, Dan is actually alive. When he investigates, he finds Little Ann curled up to Dan's dead body, whimpering. It is more than the boy can bear. He begins to run and does not stop until he reaches the riverbank. There he flings himself down and sobs until dawn. As he walks back to the house, Papa tells him breakfast is nearly ready. Billy doesn't want breakfast, though. He is going to bury his dog, and he doesn't want Papa's help either. He builds a rough box and buries Dan at the foot of a red oak tree where he will be surrounded by wildflowers. Then he sits down and reminisces about the path that brought him to this point, beginning with the K.C. Baking Powder can, remembering their challenges and joys together. He tells Dan, "You were worth it, old friend, a thousand times over."

Two days later Little Ann has stopped eating and has hidden herself under a blackberry bush. Billy pulls her out and tries to force feed her, but Papa says that the life has gone out of her and she has no will to live. Two days after that Little Ann is so weak she can hardly stand, and she has gone off into the hollow. Billy searches and calls, heartsick, and finally decides to go to Old Dan's grave. He finds his little hound stretched out on top of Old Dan's grave, dead. Holding her, Billy looks up to the sky and asks why they had to die and why he has to hurt like this.

It turns out that his mother has followed him, and now she tries to comfort him, suggesting he can get other dogs. He does not want to hear about other dogs. She tells him that the dogs fulfilled a prayer for her before they died, but he no longer believes in prayer. After all, he prayed for his dogs and they both died. Mama gently and tearfully tries to help him deal with his loss. When they hear Papa call, they make a bed of leaves for Ann and Billy covers her with his coat, knowing he must bury her the next day.

On the porch Papa tries to help Billy see that this is one of those moments when he must face adversity like a man. His sisters are crying and he is still angry with God. They go inside for dinner, but Papa goes to his bedroom and returns with the small shoebox in which Mama keeps her valuables. There are stacks of money. Papa explains that this is the money Old Dan and Little Ann won in the contest as well as all the money Billy was paid, and turned over to his father, for the coonskins he sold. Billy's parents are sure this signifies an answered prayer and that God has a reason for everything that happens, but these sentiments are no comfort to Billy. When Billy asks how a loving God could give him his pups as an answer to prayer and then take them away, Papa explains that they saw that as an answer, too. Had the dogs lived, they would have moved to town without Billy, leaving him and his dogs with Grandpa. The Lord must have had other plans, Papa says.

Dinner is not pleasant. Mama offers to help him bury Little Ann tomorrow, but Billy wants to do it himself. He tells Mama that Ann used to look in his window and check on him every night. As the family sleeps, Billy lies awake, still trying in vain to take comfort in his father's words. He looks out at the doghouse and begins to cry. Mama enters and tries again to comfort him, but she cannot. He cries himself to sleep. The next morning Billy builds a smaller box and buries Ann next to Dan and then inscribes a limestone marker for them. Then he has a talk with his mother about heaven, and she assures him



that God made a wonderful heaven for dogs, including great hunting opportunities. He feels better now, although the hurt is still there.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Billy completes his rite of passage in this chapter. He performs the final tests of manhood. He provides for his family in the form of money to move them off the farm and into town where the children can be educated. He suffers the most incomprehensible loss of loved ones and recovers in order to continue to contribute responsibly to the community. He considers his ancestors' (parents') religious beliefs, applies them to his own situation, and finally makes his own, authentic peace with a higher power. For all intents and purposes, Billy is now a man.

Surely some readers will theorize, at this point, that the dogs were Billy's guardian angels. They have, after all, saved his life. In fact, Dan gave his own life to save Billy's. The dogs seem to exemplify the purest kind of love, for each other, for Billy, for the hunt, and for life. One might reason that they are the angels who have guided Billy through his rite of passage to adulthood. Whether or not the dogs are mystical or divine in nature, they surely have been more than any young boy could have hoped for in a pair of hounds.

Billy's ax and lantern play a final role in another death scene. Once again the ax brings to an end the life of a being who has been threatening Billy. The lantern, which seems to have performed a miracle many chapters back, when Little Ann had fallen into the icy waters and was nearly frozen, is now blown out for the last time. When Billy realizes that Old Dan must be carried back to the house, he lays down his ax and blows out his lantern, since he cannot carry them. Perhaps they have been tools of his passage that are no longer of use to him.

We now realize that the mountain lion that terrified Billy and his puppies on that first night in the cave, when they were returning from the depot, foreshadowed the encounter with the deadly mountain lion in this chapter. Just as Old Dan, who was then known to Billy only as "the boy dog," showed courage and determination as a tiny puppy, trying to roar back at the ubiquitous lion, he now demonstrates the ultimate courage, sacrificing every last bit of strength to save Billy's life.

The reader becomes aware, in this chapter, that Billy's parents have maintained a global perspective on his hunting routine. Whereas Billy saw only as far as his dogs and the raccoon currently being tracked, his parents have noticed the special gifts the dogs have brought to their tasks. They clearly view the hounds as the answer to a prayer, firmly believing in "fate," as Billy says. On the other hand, they have pragmatically considered their move into town and the needs of their son. In other words, their perspective has been broader than Billy's, another testimony to the wisdom of the older generation.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

In spring the Colman family happily leaves the Ozarks and moves to town, but not before Billy is given a chance to bid farewell to his hounds. At their gravesite he is astounded to find a lovely red fern, having grown up between their graves and cascading beautiful, graceful leaves over each of them. He recalls the Indian legend of the red fern, planted by an angel where a small boy and girl have died, and he summons his family to see the wonder. Papa suggests that this might be God's way of helping Billy understand and accept the loss of his dogs, and Billy agrees that the weight of awful pain has been lifted. The family members return to the wagon to give Billy time to be alone with his dogs, and Papa murmurs, "Wonderful indeed is the work of our Lord."

Taking note of the colorful wildflowers that have covered the two mounds and the caressing summer breeze, Billy bids his dogs farewell, telling them he is sure they have been given the finest place in heaven. Back in the wagon, Billy moves on with his family, but Papa stops on a hill for them to say goodbye to their childhood home. As Billy's eyes fill with tears, his mother points out to him the glorious red fern, seeming to say, "Don't worry, for I'll always be here."

Finally Billy, now as an older man, remembers it all, saying he has never gone back to the Ozarks, and dreams of what he would see if he returned: the red oaks, the white bark of the sycamore, and perhaps a rusty old lantern hanging on an ax blade, driven long ago into a white oak. He knows he would find the red fern, completely covering the two mounds, because he believes the legend of the sacred red fern.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

With the final chapter there is resolution of all the problems introduced along the path of Billy's maturing. He has come to accept the death of his dogs and commit them to immortality, thanks to the legend of the red fern. The family concludes its sojourn in the Ozarks and takes the step Mama has dreamed of through all these years. Papa feels his faith justified. As a young man now, Billy joins his family in the next chapter of his life, no longer tied to the mountains and hunting hounds of his childhood. The red fern symbolizes the lasting beauty of all that the Colman family brought to the Ozarks and the rich life they drew from the mountains. Billy's final remembrance, many years later, includes the ax and the lantern, tangible signs of a glorious and blessed few years, during which he grew to manhood, and he remembers the red fern, symbol of immortality.

Now we know for sure that the older man of chapter one is, indeed, Billy, and the gold and silver cups on his mantel are the trophies his wonderful hounds won for him. We



fully understand now his compassion for the cornered redbone hound, and we know why he takes such an interest in the rough check line collar. We understand why he refuses to pen the dog up and likes to think the dog might be heading home to the Ozarks. We can fully appreciate the depth of devotion the old man feels for an ordinary redbone hound.



# Characters

## Billy Colman

We first meet Billy, the narrator and main character, as an older man, remembering his experience with a pair of redbone hounds. Then, as the story gets underway, we see him at the age of ten, running through the bottoms of the Oklahoma Ozarks and longing for a pair of hunting hounds. We watch Billy grow and develop through the age of fourteen, completing his rite of passage to manhood.

Billy is the oldest of the four Colman children and the only boy. He is a carefree boy who loves nature and his family. Billy has three younger sisters who do not spend much time with him, but all his actions toward them are kind and sensitive. He also seems to have a close relationship of mutual respect and affection with both of his parents as well as with his beloved grandfather.

What Billy wants more than anything is that pair of redbone hounds. His dedication to this goal allows him to earn and save a significant amount of money over two long years, demonstrating his tenacity and seriousness of purpose. When the dogs arrive at the depot in Tahlequah, he thinks nothing of walking twenty miles through the night, in the mountains, to pick them up. From that day forward, Billy and his dogs are inseparable. He displays great maturity and patience in training them for hunting. Through his two years of hunting experience, Billy matures, learning to face increasingly more serious challenges. He develops good judgment and faith in God as he continues to deepen his respect for nature.

At the end of the story we see a young man who has experienced glorious victory, poignant loss, and life-changing challenges. He is still a country boy, naive and simple; we know that as he leaves his home in the hills, he leaves a piece of his heart behind.

## Papa Colman

The father of four children, all under the age of eleven when the book opens, and with a fifth on the way as the story closes, Mr. Colman is a hardworking farmer with little time for leisure and little patience with foolishness. He has tremendous patience, though, with his wife and children, and he is Billy's primary guide on the passage to manhood. "Papa," as Billy calls him, has dedicated himself to farming his land in the Ozarks and helping make his family's dreams come true. He will ultimately help make his wife's dream come true and move to town so the children can attend school.

Through most of the story we see Papa's serious side, always working the farm but never too busy to stop and give Billy advice or teach him something important. He seems to love his hard farming life and to feel entirely comfortable surrounded by nature. When he joins Billy and Grandpa for the hunting competition, though, we finally





see Papa engage in a recreational "male" activity. Once encouraged by his wife to participate in the contest, he joins wholeheartedly in the thrill and challenge of the hunt.

Papa's loyalty to Billy presents him with some hard decisions during the hunting competition. When, in the face of a blizzard, everyone wants to turn back, he understands that Billy cannot leave his dogs out in the storm, and so he will go on with Billy no matter what. When Grandpa slips and sprains his ankle, Papa's concern is all for Grandpa's well being. Throughout the story Papa's voice is the voice of quiet reason and unwavering loyalty. He seems to be the embodiment of human love.

## Mama Colman

Billy's mother is a gentle woman who loves her four children and takes great pleasure in nurturing them. As Billy grows, she finds it hard to believe that he can be old enough to spend the night alone in the woods and face a mountain lion and do all of the other things that Billy just takes for granted. She worries about him constantly, and Billy complains of her kissing him all over his face. She happily transforms his first coonskin into a hat for Billy and then calls him "my Little Daniel Boone."

Mama is often in the background with the little girls. When she interacts with Billy, it is usually in an attempt to soothe him or help him process a problem he is facing. She gently answers his questions about God and prayer, encouraging him to have faith and to trust in the wisdom of the Lord. When Little Ann dies, Mama offers to help Billy bury her. She is unable to comfort him at his lowest point, though, and must leave it to the boy to find his own peace with the hand that life has dealt him.

Mama is the embodiment of religious faith and the comfort of home and hearth. Billy seeks her for advice, but she comes to him when she senses that he is confused or hurt. The night he walks to Tahlequah to pick up his pups, Papa is confident that is where he has gone, but Mama worries through the night and the next day until he returns. One of Billy's greatest joys is making Mama happy, and one of Mama's greatest joys is helping smooth the bumps in Billy's road to adulthood.

## Grandpa Colman

Probably in his sixties, Grandpa seems to be Papa Colman's father, although this is never clearly stated. He owns the general store in the area, adjacent to his own home and farm. His store includes a millwheel for grinding corn. In addition, he has some sort of legal authority, probably having been deputized for this rural area. He lives with his wife who appears in the book only once and only briefly.

Grandpa is, undoubtedly, Billy's compass and inspiration. While running an efficient business and treating Billy like a bona fide customer, he looks for chances to treat Billy and his sisters to some candy. We do not understand what he writes down each time he buys a coonskin from Billy until we discover that he is using the data to support the two dogs' eligibility for the big contest. Sometimes Billy thinks Grandpa is teasing him or



leading him on, but Grandpa is just full of fun and incapable of passing up the chance to tell a joke or a story.

Grandpa is patient with Billy, but he has a bit of a temper, too. He allows the Pritchard boys to rile him, unwittingly pushing Billy into a horrific situation. Later he deeply regrets his words to the Pritchards. Grandpa also has a tendency to spin yarns and embellish the truth a bit, especially when it comes to bragging about his grandson's achievements. This is readily apparent both in his store and at the hunting competition. On several occasions Billy remarks that he has the best grandpa in the world.

## Billy's Little Sisters

These three little girls are never given names or ages. We only know that all of them are younger than Billy. The eldest of the three helps him train his dogs by dragging the coonskin wherever he tells her to drag it, so a good guess might be that she is two years younger than her brother. The youngest girl is old enough to participate in conversation and ask intelligent questions, so she probably is three or four-years-old when Billy is fourteen. The third girl would be in between those two in age.

The girls, who are generally with their mother, serve to round out the family for which Billy is learning to provide. They are part of Billy's cheering section as well as his support. When he is cutting down the giant sycamore, his oldest sister carries his lunch to him. The girls believe in Billy and his dogs and, in fact, make a pet of Little Ann. Because they are younger, and perhaps also because they are girls, they bring out the gentle and protective side in Billy.

## Old Dan

Old Dan is Billy's "boy dog," the larger and stronger of the two, and more aggressive but less intelligent than Little Ann. Old Dan might be said to reflect Billy's masculine side. In many ways Dan behaves like a human male, demonstrating perfect loyalty to both Ann and Billy, taking the lead, especially in threatening situations, and refusing to back down in the face of danger. His impetuosity sometimes causes him to blunder, but his tenacity often wins him the prize.

Old Dan ultimately gives his life for Billy when the mountain lion attacks. Prior to that awful scene, though, he demonstrates absolute perfection as a dedicated hunting hound. He is definitely half of a loving pair, refusing to eat until Little Ann has been served and running to Billy for help when Ann is stuck in the frigid river. When the mountain lion leaps at Billy, Dan and Ann are said to spring to the lion's throat as one. Although each dog has a "specialty" when it comes to hunting and killing the prey, Dan realizes that they are a team.



## Little Ann

Little Ann is Billy's "girl dog," the smaller and more intelligent one. She is just as tenacious as Dan, but neither as strong or aggressive nor as intimidating to other animals. She might be said to reflect Billy's feminine side. Like a human female, she ministers to Old Dan when he is hurt and falls in at his side when he is hunting. We know that Little Ann is attractive in appearance because she wins the "Best Looking Dog" award at the hunting competition.

Probably because she is small and clever, Little Ann becomes a pet to Billy's little sisters. In a hunting situation, it is Ann who solves the tricky problems and can never be outsmarted by a raccoon. Because she is small, Ann finds herself in need of help from time to time, yet she never shirks her responsibility. After Old Dan dies, Ann performs two actions that confirm her unwavering loyalty: she cuddles up to Dan's body immediately after his death and stays with him, and she seeks his grave out when it is her turn to die.

It would not be incorrect for a reader to interpret Ann and Dan as possible guardian angels to Billy. An argument against this might be that they appear in his life for only two years, but a rebuttal might be that the angels simply take on the form of dogs for those two years but are present in spirit form before and after. Another interpretation of the dogs might be as the force that allows Billy, in his pursuit of maturity, to experience both his masculine side and his feminine side. As a pair, the dogs also become the vehicle by which he matures through the hunt and by which he learns to deal with loss without losing his very identity or reason for living.

## Rubin and Rainie Pritchard

The two Pritchard boys are "stock characters," rather stereotypical "bad guys," who provide a foil for Billy's inherent goodness. They bring out the worst in Grandpa but, ironically, the best in Billy. Uncouth and unwashed, they are the typical low-life characters who show up when all is going well and place a huge boulder in the main character's road. Their behavior is believable, though, and Rubin's death is chillingly authentic. As part of the large Pritchard clan, they pose a direct contrast to the warm, lively Colman family.

## Mr. Kyle

The chairman of the hunting competition is important in Billy's life because he represents the authority of the adult world. As such, he gives Billy the same respect and courtesy as he does the adult hunters. Mr. Kyle is a knowledgeable outdoorsman, decisive and organized, and he takes charge and gives orders when the situation deteriorates, as in the post-blizzard scene when Grandpa has been hurt. It is significant that a man of this stature views Billy as just another one of the men within this man's world.



## Objects/Places

### The Abandoned Campsite

The campsite is a special place across the river where Billy finds what he needs, including the magazine ad offering hunting hounds, fishermen to buy his bait, the sycamore log on which he prays, and the names for his beloved dogs

### Raccoons

Raccoons are the prey in this story. They provide the challenge to the hunter and his dogs. The only animal actively hunted in the novel is the widely respected, crafty raccoon.

### The "Ghost Coon"

The Ghost Coon is a huge, elusive raccoon that lures Billy to the killing site where Rubin dies and Old Blue nearly dies. He has evaded hunters for years. When Billy traps him, he is unable to kill him. This raccoon is the cause of death and destruction but not responsible for it.

### Grandpa's Store

Billy's grandfather owns the local general store and mill. It is a gathering place for hunters and others to socialize, share news, and trade for the things they need.

### The town of Tahlequah

The closest town of any size (800 inhabitants), Tahlequah is for Mama the longed-for destination where her children can attend school. For Billy this is the site of wonders and challenges, as well as the depot where his dogs wait.

### Sycamore Trees/Logs

The sycamore was regarded as the sacred tree of life in ancient Egypt and Assyria. Trees have always been revered as representations of deity. Billy prays several times near a sycamore, and large sycamores present challenges to him throughout the novel.



## **Billy's Ax**

Billy carries a two-sided ax to cut down trees once the dogs have treed a coon. It is the instrument of death for Rubin Pritchard, who falls on it, and for the mountain lion, which Billy kills to save his dogs.

## **Billy's Lantern**

Billy uses an old coal-oil lantern when he hunts at night. The handle drops mysteriously when Little Ann is fighting for her life, giving Billy an idea about how he might save her.

## **Sacred Red Fern**

The red fern is a beautiful plant that grows up between the graves of Dan and Ann. Indian legend holds that the fern is planted by an angel and will never die, the first one having appeared over the bodies of a small girl and boy who froze to death.

## **Mountain Lion**

The mountain lion is the final challenge in Billy's bid for manhood, and the force that ultimately robs him of his dogs. Billy kills the lion, and the lion fails to directly kill the dogs, but Dan dies of the wounds the lion inflicts.

## **Gold and Silver Cups**

The cups are trophies Billy brings home from the big hunting competition, for the pair of dogs that treed the most coons and for "Best Looking Dog." They appear on the old man's mantel in chapter one.

## Setting

Where the Red Fern Grows is set in the Ozark Mountains on Cherokee land in northeastern Oklahoma during the Great Depression. Billy Coleman's father farms the land.

His grandfather, a driving force and constant source of encouragement to Billy, runs a country general store and mill. The store is a gathering place for the area's racoon hunters.

Their home is nestled deep in the heart of nature.

[The house] was in a beautiful valley far back in the rugged Ozarks. The country was new and sparsely settled. The land we lived on was Cherokee land, allotted to my mother because of the Cherokee blood that flowed in her veins. It lay in a strip from the foothills of the mountains to the banks of the Illinois River in northeastern Oklahoma. The land was rich, black, and fertile . . . [The log house was] nestled at the edge of the foothills in the mouth of a small canyon, and was surrounded by a grove of huge red oaks.

This rural setting provides a safe place for Billy to explore, run free, hunt, learn responsibility, and learn about love.

Rawls creates a mood of protectiveness on the part of his mother, and freedom for Billy. Billy and his family are enveloped in a haven of love and respect for each other and for their neighbors, God, and His creation. The Colemans take pride in who they are. It is a poor home in material things but rich in love and understanding in relation to the desires and yearnings of a young boy.



## Social Sensitivity

In choosing the river bottoms of the Ozark Mountains as his setting, Rawls creates a sensitivity to rural life in the early part of the twentieth century. Where the Red Fern Grows not only tells a good tale, but this story also preserves the strong, proud, and determined spirit of the people of this place and time.

Although the focus of the story is Billy Coleman and his devotion to his coon dogs, the story allows the reader, through Billy's eyes, to view the family structure, values, and customs present in this rural farming community. It is a virginal state with sparse settlements and few social institutions.

Rawls' portrayal of life in the mountains is in direct contrast to the life of the average reader. An example of the contrast is seen when Billy goes to Tahlequah to pick up his dogs. He is stared at, laughed at, and called a hillbilly. Billy and his family are honest and simple people, down-to-earth people, and hard-working people. The fruits of their labors support them, making them self-sufficient individuals. This view of life is in direct contrast to the average reader's modern world where independence is touted but, in fact, we are much more dependent on each other because of our way of life.

Young people can identify with the desire to own something that is all theirs, like Billy and his dogs. They can identify with Billy's desire to grow up, make decisions for himself, and move a little away from the protectiveness and restrictions of parents.

Billy's attitude towards his parents and their authority over him may nudge young readers to examine their own lives and attitudes.

## Literary Qualities

Rawls creates an exciting adventure and a captivating story of love, devotion, determination, and achievement through the use of aphorism (a brief statement of a truth or a principle), foreshadowing, and imagery.

Billy, the protagonist and narrator, in a prolonged flashback, tells the story. More than fifty years have passed since his experiences as a young boy living in the Ozarks of northeast Oklahoma and his love affair with two special dogs. Rawls uses figurative language to paint a picture of the Ozark Mountains, the family farm, surrounding forests, and the customs and traditions of the region. The following examples show some of these descriptions. "Papa's words perked me up just like air does a deflated inner tube." "A big grinning Ozark moon had the countryside bathed in a soft yellow glow. The starlit heaven reminded me of a large blue umbrella, outspread and with the handle broken off." "By the time I had reached the river, every nerve in my body was drawn up as tight as a fiddlestring."

"The next morning I went out to my doghouse. Scraping the snow away from the two-way door, I stuck my head in. It was as warm as an oven. I got my face washed all over by Little Ann. Old Dan's tail thumped out a tune on the wall."

Rawls' use of foreshadow with the death of Rubin Pritchard prepares the reader for the death of Old Dan and Little Ann.

Although Billy is truly unprepared to deal with the deaths and the intensity of his sorrow, he is prepared for his "real" grief by the accidental death of an unsavory acquaintance.





# Themes

## Reliance on a Higher Authority

A religious theme is overt in this novel. At the end of the story, the young boy who has achieved the dawning of manhood has also found his faith in God. As a little boy of ten, Billy prays to God for the hounds he so dearly desires. When he gets the dogs, though, he neglects to say thank you to God. Billy often talks to his mother about God and faith, and she encourages him to trust in the Lord. Her own actions reveal a firm faith, when Billy brings home the prize money she says that God has answered her prayers. Later that night Billy sees her kneel in prayer in front of the dog house. She certainly provides a model of religious faith.

Billy must develop his faith and his relationship with God on his own, however. At first he sees signs that suggest there might be a supernatural force helping him out. After he has prayed for dogs and receives them (largely through his own two-year effort of earning and saving money, of course), his dogs tree a coon in the largest sycamore in the forest. When the tree has Billy just about beat and he is ready to give up, he says a quick prayer. Suddenly a strong breeze blows only that sycamore and makes it fall, allowing him to get the coon. Billy has doubts, though. After all, it was the tallest tree, and he had already chopped through most of the trunk, but he does wonder if it is God's answer to his prayer.

When Little Ann slips into the freezing river and cannot regain her foothold, try as he might, Billy is unable to rescue her. Then he says an earnest prayer and he suddenly hears a clanging sound. When he discovers that the clang came from the falling of his lantern handle, he is inspired to use that handle in his rescue efforts, snagging Ann's collar with it. Billy still doubts, but now he wants to test his theory. He brings the lantern into his room, handle erect, and watches to see what might make it fall; nothing does. He again wonders if it is God's answer to his prayer. During the competition, when the dogs are lost in the storm, Billy says a silent prayer and a huge branch breaks with a loud crack. This reminds him of his father's pistol and he asks his father to shoot, knowing the gunshot might bring Ann to him. It does. Where did the idea come from? God?

At his moments of greatest horror, after the deaths of Rubin and Old Dan, Billy struggles to "think," but cannot. Perhaps what he is really struggling to do is pray. Immature faith precludes this, however. Finally, as his family leaves the farm and Billy finds the lovely red fern adorning his dogs' graves, he feels at peace. Papa suggests that the red fern may be "God's way of helping Billy understand why his dogs died."



## Ancestral Wisdom

Wisdom of ancestors is a common theme in the literature of most cultures other than our own, just as devotion to ancestors flourishes in most cultures other than our own. Although this novel is a mainstream American story, it does offer more than a passing nod to ancestral wisdom. The "ancestors" in this story are not far removed from the main character's generation, being his father and grandfather. However, Rawls clearly relies on both of the older generations to provide the lessons and support his main character needs in the passage to adulthood.

Papa Colman is the rock that anchors Billy when he is at loose ends, incapable of understanding the forces against him, or of solving a complex problem. When Billy is agitated, his father remains calm. When Billy starts to head out in the storm to save his dogs, Papa pulls him back and talks reason to him. Papa is also the conservator in this story, the individual who safeguards the assets and resources of the younger generation. Billy gives to his father the money he is paid for each coonskin, never questioning what his father might do with the money, or whether it might make sense for him to keep some or all of the money for himself. It feels right to give this resource to his father. The reader has no idea what Papa is doing with the money either. Then, when Billy is handed the jackpot at the contest, he again hands the money to his father. The look in Papa's eyes tells us that this money has brought him to a particular realization. Later, when he tells Mama about the jackpot, she declares that her prayers have been answered. Billy's work has earned the money, but Papa's mature wisdom has conserved the money over the years to make their dream of moving to town a reality.

Grandpa is a generation further removed from Billy, and the bond between them is even stronger. Unlike Papa, Grandpa is a man of the world, the owner of the center of commerce as well as a representative of the law. Yet to Billy, Grandpa is the warmest, most supportive and energizing person in his life. Billy has not idea why Grandpa writes something every time he trades a coonskin; he seeks only the immediate gratification. Grandpa, however, in his aged wisdom, is recording evidence of the dogs' prowess, and that evidence qualifies them for the competition that ultimately provides the family with an escape from poverty and illiteracy. Grandpa is a symbol for Billy of competence and resourcefulness. Together, Papa and Grandpa represent the wisdom of ancestors.

## Rite of Passage to Adulthood

The rite of passage is one of the most popular themes in literature because it spans every culture and is an experience embedded in the memory of every living adult. Especially in books aimed at adolescent readers, we find the story of a youth overcoming the obstacles and enduring the rituals involved in attaining adulthood. When the youth is fully recognized as a man or woman by the local community, the "passage" is complete. Each culture has its own rites, and, even within the United States, the rites of passage are different in various locales and eras.



As a mountain boy in the Ozarks in the first half of the twentieth century, Billy Colman's passage to adulthood must involve development of a respectful interdependence on nature. He must learn to care for the animals that serve him and subdue the animals that threaten him. He must demonstrate an ability to find his way up and down the mountains and throughout the bottoms, developing a healthy respect for the Illinois River and an understanding of the local climate and topography. In addition, he must grow as a contributing member of a rural farm family, responsive to the needs of his mother and sisters, respectful of his grandparents, and an able worker alongside his father.

Billy's first accomplishment in his rite of passage is the amazing ability to save \$50 over a two-year period, during which he never loses sight of the goal to which he has dedicated himself. Once he has his pups, they become the vehicles by which he will learn to face and overcome the obstacles in his way to adulthood. Their training and loving care are important learning experiences for Billy. When the three begin to hunt together at night, Billy adds the two tools, his lantern and ax, which will become the tangible symbols of his growing up. Selling his coonskins to Grandpa and then turning over the money to Papa is another sign of maturity; Billy might have hoarded the money to save for a spending spree in town.

Specific obstacles in the plot become significant stepping-stones to Billy's maturity. The taunts of the Pritchard boys that lead to actual danger force Billy to stand up to real and perceived threats. When Rubin tragically dies, Billy is faced with numerous decisions, as this is the most complex and important event of his young life. He makes the right decisions and moves toward maturity. The hunting competition also brings its own challenges, including decisions about where to hunt and how to save his dogs, how to choose between his dogs' safety and his grandfather's safety, and how to work within the milieu of the hunt and yet excel as an individual. He masters each of these steps, but not without heartache and blunders. The final proving ground of his maturity is, of course, the mountainside on which he fights the mountain lion. There he demonstrates his physical courage as well as his loyalty to his dogs. When the dogs die, his maturity is again tested as he learns to deal with heart breaking loss that can have no rhyme or reason. His unwitting contribution of money to his family's ability to move on to a better life represents his readiness to contribute as an adult. Finally, the spiritual fortitude with which Billy makes peace with his loss, accepting the red fern as its eternal symbol, and moving on with his family, is the crowning glory of Billy's passage to adulthood.

## Loyalty

Loyalty is the strongest fiber running through Rawls's novel. A reader might choose to disregard the religious faith or the ancestral wisdom themes, but no one who reads this novel can disregard its reliance on loyalty as the foundation for success and happiness.

The most obvious form of loyalty is the dogs' devotion to Billy. They will not hunt with anyone else, and they will leap to the throat of a mountain lion that far outweighs them when Billy is endangered. Billy can rarely slip away to his grandfather's store or even to



the Pritchard cemetery without his dogs following. The dogs' loyalty to Billy is matched only in their loyalty to each other. Billy remarks that neither dog will hunt without the other. When one is fed, he or she waits until the other one is fed before starting to eat. When Dan becomes trapped in the muskrat den, Little Ann insists on Billy's attention until he is rescued, and Dan behaves similarly when Ann slips into the icy river. Both dogs nurse each other's wounds before continuing the hunt, and, of course, they insist on dying together. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that the dogs, Little Ann and Old Dan, are the *symbols* of loyalty, for they also call forth loyalty *from* Billy toward them. He also takes risks to save them, attempting to thwart the mountain lion, and entering the frigid river in winter. Billy relies on his dogs to take the lead in hunting, and then he follows without question. In the bet with the Pritchard boys, when he feels his dogs have given up, he pays the debt; it is their decision. He is loyal to them.

Intergenerational loyalty plays a role, too. Papa remains loyal to Billy during the contest, continuing on in the storm rather than let Billy or his dogs face danger. Even when Billy was a little boy, though, his father was loyal to him, trying to fulfill his needs to the best of his ability, bringing him the traps when he could not hunt and taking him to the fields to build up his muscles when he became puny. Grandpa is also loyal to Billy, bragging about his grandson's hunting prowess and sending in qualifying evidence to register his dogs for the hunt. The loyalty is mutual. Billy wants to tree the ghost coon mostly to please his grandfather. When the old man falls and is injured during the contest, Billy actually forgets about the hunt, he is so concerned about his grandfather.

Throughout the story Billy displays tremendous loyalty to his entire family. When he goes to Tahlequah to get his dogs, he has an extra ten dollars to spend. He could spend it all on himself, but he buys his father some overalls and his mother some sewing fabric and his sisters some candy. When he returns home, it is the worry in his mother's eyes that brings him to his knees. Finally, asked by his littlest sister whether she might have the cup his dogs are going to win, he assures her it will be so, and he never considers any other plan. In fact, he immediately gives both cups to his sisters.



## Themes/Characters

This is a story about a young boy coming of age during the Great Depression. He develops from a young boy, fairly restricted to home and the immediate farm area, to a young teen allowed to roam the river bottoms, hills, and mountainous terrain surrounding his home. He leaves the protection of parental decisions and supervision to make life and death decisions affecting the lives of his dogs, the Pritchard boys, and himself.

A constant theme is determination or hard work and that a man who helps himself will get what he wants. This quality is first seen when Billy decides to save all the money he can earn to buy his coon pups and is demonstrated by his willingness to work in a variety of creative ways. For two years he catches worms and crawfishes, picks berries, harvests vegetables to sell, and hires himself out for any odd job he can to earn the money. Billy's grandfather tells him that determination and willpower are good for any boy to have and that is what it takes for Billy to realize his dream.

A third theme developed in *Where the Red Fern Grows* is love and devotion. A deep love of family is developed among the members of Billy's immediate family and with his grandpa Coleman. Billy has been taught respect for siblings and his elders. That respect exhibits itself in his evident love for his sisters, parents, and grandparents. His love and devotion expands to include two redbone coonhounds. He and his dogs become an inseparable team. Their love for him results in a fight to protect him from the attack of a mountain lion and the eventual death of Old Dan as the dog sacrifices himself for his master. The reader also witnesses a bond of "love" between the dogs as one refuses to live without the other.

A fourth theme developed by Rawls is a mother's yearning for a better way of life for her children. Billy's mother prays for and seeks a way to improve the opportunities for her children. The reader is aware of her desire from the beginning of the story and follows the recurring theme through to the end as the family leaves their farm for a home in town where there are better opportunities.

Billy Coleman is the ten-year-old protagonist of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. He is an obedient young boy growing up in a loving family with mother, father, and three younger sisters. He is a young boy consumed by a desire to hunt raccoons with his own pair of dogs, so consumed that he cannot sleep as he listens to the baying of the hounds in the surrounding hills at night.

At the end of the story Billy is a completely fulfilled young man of fourteen. He has accomplished all he set out to do: earned the money for pups, trained them, hunted successfully, and earned the trust and respect of his family. He is a strong, courageous, wholesome young man.



Mr. Coleman, Billy's father, is a man comfortable with himself. He has a good sense of humor with an easy smile. He has confidence in Billy and persuades his wife to loosen the apron strings that she would keep tied tightly.

Mrs. Coleman, Billy's mother, is Cherokee Indian. She loves her family but is a bit overprotective. She refuses to see Billy as anything other than her little boy. Much to his embarrassment, she smothers him with kisses and tries to keep a tight rein on his activities. She is concerned for the welfare of all of her children and wants a better life for them than she has had.

Billy's three sisters are all younger than him and stay close to home and mother.

They idolize Billy.

Grandpa Coleman owns a general store and mill. The reader is given the impression that he is a little better off financially than all of his neighbors. He is devoted to his grandchildren and Billy in particular. The two of them are a great deal alike in their love of dogs, hunting, and telling tales.



# Style

## Point of View

*Where the Red Fern Grows* is told in the first person, from the point of view of Billy. All characters' actions are viewed through Billy's eyes and perception, and all dialogue is filtered through his level of understanding. He comments on what others say and do, coloring our view of his world.

This is truly the story of Billy Colman as remembered by the adult and aged William Colman. Just like any other human being, Billy is the center of his own universe. Everything that happens in his world happens to him or because of him or in spite of him. Therefore we see a loving but teasing grandfather, for that is how Billy sees Grandpa. We see a warm, nurturing mother who gives sloppy, wet kisses and suffers when Billy suffers, because that is how Billy sees Mama. Perhaps it is the point of view that explains why the three little sisters remain so vague, without names, ages, or much in the way of unique personalities. It may be that, during these four years of Billy's life, his little sisters remain so on the periphery that he hardly gives them a thought. That also explains why so few characters people the novel. The mountains and the bottoms of the Illinois River circumscribe Billy's world at this point, and the most significant "people" in that area are his two hounds. Mama and Papa and Grandpa are at the second level of importance. The rest are hardly noticed as the main character tells the story of this golden period of the lives of Old Dan and Little Ann.

Interestingly, because of the limited perception of telling a story through the eyes of a young boy, the book is filled with foreshadowing and intrigue. Billy cannot fully understand all that he sees and hears, nor does he get to see and hear the entire account of the adult lives around him. Therefore, Mama's religious faith is observed in snippets and glimpses that mystify the reader like they mystify Billy. Grandpa's scribbling of notes when the coonskins are traded becomes intriguing to the reader simply because Billy mentions it and then discards it having no significance. When Papa warns that the countryside will be dangerously slippery after the blizzard, and then Grandpa mentions that this can be a particularly dangerous time for hunting dogs, Billy gives their warnings little thought. By simply relating them to us, however, he foreshadows danger and tragedy, enhancing the intrigue of the story. The overall effect is a most engaging and believable story.

## Setting

The entire story takes place in the Ozark Mountains of Oklahoma some time in the first half of the twentieth century. Since a young boy relates it, the settings are limited to the places a young country farm boy might have gone at that time.



Most of the action takes place in the "bottoms" along the Illinois River, for this is essentially a story of hunting. Billy clearly knows the flora and fauna of his homeland and is completely comfortable in the midst of it. Sycamore trees play a special role in his nature haunts; these are the trees to which he always goes to pray. The reader gets a definite sense that Billy rambles far and wide, often crossing the river, going up and down mountains. Still, when he is in the process of chopping down the giant sycamore, Billy's oldest sister (probably a year or two younger than he) walks into the forest carrying a lunch for him. It's hard to be sure just how much area Billy actually covers in his hunts. We do know that it is fairly untracked land, and he never encounters other people or dogs as he hunts. We also know that the Pritchard boys, who lure him into a hunting expedition on their land, live four or five miles away, and Billy clearly states that Tahlequah, the nearest town, is twenty miles as the crow flies.

Billy takes us to Tahlequah only once, and the city is a unique setting in itself. Here Billy encounters a lifestyle that is absolutely foreign to him. There are some attractions, such as the sliding pipe on the playground, soda pop, and nice things to buy, but all the people laugh at him and the boys even pick a fight with him. At the end of the story, we realize that this is the very town to which his parents are now moving the family.

Grandpa's store is a very special destination for Billy, filled with the most exciting aspects of his young life. Here he encounters his beloved grandfather, who is also his staunchest supporter and ally, as well as the hunters who at first tease him about his dogs' reputation and later include him in the thrilling hunting tales. Grandpa's store has candy, and it is also the place where Billy engages in the commerce of trading furs for cash. The store seems to be the hub of this rural community, providing the millwheel for grinding as well as housing the local representative of the law, Grandpa.

The other major locale in this story, still within the Ozarks, is the campsite of the huge hunting competition. A full day's ride by buggy, it might be the farthest distance Billy has ever traveled. This scene is magical, a place populated by men only, and all hunters at that. In this area Billy drinks his first cup of coffee and is, for the first time, treated as a respected adult hunter.

## Language and Meaning

Told by a young boy, Billy's story is related in simple language, making it accessible to pre-adolescent readers as well as adults. Billy is an innocent country boy, and so he tells his story very simply and straightforwardly. There is little use of figurative language because, for Billy, this is, literally, what happened in four years of his life. When Billy discovers that his mother is pregnant, for example, he says that "her tummy was all swelled up," stating the evidence exactly as he sees it. He relates his discomforts with his mother's kisses in this way: "It seemed that I could practically rub my skin off and still feel it, all wet and sticky, and kind of burning."

Foreshadowing is probably the most often employed language tool. This is accomplished easily as the narrator innocently relates bits of what he overhears or is





told, and then leaves the reader to make whatever he or she will of the information. The sense of foreboding thus created makes a "homely" story of plain rural life filled with tension and excitement.

Authentic to its time and place, the novel uses the "lingo" of the Ozark hill country of that period. Thus we read about check lines and coal oil lanterns and rail fences and the bottoms, which are rather foreign to the contemporary reader. Still, this authentic terminology never clouds the meaning of the story and serves to make it more "real" to the reader. Reacting to the females' hysterics at one point, he says, "This hurt my feelings and I really did get tuned up." Billy relates his fight on the streets of Tahlequah by saying, "As I turned around to face the mob, I doubled up my fist and took a Jack Dempsey stance." Simple, straightforward language that would have come naturally to a twelve-year-old boy in the Ozarks of that era is part of the delightful reading experience the novel offers.

## Structure

Rawls uses a traditional but fascinating structure for his novel. The entire story is actually a flashback book-ended by brief glimpses of Billy Colman as a man of roughly sixty-five years of age. The entire first chapter is set in the Snake River Valley in Idaho as the adult Colman encounters a redbone hound in need of help. This experience takes him back fifty years and, as he sits by the fire and fingers the gold and silver cups from his mantel, the tale is spun.

The actual story of Billy and Old Dan and Little Ann covers four years. We meet Billy at age ten and learn of his longing for hunting hounds. Once he has instituted a plan for getting those dogs, the next two years are covered rather quickly. Billy tells us, in summary, how he earned the money by the time he was twelve years old. Now the dogs enter the picture and the heart of the story unfolds. There are two parallel stories: the coming of age of a young mountain boy and the mystical love and loyalty of two redbone hounds. It is the period of Billy's life from ages twelve to fourteen that comprises most of the story's action and challenges. By the time Billy is fourteen, Old Dan has been mauled by a mountain lion and dies of his wounds and Little Ann follows quickly, dying of a broken heart. Their big accomplishment as hunting dogs has brought in enough money for the Colman family to leave the farm, and so the story quickly draws to an end.

Following chapter one, in which the older Colman appears, we see Billy saving for his dogs in chapters two and three. Billy gets his dogs in chapter four, and that is when the real story is launched, as the procurement of the hounds, his heart's desire, sets his life on an entirely new path. Three chapters are devoted simply to the journey to get the dogs and the subsequent journey back home. At the age of thirteen, Billy begins his coon hunting life with his dogs, and two entire chapters cover their very first hunt, one focusing entirely on the chopping down of the giant sycamore. Through the next five chapters, Billy and his hounds share a series of increasingly complex and threatening challenges, each followed by a period of calm and celebration. In this way the tension



mounts until, in chapter fourteen, Grandpa announces the hunting competition. Four chapters are devoted to the competition, also with its series of challenges and moments of glory. Chapter nineteen brings the ultimate challenge, the attack of the mountain lion, and then in chapter twenty, the Colman family leaves the farm and moves to town.

Interestingly, the main story is also book-ended by another set of parallel incidents to do with the encounter with a mountain lion. As Billy's walks home with his new puppies, he is forced to spend the night in a cave. A mountain lion howls all around the cave, frightening boy and pups, but the male dog goes to the entrance of the cave and barks a puny, puppy-style warning to the lion. At the end of the story, it is a mountain lion that kills Old Dan, but not before Dan trees the cat and curls his lip and growls at the creature, behavior Billy has never before witnessed in his dog. Could it be the same mountain lion, come back to show the dog who is boss? In the first encounter, Billy, as scared as he is, seeks to protect his dogs from the lion. At the end, it is his attempt to save his dogs from the lion that causes Billy to fall, putting his own life at risk. This time, however, the dogs leap to his defense and give their lives for Billy as he kills the lion. In the first encounter he is a little boy with two puppies. In the final encounter he is a young man with two reliable, mature dogs.



## Quotes

"It's not easy for a young boy to want a dog and not be able to have one. It starts gnawing on his heart, and gets all mixed up in his dreams. It gets worse and worse, until finally it becomes almost unbearable." Chapter 2, p. 16

"Realizing that everything was forgiven, I stood up and dried my eyes. Papa was pleased with his new overalls. The light that was shining from my mother's eyes, as she fingered the cheap cotton cloth, was something I will never forget." Chapter 6, p. 51

"It was a beautiful night, still and frosty. A big grinning Ozark moon had the countryside bathed in a soft yellow glow. The starlit heaven reminded me of a large blue umbrella, outspread and with the handle broken off." Chapter 8, p. 69

"If a man's word isn't any good, he's no good himself." Chapter 8, p. 77

"I could scold them a little, but I could no more have whipped one of them than I could have kissed a girl. After all, a boy just doesn't whip his dogs." Chapter 10, p. 92

"As I passed under the branches of the bur oak tree, I looked up into the dark foliage. I could see the bright eyes of the ghost coon. Everything that had happened on this terrible night was because of his very existence, but it wasn't his fault. I knew he was a silent witness to the horrible scene. Behind me lay the still body of a young boy. On my left a blue tick hound lay torn and bleeding. Even after all that had happened, I could feel no hatred for the ghost coon and was not sorry I had let him live." Chapter 13, pgs. 130-131

"Each noise I heard and each sight I saw was very familiar to me but I never grew tired of listening and watching. They were a God-sent gift and I enjoyed them all." Chapter 14, p. 141

"Walking along in the line, I noticed the beautiful red coats, the caps, and the soft leather boots worn by the other hunters. I felt out of place in my faded blue overalls, old sheepskin coat, and scuffed and worn shoes, but to the wonderful men it made no difference. They treated me like a man, and even talked to me like a man." Chapter 15, p. 156

"You can read everyday where a dog saved the life of a drowning child, or lay down his life for his master. Some people call this loyalty. I don't. I may be wrong, but I call it love - the deepest kind of love ... It's a shame that people all over the world can't have that kind of love in their hearts ... There would be no wars, slaughter or murder; no greed or selfishness. It would be the kind of world that God wants us to have - a wonderful world." Chapter 18, p. 184



"I looked at his grave and, with tears in my eyes, I voiced these words: 'You were worth it, old friend, and a thousand times over.' In my heart I knew that there in the grave lay a man's best friend." Chapter 19, p. 201

"I had heard the legend about the red fern. How a little Indian boy and girl were lost in a blizzard and had frozen to death. In the spring, when they were found, a beautiful red fern had grown up between their two bodies. The story went on to say that only an angel could plant the seeds of the red fern, and that they never died; where one grew, that spot was sacred." Chapter 20, pgs. 209-210.

# Adaptations

The novel, *Where the Red Fern Grows* was adapted to film by Doty-Dayton Production in 1974. Starring in the film were James Whitmore as Billy's grandpa and a young Stewart Peterson of Cokesville, Wyoming, as ten-year-old Billy. The film was directed by Norman Tokar. The movie captures the warmth and spirit of an Oklahoma family and the two beautiful coon dogs who joined their lives. The movie is a visual masterpiece recalling the boyhood days of the ambitious Woodrow Wilson Rawls.

A video of *Where the Red Fern Grows, Part Two*, released in 1992, features Wilford Brimley and Doug McKeon. In this continuation of the classic novel, Billy returns from WWII to his grandfather's home and tries to readjust to civilian life. However, the killing he witnessed in the war, along with the loss of a leg, have embittered him.

It is through the gift of two puppies and a new friend that Billy rediscovers himself.

*Where the Red Fern Grows* has been recorded on two audiocassettes by Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio Publishing Group, read by Richard Thomas, 1989. Listening Library produced one read-along audiocassette as part of the "Young Adult Cliffhangers Series" in 1984. It includes a book and teacher's guide. Frank Muller read the text for an unabridged reading of *Where the Red Fern Grows* in 1995. It was recorded on six audiocassette tapes by Recorded Books.

An unabridged edition read by Anthony Heald was recorded on six audiocassette tapes in 1995 by Listening Library. A second set by Anthony Heald on seven audiocassette tapes was produced by Books on Tape in 1996. A third set of six of audiocassette tapes by Anthony Heald was recorded by Chivers North America in 1997.

*Summer of the Monkeys* was released in video format in 1998 by Buena Vista Home Video. Directed by Michael Anderson, it features Corey Seiver, Michael Ontkean, Wilford Brimley, Leslie Hope, and Katie Stuart.

In his book *Summer of the Monkeys*, fourteen-year-old Jay Berry Lee, a happy, carefree boy roaming the Oklahoma Ozark river bottoms finds twenty-nine monkeys in a tree. Like Billy in *Where the Red Fern Grows* Jay has a dog, runs the river bottoms, and has a family with a dire need for money (this time for an operation for the boy's sister). With advice from his grandpa, Jay sets out to claim the reward offered for the capture and safe return of the monkeys, which have escaped from a traveling circus.

Themes of strong family values, hard work, devotion, and respect for one's elders are central to this tale, as they were to *Where the Red Fern Grows*.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Billy talks about being a hunter from the time he could walk. What were you like as a very young child? How have your youthful dreams influenced who you are now?

2. Have you ever wanted something so much it affected your eating and sleeping habits? Explain.

3. Billy's grandfather says that determination is good for a boy to have. More than anything, Billy wants two redbone coonhounds to train for hunting. How does Billy acquire them?

4. Taking into account the Coleman family's financial position, would it have been easier for Billy to just give up?

How does setting a goal and achieving that goal help a person grow and mature? How did it help Billy?

5. Billy's mother compares him to the young Daniel Boone. How is her comment an accurate description of him?

6. Trapping is a fully acceptable activity for Billy. What do people think of this activity where you live?

7. Billy makes a big decision to walk to Tahlequah, thirty miles away, to get his dogs at the railroad depot. What kind of courage did this require? He left without telling his parents. What would they think happened when Billy was gone when morning came? What would your parents think? What would they do?

8. Rawls uses strong foreshadowing in chapter six. What do you think might happen?

9. Billy is thankful for his pups. Have you had circumstances come together to help you do something special or acquire something special? How did you feel?

Compare your response of thankfulness with Billy's response of thankfulness.

10. Billy's mother worries about him hunting alone at night, even though he is nearly fourteen. His father understands he is growing up, but his mother wants to keep him a boy. How do your parents feel about you growing up? Compare your parents' feelings to Billy's parents' feelings.

11. The death of a young person is a terrible tragedy. Compare Billy's reaction to the death of Rubin Pritchard or the death of his dogs to the reaction of someone you know who has gone through a similar experience of loss.

Perhaps you have experienced such loss.



If so, can you talk about your reaction to that loss?

12. Billy feels strongly that he must keep his word with his dogs, that if they treed their first coon he would give it to them. What does Papa mean when he says, "If a man's word isn't any good, he's no good himself."

13. What would our society be like today if this code of ethics were still practiced?

What would your school, community, and family be like if this code of ethics were practiced?

14. Billy and his dogs become champion hunters. Outline the process Billy, Little Ann, and Old Dan went through to become champions.

15. How did Billy's attitude and character change as he experienced trials and success? What is the evidence of these changes?

16. Billy and his family leave the farm and move to town following the death of his dogs. Compare Billy's life on the farm with his new life in town. What would life in town have been like for Old Dan and Little Ann? Was it good that they did not live to move to town?

Explain.

17. Billy truly loves his grandpa and believes he has the best grandpa in the whole world. Describe your relationship with a "best" grandpa, grandma, aunt, uncle, or someone really important in your life. Compare that person to Billy's grandpa.

18. What have you learned about these topics from reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*: love, devotion, perseverance, family, faith, friendship?

19. Explain this statement as it relates to *Where the Red Fern Grows*: This story is fiction, but it is true.



## Essay Topics

Every journey to maturity creates memories for the growing youngster, and many of those memories will be triggered by tangible items, actually saved or merely recalled. Discuss the tangible items that became the "props" of Billy's journey to adulthood.

Billy's three sisters are never given names or specific ages. All we know is that they are all younger than Billy. What would be the purpose of leaving three characters so vaguely defined, and what would have been the effect on the story if each had been given a name, age, description, and personality?

Consider whether Old Dan and Little Ann are actually Billy's guardian angels, using evidence from the story to support your position. Remember that neither position is "wrong" as long as the story supports your conclusion.

Mentorship by representatives of older generations is a key to the successful development of a culture's youth. Discuss the specific lessons Billy is taught by his father and grandfather as well as the values he gradually learns from associating with them.

The five-day hunting competition is Billy's first foray into the world of men, and there he is completely immersed in the manly hunting lifestyle. Identify the critical events of the competition by which Billy learns a lesson or deepens his understanding of the world.

The two dogs encounter a mountain lion on their first night with Billy and on their last night with Billy (because Dan dies that night and Ann begins the slow journey to death that night also). Consider the two encounters. How they are alike and how they are different? What characteristics do they bring out in each dog? How does Billy respond each time? Then discuss the possible symbolism of the mountain lion in Billy's story.

Speculate about Billy's life in Tahlequah after the family leaves the farm at the end of the novel. The older Billy who speaks in the first chapter and in the very last passage tells us that he never returned to those hills again. Discuss your vision of how Billy's life transpires for the next few years.

The accidental death of Rubin Pritchard is surely the most awful experience Billy has ever witnessed. We never know how we will respond to such experiences until they befall us. Consider other ways Billy might have responded, and discuss what those actions would have said about his character. Why is each possibility "out of character" for Billy?

The "ghost coon" is old and crafty, and Billy cannot bring himself to kill him when they finally meet in the "ghost tree." Review the events of chapter thirteen and discuss what the "ghost coon" and "ghost tree" might represent to Billy, the Pritchards, and the other people living in the area.





## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Rawls writes a beautiful description of Billy's home in chapter two. Make a collage using pictures from magazines that illustrate his description. Display your finished piece.

2. Find out about steel traps, the kind Billy used. Talk to a hunter/trapper who has traps. Video tape a demonstration of how to set and spring a trap.

Interview the trapper to learn how he prepares traps, sets his trapping lines, prepares pelts, and markets them. Share your work with classmates.

3. Make a display of dogs who are hunting breeds. Include the redbone coonhound Billy wanted.

4. Billy saved for two full years to accumulate fifty dollars, the cost of two coon pups. Find the average cost of two coon pups today. What money-making activities could a ten-year-old do today to earn money? Make a list of them and what you think could be earned by each. How long would it take to acquire the needed money?

5. Billy hunts the river bottoms of his home. Find his home on a map. Use the Internet, encyclopedias, library books, or travel literature to learn about the Ozarks and the Cherokee lands. Share your information with your classmates.

6. Billy was a coon hunter. Write a paper on the regulations for coon hunting today. List the regulations for coon hunting gleaned from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Compare and contrast present day regulations to those of the early twenties.

7. Work with a friend and prepare an interview on the social issues and public sensitivities surrounding coon hunting, or perhaps any kind of hunting, today. Prepare questions to which you find answers. Role play. One of you is the interviewer and the other the hunter being interviewed. You may audio tape or video tape your interview to share with classmates.

8. Billy believes in God and prayer. List the occasions when Billy prays, asking for help. Beside each petition write the outcome/answer to his prayers.

9. Grandpa owns and operates a general store and mill. What is his store like?

Do we have anything like this today?

Research merchandising at this time in history. Sears Roebuck Catalog has reprinted their old catalogs and you can sometimes find them in libraries where they are considered resources. Many people living in rural and/or remote places used the catalog and placed "mail-order requests" to get a variety of items needed for everyday living.

How are general stores and the Sears Roebuck Catalog alike?



10. In chapter eighteen, Mr. Kyle said people call it loyalty when a dog lays down his life for his master, but he calls it love. What do you think about a dog showing love? Respond to what the gentleman said about love in the hearts of men and the kind of world this would be.

11. Billy enjoyed the company of his grandfather and the wisdom he shared with him. Interview an older relative or friend. What gems of wisdom can they share with you? Write a short paper about that person and talk about the influence he or she has in your life.

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