



Wilson Rawls on Writing

"Son, a man can do anything he sets out to do, if he doesn't give up."

—Wilson Rawls's father

Wilson Rawls never forgot his father's words. These words gave him the courage to try to become a writer.

After he published *Where the Red Fern Grows*, Wilson Rawls wrote just one more book. It is called *Summer of the Monkeys* and you'll like it, too. Even when he was a big success, Wilson Rawls never forgot the hard time he had learning to write and getting his book published. He wanted to make it easier for children to achieve their goals, especially the goal of becoming a writer.

To help kids get the courage to reach for *their* dreams, Rawls visited many schools around the country. He visited more than twenty-two states! Rawls told students how he decided to become a writer when he read Jack London's *Call of the Wild*. He explained how the book was his first real treasure. Wilson Rawls dreamed big, but he never dreamed that someday there would be thousands of children who would carry around *his* book as a treasure.

He told the children how hard it was for him to make his dream come true because he only went to school for a short time. He did not know how to spell. He did not know much grammar, either. He told the children that when he was a child, he was too poor to buy paper and pencils.

Rawls always took along the manuscript of *Where the Red Fern Grows* to show the children. A manuscript is a rough draft of a book before it has been edited, revised, and proofread. The manuscript Wilson Rawls showed to the children had a lot of writing mistakes. Why did he show the rough draft? "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."

Rawls's letter to the world

So many people asked Wilson Rawls for advice about becoming a successful writer that he decided to put his advice in writing. Here is his letter:

For Those Who Want to Be Writers:

Even though I can't tell you how to be a writer, maybe I can give you some pointers.

Do a lot of reading. Study the style of authors you admire but do not try to copy their style. You will have to find a style of your own. Write in a way that is natural for you.

Read all the books you can find on creative writing. Your librarian can help you find books that will help you.

Do not wait to start writing. You are never too young to start. Your first story should be based on something you know well. Make it exciting. Do not worry about grammar and punctuation on your first draft. The important thing is to get the story down on paper. It will probably need a lot of revising and rewriting. You can worry about grammar and punctuation then. Remember, the more you write, the better you will be.

Don't get discouraged. If you can keep on trying and don't give up, you will make it someday. The road can be rough but the day you see your work in print makes it all worth it.

Best of luck!

Sincerely,
Wilson Rawls

Attention, all writers!

Rawls's struggle to become a writer shows the importance of not giving up. His hard work and determination prove the importance of the old saying, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."



You Be the Author!

- **Books that change a life:** Wilson Rawls decided to become a writer after he read *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London. Read *The Call of the Wild*, and write a little about the story. Then, explain why you think this book made Wilson Rawls want to be a writer. What parts of the book do you think he liked the best? Why?

You can also choose a book that changed *your* life. It might be a make-believe story, such as a novel or possibly the real-life story of a person, such as a biography or an autobiography. First, summarize the story. Then, explain how the book changed your life. What parts had the strongest influence on your life? Give specific reasons explaining why the book is important to you.

- **My life and welcome to it!:** *Where the Red Fern Grows* is the real-life story of Wilson Rawls's life growing up on a small farm in the Ozarks. The story takes place from the time Wilson/Billy is ten years old to the time he is around twelve years old. Choose two years in your life that have been very important to you. Perhaps the two years take place when you were five to seven years old, when you first started school. They might be when you were eight to ten, when your family moved or you got a new baby brother or sister. Tell the story of your life in the first-person point of view, as Wilson Rawls did. Show all the events through

your eyes. Use the pronouns “I” and “me.” Add lots of details to make your story interesting, just as Wilson Rawls did.

- **Write a legend:** Billy is very sad when his dogs die. However, he feels better when he sees the red fern on their grave because of the Indian legend of the red fern. He is sure the red fern has come from an angel. He thinks this means his dogs are in heaven. A legend is a story handed down through time that explains how or why something in nature originated. Legends are sometimes based on facts from nature or history. Often, however, they have wild details and characters. Write a legend to explain what has happened to Billy’s dogs after they die. Make the legend happy so it gives Billy some comfort.

- **Debate whether people should hunt:** In the Ozarks in the 1930s, hunting was a way of life. People hunted for food and for animal pelts. They ate the meat and sold the pelts to earn money. To Billy and his neighbors, hunting is also a sport. The big championship hunt shows this.

Even today, many people hunt. Some animals such as deer and rabbits are hunted for both sport and food. Other animals, such as tigers and lions, are hunted just for sport. However, not everyone feels that people should hunt animals for food or sport.

Write a make-believe dialogue between Billy and someone who doesn’t understand hunting. You could also write the dialogue between Billy and someone who doesn’t think people should hunt, even for food. Be sure to use quotation marks to show each character’s dialogue.



Activities

• **Learn about our best friend:** Billy loves his dogs, Little Ann and Old Dan. Billy is not the only person who loves his dogs. There are nearly 58 million pet dogs in America alone! But Billy's dogs, like many dogs around the world, are far more than pets: They are helpers.

Ever since dogs and humans got together, dogs have been trained to help people. Billy's hounds, Old Dan and Little Ann, hunt for food and valuable pelts. The Seeing Eye Foundation trains guide dogs to help people with impaired vision become more independent. Canine Companions for Independence trains dogs to help disabled people, such as those who have cerebral palsy. In wartime, dogs have served as messengers, guards, and rescue dogs. In peacetime, dogs search for people who are buried in snow or trapped in rubble from fires.

Choose one way that dogs help people. Do some research to learn more about the way they help. You can look on the Internet, in magazines, or interview people who train or use dogs in their jobs and lives. Share your findings in an oral report or on a Web page. You might also want to invite a person from the Seeing Eye Foundation, Canine Companions for Independence, or the police department to demonstrate how they train and use dogs as helpers.

• **Go on an ecology hunt:** Ecology (ee-**kol**-uh-jee) is the study of plants, animals, and their environment. Billy knows a lot about ecology because he spends most of his time in the woods. Learn about the ecology of your area by going on an ecology hunt. Take a look-and-see hunt by finding the things on the list below. Look and see, but don't touch!

First, copy the list into a notebook. Then, go outside with a buddy or small group of friends and look around. When you find an item, check it off on your list. Last, draw a simple picture of it. (You may find it helpful to bring along a nature guidebook, which will help you identify specific plants and animals. Visit your school or public library to get some suggestions from a librarian.) Remember: You're visiting living things, so don't disturb their home. Be careful not to touch any of the plants or animals.

acorn or other large tree seed	moss
animal footprint	mushroom
ant	rock with many colors
beetle	sand
bird	small seed
butterfly	spiderweb
caterpillar	squirrel
feather	tree
fern	twig
flower	worm
leaf	

• **Play a game from Billy's childhood:** Billy and his sisters don't have a lot of time to play games. When they do have fun,

they don't play video games, ride skateboards, or go bowling like you might do! Billy and his sisters play games like hopscotch and jacks. Play a game of jacks to get a taste of life in the 1930s.

Jacks is played with two people. Here's how to do it.

You will need a small ball that fits into the palm of your hand and ten small objects. They can be shells, pebbles, beans, or jacks (metal or plastic X shapes). The object of the game is to pick up the jacks on one bounce of the ball. You have to catch the ball before it hits the ground a second time. Follow these three easy steps to play.

1. Sit on the ground. Put all ten jacks in your hand. Then, toss them on the ground. They must stay where they land. You cannot move them.
2. Toss the ball in the air. Pick up one jack—but don't touch any other jacks! Keep the jack in your hand, and catch the ball after it bounces on the ground once.
3. If you miss the ball, touch any other jack, or drop your jack, you lose your turn.

Keep playing until one player picks up all ten jacks, one by one. For the next round, toss all the jacks again and now pick them up two jacks at a time. Then, play by picking up three jacks at a time, four jacks at a time, and so on.

• **Map it!:** At the end of the novel, the grown-up Billy says: "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. . . . Once again I'd like to face

a mountain breeze and smell the wonderful scent of the redbuds, and pawpaws, and the dogwoods. With my hands I'd like to caress the cool white bark of a sycamore." Billy loves the Ozarks. That's no surprise because the Ozarks are a beautiful area!

The Ozarks cover a large area in the south-central part of the United States. The Ozarks include parts of four states: Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma. Make a map showing the Ozark region. Use markers, crayons, or different-colored clay to show the mountains, valleys, and rivers in the area. Be sure to show the borders for each of the four states. Label major cities, mountains, and rivers.

- **Make a miniworld:** A terrarium is a small, closed world. It is made up of plants, soil, water, and air. In some ways, Billy's childhood home is like a terrarium because it is closed off from the rest of the world. Very few people visited the backwoods of Oklahoma during the 1930s.

Make your own terrarium and learn how to keep the earth healthy, as Billy and his family does. You will need the following things:

- a clear plastic or glass jar with a wide mouth, such as an applesauce or peanut butter jar
- 2 handfuls of pebbles or sand
- 2 handfuls of soil
- 1 handful of dead leaves
- 1 handful of moss
- several small plants, such as ferns or flowers
- a long stick
- water

Now, follow these steps to create your miniworld:

1. Wash and dry the jar. Remove any labels.
2. Put the sand in the bottom of the jar. Then, put in the soil. Next, put in the dead leaves.
3. Using the stick, make holes in the soil and add your plants. Place the moss around the plants.
4. Sprinkle a *little* water on the plants.
5. Cover the jar with the lid. Place your miniworld in the light, but not in direct sunlight. See how your miniworld changes over the weeks and months.

- **Meet Rocky Raccoon:** Billy describes the raccoons' sneaky tricks. Raccoons have many ways to outsmart hunters! Billy and Grandpa talk about how curious raccoons are and how much they love shiny objects. Grandpa says, "You see, a coon is a curious little animal. Anything that is bright and shiny attracts him. He will reach in and pull it out."

Find out more about these interesting wild creatures. How many species or kinds of raccoons are there? What do they look like? How big are they? Where do they live? What do they eat? How do they raise their young? Do they make good house pets? Why or why not? Make a poster to share your findings.

- **Cook up some corn bread!:** Billy's family eats a lot of corn bread. That's because corn bread is good—and good for you. The first settlers learned from the Indians the good things you can do with corn. Here is an easy and fun recipe for corn bread just like

Billy and his family ate. Because you will be using the oven, make some corn bread with a parent, an older brother or sister, or an older friend.

Ingredients

- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- 1 cup flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 4 teaspoons baking powder (not baking *soda!*)
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup milk
- ¼ cup butter or margarine
- 1 egg

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 425° Fahrenheit.
2. Wash your hands.
3. Rub some butter or margarine in a square pan. You can use a pan 8 inches wide and 2 inches high or one that is 9 inches wide and 2 inches high.
4. In a big bowl, mix all the ingredients. Mix until blended, no more than one to two minutes.
5. Pour the batter into the pan.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until golden brown.

Variation: You can make corn muffins by baking the batter in muffin cups. This batter will fill 12 cups. Bake about 15 minutes.