

Study Guide Prepared by
Ben Greenstone
Barter Player

Where the Red Fern Grows

Adapted for the stage by Brian Guehring
Based on the novel by Wilson Rawls

Barter Stage II- SEPT. 8 – NOV. 10, 2007

Virginia SOLs

English: 3.1, 3.6, 4.1, 4.4, 5.1, 5.4, 5.5, 6.3, 6.4, 6.6, 7.2, 7.5, 8.3
Non-Performance Theatre SOLs

Tennessee TCAPs

English: 3.1.02, 3.1.07, 3.1.13, 4.1.04, 4.1.06, 5.1.06, 5.1.12, 6.1.01, 6.1.12, 7.1.01,
7.1.04, 7.1.12, 8.1.01, 8.1.06, 8.1.12
Theatre 3–6: see all levels
6–8: 5.0, 6.0, 7.0

Background

Coon hunting was quite a sport for a while. Farmers consider raccoons to be pests, as they are smart animals and are able to steal food. As a result, farmers would train dogs to follow the scent or trail of a raccoon through the woods to capture and kill it. The raccoons would then often be skinned and the pelts sold to make any number of items for clothing and warmth. Coon hunts occurred at night, since raccoons are nocturnal animals, and there were great competitions in many parts of the country.

This story takes place during the Great Depression. In 1929 the stock market crashed, causing financial problems throughout the United States and internationally. People throughout the country were without jobs and couldn't support their families. These problems didn't affect the more self-sufficient people like farmers in the same way as they did salesmen and others highly involved in commerce, but farmers felt the results of the Depression nonetheless. With no one to sell their produce to, entire crops would go to waste. While they could survive, farmers were as financially hurt as anyone else.

Setting

In and around the Ozark Mountains during the Depression. Billy's house, the land surrounding it, and the station at Tahlequah.

Characters

Older Billy—A grown man remembering his childhood
Billy Coleman—A twelve-year-old boy

Papa—Billy’s farming father
Mama—Billy’s mother
Grandpa—Billy’s grandpa, and the town’s store owner
Station Master’s Wife—The depot manager’s wife
Head Judge—Championship coon hunt judge
Old Dan—A male redbone coon hound
Little Ann—A female redbone coon hound
Raccoons—The hunting targets
Mountain Lion—An Ozark “devil cat”

Synopsis

Billy Coleman, a young boy growing up in the Ozark Mountains during the Great Depression, is infected with the wonderful disease of puppy love at age 10. His family can’t afford hunting dogs, so he has to save dimes and pennies for two years to afford his dogs. Billy teaches Old Dan and Little Ann (the mangy mutts) everything they need to know about raccoon hunting. These beloved hunting hounds end up teaching Billy about friendship, faith, and life itself.

Information about the Author

Wilson “Woody” Rawls was born in Oklahoma in 1913. Growing up in a poor family, Rawls fell in love with books after his mother gave him a copy of Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*. He wrote in his youth, but due to his lack of schooling, his spelling, grammar, and punctuation were poor. Shortly before getting married, Rawls burned all of his manuscripts so that his wife wouldn’t know how poor he was on the finer points of writing. When he told her about it later, she encouraged him to rewrite all of his stories, and she helped him with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. “The Hounds of Youth” was published as a three-part serial in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1961. Later that year, it was published as a novel called *Where the Red Fern Grows*. In 1976 Rawls published a second book, *Summer of the Monkeys*. Both books received numerous awards. Rawls died in December 1984.

Information about the Playwright

Brian Guehring is the award-winning playwright-in-residence for the Omaha Theater Company for Young People, one of the five largest children’s theater companies in the United States. For OTC, Brian has written shows such as *Julie of the Wolves*, *Millions of Cats*, and *Little Tailor*, to name a few. His adaptation of *Where the Red Fern Grows* was honored by the American Alliance for Theater and Education’s Unpublished Play reading project. His work has been produced by Lexington Children’s Theater, South Carolina Children’s Theater, University of Texas at Austin, Macon (GA) State College, and other theaters for young people. He earned his MFA in Children’s Theater/Creative Drama from University of Texas at Austin. For more information, see www.brianguehring.com.

Vocabulary for Study

aggressive
championship
Daniel Boone
depot
determined
Great Depression
horehound (candy)
Ozark Mountains
paralyzed
pelt
red fern
registered

Discussion Questions/Activities

For Elementary School:

1. Why do you think Billy wants the dogs so badly? Do you have any pets? Do you want any? Why or why not?
2. Where are the Ozarks? What is the geographical area like? How far away is it from where you live?
3. What was Billy's life like before the story began? Who were his friends? What were his hobbies? Write a short story or scene describing it.
4. How do Billy and Grandpa train Old Dan and Little Ann?
5. Write a description of each of the major characters. Describe their physical attributes as well as their attitudes, likes, and dislikes. (These can include Billy's parents, and even the animals.)
6. Why does Billy decide to walk to Tahlequah? What would you do under the same circumstances?
7. What did Billy do to save up money? What are some ways you can start saving money today? What might you save it for?
8. Draw a picture of Billy hunting with his dogs.

For Middle School:

1. How does Billy change as a result of his life with the two dogs? Is this change positive or negative?
2. Research the Great Depression. What was it like to live then? What were some hardships? Can you find anything positive about it?
3. Research the Ozarks. Is the area good for farming? What is good about living there? Why might Billy's parents have wanted to leave?
4. What is one thing that Billy did that you'd like to try? Why? How about one thing that you'd never want to try? Why?
5. How did the actors portray the characters of the animals? Was this effective? What would be another way to do it?
6. Describe Billy and Grandpa's relationship. How about Billy and his parents? Billy and his dogs?
7. Why don't Billy's parents buy him the dogs right away?
8. What did Billy do to save up money? What are some ways you can start saving money today? What might you save it for?