



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

"Papa said, 'I intend to butcher a hog. We're about out of meat.' Looking at me, he said, 'Shell a sack of corn. Take one of the mules and go to the mill for your mother.'"

—*Where the Red Fern Grows*

### **Time: When does the story take place?**

*Where the Red Fern Grows* takes place in the early 1930s. At that time, the world was in the longest and worst economic crisis in modern times. This crisis was called the Great Depression. It started with the stock market crash on October 29, 1929, and did not end until the early 1940s. Stores, companies, and banks went out of business. People lost their jobs, homes, and savings.

*Where the Red Fern Grows* takes place around 1933, the worst year of the Depression. That year, more than one quarter of all workers did not have jobs. People patched their clothes and went without new things. In big cities, the jobless sold apples and shined shoes on street corners to earn a little money. Many people needed charity to survive. Some people searched garbage dumps for food or ate grass and weeds. In small towns, people

ate what they could grow, hunt, or find. People often went to bed hungry.

In the 1930s nearly everyone in the Ozarks was poor. Rawls suggests the deep poverty in this area by describing how Papa cannot afford to buy Billy his hunting dogs, even though the family could use the pelts and meat they would bring. Papa explains it to Billy this way:

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.

The family can't afford to buy clothing, although their clothes are ragged. Billy does not have shoes. His feet are all cut up. "I took one look at my bare feet and winced," he says. "They were as brown as dead sycamore leaves. The spider-web pattern of raw, red patches looked odd in the saddle-brown skin."

Mama starts crying when Billy brings her some fabric for a new dress. It has been a long time since Mama and the girls have had any new clothing. "The light that was shining from my mother's eyes, as she fingered the cheap cotton cloth, was something I will never forget," Billy says to the reader.

## **Place: Where are we?**

Take a giant step back in time to Oklahoma in the 1930s. Hungry for meat? If so, you have to hunt it or raise it yourself. As you read in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, Pa must butcher a pig to get food for the family. The family raises chickens for meat and eggs. They also eat the raccoons and squirrels that Billy hunts. They catch and eat fish, too. Since there is no electricity or refrigeration, the family smokes, salts, and dries their meat to preserve it. Billy takes a slab of salt pork with him to eat when he goes to pick up his puppies.

The family grows their own vegetables, picks wild berries in the woods, and finds honey in hollow logs. To get cornmeal, they grow corn, pick it, and clean it. They “shell” the ears of the corn by cutting off all the kernels. These kernels are dried and then ground into cornmeal at the mill. The miller takes some of the cornmeal as his pay. The family uses the rest of it to make corn bread, corn muffins, and corn cakes.

After Billy wins the hunting championship, the family has a big, fancy meal. “Papa went to the smokehouse and came back with a hickory-cured ham. We sat down to a feast of the ham, huge plates of fried potatoes, ham gravy, hot corn bread, fresh butter, and wild bee honey.” At that time, there wasn’t any take-out food, frozen food, or microwave food!

Rural Oklahoma in the 1930s is a place without many cars. People walk to get places: the fields, their friends’ farms, and the few stores in town. If you have a heavy sack of cornmeal to carry,

you put it on a mule, just as Billy does. People often walk long, long distances. Billy walks about forty miles round trip to Tahlequah to pick up his puppies.

Rural Oklahoma in the 1930s is also a place without much indoor plumbing. Since there's no water inside the house, taking a bath is a long process. First, you have to get water from the outside well and carry it inside. Then you heat the water on the wood stove. (Don't forget to chop the wood for the stove fire!) Next, you (or your parents) have to pour the water carefully into a big copper tub. Finally, you can take your bath. But since it is so hard to set up the bath, no one wastes the hot water. After you have your bath, your brothers and sisters take turns in the same water. It's no wonder most people bathed only once a week!

Few home have electric lights. There is no television, no video games, no washing machines, no computers, no hair dryers, no microwaves, and no air-conditioning. Only a few people have telephones. People may know what an airplane is, but it is unlikely that anyone in this area has actually seen one.

Life is hard in Oklahoma in the 1930s, but it is also beautiful. Billy loves the land. "I had never seen a night so peaceful and still," he says the first night he hunts alone. "All around me tall sycamores gleamed like white streamers in the moonlight." Billy especially likes the biggest tree in the forest. It is so big that he calls it "the giant." Billy likes to lie on the ground in the warm sun and stare at its leafy branches.

Most of all, Billy likes to run through the woods with his dogs and hunt raccoons. “What wonderful nights they were,” he says, “running like a deer through the thick timber of the bottoms, tearing my way through stands of wild cane, climbing over drifts, and jumping logs, running, and screaming, and yelling, ‘Who-e-e-e, get him, boy, get him,’ following the voices of my little hounds.”

Oklahoma in the 1930s is a place of death as well as beauty. Animals and people kill and eat other animals to live. One night in the woods, Billy hears this happen: “I heard a sharp snap and a feathery rustle in some brush close by. A small rodent started squealing in agony. A night hawk had found its supper.” Billy, too, must hunt for food.

Deadly storms flatten crops and can even kill people. Billy and the other hunters get trapped in a terrible blizzard. “The wind-driven sleet stung our skin like thousands of pricking needles. Strong gusts of wind growled and moaned through the tops of the tall timber,” Billy says. Grandpa falls on the icy ground and hurts his leg. If Little Ann had not found him, he would have frozen to death.

Later in the book, a fierce mountain lion tries to attack Billy. “There was a low cough and a deep growl from the lion. I saw him crouch. I knew what was coming. My hands felt hot and sweaty on the smooth ash handle of the ax. With a blood-curdling scream, he sprang from the tree with claws outspread and long, yellow fangs bared.” Billy’s dogs bravely fight the mountain lion.

Sadly, Old Dan dies from his injuries. Little Ann dies shortly after, too sad to go on without Old Dan.

### **Thinking about the setting**

- When and where does *Where the Red Fern Grows* take place?
- How does Rawls use description to make you feel as if you are with Billy and his family?
- How is life different for Billy than it is for you? How is it the same?

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



"Two beautiful cups gleamed from the mantel. I held the match up so I could get a better look. There they were, sitting side by side....There was a story in those cups—a story that went back more than a half century."

—Billy, *Where the Red Fern Grows*

**T**he theme of a literary work is its main idea. It is a general statement about life. The quotation you just read suggests the main themes of *Where the Red Fern Grows*: determination, sacrifice, and love. There are a few other themes as well, because a good story like this one makes us think about life in many different ways. Let's look at the themes in *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

### **Determination pays off**

Billy is determined. People who are determined set goals and work until they reach them. We can see how determined Billy is from the beginning of his story. He wants a pair of hunting dogs more than anything else in the world, but his papa does not have

the money to buy them. The puppies cost fifty dollars. Today, fifty dollars isn't a fortune, but it sure was in the 1930s.

Billy shows his determination by working for two years to save enough money to buy the hounds. "Slowly a plan began to form," he thinks. "I'd save the money. I could sell stuff to the fishermen: crawfish, minnows, and fresh vegetables. In berry season, I could sell all the berries I could pick at my grandfather's store. I could trap in the winter. . . . There was the way to get those pups—save my money." Penny by penny, nickel by nickel, Billy saves the money. His determination pays off and he is able to buy the puppies. They cost ten dollars less than he expected, but he still saved the entire fifty dollars.

The marshal in Tahlequah is very impressed with Billy's determination. After he breaks up the fight and helps Billy, the marshal asks Billy about his puppies:

Walking over, he knelt down and started petting the pups. "They're fine-looking dogs," he said. "Where did you get them?"

I told him I had ordered them from Kentucky.

"What did they cost you?" he asked.

"Forty dollars," I said.

He asked if my father had bought them for me.

"No," I said. "I bought them myself."

He asked me where I got the money.

“I worked and saved it,” I said.

“It takes a long time to save forty dollars,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “It took me two years.”

“Two years!” he exclaimed.

I saw an outraged look come over the marshal’s face. Reaching up, he pushed his hat back. He glanced up and down the street. I heard him mutter, “There’s not one in that bunch with that kind of grit.”

The marshal admires Billy’s determination, which he calls “grit.” The marshal knows that the kids who picked on Billy don’t have that kind of determination. They don’t work for what they want.

Billy’s dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann, are just as determined as Billy is. That’s one reason why Billy and his dogs are such a good team. Little Ann always sticks to a raccoon’s trail, and Old Dan never gives up the chase. The hounds stay with the coons they chase up a tree even when they might die. During the big hunt competition, for example, Old Dan and Little Ann stay with the last raccoon in the blizzard—even though they get covered in ice. Mr. Benson says: “Those two hounds. I found them. They’re frozen solid. They’re nothing but white ice from the tips of their noses to the ends of their tails.” Mr. Benson is wrong: The dogs are not frozen solid. Billy is able to thaw the ice from their bodies and they are not hurt. Because they are determined and stay with the coon, Billy wins the competition.

Many people praise the dogs for their determination. Old Dan is determined until the very end of his life. We see this when Billy has to pry Old Dan's jaws from the mountain lion. Little Ann loses her determination after Old Dan dies, but this is because the dogs were a team.

Determination pays off for Billy and his dogs. With his dogs, Billy is able to earn money to help his family. Billy also has a lot of fun hunting with his dogs. From their example, we can see that Rawls believes that determination helps people achieve their goals and have a happier life.

### **The importance of sacrifice**

Sacrifice is another theme in *Where the Red Fern Grows*. From the actions of Billy, his family, and his dogs, you can figure out that Rawls believes that people should sacrifice for other people. When you sacrifice, you give up something to help someone else. You might give up time, money, or an object you value, for example. True sacrifices are given freely, with love and affection. We see many examples of selfless sacrifice in the novel. Often, one sacrifice leads to another.

Every time Grandpa gives Billy candy, for instance, Billy gives it to his sisters. Billy loves candy and he rarely gets any. Therefore, you would think that he would want to keep it, but he doesn't. He wants to make his sisters happy. When Billy has ten dollars left over from buying the puppies, he spends the money on gifts for his parents and sisters. He does not spend the money on himself, even though he wants a hunting rifle very much.

Billy learns the importance of sacrifice from his parents. Billy's father often helps Billy hunt, even though Mr. Colman needs the time to take care of the animals and farm. Billy's sisters sacrifice their time, too. Billy says, "With the help of my oldest sister, we started giving my pups their first lessons. She would hold their collars while I made trails with the hide for them to follow." Billy's little sister brings him lunch when he is cutting down the big sycamore tree. "When my sister came with the lunch bucket," Billy says, "I could have kissed her." Grandpa drives into the woods to help Billy with the tree, too. Grandpa teaches Billy how to make a stuffed man to fool the coon into staying in the tree.

Old Dan and Little Ann make the biggest sacrifice in the book. Old Dan sacrifices his life for Billy in the fight against the mountain lion. Billy says: "I never saw my dogs when they got between the lion and me, but they were there. Side by side, they rose up from the ground at once. They sailed straight into those jaws of death, their small, red bodies taking the ripping, slashing claws meant for me."

### **The strength of love**

Billy's family is very close and loving. Mama makes Billy a hat with the pelt from the first raccoon he catches. This shows that she supports his hunting and is happy that he is happy. Mama comforts Billy when he is tired, frightened, or sad. Billy's family helps one another in good times and bad times. Their love helps them get through the hardest times of all, the poverty and despair of the Great Depression.

Billy is very close to his grandpa, who teaches him all he knows about coon hunting. Grandpa is also Billy's greatest hunting supporter. When Grandpa enters Old Dan and Little Ann in the big hunting contest, Billy is thrilled. He says: "I was so surprised at what Grandpa had said that I couldn't utter a word. At first I was scared and then a wonderful feeling came over me. I felt the excitement of the big hunt as it burned its way through my body, I started breathing like I had been running for a hundred miles." Even when Grandpa is badly hurt, he stands by Billy. He will not leave the hunting grounds until Billy gets his prize. "Snorting and growling, Grandpa said, 'I told you I wasn't going anywhere till I see the gold cup handed to this boy.'"

Billy and his dogs love one another, too. One of the hunters says that Billy's hounds seem to have more than just loyalty for him. They also love him deeply. "My whole life was wrapped up in my dogs," Billy tells the reader.

### **The power of spirituality**

Billy believes in a higher power. When the big sycamore finally falls over, Billy believes that it was guided by God. Billy asks his parents about the event. Billy says to his father:

"I thought something strange happened down at the bottoms this afternoon." . . .

I told him about how my hands had gotten so sore I couldn't chop any more, and how I had asked for strength to finish the job.

“Well, what’s so strange about that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I didn’t chop the big tree down. The wind blew it over.” . . .

“It wasn’t just the wind,” I said. “It was the way it blew. It didn’t touch another tree in the bottoms. . . . Do you think God heard my prayer? Do you think He helped me?” . . .

“I don’t know, Billy. I’m afraid I can’t answer that. . . . No, I’m afraid I can’t help you there. You have to decide for yourself.”

It wasn’t hard for me to decide. I was firmly convinced that I had been helped.

Throughout the novel, Billy prays when times get tough. It seems to Billy that his prayers are answered. However, his faith is shaken when his dogs die. He cannot understand why Old Dan and Little Ann had to die. Perhaps the dogs died to help other creatures. By killing the mountain lion the dogs have gotten rid of a terrible threat in the forest.

After the dogs die, a red fern grows over their grave. Billy knows the story of the fern:

I had heard the old Indian legend about the red fern. How a little Indian boy and girl were lost in a blizzard and had frozen to death. In the spring, when they were found, a beautiful red fern had grown up between their bodies. The story went on to say that only an angel could plant the seeds

of a red fern, and that they never died; where one grew, that spot was sacred.

When he sees the fern, Billy's faith comes back to him. He believes that his dogs had a holy purpose on earth. His belief in a spiritual power helps Billy accept their deaths.

### **Thinking about the themes**

- One of the hunters says: "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—the deepest kind of love." Based on what you read in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, do you agree? Why or why not?
- What was the last goal you worked to achieve? How did your determination help you?
- Arrange the themes in this section in order from most to least important to you.



## Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?

"Mama was the best helper a boy ever had."

—Billy, *Where the Red Fern Grows*

**W**here the Red Fern Grows has three main characters: Billy Colman and his two hunting dogs, Old Dan and Little Ann. Below is a list of all the characters. After you read the list, read on to find out more about some of the important characters in the novel.

### **The Colmans**

Billy Colman	ten-year-old narrator
Papa Colman	Billy's father, a farmer
Mama Colman	Billy's mother
the girls	Billy's three younger sisters, never named
Grandpa	Billy's grandfather, a storekeeper
Grandma	Billy's grandmother

### **Animals**

Little Ann	Billy's female hunting hound
Old Dan	Billy's male hunting hound
mountain lion	fierce creature who attacks Billy

ghost coon	sneaky old raccoon
Samie	the Colmans' cat

### **Other Characters**

Rainie Pritchard	ten-year-old neighbor boy
Rubin Pritchard	twelve-year-old neighbor boy
Mrs. Pritchard	Rainie and Rubin's mother
Mr. Pritchard	Rainie and Rubin's father
Mr. Benson	one of the hunters
Mr. Kyle	one of the hunters
the marshal	sheriff of Tahlequah
the stationmaster	stationmaster of Tahlequah depot

**Billy Colman:** Billy is not only the novel's main character but also its narrator. Everything we learn in the book comes through Billy's eyes.

Ten-year-old Billy is strong, brave, and hardworking. He says, "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."

Billy doesn't care about the way he looks. He doesn't pay any attention to his clothes or hair. When he is in town picking up his puppies, Billy sees his full reflection for the first time in his life. He is surprised at what he sees: "My straw-colored hair was long and shaggy, and was brushed out like a corn tassel that had been hit by the wind. . . . My overalls were patched and faded but they were clean. My shirt had pulled out. . . . I pumped up one of

my arms and thought surely the muscle was going to pop right through my thin blue shirt.”

Billy loves his parents and sisters, but he loves his dogs and raccoon hunting more than anything else. “I was a hunter from the time I could walk,” he says. “I caught lizards on the rail fences, rats in the corncrib, and frogs in the little creek that ran through the fields.” Although Billy is a great coon hunter, he cares more about his dogs than about catching a lot of raccoons. Billy loves his dogs and takes good care of them.

From the very beginning of the book, we can see that Billy is kind and generous. When Grandpa gives Billy a bag of candy, Billy takes a few pieces and saves the rest for his sisters. “Arriving home,” Billy says, “I dumped the sack of candy out on the bed. Six little hands helped themselves. I was well repaid by the love and adoration I saw in the wide blue eyes of my three little sisters.” Later in the novel, Billy gives his three-hundred-dollar contest winnings to his parents.

Billy is also deeply religious. For example, he believes that his dogs have been sent by heaven. Billy says: “Just when I had given up all hope of ever owning a good hound, something wonderful happened. The good Lord figured I had hurt enough, and it was time to lend a helping hand.” When his dogs die, Billy believes they have gone to heaven. Billy says: “Good-bye, Old Dan and Little Ann. I’ll never forget you; and this I know—if God made room in heaven for all good dogs, I know He made a special place for you.”

**Little Ann and Old Dan:** These are Billy's dogs. They are special hunting dogs—just the kind of dogs that Billy wants. "I didn't just want one dog," he says. "I wanted two, and not just any kind of a dog. They had to be a special kind and a special breed." These special hunting dogs are called hounds.

There are many different kinds of hounds: wolfhounds, deerhounds, coonhounds, and foxhounds, for example. Each kind of hound hunts the animal in its name. Wolfhounds hunt wolves, deerhounds hunt deer, coonhounds hunt raccoons, and so on.

Coonhounds are born wanting to hunt raccoons. They hunt by following the animal's smell. Little Ann and Old Dan are called "redbone" coonhounds because they are a deep red color. When redbone coonhounds track raccoons, their tail goes up in the air and their ears drag on the ground. These dogs also make good family pets.

**Little Ann** is Billy's female hound. She is very small for her type of dog. However, Little Ann more than makes up for her small size with her great intelligence. Billy says: "I didn't have to look twice to see that what she lacked in power, she made up in brains. She was a much smarter dog than the boy dog, more sure of herself, more cautious. I knew that when the trail became tough, she would be the one to unravel it." Sure enough, no raccoon can trick Little Ann! She loves Billy and Old Dan. Billy tells his mother, "Did you know, Mama, that Little Ann used to come every night and peek in my window just to see if I was all right?" Little Ann is very loyal to Old Dan. She stays by Old Dan's

side no matter what happens. When Old Dan dies, Little Ann lays her head on his grave. "With the last ounce of strength in her body, she had dragged herself to the grave of Old Dan." She dies on his grave.

**Old Dan** is Billy's male hound. Old Dan is strong, brave, and determined. He will hunt with only Billy and Little Ann, and he never gives up a chase. Mama and Papa are amazed at Old Dan's spirit. After Old Dan sleeps in the woods all night to keep a raccoon in the big sycamore tree, Mama says, "Well, I never in all my life. I had no idea a dog loved to hunt that much." When Old Dan kills the mountain lion, Billy has to pry his locked jaws apart with the ax handle. "I led him off to one side," Billy says. "I couldn't turn him loose as I knew if I did, he would go back to the lion."

**Grandpa:** Billy's grandpa runs a store. Grandpa and Billy love each other very much. Billy admires his grandfather, too. Billy says, "I had the finest grandpa in the world." Readers see how much Billy loves his grandpa during the championship hunt. When Grandpa is lost in the storm at the end of the hunt, Billy says: "I couldn't hold back the tears. My grandfather was lost and wandering in that white jungle of cane. Screaming for him, I started back." Billy is very relieved when Grandpa is found, suffering only a minor injury.

Grandpa helps Billy make his dream of hunting raccoons come true. First, Grandpa helps Billy earn money to buy the hounds. Grandpa does this by buying and selling the berries that Billy picks. Then Grandpa writes the order letters for the purchase of

the hounds. Later, Grandpa enters the dogs in the championship coon hunt. Grandpa likes to tell jokes and exaggerated stories about Old Dan and Little Ann. If the dogs caught two coons, Grandpa says they caught five!

**Papa:** Billy's papa is a good man who always tries to do what is right. For example, he makes Billy take down the traps that hurt the raccoons. Papa says: "I don't think this is very sportsmanlike. The coon doesn't have a chance. It's all right this time. You needed this one, but from now on I want you to catch them with your dogs. That way they have a fifty-fifty chance."

Papa understands that Billy is growing up and needs to do things on his own. For example, Papa lets Billy go hunting alone and cut down the giant tree by himself. Papa lets Billy hunt in the snow and ice, too. Papa wants the best for Billy and his sisters. At the end of the story, Papa and Mama move to town so their children can go to school.

**Mama:** Billy's mama is a hardworking, religious, and kind woman. She loves Billy very much and worries that he will get hurt while hunting. However, Mama understands how important hunting and the hounds are to Billy. As a result, she tries to help him as much as she can. She encourages Papa to go with Billy on the hunt. "Why, don't you worry about the girls and me," Mama said. "We'll be all right. Besides, it'll be several months yet before I need any help." That's when Billy realizes that Mama is going to have a baby. It can be dangerous for a pregnant woman to be alone far away from a town, but Mama wants Billy to have

his chance to hunt in the big contest. That's why she encourages him to go.

Billy and his mother are close to each other. They can talk about important issues. Billy often has serious talks with his mother about life, death, and heaven. When Old Dan and Little Ann die, Billy goes to his mother for comfort. He asks her if God made a special place for dogs in heaven. She says: "From what I've read in the Good Book, Billy, He put far more things up there than we have here. Yes, I'm sure He did." Mama's words make Billy feel much better.

### **Thinking about the characters**

- What do you like the most about Billy?
- How does the author show us that Mr. and Mrs. Colman are good parents?
- *Where the Red Fern Grows* is based on the true story of Wilson Rawls's childhood. Which characters seem the most true to life? Why?