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This will give you an idea of the format and content.

Watership Down

by

Richard Adams



1972 U.K - 1974 U.S.

MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Karen S. C. Ruff

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LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Watership Down takes place in central England, primarily in the Hampshire district. The landscape is one of high downs, long narrow valleys and sweeping meadows dotted with farms. Although the characters are all entirely fiction, the locations are real even to the shed at Nuthanger Farm where the rabbits hid.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Hazel - the main character. Leader of the group of rabbits who leave Sandleford warren looking for a safe home.

Fiver - brother to Hazel. The rabbit gifted with supernatural, but not always very specific insights.

Captain Holly - the captain of the Sandleford Owsla. Escapes when the warren is gassed and later becomes indispensable to the Honeycomb.

Bigwig - Owsla member. Personal guard to the Chief Rabbit. Believes Fiver and joins the quest

Woundwort - the leader of Efrafa. Bigwig's enemy and equal

El-ahrairah - the rabbit folk hero and main character in all the story telling

Minor Characters

Speedwell - Sandleford rabbit

Buckthorn, Acorn, Hawkbit, Pipkin - Sandleford rabbits who follow Hazel

Bluebell - Sandleford rabbit who escapes the gassing with Holly

Silver - member of the Owsla who joins Bigwig

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Although numerous events take place, the primary conflict is for the rabbits to overcome their individual differences and develop a sense of trust and comradeship that will enable them to build and maintain a home in a safer location.

Protagonist - Hazel

Antagonist - human and other enemies of rabbits, including certain.....

Climax - the battle against Woundwort. Some of the rabbits think they should.....

Outcome - Woundwort is defeated with the help of the farmyard dog. The rabbits live....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Having been persuaded by his mystic brother, Fiver, that their home is in immediate danger, Hazel takes a group of rabbits on a journey to build a new warren. In the course of their journey, they have to learn how to handle new experiences, develop new methods for handling crises, and avoid enemies. Not wanting to travel any further than necessary, they first attempt to make their home with a strange bunch of rabbits who have secrets and weird habits such as collecting farm-grown scraps and hoarding them underground. After nearly losing one of their most crucial members to a wire snare, the rabbits realize that the strange warren has become

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complacent and dull, unable to forage for themselves, and dependent on the vegetable scraps scattered across the field by a man. The price they pay, however, is that frequently the man sets snares and captures just enough rabbits to satisfy his need at the time. These rabbits live in a state of denial and threaten to kill any rabbit that would make them face the truth of their precarious existence.

After leaving the "tame" warren, the rabbits finally reach Watership Down where.....

THEMES

Loyalty

Trust

Journey Motif

Friendship.....

Additional themes are identified in the complete study guide

MOOD

The story is easy to read, but although the vocabulary is fairly simple, the language style is sophisticated and serious. The author wrote the story in such a way that we accept the.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Richard Adams was born on May 9, 1920 and he is a British author of fantasy tales whose first book Watership Down was his road to enduring fame. He also wrote The Plague Dogs and Shardick, among others. He is still living in the area that formed the setting for Hazel and his friends in this novel. Some critics have found political implications in the novel, but Adams himself claims to have had no political agenda when writing his books. The origin of Watership Down is a story with which he entertained his two daughters, Juliet and Roamund. Upon their insistence, he wrote it down and sought publication. Two and a half years.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The story is adult fantasy inspired by a series of oral tales that Adams had invented to please his daughters. There is no deliberate correlation with historical or political events.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Part 1: The Journey

Chapter 1 - The Notice Board

Summary

The story opens with several rabbits from a warren known as "Sandleford" feeding in an open area close to the woods. Hazel and Buckthorn are looking for cowslip which Fiver finds for them. Toadflax comes along to take it away and reminds the rabbits that cowslip is a delicacy reserved for Owsla, the ruling class of rabbits.

Fiver, a rabbit gifted with a form of ESP or prophetic insight feels as if the warren is under threat but can't define the source of his impressions. They come upon a sign which they can't read, but which Fiver sees as the source of his negative vibes. He sees a field covered with blood, but Hazel tells him that it is just a reflection from the sun.

Notes

The chapter introduces the main characters of the story, especially Hazel and Fiver. We receive a little explanation of some of the rabbit terms (their language is called Lapine) and learn something about the structure of the warren. The Owsla is a dictatorial ruling body who make the decisions, guard the warren and mete out punishment to those who break rules. The sign in this chapter is a notice of a high class housing development that will be built in the area, destroying the wildlife habitat. Hazel seems to be the only one who pays much attention to Fiver who is described as an undersized rabbit with an oversized imagination.

Chapter 2 - The Chief Rabbit

Summary

Fiver wakes Hazel in the night by kicking him during a bad dream. Fiver insists that the entire warren is in danger and must leave immediately. In the morning Hazel takes Fiver to see the Chief Rabbit and explain the unseen danger as best he can. Bigwig, one of the Owsla is on duty but Hazel talks him in to letting them into the burrow of the Chief Rabbit. The Threarah listens tolerantly to Fiver's warnings of doom, and Hazel reminds the Chief Rabbit of past predictions Fiver had made that were always true. Nevertheless, Threarah is not going to take Fiver or Hazel seriously. As they leave, Threarah tells Bigwig to remain behind. They soon hear the Chief Rabbit giving Bigwig a lecture for allowing Hazel and Fiver to bother him.

Notes

We are introduced to Bigwig and given a foreshadowing of Bigwig's coming desertion of the Owsla. The Chief Rabbit is characterized as tolerant, but condescending to the other rabbits. He also doesn't like anything he hasn't thought of himself, not unlike a ruling monarch. Fiver is seen as a rather overactive mystic whose information is threatening but not very specific. Hazel, however, has had enough experience with Fiver's predictions in that past that he takes him more seriously.

Chapter 3 - Hazel's Decision

Summary

Hazel decides that he and Fiver will leave the warren along with any rabbits who want to go with them. Blackberry and Dandelion appear and volunteer to join up, partly because "there are too many bucks in the warren" and those not in the Owsla have a rather poor existence. Bigwig shows up and announces that he is going and that he thinks he can locate a couple additional bucks in the Owsla who are becoming increasingly discontented. Hazel warns Bigwig to steer clear of Captain Holly, the commander of the Owsla police and to be careful whom he talks to.

Notes

Additional rabbits are introduced. We also get a sense of additional discontent in the Owsla. Captain Holly presents a possible threat or obstacle.

Chapter 4 - The Departure

Summary

Shortly after moonrise--called "fu inle"--the departing rabbits begin to gather. Pipkin, a timid friend of Fiver's has been persuaded to come along. Hawkbit, considered slow and stupid by Hazel, has been brought in by Dandelion. Bigwig has managed to bring along Silver, a nephew of the Threarah who has not yet established himself among the Owsla. They are just about to leave when Captain Holly and two other guards show up and announce that Silver and Bigwig are under arrest. Silver is to be arrested for failing to report to Toadflax, and Bigwig is under arrest for spreading dissension and inciting to mutiny. A brief struggle takes place which is brought to a halt when Hazel confronts Holly and tells him to leave or he will be killed. Holly and the two guards run off, but the rabbits know that they will soon be back with an entire contingent of the Owsla. Thus they are now forced to leave quickly to avoid severe punishment and even death.

Notes

The tyrannical nature of the Owsla is apparent, although in another sense they are simply doing their job. However, the rabbits obviously do not have the freedom to come and go as they choose or to leave the warren for any reason. Most of them don't want to, but even if they did, they would be prevented from doing so unless the Owsla had thought of it first. Holly is a sensible captain who has more brains than to take on a half dozen or more rabbits all by himself. Hazel's leadership qualities are developing very quickly along with the other rabbits' trust in him. It is also worth noting that Hazel chooses NOT to harm Holly or the other guards, but lets them go with a warning even though it may bring additional trouble. It is part of Hazel's nature that he doesn't kill even his enemies unnecessarily.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Fiver - Fiver is the character who initiates the journey with his mystical insight that harm is about to come to the Sandleford warren.

He begins the story as a timid rabbit who is known only to his brother Hazel although other rabbits have heard of his predictions. As the story progresses he grows more confident of his own abilities and begins to speak up regarding his insights even when the other rabbits disagree with him. By the end of the story, his perceptions are so finely honed that he can tell which rabbit will actually be in danger and is capable of taking the lead when he knows an action is safe. The other rabbits go from respecting his opinion to actually relying on it.

Hazel - The leader of the Sandleford rabbits who take the quest.

Hazel gradually learns what it means to truly be a great leader.

He knows it is better to have his people follow him out of their own desires and their trust in him rather than to merely give orders, but he is able to make a decision and stick to it when he believes.....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The story plot is a journey which takes the rabbits from a place where they are in danger to a place where they can live in safety. Two major subplots are the discovery of the secrets of the tame warren and the journey to Efrafa and back.

As with most journey stories, the most important lessons are those that are learned on the journey itself. The rabbits have a tremendous amount of learning to do for an 8 mile trip. They have to learn when to trust and when to be suspicious, how to find unexpected friends, how to be examples of leadership and.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Maturity - Like most journey stories, one of the primary themes is that of growing up. The rabbits are adults when they start on the trip, but they mature in other ways, such as in their abilities to work together, to think both independently and as a unit, and in their appreciation of each other.

The Ideal Society - Although Adams claims that he had no political agenda in mind when writing the story, some readers noticed a similarity between different forms of government and the rabbit communities in the story. Sandleford has been compared to the traditional monarchy where the leaders get the best of everything and really don't even know their "people" although the citizens can do almost anything they want within the boundaries of their class. The Cowslip warren is analogous to extreme socialism with a lack of constructive leadership. The only leadership is in the form of rigid rules and a direction to violence whenever something threatens to reveal the faulty ideology. Efrafa could be compared to a totalitarian state with Woundwort being a rabbit "Hitler." Finally, the Honeycomb might be considered a benevolent "republic." One student has.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

POINT OF VIEW

Limited Omniscience from the perspectives of Hazel, Woundwort or Bigwig, depending on the section of the story involved.

QUOTES - IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS

(From the hardcover 1972 edition. Publisher: MacMillan)

1. *"The Threarah doesn't like anything he hasn't thought of for himself."* The chief rabbit. This represents an attitude that seems to be characteristic of chief rabbits. Hazel has to become a more democratic leader than his

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examples. (13)

2. *"El-ahrairah, your people cannot rule the world, for I will not have it so. All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed."* Frith in the gift giving myth told by Dandelion. The quote is a prophesy of the enmity most of the world will have for wild rabbits but also specifies the gifts of strength, speed, and intelligence which the rabbits are to use to thrive. (24).....

Additional quotations are listed and analyzed in the complete study guide.

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Speculate on what might have happened if Hazel had gone to Efrafa on the first trip there.
2. Which character undergoes the most change in the course of the journey?
3. Why do the rabbits in Cowslip's warren resist the knowledge of what will happen to them? Why couldn't they change if they faced up to it? Or could they?.....

ESSAY TOPICS

- Compare/contrast Hazel and Woundwort.
- Write an essay analyzing the leadership qualities of Bigwig.
- How might he have made a better leader than Hazel?.....

END OF SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM MONKEYNOTES FOR "WATERSHIP DOWN " BY RICHARD ADAMS

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