

Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"When the sky lightened, when the birds awoke, I knew I would never again see anything so splendid as the round red sun coming up over the earth."

—Sam, *My Side of the Mountain*

There are two major settings for this novel: New York City and the Catskill Mountains. Most of the story's action takes place in the Catskills. The author sets the story on a fictional plot of land called Gribley Farm.

It is 1959 when Sam Gribley leaves New York City to live in the Catskill Mountains, a mountain range about 100 miles northwest of New York City. The Catskills have campgrounds, summer homes, and resorts, but are mostly wilderness. The Catskills are called "America's First Wilderness." The region covers more than 6,000 square miles of mountains, forests, rivers, and farmland, complete with rolling hills, streams, and waterfalls, too.

In *My Side of the Mountain*, Jean Craighead George doesn't spend much time explaining what New York City is like, although she does say that Sam's apartment there was crowded. Eleven of

Sam's family members live in a single apartment on Third Avenue. And for Sam, that was ten too many.

George uses marvelous language to describe the mountain setting. She establishes the wilderness setting by describing it in great detail so that you can picture yourself there. "Two sentinel boulders, dripping wet, decorated with flowers, ferns, moss, weeds—everything that loved water—guarded a bathtub-sized spring." Plus, she includes drawings of flowers, birds, and other parts of the natural surroundings to help the reader visualize the scenes.

The Catskill Mountains provide a dramatic backdrop for a survival story. The varied terrain and the extreme weather make for lots of adventure and many challenges. When winter gets particularly bad for Sam, he writes: "Never had humanity seemed so far away as it did in those cold still months of January, February, and March." Delhi, the real town that is located near Sam's fictional camp, has some of the most extreme weather in the Catskill region, so Sam isn't exaggerating when he describes the intense winter and the exciting spring that follows. In fact, Delhi registers some of the coldest winter temperatures (an average of 14 degrees Fahrenheit) and some of the heaviest snowfalls in the Northeast. February is the most brutal month, with many days of temperatures below zero degrees. At the very beginning of the novel, we learn just how scary it might be to live through a powerful storm with such low temperatures. Looking back at his first winter days in the woods, Sam writes about his fear that he will not be able to escape: "I was scared and thought maybe I'd never get out of my tree. I had been scared for two

days—ever since the first blizzard hit the Catskill Mountains. When I came up into the sunlight, which I did by simply poking my head into the soft snow and standing up, I laughed at my dark fears.”

Even when March does arrive, temperatures regularly remain below zero. It isn't until April that Sam finally feels that winter is ending. The thaw begins and streams start to flow again.

Perhaps the most striking setting of the book is the tree in which Sam lives. It is the ultimate tree house, and the author details exactly how Sam goes about creating it. When he finishes making his bed, he describes it right down to how it feels. “The ash slats work very well, and are quite springy and comfortable. The bed just fits in the right-hand side of the tree. I have hemlock boughs on it now, but hope to have deer hide soon.” The author even includes a drawing of the bed in Sam's journal entry. The combination of words and pictures allows the reader to experience Sam's home right along with him.

Despite Sam's talent for surviving in the wilderness, the author makes sure to remind us that Sam is a New Yorker. Mr. Jacket, who Sam meets at the store in Delhi, recognizes that Sam is from New York by his accent. Plus, Sam compares the birds that are his neighbors now to the ones he had in the city. This helps us compare the way Sam is living now with the way he lived before. It helps us to see the similarities, even though we might not think that there are any.

Although the book was written in 1959, Sam's story doesn't seem like it took place long ago. It just as easily could have been written today. Although modern parents are less likely to allow their children to go on unsupervised adventures, much of the story still rings true: The Catskills are still there—though perhaps a bit more populated—and the city is still as crowded as ever.

Thinking about the setting

- Where does *My Side of the Mountain* take place?
- When does it take place?
- How do the author's love and knowledge of nature show in the setting?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"He ate and ate and ate, and when he was done he said, 'May I call you Thoreau?'"

—Sam, *My Side of the Mountain*

The theme of a literary work is an important statement the author wishes to make about life. In *My Side of the Mountain*, Jean Craighead George explores several themes: establishing a personal connection with the natural world, asserting one's independence, surviving in difficult circumstances, young people's search for adventure, and the balance between the need for solitude and the desire to find one's place in society.

Connection with nature

The most important theme of the book, connecting emotionally to the land, is evident on nearly every page. In order to connect with the land, you need to respect it and all it has to offer. And Sam knows that in order to live solely off the land, he must trust and respect his new surroundings. Without all the hubbub of the city to distract Sam, he can spend long hours watching how the woodland creatures interact with one another and with the

environment. From these observations, Sam learns how he can take advantage of the natural bounty to feed, clothe, and house himself.

As Sam establishes an emotional connection with the animals and plant life, he notices all kinds of wondrous events. Some of them are scary, some others are inspiring. These moments give him increasing respect for nature and its offerings.

Sam's observation of his first sunrise on the mountain sets the stage for the theme dealing with his connection to nature. "When the sky lightened, when the birds awoke, I knew I would never again see anything so splendid as the round red sun coming up over the earth."

After he captures Frightful, Sam's connection to his natural surroundings deepens. "It is hard to explain my feelings at that moment. It seemed marvelous to see life pump through that strange little body of feathers, wordless noises, milk eyes—much as life pumped through me," he tells the reader. From this we can see the affectionate bond begin to grow between Sam and his falcon.

Sam's observations reveal the depth of his connection to his new environment. In one instance, he actually takes a moment to admire the contribution of the earthworms, something he probably never would have done in New York. He writes his thoughts in his notebook: "I don't know why, but this seemed like one of the nicest things I had learned in the woods—that

earthworms, lowly, confined to the darkness of the earth, could make just a little stir in the world.”

When the winter begins to thaw and the mountain starts to breathe easier, Sam’s connection is firmly intact. He writes, “Spring is terribly exciting when you’re living right in it.”

Survival

Not only does Sam connect with nature in many ways throughout the book, but he also must try to conquer it. As he observes the wildlife, plants, and changing seasons around him, Sam learns how to survive by making use of his knowledge. If he couldn’t turn his observations into practical skills or items, Sam wouldn’t have survived the harsh conditions. He must eat, keep warm, and keep safe. To do all of those things, he must conquer nature.

At no point is this better illustrated than when Sam finally makes fire on his own. “I must say this now about that first fire. It was magic. Out of dead tinder and grass and sticks came a live warm light. . . . Oh, this was a different night than the first dark frightful one. . . . [N]ever have I enjoyed a meal as much as that one, and never have I felt so independent again.” He is overjoyed. With fire, he can cook and keep warm. Being able to create fire gives him the confidence to master other survival skills he will need in order to make it on his own.

Sam knows he needs a warm, safe place to live if he is going to survive in the wilderness. He gets a marvelous idea when he

spies a giant old tree. A home inside the tree would keep him safe from all kinds of weather. It would also keep him hidden from passersby. Right away, he gets to work. “I scraped at it with my hands . . . I dug on and on, using my ax from time to time as my excitement grew.”

During the winter, Sam faces his worst fears. In fact, the very first time we meet Sam he is scared that he will not make it through that first storm. Later we learn that he had provided for himself well. He had stored food, built a stove to warm his home, and even created a ventilation system for himself and Frightful. So, when the spring thaw finally begins, Sam knows that he has survived his ultimate test. This is a powerful moment for Sam. He tells the reader: “I looked down the valley, and in the dim light could see the open earth on the land below. The deer could forage again. Spring was coming to the land! My heart beat faster. I think I was trembling. The valley also blurred. The only thing that can do that is tears, so I guess I was crying.”

It is Sam’s ability to think ahead and think fast, his commitment to his goals, and his knowledge of the land that allows him to survive on his own. By the end of his solitary time in the woods, Sam has done more than survive—he has lived well.

Independence

The thing that Sam craves most is independence from his parents and his cramped quarters. He wants to be alone and self-sufficient. By the end of the story, Sam has achieved these goals. The first real test of Sam’s independence occurs on the day that

he is terribly hungry and has finally gathered a whole sweater full of mussels. At first, he heads back to his camp, where he plans to cook them. He suddenly realizes that there is no reason to head back right away and there is no reason to wait to eat. "But I don't have to carry them anywhere, I said to myself. I have fire in my pocket, I don't need a table. I can sit right here by the stream and eat. And so I did," Sam informs the reader.

Things that were easy in New York become giant undertakings in Sam's new life. It is the small things that test Sam's determination to be independent. When he wants to burn out the inside of his tree to make his home, he realizes that he needs a bucket of water in case things "got out of hand." He is in a predicament. "Where was I going to get a bucket? How did I think, even if I found water, I could get it back to the tree? That's how citified I was in those days. I had never lived without a bucket before . . . and so when a water problem came up, I just thought I could run to the kitchen and get a bucket." Sam finally understands what total independence is all about; he cannot depend on modern conveniences at all.

Later, when he comes upon the fire warden inspecting his tree, Sam again realizes he doesn't have to follow the rules he grew up with. In fact, he doesn't even need to have a permanent home, although it is convenient. "Then I realized that I didn't have to go back to meet the man at all. I was perfectly free and capable of settling down anywhere. My tree was just a pleasant habit," Sam tells the reader. Sam realizes that he can make a new home anywhere. He knows he can start again if he has to.

In the end, when Sam has the opportunity to run away from his family as they move into his new world, he chooses to stay. He has accomplished ultimate independence because he has proven that he can survive in the wilderness on his own. If he had to, he knows he could run off and do it all again. Instead, he chooses to continue to live off the land, with his family right there beside him.

Adventure

Many people dream of running away in search of adventure, but few actually do it. In *My Side of the Mountain*, the reader gets to live an extraordinary adventure along with the fictional character of Sam. Heading into the woods alone is quite ambitious and Sam's journey is chock-full of exhilarating moments. These moments keep Sam going. Learning to make fire, catching and training Frightful, and using deer for meat and clothing are important accomplishments. They remind Sam that he is succeeding in his great outdoor survival test and that he's having fun, too!

One of Sam's most thrilling moments comes when he must act quickly to get the prize a hunter leaves behind. "Without waiting to consider what I might be running toward, I burst to the edge of the meadow. . . . With all my strength I dragged the heavy animal into the woods. I then hurried to my tree, gathered up the hemlock boughs on my bed, rushed back and threw them over the carcass. I stuck a few ferns in them . . . and ran back to camp, breathless."

There is an adventure or challenge on every page of this book and Sam must find a way through each one by using what he already knows, paying close attention to his surroundings at all times, and learning from every mishap and every triumph.

Solitude versus society

At first, Sam is utterly content to be alone in the wilderness. He makes friends with the animals, talks to them, and treats them as friends. He avoids contact with humans at all costs, partly because he is afraid a stranger will turn him in, but mostly because he is tired of interacting with people. He learns to entertain himself, and is almost too busy to be lonely. Even in the winter, when Sam might have become overwhelmed by loneliness, he finds solace instead. “I did not become lonely. Many times during the summer I had thought of the ‘long winter months ahead’ with some fear. . . . The winter was as exciting as the summer—maybe more so.”

Sam does feel lonely when Bando departs after his first visit. “I was so lonely that I kept sewing on my moccasins to keep myself busy.” But then, Frightful strikes up a conversation with Sam. This comforts him and reminds Sam of the special friendships he has with Frightful, Jessie Coon James, and The Baron.

When spring comes and people start dropping in for visits, Sam realizes he has a need for human friendships as well as for solitude. “I worked with them, wondering what was happening

to me. Why didn't I cry 'No'? What made me happily build a city in the forest—because that is what we were doing.”

Thinking about the themes

- What is the main theme of *My Side of the Mountain*?
- What lessons does Sam learn from living on the mountain?
- Do any of the themes apply to your life? How?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



My *Side of the Mountain* has only a handful of human characters. The other characters are the wildlife on the mountain. Here is a list of characters, human and animal, followed by a brief description of each of the most significant ones.

Sam Gribley	twelve-year-old boy, main character, and narrator
Frightful	falcon
Bando	college professor and adventurer
Mr. Gribley	Sam's father
Mrs. Gribley	Sam's mother
Miss Turner	librarian in the town of Delhi
Jessie Coon James	raccoon
The Baron	weasel
The Barometer	the nuthatch Sam uses to gauge the weather
Mr. Jacket/Tom Sidler	boy from town
Matt Spell	teenage reporter
Aaron	vacationer/songwriter
Mrs. Thomas Fielder	the woman who goes strawberry picking with Sam

Sam Gribley: Sam is the main character in *My Side of the Mountain*. He is a twelve-year-old boy who seeks a different kind of life than the one he and his family live in New York City. He loves nature and wants to live in the wilderness, away from other people and material possessions. He leaves his family, intending to make a home among the trees, the birds, and the animals that populate the mountain. It is clear that he is a good researcher; he has a tremendous knowledge of the land. To survive, he refers again and again to information he has read in books. In addition to knowing which plants and vegetables are edible and which ones can be put to other uses, Sam has a natural ability to understand wildlife.

Sam's independent spirit thrives on adventure. He trains a falcon, makes a home inside a tree trunk, and cooks delicious meals of fish, animal meat, and wild plants.

Sam's connection to the animals around him grows as he gets to know their individual personalities. This is especially evident in his first encounter with The Baron. "I shall never forget the fear and wonder that I felt at the bravery of that weasel. He stood his ground and berated me. I could see by the flashing of his eyes and the curl of his lip that he was furious at me for trapping him. He couldn't talk, but I knew what he meant." In this encounter, Sam describes The Baron with the same words we would normally use for humans. Sam's keen grasp of animal behavior helps him understand what his animal friends want, even though they can't speak with words.

Courageous and confident, Sam almost always knows he will be successful. Even when he doubts himself, or becomes frightened, he never panics. He sets about solving problems efficiently and with ingenuity. When he needs to tan the hide of a deer, he finds inspiration in an old tree stump: “It had showered the day before, and as Frightful and I passed an old stump, I noticed it had collected the rain. ‘A stump, an oak stump, would be perfect.’ . . . So I felled an oak . . . burned a hole in it, carried water to it, and put my deerskin in it.”

The thoughtful way in which Sam looks around as he wanders through the woods gives him a thorough knowledge of his surroundings. Sam’s cleverness at using the natural materials he finds helps him live better and more comfortably.

Over the course of the novel, though, Sam changes. At the beginning, he desires complete solitude. Slowly, Sam allows some people back into his life. Where once he would hide from anyone who happened by his tree house, later he becomes much more interested in interaction with other people. He seems to long for human companionship. When he realizes this, Sam begins to combine his old life into his new one. He questions himself constantly. Why does he go into town? Does he want to talk to a human being? Why doesn’t he run from Matt Spell? Does he want to be found? Has he had enough of the wilderness? Sam has accomplished a great deal. Having ventured out on his own and established a very special relationship with nature, he begins to share his new world with the people he cares about.

In the end, Sam finds peace in his decision not to run from all the attention his new life has attracted. He is happy to teach his

siblings how to live off the land. Though Sam is torn about his father's plan to erect a real house in the woods, and he is concerned about sharing his space once again, he is also content to be surrounded by a family that cares enough to change the way they live just for him.

Frightful: Frightful is a peregrine falcon that plays an important role in the story. Sam thinks of her as a good friend and confidante. From the start, Sam acknowledges that Frightful is a huntress with an independent spirit, so he trains her carefully. He does not allow her to eat her own kills. If she did, Frightful might realize she doesn't need Sam and he would lose her to the wild.

Frightful is a fast learner. The bond that develops between the falcon and her owner is one of the most touching outcomes of this novel. When he first begins to sense the falcon responding to him, Sam writes: "I looked into her steely eyes that morning and thought I saw a gentle recognition. She puffed up her feathers as she sat on my hand. I call this a 'feather word.' It means she is content." Later, Frightful communicates with Sam when she senses potential food nearby and when she senses danger. Frightful is expressive and loyal. It is her skill as a hunter that keeps Sam well fed, but it is her companionship that keeps Sam from feeling too lonely or frightened.

Bando: After a case of mistaken identity, Sam learns that his first human visitor is a professor who has gotten lost on the mountain, not a bandit on the run from the police. Bando is a relaxed, adventurous man who likes Sam immediately. Bando calls Sam "Thoreau," which is a reference to the

nineteenth-century writer. The real Thoreau left his town life to make a solitary home for himself on Walden Pond in Massachusetts and live entirely off the land—just like Sam!

Bando admires Sam for creating a wonderful home in nature. He cares very much about Sam and is proud of his accomplishments. Bando does not return Sam to his family in New York. On his visits, Bando subtly makes sure that Sam is eating well, taking good care of himself, and is content. He becomes a good friend to Sam.

Mr. Gribley: Sam's father works hard to support a family of eleven, and from what Sam tells the reader, we know that his father takes time to talk to his children and encourage their interests. It is he who allows Sam to leave home to live on Gribley Farm. Of course, he does this thinking Sam will return the very next day. However, when Sam doesn't return, his father doesn't come after him right away. He has faith that Sam will be all right and is confident in his son's abilities and in his determination to survive.

At Christmas, when Mr. Gribley visits Sam, he has come out of both concern and curiosity. He knows that Sam is living as he said he would, because he has read the newspaper reports of the "wild boy" on the mountain. Once he sees what Sam has created, he is bursting with pride. Braving the hazardous winter also reveals the older man's adventurous spirit. Mr. Gribley extends his visit with Sam, partly because he has missed his son, but also because he wants a taste of the world Sam lives in now. He is so impressed with his son that he does not want Sam to have

to return to the life he had before. He knows that this life is the one that makes Sam happy. When Mr. Gribley is about to leave after his Christmas visit, he tells Sam: “I’ve decided to leave by another route. Somebody might backtrack me and find you. And that would be too bad. . . . You’ve done very well, Sam.” He takes a different route off the mountain in order to protect Sam from reporters who might expose him and return him to his old life. Mr. Gribley’s actions show the enormous amount of respect and faith he has in his son.

In the end, Mr. Gribley leads the entire Gribley family to Sam’s mountain home. This move shows that Sam’s parents and siblings are both loyal and adventurous—traits Sam shares and displays throughout the book.

Thinking about the characters

- In your own words, how would you describe Sam Gribley? Can you relate to him? Would you be friends with someone like him? Why or why not?
- How does the author show that Frightful is Sam’s friend?
- How does the author let us know that the adult characters are concerned about Sam’s safety and well-being?
- In what ways do we learn that Sam is not completely independent, that he needs and wants people around him?