

Where the Red Fern Grows



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILSON RAWLS

Wilson Rawls was born in the Oklahoma Ozarks and came of age during the Great Depression. The financial collapse forced his family to move westward in search of work. Rawls himself became a carpenter and lived an itinerant existence throughout North and South America, taking odd jobs and even serving time in prison. He wrote throughout his travels and eventually settled down in Idaho, where he married his wife and began turning his manuscripts into novels. *Where the Red Fern Grows* was published in 1961 to great acclaim—the semi-autobiographical novel is based on Rawls’s childhood roaming the Ozarks with his pet bluetick hound. *Where the Red Fern Grows* is Rawls’s most widely known work. Having sold well over seven million copies, it is popular reading for school-aged children and has been lauded with the Evansville Book Award, the Great Stone Face Award, and more accolades. Rawls is also the author of *Summer of the Monkeys*, which was published in 1976. Like *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Summer of the Monkeys* also follows a young boy growing up in rural Oklahoma.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Where the Red Fern Grows is set at the height of the Great Depression, a devastating economic downturn which sent shockwaves through the world economy from 1929 to 1939. The effects of the Depression were felt particularly throughout the United States, with poverty and job scarcity becoming major issues for countless American families. Billy and his family are, the novel implies, struggling severely under the weight of the Depression—Billy’s parents have not always dwelled in the Ozarks, but have instead moved to the rural mountainous countryside out of a lack of other housing options. Billy’s father works a small farm to sustain their family while Billy’s mother frets about the educational and social opportunities her children are missing out on due to their rural, hardscrabble upbringing. At the end of the novel, with the help of the money Billy has made selling valuable raccoon hides, the Colmans at last have enough to move out of the Ozarks—their stroke of luck portends the end of the Great Depression and the revitalization of the American economy that was to come in the 1940s and 1950s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Where the Red Fern Grows takes place during the Great Depression, an economic disaster which lasted from 1929 to about 1939. Other novels for children which take place during

the Great Depression include Pam Munoz Ryan’s [Esperanza Rising](#), Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust*, and Christopher Paul Curtis’s [Bud, Not Buddy](#). The novel also shares a setting with many popular novels for both children and adults—the Ozark mountains, which stretch through Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and parts of Kansas provide a rich physical setting for novels which dramatize the human interior. Just as Billy Colman learns more about himself through his travails in the Ozarks, the novels [Winter’s Bone](#) by Daniel Woodrell and *The Weight of Blood* by Laura McHugh explore how the rugged and often isolated Ozark mountains influence the psychology and behavior of their main characters. Lastly, *Where the Red Fern Grows* features an important, meaningful relationship between a boy and his dogs. Books like Jack London’s [The Call of the Wild](#), Garth Stein’s [The Art of Racing in the Rain](#), Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s *Shiloh*, and Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn Dixie* also focus on the profound roles dogs can play in the lives of humans and explore the deeper meaning of the phrase “man’s best friend.”

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Where the Red Fern Grows*
- **When Written:** Late 1950s
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Children’s Literature
- **Genre:** Fiction; Children’s Novel
- **Setting:** The Oklahoma Ozarks
- **Climax:** Billy and his beloved hounds Old Dan and Little Ann encounter a terrifying mountain lion while hunting raccoons one night, and a fatal fight ensues.
- **Antagonist:** Rubin Pritchard
- **Point of View:** First-Person Retrospective

EXTRA CREDIT

Memorialized. At the public library in Idaho Falls, there is a statue of Billy Colman, Old Dan, and Little Ann which readers young and old can visit. Cast in copper by artist Marilyn Hoff Hansen, the statue stands in the town where Wilson Rawls wrote *Where the Red Fern Grows* and honors the massive impact the book has had on readers since its publication in 1961. The official title of the work is “Dreams Can Come True”—a name that reflects the book’s themes of patience, prayer, faith, and, above all, trust in one’s animal companions.



PLOT SUMMARY

After rescuing a hound from a dogfight on the streets of his town, Billy Colman, a man in his 50s, recalls the joy and heartache that the “wonderful disease of puppy love” brought him as a boy.

At 10 years old, Billy becomes obsessed with obtaining a pair of purebred redbone coonhounds and becoming the best raccoon hunter in the Oklahoma Ozarks. Billy begs his parents to buy him the hounds, but Mama and Papa can’t afford them. Over the course of two years, Billy scrounges and saves by selling bait to local fishermen and berries to his beloved Grandpa, who runs a small general store. Eventually, Billy saves the money he needs and enlists his grandfather’s help in ordering the dogs from a kennel in Kentucky. The kennel will only ship the dogs as far as Tahlequah, a town 20 miles from Billy’s home. Rather than wait for a ride into town, Billy decides to run away from home in the middle of the night and walk to Tahlequah himself to pick up the dogs.

In town, Billy finds himself the subject of stares and taunts from the local children, who mock his “hillbilly” appearance. Billy travels to the depot to retrieve the puppies, where a kindly stationmaster helps him open up their crate and make holes in a gunny sack so that Billy can carry them home. On the way out of town, Billy is again accosted by a cruel gang of children, but a kind marshal shoos the kids away. Billy returns home through the mountains with his pups. When they stop for the night, Billy hears the cries of a mountain lion. As his pups howl at the cat’s cries, Billy adds his voice to theirs—with his dogs beside him, he feels fearless. Back at home, Billy apologizes to his parents for running away without their permission and for ordering a pair of dogs without telling them. However, Mama, Papa, and Billy’s little sisters are delighted by the dogs, whom Billy has named Old Dan and Little Ann. As Billy’s parents help him build a doghouse and make collars for the dogs, Billy reveals to his Mama that two years ago he prayed that God would give him the patience to save up for his dogs—Mama declares that God must have heard Billy’s prayer.

With his grandpa’s help and advice, Billy traps a raccoon whose hide he uses to start training the dogs. Billy works with his dogs every night and develops a close relationship with them. Though the dogs can’t speak, Billy knows they understand him. On opening day of hunting season, Billy takes his dogs out on the hunt, promising them that all they have to do is “tree” a raccoon, or chase it up into a tree, and he will do the rest. The hunt is joyful and fun, and Billy finds himself crying tears of joy as he follows his bawling, barking dogs through the mountains in pursuit of their first raccoon. Dan eventually trees his first raccoon in the tallest sycamore in the valley. Billy has no way of climbing the tree and knows that the only option is to chop it down. Though he’s daunted by the task ahead of him, Billy knows he must keep his promise to his dogs. Using his ax, Billy

slowly chops away at the tree over the course of several days, taking only scant breaks to return home for food and rest. Billy’s father and grandfather encourage him to quit, but Billy reminds them of his promise. Billy comes close to felling the tree, but he can work no more when his hands begin to break out in terrible blisters. Billy prays to God to help him finish the job—suddenly, a strong breeze comes and knocks the tree over, allowing Dan and Ann to catch the raccoon.

Billy and his dogs have many exciting adventures throughout hunting season—but several times, they get into terrible danger. One night Dan becomes stuck in a muskrat den, and Ann and Billy must work together to dig him out. Another night, while hunting in the snowy woods, Ann becomes trapped on an ice floe in the river. Billy manages to save her just in the nick of time by hooking his lantern’s handle onto a piece of long cane and fishing her out. The most difficult incident Billy and his dogs face unfolds when a pair of brothers from a family of “bootleggers [and] thieves,” Rubin and Rainie Pritchard, bet Billy that his dogs can’t tree the infamous “ghost coon”—a raccoon who roams the woods near their family’s homestead. At Grandpa’s encouragement, Billy takes the bet and meets the Pritchard boys in the woods near their home. After a long night, Ann and Dan tree the infamous raccoon—but Billy develops such respect for the creature that he refuses to make his dogs kill it. Enraged, Rubin begins beating Billy for being “chicken-livered.” As Rubin and Billy fight, Dan and Ann get into a fight with Rubin and Rainie’s blue tick hound. When Rubin notices and picks up Billy’s ax to rush at Billy’s hounds with it, he trips, burying the ax in his stomach. Billy pulls the ax from the dying Rubin’s belly as the traumatized Rainie runs for home.

Billy tells his parents what has happened, and the next day, a search party goes out to retrieve Rubin’s corpse. Grandpa calls Billy to the store the next day to talk to him about the incident and to apologize for involving Billy in the bet. Grandpa then tells Billy that a large hunting competition is taking place nearby in just a few days—he reveals that he’s entered Billy, Ann, and Dan in the contest. Several days later, Billy, Grandpa, and Papa load up Grandpa’s buggy and head off to the competition, determined to bring home the grand prize: a large and handsome golden cup. When the group stops for the night, Billy becomes concerned after hearing two different owls’ hoots—an omen of bad luck.

At the competition, Billy, Papa, and Grandpa settle in amongst the other hunters who have pitched their tents over an acre of land. Though Billy is nervous to be in the presence of such seasoned hunters, he enters Little Ann in a dog show and finds himself surprised, touched, and overwhelmed when she takes home best in show. For several days, Billy and his dogs rest and prepare while they watch the other hunters go through eliminations. When it’s Billy’s night to hunt, a judge accompanies him, Papa, Grandpa, and the dogs downriver. Dan and Ann easily tree and kill three raccoons. The judge is

impressed by their remarkable teamwork and announces that Billy and his dogs will move on to the finals the next night. That evening, Dan and Ann tree their first raccoon with ease. As Billy and Papa skin the animal, they notice a storm approaching. Papa worries that the storm will make the hunt difficult, but Billy suggests that a storm will stir the raccoons from their hiding spots. As sleet and snow begin to fall, Billy and his team press onward—but when the storm worsens and the group loses sight of the dogs, the judge suggests returning home. Billy, however, refuses to give up. He prays that God will make Old Dan's voice heard—soon, Old Dan bawls, and Billy tracks him to a nearby gully. Upon arriving at the tree, however, Billy realizes Grandpa is not with the rest of the group. Billy and the others double back and find Grandpa in a field—he has fallen and twisted his ankle, but he is alive.

Billy fells the hollow tree where his dogs have forced three raccoons into hiding. Dan and Ann catch two, but the third one gets away. Billy knows they need the third raccoon to win. Dan and Ann seem to intuit it, too, and they run off into the storm in search of the last raccoon. As the storm settles and daylight approaches, a search party arrives at the gully and helps get Grandpa back to camp. One member of the party reports seeing Billy's frost-covered dogs circling a tree nearby. Billy makes his way to the tree and helps his dogs capture the raccoon. The whole group returns to camp, where the head judge announces Billy the winner of the hunt and awards him a golden cup and a jackpot of \$300. A doctor brings Grandpa to a nearby town to fix up his ankle while Billy, Papa, Dan, and Ann head home to a warm reception from Mama and the girls. Upon seeing the money Billy has won, Mama happily announces that God has answered her prayers. That night, she and Papa feed the dogs two heaping plates of food and pray beside their doghouse while Billy, perplexed, watches from his bedroom window.

Billy takes advantage of the final days of hunting season and continues taking his dogs out each night to hunt. One night, they scent an animal that isn't a raccoon. Billy thinks it's a bobcat and allows his dogs to pursue it through the woods and tree it—but as Billy approaches the tree to scare the animal down, he realizes that his dogs have treed a fearsome mountain lion. A horrible, bloody fight ensues—Dan and Ann rip and tear into the mountain lion's flesh as Billy tries to hack the cat to death with his ax. The cat fights back, wounding Dan and Ann terribly before at last succumbing to its wounds and dying. As Billy inspects his wounded dogs, he realizes that though Little Ann's wounds are mostly superficial, Dan has sustained a terrible, deep wound to his belly. On the walk home, Dan's entrails begin spilling from his gut. Back at the house, Mama tries to patch Old Dan up, but it's no use—his wounds are too severe, and by the time daylight breaks, he is dead.

Although Billy tries to focus on the fact that he still has Ann, it soon becomes clear that something is terribly wrong. Ann

refuses to eat and keeps trying to hide in bushes and brambles at the far end of the property—Billy and Papa realize she has lost the will to live. One night, Ann crawls to Old Dan's grave on a nearby hillside to die herself. Billy asks Mama why God would have taken his dogs from him and caused him so much pain. Mama admits that she and Papa have long been praying that they'd be able to save enough money to move back to town and make sure that Billy and his sisters can get an education—now that they have the money from the competition, their prayers have been answered, but Mama feared having to leave Billy and his dogs behind with Grandpa. Now that the dogs have died, Mama says, their family won't be split up. Mama urges Billy to see that God has answered her prayers. Billy, however, is unable to feel anything but pain as he buries Little Ann beside her brother.

Several months later, Billy is helping his parents pack up their belongings in their wagon so that they can move back to town. Before leaving, Billy returns to his dogs' graves and sees that a magnificent **red fern** has sprouted between them. Recalling a local legend which tells of a red fern planted by angels which sanctifies the ground where pure souls have died, Billy calls his family over to look at the fern. Mama and Papa declare that the fern must be "God's way of helping Billy understand why his dogs died." Billy says he understands at last and feels better about their deaths. The older Billy finishes his tale by stating that though he's never returned to the Ozarks, he knows that if he ever gets to, he will find the red fern continuing to bloom upon the hillside where Dan and Ann were laid to rest so many years ago.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Billy Colman – The protagonist and narrator of the novel. The older Billy Colman is a man in his fifties who feels compelled to relive the memories of his Ozark mountain youth after rescuing a hound from a dogfight on his way home from work one afternoon. The hound reminds him of the two hounds he owned as a young boy, Old Dan and Little Ann, and the adventures they shared over the course of a fateful, formative year when Billy was 12. Billy is faithful, determined, motivated, and loyal—and through his relationship with his dogs, he comes to learn more and more about himself, his place in the world, his beliefs, and his values each and every day. Billy saves up for two years to buy himself a pair of purebred redbone coonhounds in hopes of becoming the best raccoon hunter in the Ozarks. With Little Ann and Old Dan by his side, Billy has many adventures—some exciting, some frightful, and some emotional. As Billy's faith in his dogs' loyalty, in God's love, and in his own capability for resilience and perseverance is put to the test again and again, Billy finds himself learning important lessons about family, responsibility, and commitment. Billy is an

emotional and expressive young man who cries and laughs easily, who loves with a full and open heart, and who isn't afraid to declare his belief in a higher power. He has a clear sense of right and wrong, a profound respect for the wonder of nature, and a deep, expansive intuitiveness which allows him to understand what his dogs are thinking and feeling (and share his own feelings with them, too) in spite of the fact that they're not human. Through Billy's journey, Wilson Rawls explores themes of masculinity and emotion, love and loyalty, faith and prayer, and the lessons a dog's love can teach their human counterparts.

Billy's Father / Papa – Billy's father is a thoughtful, supportive, and hardworking man who does all he can to provide for his family. Though the novel is relayed through Billy's eyes, meaning that the specifics of Papa's past and present struggles are never fully explored, Rawls gives his readers the sense that Papa is a proud man who has fallen on hard times. As Papa works day in and day out, toiling in the fields beyond his homestead in order to provide for his family, he teaches Billy about the value of hard work and determination. Papa's heart breaks at the idea of being unable to give his children everything they want and deserve—it is clear that Billy and his sisters' lack of access to good educations weighs on him, as does their desire for material things that are impossible for him to acquire on their behalf. Nevertheless, Billy's father shows himself to be a man of faith, perseverance, and resilience even in the toughest of times. Papa is proud of Billy for working so hard with his dogs and dedicating himself so entirely to their training and success. When Mama worries that Billy is in danger or tries to keep him from going out with his dogs into the cold or the rain, Papa tempers Mama's anxiety by reassuring Billy that he and the dogs have their love and support no matter what. Billy's relationship with his father ties in with themes of masculinity and emotion as well as prayer and faith over the course of the novel as Billy and his father have difficult, intense, existential discussions—often while skinning a raccoon that Old Dan and Little Ann have just caught. Supportive, thoughtful, emotional, and yet steadfast and calm in the face of worry and fear, Papa is an important figure in Billy's coming-of-age journey.

Billy's Grandfather / Grandpa – Billy's paternal grandfather is a kind and scrappy old man who runs a small general store serving a remote Ozark mountain town. A spitfire of a man who loves his family and community, Grandpa was a skilled and seasoned raccoon hunter in his day. When Billy becomes obsessed with obtaining a pair of hounds of his own and using them to hunt raccoons, Grandpa sees an opportunity to relive his glory days and commits wholeheartedly to helping Billy realize his dreams. Grandpa is supportive of Billy through and through, helping him to order the hounds from a kennel in Kentucky, trap a raccoon whose hide can be used to train them, and even keeping track of the skins Billy brings to the general

store to sell. Grandpa is so supportive of Billy's hunting, in fact, that he sometimes even gets Billy into troublesome or tricky situations, such as when he encourages Billy to accept Rubin and Rainie Pritchard's challenge to hunt the fabled "ghost coon" native to their part of the mountains, or when Grandpa enrolls Billy in a hunting competition which tests Little Ann and Old Dan as they've never been tested before. In spite of his occasional overenthusiasm, Grandpa's heart is always in the right place—and his love for Billy, Ann, and Dan never wavers. From his grandfather, Billy learns important lessons about nature, masculinity, and perseverance.

Old Dan – The larger of Billy's hounds. Old Dan is bolder and more aggressive than his sister and littermate, Little Ann. Dan eventually grows to be larger and more physically powerful, but he often finds himself following the more calculating Ann's lead on their hunts. Though Old Dan is not a human character in the novel, he and Little Ann are so intimately emotionally connected to Billy that the relationships the three of them form with one another become the central point around which the entire novel revolves. Old Dan is loyal, brave, and intrepid—he is scrappy and up for any brawl, and over the course of his first hunting season, he accrues an impressive number of toughened scars from his battles against raccoons, bobcats, and other small game. Dan is unafraid to put himself in dangerous physical situations—he raids muskrat dens, climbs up the insides of hollow trees, and launches himself into fights with raccoons, other dogs, and even a mountain lion. Though Dan dies at the end of the novel after sustaining mortal wounds in a fight to the death against a mountain lion, Billy recognizes the intensity and profundity of the love and loyalty Dan showed him throughout his short life. Billy admires Dan's loyalty and his unquestioning selflessness—Dan gives his life to save Billy's, an act which devastates Billy but simultaneously assures him of the depths of his dog's love. By witnessing the close relationship between Dan and Ann and seeing the ways in which the dogs care for one another, Billy learns important lessons about love, loyalty, and the beauty of animal and natural life.

Little Ann – The smaller of Billy's hounds. Little Ann is, Billy deduces, the runt of her litter—but what she lacks in size, she makes up for in smarts. Little Ann is, in many ways, a foil to her brother, Old Dan. Where Dan is large, headstrong, and bold, Ann is small, crafty, and timid. Little Ann is able to outwit raccoons with ease, picking up on their tricks and paying attention to the subtle changes in scent and tracks that the more bullheaded Dan often ignores. Little Ann is loving, patient, and gentle—she licks Dan's wounds after his fights with raccoons, bobcats, and other small game, and she shows similarly affectionate behavior to Billy, Mama, and Billy's sisters. The relationship between Little Ann and Old Dan is loving and deep—so deep, in fact, that toward the end of the novel, when Dan succumbs to wounds sustained in a fight against a mountain lion and perishes, Little Ann gives up her

will to live, lies down upon Dan's grave, and dies. Though Billy is devastated by the loss of his dogs, their relationship during their healthy, wild days as well as throughout their sad final hours teaches him a great amount about love, loss, loyalty, and the beauty of animals and the natural world.

Billy's Mother / Mama – Billy's mother is a kind, religious, and anxious woman who dreams of one day moving her family from their Ozark home into the city where they can have access to better educations and more economic resources. Mama is deeply anxious when Billy starts hunting in the Ozarks—she worries about him being out every night and getting into trouble or danger. At the same time, Mama knows that her “little boy” is growing up and wants to allow him the freedom to explore the world around him and learn important lessons about life, love, and perseverance. Mama is one of the most religious characters in the book—she is a woman who believes in the power of prayer and who wants to impress upon her children the important role that faith can play in a person's life. Mama is also one of the most emotional characters in the novel—though she is a woman, her arc often ties in with the novel's theme of masculinity and emotion as she shows Billy through example that it is more than okay to feel one's feelings deeply and authentically, even when those feelings are vulnerable or difficult. Through Mama, Billy learns important lessons about faith, feeling, and love.

Rubin Pritchard – Another Ozark mountain youth who is part of the infamous and insular Pritchard clan of bootleggers and thieves. A large, imposing boy two years Billy's senior, Rubin is a bully through and through. When Rubin's younger brother Rainie challenges Billy to a bet, claiming that Billy's dogs won't be able to tree the infamous “ghost coon”—a large, wily, uncatchable raccoon native to the Pritchards' part of the Ozarks—Rubin repeatedly attempts to get Billy to give up and surrender his money before the terms of the bet have been determined either way. Rubin isn't just physically intimidating—he's also verbally abusive as he tries to get Billy to give up on his dogs. When Billy refuses to give into Rubin and Rainie's bullying and decide to call his dogs off of killing the “ghost coon,” Rubin and Rainie become incensed. Rubin starts beating Billy for being yellow and “chicken-livered”—so Ann and Dan turn on Rubin and Rainie's blue tick hound. When Rubin takes up Billy's ax and runs toward the dogfight, intending to kill Ann and Dan, he trips and impales himself upon the ax. Rubin dies almost immediately, leaving Rainie traumatized and Billy forced to confront the swiftness of death, the randomness of life, and the lifelong guilt that accompanies bearing witness to such a tragedy.

Rainie Pritchard – Rubin's younger brother Rainie is a young boy about Billy's age. Nervous, shifty, and always looking to make a bet, Rainie is wily and excitable. Rainie is the one who suggests Billy take on a bet that his dogs can tree the infamous “ghost coon”—an old and wily raccoon who roams the territory

around the Pritchards' homestead. Billy accepts the bet at his grandfather's behest, but when he arrives on the Pritchards' home turf, Rubin and Rainie denigrate him and his dogs, urge Billy to give up before the bet is done, and turn on him when he trees but refuses to make his dogs kill the raccoon. Rainie calls for Rubin to beat Billy, demonstrating his desire for violence and his excitable, changeable nature—but when Rubin falls on Billy's ax, impaling himself, Rainie becomes full of terror and succumbs to a debilitating shock. Rainie's meanness, then, is ultimately a mask covering his vulnerable nature—he idolizes his older brother and is devastated when Rubin dies.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Marshal – A kindly marshal in Tahlequah. The marshal is large and intimidating, but Billy recognizes him as a friend rather than a fearsome figure of authority after the marshal rescues Billy from a gang of cruel children (the Tahlequah kids) who tease, taunt, and beat Billy for being a “hillbilly.”

The Stationmaster – A kindly stationmaster in Tahlequah who helps Billy unpack his puppies from the crate in which they were shipped. The stationmaster watches Billy's emotional first meeting with his dogs and declares that it seems like the pups “already know [him.]”

Billy's Sisters – Billy's younger sisters, always represented as a gaggle of excitable and emotional children.

The Judge – The judge assigned to evaluate Billy and his hounds' performances during the hunting competition toward the end of the novel. The judge is impressed and deeply moved by the close relationship Billy shares with his hound dogs—and with the dogs' love for and loyalty to one another.

Mr. Benson and Mr. Kyle – Two fellow hunters who come to Billy and his family's aid after they spend a long night hunting in a terrible snowstorm. Mr. Benson and Mr. Kyle both marvel at the depths of Billy's dogs' loyalty to their master, to the hunt, and to one another.

The Head Judge – The head judge of the hunting competition.

Tahlequah Kids – A gang of cruel children who tease Billy and pick on him for being a “hillbilly” and even harass his brand-new hound puppies.

Grandma – Billy's grandma.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE LESSONS OF A DOG'S LOVE

At the heart of *Where the Red Fern Grows* is the beautiful relationship between a boy and his dogs. When Billy Colman buys himself two hound pups,

he makes a lifelong promise to care for them both. As the dogs grow and learn to hunt, they become much more than pets. Wilson Rawls ultimately argues that through caring for dogs and learning to see them as soulful, feeling, capable creatures, human beings can learn important lessons about hard work, resilience, and the relationship between loyalty and love.

Over the course of the novel, Wilson Rawls tracks Billy's evolving relationships with his dogs in order to show how Old Dan and Little Ann teach Billy important lessons about life and love. The first major lesson Billy's dogs teach him concerns the value of hard work. When Billy is 10, he becomes consumed with the idea of getting a pair of dogs with whom he can hunt raccoons. Billy's Mama and Papa, however, tell him that they can't afford to buy him the purebred dogs he wants. Over the next two years, Billy commits to saving every penny he earns through odd jobs such as selling bait to local fishermen and blackberries to his grandpa. After a lot of hard work, Billy saves up enough to order a pair of red hounds and have them sent from Kentucky to the nearest town, Tahlequah, 20 miles away. Billy travels on foot to Tahlequah to collect his pups; as he opens the crate they've traveled in and he cries as the pups cover him in licks, the Tahlequah stationmaster (who has been looking over the package since its arrival) marvels that the pups "already know" Billy. Billy feels he is destined to have these dogs—and as he meets them for the first time, it is apparent even to the stationmaster that there is something profound or even fated about the dogs' arrival in Billy's life. The reason, perhaps, that their arrival feels so fated is because of how hard Billy has worked for them. He feels he knows them because they have already taught him something important: that hard work done meticulously and diligently over a long time pays off.

The second major lesson Billy's dogs teach him is about resilience, perseverance, and bravery. After getting his dogs, Billy wastes no time in training them to be top-notch hunters. As Billy works with them day after day—and, once hunting season starts, takes them out to hunt each night—his relationship with the dogs develops even further. Billy is proud of his dogs' hard work and devotion to their tasks. Though the dogs' skills as hunters are innate, Billy begins to sense that they have even deeper reasons for their commitment to the hunt. Billy loves his dogs from the second he meets them—but as he begins working with them and getting to know them, he comes to see that their devotion to him and to their work is far beyond ordinary. Billy is grateful for his dogs' resilience and he attempts to repay them by promising to work just as hard as they do on each and every hunt. The dogs' determination and collective support during these nightly hunts becomes, over the course of the novel, a profound metaphor for the unique

lessons dogs can teach their owners about resilience in the face of difficulty or even danger.

The third major lesson Billy's dogs teach him is about love and loyalty. "People have been trying to understand dogs since the beginning of time," says one of the men at the hunting competition Billy attends toward the end of the novel. He continues, "You can read every day 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 call it love." In this passage, even a minor character is shown to understand what Billy and his family have already come to learn: that a dog's love is like no other, and that through having a relationship with a dog, one can come to understand new things about the limitlessness of love and loyalty.

Rawls further examines the dogs' sense of loyalty not just to Billy, but to one another. Toward the end of the novel, Billy and his dogs find themselves up against a mountain lion one night while hunting. Dan and Ann defend Billy from the vicious animal, and Dan is mortally wounded in the fight. After he dies the next morning, Ann loses the will to live and she, too, dies within a few days. Billy is left devastated—but he begins to take stock of just how much his dogs taught him while they lived. As a rare "sacred," **red fern** sprouts between Ann and Dan's graves, Wilson Rawls symbolizes the sanctity of the relationship Billy and his dogs shared. Dan gave his life to protect Billy, and Ann was so connected to her brother Dan that she gave up her life to be with him shortly after his death. Rawls further signals the lifelong poignancy of the three's devotion to one another when he has the older Billy state that "part of [his own] life is buried there [with the dogs] too." Dan and Ann's sacrifice teaches Billy that there is no limit to a dog's loyalty—and he carries the desire to embody the love and devotion his dogs showed both to him and to one another throughout his life.

Where the Red Fern Grows portrays dogs as creatures that stand to teach their human owners a great deal about faithfulness, devotion, persistence, and tenderness. In understanding and respecting dogs and other animals, Rawls argues, human beings can learn to develop a greater appreciation for their own lives and for the values of loyalty, selflessness, and perseverance.



THE CIRCLE OF LIFE AND COMING OF AGE

In *Where the Red Fern Grows*, the harsh realities of the world are never too far off: over the course of the novel, Billy Colman has both experiences and witnesses violence, cruelty, and death to varying degrees—both in the animal world and in the human one. Throughout the book, Wilson Rawls uses instances of violence and death, which are both necessary but often ugly or frightening parts of the circle of life, and Billy Colman's reaction to witnessing or participating

in acts of violence to ultimately argue that coming of age and growing up requires one to reckon with the darker parts of life.

Throughout *Where the Red Fern Grows*, Wilson Rawls uses several major instances of violence, loss, and death to illustrate how as Billy Colman learns more about nature and the circle of life—including its hardest, darkest realities—he finds himself growing up, coming into his own, and becoming more capable. The first instance of violence Wilson Rawls uses to demonstrate the circle of life—and thus Billy’s slow but steady coming of age—takes place when two local brothers, Rubin and Rainie Pritchard, challenge Billy to a bet that his dogs can’t catch a large old raccoon they call the “ghost coon.” Billy reluctantly accepts the bet at his grandfather’s behest, but the hunt takes a bloody and deadly turn that irrevocably changes Billy’s understanding of the circle of life and marks an important milestone in his coming-of-age journey. After Rubin and Rainie turn against Billy and threaten to beat him once his dogs successfully “tree” the “ghost coon,” or chase it up into a tree so that it can be caught—they’d assumed Billy would lose the bet and so they are humiliated when Billy wins—Old Dan and the Pritchard brothers’ blue tick hound begin fighting. Little Ann joins the fray, and soon it seems as if Billy’s dogs will kill the Pritchard boys’ hound. Rubin stops beating Billy, picks up Billy’s ax, and heads for the dogs with it—but he trips over a stick, impaling himself on the ax’s sharp blade. Rainie runs away in horror, but Billy stays with Rubin until he dies and he even (at Rubin’s request) pulls the ax from his abdomen. Rubin’s dog lives, but Rubin is dead, and Billy, having witnessed his first human death, trudges home to tell his parents what has happened. Billy’s reaction to this horrific incident shows that the experience has aged him. Though Billy’s mother laments that her “poor little boy” has seen such violence, Billy is no longer a “little boy” after the accident. While he wishes he could forget what he saw on the mountain, he knows that the warning his grandfather gives him just days after the incident—that Billy will carry what he witnessed “all through [his] life”—is correct.

The second major instance of violence that Wilson Rawls invokes in order to show how Billy’s experiences with death and violence mark milestones in his coming-of-age journey comes at the novel’s climax as Billy, Old Dan, and Little Ann face off against a fearsome mountain lion. The fight is an unbelievably bloody one—and the injuries Old Dan sustains from fighting off the cougar are fatal. Shortly after Old Dan succumbs to his injuries, Little Ann loses the will to live and she dies of self-inflicted starvation. Billy is devastated by the loss of his dogs—but as the months go by and he gets some distance from their deaths, he comes to see that Little Ann and Old Dan had their own places in the great circle of life.

Billy’s eventual acceptance of his dogs’ deaths represents another major milestone in his coming-of-age tale. After learning all his dogs have taught him—and after grieving their

loss—Billy is no longer a boy, but a young man who understands that loss and death must touch every life. In the wake of his dogs’ deaths, Billy struggles to understand the “reason” why they died. He insists that neither he nor the dogs did anything wrong—there is no earthly justification, he feels, for their passing, and no balm that will ever take away the pain and injustice of that fact. However, in the novel’s final chapter, set nearly a year after the dogs’ deaths, Rawls introduces readers to a version of Billy who is very different despite only being about six months older. Billy is no longer angry about his dogs’ deaths—and when he spots a sacred **red fern** sprouting from the ground between their graves, he becomes even more sage and accepting of the tragedy of their loss. As Billy and his family prepare to leave the Ozarks to go live in town, Billy looks at the “sad and lonely” house where he was born—it is no longer his home, and he feels little regret or remorse when their wagon pulls away from the land on which he grew up. This moment symbolizes that Billy has at last come of age and acquired a grave new understanding of the world through a combination of suffering, grace, and acceptance.

Billy Colman’s coming-of-age tale is one suffused with darkness, violence, and death—but also with the joy of love and the beauty of nature. Ultimately, Wilson Rawls argues that no one can come of age and begin the process of growing up without bearing witness to the darker parts of the circle of life and understanding that just as all things bloom and grow, all things must meet death at some point.



FAITH AND PRAYER

Where the Red Fern Grows is a book with overt religious overtones. Set in the Ozarks in the 1930s, the novel focuses on a religious family, the

Colmans, who believe not only in the legends and lore of their small mountain community but also in the power of prayer to transform one’s life. As Wilson Rawls investigates the role of religion and prayer in his characters’ lives, he ultimately suggests that faithful people are eager to make their realities accord with their belief systems—in other words, he suggests that it is his characters’ actions, whether or not there is some kind of higher power watching over them, that allows them to see their prayers delivered.

While Rawls does recognize the importance of faith and he hints that a higher power may have some hand in the events of the novel, he also makes sure to ground his characters’ experiences with prayer in the mindsets they adopt, the patience they practice, and the actions they take in order to help make their realities reflect their innermost hopes. The first major instance in which one person’s prayer comes to shape their reality occurs early on in the book: after finding an advertisement for a kennel breeding hounds in Kentucky, Billy drops to his knees and asks God to deliver to him the hound pups he wants so badly. Even after offering up this prayer,

though, Billy realizes that just asking will not be enough: he will need to do his part to prove he is worthy of having his prayers answered. For years, Billy works to save the money he needs to buy the hounds—and when he finally has the amount he needs, he thinks to himself that God is responsible for giving him the “heart, courage, and determination” to work hard toward his dream. On his first trip out hunting with the hounds, Billy thinks to himself: “This is what I [have] prayed for, worked and sweated for.” Through Billy’s experience, Rawls shows his readers how people of faith use prayer to help their realities reflect their innermost beliefs: that a higher power is guiding and helping them. Billy never credits God fully with having gotten him his dogs—but he does acknowledge that his belief that God enabled him to find reserves of strength and grit that he might not have been able to summon otherwise.

Another major instance in which a character’s reality comes to reflect their prayers happens about midway through the book on the tail end of a long, tiring raccoon hunt ending in Dan and Ann “treeing” (or chasing up into a tree) a large raccoon. Billy, who has promised to never to let his dogs tree a raccoon without stepping in himself to finish the job, gets to work chopping down the enormous tree. After Billy has spent days trying to fell the giant sycamore, he falls to his knees in exhaustion and he prays for God to “give [him] the strength to finish the job.” Just then, a wind rises up and blows the big sycamore over. Billy later asks his father if he thinks God “heard [his] prayer” and helped him, and his father answers that Billy must decide that for himself. Billy quietly decides on his own that God did intervene. This instance blurs the line between the idea of prayer as a tool of faith and self-motivation and prayer as a direct method of communication with a higher power. The wind is unlikely and perfectly timed—and yet it cannot be ignored that perhaps all of Billy’s hard work on the sycamore made it susceptible to falling over at even the slightest touch. Rawls uses this incident to further examine the ways in which people of faith use prayer to deepen their perceptions of how their realities align with their belief systems.

Toward the end of the novel, after Little Ann and Old Dan have died, Billy’s parents confess to him that they’ve long been praying that their family would be able to stay together after the two of them saved up enough money to move out of the hills and into town—but they fretted that Billy would want to stay behind with his dogs. Billy’s parents declare that while the loss of the dogs is devastating, their own prayers have, in a way, been answered: the dogs kept Billy safe as long as they needed to, and now the whole family can still stay together. “I know what you’re going through and how it hurts,” Billy’s father tells him after the dogs both die, “but there’s always an answer. The Good Lord has a reason for everything He does.” This ethos, while not exactly a prayer, embodies Billy’s parents’ desire to see the world around them reflect the faith and ideology they cling to in difficult times. Wilson Rawls’s characters hold a

worldview in which their experience of reality reflects the will of that higher power. Whether or not the dogs did actually die for any “reason,” the Colmans decide that the reason was God’s will to keep their family together—and this belief allows all of them to feel the blow of the beloved hounds’ loss softened just a bit.

Ultimately, Wilson Rawls uses the theme of faith and prayer to argue that while faith and trust in a higher power are important parts of many religious peoples’ lives, the actions of the faithful, too, have significant bearing on the ways in which they see their prayers answered. Through a combination of grace, openness, patience, and action, many of the characters in *Where the Red Fern Grows* find their most sacred prayers answered. Though Rawls purposefully leaves several instances of answered prayers ambiguous, allowing for the possibility that there is indeed a higher power, he ultimately points to the correlation between faith and action as the means by which most prayers are answered.



THE NATURAL WORLD

The majesty of the natural world is an important part of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. On nearly every page, there is some description of nature as the young Billy Colman tromps and tracks raccoons through the scenic Ozark mountains. Billy is under the spell of nature, and through Billy’s reverence for the beauty all around him—and his disdain for even the small “cities” miles and miles from his mountain home—Rawls argues that to exist alongside and commune with nature is to understand not just the world one finds around oneself but the wilds one encounters within oneself.

Over the course of the novel, Rawls uses Billy’s adventures in nature to show how as the boy becomes more familiar with the world around him, he also begins to better understand and enjoy his relationship with himself—ultimately suggesting that just as Billy grows through his time in nature, so too can all human beings. In order to demonstrate the ways in which adventures in nature allow people to challenge themselves, Wilson Rawls centers much of the book around Billy’s exploits in and around the Ozark mountains. Billy is a boy who has a deep relationship with nature, as he spends his days helping his father on their family’s small farm or fishing in the nearby river. When he travels to Tahlequah to retrieve his hound pups, he does so on foot, without shoes to shield his feet from the forest floor. On the way back, Billy proves himself to be resourceful by building a fire in a cave for himself and his pups—and he never once grows weary of the long walk through the towering sycamore forests and swampy bottoms of the Ozarks. On nights when Billy takes his dogs hunting, he takes stock of and marvels at the plant and animal life all around him. He knows trees by their leaves and animals by their calls, and he loves the easy pleasure of simply being alone in nature as much as he

loves the thrill of the hunt. Wilson Rawls takes care in the book's early chapters to paint Billy as a boy whose reverence for nature is pure and intense: he is a country boy who is skeptical of the city and a nature lover who has deep respect even for the animals he hunts. Rawls shows how taking such pleasure from the simplicity of the natural world allows one to be happy nearly all the time. Even when Billy is working hard in the sun, exploring the unknown, or putting himself into danger, he trusts in the natural world to hold and care for him. He doesn't fear the call of a mountain lion or resent the scratches he gets on his bare feet as he walks through the woods—Billy's relationship to nature is the most mature, stable aspect of his life.

As the book progresses, Rawls continues to use examples of Billy's adventures in the natural world to show how, the more time he spends in nature, the more he learns about himself. The hunting competition which Billy, his father, and his grandpa all attend together serves as a kind of litmus test for Billy's understanding of nature—and thus his understanding of himself, too. Billy is the only child competing in the hunting contest, yet with the help of Little Ann and Old Dan, he succeeds in taking home the winning golden cup after a long, harrowing final round of hunting conducted at night in the middle of a terrifying blizzard. Billy and his dogs nearly freeze to death in the cold, and yet Billy's faith in the idea that the natural world will in fact deliver them never wavers. It's not so much that he believes he can conquer nature—it's that he has, through his experiences in nature, come to understand his and his dogs' capacity for resilience in the face of tough situations. Billy's success in the hunting contest serves as a symbol of the ways in which he's come to understand the world around him and the world within himself simultaneously. He understands both the possibilities and limitations which nature represents, and though he recognizes nature's dangers, he remains committed to plunging deeper and deeper into those danger to prove his grit and worth to himself and to others.

Ultimately, Wilson Rawls uses *Where the Red Fern Grows* to illustrate how humans are dependent upon and inseparable from the natural world all around them. In exploring and understanding the ecosystems of plant and animal life around them, Rawls suggests, humans can ultimately achieve a deeper understanding not just of their place in the world but indeed of their own innermost selves.



MASCULINITY AND EMOTION

Wilson Rawls's *Where the Red Fern Grows* is a classic of children's literature, but one of the most groundbreaking things about the novel is its treatment of masculinity and emotion. Throughout the novel, Wilson Rawls shows his protagonist Billy Colman emoting openly—and Rawls shows the majority of men in Billy's life, including his father, doing the same and even encouraging

Billy's softer side. Rawls ultimately argues that society's understandings of masculinity can—and absolutely should—make space for a wide range of emotion, tenderness, and depth of feeling.

Billy Colman is a young boy who often finds himself flooded with feelings, unable to hold back whoops of laughter or falls of tears when they come to him. Though Billy is, toward the beginning of the novel, given to trying to control or conceal his emotions, he soon learns to be more open and nonjudgmental about them with the help of the men in his life—his father and his grandfather—who never discourage Billy from expressing himself however he needs to. Early on in the novel, Billy is given to intense emotions—but more often than not he tries to hide them or keep them to himself. When he asks his parents for a pair of dogs and they refuse him, explaining that times are too hard to afford anything other than what's needed to survive, Billy cries himself to sleep; in moments of emotion, he often finds himself fighting or choking back tears or reluctantly letting them slip out. Billy's instincts about hiding his emotions early on in the book, however, soon give way as he comes to accept that sometimes one can't—and shouldn't—try to keep a lid on their biggest feelings.

Billy's own father and grandfather are boisterous men who cry “big tears” when they laugh; who express their love for each other (and for Billy) earnestly through word and deed; and who equate masculinity not just with hard work and grit but with honesty, openness, and faith. Over the course of the novel, as Billy's relationships with his dogs, with nature, and with the men in his family continue to grow, he becomes more comfortable with his own emotions. He cries openly in moments of pride and frustration alike, such as the first time he hears Old Dan “bawl” to signal catching the trail of a nearby raccoon or when he becomes exhausted trying to chop down a giant sycamore in which a raccoon is hiding. Billy cries at the sight of his mother crying when she admits to her fears about him staying out all night in the mountains. He also cries as his dogs, in a “savage and brutal” fight, take down a large raccoon. He cries when his mother gives him permission to travel with his father and grandfather to a nearby hunting competition, and he cries when Little Ann wins best-in-show at the dog show there. Billy still sometimes judges his own tears as “silly” or unnecessary—but more often than not, he allows his emotions to flow openly, whatever they may be.

Sometimes, Billy simply can't hold his emotions back—he is, after all, only 12 for the majority of the novel—but even when he himself still expresses reservations about showing the full range of his feelings, the people around him never encourage him to stop crying or to deny his feelings. After Billy's dogs die and his emotions go haywire, his parents do ask him to stop his tears—but only because they begin to fear that Billy will make himself sick with sadness and desperation. His parents never police his emotions at any other point in the novel, consistently

allowing the young boy to cry when he's moved to do so. "It's hard for a man to stand and watch an old hound fight... [...] especially if that man has memories in his heart like I had in mine," the older Billy writes during the novel's first chapter, which is set many years in the future. Though this passage comes early in the novel, when put in context chronologically, it shows the ways in which Billy has grown to understand and respect his own emotions over time. He acknowledges that even "for a man," it's difficult to bear witness to pain and suffering—and that a man shouldn't resist his memories or emotions, but rather let them guide him through his most difficult moments. The older Billy ends up intervening in the street dogs' brawl and tenderly caring for the hound caught in the middle of it all.

Where the Red Fern Grows is a tearjerker of a book. Its intensity of action and emotion are palpable from beginning to end—and it is significant that a young boy is at the center of it all. As Billy Colman learns to process feelings of joy, longing, and grief, he becomes proud of his immense capacity for feeling rather than embarrassed by his inward emotions or outward demonstrations of them. Through Billy, Rawls suggests that all young boys should be taught that their emotions are valid, that their expressiveness is important, and that masculinity should not be dependent upon or defined by stoicism and silence.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE RED FERN

At the end of the novel, several months after the deaths of Old Dan and Little Ann, Billy Colman and his family prepare to move out of their Ozark mountain home and pursue a new life in town. As the family packs up their buggy to leave, Billy pays one last visit to his beloved hounds' graves—and sees that a beautiful red fern has sprouted between them. According to "old Indian legend," the red fern first sprouted where a young boy and girl froze to death while lost in a blizzard—rumor has it that "only an angel" can plant the seeds of the red fern in order to mark a "sacred" spot.

The red fern, then, comes to symbolize the sanctity of the spirit and the possibility of rebirth and renewal in the face of death and loss. Seeing the sacred fern upon his dogs' graves allows Billy to make peace with their deaths at last—an integral part of his coming-of-age journey and his understanding of the circle of life—and prepare to move on from his boyhood home and his childish notions of life and death. "Part of my life is buried there too," the older Billy says of his dogs' graves at the end of the novel. With this, the sprouting of the red fern both externalizes and symbolizes the "death" of a "Part of [Billy's] life" so that a

new chapter can begin and a new understanding of the world can take root and grow.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Yearling edition of *Where the Red Fern Grows* published in 1996.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● By this time, my fighting blood was boiling. It's hard for a man to stand and watch an old hound fight against such odds, especially if that man has memories in his heart like I had in mine. I had seen the time when an old hound like that had given his life so that I might live.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *Where the Red Fern Grows*, Billy Colman finds himself encountering a dogfight which reminds him of his own memories of the hounds he owned in his Ozark mountain boyhood. In this passage, the older Colman describes the feelings that watching the dogfight stirs up within him. He is both enraged at the sight of a dog fighting "against such odds" and touched by the memories of a dog who gave its life for his. This passage sets up the extreme devotion that Billy still feels to the memories of his boyhood hounds, Old Dan and Little Ann, even decades after the dogs' deaths. The anger he feels on behalf of this strange stray is a testament to the appreciation for animal life his dogs gave him, and to the devotion they inspired within him through their own love and loyalty. Billy understands that dogs have feelings just like people do—and he is determined to make sure that this dog is rescued from its tormentors and given back the dignity it deserves.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ Papa set me on his lap and we had a good talk. He told me how hard times were, and that it looked like a man couldn't get a fair price for anything he raised. Some of the farmers had quit farming and were cutting railroad ties so they could feed their families. If things didn't get better, that's what he'd have to do. He said he'd give anything if he could get some good hounds for me, but there didn't seem to be any way he could right then.

I went off to bed with my heart all torn up in little pieces, and cried myself to sleep.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Billy's Father / Papa

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, 10-year-old Billy Colman approaches his beloved father full of “puppy love” and “dog-wanting” and he asks for a pair of purebred redbone coonhounds. The dogs, though, are expensive—and here, as Billy's father sits him down to tell him about “how hard times [are,]” Billy at last understands that if he wants his dogs he'll have to earn them himself. Billy, however, is emotional both at the idea that his dogs are out of reach and at the idea of his parents going through suffering and hardship. Billy breaks down and cries but he makes sure to do so where he can't be seen by his parents since he doesn't want to upset them further. Billy and his father have a unique relationship—it is an emotional one in which both men are free to express what they're feeling. Billy remains ashamed of his emotions in this passage not because he feels that to show them would be a betrayal of masculinity, but because he wants to lessen the burden his parents are already feeling.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ I remembered a passage from the Bible my mother had read to us: “God helps those who help themselves.” I thought of the words. I mulled them over in my mind. I decided I'd ask God to help me. There on the bank of the Illinois River, in the cool shade of the tall white sycamores, I asked God to help me get two hound pups. It wasn't much of a prayer, but it did come right from the heart.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Billy's Mother / Mama

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20-21

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy Colman comes upon a discarded advertisement for a kennel in Kentucky which breeds the exact kind of hounds that Billy has been dying to own. Alone in the woods, Billy kneels and prays for God to help him obtain the pups. Billy's family is a family of faith—his mother, especially, is a deeply religious Christian who believes that God answers all prayers that come from deep within one's heart. In this passage, Rawls explores the impact that faith and prayer have had on Billy's life. Billy believes that prayer can impact his reality—but he doesn't yet understand that oftentimes, prayer simply enables people to fight harder for the realities they wish to see. Throughout the novel, Rawls will blur the lines between prayers that are answered because of Billy's own faith in himself and his commitment to hard work and prayers that seem to be answered by divine intervention. Either way, Rawls suggests, prayer has the power to shape a person's reality—and faith has the power to change a person's life.

☝ Lying back in the soft hay, I folded my hands behind my head, closed my eyes, and let my mind wander back over the two long years. I thought of the fishermen, the blackberry patches, and the huckleberry hills. I thought of the prayer I had said when I asked God to help me get two hound pups. I knew He had surely helped, for He had given me the heart, courage, and determination.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy Colman has just finished saving up the money he needs to purchase his hounds from a kennel in Kentucky. Over the course of two years, he has saved upwards of \$50—an exorbitant sum of money for a young boy growing up in the middle of the Great Depression. Here, as Billy reflects on his hard work, he also reflects on the nature of the prayer he offered up to God two years ago and how that prayer has impacted his life. In this passage, it's clear to Billy that God did not directly intervene in Billy's life and magically deliver his pups to him—instead, Billy's

faith that God would help answer his prayer gave Billy the “heart, courage, and determination” he needed to work hard, press forward, and never give up his confidence in his own ability to achieve his dreams. Billy’s prayer has come to shape his reality—but ultimately he has done all the hard work needed to see that prayer answered on his own.

●● It was too much for my grandfather. He turned and walked away. I saw the glasses come off, and the old red handkerchief come out. I heard the good excuse of blowing his nose. He stood for several seconds with his back toward me. When he turned around, I noticed his eyes were moist.

In a quavering voice, he said, “Well, Son, it’s your money. You worked for it, and you worked hard. You got it honestly, and you want some dogs. We’re going to get those dogs. Be damned! Be damned!”

Related Characters: Billy’s Grandfather / Grandpa, Billy Colman (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Billy raises the money he needs to purchase his hounds, he takes his can of coins to Grandpa’s general store so that his grandfather, who promised two years ago that he’d place the order for Billy when the time came, can contact the kennel about purchasing the hounds. As Grandpa looks at Billy’s uncut hair, scratched-up feet, and dirty clothes, he realizes just how hard Billy has worked for this money. Grandpa has seen Billy throw his heart and soul into raising the funds for his hounds for two years—but now, as the culmination of all that work makes itself apparent, Grandpa becomes overwhelmed by his own emotions and he breaks down in tears. Grandpa shields his tears from his grandson but he quickly rallies and he declares that Billy will soon have the dogs he wants so badly. As Grandpa hides his feelings from Billy in this crucial, pivotal moment, Rawls explores the ways in which masculinity and emotion relate to each other in the world of this novel. Grandpa and Billy are men of different generations—though Grandpa may very well have been encouraged to hide his less “masculine” emotions in his youth, Billy has never been made to do so—and he can see right through his grandfather’s halfhearted attempt to mask how he really feels.

Chapter 4 Quotes

●● By the road it was thirty-two miles away, but as the crow flies, it was only twenty miles. I went as the crow flies, straight through the hills.

Although I had never been to town in my life [...] I had the river to guide me.

[...] In a mile-eating trot, I moved along. I had the wind of a deer, the muscles of a country boy, a heart full of dog love, and a strong determination. I wasn’t scared of the darkness, or the mountains, for I was raised in those mountains.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Billy, unable to wait even a day longer to travel to Tahlequah to pick up his dogs from the depot there, sets off on foot across state lines to the faraway town. As he treks, he is filled with confidence and excitement. Billy takes the path that “the crow flies,” determined to mirror the travel patterns of the animals who live in the woods as he makes his way through the Ozark Mountains toward town. This passage demonstrates Billy’s deep reverence and appreciation for nature. Billy trusts that the mountains in which he has been raised will shelter and take care of him as he makes his way through—he doesn’t pause for even a moment to consider threats from the rough terrain or the intimidating animal life around him. Billy is confident in his relationship with nature and he’s determined to let nature guide him on his way to a new adventure. Before Billy has even obtained his dogs, they have already taught him an important lesson about trust, perseverance, and faith in the power of the natural world.

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● One pup started my way. I held my breath. On he came until I felt a scratchy little foot on mine. The other pup followed. A warm puppy tongue caressed my sore foot.

I heard the Stationmaster say, “They already know you.”

I knelt down and gathered them in my arms. I buried my face between their wiggling bodies and cried. The Stationmaster, sensing something more than just two dogs and a boy, waited in silence.

Related Characters: Billy Colman, The Stationmaster

(speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Billy, who has just arrived in Tahlequah after a night of traveling through the mountains on foot, navigates his way to the depot to pick up his dogs. As he passes through town, he is the subject of jeers and taunts from children and adults alike. By the time he reaches the depot he is sad and demoralized—but when the kindly stationmaster helps him open the crate containing the puppies that Billy has worked so long and so hard for, all of Billy's troubles melt away. As Billy meets his hound pups for the first time he is overwhelmed by his emotions—and as the stationmaster watches the meeting, the man, too, is touched by how the puppies “already know” Billy. Rawls implies that the profound, almost fated sense of love and connection between Billy and his pups comes from the intense way in which Billy has longed for his dogs and worked to bring them into his life. The dogs sense Billy's devotion to them right away—and they become determined to pay that devotion back through love and loyalty.

☝ What I saw in my pups gave me courage. My knees quit shaking and my heart stopped pounding.

I figured the lion had scented my pups. The more I thought about anything harming them, the madder I got. I was ready to die for my dogs.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Billy and his dogs have stopped in a mountain cave on the way back home from Tahlequah. Their stopover is pleasant, calm, and enjoyable, and Billy loves watching his pups play—until the sound of a mountain lion's terrifying call interrupts their rest. As the pups hear the call, they go to the mouth of the cave and they begin howling in response. Billy believes his pups are trying to protect him by scaring the mountain lions off with their cries. Billy is touched and moved by his pups' act of courage and devotion—and their howls give him strength and bravery of his own. As Billy

senses his dogs' loyalty to him even in the face of danger, he becomes incensed by the idea of anything that would try to hurt them. Billy is determined to repay their loyalty and devotion by expressing his own commitment to loving and protecting them—so he joins them at the mouth of the cave, raises his own little howls alongside their own, and declares to his dogs that he will protect them against any adversary, no matter how fearsome. This passage demonstrates the lessons in loyalty and devotion that Billy has already learned as the result of his dogs' love.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ Papa whacked him again and it was all over. [...]

After the coon was killed, I walked over. Papa was trying to get the coon's paw from the trap. [...] A sorrowful look came over Papa's face... [...] "Billy," he said, "I want you to take a hammer and pull the nails from every one of those traps. [...] I don't think this is very sportsmanlike."

Related Characters: Billy's Father / Papa, Billy Colman (speaker), Billy's Grandfather / Grandpa

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy looks on in fascination as his father uses a wooden club to viciously kill a raccoon which Billy has managed to trap in a log near the river. Billy set up the clever trap using advice from Grandpa and he managed to snare the raccoon by luring it to reach down into a log for a shiny piece of tin, only to trap its fist in a crosshair of nails as it pulls its paw back up. As Papa finishes the job, he is full of “sorrow” and remorse. He orders Billy to remove the rest of the traps—Billy has caught a skin which he can use to train his pups to scent raccoons and he must now only trap the animals in a more “sportsmanlike” manner once the hounds are grown. This passage is a major incident in which Billy witnesses an instance of violence which becomes central to his coming of age. As he becomes familiarized with the sometimes-vicious circle of life and the dangers of the natural world, Billy understands more about himself and his place within the larger scheme of nature. Billy's father, too, is conscious of the circle of life and the violence that can be part of nature—he doesn't hold back in expressing his emotions as he confronts the necessary evil he's committed in order to help Billy get one step closer to being a real raccoon hunter.

☝ It was wonderful indeed how I could have heart-to-heart talks with my dogs and they always seemed to understand. [...] Although they couldn't talk in my terms, they had a language of their own that was easy to understand. Sometimes I would see the answer in their eyes, and again it would be in the friendly wagging of their tails. [...] In some way, they would always answer.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 77-78

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy prepares to take his hounds out for the first night of hunting season. As all their training culminates and the end of summer approaches, Billy has a “heart-to-heart talk” with Little Ann and Old Dan in order to tell them about the challenges ahead. Billy is gratified and happy to know that when he talks to his dogs, they seem to understand him. He is amazed by their desire not just to please him but to work together with him toward their shared goals. This passage highlights the lessons in love, devotion, and loyalty that Billy is learning from his dogs with each and every passing day, as well as the beautiful and miraculous nature of the animal world. Billy has a deep reverence for his dogs and so he treats them like people—he believes they are worthy of dignity, care, respect, and love. Because Old Dan and Little Ann sense this from Billy, they repay him with their attention and devotion at each and every turn.

In this scene, Billy takes his dogs out on the first night of hunting season. As he leads them into the beautiful Ozark wilderness and he waits for them to “bawl,” or bark to announce that they’ve scented a trail, Billy is full of excitement. When the telltale bawl at last comes, Billy finds himself overcome by emotion. He knows that this is the moment he’s worked for over the course of two long, hard years during which he worked tirelessly and saved up the money to buy his hounds and then devoted himself to training them. Billy doesn’t try to contain his tears as happiness floods him. In this passage, Rawls celebrates the beauty of the natural world and the devotion, hard work, and resilience which Billy’s dogs have already inspired in him, even though their hunting journey together has just begun. Rawls also shows how Billy lets his emotions flow freely as he thinks of how his prayers have been answered through a combination of faith and hard work.

☝ With tears in my eyes, I looked again at the big sycamore. A wave of anger came over me. Gritting my teeth, I said, “I don't care how big you are, I'm not going to let my dogs down. I told them if they put a coon in a tree I would do the rest and I'm going to. I'm going to cut you down. I don't care if it takes me a whole year.”

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy is still out on his first night of hunting season with Old Dan and Little Ann beside him. Before setting out on the hunt, he told his dogs that all they had to do was tree the raccoon, or chase it up into a tree—he promised that he would “do the rest.” Now, Billy’s dogs have treed a raccoon in the largest, tallest tree in the forest—and though Billy initially wants to give up and find another raccoon, in this passage he senses his dogs’ devotion to finishing the hunt and he becomes determined to make good on his word. This passage is significant because it demonstrates the devotion Billy feels to his dogs not just on an emotional level, but on an ideological one as well. He knows that his dogs look up to him and that if he fails them, he’ll also be failing himself. With burning resolve, with reverence for the natural world, and with a deep sense of duty to both his dogs’ determination and his own dreams of

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ I was expecting one of them to bawl, but when it came it startled me. The deep tones of Old Dan's voice jarred the silence around me. [...] A strange feeling came over me. [...] This was what I had prayed for, worked and sweated for, my own little hounds bawling on the trail of a river coon. I don't know why I cried, but I did.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 83-84

Explanation and Analysis

hunting raccoons, Billy promises to cut down the giant sycamore and snare his first raccoon.

☞ “If a man's word isn't any good, he's no good himself.”

Related Characters: Billy's Father / Papa (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan, Billy Colman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy's father comes upon him in the woods, attempting to chop down the largest sycamore tree in the entire forest, Papa becomes concerned about Billy's ability to complete the task. Papa suggests that Billy give up and try again tomorrow. When Billy, however, tells Papa that he has made a promise to his dogs—a promise he is determined to keep, no matter the cost—Papa solemnly comes to understand where Billy is coming from. Papa ultimately congratulates Billy on his resolve and devotion—Papa can see just how much Billy has learned from his dogs in such a short time. He agrees with Billy and he suggests that a real man keeps his word. Papa's concept of masculinity is not rooted in strength or shows of force but rather in loyalty, honesty, and integrity—and as the novel progresses, Billy, too, will come to understand masculinity as it relates to love and devotion.

In this passage, Billy has gone home for the night to rest after chopping for days on end at the giant sycamore in which Dan and Ann have treed a raccoon. As Billy returns to the sycamore in the light of day, he sees that Little Ann and Old Dan have been returning to the tree to sleep and keep watch. Billy is deeply moved by his dogs' commitment not just to the hunt, but to Billy and to each other. This passage is important because it shows that Billy learning more and more about how deep the connection between his dogs truly is—he's so emotionally moved by their bond that he resolves to protect, defend, and help them at any cost. This scene is a formative moment in Billy's deepening relationship with his dogs and it portends the devotion that Little Ann and Old Dan will continue to show each other as the novel progresses.

☞ Kneeling down between my dogs, I cried and prayed. “Please God, give me the strength to finish the job. [...] Please help me finish the job.” I was trying to rewrap my hands so I could go back to work when I heard a low droning sound. [...] I looked up. High in the top of the big sycamore a breeze had started the limbs to swaying. A shudder ran through the huge trunk. [...] It started popping and snapping. I knew it was going to fall. [...] I held my breath. The top of the big sycamore rocked and swayed.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

On Billy's third day of working on the giant sycamore tree, his hands start developing in painful blisters. He has been working tirelessly to chop down the tree out of allegiance to his promise to his dogs—but now, as the pain becomes unbearable, Billy believes he will have to give up. In this passage, Billy kneels near his dogs and prays to God for the strength to “finish the job.” Sure enough, within seconds, a strong breeze roils its way through the forest and knocks the giant and imposing sycamore tree to the ground.

This passage is significant because it illustrates one of many instances throughout the novel in which prayers offered up to God deliver seemingly instantaneous results—and though several other prayers Billy offers are met with silence, this is one of the instances which seems to suggest

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ There, scratched deep in the soft leaves were two little beds. One was smaller than the other. Looking at Little Ann, I read the answer in her warm gray eyes.

Old Dan hadn't been alone when he had gone back to the tree. She too had gone along. There was no doubt that in the early morning she had come home to get me.

There was a lump in my throat as I said, “I'm sorry little girl, I should've known.”

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

that there is, in fact, a higher power listening to Billy's innermost desires. In this passage, Billy is highly emotional and desperate. He knows that he can't let his dogs down, but he doesn't have the strength to push himself any further. In this seemingly impossible moment, a gift from God—or a gift of nature in the form of a random gust—allows Billy's "job" to come to an end. This moment changes the way Billy thinks about prayer, about nature, and about his own capacity for hard work and devotion.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ I opened my mouth to call Old Dan. I wanted to tell him to come on and we'd go home as there was nothing we could do. The words just wouldn't come out. I couldn't utter a sound. I lay my face against the icy cold bark of the sycamore. I thought of the prayer I had said when I had asked God to help me get two hound pups. I knelt down and sobbed out a prayer. I asked for a miracle which would save the life of my little dog. I promised all the things that a young boy could if only He would help me.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy faces a terrible decision: during a hunt on a snowy, icy night, Little Ann has fallen into the partially-frozen river and become trapped, clinging to an ice floe with her two front paws. Billy has tried everything to rescue Ann but he's been unable to reach her. He fears all is lost in this passage—but as a last-ditch effort, Billy falls to his knees and he "sob[s] out a prayer." This passage is significant because it shows that Billy, in moments of intense emotion or danger, resorts to prayer rather than action in order to see things through. The prayer Billy offers up in this moment is answered—but again, the answer is not necessarily the act of a higher power, though Billy chooses to read it that way. When a gust of wind knocks Billy's lantern's handle down, he realizes he can use the piece of metal to fashion a hook. Though the gust of wind seems divine, as the gust that knocked down the huge sycamore earlier in the season did, it's Billy's own quick thinking that inspires him to form the hook and use it to save Little Ann. This passage thus explores how people's faith in the power of prayer ultimately enables them to shape their own realities.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ About halfway up, far out on a limb, I found the ghost coon. As I started toward him, my dogs stopped bawling. I heard something I had heard many times. The sound was like the cry of a small baby. It was the cry of a ringtail coon when he knows it is the end of the trail. I never liked to hear this cry, but it was all in the game, the hunter and the hunted.

As I sat there on the limb, looking at the old fellow, he cried again. Something came over me. I didn't want to kill him.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Rainie Pritchard, Rubin Pritchard, Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy and his dogs have successfully treed the infamous "ghost coon"—an old, huge, wily, and uncatchable raccoon native to Rainie and Rubin Pritchard's part of the Ozarks. The Pritchard boys bet Billy that he and his dogs would not be able to tree it, but against all odds, Billy and his dogs have chased the raccoon up into a tree where it can easily be knocked down and killed. As Billy climbs up into the tree to scare the raccoon down so that his dogs can kill it, however, he finds himself confronted by the raccoon's pitiful cry. Seeing the infamous "ghost coon" reduced to just another animal of prey hurts something within Billy, and he decides against killing the raccoon after all. This passage is significant because it shows Billy's devotion not just to his own dogs, but to all living things and parts of nature. He is emotional and thoughtful as he comes upon his prey rather than ruthless, cruel, and punitive like his foils, the Pritchard boys. Billy is a true hunter because he is able to respect nature—not because he kills with indiscretion.

☝ "Don't let him up, Rubin," Rainie said. "Beat the hell out of him, or hold him and let me do it."

Just then I heard growling, and a commotion off to one side. [...] I heard Rainie yell, "Rubin, they're killing Old Blue."

Rubin jumped up off me.

I clambered up and looked over to the fight. What I saw thrilled me. Faithful Little Ann [...] had gone to the assistance of Old Dan.

I knew my dogs were very close to each other. Everything they did was done as a combination, but I never expected this.

Related Characters: Rainie Pritchard, Billy Colman (speaker), Rubin Pritchard, Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 164-165

Explanation and Analysis

As Rubin Pritchard, furious that Billy refuses to make his dogs kill the infamous “ghost coon,” tackles Billy to the ground with the intent to beat him half to death, Billy becomes aware of another fight breaking out nearby. Little Ann and Old Dan, seeking to defend Billy the only way they know how, have turned on Rubin and Rainie’s blue tick hound. As Billy becomes aware of the sight of his dogs defending him, he is scared but “thrilled.” This passage is important because it shows the reciprocal devotion between Billy and his dogs. He loves them and he’d do anything for them—and they, too, would defend him to the death against any enemy. Billy is grateful to know that his dogs have such a strong protective instinct—but when he sees them defending him as one, he becomes especially touched and emotional at the sight of his dogs acting together on his behalf, putting their own lives in danger in hopes of saving his.

beginning to eat. Grandpa admires the dogs’ solidarity and togetherness, but their love for and devotion to each other is nothing new to Billy. Billy has witnessed his dogs sleep, eat, and hunt as one unit. He is amazed by the intimacy between them but he has come to expect it of them. To others, however, the dogs’ synchronicity is still a wonder of the natural world and a beautiful, enchanting thing to behold. In this way, it seems that Old Dan and Little Ann’s innate devotion provides a lesson about love and loyalty not only for Billy, but for everyone who comes in contact with the dogs.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☛☛ The judge said, “Well, have you ever seen that? Look over there!”

Old Dan was standing perfectly still, with eyes closed and head hanging down. Little Ann was licking at his cut and bleeding ears.

“She always does that,” I said. “If you’ll watch, when she gets done with him, he’ll do the same for her.”

We stood and watched until they had finished doctoring each other. Then, trotting side by side, they disappeared in the darkness.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☛☛ Both of them started eating at the same time.

With an astonished look on his face, Grandpa exclaimed, “Well, I’ll be darned. I never saw anything like that. Why, I never saw a hound that wouldn’t eat. Did you train them to do that?”

“No, Grandpa,” I said. “They’ve always been that way. They won’t take anything away from each other, and everything they do, they do it as one.”

Related Characters: Billy’s Grandfather / Grandpa, Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy, Grandpa, and Papa are on their way to a hunting competition in the Ozarks. As it grows dark, the three of them stop to eat and rest for the night. Grandpa, intent on spoiling Old Dan and Little Ann before their big hunt, feeds them delicious corned-beef hash—but he is shocked when, after putting down Old Dan’s food first, Old Dan waits for Little Ann to be served as well before

Related Characters: Billy Colman, The Judge (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 222-223

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy Colman and his hounds are in the midst of the most serious hunt they’ve ever undertaken as they join a hunting competition which gathers the greatest raccoon hunters in the Ozarks. During their first night out hunting, Old Dan and Little Ann successfully catch and kill several raccoons—but during the scraps with the animals, Old Dan sustains some cuts on his ears. As Little Ann licks and tends to Old Dan’s wounds, the judge watching Billy’s dogs remarks that he has never seen an animal take care of another one in the way Ann is tending to Dan. Billy, however, knows that his animals delight in caring for each other—and he knows that Dan will take care of Ann next. This passage is important because it demonstrates the depth of devotion that Little Ann and Old Dan show to each other—and it foreshadows the idea that they cannot and will not live without each other. During the chapters set during the hunt, Ann and Dan prove themselves to be

inseparable, deeply connected on an emotional and physical level. This fact is beautiful and sweet, but it also portends disaster if one of them is seriously injured during a hunt.

Chapter 17 Quotes

“Please go just a little further,” I begged. “I just know we'll hear them.”

Still no one spoke or made a move to go on.

Stepping over to my father, I buried my face in his old mackinaw coat. Sobbing, I pleaded with him not to turn back. He patted my head. “Billy,” he said, “a man could freeze to death in this storm, and besides, your dogs will give up and come in.”

“That's what has me worried,” I cried. “They won't come in. They won't, Papa. Little Ann might, but not Old Dan. He'd die before he'd leave a coon in a tree.”

Related Characters: Billy's Father / Papa, Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan, The Judge, Billy's Grandfather / Grandpa

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Billy participates in the hunting competition in the Ozarks, he and his hunting party—Papa, Grandpa, and the judge—encounter some terrible weather in the middle of their hunt. A blizzard comes upon them, and the humans are separated from Old Dan and Little Ann, who have run off in search of a raccoon. Papa, Grandpa, and the judge suggest that their group turn back and head for camp, leaving the dogs to come in on their own—but Billy is incredulous at the thought of doing so. Billy has witnessed his dogs' fixedness during a hunt, and he knows that Papa has too. Here, he tries to remind Papa of how devoted Little Ann and Old Dan are to completing their hunts—and of how in this case, that devotion and single-mindedness could spell their deaths. This passage is significant as it shows that while Billy is usually grateful for his dogs' resilience, loyalty, and desire to make him proud, he also knows that their very natures could be the things that kill them—and the thought is more than he can bear.

“I heard the judge say to my father, “This beats anything I have ever seen. Why, those dogs can read that boy's mind.” [...]

Papa said, “Yes, I know what you mean. I've seen them do things that I couldn't understand. I'd never heard of hounds that ever had any affection for anyone, but these dogs are different. Did you know they won't hunt with anyone but him, not even me?”

Related Characters: Billy Colman, Billy's Father / Papa, The Judge (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy's dogs, Little Ann and Old Dan, have run off after a raccoon after Billy simply pointed in the direction in which the raccoon ran. The judge who has been following Billy and his dogs around in order to tally their kills and judge their performance is astounded by the ways the dogs can seemingly “read [Billy's] mind.” Papa agrees with the judge's assessment, stating that Billy's dogs are profoundly “different” from other hunting hounds in their devotion—not just to the hunt itself, but to their master. This passage demonstrates the ways in which other people think of Billy's remarkable relationship with his hounds. Billy has known from the start that Old Dan and Little Ann are special dogs and he's fostered an intimate and deeply connected relationship with them from the first day he met them. Billy worked so long and so hard to save up for his hounds that he feels he was destined to have them—their relationship reflects that cosmic, spiritual, fated quality. The closeness between Billy and the hounds is therefore evident to anyone who watches them communicate and work together.

Chapter 18 Quotes

“What I can't understand is why they stayed with the tree,” Mr. Benson said. [...]

“Men,” said Mr. Kyle, “people have been trying to understand dogs ever since the beginning of time. [...] You can read every day 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... [...] 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.”

Related Characters: Mr. Benson and Mr. Kyle (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 242-243

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Benson and Mr. Kyle, two hunters taking part in the same competition as Billy, marvel at the fact that Little Ann and Old Dan stayed at the base of a tree in which they'd caught a raccoon all night through a terrible blizzard. Benson says he can't understand why the dogs would do such a thing—but Mr. Kyle suggests that perhaps humans aren't meant to, or cannot, understand the inherent goodness, loyalty, and love that dogs embody. Kyle says he wishes that the people of Earth could embody the selflessness and loyalty that dogs show their masters every day and use to help their humans out of terrifying situations. Kyle shows himself to be a man of faith in this passage as he longs for "the kind of world that God wants [humans] to have," but there is a sense of melancholy in his speech—he seems to believe that humans will never be able to set aside their selfishness and greed and learn from their animal counterparts.

Chapter 19 Quotes

☛ I went berserk, and charged into the fight.

There in the flinty hills of the Ozarks, I fought for the lives of my dogs. I fought with the only weapon I had, the sharp cutting blade of a double-bitted ax.

Screaming like a madman, with tears running down my face, I hacked and chopped at the big snarling mountain cat.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Billy leaps into a dangerous brawl with a mountain lion in order to come to his dogs' defense. Billy has watched his dogs defend him time and time again from all manner of foes and hunt viciously on his behalf in order to make him proud—now, he knows, it is his turn to fight for their lives instead. Billy is emotional and angry as he charges into the fight—he is incensed by the idea that anyone would

ever hurt his dogs and he wants to fiercely punish the entity, animal or man, that would try to take his dogs from him. This passage is significant because it demonstrates the intense and reciprocal devotion between Billy and his dogs—and it shows that during his time with them, he has learned important lessons about loyalty, selflessness, and courage in the face of impossible odds.

☛ "I never saw anything like it. Little Ann wouldn't have fought the lion if it hadn't been for Old Dan. All she was doing was helping him. He wouldn't quit. He just stayed right in there till the end. I even had to pry his jaws loose from the lion's throat after the lion was dead."

Glancing at Old Dan, Papa said, "It's in his blood, Billy. He's a hunting hound, and the best one I ever saw. He only has two loves—you and hunting. That's all he knows."

Related Characters: Billy's Father / Papa, Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan, Billy's Mother / Mama

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Mama and Papa help Billy tend fruitlessly to the mortal wounds Old Dan has sustained in a terrible fight with a huge mountain lion, Billy relays with both awe and horror how hard Dan fought against the fearsome foe. Billy is amazed by how fiercely both Little Ann and Dan fought, even when they knew that their very lives were at stake. Papa suggests that Old Dan fought so hard not just because of his nature as a hunting dog, but also because of his intense, devoted love for Billy. For the entire novel, Billy has been amazed time and time again by the depths of his dogs' devotion to both him as their master and to their hunting. In this passage, Billy at last understands that the dogs' devotion to both things is intimately interconnected. The dogs love to hunt because it is the only way they know of proving themselves to Billy; they love Billy because he taught them to hunt and he always hunts alongside them. The dogs' innate biology and learned devotion have combined over time, making them intensely devoted companions.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝ "Don't touch it, Mama," my oldest sister whispered. "It was planted by an angel."

Mama smiled and asked, "Have you heard the legend?"

"Yes, Mama," my sister said. "Grandma told me the story and I believe it, too."

With a serious look on his face, Papa said, "These hills are full of legends. Up until now I've never paid much attention to them, but now I don't know. Perhaps there is something to the legend of the red fern. Maybe this is God's way of helping Billy understand why his dogs died."

"I'm sure it is, Papa," I said, "and I do understand. I feel different now, and I don't hurt any more."

Related Characters: Billy Colman, Billy's Father / Papa, Billy's Mother / Mama, Billy's Sisters (speaker), Grandma, Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Billy visits his dogs' graves one final time before preparing to leave the Ozark Mountains with his family for good, he spots a beautiful red fern growing between Old Dan and Little Ann's graves. Knowing that the fern is part of an old legend which states that anywhere the fern grows, an angel has planted sacred seeds on sanctified ground, Billy finds himself suddenly and deeply comforted—the pain of his dogs' deaths, which has eaten away at him for months, finally feels manageable. As Billy calls his family to gather around and look at the fern, his parents, too, find themselves amazed and even comforted by the fern's presence. The fern seems to confirm Billy's parents' belief that just as the dogs came into Billy's life for a reason, they had to die for a reason. The fern allows the young Billy to feel a sense of peace and closure as he considers the end of his dogs' lives—and with that sense of

closure, he and his family are able to confidently move on and begin a new chapter in their lives.

☝ I have never been back to the Ozarks. All I have left are my dreams and memories, but if God is willing, some day I'd like to go back-back to those beautiful hills. I'd like to walk again on trails I walked in my boyhood days.

[...] I'm sure the red fern has grown and has completely covered the two little mounds. I know it is still there, hiding its secret beneath those long, red leaves, but it wouldn't be hidden from me for part of my life is buried there, too.

Related Characters: Billy Colman (speaker), Little Ann, Old Dan

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the novel, the older Billy Colman reflects on his memories of his "boyhood days" in the Ozarks one final time. He thinks about the symbolic red fern which sprung up between the graves of his two beloved hound dogs and he decides to himself that the fern must still be there. Just as the younger Billy's earlier expressions of faith in God were definitive and clear-cut, so too is the older Billy's belief in the meaning and endurance of the legend of the red fern. Whether or not the red fern is truly still there is impossible to know—but because Billy feels that "part of [his] life is buried" with his dogs, he feels the need to believe that the fern still stands. Billy believes that the fern symbolizes the sacredness of his dogs' relationships to each other as well as their enduring love for Billy himself. When Billy pictures the red fern thriving and growing in nature, this image is as much a reflection of his enduring love for his dogs as it is an expression of the true belief that the fern is still there.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Billy Colman leaves his office one pleasant spring day feeling that “everything is right” in the world—but as he walks home whistling, he stumbles upon a dogfight in a residential section of town. Billy moves out of the dogs’ way as they tussle but he can’t help looking at the brawl. He sees that a group of dogs have ganged up against an old red hound. As Billy watches the dog struggle to defend himself, his blood begins to rise. With the “memories [he has] in his heart,” it is impossible for Billy to watch such a beautiful hound face such violence. Billy removes his coat and he swings it at the mass of dogs, successfully scattering all but the red hound.

Billy calms the agitated dog and he beckons it toward him. As it approaches, he can see that the dog is dirty and starving. Billy can tell that the dog has strayed far from home as he looks at its worn paws. The dog’s collar, however, has a tag which reads “Buddie”—Billy imagines that the dog belongs to a little boy. His own “wonderful memories” of childhood begin rushing back to him, and he leads the dog home with him by the collar. At home, Billy gives the dog a bath, a rubdown, and a big dinner. Buddie sleeps all night and most of the next day but he begins growing restless when the sun starts to go down. As night falls, Billy opens up the back door and he lets the dog head on his way. Billy watches wistfully as Buddie leaves—he wishes he could keep the dog but he knows that to pen up a such a beautiful hound would be a “sin.”

Billy knows that the dog will walk as long and as far as it needs to in order to get back home. As Billy envisions Buddie’s long journey, he’s overcome not by loneliness but by warmth and happiness. Memories of two hounds he loved and lost in his youth flood back to him. As he heads back inside, he makes sure to leave the gate open just in case Buddie decides to come back. Inside, Billy sits in front of the fireplace and he lights his pipe. He sits in his chair and he looks at two trophies on his mantelpiece: one tall golden cup and one small silver cup. He thinks of the story, now half a century old, behind the cups—the story of his boyhood days in the Ozarks.

The novel’s introductory passages show that Billy Colman has a deep, profound love of dogs rooted in some mysterious memories from his past. The older Billy has clearly been taught lessons in solidarity, love, and loyalty—and as the novel unfolds, Rawls will show how the impact of a pair of dogs gave him knowledge of those things.



Billy clearly knows how to take care of dogs; not only that, but he obviously has a deep, abiding reverence and respect for them. He saves Buddie when Buddie needs him most—but he is open, patient, and kind enough to let Buddie make his own choices and follow his own path through the world.



The cups atop the mantelpiece jog Billy’s fond but winsome memories of his childhood in the Ozarks—and the dogs that were an integral part of his coming of age. As Billy drifts into memory, it becomes apparent that this chapter has been a precursor meant to demonstrate the lessons about love and care (and ultimately loss and acceptance) that Billy learned as a young man.



CHAPTER 2

At 10 years old, Billy Colman is struck out of nowhere by “that wonderful disease of puppy love”—seemingly overnight, he becomes consumed with longing for a pair of hunting hounds. Billy approaches his father one evening and he asks if he can have them, but his father ruefully explains that their family does not have enough money for such a purchase. Having failed to convince Papa, Billy goes to Mama—she, too, refuses him out of hand, telling Billy that he’s too young to be a hunter. Billy is devastated that despite living in the “finest hunting country in the world,” he is not allowed to have his own dogs.

Billy describes his family’s homestead: they live in the foothills at the base of the Ozarks in Northeastern Oklahoma. The homestead is on a plot of Cherokee land which was allotted to Billy’s mother due to “the Cherokee blood that flow[s] in her veins.” The land is fertile and rich, and Billy’s father runs a small farm just beyond their log house. Billy often spends his days exploring the countryside, familiarizing himself with game trails and animal tracks. He is most fascinated by raccoons—he loves their wily smarts and fastidiousness.

Billy’s “dog-wanting” becomes so intense that he starts moping around the house, “grieving” with each passing day and refusing to eat or play. One evening, Billy overhears Mama tell Papa that something needs to be done about Billy’s melancholy. Papa explains that he offered to buy Billy a mutt, but Billy only wants a specific breed of purebred hound—a pair will cost \$75, an enormous sum of money to the Colman family. Overhearing his parents’ woes, Billy feels saddened by their money struggles. He goes to his father and he says that he will settle for a single hound. Papa looks at Billy sadly and he explains that times are hard—most of the farmers in the region have given up and have turned to the railroad to find work, and Papa may soon face the same fate. Billy goes to his room and he cries himself to sleep.

The next day, Papa brings home three steel traps from the store. Billy is so excited he begins crying on the spot. The next morning, after a lesson from Papa, Billy gets to work setting traps—but he only manages to catch and enrage the family’s housecat, Samie. Billy’s sisters scream and cry as the cat struggles in the trap. Mama rushes over to help and she manages to get Samie free. As Samie skulks away, Mama declares that Samie has learned his lesson—but over the next several days, Samie gets caught in Billy’s traps many more times. Eventually, Samie runs away and he becomes an outdoor cat who only visits occasionally for food and milk. Billy feels guilty about scaring Samie off—but every time Samie visits home, Billy can’t help but notice how wild the cat has become.

This passage sets up a lot of crucial information that will come into play throughout the rest of the novel. Billy’s family is poor and they live in a rural environment—importantly, Billy seems ignorant of these facts, willfully or otherwise. This passage thus shows that Billy is a passionate young boy but that he still has a lot of growing up to do.



This passage shows just how important the natural world is to Billy and his family; they have an intimate relationship with the land they live on. The family depends on the land not just for their sustenance and livelihood, but also for their happiness and enrichment—with little else to do in the mountains and no money to do it with, Billy must rely on the natural world to give him an education and a source of entertainment.



In this passage, Rawls investigates the roles that money, masculinity, and emotion all play in Billy’s life. His family is struggling to get through the Great Depression—a time of hardship not just for Billy’s family but for families everywhere. When Papa tries to level with Billy about their family’s reality—man-to-man, so to speak—it’s clear that Billy isn’t yet ready for that kind of emotional load. He retreats into himself, embarrassed by his depth of emotion as he wrestles with the idea of not getting what he wants.



This passage shows how deeply Billy’s parents love him. They want to provide for him and help him have a happy childhood, even if they can’t get him exactly what he wants. Though this incident with Samie is relatively lighthearted, it’s also an important teaching moment for Billy about the consequences of hunting animals. As Billy begins exploring the natural world and his love of hunting more and more—with his parents’ help—he learns about the violence inherent within the pursuit he so loves, and how that violence comes to affect the relationships between animals and people.



Papa helps Billy trap opossums, skunks, rabbits, and squirrels in the cane fields beyond the house and he teaches Billy to skin them. In spite of Billy's success trapping small game, Billy remains determined to catch himself a raccoon—but raccoons are too smart for Billy's little traps, and Billy finds daily evidence of the tools and tricks they use to steal food from the traps without getting caught.

After a while, Billy begins longing for his hounds again when hunting season starts and he hears a hunter and his hound out in the mountains each night. The hunter's whoops and the dog's bawls are too much for poor Billy—he resumes begging his parents to buy him the dogs, but his requests are only met with his mother's tears and his father's sadness. In order to distract Billy from his longing, Papa tells Billy that he's old enough to start working in the fields. Billy is excited—he feels he has “finally grown up to be a man.”

CHAPTER 3

Though working on the farm helps Billy distract himself from his dog-wanting for a time, it never fully eradicates his feelings of longing. One day, while hoeing corn, Billy hears a group of fishermen who have been camped out by the creek depart in their car. He hurries down to the river to prowl through their campsite and collect anything they might have left behind. Sure enough, Billy finds a great “treasure”: a sportsman's magazine. As Billy flips through the “For Sale” section, he comes across an advertisement for hound pups for sale for \$25 each at a kennel in Kentucky. Billy's longing is renewed, but he agonizes over how to earn \$50. He recalls something his mother once told him: “God helps those who help themselves.” He prays that God will help him get his hounds.

Billy leaves the fishermen's campsite as dusk begins to fall. He notices animals coming to life throughout the forest. Comforted by nature, he stills his mind and he begins thinking of a plan to save the money. Billy decides to sell bait and fresh vegetables from the farm to the local fisherman and to sell the small game hides he traps throughout the winter. He begins dreaming of building a doghouse and making collars—but he becomes determined to remain realistic and not get ahead of himself.

Billy wants to catch a raccoon because he admires their wiles and smarts so deeply. To catch a raccoon would prove that Billy understands the natural world and that he can successfully outwit the animals in their natural habitat.



This passage suggests that the root of Billy's “dog-wanting” perhaps lies in his desire to prove himself as a man capable of taming the wilderness. Papa's offer to let Billy work in the fields allows Billy to satiate this desire in another way—even if he doesn't get to experience the freedom of roaming the woods with a pair of hunting dogs at his side.



In this passage, Rawls begins to introduce the large role that faith plays in Billy's life. Billy believes that there are certain things he can't accomplish alone—certain things, he believes, can only be accomplished through God's will. Billy prays ardently for God's assistance in this passage, though Mama's quote suggests that it's actually the strength and confidence derived from a person's faith that inspires them to make their reality reflect their prayers.



Billy draws strength from one other major part of his life: the natural world all around him. Billy feels connected to nature even without his dogs, and the sense of peace, calm, and fulfillment he derives from being in nature allows him to visualize the future positively.



The next day, Billy finds an old baking powder can and he washes it up. He deposits 23 cents—all the money he has in the world—in the bottom of it. The sight of the paltry sum doesn't depress Billy, but instead it motivates him to work hard. All summer, Billy “work[s] like a beaver” selling bait and gathering blackberries to sell to his grandfather, who owns a store in town. Billy's grandpa becomes curious about what Billy's saving up for, and Billy confides in the man about his plan. Grandpa promises that when Billy has saved up enough money, he will place the order for Billy's dogs himself.

Over the course of that winter and the following summer, Billy continues working hard. After a year, Billy, now 12, has saved well over the halfway mark. Another year of hard work sails by, and at last Billy has his \$50. He cries as he counts his money and he confirms that he has the right sum. Contented and proud, Billy offers up a prayer of thanks to God for giving him the “heart, courage, and determination” to work hard and to never give up hope.

The next day, Billy brings his can of money to his grandfather's store and he presents his “dumbfounded” grandpa with the money. Grandpa is stunned that Billy has been saving relentlessly for two years. When Billy produces the yellowed old ad from the sportsman's magazine from his pocket, Grandpa becomes emotional. Billy notices his grandfather looking at him strangely. Grandpa tells Billy that his hair is too long and that his feet are all cut up; Billy explains that he's been working so hard harvesting blackberries that he hasn't noticed either. Grandpa turns away from Billy, removes his glasses, and blows his nose into his handkerchief.

Grandpa turns back around and he tells Billy that it's time to get him his dogs. He urges Billy to head home—he is going to make some calls and see if the Kentucky kennel is still breeding redbone coonhounds. Before Billy leaves, however, Grandpa pulls a large sack from behind the register and fills it with candy until it's stuffed. Billy hurries home and he shares the candy with his three little sisters, enjoying the happiness he sees in their eyes as they devour the sweets.

CHAPTER 4

One day, when Billy visits Grandpa's store, he notices that Grandpa has a special twinkle in his eye. Grandpa tells Billy that he's gotten a letter back from the kennel in Kentucky—not only are the dogs are still for sale, but the price for each hound has gone down by \$5. Grandpa tells Billy that he has ordered two pups and then he hands Billy a \$10 bill—his change. Grandpa tells Billy that the dogs can only be shipped as far as the depot in Tahlequah, the nearest city—which is still 20 miles away.

This passage shows that the adults in Billy's life—the ones who know about his plans, that is—are motivated to help him as they become moved by his determination and eagerness. Billy's faith and hard work are inspirational to others. Before he even has his dogs, the hounds are teaching him important lessons about commitment, confidence, and perseverance.



This passage shows that in spite of all Billy's own hard work day in and day out over the course of two years, he still credits God with empowering him to get the job done. Billy has shaped his reality around his prayers and his faith, yet he still believes God is ultimately responsible for his success.



In this passage, Grandpa is so moved by Billy's hard work and steadfast nature that he begins to cry. He sees how hard Billy has worked for these dogs and he is deeply moved—yet his instinct is to conceal his emotions, however halfheartedly, from his grandson. Billy's relationship to emotion is very different from his grandfather's, and over the course of the novel, both men will continue to learn about the nuance of emotional expression from each other.



Grandpa wants to reward Billy's hard work. While Billy has simply been doing what he needs to do in order to get his dogs, Grandpa knows that the amount of effort Billy has been pouring into this endeavor each and every day is monumental and worth celebrating—particularly given Billy's young age.



Things seem to be looking up for Billy: not only is he about to get his dogs, but he's able to save a chunk of the money he raised for himself. All of Billy's hard work has paid off—and those around him want to help him realize his dreams.



That night, at the dinner table, Billy asks how far it is to Kentucky. Billy's parents tell him that it's a long ways away and they become suspicious of why he'd ask. Billy insists that he simply overheard some men in town talking about Kentucky and he became curious; the conversation ends. After two long and agonizing weeks of waiting, Billy visits his Grandpa's store and he learns that the pups have arrived in Tahlequah. Grandpa tells Billy that he can hitch a ride to Kentucky with a customer who's headed there in about a week. As Billy heads home, he wonders how he'll tell his parents about the dogs and about having to go to Kentucky to collect them—he's afraid they'll be furious with him.

In the middle of the night, unable to sleep, Billy makes up his mind to hoof it to Kentucky himself. He rises from bed, dresses, and makes up a little pack full of food for himself. He decides to take a shortcut through the hills but knows he will still have to walk 20 miles before he reaches the town of Tahlequah, which will be the most populous place he's ever visited. As Billy trots through the mountains in the dark, he is decidedly unafraid—he has been raised in the Ozarks and he feels that the woods are his home. As dawn nears, Billy stops to eat. After a short rest, he continues on his way and he soon arrives in Tahlequah.

Billy is overwhelmed as soon as he sets foot in Tahlequah. From the sight of young ladies giggling at him to a tall, imposing marshal with a gun at his hip to a storefront full of rare goods, Billy is both frightened and transfixed. As Billy stares at the shop window, he sees a reflection of himself for the first time in his life: he realizes how scruffy and unkempt he is. Billy decides to go into the store and buy some things for his family as a way of making amends "for leaving home without telling anyone." As Billy pays for his things, the shopkeeper asks Billy if he needs shoes, but Billy insists he's fine without them.

Billy walks through town toward the depot, trying to ignore the way the strangers of Tahlequah "gawk" at him. Soon he stumbles upon a group of boys and girls about his age taking turns sliding down the chute-like fire escape of a tall building. Billy wishes he could join them, but when a boy approaches Billy and the boy taunts him about his "hillbilly" appearance, Billy becomes self-conscious. The children all taunt Billy until a school bell calls them into class. Alone in the square, Billy climbs up to the top of the chute himself and he slides down alone. As he lands on the ground, spread-eagle, a small old woman standing nearby starts laughing at him. Billy picks up his things and he continues glumly toward the depot, unable to understand why he arouses such laughter in all of "these town people."

Billy knows that while Grandpa is supportive of his dreams, his parents may not be so keen on Billy having a pair of hounds. Billy, however, has come too far to stop now—he knows that now, his dogs are waiting for him and that they're depending upon him.



Billy makes the decision to set out on his own in the dark—not only that, but he takes the path less traveled and he goes straight through the mountains. Billy isn't frightened at all, though, as he sets out on his journey—he feels that the natural world will protect and care for him.



Billy's arrival in Tahlequah underscores—not just to readers, but also to Billy himself—just how impoverished and isolated his life has been so far. Billy is decidedly different from these town folk, and while he doesn't yet know to feel shame about that difference, he'll soon feel the sting of being singled out and othered.



As Billy finds himself the subject of ire and derision in Tahlequah, he is perturbed that children and adults alike are eager to pick on him and laugh at him for being different. Growing up and coming of age is, within the world of this book, intimately tied to violence and death. In this passage, Rawls shows how the cruelty of the Tahlequah residents' taunts is a kind of social violence; the "death" of Billy's innocence and his ignorance about his "hillbilly" appearance forces him to grow up and see the world in a different light.



CHAPTER 5

Billy arrives at the depot feeling self-conscious and disheartened. He is afraid to go inside, but when he spies the friendly-looking stationmaster through the window attending to a pet canary he feels a little more secure about heading in. Inside, Billy greets the stationmaster and they engage in a little small talk about the weather. When the stationmaster asks where Billy is from and Billy answers, “Up the river,” the stationmaster tells him he has a package from a boy up the river named Billy Colman. Feeling his heart jump into his throat, Billy tells the stationmaster who he is. The stationmaster leads Billy around to the freight door and he helps Billy open the heavy crate in which his dogs are waiting. Billy hears whimpers as the stationmaster works on the crate with a hammer.

At last, the stationmaster gets the box open. He lifts the puppies out and he hands them to Billy: one is a girl, one is a boy, and they’re both a beautiful red color. The puppies are tiny, nervous, and adorable; as Billy holds them for the first time, he is so excited that he struggles to breathe. The stationmaster, observing the pups lick Billy, states that they “already [seem to] know” him. Billy buries his face in the puppies’ bodies and he cries as the stationmaster looks on in silence. Billy eventually recovers and he looks up. He asks the stationmaster if he owes anything, and the stationmaster replies that there is a small feeding fee but he assures Billy that it’s taken care of. The stationmaster helps Billy make two holes in a gunnysack and load the puppies into it. Wishing him “good hunting,” the stationmaster bids Billy farewell.

Walking back through the streets of Tahlequah, Billy feels proud and confident. He is sure that once the townspeople get a load of his hounds, no one will tease him or laugh at him. As Billy approaches the main square, however, he finds himself drawing the same stares and snickers he did before. The townspeople heckle Billy about his dogs as he walks down the street, and soon the children from earlier swarm around Billy and they taunt him once more by calling him “dog boy.” The leader of the gang of kids stomps on Billy’s bare foot, breaking a toenail and drawing blood. Billy grits his teeth and he continues on—but when the leader pulls on the long ears of one of the pups, Billy becomes enraged.

When Billy sees the stationmaster showing kindness to an animal, he knows that the man must be inherently good. This demonstrates the connection between humanity and the natural world that Billy so cherishes—anyone who understands and respects nature must surely understand and respect not just themselves, but their fellow men.



In this passage, Billy meets his beloved dogs for the first time. The moment is suffused with intense emotion and a kind of fatefulness. The stationmaster remarks that the puppies “already [...] know” Billy after seeing the profound connection between them that exists immediately. He doesn’t know how hard Billy has worked for these dogs and how deeply Billy has dreamed of them for so long—and that these may be the reasons why Billy already knows, loves, and cares for these dogs. Billy prayed and worked for these dogs, and now they are a part of his life.



Even after suffering taunts and jeers, Billy still believes the best in people—he thinks that because his dogs are, to him, a symbol of hard work and achievement, the others in Tahlequah will recognize them as such, too. Unfortunately, Billy is wrong—the Tahlequah children are even crueler to Billy when they see him toting his hounds through the streets. Billy can handle being picked on himself—but when someone messes with his dogs, he decides that enough is enough and he jumps to his pups’ defense.



Billy sets his sack down and lets loose on the leader of the gang, socking him in the nose. The leader fights back. Soon, the other children join in and they begin beating on Billy too. Billy buries his face in his arms as the children kick at his body. Soon, the kicking stops—Billy looks up and sees the marshal shooing the children away. Billy is terrified that the marshal will hurt or arrest him, but instead the marshal kindly helps Billy get up and gather his sack. The marshal compliments Billy’s hounds, and Billy tells the marshal about saving up to buy them. The marshal, visibly moved, declares that “not a one in that bunch [of kids has] that kind of grit.” The marshal offers to buy Billy a soda pop before he gets back on the road. Billy has never had a pop in his life—he happily accepts the marshal’s invitation.

Though Billy was afraid of the marshal the first time he saw him, he now realizes that the marshal is perhaps his one true ally in this strange place. The marshal recognizes Billy’s strength of spirit and character and so he wants to reward him. Billy continues to inspire emotion and pride in the men he encounters—men who understand what it’s like to be a young boy with a dream.



After bidding the marshal farewell, Billy starts back out on the road. The journey back is more difficult—the pups are heavy and they cry and whimper as Billy winds his way into the hills. Soon, however, the pups fall asleep. As night falls, Billy seeks shelter in a cave near a stream. He makes a bed of leaves for the sleepy pups and he builds them all a fire. Cooking up some of the provisions he brought along, Billy prepares a meal for himself and a snack for the pups. Billy watches the dogs play, feeling contented and excited as he learns more about their personalities.

Billy clearly has a protective instinct toward his new hound pups; he wants to keep them safe and warm on their journey home. Entranced by their presence, Billy enjoys seeing that his hard work has paid off and his dream has come true.



The “bold and aggressive” boy dog is bigger than the girl. The girl pup is small, timid, and delicate—but what she lacks in size, Billy observes, she makes up for in smarts. Tired and happy, Billy falls asleep shortly after his dogs settle down for the night. In the middle of the night, however, they are all awakened when the sound of a high-pitched scream echoes through the cave. Billy realizes that a mountain lion is howling somewhere in the mountains. He watches as his dogs run to the mouth of the cave, sit, and howl back. Billy, initially frightened by the cat’s call, feels braver knowing his pups are with him. Billy joins them at the mouth of the cave, whooping alongside their bawls and tossing rocks down the mountain to warn the cat off.

Even though Billy hears the fearsome call of a mountain lion and he grows scared, having his pups howling beside him makes him feel less alone. Though Billy’s pups are young and they could never defend him against a mountain lion, just having them nearby makes him feel loved and protected. He has two hounds who would die for him—and for whom he would gladly give his own life.



CHAPTER 6

In the morning, Billy puts his puppies into their sack and they continue on their way. At about midday, Billy begins to recognize the terrain around him and he knows he is close to home. Billy is relieved to be in familiar territory—but he’s also nervous about facing his mother and father and explaining why he ran away from home. After deciding that he’ll simply tell his parents the truth and “weather the storm,” he relaxes and enjoys watching his puppies play. He thinks of different names he could give them, but traditional dog names don’t fit.

Billy is no longer too worried about what his parents will think, say, or do when they learn about his puppies—being with the pups seems to imbue Billy with confidence, strength, and courage.



As Billy looks around, he sees two names, Dan and Ann, carved into a nearby sycamore tree, a heart drawn around them. Billy settles on “Old Dan” for the boy dog and “Little Ann” for the girl dog. As soon as he finishes naming the dogs, he looks around and he realizes that he is in the fishermen’s camp where he first found the magazine ad. He marvels at how, in the very place he first asked God to help him get his hound pups, he has named them.

Billy walks the final stretch home along the river and he nervously arrives at the front porch of his house. As he steps inside, he sees his family gathered together in the living room. His mother looks up at him—Billy can see that her face is full of worry and grief. Papa, however, greets Billy warmly and happily and he asks to see the puppies—he reveals that after Billy went missing, he himself went to Grandpa’s store, where Grandpa spilled the beans as to what Billy had been up to with the dogs. Billy apologizes profusely to his mother for causing her such worry. He then opens his sack and pulls out all the presents he bought at the general store—bolts of cloth for his mother, overalls for his father, and candy for his sisters.

Billy tells his family all about his adventure, from the kindness of the stationmaster to the treachery of the mountain lion’s call on the way back. When Billy’s father asks him how he liked town, Billy replies that he hated it and that he’d never want to live anywhere near other people. Billy’s father’s face grows solemn. Papa tells Billy that he and Mama don’t intend to live in the mountains forever—one day, Billy and his sisters may very well have to get used to living in town. The mountains, Papa says, are “no place to raise a family.” Mama quietly says that she’s been praying every day for the opportunity to give her children a life and an education in a town nearby.

The next morning, Billy gets right to work building a doghouse. Papa fashions collars for the dogs out of tough leather. That night, Billy confides in his mother about how hard he prayed for his dogs. He also tells her about the coincidence of finding his dogs’ names carved on the sycamore tree in the fishermen’s camp. Mama asks Billy if he believes God helped him after hearing his prayer, and Billy says that he knows in his heart that was the case.

In this passage, Billy again reflects upon how his faith has allowed him to achieve so much. Billy perceives God’s unseen hand in all that has transpired since he prayed in this riverbed years ago—so much so that he doesn’t give himself credit for putting in the hard work that made his reality reflect his innermost hopes, prayers, and dreams.



Billy knows that in chasing his dreams, he has put his family’s peace of mind second to his own wants and needs. Here, he attempts to make amends for that choice by showing them that he was thinking of them the whole way along his big journey. Billy never makes a decision without considering the emotional consequences as well as the physical repercussions—a fact that makes him a good son and that will soon make him a good hunter.



This passage foreshadows a major tension at the heart of Billy’s family: Mama and Papa’s desire to move their family out of the Ozarks, and Billy’s hatred of town and his fear of leaving the natural world behind. Mama’s prayers all revolve around giving her children a better and different life—but Billy’s prayers have all revolved around making a life for himself that is as wild and free as the mountains themselves.



In this passage, Billy and Mama bond over the strength of their shared faith in God’s power to transform a life. Billy internalizes the idea that prayers from the heart are always answered—an idea that will fuel how he moves through the world in the months to come.



CHAPTER 7

Though Billy is thrilled to have his pups at last, he soon realizes that another obstacle stands before him: in order to train Old Dan and Little Ann to hunt raccoons, he'll first need a raccoon skin to help them learn the scent. For weeks, Billy tries to catch a raccoon in the traps Papa got for him—but he fails each and every time. Frustrated, Billy goes to visit Grandpa at the store, knowing that his grandfather was once a skilled raccoon hunter. Grandpa goes out to his tool shed and he retrieves a couple of simple tools. He fills a sack with nails and he tells Billy that if Billy follows a very specific set of instructions, he'll have his raccoon in no time.

Grandpa instructs Billy to drop a piece of shiny tin inside a hole in a log in the woods. He tells Billy to hammer in the nails around the hole in the log at opposite slants to one another. Grandpa tells Billy that raccoons, being such curious animals, will try to get the piece of tin out of the bottom of the log—but when they try to pull out their fisted paw, it'll catch on the nails. Billy protests that all the raccoon would need to do to escape the trap is open its fist and slip through, but Grandpa insists that a raccoon will never release its grip on something bright and shiny—he had a pet raccoon as a boy and he learned from its “peculiar” behaviors. Billy heads home, excited to try out Grandpa's “wonderful” plan the following day.

The next morning, Billy gets to work collecting pieces of tin and using them to lay traps in a series of sycamore logs along the riverbed. Billy sets a total of 14 traps and he goes to bed that night excited to see what he'll catch. At first light, Billy bounds out of bed and he rushes down to the riverbed to check his traps—but he's dismayed to realize that he's caught nothing. Billy returns home feeling discouraged, but Papa warns him not to lose hope—it takes about a week, he says, for a human's scent to disappear from the wilderness. Pretty soon, Papa says, Billy scent will evaporate, and the raccoons will start to go near the traps.

Sure enough, after a week, Billy goes out to check his traps and finds that he has caught a raccoon. The raccoon is hissing mad as Billy comes upon it struggling in the trap. Little Ann and Old Dan begin barking and whimpering at the raccoon. Billy releases their collars and he lets them rush the raccoon. Billy watches the pups tussle with the raccoon—but when the raccoon fights back, Billy retrieves his pups, scoops them up in his arms, and runs for home.

Here, Rawls shows yet again how Billy's grandfather is an important and influential figure in his life. Grandpa is just as wily as the raccoons he spent his youth trapping. As he teaches Billy important lessons about the natural world, he also helps Billy to learn more about himself and his own capabilities.



Grandpa clearly knows a lot about how raccoons behave. The novel overwhelmingly shows that knowledge of the natural world allows one to possess a deeper knowledge of the self, and Rawls accordingly makes it clear that Grandpa is a man with knowledge not just of the world around him, but of the world within himself.



Billy is eager to start conquering the natural world—as well as the world within himself. He wants to explore his capabilities as a hunter and thus to tame not just the animals he's trapping, but his own spirit.



As Billy traps his first raccoon, he begins to realize that growing up, coming of age, and taming the wild world within oneself is inextricably tied with violence and death.



As Billy bounds into the yard, Mama begins crying—she asks Billy if he’s been bitten by a snake. He excitedly tells her he’s caught a raccoon, but when he sees the depth of her worry, he, too, begins crying and apologizes for scaring her. Papa comes over and he hands Mama his handkerchief. After comforting her, he tells Billy that it’s time for them to go get the raccoon. He suggests Mama and Billy’s sisters come along to watch the show. On the way back through the woods, Mama notices some blood on Billy’s shirt. After investigating, Billy realizes that the blood is coming from Old Dan’s nose—the raccoon scratched it hard.

The Colmans come upon the raccoon. Everyone stands back as Papa picks up a large stick and he begins beating the raccoon to death. Billy’s sisters start to cry, so Mama leads them away—but Billy watches transfixed and unafraid. After delivering the final blow, Papa begins pulling the nails from the trap—sure enough, as he pulls the raccoon’s paw from the hole, he and Billy see that the raccoon still has the shiny piece of tin locked firmly in its grasp. Papa suddenly grows grave and sad. He suggests that Billy take all the nails out of the traps—it’s not hunting season in the first place, and trapping raccoons this way, he says, isn’t “sportsmanlike.” Now that Billy has his first hide, Papa says, it’s time to train the dogs to catch raccoons and stop relying on unfair traps. Billy agrees with his father.

The next day, Billy begins giving his dogs hunting lessons using the raccoon’s skins. As Billy’s pups learn to work the trails he lays for them, he watches them go from “awkward” to beautiful. Old Dan’s eagerness is tempered by Little Ann’s wily smarts—together, the dogs learn how to follow the winding and sometimes difficult trails that raccoons can set in order to outwit predators. Billy teaches his dogs to swim, knowing that raccoons often cross rivers in an attempt to throw predators off—it is not long before Billy’s dogs love the water. Billy teaches his dogs all of the tricks he can think of. In order to learn more, he starts hanging around Grandpa’s store and listening to the tales that the hunters who shop there tell one another.

At the end of the summer, Billy is exhausted from having worked with Old Dan and Little Ann each and every day. He calls the dogs over at the end of a training session and he speaks to them as if they’re people, letting them know that hunting season will start in a few days and that it’s time to put all they’ve learned to the test. Though the dogs don’t answer Billy with words, as humans would, he sees their “answer” in the glint of their eyes and the wag of their tails. Billy is grateful that his dogs always find a way to answer him.

This passage demonstrates what a serious fighter Old Dan is even as a pup. He doesn’t hesitate to throw himself into the fray to please Billy—even when it means sustaining injuries or facing down danger.



This passage demonstrates that those who want to grow up and tame the natural world (and the unknowable world within themselves) must often bear witness to violence and death. Billy’s mother and sisters are too emotionally fragile to watch the bloody act Papa perpetrates—but Billy knows that if he wants to make it as a hunter, he needs to be able to witness and understand the endless circle of life and death of which all nature is a part.



As Billy watches his dogs work, he learns a lot about their personalities. He sees how they help and complement each other in terms of strengths and weaknesses—and, above all, how they work tirelessly to please their master. Billy is starting to feel like a real hunter as he and his dogs train to conquer the natural world together.



This passage shows how deeply Billy’s relationship with his dogs has evolved in just a short period of time. Billy, Old Dan, and Little Ann seem to understand one another innately—their bond breaks down the barriers between their species.



CHAPTER 8

On the first day of hunting season, Billy calms his anxiety by making preparations for the coming night, when he and the dogs will go out to hunt their first raccoons. Billy cleans his lantern, greases his boots, and sharpens his ax. As Billy is in the midst of preparing, his father approaches him for a heart-to-heart. Papa warns Billy that because Mama is so nervous about Billy being out hunting all night, it's important that Billy let them know where he'll be each night—just in case his parents need to go out and look for him. Billy privately thinks that his father is no longer talking to him like he's a little boy—he's talking to him as a man would talk to another man.

That night, as Billy prepares to head out on the hunt, Mama fusses over him and she tells him that she doesn't approve of his hunting. Papa defends Billy, observing that he's "getting to be a good-size man now." Mama admits that she knows Billy is growing up but she says she doesn't like it one bit. Billy promises his mother that he'll be careful. She tells him that she will pray for his safety each and every night. Billy feels some hesitation about heading out, but Papa urges him to get going while the raccoons are just beginning to stir. Billy heads out to the porch with his lantern, where Old Dan and Little Ann are already waiting excitedly. Mama and Papa marvel at how intuitive the dogs are.

Billy sets off into the frosty, beautiful Ozark darkness with his dogs beside them. He talks to Little Ann and Old Dan, reminding them that tonight is the "real thing." As excited as Billy is, he still takes the time to appreciate the "peaceful" sounds and sights of nature all around him as he heads deeper into the mountains. He is startled and happy when Old Dan lets out the bawl which lets Billy know the dog has found a raccoon's scent—Billy nearly drops his lantern out of anticipation. As Little Ann's voice joins Dan's and the two set out on the trail, Billy begins crying for reasons he can't name or understand.

The raccoon plays many tricks on Dan and Ann as it leads them through the woods, crossing the river and darting this way and that. Old Dan whines to Billy, but Billy tells Dan that he needs to pick the trail back up himself. Dan excitedly gets back to work. Little Ann leaps into the river and soon Dan follows her—they work from bank to bank to pick up the trail, and Billy is full of pride as he witnesses their determination and resolve in action for the first time. After over an hour, however, the dogs are no closer to finding the wily raccoon. When the dogs approach Billy, wet and panting, he calls them off and he tells them they did their best.

As Billy's relationships with his dogs have grown and his prowess as a hunter has evolved, he has grown up. Billy has witnessed violence and death and he's begun to understand more about the circle of life and the cycles of the natural world. Even though Billy is, of course, still a young boy rather than an adult man, he delights in experiencing a new chapter in his relationship with his father.



Mama and Papa have very different feelings about this momentous night, which represents Billy's coming of age. Mama turns to her faith for comfort while Papa places his trust in the natural world and Billy's ability to understand it and move within it. Both of them are comforted by how devoted Little Ann and Old Dan are to Billy—they know that the dogs Billy has poured so much love into will give that love and care back to him.



In this passage, Billy becomes overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude for his dogs, for nature, and for the steadfastness he himself has shown as he's worked toward this night—the culmination of his life's dreams. Billy can't hide his emotions—and out here in nature, he doesn't feel he has to.



This first hunt is important to Billy simply because it represents the fact that he has achieved his dreams—he has his dogs, he's trained them to hunt, and he's out in the wild alone. When Billy believes his dogs have failed, he's not hurt or upset by it—but at the same time, his willingness to accept failure in this passage is not indicative of the devotion and hard work his dogs have shown him. Dan and Ann know that both they and Billy deserve more.



Just as Billy picks up his things and prepares to lead his dogs home, however, Little Ann begins bawling and running down the bank. Old Dan follows her. Billy realizes that his dogs have scented the raccoon again, and he stands still, waiting. Soon, he watches a raccoon streak by—and sees that his dogs are not far behind it. Billy whoops and cheers as Ann and Dan successfully “tree” their first raccoon by chasing the raccoon up into a tree and surrounding the base so the animal cannot escape. As Billy approaches the tree where the raccoon is caught, however, he groans—Ann and Dan have trapped the raccoon in the tallest sycamore in the valley, a giant tree which Billy has admired for years.

Billy takes stock of the tree. Though he can see a hollow limb near the top where the raccoon must be hiding, he knows the tree is too tall to climb and too big to fell with his ax. He tells Little Ann and Old Dan that it’s time to give up and go find another raccoon—Dan and Ann, however, continue to paw and whine at the tree and they refuse to leave it. Billy knows that he has promised his dogs many times that once they treed a raccoon, he would do the rest—he realizes he cannot let his dogs down, even if felling the tree takes “a whole year.”

Billy begins chipping away at the tree with his ax. He works through the night, bolstered and encouraged by his dogs as they lick his face and bark, seemingly helping to cheer him on. By daybreak, though, Billy is so exhausted that he slumps against the tree and he falls asleep. He is awakened sometime later by the sound of Papa calling for him. Billy calls back to let his father know where he is. Soon, Papa comes into view—he is riding the family’s mule and looking concerned. As Papa comes upon Billy and inspects his work on the tree, he pieces together what has happened.

Papa explains that Mama was worried sick when Billy didn’t come home. Billy tries to hold back his tears of shame and remorse. Papa, however, insists he isn’t scolding Billy—in fact, he says, he’s proud of Billy for working so hard. Papa asks why Billy won’t just give up. Billy replies that he made a promise to his dogs and he intends to make good on it. Papa solemnly agrees that “if a man’s word isn’t any good, he’s no good himself.” Papa heads back home, promising to tell Mama what’s going on and to send Billy’s sister down with lunch later on.

Billy is shocked, amused, and a bit dismayed when his dogs tree their first real raccoon in the largest tree in the valley. This new trial in front of him represents the ways in which life continually tests people—Billy is learning that growing up means one must constantly face new and increasingly difficult physical and emotional challenges.



In this passage, Billy experiences a swift and decisive change of heart. After seeing how devoted his dogs are to him and to the hunt itself, he decides to embody their relentless nature and to take the work of hunting as seriously as they do—even if it means he has to work much harder than he thought he’d have to.



Even with Billy’s newfound determination to make his dogs proud and to follow through on his promise to them, Billy is daunted by the hard work in front of him. Billy needs the support not just of his dogs, but of his family, in order to see the job through.



When Billy becomes emotional or cries in front of his father, Papa never scolds him—instead, Papa congratulates Billy on his depth of feeling and his commitment to both himself and his dogs. This sends the important message to Billy that coming of age and becoming a man doesn’t mean a person has to suppress their feelings.



Billy resumes work on the tree and he chops all morning until his sister visits with lunch. When Billy's sister sees how hard he's working, she tells him that he's "crazy as a bedbug" and she warns him that he's losing his mind. Billy shoos his sister back up toward the house and then he sits down with his meal. He finds a package of scraps for Old Dan and Little Ann tucked in with his own food. After the three of them eat, Billy resumes work on the tree—and his dogs keep watching every move he makes.

Billy is determined not to let his dogs down even in the face of physical exhaustion or ridicule from his family. He knows that he has made them a promise—and that seeing that promise through, especially on their first hunt ever, is crucial to how their relationship will continue to grow and progress.



CHAPTER 9

By late evening, Billy is exhausted from chopping when he hears someone coming: it is Grandpa in his buggy. Grandpa asks how Billy's doing, and Billy confesses that he's about ready to give up. Grandpa, however, insists that Billy can't give up—what he needs is some rest and some food. Billy, however, states that if he leaves the tree, the raccoon will escape. Grandpa reaches into his buggy and he pulls out the materials to make a scarecrow, explaining to Billy that the scarecrow will help keep the raccoon in the tree while Billy returns home to eat, sleep, and rest.

Grandpa is a seasoned hunter and he knows that while Billy is devoted to trapping this raccoon and proving his devotion to his dogs, the young man still needs to take care of himself. Grandpa arrives to help Billy out by teaching him a new trick that will let Billy show his dogs that it's important to preserve one's own wellbeing even in the face of a major task.



Together, Billy and his grandfather build and erect their scarecrow, laughing and talking all the while. Grandpa helps Billy and the dogs into the buggy and they all set off for home. On the way, Grandpa compliments Billy on his hard work on the tree. Back at the house, Mama greets Billy and she fawns over him. She has prepared one of his favorite dinners: chicken and dumplings. Over dinner, Billy and Grandpa continue talking about raccoon hunting and the various tricks raccoons pull to try and get hunting dogs off their trails. Grandpa reassures Billy that his dogs will soon enough learn how to handle any trick a raccoon throws their way. After dinner and a hot bath, Billy lets Mama cover him in liniment and then he falls into bed and he sleeps deeply through the night.

Surrounded by his family's love and warmth, Billy begins to rest up and feel like himself again. He understands that backing off of a task doesn't mean one has to abandon it. Prioritizing one's own health in tricky or difficult situations is important, and Billy is coming to see how sometimes half the battle is taking care of oneself.



In the morning, Billy is stiff and tired, but Papa assures Billy that he'll limber up as soon as he starts swinging his ax. Papa says that he heard a hound howling all night; Billy looks out the window and realizes that Old Dan isn't in the doghouse. Billy declares that Old Dan must have returned to the sycamore in the middle of the night, determined not to let the raccoon get away. Billy grabs his things and hurries back out to the woods with Little Ann close behind, determined to prove to Old Dan that he's just as committed to catching the raccoon as the dog is.

Old Dan's ironclad commitment to making sure that the raccoon stays treed—and that Billy will be able to capture it—is representative of his love, loyalty, and devotion to the boy who has raised and trained him.



Back at the old sycamore, Billy notices that there are two small beds made of leaves. He realizes that Little Ann must have come out here to sleep beside Old Dan, then returned to fetch Billy at first light. Further moved by his dogs' determination, Billy gets back to chopping. He limbers up soon enough—but as the day progresses, Billy begins developing blisters on his palms. He wraps them in rags, but his preventative measures are no use—the blisters burst and they cause Billy excruciating pain. By late afternoon, Billy realizes that he is in too much pain to keep going.

Billy kneels between his dogs and he prays, asking God to give him “the strength to finish the job.” As Billy stands, he hears a gust of wind approach. Billy watches as the wind tangles in the branches of the big sycamore and it starts to blow the tree over. Fascinated, Billy pulls his dogs out of the tree's way and watches as it falls with a “cyclone roar.” Sure enough, as soon as the tree hits the ground, a large brown raccoon scrambles out of it. Billy sics Old Dan on the racoon, and Dan and Ann hurry after it.

Billy watches as Old Dan and Little Ann trap and kill the racoon in a “savage and brutal” manner, tearing his flesh amidst his “dying squalls.” Billy feels a sadness in his heart as he retrieves the raccoon from his dogs—but at the same time, he is excited to have made his first kill. As Billy walks back through the woods, passing the large sycamore, he feels a sense of sorrow at the giant tree's fall. He apologizes to the tree for his role in felling it.

As Billy arrives home, he sees that his whole family is waiting out on the porch for him. He holds up the raccoon triumphantly, and Papa offers to help him skin it out back in the smokehouse. As Billy and Papa work together on the skin, Billy asks if Papa noticed any gusts of wind earlier. Papa says he didn't. Billy tells Papa about praying to God for the strength to fell the tree, and the sudden gust of wind that took it out. Billy asks Papa if God answered his prayer. Papa says it's up to Billy to decide for himself. Billy quietly decides that he did, by some blessing, receive God's help in felling the tree.

This passage illustrates how committed and loyal Old Dan and Little Ann are not just to Billy or to the hunt, but to each other as well. Little Ann and Old Dan take care of and look out for each other—they are inseparable and intensely devoted.



This passage represents another instance in which Billy's faith changes his understanding of the world. Billy prays for help finishing the job—but whether or not it is God who sends the breeze, the fact remains that Billy worked so hard that he made the tree vulnerable to a strong wind.



As Billy again bears witness to the brutal death of a raccoon, he understands even more about the circle of life and the necessary evils of the natural world. Billy feels he owes a debt to nature—he wants to do right by the world around him.



Papa is not as vocal about his religion or beliefs as Mama is—he wants Billy to decide what to believe in for himself. Billy is convinced of God's love and constant presence in his life, however, and in this he passage gives thanks for all that God has done for him.



CHAPTER 10

Night after night, Billy takes Old Dan and Little Ann out to hunt. He loves climbing through the wild forest and mountainous terrain, chasing his dogs as they trail the wily raccoons through the woods. Billy has great success, managing to trap raccoons most nights—and because the price of raccoon skins is high, Billy is able to make between \$4 and \$10 off of each hide by selling them at Grandpa’s store. Billy turns the money he makes off of his skins over to Papa—he doesn’t care about money anymore now that he has his dogs.

Little Ann and Old Dan go everywhere with Billy except to Grandpa’s general store, where the old dogs gathered outside often pick on Old Dan. Billy takes his furs to Grandpa’s store each week to sell them and he begins to notice that Grandpa is keeping a tally of the number and sizes of the hides Billy brings in. Billy loves going to the store on Saturdays, when other raccoon hunters are often gathered around telling stories about their hunts. The other hunters sometimes poke fun at the small size of Billy’s dogs compared to other hounds—their taunts make Billy’s blood boil, but he never causes a scene.

Billy loves his dogs deeply. He has noticed how much they love each other as well—Old Dan won’t hunt without Little Ann, and Little Ann is always protective of Old Dan on difficult hunts. The dogs help each other and they work together each and every night—even when they find themselves up against racoons so wily that Billy wants to give up the chase.

One night, during a particularly long and difficult hunt against a whip-smart raccoon, Billy loses sight of Old Dan and Little Ann after they follow a raccoon into the river. Billy soon hears Little Ann barking, but sees no sign of Old Dan and worries that the raccoon has drowned him by jumping on his head. Soon enough, however, Little Ann begins digging into a muskrat den in the riverbank—Old Dan has, somehow, gotten himself trapped inside. Billy helps Ann dig through the night to get Old Dan out—finally he emerges, muddy and excited. Dan rinses off in the river and then he runs right back to the hole to keep digging. Billy realizes that the raccoon is in the hole. Together, the three of them dig the raccoon out and trap it.

Billy’s love for his dogs and for the art of hunting is pure and simple. He doesn’t need to make money off of his work or even advertise his spoils—he simply wants the freedom to roam the wilderness with his beloved hounds night after night.



Billy loves being around other hunters but he hates when they underestimate him or his dogs. Billy is angrier when the hunters make digs about his hounds—this shows how devoted he is to them and how viciously he would fight to keep them safe from any kind of harm.



Billy continues to be impressed and touched by the meaningful connection between Old Dan and Little Ann. Their devotion to one another moves him emotionally and it inspires him to give his all to them, as they give their all both to him and to each other.



This passage shows how passionately Billy, Old Dan, and Little Ann work together. They never give up on each other; even when they face fear, adversity, or danger, they do their best to rally together and get the job done. This kind of devotion teaches Billy some important lessons about hard work and loyalty—lessons that will continue to deepen in significance as Billy’s journey with Dan and Ann progresses.



Another night, Little Ann and Old Dan tree a raccoon in a petrified tree. When Billy catches up with them, he sees that Old Dan has climbed up the hollow inside of the tree and has chased a baby raccoon out onto a limb. Billy knows that if Old Dan falls or jumps, he'll break his legs. Billy decides to climb up the inside of the tree and bring Old Dan down. Billy slowly, carefully works his way up the tree, grabs Old Dan by the collar, and coaxes him back down again. Back on the ground, Billy lobs a rock at the raccoon to knock him out of the tree—and Old Dan at last “satisfie[s] his lust to kill.” Exhausted, Billy leads Dan and Ann home for the night, their prize in tow.

This passage shows the flip side of the dogs' extreme level of devotion and it hints that there are deadly consequences to the dogs' bloodlust and singular focus on the hunt—especially when it comes to Old Dan. While the dogs' loyalty to Billy can be deeply moving, it can also be a little disturbing—especially when they put their own lives in danger to satiate their desire to kill and triumph.



CHAPTER 11

One night, Little Ann gets into a “predicament” while out hunting in a deep fall of fresh snow. Billy is determined to take his dogs out in spite of the icy weather that has been plaguing the mountains for days. As Old Dan and Little Ann begin chasing a raccoon toward the river, Billy excitedly anticipates how they'll outsmart the many tricks the raccoon will surely play in an attempt to disguise its snowy tracks. Billy, however, also remembers something Grandpa told him: “When the nights are dark and the ground is frozen and slick, [raccoons] can pull some mean tricks [that] can be fatal.”

Grandpa has been a steadfast and reliable source of advice for Billy since his obsession with raccoon hunting began. Here, Billy recalls some important wisdom Grandpa once shared—wisdom which Billy perhaps thought he wouldn't need to worry about, but which will perhaps become important as Billy and the hounds navigate the wilderness during this bitterly cold weather.



As Billy follows his dogs down to the river, he loses track of their voices. He calls to them and waits for them to howl or bawl back, but in spite of his whoops, he receives no answer. Down at the river, Billy realizes that the water is partially frozen and he gets an uneasy feeling. Halfway across the stream, he hears a gurgling and he notices that the water in the middle of the river is still running. Billy walks down the riverbank until he hears Old Dan—but rather than bawling to announce he's caught the scent of a raccoon, Dan is letting out a horrible long cry. Soon, Billy comes upon Dan out on the ice pack with his tail tucked between his legs. Billy instantly knows that something is wrong with Little Ann.

Old Dan and Little Ann are intimately devoted to each other and they're profoundly connected. When one is in trouble, the other experiences that trouble too. Here, as the proud and vicious Old Dan cowers and whines, Billy realizes just how serious things are for Little Ann and he knows he must take action to find and rescue her quickly.



Billy realizes that Little Ann probably slipped into the icy water while trying to leap from one frozen section of the river to the other in pursuit of the raccoon. Billy knows that he must do something to save Little Ann. He runs toward the sound of her cries and whines, using a stick of wild cane as a lantern pole to better see where Little Ann is. As he catches sight of her clinging to the ice along the far bank with her front paws, Billy breaks down in tears himself. Billy attempts to go out onto the ice toward Little Ann but he falls through into the freezing water. He drags himself out and he rushes back to the bank, fearing all is lost.

Billy realizes that Little Ann has gotten herself in a profoundly dangerous situation—the deadliest one the three of them have encountered so far. Billy has no idea what to do. Though he is devoted to his dogs and deeply attached to them emotionally, he fears he will be unable to save Little Ann from the treachery of nature.



Billy is just about to give up and head for home, leaving Ann for dead. He prays for God to help him once more. Soon, he hears the peculiar sound of metal hitting metal. As he realizes that the handle of his lantern has fallen from an upright position to clang against the side of itself, he suddenly understands what he must do. After prying off the handle and bending a hook in one end, he affixes the metal handle to the cane using a shoelace. Billy strips naked and he wades into the icy water—able to touch the bottom of the river with his feet—while holding the hook out in front of him and attempting to hook Ann’s collar. Eventually, Billy catches hold of Ann and he drags her back across the rushing river.

Once Billy has Ann back on land, he wraps her in his coat and he builds a fire. He massages the life and warmth back into Ann’s frigid limbs, and soon she’s is ready to head for home. On the way back to the house, Billy spots the giant sycamore and he says a prayer of thanks to the “miracle” of the lantern which saved Ann’s life. Back at home, Billy catches a cold and is stuck in bed for several days. While convalescing, Billy asks his mother about prayer one afternoon. He asks her if every prayer offered up to God is answered. Mama replies that only ones that come “from the heart” are heard. She asks Billy what made him curious, but Billy, afraid to tell his mother about the incident with Little Ann, says he was just wondering.

CHAPTER 12

Soon, aided by Grandpa’s bragging, word about Billy’s dogs spreads all over the countryside. One morning, Billy takes some corn into town so that Grandpa can grind it up into meal using the mill at his store. While Billy waits for his grandfather to finish up with a customer, he sees out the window that the Pritchard boys—a pair of brothers from a “no-account” family of “bootleggers [and] thieves”—are approaching. Rubin is two years older than Billy with broad shoulders and mean eyes. His small and antsy brother, Rainie, is Billy’s age. Rainie is positively obsessed with making bets.

Sure enough, as soon as Rainie and Rubin come into the store and spy Billy, Rainie asks Billy if he wants to make a bet. Billy refuses him. Rubin and Rainie buy chewing tobacco for themselves—much to Grandpa’s disgust—and then Grandpa takes Billy out back to the mill. Rainie and Rubin follow them. Rainie continues pestering Billy, betting him that their blue tick hound can out-hunt both of Billy’s dogs. As Rainie continues pressing Billy to bet \$2 that his dogs can tree the famous “ghost coon,” a giant, old, and wily raccoon native to their part of the mountains, Grandpa becomes agitated. Eventually, he insists Billy take the bet. He even gives Billy the \$2 to buy in—but he orders all three boys to play fair and respect whomever the winner turns out to be.

Once again, Billy finds himself in a situation in which his prayers are seemingly magically answered by an unseen presence—a presence he takes to be God. The wind which blows the lantern handle over gives Billy the idea of using the handle to make a hook which will allow him to rescue Ann. His plan is successful, and Billy attributes Ann’s rescue not to his own ingenuity but to God’s influence on the situation.



Billy continues to believe that his triumphs and successes in the face of hardship are owed entirely to God’s benevolence. Rawls, however, shows that while God may or may not have intervened, Billy’s faith has allowed him to feel stronger and more capable—a sensation which makes him feel more in control of his own reality. Rawls purposefully blurs the lines between divine intervention and human determination in order to show the important role that faith and prayer can play in an ordinary life.



Most of the people in Billy’s life are kind and supportive—the only difficulties he’s had with other human beings have been with the children in Tahlequah and, occasionally, with the braggadocious hunters who hang around Grandpa’s store. The introduction of the Pritchard brothers, however, signals that not all of the humans in Billy’s orbit are kind or hold the same values Billy does—the shifty, jealous brothers are foil against Billy’s good-natured openheartedness.



In this passage, Rawls demonstrates the effect of Grandpa’s pride on behalf of Billy and his dogs. While Billy is eager to defend his dogs against anyone who questions their abilities, he is much more soft-spoken. Grandpa, however, is so proud of Billy, Dan, and Ann that he’s determined not to let a single slight get past him. Grandpa’s involvement in this moment will have terrible consequences for all three boys—but right now, all Grandpa is focused on is helping Billy prove himself.



Rainie and Rubin make a plan to meet Billy at a landmark near their home the following night. Billy agrees but he asks the boys not to bring their hound—his dogs are distracted, he says, when other dogs are around. As Rainie and Rubin, satisfied, walk away, Grandpa grows excited about the bet. He tells Billy how much he hopes that Dan and Ann will be able to catch the famous “ghost coon.” Even Billy is, in spite of himself, looking forward to the following night—but knowing his mother will worry about him associating with the Pritchard boys, he decides not to tell his parents about where he’s going.

The next night, Billy meets the Pritchards at the appointed spot. On the way, Billy gave his dogs a pep talk and he begged them to catch the “ghost coon” for him and Grandpa. As Rubin and Rainie approach, Billy sees that they have their blue tick hound with them. The Pritchard boys catch sight of Old Dan and Little Ann for the first time. They remark that the dogs “look too little to be any good” and then they insult Billy’s grandfather. Billy works not to lose his temper, instead choosing to focus on the hunt before him. With his lantern and ax in hand, Billy sends Old Dan and Little Ann out on the trail.

Old Dan and Little Ann soon pick up on the scent of the fabled “ghost” raccoon and they start tracking it. Though the raccoon crosses the river several times, Ann and Dan stay on his trail. When Old Dan becomes intent on digging his way into a hollowed-out log which has formed a drift filled with water, Rubin and Rainie declare that the hunt is over—but Billy insists that he is not giving up until his dogs do. Rubin tries to get Billy to hand over the money, but Billy remains focused. Little Ann joins Old Dan in sniffing out the log—and soon, she chases the “ghost coon” from the drift beneath. It is the biggest raccoon Billy has ever seen.

The dogs chase the raccoon. Billy and the Pritchard boys chase the dogs upriver through the swampy bottoms of the valley. As Billy looks over at Rubin and Rainie, he feels happy and excited in spite of his dislike of the boys. Rainie predicts that the raccoon is about to pull his signature “disappearing” trick by hiding in a nearby tree—sure enough, seconds later, Billy hears Old Dan let out the bark that signals he’s treed a raccoon. Billy rushes to catch up with Dan—but Rainie suggests that Billy get his money out and be ready to pay up once the raccoon disappears.

Billy has gotten himself into a few dangerous situations over the last several weeks. Consequently, he feels that in spite of his anxiety about going onto the Pritchards’ territory in search of a ghostly animal, he’s up to the task. His dogs have taught them that with enough grit and devotion, he can conquer anything. Billy doesn’t realize that this bet will challenge him and his dogs in a way they’ve never been tested before.



Billy has impressed upon his dogs how important this hunt is—he doesn’t yet realize how seriously Dan and Ann take his pleas. Billy tries to remain calm as the Pritchards taunt him and his dogs, determined to let his dogs’ actions speak for themselves.



Rubin and Rainie are determined to get Billy to give up early and surrender his money—they have no interest in a fair bet. When Billy and his dogs begin successfully sniffing out the “ghost coon,” Rubin and Rainie become defensive and irritated.



This passage shows how much pure, unadulterated joy Billy takes in hunting. His love for the sport, for his dogs, and for nature is enough to make even Rubin and Rainie seem tolerable.



CHAPTER 13

Billy approaches the tree, a squat oak in the middle of a field. Billy walks once around the tree looking for the raccoon, but Rubin and Rainie insist it's no use—the “ghost coon,” they declare, has already disappeared. Rainie urges Billy to pay up. Billy, however, insists on climbing the tree. From up in its branches Billy can see Little Ann sniffing around an old fence post a few yards off. Because his dogs are scenting elsewhere, Billy realizes that the raccoon is not in the tree after all. The boys urge Billy to pay up already. Billy insists on letting the dogs sniff a while longer. After several minutes, however, even Little Ann and Old Dan give up and return to Billy. Billy takes out the \$2 and hands it over, congratulating the Pritchard boys on winning the bet.

A breeze rustles through the trees. Little Ann raises her head to sniff and she begins walking with purpose toward the tree. Watching her, Billy declares that he might not have lost his \$2 after all. Little Ann tracks the scent to a fence post nearby. Billy approaches the post and he knocks on it—it is hollow. Billy picks up a switch, asks Rubin to give him a boost, and uses the switch the poke around inside the post from the top town. Soon, his switch catches on something soft, and the “ghost coon” scrambles out of the post right into Billy's face.

As soon as the raccoon hits the ground, Little Ann and Old Dan are on him. The raccoon puts up a good fight, eventually scurrying up into the oak tree. Billy climbs the tree to shake the raccoon out—but as he climbs out onto the limb where the raccoon is hiding and hears its nervous cries, he becomes emotional and he decides that he doesn't want to kill the “ghost coon”—having caught up with it is enough. Billy climbs down and he tells Rubin and Rainie that he isn't going to kill the raccoon. They call him “chicken-livered” and they warn him that if he doesn't call his dogs on the raccoon right away, they'll “beat [him] half to death. Billy refuses once again. The boys warn Billy that if his dogs don't kill the raccoon, theirs will. The blue tick hound growls menacingly.

Billy asks for his money back and he declares that he wants to go home—he doesn't want to stay and watch the raccoon die. Rubin becomes angry and he accuses Billy of going back on his bet. Billy reminds him that the bet only concerned treeing the raccoon—not killing it. Rainie begins calling for Rubin to beat Billy. Rubin grabs Billy and throws him to the ground. Just as Rubin is about to unleash a blow, Billy hears growling nearby. He turns to see Old Dan and the blue tick hound fighting. Rubin starts beating Billy anyway. Rainie, however, calls out in distress that Old Dan and Little Ann are “killing Old Blue.”

Billy is determined not to give up the hunt before his dogs have exhausted all possibilities. He knows how devoted they are and he has seen them accomplish extraordinary feats even when it seemed like all was lost. Rubin and Rainie, though, aren't actually interested in a fair bet—they want Dan and Ann to fail. Billy succumbs to the social pressure and gives up—much to the Pritchards' delight.



The hunt is not over after all—Little Ann's wily nature and gift for picking up on delicate scents comes in handy as the “ghost coon” makes itself known once again. Billy is reminded to never second-guess his dogs' resilience and the power of hard work and devotion.



Billy is used to the hard facts of hunting: in order to have success, he must make his dogs kill their prey. Billy has been familiarized with the circle of life and the violence and death that accompanies it—but in this instance, his respect and reverence for nature wins out over his desire to see his dogs' devotion to the hunt all the way through. Billy knows how old and skilled the “ghost coon” is and wants the animal to live a long life. It has earned its freedom, he believes—but Rubin and Rainie clearly don't have the same respect for nature and animal life that Billy does.



Billy's gentleness and generosity of spirit gets him in trouble with the Pritchard brothers who have no qualms about killing any animal for sport. As Billy finds himself in dire straits—Little Ann and Old Dan come to his rescue by distracting Rubin and Rainie and retaliating against the boys' dog.



Rubin leaps off of Billy and seizes Billy's ax. He roars that he will kill Old Dan and Little Ann before letting them kill his dog. As Rubin runs toward the dogfight, however, he trips on a stick and falls. Billy runs past him to break up the fight. Old Blue is alive but in bad shape, and Little Ann will not relinquish her jaws' hold on his neck. Billy carefully pries her jaws apart and pulls her and Old Dan off to the side, calming them down.

Billy turns around to see Rainie staring down at Rubin in horror. As Billy moves closer to the Pritchard boys, Rainie starts screaming and he runs for the hills. Billy looks down and Rubin and he sees that Rubin fell on the ax—the sharp blade has lodged itself in Rubin's stomach. Rubin quietly pleads with Billy to take the ax out of him. Through fear, shock, and nausea, Billy reaches down to remove the blade from Rubin's stomach. Blood gushes from the wound. Rubin tries to push himself up but he fails—he dies within seconds. Billy grabs his dogs and he starts heading for home. He looks back one last time and he sees the eyes of the “ghost coon” shining in the tree above Rubin's dead body.

Back at home, Billy wakes his parents and he tells them everything that's happened. Mama begins crying and she wraps her arms around her “poor little boy.” Papa, however, stands up and gets dressed. He announces that he is going to tell Grandpa what's happened, as Grandpa has the “authority to move the body.” He urges Billy to go alert the rest of their neighbors.

The next day is long, slow, and rainy. Papa doesn't come home from the Pritchards' until late in the afternoon. He reports that while the boys' father took the news “pretty hard,” none of the women living at the Pritchards' shed a single tear. Rainie, he says, is still in shock—he hasn't said a word all day, and his parents are planning to take him into town to see a doctor. In a stern, tired voice, Papa warns Billy not to mess around with the Pritchards anymore.

Billy doesn't want his dogs to kill Old Blue—but at the same time, he knows that they'd defend him just as viciously and devotedly as he'd defend them against anyone who tried to hurt them. Billy must work to calm his dogs down and call them off from the fight.



This instance of extreme violence and untimely death teaches Billy that the circle of life spares no one. Billy is traumatized by what he's seen, but because he has an understanding of the natural world (and a deep sense of faith in a higher power) he accepts the events of the evening with a sad kind of grace. Billy understands, on some level, that what he's witnessed is a part of growing up and understanding the world around him. There are consequences to one's actions—and nature often shows no mercy.



Papa and Mama aren't angry with Billy for his part in the night's grisly events—but Papa does encourage Billy to step up into a man's role and take responsibility for his actions by spreading the news around the community.



This passage complicates the novel's conception of masculinity and emotion. The day after Rubin's death is a hard day for both Billy and Papa, but they manage to keep it together—even as they make their sorrow and exhaustion known. Papa reports that the Pritchard men were emotional and upset—but that the “womenfolk” of their family were cold and unresponsive to the news. This shows that gender roles aren't absolute—while women are stereotypically portrayed as more emotional and men as more stoic, sometimes individuals deviate from these norms.



Over the next several days, Billy is plagued by terrible guilt and nightmares. Billy asks Mama if there's anything he can do to help, but she insists the Pritchards "don't like to have outsiders interfere." Nonetheless, Billy takes an old bouquet given to him by his sisters off the wall in his room and heads to the Pritchards' place. Old Dan and Little Ann follow him dutifully through the hills. As Billy approaches the property, he can see that a fresh grave has been dug in the graveyard on the Pritchards' land. As Billy quietly places the flowers on Rubin's grave, he can hear the sounds of Old Blue howling inside the house.

Though Billy didn't particularly like Rubin, he still feels guilty about his role, however small, in Rubin's death. When he goes to pay his respects to the insular family, he realizes that perhaps their families are not as different as he imagined them to be—after all, Rubin has a hound dog, too, and the dog is just as devastated by Rubin's death as Billy knows Ann and Dan would be by his own.



CHAPTER 14

A few days later, Billy gets word that Grandpa wants to see him. Billy is sure that Grandpa wants to ask him about Rubin's death. He heads nervously to the general store with Little Ann and Old Dan following behind. Sure enough, when Billy gets to Grandpa's store, Grandpa asks to hear the story of Rubin's death and how the bet went so wrong. When Billy finishes relaying his tale, Grandpa, in a quavering voice, admits that everything is his own fault. He apologizes profusely to Billy for suggesting he go along with the bet. Billy tells his grandfather that the incident was no one's fault—just a terrible accident. Grandpa tells Billy that they won't speak of it anymore—though he warns Billy that Billy will always think of what happened "now and then" throughout his life.

This conversation represents another manly heart-to-heart which Billy feels both privileged to have and intimidated by. Grandpa tries to comfort Billy by telling him to forget about the incident with Rubin—but at the same time, Grandpa is prepared to level with the boy by admitting that he has endured something large and life-changing and that he may find himself thinking of it from time to time as he grows older.



Grandpa changes the subject—he says he has something else he wants to talk to Billy about. He pulls out a newspaper and shows Billy an ad for a championship raccoon hunt that's coming up soon. Grandpa explains that he's wanted to go to one all his life—he wants Billy to enter Old Dan and Little Ann in the hunt. Billy feels scared and excited all at once. Grandpa tells Billy that he's been keeping track of all the raccoons Dan and Ann have caught, and that their record is "up there with the best of them." The entrance fee is already paid, Grandpa says, and on top of it all, the winner gets to take home a golden cup. Billy happily agrees to enter the hunt.

Grandpa doesn't want to linger too long on sad things—he has an exciting opportunity for Billy. When confronted with the idea of entering the hunting competition, Billy is nervous at first. His grandfather's faith in him and his dogs, however, changes Billy's mind and gives Billy the strength to believe in what his dogs can do even after hunting for only one season.



Grandpa calls Little Ann and Old Dan into the shop and feeds them each a big hunk of cheese. He calls them "the best darn [...] hounds in these Ozark Mountains." Billy is full of excitement and anticipation. Grandpa says that the hunt starts in six days, so they'll need to leave in five. He tells Billy that they can travel in his buggy, and that Papa can come along if he's free. Grandpa tells Billy to run home—but he reminds Billy to let the dogs rest for the next several days to get them ready for the rigorous hunt. Grandpa sends Billy home with a sack of candy.

Grandpa is determined to give Dan and Ann the royal treatment in the days leading up to the hunt—he knows that they deserve a break from their hard work and a chance to have their devotion repaid before their skills are put to the ultimate test.



As Billy runs home with his dogs by his side, he feels especially tuned into the sounds and sights of the beautiful country all around him. He hears the calls of various birds, the rustling of squirrels in the trees, and the shifting of leaves in the breeze. Every sound and sight is, to Billy, a “God-sent gift.” As Billy takes stock of his life—his beautiful hounds, his loving family, the opportunity to attend a giant hunt—he is overwhelmed with joy and gratitude.

At home, Billy tells his parents about Grandpa’s plans for the hunt. He begs Papa to agree to go with them. Papa is hesitant and he insists that Mama needs his help around the house. Mama says she won’t need Papa’s help for “several months yet.” As Billy looks at his mother, he is stunned to realize that she is pregnant and he’s amazed that he didn’t notice sooner. Papa excitedly agrees to go along on the hunt. One of Billy’s little sisters declares that Old Dan and Little Ann will bring home the cup for sure. Billy begins to cry tears of happiness. He promises his little sister that if he wins the cup, he will give it to her as a gift.

The next several days are full of excitement and anxiety. When it is at last time to leave for the hunt, Billy and Papa walk together with Old Dan and Little Ann to Grandpa’s general store, musing all the way about what skilled hunters—and what loving dogs—Dan and Ann really are. At the store, Grandpa and Grandma are loading up the buggy. Billy puts his things in the back and sees that his ax—the one which was lodged in Rubin’s stomach—has been cleaned and packed up along with everything else. The sight of it fills Billy with a strange uneasiness, but he admits to himself that there’s no use in throwing a perfectly good ax away.

Grandpa urges Billy to go into the barn and grab some hay to make beds for the dogs in the back of the buggy—and instructs him to fetch a jug of corn liquor and hide it in the buggy where Grandma won’t see it. Once everything is packed, Grandma bids the men goodbye and she urges them to be safe and “have a little sense” on their trip.

CHAPTER 15

Grandpa drives the buggy all day until sundown, then pulls over at a creek to rest for the night. He insists Billy make soft beds on the ground for the dogs and feed them some delicious corned-beef hash rather than their usual feed. Grandpa is astonished to see that Old Dan refuses to eat before Little Ann has had her share—he declares that he’s never seen dogs behave almost “as one” before. Grandpa says that he can’t put his finger on what’s special about these hounds—but he knows it’s something.

In this moment, Billy’s high-flying emotions allow him to feel an even deeper reverence for nature than usual. He feels that his relationship with nature is a blessing from God—and that God has, in fact, allowed him to experience all the good things in his life. In reality, Billy’s own hard work and devotion have allowed him to attain his achievements and experiences.



This passage shows how wrapped up in his hounds Billy has been over the last several months—he hasn’t even noticed that his mother is expecting a baby; expanding their family; and wrestling with her own private flood of emotions, excitements, and anxieties. Billy realizes that he needs to share his winnings with his family and to bring his focus back to them once the competition is over.



Billy is confronted with his old ax—an object which reconnects him to the trauma of the night Rubin Pritchard died. Billy doesn’t necessarily balk at the sight of the ax, however. He understands more about the circle of life and the necessity of death now—he takes a minute to get over his uneasiness and then he decides practically to use the ax after all. It is an even more meaningful object now because of the lesson it has come to represent.



Billy is excited to be on a real men’s trip for the first time in his life. His father and grandfather are treating him as an equal, a fact which moves and gratifies him.



Though Grandpa knows that Ann and Dan are devoted to Billy, in this scene he witnesses their profound devotion to each other, as well, for the first time. He is deeply moved by Ann and Dan’s love for each other—it is something singular and remarkable.



That night, as Billy lays down to go to sleep, he hears the sound of a hoot owl calling followed by the sound of a second owl—a screech owl—answering. Billy knows that hearing two owls is bad luck. Billy wakes Grandpa and he tells him what he’s heard. Grandpa tells Billy not to believe in superstition. He urges him to rest up for the big day tomorrow—if a man believed all the “jinx stuff” that is lore in the Ozarks, he tells Billy, “he’d go crazy.”

Late the next afternoon, the buggy arrives at the camp where the hunt is to be held. Billy is in awe—he has never seen so many people in one place. Grandpa and Papa, too, are overwhelmed by the number of tents spread out over an acre-and-a-half of land. After unpacking the buggy, Billy wastes no time in exploring camp. As he makes his rounds, he overhears people pointing him out as “the boy who owns the two little red hounds.” Billy is full of pride—but as he catches sight of all the different kinds of hounds gathered at the campsite, he grows nervous. As soon as he returns to his own tent, however, and catches sight of Ann and Dan again, he feels doubt release its hold on his heart. He believes they are sure to win.

The next day, Billy enters Little Ann in a contest to determine the best-looking hound at the hunt. Billy oils her coat with butter and brushes her out using Grandpa’s ivory comb. At the contest, Billy brings Little Ann before the judges and he watches in awe as more and more dogs are eliminated while Ann remains in competition. Ultimately, Ann takes the top prize, and Billy is near shock as the other hunters congratulate him and the judges award him with a small silver cup. Billy begins to cry as he carries Little Ann back to their tent.

Later that evening, the head judge gathers all the hunters around to give them instructions as to how the hunt will be carried out. Each night, five sets of hounds will go out to hunt. A judge will accompany each team and count their kills. The hounds that tree the most raccoons will go to a championship runoff. The judge tells the men to line up and to each draw a card which will tell them what night their team is to hunt. Billy waits in line with the other men; while he waits, the others treat and talk to him “like a man.” Billy draws a card indicating that his team will go out on the fourth night of the hunt. That evening, Billy sits with Papa, Grandpa, and some other hunters around a campfire, singing songs and laughing.

Billy’s faith in unseen powers goes both ways—it is a bolstering force which allows him to feel loved and supported, but it is also a factor which makes him vulnerable to fearing things he can’t fully understand or control.



Being in a new environment like this one fills Billy with excitement, but also with trepidation. He is worried that he won’t be able to live up to the expectations others have for him—or the expectations he has for himself. When Billy sees his dogs, though, they remind him of their steadfast devotion—his confidence in their ability to take on anything together as one is renewed and restored.



Little Ann and Old Dan are devoted hunters who work hard each night to bring Billy the skins of several raccoons. In this passage, however, Ann proves her devotion to Billy in a different way—and Billy is able to see his special dog through the eyes of others for the first time. He recognizes just what a remarkable and beautiful dog she really is, and his emotions for her spill over more strongly than ever.



Everything about this trip so far has made Billy feel more grown-up than he ever has before—the treatment he’s received from Papa and Grandpa so far feels like a reward for all his hard work with Dan and Ann. To be treated like an equal by the other hunters, however, moves Billy on a deeper level—it means that he truly is worthy of these men’s company and esteem.



As the days go by, more and more groups are eliminated. Billy, Papa, and Grandpa patiently wait their turn. On the day of their hunt, however, Grandpa takes to “hopping around like a grasshopper.” He, Billy, and Papa are all full of energy. As Billy passes through camp that afternoon, a hunter stops him to ask if it’s true that his hounds once treed six raccoons in one night. Billy laughs, knowing that his Grandpa has been telling tall tales about Dan and Ann.

Billy is amused and excited by his grandfather’s enthusiasm for him and his dogs—but at the same time, he remembers that the last time Grandpa tried to talk up Dan and Ann too loudly, it got all three of them in deep trouble.



CHAPTER 16

That afternoon, the judge who is to accompany Billy and his hounds out that night comes to their tent to introduce himself—at sundown, the judge, Billy, Grandpa, Papa, and the dogs load up into the buggy and they drive downriver, away from the picked-over territory near camp. As soon as the buggy pulls over, Dan and Ann leap from the back, howl, and start running through the woods in search of a trail. Billy admires his dogs’ beauty and hard work. Soon, Ann and Dan bawl to announce that they’ve caught a scent. Grandpa lets out an excited, strangled whoop and joins Billy as he runs after the dogs.

Dan and Ann are clearly excited to be out on the trail once again—but they’re not the only ones who feel a special excitement about the hunting competition. Grandpa, too, is ecstatic to finally realize his dream of seeing a big raccoon hunt. He is just as moved as Billy was on his own first night hunting in the Ozarks with his dogs by his side.



After a long chase, Billy at last hears Ann and Dan howl that the raccoon has been treed. Papa pulls out a gun—one that Billy has never been allowed to use. As the group approaches the tree, Papa fires the gun to scare the raccoon down. Dan and Ann kill the raccoon, and Billy helps Grandpa and Papa skin it. The group moves on as Dan and Ann pick up yet another trail, then tree and kill yet another raccoon. The group takes a break and they build a fire after Grandpa stumbles into the icy creek—but at nearly three in the morning, Dan and Ann catch a third scent.

The hunt is long, intense, and tiring—but Dan and Ann, seemingly realizing how much is at stake, don’t give up or wear out even as the night’s twists, turns, and surprises test Billy, Papa, and Grandpa.



Billy, Papa, Grandpa, and the judge take off after the dogs. Soon, they come upon Dan and Ann in a field—they have lost the raccoon’s trail. Billy knows that if they don’t find the raccoon by daylight, they’ll be knocked out of the competition. As if understanding the urgency of the situation, Dan and Ann continue to work the trail tirelessly. Just before daylight, Billy hears Little Ann bawl—she has treed the raccoon. Billy waits to hear Old Dan’s voice join hers—he knows that if the raccoon jumps, Dan won’t let it get away. Billy, Grandpa, Papa, and the judge run toward the sound of the dogs’ voices. The dogs kill the raccoon, and together, Billy, Grandpa, and Papa skin it. The judge remarks that in 40 years of work, he’s never seen anything like Little Ann’s remarkable work outwitting such a wily raccoon.

The judge is deeply impressed by the way Dan and Ann work together. Between Old Dan’s headstrong bullishness and Little Ann’s wily trickery, the dogs have been able to accomplish a remarkable night of hunting. The judge has no doubt seen his fair share of hunts—but something about the devotion and focus that Ann and Dan share is special.



After a day of rest and another night of eliminations, the head judge calls Billy and the other winning teams to his tent. He informs them that the eliminations are over—only three sets of hounds remain, and the winner of tonight’s hunt will win the golden cup. Over the rest of the afternoon, Billy notices tension running through the camp as the eliminated hunters place bets on who will take home the cup. Someone begins collecting money for a jackpot to give to the winner—when the man comes to collect from Billy and his team, Grandpa urges the man to just leave the pot with them.

That night, Grandpa drives his buggy out to the swamp, where Billy believes there will be the best hunting. As Billy prepares to set Ann and Dan loose, he kneels down close to them and tells them that tonight is the last night. He begs them to do their best, then turns them loose. Before they take off, they stare hard at Billy as if to promise they’ll do all they can. Ann and Dan tree their first raccoon in no time, but the raccoon leaps from the branches and into the river. Ann and Dan follow him in, chase him out, and catch him before he can climb another tree.

As Grandpa, Billy, and Papa skin the raccoon, the judge points out a remarkable sight: Ann is licking at the cuts Dan sustained during a scrap with the raccoon in the river. Billy tells the judge that Dan does the same for Ann when she is hurt.

Though Billy is nervous about the final stages of the competition, Grandpa is completely confident that their group will take home the cup. He has seen what Dan and Ann can do and he believes that tonight they’ll prove themselves once and for all as the best hounds in the Ozarks.



This passage makes it clear that not only do Ann and Dan have an innate biological talent for hunting and desire for success—they also feel motivated by Billy’s love, trust, and faith in them. These are truly special dogs with a special relationship to the master who has cared for them and nurtured them all their lives. Billy’s devotion to his dogs has been repaid tenfold—and it is now he who is in their debt.



The competition judge is visibly moved by Dan and Ann’s love, respect, and care for one another. He is ostensibly a seasoned judge who has seen a lot of dogs in action—but this passage makes it clear that he’s never seen a relationship like the one Ann and Dan have.



CHAPTER 17

A storm begins approaching. Grandpa and Papa suggest that the storm will impact the hunt negatively, but Billy points out that all game gets to stirring before a storm. After a while it begins sleeting. Billy grows nervous, too—but his faith is restored when Old Dan and Little Ann pick up a scent. Papa, Grandpa, Billy, and the judge attempt to follow the dogs on foot, but the storm continues to worsen. Even more worryingly, Billy loses track of the dogs’ bawls—he can’t hear them over the wind. Still, he insists on following them. Papa and Grandpa tell him it’s time to turn back, but Billy begins sobbing. He explains that he’s never left his dogs in the woods—and he won’t do so now. Seeing Billy’s resolve, Papa decides to go onward with him. Grandpa and the judge follow suit.

Billy believes that he and his dogs can surmount any obstacle—but they have never faced weather this bad, nor have they ever hunted under so much pressure. Billy’s emotions begin to come out in a flood as he confronts the idea of abandoning not just the hunt, but his dogs as well. Billy knows that to do so would be to betray his dogs on a deep level—something he outright refuses to do. Billy’s dogs have taught him to be loyal, intrepid, and steadfast even in the face of difficulty or danger.



The group trudges on through the sleet, slipping and falling as they follow the intermittent sounds of Old Dan's bawls. Eventually, Papa suggests they stop. Billy asks Papa to shoot his gun in hopes that the dogs will hear it and come running—after a while, Little Ann approaches, but Old Dan is nowhere to be found. Billy begs Ann to bring their group to Dan. She leads them through the storm awhile, but has no luck finding Dan. As Grandpa begins struggling to keep up, the judge suggests they all turn back—no dog, he says, is worth the lives of three men. Billy falls to his knees and he prays for Old Dan's voice to make itself heard. Sure enough, moments later, Dan howls loud and clear. Billy follows the sound.

Old Dan has a raccoon treed in a deep gully. Dan is covered in ice and sleet, yet he refuses to move from the treed raccoon. Soon, Papa and the judge catch up to Billy—but Grandpa is nowhere to be found. Billy begins doubling back and calling for Grandpa, but his shouts are no use. Little Ann, sensing Billy's distress, runs into the storm to search for Grandpa. Soon, her mournful cry alerts Billy that she's found him. Billy rushes toward the sound of her voice—Grandpa is unconscious on the ground in the sleet. His ankle is twisted, but he is alive. Billy prays for God to save his Grandpa's life.

Papa, Billy, and the judge help carry Grandpa back to the gully where Old Dan has treed the raccoon. There, they build a large fire and tend to Grandpa's swollen ankle. Grandpa insists the men stop fussing over him—he assures them that he's fine and can't feel a thing. The important thing to focus on, he tells them, is getting the raccoon out of its tree. Billy and Papa go over to the tree and they realize that it is hollow—the raccoon must be hiding inside. Papa chops the tree down, and Billy is shocked when three raccoons scurried out of it. Dan and Ann manage to chase down and kill two raccoons—but after a bloody brawl, one raccoon escapes.

When Billy and Papa return to the fire and tell the judge what has happened, Billy makes the mistake of pointing at where the third raccoon ran while illustrating the story. Dan and Ann immediately turn and run up the bank in the direction Billy has indicated. The judge marvels at how Dan and Ann have the ability to seemingly read Billy's mind. Papa agrees that Billy's dogs are "different" from any other dogs he's seen in terms of the level of devotion they show Billy.

Billy goes to sit with Grandpa. Grandpa can see that Billy is distressed. Billy expresses his worry that the dogs will chase the raccoon across the river and freeze to death or get into some other kind of trouble. Grandpa tells Billy to focus on skinning the raccoons they already have. Billy joins his grandpa in working on the hides.

Even when things look dire, Billy is not willing to give up on his dogs. He knows that Old Dan would never give up on him—and he doesn't intend to betray his dog's loyalty by leaving him for dead. Billy almost did that with Little Ann months ago but he's realized that there is always a way through—with enough faith and patience, he believes he and his hounds can overcome anything.



The judge pointed out just moments ago that no hunt—and no dog—is worth the life of a human being. In this passage, however, Little Ann and Old Dan show that their devotion to Billy and to each other has actually taught Billy a lot about reciprocating love and loyalty. In the midst of his own hunt, he stops to help his grandfather, repaying the loyalty of the person who's been most encouraging of his hunting career so far.



Though Grandpa has suffered an injury, he insists that he shouldn't be the center of attention. Grandpa is just thrilled to be along for the ride—he knows that the priority must be winning the hunt. Sure enough, when the others turn their focus back to Dan and Ann, it becomes clear that their group has a unique opportunity to clinch the cup by trapping all three raccoons that were hiding the hollow tree.



Dan and Ann impress and surprise everyone around them when they demonstrate how intuitive they are regarding Billy's needs—and how devoted they are to fulfilling the wishes he doesn't even verbally express. The connection between the boy and his dogs is intense and palpable even to strangers.



Grandpa doesn't want Billy to get distracted from the hunt by worrying over the dogs. The prize is nearly in their grasp—and Grandpa knows that if Billy lets his emotions get out of control, it could affect the dogs' behavior and thus their chances of winning.



CHAPTER 18

Just before dawn, the storm settles into a fine snow. The “hellish night” is over at last. Billy climbs out of the gully and he listens for the sounds of his dogs’ bawls—instead, he hears someone whooping. It is the sound of the other men from camp looking for the group. Soon, the search party arrives at the gully. The men tell Grandpa that there’s a doctor back at camp who’ll patch his ankle right up. One of the men asks where the dogs are—Billy explains that they are probably with a treed raccoon somewhere. The men marvel at the dogs’ devotion and they remind Billy that he needs this raccoon to take the cup.

Another man from camp, Mr. Benson, approaches and announces that he has found Billy’s hounds—they are “frozen solid” and they’re covered in white ice at the base of a tree nearby. Billy passes out on the spot. When he comes to, the man apologizes for frightening Billy—he explains that the dogs are alive, just covered in snow. While a few of the men make a stretcher and bring Grandpa back to camp, Mr. Benson and another man named Mr. Kyle follow Papa and Billy toward the hounds. As the group approaches the tree, Billy can see that Ann and Dan have been walking in circles around the tree all night. He begins crying and runs toward the dogs.

Benson and Kyle build a fire and help warm the dogs near its glow. Mr. Kyle declares that the kind of loyalty Billy’s dogs have shown him represents “the deepest kind of love.” Mr. Kyle suggests that if people were as good to one another as dogs are to their owners, mankind would be able to live in “the kind of world that God wants [people] to have.”

Once the dogs are thawed out, Papa shoots his gun to scare the raccoon from the tree. Dan and Ann dispatch the raccoon. Together, the group sets out for camp once again. Billy brings his dogs to Grandpa—Grandpa cries happy tears as he coos over Dan and Ann and he congratulates them on a job well done. A doctor comes into the tent and tells Grandpa that it’s time to head for town—but Grandpa insists he’s not going anywhere until he’s seen Billy win his golden cup.

To Billy, Dan and Ann’s outstanding devotion to keeping their prey treed is nothing special—it’s simply the way they are and always have been. To the judges and other hunters, however, it’s clear that Billy’s dogs are special and that their devotion signifies something much deeper than pure hunting prowess.



Billy fears that his dogs are dead, and unable to take the emotional gut punch, he faints on the spot. When Billy realizes that his dogs are alive—and simply so devoted to the hunt that they’ve grown covered in snow as they’ve waited out the night—he is relieved and full of an intense amount of gratitude and love for his dogs’ devotion to him.



Mr. Kyle’s suggestion that dogs can teach humanity many important lessons about the role of love, loyalty, and goodness is one of the book’s central tenets. Through the lessons of a dog’s love, Rawls suggests, humans can understand what it is to live a life suffused with the grace and generosity that God “wants [people] to have” and to embody.



Grandpa is determined to see the competition through to the very end in spite of his injuries. He is overwhelmed with pride and joy on behalf of Billy, Dan, and Ann—through the three of them, he, too, has been able to see his wildest raccoon-hunting dreams come true.



A crowd gathers outside the tent as the man who was collecting the jackpot the night before brings Billy his winnings of over \$300. Soon, the head judge brings Billy his golden cup and he begins crying as the crowd explodes in a sea of happy roars. Satisfied, Grandpa asks the doctor to bring him to town—he tells Papa to drive the buggy home and he gives him instructions for running the store over the next few days. Soon after Grandpa and the doctor get on their way, Papa and Billy load up the buggy and they start heading back through the mountains for home.

The next afternoon, Billy and Papa drop the buggy at Grandpa's store and they walk the rest of the way home. As they round the bend in the road near their house, Billy's sisters run out in a scramble to meet them. Billy gives the golden cup to the sister he promised it to and rewards the other two with the silver cup. Billy's sisters run back up to the porch to show Mama Billy's spoils—she, too, is proud and excited. When Papa shows Mama the box full of the jackpot money, she can hardly believe it. She remarks that God has answered her prayers. That night, the Colmans enjoy a huge feast as Billy and Papa regale the women with stories from the hunt.

That night, after Billy gets into bed, he notices a light out in the yard. He looks out his window to see that Mama has brought two large plates of food out to Ann and Dan's doghouse. Billy watches as Mama sets the food down before the dogs, then she kneels and prays as they eat. Billy watches as Papa joins Mama near the doghouse and embraces her. Billy wonders what his parents are saying to each other. He can make out something about Grandpa—Billy deduces that his parents will want him to help Grandpa run the general store when Grandpa returns from town. Satisfied and happy, Billy falls asleep.

CHAPTER 19

After winning the cups, Billy continues taking Little Ann and Old Dan out hunting every night. About three weeks after returning home from the hunt, Billy takes the dogs out one night and soon realizes that the animal they've begun to track isn't a raccoon, but a bobcat. Billy doesn't like having his dogs hunt bobcats, but tonight he allows them to chase it down. When the dogs finally tree the animal, however, Billy can tell by their cries that "something [is] wrong."

There is emotion and excitement in the air as Billy wins the competition. As the head judge and the other hunters present him with gifts and prizes, Billy is overwhelmed. All he ever wanted was to hunt in the woods with his hounds—now, together and through mutual devotion, they have achieved so much more than he ever dreamed possible.



Yet again, Rawls shows how a character feels that their prayers have been answered by God rather than as a result of the earthly actions of another. Mama credits the jackpot money to God's benevolence rather than Billy's hard work, when in fact the latter is what stands to transform their family's lives.



This passage hints at a larger tension in Mama and Papa's lives. Billy has come a long way in the last couple of years and grown up a lot—but he's still not ready to understand or face the problems that adults have to deal with. Billy tries to ignore the solemnity in his mother's prayer before the dogs and Papa's nervous, mournful embracing of her afterward.



Billy is so confident in his dogs' abilities that he doesn't question it much when they choose to hunt larger game. As the chase gets underway, however, Billy begins to realize that perhaps he and his dogs have gotten in deeper than they bargained for.



As Billy approaches with his lantern to grab the dogs' collars and pull them away from the tree, he spots two "burning, yellow eyes" and he realizes that his dogs have not treed a bobcat, but a mountain lion—"the devil cat of the Ozarks." Old Dan lets out a loud howl. The mountain lion responds with a deep growl before launching from the tree and jumping upon Dan. Little Ann joins the brawl and she locks her jaws around the cat's throat. A bloody, horrible fight begins—Billy, "berserk" at the sight of his dogs in trouble, charges in with his ax and he chops at the big cat. When the cat rounds on him, Dan and Ann leap to Billy's defense.

The fight goes on and on as Billy continues chopping at the cat while the mountain lion rips and tears at Dan and Ann. Finally, Billy manages to strike a fatal blow and fell the mountain lion. The effort of the blow and the shock of the brawl get to Billy at last, and he passes out. When he reawakens, he sees that his dogs are still "glued" to the cat's lifeless body, unwilling to release their jaws' fatal grips on him. As Billy sees his ax sticking out of the mountain lion's back, he thinks of Rubin Pritchard. Billy goes to the dogs and he examines them. Little Ann is cut up badly, but none of her wounds look fatal. Dan, on the other hand, is a "bloody mess."

With tears in his eyes, Billy begins trying to stanch Dan's wounds using mud. Billy pulls his ax from the mountain lion's corpse and he starts leading the dogs back home. Halfway there, he realizes that Old Dan is not behind him—he turns around and hears a pitiful cry. When he doubles back to find Dan, he realizes that Dan's entrails are falling out of a wound in his stomach and have wound around a berry bush. Billy helps extricate Dan from the bush and stuff his entrails back into the wound, then continues leading the dogs home.

Back at the house, Billy wakes his parents. Mama immediately gets to work on Old Dan's terrible wounds, washing his entrails and sewing him back up. Little Ann is easier to tend to. As Billy works on Ann, he tells his parents about how Dan and Ann saved him from the mountain lion. After Mama finishes sewing Dan up, Billy and his parents sit and wait with him on the porch to see what will happen. Before daybreak, however, Dan begins struggling to breathe—soon, he is dead. Mama and Papa try to comfort Billy by reminding him that he still has Little Ann, but Billy states that he'll never be able to forget that Dan gave his life so that he himself could live.

Billy realizes he has made a horrible (and indeed possibly fatal) mistake much too late. His dogs are already determined to fight off the predator—and once they lock onto a threat against Billy, there is little chance of calling them off. Billy has no choice but to join the fray and help defend his dogs against the giant cat, mirroring their devotion by demonstrating his own.



The second major instance of violence and death that Billy has witnessed—the attack of the mountain lion—reminds him of the first: the death of Rubin Pritchard. Billy is more traumatized by this incident than by Rubin's death, yet he finds himself in a similar position of being forced to pry his dogs' jaws off of the entity which threatened Billy's safety. Billy is reminded not only of his dogs' devotion, but of their savagery as well.



As Billy leads the dogs home, it becomes clear that Dan's wounds are much worse than they appeared to be. Billy remains in denial of the fatal nature of the wounds, however, maintaining his belief that there's still a way for Old Dan to pull through if he can just make it home to Mama and Papa's care.



Billy is devastated as Dan dies. His gratitude for the fact that Dan gave his life so that Billy could survive the mountain lion attack is outweighed by his misery over losing his beloved dog. Billy once valued his dogs' almost automatic, unthinking devotion—now, however, he finds himself nearly resentful of the fact that Dan was loyal to the point of such selflessness.



Mama and Papa go to bed, but Billy stays up by the fire. Around dawn, he hears a mournful cry. He goes out to the porch to see Ann curled around Dan's lifeless body, whimpering and crying. Billy runs away from the house into the woods and breaks down in horrible sobs. When he is finished crying, he returns to the house and begins building a box to bury Dan in. When the box is finished, he digs a grave on the hillside and solemnly buries Dan.

Two days later, Billy realizes that the worst is not over. When he comes in from working in the field with Papa, Mama tells him that Little Ann has been refusing food all day and that she's now disappeared. Billy calls and calls for Ann, eventually finding her in a bush at the very back of the property. As Billy looks into her eyes, he sees that there is "no life" in them anymore. Billy brings Ann back up to the house and he attempts to feed her, but Papa tells Billy that Ann has lost the will to live.

Billy nurses Ann all night and all day, but when he goes out to work with Papa for a bit, he comes back to find that Ann has left her spot on the porch. Billy knows that she has gone to Dan's grave to die. He goes to the grave and, sure enough, he finds Ann's lifeless body atop Dan's resting place. Billy cries and he turns his face to the heavens. He asks God why his dogs had to die—and why he now must suffer. Mama approaches Billy and she comforts him by telling him that "even the Good Lord suffered while He was here on earth"—and that the dogs have "fulfilled a prayer that [she] thought would never be answered." Mama tells Billy to come up to the house—she and Papa want to talk with him. Mama believes that Billy may feel better once he's heard what they have to say.

Back inside, Papa tells Billy that now is the time to "stand up like a man" and accept that there is a reason for everything God does. Over a dinner of sweet potato pie, Papa tells Billy that he and Mama have been praying each day to be able to save enough money to move the family into town so that Billy and his sisters can get an education. Papa says that because of Dan and Ann's success at the competition, their prayers have been answered—they now have enough money to move.

Billy concedes that God may have given the dogs to him in order to fulfill Mama and Papa's prayers—but Billy wonders aloud why He took them away. Papa says there is an answer for that, too. He and Mama had decided a while ago not to separate Billy from his dogs when the family moved to town—they planned to leave Billy and the dogs with Grandpa. Now, though, their family will be able to move to town together—they won't be split up.

Billy tries to control his emotions and keep them hidden from those around him, even as the intensity of what he's feeling is obviously the thing that's controlling him in these painful and tender moments. Billy doesn't want to add to Ann's suffering—but little does he know there's no helping her recover from Dan's death.



Little Ann's devotion to Old Dan is so intense that she loses her will to live after watching him die. Ann and Dan are still connected, even after Dan's death—and she is determined to be with him no matter what, for reasons Billy can't understand.



Billy's pain doubles when he realizes that Ann has given up her life to be with Dan. Losing one dog was hard—losing both feels like a curse. Billy doesn't understand the reasoning behind his dogs' deaths—and though his mother and father try to comfort him with important tenets of their faith, Billy remains unable to see why God would give him his dogs only take them away.



Billy's dogs fulfilled a purpose in his own life by teaching him important lessons about love, loyalty, hard work, and determination. Learning that they fulfilled a purpose in the lives of his family members, too, makes Billy feel proud but not necessarily comforted.



While Billy can understand that perhaps his dogs didn't die in vain—perhaps they served a larger purpose of allowing Billy's family to stay together—even his faith in God's plans doesn't fully comfort him in this devastating time of mourning.



In the middle of the night, Billy gets up and goes out to the doghouse to cry. Mama hears him outside. She comes out to get him and bring him back in. Billy cries himself to sleep. In the morning, he gets up and he makes a second box. He goes up to the hillside and he digs a second grave. Billy buries Ann right next to Dan—and he feels he has buried “a part of [his] life” alongside both of them. Upon returning to the house, Billy asks Mama if she believes that God has made a place in heaven for good dogs. Mama says she believes He has. Billy says he hopes his dogs are there.

As Billy grieves his dogs, he doesn't try to control his emotions—and his parents don't try to stop him from feeling his feelings, either. Billy isn't exaggerating when he says that “a part of [his] life” has been buried alongside the dogs—the carefree optimism, the trust in nature, and the pure love of the hunt they helped him feel is gone.



CHAPTER 20

Several months later, spring arrives in the Ozarks, and Billy and his family prepare to leave for town. Mama and Papa are elated about the move. On the day they're to set out, Billy helps his parents pack up their wagon and then he asks if he can have a few minutes to himself to say goodbye to the dogs. Mama and Papa urge him to go to their graves. As Billy walks up the hillside, he sees something amazing: a giant and beautiful **red fern** has sprung up between the graves and it has grown over two feet tall. Billy knows that there is an “old Indian legend” about how the red fern grows on the graves of those who have died in order to sanctify the land around them. Only an angel, legend has it, can plant the red fern's seeds.

As Billy spies the red fern—the product of an intermingling of native legend and Christian imagination—he realizes that both God and the majesty of the natural world have blessed his dogs' memories. Billy has been in pain over his dogs' deaths for months—but now, the red fern shows him that it is okay to move on while keeping his memories of his dogs alive with him wherever he goes.



Billy calls for his parents and his sisters, and they all approach the hillside together. Mama in particular is in awe of the **red fern**, and Papa concedes that “perhaps there is something to the legend.” Papa suggests that the fern is “God's way of helping Billy understand why his dogs died.” Billy says he does understand—he doesn't hurt anymore. As Billy looks at the ferns, he marvels at the beautiful mountains all around. He bids his dogs goodbye and he leads his family back to their wagon. Together, they set off for town. As Billy looks back over his shoulder at the home he grew up in, he realizes how “sad and lonely” the house looks.

Billy finds himself comforted by the idea that God has, after all, played a role in not just his dogs' lives, but in their deaths as well. The red fern does indeed symbolize rebirth and the ongoing circle of life. Though Billy has had to witness his dogs die violent and terrible deaths, the fern reminds him that there are new things on the horizon—and that Dan and Ann did not die in vain.



The older Billy, looking back on his tale, states that he has never been back to the Ozarks—he only has “dreams and memories” of the place he grew up. He hopes that one day, “if God is willing,” he will be able to return to the hills of his boyhood days. He imagines returning to the hillside where Dan and Ann are buried and looking again upon the glorious **red fern**, whose legend he still believes to this very day.

The legend of the red fern continues to fill the older Billy with hope and reassurance. He believes that his dogs came into his life for a reason—and he knows that under the protection of the red fern's blessing, the lessons they taught him and the ways in which they shaped his life will remain sacred and alive forever, even though Dan and Ann themselves have passed on.





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