

The Yearling

Study Guide

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For the novel by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings



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Synopsis

Jody Baxter, his father, Penny, and his mother, Ora, live on an island of high good land surrounded by the Florida scrub. It is a meager existence, often filled with hardship, but the Baxters get by on what they have. Jody and his father have a special relationship, sharing a common love of nature and the simple pleasures of life. Penny is indulgent, allowing Jody to “kick up his heels” while he can. “The day’ll come,” Penny thinks, “he’ll not even care to.”

In contrast to the quiet peaceful lives of the Baxters, their nearest neighbors, the Forresters, are loud, argumentative, and prone to being troublemakers. Jody finds their zest for life and their free and easy ways appealing. But relations between the Baxters and the Forresters are strained when Penny and Jody intervene in a fight between Lem Forrester and Oliver Hutto, a friend of the family.

When the Baxters’ hogs are missing, Penny and Jody venture into the scrub to search for them, suspecting that the Forresters are responsible. On the hunt Penny is bitten by a rattlesnake and nearly dies. While he is recovering from the snake bite, Penny allows Jody to take in a motherless fawn and raise it as a pet. Ora protests, but concedes to Penny. Jody names the fawn Flag, and the deer becomes Jody’s constant companion.

Flag also becomes a main source of Jody’s joy when hardship strikes. A long storm floods the scrub, killing much of the wildlife and destroying the Baxter’s crops. The animals that don’t die from the flood are soon taken by a plague. As a result, hungry wolves prowl the scrub and kill the Baxter’s heifer calf.

Jody and Penny team up with the Forresters to rid the scrub of the menace of the wolves. During a successful hunt, the party comes upon a group of bear cubs. Thinking quickly, Penny arranges that the cubs be captured live and sold. The money from the resulting sale, and the birth of a new heifer calf, promise a joyful Christmas for the family. The Baxters make plans to go to Volusia for a community Christmas celebration and stay with the Huttos.

But disaster strikes once again. Old Slewfoot, a marauding black bear, returns to the Baxter farm and kills the new calf. Penny becomes obsessed with killing the

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bear. Penny and Jody, caught up in the hunt, almost miss the celebration, and arrive in Volusia on Christmas Eve. But the celebration at Volusia turns to horror when the Forresters seek revenge on Oliver Hutto. The rift between the Baxters and the Forresters widens.

In the spring, during planting, Penny strains himself removing a stump. He is bedridden, and Jody must take over much of the work. But Flag, now nearly grown, begins eating the young green shoots as fast as they appear. Jody tries in vain to keep the deer from the crops, but Penny recognizes what must be done if the family is to have any crops at all in the coming year. It is then that Jody feels betrayed by his father.

The Yearling is a story about a special relationship between a father and a son, covering a year in the life of an adolescent who is “betwixt and between,” no longer a boy, but not yet a man.

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Dialect:

A *dialect* is a regional variation of language. An author often will write dialogue in dialect so that readers can get a sense of how the characters sound. In *The Yearling*, the spelling and grammar of the dialogue reflects the dialect of backwoods Florida at the time of the story.

Using standard spelling and grammar rules, rewrite the sentences below that were spoken by characters in *The Yearling*.

Example: "Goin' to Grahamsville allus do make me hongry."
"Going to Grahamsville always makes me hungry."

1. "... 'twa'n't mine and I wouldn't of wanted to die with it on me."
2. "Iffen you'll learn yourself to work, you'll be your Pa all over."
3. "I'm o' no mind to set around waitin' breakfast."
4. "Ain't a dog borned as smart as that bear."
5. "I'm fearful, always, for the pore dogs. They're the scapers gits the worst of it."
6. "You shore kin figger what a creetur'll do."
7. "You belong to figger. A wild creetur's quicker'n a man and a heap stronger."
8. "Don't go gittin' faintified on me."

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Analysis:

11. Penny tells Jody,

“A creetur that kills and eats what he needs, why, he’s jest like the rest of us, makin’ out the best he kin. But an animal, or a person either, that’ll do harm jest to be a-doin’—You look in a bear’s face and you’ll see he’s got no remorse.”

Later, how does Penny compare the Forresters to bears?

12. Penny tells Jody,

County lines is nothin’ to [animals], nor a man’s fences. How’s a creetur to know the land’s mine and paid for? How’s a bear to know I’m dependin’ on my hogs for my own rations? All he knows is, he’s hongry.”

What is the author saying about animal behavior?

13. What law of nature does Penny explain to Jody near the end of Chapter 4? Considering this law, why have Slewfoot’s actions angered Penny?

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Dig Deeper:

14. Read Genesis 1:26–30, Genesis 9:1–3, and Psalm 8:3–8. According to these verses, what is mankind’s place in the natural order?

15. Does the natural law that Penny explains to Jody apply to humans? Explain your answer. In what way might it apply to animals only?

Optional Exercises:

1. Sketch and label the parts of a muzzle-loading rifle. When did muzzle-loaders fall out of common use? Why? What must be done to load and fire a muzzle-loader?

2. Consider the name the author gives to the marauding bear: Old Slewfoot. Research some of the regional names or nicknames given to Satan. Are there similarities? Do you think the author chose to draw a parallel? If so, what would be the purpose of this parallel?

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3. The mood of these chapters is peaceful with pleasant descriptions of nature as if Rawlings is using this section to show her readers why it was that Penny moved to the scrub. The descriptions of the sink-hole, the fishing trip, and the dance of the whooping cranes help set this mood. The sink-hole is described as “a great cupped garden, feathered with green leaves, cool and moist and, always, mysterious. . . . a lush green heart.” The whooping cranes are described as “washed with gold,” and “whiter than any clouds.” Penny and Jody sit quietly at dinner. “They had seen a thing that was unearthly. They were in a trance from the strong spell of its beauty.”

Dig Deeper:

4. Answers will vary. These verses mention that Jesus withdrew to lonely places to pray. Being alone gives us a chance to be with ourselves—to get to know ourselves and think. It also takes away distractions and gives us time to speak with God.

5. One of the benefits of spending time in nature is that God is revealed in it.

6. In this quotation, Penny was probably thinking of his father’s teaching, but he may also be thinking of Ora. The James passage tells us we are capable of both evil and good, and that we must struggle to put down the evil. The Romans passage says that our old physical, sinful side holds to sin, but the spiritual side, given life by Christ, yearns for good.

7. The Forresters, like all humans, are capable of both good and evil. Jody has only seen the wild and free and enjoyable part of the Forresters—the good part. Ora warns about the Forresters being black-hearted, but Jody hasn’t yet seen that part of them.

8. Our actions should be done with heavenly wisdom. According to these verses, we should lead a good life, do good deeds in humility that comes from wisdom—wisdom that comes from heaven. This wisdom is “pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

9. Jody imagines himself to be a bear, drinking from the water trough in the sink-hole. Penny compares himself to the fish, “helpless in a world o’ their own. . . . Mebbe the Lord figgers the same about me.” As Jody and Penny watch the cranes, Jody “found his own arms lifting and falling with his breath, as the cranes’ wings lifted.”

10. Answers will vary. The author may be saying that humans are capable of both animal-like, or instinctive behavior, and human, or rational behavior. Humans can also understand and sympathize with animals in their position as caretaker (Genesis 1:26–31).

Chapters 11–13

Vocabulary:

1. d; 2. j; 3. a; 4. h; 5. k; 6. c; 7. f; 8. b; 9. i; 10. e; 11. g.

Questions:

1. Jody means that he wants something that will need and rely on him. Answers will vary.

2. The river was the main method of travel from the heart of the scrub to larger settlements and cities. For Jody, who had known only the scrub, the river is the pathway to the unknown and mysterious—places that exist only in stories.

3. Jody sees Eulalie Boyles and, because Penny had teased him earlier, Jody is flooded with hate and throws a potato at her. Penny reprimands him sharply.

4. Jody’s reaction was a knee-jerk response. He reacted instinctively, like an animal.