

Movie Guide: “Where the Red Fern Grows” (1974)

About the Author:

Where the Red Fern Grows is a novel by Wilson Rawls, first published in 1961. Rawls was born in 1926 in the small town of Scrapper, Oklahoma. Raised in a rural environment, much of his childhood was spent in the outdoors, which influenced his love for nature and animals. Despite struggling with dyslexia, Rawls became a successful writer, and *Where the Red Fern Grows* remains his most famous work. The book was later adapted into two films, in 1974 and 2003. Rawls’ deep connection to the natural world and his personal experiences of growing up in the rural America are evident in his storytelling.

About the Time Period and Culture:

Set in the late 1920s, “Where the Red Fern Grows” provides a snapshot of rural life in the United States during this time. The story takes place in the Ozark Mountains, a region in the central United States known for its rugged terrain and deep forests. This setting emphasizes the isolation and self-sufficiency of the characters, who depend on hunting and farming for survival. The culture of the time was deeply influenced by a connection to nature, community, and hard work. Additionally, the movie/novel reflects the importance of family and the rural American tradition of training hunting dogs. The story also touches on the theme of the American frontier, where people and animals were often seen as partners in survival.

About the Story:

Where the Red Fern Grows is the story of a young boy named Billy Colman who dreams of owning a pair of coonhounds (dogs trained to hunt raccoons). After years of hard work and saving money, he finally buys two puppies, Old Dan and Little Ann, and they form a close bond as they hunt raccoons together in the Ozark Mountains. As Billy and his dogs grow, they face many challenges and adventures together.

Hunting Raccoons:

For families like Billy’s, hunting is necessary for survival because it supplies food, clothing, and other basic necessities of life. Raccoon hunting is especially challenging because raccoons are smart, sneaky animals that are difficult to track and capture. The process can be broken down into four key steps:

1. Training the Dogs:

Billy spends a lot of time training Old Dan and Little Ann to hunt raccoons. The dogs are taught to track the scent of raccoons and to “tree” them, which means they chase the animal up a tree and bark loudly to signal their success. Training is a gradual process where Billy teaches the dogs how to work together and follow the trail.

2. Tracking the Raccoons:

The hunt begins at night, when raccoons are most active. Billy takes his dogs into the woods, where they use their keen sense of smell to track the raccoon’s scent. Raccoons are known for being clever and often try to confuse their pursuers by doubling back or hiding in places like caves or hollow trees.

3. Treeing the Raccoon:

Once the dogs find the raccoon’s scent and track it, they chase it until the raccoon climbs a tree to escape. The dogs then bark excitedly to alert Billy that the raccoon is “treed.” This is the critical moment in the hunt, where Billy and his dogs have to work together to either capture the raccoon or finish the hunt.

4. The Capture:

After the raccoon is treed, Billy has the option to either trap or kill the raccoon, depending on the hunting customs of the time and place. In the context of the story, Billy typically doesn't kill the raccoon immediately, but instead takes pride in his dogs' ability to find and catch such a tricky animal.

The Learning and Language Benefits of Viewing "Where the Red Fern Grows" Together

- **Language Acquisition Through Context:**
Watching a film provides us with a rich context to hear English used in everyday situations. It allows us to understand how language is used in natural, conversational settings, which can help improve your listening comprehension. The dialogue, while simple, also introduces you to idiomatic expressions and regional language that you may not encounter elsewhere.
- **Cultural Understanding:**
The film is a time capsule of American history, culture, and values, especially the period of the Great Depression and the settling of the western United States. It highlights themes of family, perseverance, and loyalty, which are universally relevant but may offer a unique perspective for you as ESL learners.
- **Emotional and Relatable Content:**
The film deals with themes like love, loss, and growing up, which are emotions all human beings can all relate to, regardless of cultural background. These universal themes make the story accessible and engaging, encouraging you to connect emotionally with the content, which is often one of the best ways to learn a language.
- **Developing Speaking and Writing Skills:**
After watching the movie, you will engage in group discussions and complete a writing activity.
- **Visual Learning:**
The film offers a visual representation of the story. Research shows that it's easier for ESL students to understand new vocabulary and concepts when they can associate words with images and actions.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think the book/movie is entitled "Where the Red Fern Grows?" Where do you see a red fern in the story, and what does it symbolize in the story?
2. What examples of empathy and compassion do you observe in the movie?
3. How is "Where the Red Fern Grows" like the story "Little Hunters at the Lake"? How is it different?