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**Study Guide**

for

**Where the Red  
Fern Grows**

by Wilson Rawls



New York, New York   Columbus, Ohio   Woodland Hills, California   Peoria, Illinois

# Meet Wilson Rawls

Robert Bower, Idaho Falls Post Register



*Long before we moved from the farm, I learned the joy of reading. On winter evenings, Mama would read stories from books that Grandma bought for us . . . After we finished reading [Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*], Mama gave it to me. It was my first real treasure . . . I read it every chance I got. One day while I was working in the fields, I got the idea that I would like to write a book like *The Call of the Wild*. This was quite an ambitious dream for me.*

—Wilson Rawls

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**B**orn in 1913, Woodrow Wilson Rawls was named for President Woodrow Wilson, who took office that year. Rawls grew up on small farms in Scrapper and Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

The Rawls children did not attend school regularly. Wilson learned to read by listening to his mother read aloud. He and his sisters would then take turns reading the material again. He didn't like the fairy tales that his sisters did, but he very much enjoyed *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London. Rawls took the book everywhere and even read it aloud to his dog.

At the age of ten, he decided to write a powerful boy-and-dog story of his own. He couldn't afford paper or pencils, so the first words Rawls wrote were quite literally

scratched into the dust of a country road and the sand banks of a river. When hunting, he would describe the sounds he heard and the places and things he saw.

Although Rawls had little formal education as a child, his family encouraged him to pursue his dream of writing. When Wilson Rawls asked for advice, his father told him that he could accomplish whatever he wanted by trying and never giving up.

The Great Depression, which started with the stock market crash in 1929, forced Rawls to take any job he could find. He worked as a carpenter in Mexico and South America, on five of the major dam projects in the United States, and on the Alcan Highway in Alaska. In addition, he worked in shipyards on the West Coast and lumberyards in British Columbia. At night he wrote his stories, storing them in a trunk at his mother's home.

In 1958 Rawls decided that his writing wasn't worth saving. Without showing his work to anyone else, he burned everything he had written. Manuscripts for five novels were destroyed. He later rewrote one of these as *Where the Red Fern Grows*, which was published in 1961. Rawls's second book, *Summer of the Monkeys*, was published in 1976.

Wilson Rawls died in 1984. He had one regret. He would have liked to have shown a copy of his book to his father and say, "It took a long time, Dad, but I made it."

# Introducing the Novel

Wilson Rawls burned the first version of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. “I was sure it was pure trash,” Rawls told a reporter, “and no one would waste time printing junk like that. I also knew my grammar was poor and my vocabulary was zero.”

Later, his wife convinced him to return to writing. She helped him by editing the manuscript. The story he chose to rewrite was based on his boyhood and called “The Secret of the Red Fern.” Rawls sold the story to the *Saturday Evening Post*. The magazine published the novel in three parts as *The Hounds of Youth*. In 1961 the story was published in hardcover as *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

The story of *Where the Red Fern Grows* begins as a man on his way home from work encounters a dogfight. When the man discovers that one of the dogs involved is a redbone hound, memories of his childhood are stirred. The man takes the dog home and cleans and feeds him before sending him on his way. As the man—the adult Billy Colman—watches the hound slowly disappear from sight, his mind drifts back more than half a century to his childhood and to the memories of two good friends—redbone hounds named Old Dan and Little Ann.

Recalling events from the past is a literary device called a **flashback**. Writers use flashbacks for many different purposes. In some novels, flashbacks interrupt the main action of the story to provide background information. In this novel, Rawls begins the narrative with an adult Billy helping an injured dog and then tells the rest of the story as a flashback. In *Where the Red Fern Grows*, the use of flashback allows the author to comment from a distance on events that shaped Billy Colman’s life.

The story, which is now considered a classic, did not sell well for the first several years after it was published. Then Rawls spoke at a teachers’ workshop on children’s books at the University of Utah. “That was the spark,”

Rawls noted, “and the book has been selling ever since.” In 1974 *Where the Red Fern Grows* was made into a movie, which was narrated by Wilson Rawls himself.

After *Where the Red Fern Grows* became popular with students, Rawls began visiting schools. He always took along the manuscript of the book to show students. “I want to stress to them,” he explained, “how important it is to learn to spell, punctuate, and mainly how important it is for them to stay in school.”

When students asked Rawls for advice on becoming a writer, he said:

*I always tell them: Do a lot of reading. Read and study creative writing. Do not wait to start writing. You are never too young to start. Do not worry about grammar and punctuation on your first draft. The important thing is to get your story down on paper. Your first work will probably need a lot of rewriting. You can worry about grammar and punctuation then. Remember, the more you write and rewrite, the better you will get. And most important of all, do not get discouraged. If you keep trying and don’t give up, you will make it some day. The road can be rough, but the day you see your work in print will make it all worth it.*

Rawls continued his school visits until he became ill in 1983. He spoke with students in twenty-two states. Although he and his wife had no children, Rawls felt he had many children in the fans who loved his novels.

## THE TIME AND PLACE

The Ozarks, sometimes called the Ozark Plateau, is a highland region located primarily in northwest Arkansas, southwest Missouri, and northeast Oklahoma. It is an area of astonishing beauty. Deep valleys contrast with low mountains and are cut by the waters of numerous winding rivers. The region’s natural resources—thick forests of oak, maple, hickory, and pine; mountain streams; deep caves; and a vast array of plants and animals—make it a fascinating place to

explore. Unusual place names like Pea Vine Hollow, Sparrow Hawk Mountains, and Bluebird Creek add to the area's charm.

During the 1920s, when the novel takes place, daily life on an Ozark farm was difficult. Most residents made do without running water and electricity. School was too far for a daily commute. Some par-

ents taught their children to read and write, but other parents weren't able to do these things themselves, and so couldn't teach their children. Other than an occasional trip into town, families had little contact with outsiders. Their social contact was limited to their closest neighbors.

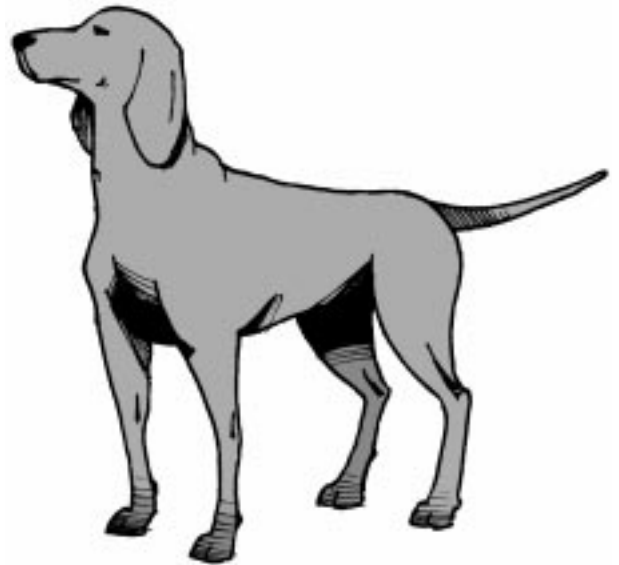
### Did You Know?

Several kinds of hounds are mentioned in the novel, including redbones, blueticks, walkers, and blood hounds. All of these hounds pursue game, particularly raccoons, by scent. Each breed has its own desirable hunting characteristics, such as speed and endurance.

Billy's dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann, are redbone hounds. The redbone hound is best known for its loud voice, strong nose (capable of locating and maintaining the scent of a raccoon), persistence, and well-developed treeing instinct. It is comfortable in water and on rough terrain. These dogs are especially brave and tough, willing to take on a bear or even a mountain lion.

Redbones are typical of other hounds in height and weight, ranging from 21 to 26 inches and 45 to 75 pounds. Their color is their most distinctive feature, ranging from a deep red to a light tan.

In general, they are intelligent dogs that have a strong sense that they are hunting



Redbone Hound

for their master, not just themselves. Much less independent than other coon hounds, they tend to be stubborn and make good watchdogs.

# Before You Read

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 1–7

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Is there anything you would be willing to work a full two years to achieve or acquire?

#### Journal

Do you have the desire and persistence to wait two years for something you really want? Would you be willing to put away every dime you made from household chores, your allowance, and other sources to get what you want? Record your thoughts and feelings about these questions in your journal.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what Billy Colman really wants and how he plans to get it.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

Raccoons are common animals in the Ozarks region. A raccoon is recognizable by its black “burglar’s mask” pattern around its eyes and its bushy, ringed tail. The tail serves as a brace when the raccoon sits on its haunches and provides balance when the animal is climbing.

Considered to be intelligent animals, raccoons try to confuse their predators by creating a maze of tracks. They avoid predators by running along the tops of fence posts and climbing trees. When forced, raccoons will reveal their strength and fight viciously to survive. Most adult coon hounds have battle wounds from fighting with these ferocious animals. During combat, raccoons will lie on their backs to use their sharp claws and teeth to the best advantage.

Raccoons usually search for food along the water’s edge. Because they dip their food in water before they eat it, humans think raccoons clean their food before eating it. However, raccoons’ sense of touch is heightened when their fingers are wet, which is probably the reason raccoons “wash” their food.

#### Figurative Language

Writers often use **similes** to describe things in new ways. In a simile, two unlike things are compared using the words *like* or *as*. Similes aren’t meant to be taken literally. They are a kind of figurative language, used for imaginative, descriptive effect.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**allot** [ə lot’] v. to parcel out

**cur** [kur] n. inferior or undesirable dog; mongrel

**fester** [fes’ tər] v. to cause increasing poisoning or irritation

**grit** [grit] n. unconquerable spirit

**mull** [mul] v. to think over at length

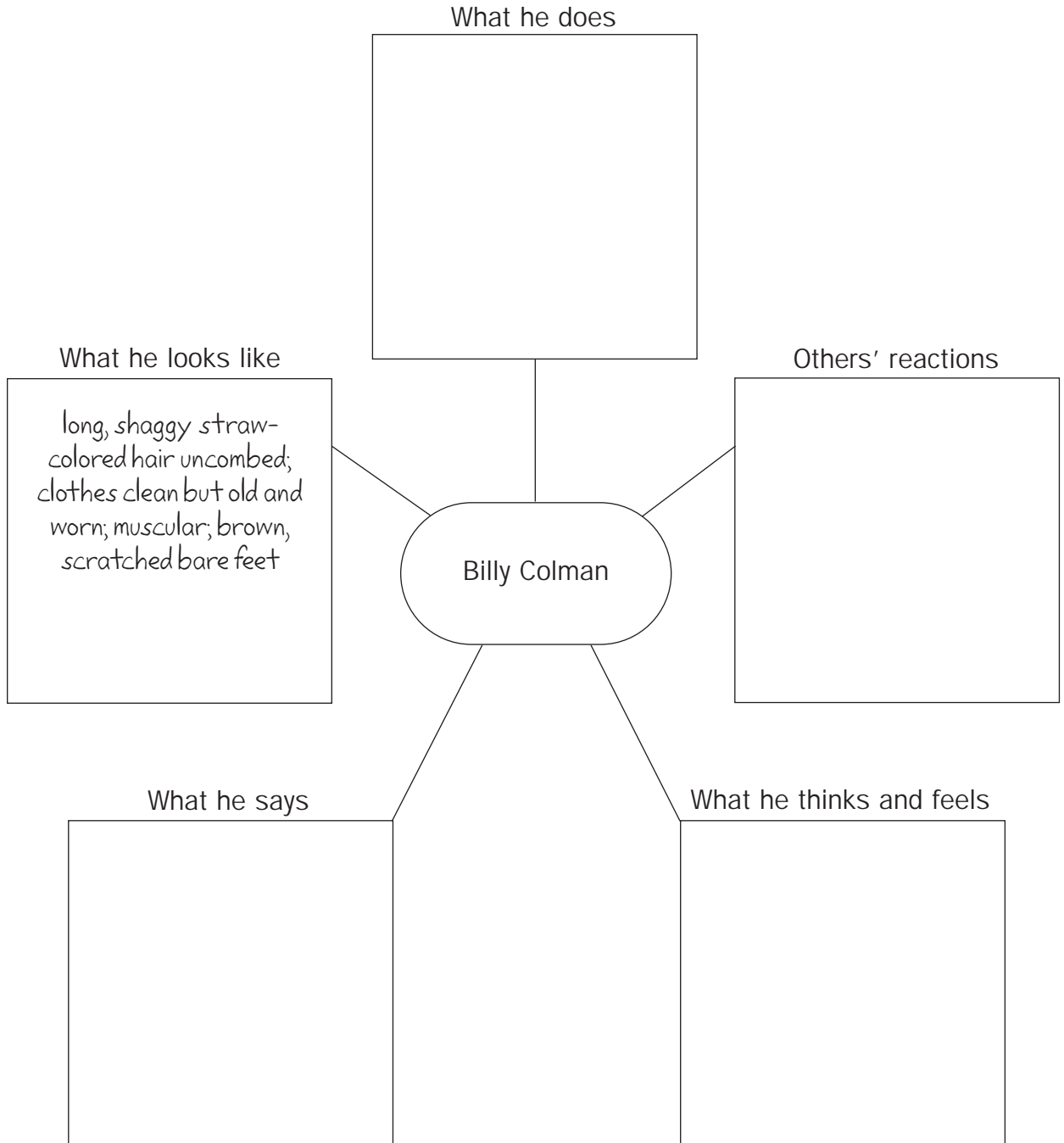
**muster** [mus’ tər] v. to assemble; to gather

**wily** [wī’ lē] adj. full of cunning

# Active Reading

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 1–7

Writers develop the personality of their characters through methods of characterization. When using **indirect characterization**, a writer reveals the character’s personality by showing what the character does and says and by showing what others think and say about the character. Use the graphic below to note what you learn about Billy Colman’s personality in this section.



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# Responding

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 1–7

### Personal Response

Were you surprised that Billy put so much time and energy into saving money for the two dogs? Why or why not?

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Based on your response to the **Focus Activity** on page 12, how are you like Billy? How are you different?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Why do Grandpa and Billy keep the secret of the dogs from Billy's father? What does this say about them?

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2. Why, in Billy's opinion, do the names carved in the tree seem perfect for his pups?

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3. How do the curiosity and stubbornness typical of raccoons enable Billy to trap one?

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# Responding

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 1–7

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. Why is Grandpa so surprised when Billy brings in his fifty dollars?

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5. Once Billy catches the raccoon to be used for training, his father wants him to be sure that all the nails are pulled from the other traps and that he catches raccoons only with his dogs. Why is Mr. Colman concerned? Do you agree or disagree with what he is trying to teach Billy? Explain.

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### Literature and Writing

#### Writing a Letter

Suppose that you have just witnessed Billy Colman coming to town to pick up his dogs. Write to a friend in a nearby town and describe what you saw. Begin with a sentence that summarizes the impression you want to give your friend about this stranger. Then, include a physical description of Billy as well as an explanation of how he was treated by the townspeople. In your letter show how he is different from the other children in town.

### Extending Your Response

#### Literature Groups

To bring the action to life for his readers, Wilson Rawls chooses active, descriptive verbs. For example, dogs *boil* out of an alley and *scoot* under a barn. A squirrel *barks* a warning, and a boy *spurts* out of a pipe. With your group, search for other examples of interesting verbs, and discuss the kinds of mental pictures they create for you. Compile a collection of your favorite examples of active verbs.

#### Learning for Life

Based on the steps Billy takes to train his dogs and on your own experience, design a practical and realistic approach to training a dog to walk on a leash, stay, retrieve, or come when called. Once you've decided on a training goal, consider these questions.

- What expectations for change can an owner have? What can she or he expect to happen?
- What preparations should the owner make? What props or aids will he or she need?
- What steps should be taken? In what order?
- What tips can you offer about communicating with a dog during training?
- What important warnings and reminders will help both the animal and owner?



*Save your work for your portfolio.*



# Before You Read

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 8–14

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Would you risk your life to save an animal? Would it depend on whether or not the animal was your pet?

#### Share Ideas

With a small group, discuss the two questions above. How would you describe the act of putting an animal's life before a human's life? Do you think it's heroic? responsible? irresponsible? foolish? Why or why not?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read about how Billy's attitude toward animals develops as he gets more experience hunting with his dogs.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

Raccoons have been hunted for centuries. Early settlers favored caps made of coonskin for their warmth, durability, and ability to repel water. During the 1920s, when pelts for coats brought eighteen dollars to twenty dollars a piece, raccoons were hunted almost to extinction in some places. Today, synthetic fabrics, game laws, and hunters who are more interested in the sport than the money, offer some protection to the raccoon.

#### Animal Communication

Is it possible for people and animals to communicate? Many hunters believe that dogs respond to the moods, fears, and uncertainties of their human companions. They believe that fear, confidence, general discomfort, and other emotions are communicated nonverbally to their animals. Therefore, the relationship hunters establish with their dogs often determines how successful the hunt will be.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**begrudgingly** [bi gruj'ing lē] *adv.* enviously; reluctantly

**belligerent** [bə lij'ər ənt] *adj.* hostile; aggressive

**destine** [des'tin] *v.* to determine beforehand

**droning** [drōn'ing] *adj.* speaking in a monotonous tone

**leering** [lē'r'ing] *adj.* sly; knowing

**limber** [lim'bər] *adj.* capable of moving and bending easily

**nonchalantly** [non'shə länt'lē] *adv.* indifferently; in an unconcerned manner

**sidle** [sīd'əl] *v.* to move sideways; to advance secretly

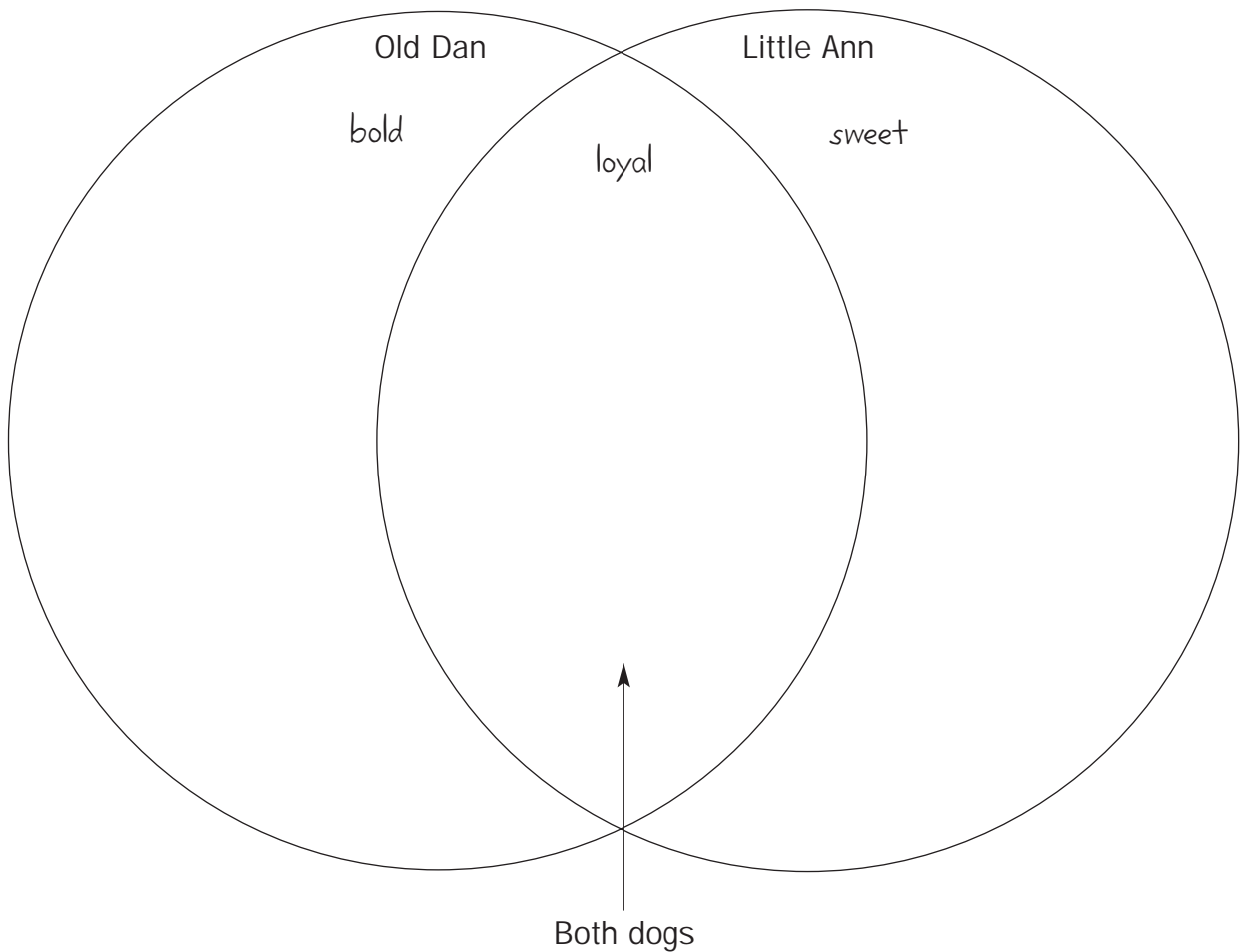
**slough** [slōō] *n.* swamp, marsh, or pond

**smirk** [smurk] *v.* to smile in a self-satisfied way

# Active Reading

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 8–14

Old Dan and Little Ann make a great team, even though they are very different dogs. As you read the second part of the novel, fill in the Venn diagram with words and phrases that show how the dogs are similar and how they are different.



# Responding

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 8–14

### Personal Response

How did you feel about Grandpa accepting the Pritchards' bet? Explain the reasons for your feelings.

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. Why does Billy not give up when his dogs have a raccoon up the “big tree”?

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2. Why does Billy not want to kill the ghost raccoon?

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3. How does Billy react to the fate of Rubin Pritchard? What does he do the day after the ghost coon hunt?

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# Responding

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 8–14

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. Why does Billy risk his life to save Little Ann? How is his response similar to yours in the **Focus Activity** on page 16? How is his response different?

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5. Billy demonstrates great bravery and strength of character. Does Rawls make this character seem believable, or is he too good to be true? Explain your answer by referring to specific scenes in the book.

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### Literature and Writing

#### Letter to the Editor

Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper in the area where Billy lived. Comment on the circumstances and tragic results of Billy's bet with the Pritchards. Include in your letter your opinion about Billy's bet with the Pritchards. Assume that newspaper readers are familiar with the tragedy.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

During this section of the novel, Billy's parents begin to treat him differently, even though they never give up worrying about his welfare. With your group, search for specific examples of the way Billy's mother and father now react to his behavior. Then discuss whether Billy acts any differently now that he is treated this way.

##### Listening and Speaking

Imagine that you and your dogs have successfully treed a raccoon and that the only way to get the animal is by chopping down the tree. Because of the tree's size, chopping it down will take you several days. Plan and deliver a successful argument that will persuade your parents to let you take on this task. Be sure to address their safety concerns as well as their fears about your general welfare.

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# Before You Read

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 15–20

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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Predict how Billy, Old Dan, and Little Ann will do in the raccoon-hunting competition.

#### Chart It

With a group of your classmates, discuss your predictions. What, if anything, has already happened in the book to lead you to this prediction? As you talk about these hints, record your guesses on a chart. Add to your chart as you read the last group of chapters.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what happens to Billy, Grandpa, and the dogs when they enter the raccoon-hunting competition.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

The field trial, or hunt, tests a hound's ability to find and tree a raccoon. These competitions have historical roots, and they still go on today. On the night of the hunt, dogs and their handlers are grouped in fours. Each group is accompanied by a judge, who also acts as the scorekeeper. Each group drives to the area of its choice, and the hunters turn their dogs loose to hunt for three to four hours.

Field trials no longer result in the death of the hunted animal. The first hound to find a track and bark is given 100 points; the second, 75; the third, 50; and the fourth, 25. These points are maintained as long as the hound barks every ten minutes and does not chase other animals or return to its owner.

The same scale of points is used when the hounds signal that the raccoon is treed. If a raccoon is sighted in the tree, the dogs are given their points, and the group goes on to the next raccoon, leaving the first one unharmed. If a raccoon is not sighted or if there is some other animal in the tree, the dogs lose points.

#### Suspense

**Suspense** is a feeling of anxious uncertainty about the outcome of events. Rising out of the conflict, suspense builds to the climax, or the moment of greatest emotional intensity, just before the outcome of the conflict is revealed. Writers create suspense by dropping hints about what might take place or when it might happen.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**flinty** [flin' tē] *adj.* resembling flint, a hard mineral

**haggard** [hag' ərd] *adj.* appearing worn and exhausted

**lithe** [līth] *adj.* effortlessly graceful

**mortal** [môrt' əl] *adj.* subject to death; fatal

**predatory** [pred' ə tôr' ē] *adj.* relating to one that preys, destroys, or devours

**scourge** [skurj] *n.* a means of causing severe suffering or punishment

# Active Reading

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 15–20

In this section of the novel, Billy, his family, and his dogs face many life-threatening situations. Use the graphic below to keep track of the problems the characters encounter and the outcomes to those problems.

Problems

Outcomes

It's close to daybreak, and Billy and his dogs need one more raccoon skin to make it to the championship round.



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# Responding

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 15–20

### Personal Response

Did Little Ann's fate surprise you? Why or why not?

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### Analyzing Literature

#### Recall and Interpret

1. In what ways are Billy's dogs unusual?

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2. How do the other hunters in the contest treat Billy?

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3. Why is Billy willing to give his youngest sister the cup?

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# Responding

## *Where the Red Fern Grows* Chapters 15–20

### Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

#### Evaluate and Connect

4. How important are the female characters, such as Billy's sisters and mother, to the novel? Explain.

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5. It is never easy to know what to say to someone who is mourning the death of a beloved animal. What would you say to Billy Colman that might comfort him?

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### Literature and Writing

#### Educational Recommendation

Imagine that your teacher is considering whether to keep this novel in the curriculum for the following school year. What would your recommendation be? Write a letter to your teacher, recommending a course of action. In your letter, consider your response to the novel. Also, consider the author's techniques—such as character development, suspense, theme—and the grade level at which the novel should be read. Make sure that you use specific examples from your novel to prove your point.

#### Extending Your Response

##### Literature Groups

Writers often build suspense by dropping hints about events that will occur later in a story. Looking back over the whole novel, you may now understand references that may have seemed unimportant when you first encountered them. These clues to future events are called **foreshadowing**. With your group, look for other examples of foreshadowing in *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

##### Artistic Interpretation

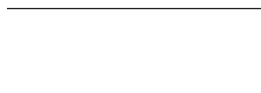
Many readers visualize scenes and characters as they read a story. Share your visualizations with the class by drawing or painting a favorite scene from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Use a medium of your choice, such as pen and ink, oils, watercolors, or even collage. With your class, plan a way to display your work for other students in the school.



Save your work for your portfolio.







# from Good Old Boy

Willie Morris

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Have you ever had a pet who was your best friend?

### Background

Writer Willie Morris grew up on the Mississippi Delta in Yazoo City. He attended college in Texas, won a Rhodes scholarship, and became the youngest editor in the history of *Harper's* magazine in New York City. *Good Old Boy: A Delta Boyhood*, a letter to Morris's son David, answers David's question about growing up in the South. In this chapter, Morris looks back at his memories of his boyhood best friend, a fox terrier named Old Skip.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What kinds of activities did the author and his dog share?

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2. What human characteristics does Morris attribute to Old Skip? Do you think the dog actually had those attributes? Why or why not?

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3. **Making Connections** In what ways is the story of Old Skip similar to the story in *Where the Red Fern Grows*? In what ways is it different?

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## Write a Letter

*Good Old Boy: A Delta Boyhood* is actually a letter from a father to his son. Imagine that you are an adult. Write a letter to a child describing some of the things you did for fun, real or imagined, as a younger child. Add details to entertain and inform your reader.

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# Harnessing the Howls

## Coon Hunt

Karin Winegar

Leroy Powell

### Before You Read

#### Focus Question

Think about an activity or hobby that you really enjoy. Have you ever met someone who makes fun of that hobby? If so, what do they say? How do you respond?

#### Background

The following two articles offer different views on raccoon hunting. Karin Winegar interviews a husband and wife who work as a competitive coon-hunting team. They take the sport very seriously. Leroy Powell, on the other hand, finds humor in the sport.

### Responding to the Readings

1. Describe the **tone**, or attitudes, of the authors toward their subjects. Whose account of coon hunting did you find the most appealing? Explain.

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2. Does raccoon hunting sound fun to you? Use examples from either or both of the readings to explain why or why not.

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3. **Making Connections** Based on the readings and on *Where the Red Fern Grows*, describe a typical raccoon hunt. With whom would you prefer to go coon hunting: Billy, Marilyn Le Blanc and Leon Swing, or Leroy Powell? Explain.

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### Creative Writing

Write a paragraph on a separate sheet of paper describing the activity or hobby you thought of in the **Focus Question** above. Choose a tone that fits your attitude about the activity and that will best capture the attention of your audience.

# The Best Coon-and-Possum Dog and The Split Dog

American folktales

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Why do you think animals are a common subject of folktales?

### Background

**Folktales** are anonymous, traditional stories handed down from generation to generation. These two stories, “The Best Coon-and-Possum Dog” and “The Split Dog,” are both folktales from the United States.

## Responding to the Readings

1. What part of the United States would you say “The Split Dog” comes from? Why?

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2. Of the two stories, which is more believable? Why?

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3. What values do these stories communicate? Give reasons for your choices.

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4. **Making Connections** In your opinion, what kinds of values do these folktales communicate? How are the values in the stories similar to or different from those expressed in *Where the Red Fern Grows*?

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## Tell a Tall Tale

Have you ever heard of Paul Bunyan or John Henry? Our culture is full of stories we call tall tales. **Tall tales** usually exaggerate to explain how something happened or to teach a lesson. In small groups, take turns making up and telling tall tales about pets.

# The Dog of Montargis

retold by  
James Baldwin

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

Have you heard the saying, “A dog is a man’s best friend”? Do you agree with it?

### Background

This reading tells the story of an extraordinary feat that a dog performed for its master. It may help you understand the deep bonds that can exist between a dog and its owner. The author, James Baldwin, is a well-known American writer who lived in France for a number of years.

## Responding to the Reading

1. What does Dragon do when Aubrey de Montedidier dies? Under what other circumstances might a pet act that way?

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2. What role does Dragon play in revealing Aubrey de Montedidier’s killer? Do you find his behavior believable? Explain.

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3. **Making Connections** Choose the dog—Old Dan, Little Ann, or Dragon—that you think shows the most loyalty to its owner. Explain your choice.

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## Performing

Work together in a small group to write a script for a TV show in which an animal is a main character. Choose the type of animal, and include a brief physical description of it. Name the human characters, and explain their relation to the animal. Write a brief outline of the opening scene of an episode of the show, and include some dialogue. Perform the scene, using improvisation to complete the dialogue as you are performing.

# The Velveteen Rabbit

Margery Williams

## Before You Read

### Focus Question

What do you think makes a friendship real?

### Background

Margery Williams’s “The Velveteen Rabbit” is a classic story of a stuffed rabbit who longs to be loved by his owner, a young boy. As the Boy plays with the stuffed rabbit, a friendship grows. The Boy and his Velveteen Rabbit develop a relationship similar to the one between Billy and his dogs.

## Responding to the Reading

1. How does the Skin Horse describe the process of becoming real? In your opinion, how might this process apply to real-life friendships?

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2. What happens to the Rabbit after the Boy’s illness? Why, do you think, would you love someone even though it might mean getting hurt? In the end, was loving the Boy worth it for the Rabbit? Explain.

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3. **Making Connections** Compare and contrast the relationships Billy has with Old Dan and Little Ann in *Where the Red Fern Grows* and the relationship the Boy has with the Rabbit in “The Velveteen Rabbit.” How are these relationships the same? How are they different?

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## Make a Collage

From old magazines, cut out words and pictures that describe the meaning of friendship. Create a collage, and share it with your class.