

Opinion: What Have Other People Thought About *Where the Red Fern Grows*?



"The book is a heart warming classic
for all ages."

—David Nishimoto, North Ogden, Utah

Remember how Wilson Rawls burned the manuscript for *Where the Red Fern Grows*? Rawls was so sad that no one wanted to publish his writing that he began to think that he did not have talent. Talking about his book years later, Rawls told the *Salt Lake Tribune*: "I was sure it was pure trash. I was sure that no one would waste time printing junk like that. I also knew my grammar was poor and my vocabulary was zero." The book *did* get published. However, *Where the Red Fern Grows* wasn't an instant best-seller. Far from it!

At first, the book sold v-e-r-y slowly. "*Where the Red Fern Grows* didn't sell a dozen copies for the first seven years," Rawls claims, "then a miracle came along." The "miracle" happened when he was invited to speak at a teachers' workshop on children's books at the University of Utah. The teachers liked his talk and his book, and began telling their students about it. "That was the spark," Rawls said, "and the book has been selling ever since." And now it is a best-seller!

Soon, critics noticed the book. They saw its charm and the author's talent. As a result, *Where the Red Fern Grows* has earned many of the top awards given in children's literature. In 1979 the novel won the Sequoyah Children's Book Award, given by the Oklahoma Library Association. That same year, it won the William Allen White Children's Book Award, given by Emporia State University. There's more! In 1979 the novel also won the Evansville (Illinois) Book Award from the Vanderburgh School Corporation. The following year, it won the Golden Archer Award from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. In 1980 *Where the Red Fern Grows* won the Maud Hart Lovelace Book Award from the Friends of the Minnesota Valley Regional Library. Finally, the heartwarming story of a boy and his dogs won the Michigan Young Readers Award, Division II, from the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.

Many people have praised the book and Wilson Rawls. An Amazon.com critic said: "This unforgettable classic belongs on every child's bookshelf." An AudioFile critic was just as impressed with the book. "In spite of being written during the Depression, there is a timelessness to this simple story," the critic wrote. "Rawls instills this autobiographical piece with a strong sense of right and wrong, as well as innocence and integrity. This title is an excellent selection for anyone desiring an uplifting, but realistic tale." Another critic called *Where the Red Fern Grows* "an exciting tale of love and adventure you'll never forget."

Young critics like the book just as much as grown-up critics. One young reader wrote: "*Where the Red Fern Grows* was truly a story

of a young boy and his dogs, and the special relationship that grew between them. I really enjoyed reading this book, and I would recommend it highly to any boy or girl who likes to read stories about people and their pets. If you read this story, you'll realize that dogs really are man's best friends!"

A teenage reader thought *Where the Red Fern Grows* was the best book she had ever read:

It is so superb that I would rate it six stars if I could. If I only were allowed to read one book in my whole life, this would be the book definitely. . . . Although the ending is not a happy one and will leave everyone in tears, this twist of plot adds to the flawlessness of this amazing story. Everyone absolutely must read this book, regardless of age. I read this book when I was fifteen, and I did not find it too childish or simple, and I believe I will reread it again some day, because I believe that every read will bring different feelings and memories to me.

Where the Red Fern Grows became so popular that in 1972 a film agent from Hollywood came to visit Wilson Rawls at his home in Idaho Falls, Idaho. The agent wanted to make the book into a movie! When the agent agreed not to change the book's title, the characters' names, or the story itself, Rawls agreed. The agent left. Two years passed. Since they did not hear from Hollywood, Rawls and his wife decided that the book was not going to be made into a movie after all.

One summer day in 1974, Wilson Rawls and his wife were getting ready to go fishing, one of their favorite activities. As they were

walking out the door, the telephone rang. It was the agent calling from Oklahoma. He wanted them to drive to Rawls's childhood home in Oklahoma. "Not having anything better to do at the time, we decided to go," he said.

"When we arrived I'd never seen such excitement," Rawls said. "The road to the river was blocked for a mile or so with cars and people. We finally made our way to the gate where a guard was posted. Still not knowing what to expect, I told the guard I was Rawls and I thought someone was expecting us. 'They sure are,' the guard said, and told us to walk down to the river."

What do you think they discovered by the river? Rawls's old home was there, completely rebuilt! The movie company had hired Cherokee Indians to build a copy of the Rawlses' house and farm. It was the movie set. The movie of *Where the Red Fern Grows* was being filmed after all! The famous actor James Whitmore played the role of Grandpa. Beverly Garland played Mama, and Jack Ging was Papa. Stewart Peterson, a new actor, got the lead role as Billy. Wilson Rawls got a part, too—he was the narrator! Many people enjoyed seeing the movie after they had read the book.

When the filming was completed, the house was moved to an Indian village. Tourists can visit it and see how Rawls and his family lived in the 1930s. Because of his Cherokee heritage (remember his mother was part Cherokee Indian), this meant a lot to Rawls.

**Thinking about what others think of
*Where the Red Fern Grows***

- Do you think the book would have been better with a happy ending? Why or why not?
- One critic said that Wilson Rawls is “a straightforward, shoot-from-the-hip storyteller with a searingly honest voice.” What parts of this book did you find honest? in what ways?
- Imagine that you are choosing actors to portray the main characters for a new movie of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Whom would you choose to play Billy, his parents, and Grandpa? What makes these actors right for these roles?



Glossary

Here are some important words and terms from *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Understanding these words will make it easier for you to read and appreciate the novel.

bawling crying loudly like a baby

blizzard a powerful, dangerous snowstorm

breed a particular type of dog. Beagles, poodles, and huskies are different breeds of dogs.

clothesline Clean wet clothes are hung on a line of rope to dry. The clothesline is hung outside in good weather and inside in bad weather.

coon short for “raccoon”

crawfish a type of shellfish that looks like a small lobster (also spelled “crayfish”)

Depression the Great Depression, the economic crisis that began with the stock market crash in 1929 and continued through the 1930s

dumbfounded speechless with shock and amazement

fern a leafy green plant, often tall and feathery-looking

gratitude a feeling of being grateful and thankful

grieve to feel very sad, usually because a loved one has died

hounds hunting dogs

minnows small freshwater fish used for bait

pangs sudden, brief pains or emotions

pelts animal skins with the hair or fur still attached, usually from animals such as raccoons, beavers, and bears

ringtail nickname for a raccoon. Raccoons are often called ringtails because their tails have rings of darker fur.

romp to play in a noisy, carefree, and energetic way

rural country

sacred holy

sacrifice to give up something important and enjoyable for a good reason

sycamore a type of tree

switch a bundle of twigs. In the novel, Billy's parents hit him with a switch when he misbehaves.

trail a path, usually in the woods

tree to chase up a tree

unbearable intolerable, too painful or unpleasant to cope with