

A GUIDE TO Watership Down

Richard Adams

. . . the little band of rabbits had disappeared into the dim, moonlit night.

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

An epic story with an unexpected cast of characters: a group of rabbits in search of a new warren and a new life.

Point of View: Omniscient. The narration is handled in an unusual way—the story is told mostly from the perspective of rabbits.

Setting: Four rabbit warrens in rural England: the doomed Sandleford warren, the warren full of snares, the authoritarian Efrafa, and the idyllic Watership Down.

Protagonists: A group of rabbits who leave the Sandleford warren in search of a safer place to live. Their leader, Hazel, is the novel's **epic hero**.

Conflicts and Resolutions: As in other novels or epics involving journeys, the action is episodic, with many conflicts, climaxes, and resolutions. The final **climax** is an **epic battle** between the protagonists and the Efracans, members of another rabbit warren. The conflict is **resolved** when the protagonists win the battle and make peace with the Efracans.

Themes: Individual freedom is important, but it must be balanced by social responsibility. Humans must show respect for the natural world. Peace is preferable to war.

BACKGROUND

Rabbit Lingo. One way Adams makes his fantasy novel seem realistic is by using a rabbit vocabulary. Adams defines terms in context and includes a Lapine Glossary.

Research on Rabbits. Richard Adams acknowledges a debt to R. M. Lockley's book *The Private Life of the Rabbit* for his knowledge of rabbits. Lockley, a naturalist, published his study of wild rabbits in 1964. It's a witty and sympathetic portrait of rabbit life, full of colorful observations—for example, a mother rabbit will fight cats, weasels, and ferrets to protect her kittens; rabbits are gregarious; rabbits see one another “as individuals, each with a personality and a place in the hierarchy” of the warren. Lockley, a great admirer of rabbits, concludes his

book with this observation: “Rabbits are so human. Or is it the other way round—humans are so rabbit?”

Epics. *Watership Down* should be read as an epic in the tradition of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. The narrative involves a perilous journey on a grand scale. It celebrates the values of a “nation” much as the *Odyssey* celebrates the values of ancient Greece. The rabbits must rely on the supernatural from time to time, and they have a mythology all their own. Like other epic heroes, the rabbits defend their nation in a great battle that secures the future of their society and all it stands for.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Hazel, a mid-size, sensible rabbit who is a natural leader despite his lack of brute strength.

Fiver, Hazel's brother, a small, nervous rabbit who has clairvoyant powers.

Bigwig, a big, tough rabbit who prides himself on his passion for fighting; he is hotheaded and impulsive.

El-ahrairah, a hero of rabbit mythology. A great trickster, he is the ideal to which all rabbits aspire.

Blackberry, the cleverest of the rabbits, whose flair for trickery rivals El-ahrairah's.

Dandelion, a strong, sensible, and brave rabbit.

Silver, a large gray rabbit, a good fighter.

Holly, a big, tough rabbit whose sharp instincts were honed in the Sandleford warren.

Kehaar, a cranky sea gull who is loyal to the rabbits and assists them in their most dangerous adventures.

The Efracans, members of a warren that resembles a fascist state. They are subject to the repressive rule of a tyrannical Chief Rabbit, General Woundwort.

General Woundwort, the largest, meanest, most frightful of the rabbits, an orphan who survived by his wits and almost single-handedly created the authoritarian state of Efrafa.

Blackavar, a rabbit who was left with a scarred, mutilated body after he tried to escape from Efrafa.

Hyzenthlay, a sensible and courageous Efracan doe who is dissatisfied with her situation.

The Black Rabbit of Inlé, the equivalent in rabbit mythology of the Grim Reaper. He delivers rabbits to the afterlife.

PLOT

Part I: The Journey

Chapters 1–5. The novel opens in the Sandleford warren, whose residents enjoy relative freedom. An **omniscient narrator** introduces two brothers, Hazel and Fiver, who discover a puzzling manmade sign on their warren. The sign, which they cannot read, announces a construction project that will destroy their home. We learn about the hierarchy in the rabbit warrens, with the Chief Rabbit at the top, his *Owsla* (body of high-ranking officers) below him, and the rest of the rabbits at the bottom. Hazel and Fiver are characterized: Hazel is not big or very strong but he has his wits about him and is generally well respected; Fiver, on the other hand, is very small and nervous, the kind of rabbit who is scorned by his peers. But Fiver is special because he sometimes has premonitions, though Hazel is the only other rabbit who recognizes his unique gift. Fiver is convinced that remaining in the warren means certain death. After a fruitless attempt to warn the Chief Rabbit, he and Hazel decide to leave, along with any rabbits who want to join them. After a violent confrontation with the *Owsla*, the motley group of wandering rabbits (or *hlessil*) escape and begin their epic journey, stopping for the night in the woods.

Chapters 6–10. We learn about the other *hlessil*: Blackberry is clever, a trickster; Dandelion has great oratorical skills; Bigwig is tough, insensitive, and brash; and Pipkin is weak and needs protection but is very loyal. Dandelion introduces us to rabbit mythology and the art of rabbit storytelling by telling a tale about the great rabbit trickster El-ahrairah and Frith, the sun god, whom the rabbits regard as the supreme being. When Dandelion's story comes to a close, the **action** resumes, propelling the rabbits into an endless series of **conflicts** whose **resolutions** depend on their ability to work together. The rabbits flee from a weasel, only to discover a river between them and safety. Blackberry comes up with the idea of floating the weaker rabbits across the river on a piece of wood; the stronger rabbits swim. Hazel leads the group to a beanfield, but on the way they are attacked by a crow. Together the rabbits defeat the bird and escape. As the journey continues, the *hlessil* encounter an asphalt road. Drawing on his *Owsla* knowledge, Bigwig explains what roads are and describes the *brududil* (cars and other motor vehicles) that drive on them. Later, in a scene **foreshadowing** the rabbits' future on Watership Down, Fiver gazes at some far-off hills and is possessed by the conviction that the rabbits must go there. But he also sees a menacing mist between the rabbits and their future home.

Chapters 11–15. After an exhausting trek that leaves many of the rabbits regretting their decision to leave the warren, Hazel restores their faith in his leadership by

taking them to a meadow. There they come upon a stranger, a large, well-groomed, oddly lethargic rabbit who introduces himself as Cowslip and invites them to his warren. Although the *hlessil* are treated hospitably there, they are mystified by the customs of the inhabitants, who create Shapes (mosaics) by pushing stones into the walls of the warren. Fiver is alarmed by the warren rabbits' strange air of resignation and sadness. He refuses to partake of the *flayrah* (delicacies) left near the warren by men each day. Cowslip and the other warren rabbits call for a story, and Dandelion obliges by telling the tale of how El-ahrairah tricked the mythological King Darzin into delivering all of his lettuces to El-ahrairah's warren.

Chapters 16–17. After Dandelion finishes his story, Cowslip stuns the *hlessil* by remarking that El-ahrairah doesn't mean much to the warren rabbits. That admission seems to be further evidence that something is amiss in the warren.

Next a poet of the warren, Silverweed, recites an abstract, melancholy poem. His performance sends Fiver into a frenzy. The next morning, Bigwig is caught in a snare, and it takes the cooperation of several rabbits to free him. Fiver, who all along has sensed something sinister about the warren, is now able to persuade the *hlessil* that the warren is maintained by a farmer and is snared regularly. The reason for the strange sadness and passivity of the warren rabbits is now clear. The *hlessil* leave immediately.

Part II: On Watership Down

Chapters 18–20. Hazel and his *hlessil* finally reach Watership Down, the hills that Fiver kept insisting were within reach. Since leaving Sandleford, they have become a shrewd, tenacious band who understand one another and work well together. There is no questioning Hazel's authority or Fiver's insight. Blackberry proposes that the rabbits dig new, deeper burrows and create a real warren. Suddenly the rabbits hear a strange cry and discover the wounded Holly, one of the Sandleford *Owsla* with whom they fought before beginning their journey. Later, to Bigwig's annoyance, Hazel rescues a field mouse from a predatory bird. This scene **foreshadows** the mouse's later role in warning the rabbits about approaching Efrafaon warriors.

Chapters 21–25. Holly tells the story of his escape from the brutal destruction of the Sandleford warren—of the men with shovels filling in rabbit holes, of the strange smell of poison in the burrows, of rabbits clawing the earth and one another in a desperate but futile struggle to escape. Saddened yet relieved to be safe on Watership Down, all the rabbits agree that Fiver is a **hero**, that his premonitions saved their lives. Hazel now explains to the others why he rescued the mouse. He hopes to enlist the local animals to help the rabbits. Bigwig and Silver find a wounded sea gull called Kehaar, who, after a great deal of loud complaint, allows himself to be nursed back to health. Hazel worries

because all the rabbits are males; without does (female rabbits) the warren will die out. To show his gratitude, Kehaar scouts the area for does and finds two possible sources: some hutch rabbits at nearby Nuthanger Farm and an overcrowded warren a few miles off. Holly leads an expedition to the warren, and Hazel takes the devoted but terrified Pipkin along on a dangerous expedition to the farm. Hazel tells the hutch rabbits he'll return to spring them from their cages. Fiver, sensing danger, objects, but Hazel, Bigwig, and several others decide to go ahead anyway. They return to the farm and, eluding several cats and a dog, free the hutch rabbits. The raiding party returns with three of the rabbits, including two does, but without Hazel; he was shot by the farmer and had to be left behind.

Chapters 26–29. Fiver has a vision and announces that Hazel is alive. He persuades Blackberry to accompany him on a search, and the two rabbits find Hazel bleeding but alive inside a drainpipe. While they're away, Holly and his party return, wounded and distraught, from their unsuccessful raid on the neighboring warren. Holly describes the warren, called Efrafa, and its leader, General Woundwort, an authoritarian, militaristic rabbit. The general and a body called the *Owslafa*, or Council police, control every aspect of the Efrafan rabbits' lives. In addition to a regular Owsla, Woundwort employs a *Wide Patrol* to search for hlessil and *elil*, enemies of rabbits that might pose a threat to Efrafa. When Fiver and Blackberry return with the wounded Hazel, they find a thoroughly demoralized warren. But when Hazel recovers, he suggests another expedition to Efrafa to get some does. Hazel, Blackberry, and Kehaar come up with a plan and recruit a number of rabbits to help them carry it out.

Part III: Efrafa

Chapters 30–35. With Silver as their guide, the rabbits embark on their expedition. As they approach Efrafa, Kehaar suggests that they cross a bridge and hide on the other side of the river. They decide to rest and think it over. At Bigwig's insistence, Dandelion tells the story of El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inlé. The dark story of El-ahrairah's subjection to torture in the underworld terrifies Pipkin. Shortly after, a fox is spotted; Bigwig runs out and leads it to a patrol of Efracans, and the fox devours one of them.

Later in their journey, the rabbits cross the bridge and discover a boat tied at the bank of the river. Blackberry proposes that they gnaw through the rope and use the boat to escape downstream after they return with the Efrafan does. **Suspense** builds as Bigwig sets off to join the Efrafan warren, in accordance with the rabbits' plan. Because of his size and strength, he is immediately made an officer. It doesn't take him long to discern that Woundwort's empire is seething with unrest. He meets Blackavar, a rabbit who once attempted to escape. He also meets Hyzenthlay, a clever doe, and persuades her to recruit other does and prepare for an escape.

Chapters 36–38. The **suspense** intensifies as General Woundwort interrogates Bigwig, who has been recognized as the rabbit who led the fox to the Efrafan patrol. Bigwig bluffs his way out of trouble, but his raid must be put off another day. Meanwhile one of Hyzenthlay's does is arrested by Woundwort and reveals the plan. Bigwig, Blackavar, and the does make a break for the river. They are pursued, but Kehaar shows up just in time and begins attacking Woundwort and his officers. The rabbits escape and run to the boat.

Part IV: Hazel-rah

Chapters 39–40. The rabbits sail down the river, narrowly miss colliding with one bridge, and are finally stopped when they collide with another. Terrified, they swim to the shore. In the morning they start the perilous trek to Watership Down. Blackavar emerges as a leader, making many wise decisions along the way. The rabbits must endure yet another **conflict** when they stumble onto an Efrafan patrol just before they reach Watership Down. Blackavar insists that they should kill the officers, but Hazel decides to let them go. (This scene **foreshadows** the **epic battle** that becomes the **climax** of the narrative.) Finally they arrive, does and all, at peaceful Watership Down.

Chapters 41–45. There is a break in the action as Dandelion tells the story of how El-ahrairah tricked a guard dog into leaving his post at a farmer's vegetable garden, a story that **foreshadows** Hazel's ingenious strategy for the battle about to take place. After Dandelion finishes telling the story, Hazel sees the field mouse whose life he saved. The mouse tells him that there is a huge party of Efracans on the other side of the down. Hazel meets General Woundwort and proposes that they start a third warren, between Efrafa and Watership Down. Woundwort refuses. Thinking that this small rabbit must be only a messenger sent by Bigwig, who he assumes is the Chief Rabbit, he lets Hazel return to the warren unharmed. The Efracans plan their attack. They decide to dig the warren out and fight to the death. As they dig overhead, Fiver goes into a trance and begins making unearthly sounds. The noises make the Efracans uneasy; some of them fear that the warren is inhabited by an animal with special powers. Remembering the story of El-ahrairah and the guard dog, Hazel, with Blackberry and Dandelion, makes a mad dash for Nuthanger Farm. There Hazel begins to gnaw the guard dog's rope, planning to free the dog and lead it on a chase back to Watership Down to attack the Efrafan rabbits outside the warren. All goes well until Hazel is attacked by a cat.

Chapters 46–50. Woundwort's troops finally break through to the warren. Woundwort and Bigwig engage in a fierce battle. Both are wounded. Bigwig tells Woundwort that he will not back down, on orders from his Chief Rabbit. His statement sends Woundwort into a panic; he had assumed that Bigwig was the Chief, and therefore the biggest, strongest rabbit in the warren. Now he imagines an even more powerful rabbit. In the

meantime, Fiver emerges from his trance to predict the death of the Efracans. Woundwort's officers begin to desert. Just then Dandelion and Blackberry lead the dog to the warren, and the Efracans flee. Only Woundwort stays behind, to do battle with the dog. Back at Nuthanger, the farmer's young daughter rescues Hazel from the cat. Hazel then returns to the warren.

At last all is peaceful. Life in the warren settles into a routine. The does pass on to their young the now-legendary stories of the rabbits' adventures. General Woundwort is never seen again.

Epilogue. The warren is prosperous and peaceful. Hazel's proposal for a warren between Watership Down and Efrafa becomes a reality. After a few years, Hazel, his work done, is visited by El-ahrairah. He sheds his body peacefully and joins El-ahrairah's Owsla, leaving behind a well-established warren for a new Chief to run.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The personification of rabbits is the first thing students will notice about this novel. Below are suggestions for writing assignments, research projects, and other activities that build on that observation. These activities will help students understand the novel's plot, characters, and themes.

1. Mapping the Epic

Have students work individually or in groups to create a map illustrating the journey described in *Watership Down*. They should plot all the places mentioned in the story and add illustrations or captions to show what happened there.

2. Writing an Animal Epic

Some students might be interested in writing their own epic set in the world of animals they know something about: dogs, cats, birds, even iguanas or pigeons. Their epic should include a hero or heroine, an adversary, and a perilous journey to reach a goal. Before students start writing, they should research the behavior of the types of animals they'll use as characters, just as Adams did for *Watership Down*.

3. Debate

Students might be interested in presenting a rabbit debate. The subject is the ideal rabbit warren, and the four debaters are Hazel, the Chief Rabbit of the Sandleford warren, General Woundwort, and Cowslip (from the warren maintained by the farmer). The issues for debate include:

- the role of the Owsla
- how to behave toward other animals
- how to avoid elil
- the distribution of flayrah
- any other issues that students can think of

4. Research: The Lives of Rabbits

Now that students have read a fanciful account of rabbit life, they might enjoy doing research to find out what rabbits are really like, using wildlife texts, encyclopedias, and R. M. Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit*. Have students work independently or in groups to write a factual description of rabbit life. Here are some questions they should consider:

- Where do they like to live?
- How do they relate to one another?
- What relationships do they have with other animals?
- How does real rabbit life compare with rabbit life in the novel?

MEET THE WRITER

Richard Adams (1920–) became a writer almost by accident. To amuse his daughters on a long car trip, he began telling them an adventure story with rabbits as the heroes—the story that became *Watership Down* (1972), Adams's first and most acclaimed novel. Adams's concern for the environment is evident in all of his books, which include *Shardik* (1974), a mythical tale about a giant bear, and *The Plague Dogs* (1977), the story of two dogs' daring escape from a laboratory. Adams has received many honors for his writing, including the Guardian Award for children's literature (1972), the Carnegie Medal (1972), and the California Young Readers' Association Medal (1977).

READ ON

George Orwell, *Animal Farm*. A novel—part fable, part allegory, part satire—about a group of animals who take over a farm from its human owners. This barnyard menagerie becomes a mirror of human society.

Homer, *The Odyssey*. A narrative poem, or epic, about the adventures of the hero Odysseus as he journeys home after fighting in the Trojan War.

Leslie Marmon Silko, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." A short story in which old traditions take on new meanings as cultures, customs, and ideas clash.

Lerner and Loewe, *Camelot*. A lighthearted look at another band of heroes, King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.

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