

A GUIDE TO Bearstone

Will Hobbs

“The hurt you get over makes you stronger.”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Bearstone is a contemporary story of the coming of age of an American Indian youth whose inner turmoil is resolved through his love of nature and the paternal guidance of an elderly farmer.

Setting: The mountains of Colorado, near the Continental Divide.

Protagonist: Cloyd Atcitty, a troubled, rebellious fourteen-year-old member of the Ute tribe.

Conflicts: The overall conflict that drives the novel stems from Cloyd’s bitterness over his upbringing in a group home and his yearning for a real father. Almost as important are Cloyd’s love of solitude in the wilderness and his need to learn to live with others.

Resolution: Cloyd finds in Walter, the rancher who befriends him, the father he needs. On the ranch with Walter, Cloyd reconciles his longing for the wild, isolated life in the mountains with his longing for love.

Themes: Forgiveness and compassion can conquer anger and hatred; a love of nature and animals can inspire a deeper understanding of human relationships.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no problems to students reading at the middle school level. There is no violence and no offensive language or situations. The novel ends happily for everyone involved, with compassion and forgiveness triumphing over anger and bitterness.

BACKGROUND

Navajos. An American Indian people of present-day northwestern New Mexico and the adjacent part of Arizona.

Utes. An American Indian people of present-day Colorado and Utah who speak a language related to that of the Aztecs.

Roan. A base color (usually red, black, or brown) dulled and lightened by a blending of white hairs; also, a horse with a roan-colored coat.

Continental Divide. The ridge of the Rocky Mountains that separates rivers flowing toward the Atlantic from those flowing toward the Pacific.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Cloyd Atcitty, a fourteen-year-old who has grown up bitter, illiterate, and without parents; he must come to terms with the meaning of forgiveness and compassion in nature and in human relationships.

Leeno Atcitty, Cloyd’s father, who lies brain-dead in an Arizona hospital.

Susan James, the concerned housemother of the group home for boys where Cloyd lives.

Walter Landis, the kindly widowed rancher who takes Cloyd in and teaches him about mining, the mountains, and forgiveness; he becomes Cloyd’s father spiritually and emotionally.

Grandmother, Cloyd’s maternal grandmother, a Ute steeped in the ancient traditions of her people.

Rusty, a crusty, sardonic outfitter who hunts down and kills a grizzly bear, a blasphemy against the American Indian traditions that Cloyd cherishes.

PLOT

Chapter 1. Cloyd was taken care of as a child by his grandmother in Utah and never knew his father. As the novel opens, he has run away from a Ute group home in Colorado to look for his father, Leeno Atcitty, a patient in an Indian hospital in Arizona. Cloyd enters the hospital room and is shocked to find a mummylike figure attached to numerous tubes. The nurse tells Cloyd that the patient—his father—has been brain-dead for four years as a result of a car accident. Terrified by his father’s appalling condition, Cloyd quickly turns and leaves.

Chapter 2. Cloyd wants to stay with his grandmother in Utah for the summer, but the housemother at the boys’ home, Susan James, afraid he would not get enough discipline there, takes him to a Colorado ranch owned by a friend, an old widower named Walter. As Cloyd and Susan drive up to the gate, Cloyd seizes his last chance at freedom and runs off into the bushes. Atop a boulder he overhears Susan explaining his background

to Walter: He's failed all his courses at the group home; his mother died when he was born; then his father disappeared, leaving him to be raised by his maternal grandmother in Utah, where he missed four years of school roaming the canyons, "half wild," herding his grandmother's goats. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the reader to the major **characters** and their **setting**.

Chapter 3. Cloyd climbs a steep slope and is impressed with Walter's herd of horses and the rugged beauty of the surrounding cliffs and mountains, knowing that his ancestors once lived in those hills. He begins to think he might stay here, after all. Exploring a cave, he finds the remains of an Indian infant and a two-inch turquoise stone in the shape of a bear—the most important animal to the Utes, according to his grandmother, who remembers the old ways and believed in their power. Feeling the force of destiny in his discovery, Cloyd is filled with new-found power and dubs himself "Lone Bear." He keeps the bearstone in his pocket as his talisman and runs back down the mountain. Here a **theme** is introduced: Cloyd's belief in the sacredness of nature and animals. **Conflict** is foreshadowed: Cloyd's eventual confrontation with local bear hunters.

Chapter 4. Cloyd returns to the house and asks Walter why he refers to his ranch as a farm. Walter quotes his wife: "A ranch is like a house, but a farm is a home." Lying in bed that night, clutching his bearstone, Cloyd decides that he likes his new home.

Chapter 5. Cloyd and Walter talk about their pasts: Cloyd says that he was raised by his grandmother, that his sister is in boarding school in Salt Lake City, and that he hasn't seen her for a long time. Walter says that he and his wife never had any children and that he has let his farming tasks slide in the past year because of her death. When Cloyd asks Walter if he likes to go up into the mountains on horseback, Walter says that he's considering reopening his gold mine. They go to look at the horses, and Cloyd immediately picks his favorite: a blue roan who comes over to him when he calls. Walter grabs a horse, too, and together they ride into the hills. The magnificent **setting** of the book is further evoked. Cloyd names his horse Blueboy. On the way back they see a bear with its cub. Exhilarated by the vista, Cloyd vows to work hard for the old man and to eventually ask him to take him up into the mountains.

Chapter 6. The next morning, turning the bearstone in his fingers, Cloyd wonders if his sighting of the bear and cub was a mere accident. At breakfast Walter gives Cloyd a project: building a fence to keep out a neighbor who claims to be a big-game guide and leads hunters across Walter's property in four-wheel-drive vehicles that tear up his field. Cloyd gets to work and begins a routine that occupies him all through June: digging holes for the posts during the day, and in the evening riding Blueboy and listening to Walter's stories about life in the mountains.

Chapter 7. When Walter suggests that Cloyd take some time off from the post holes, perhaps to spend more time with Blueboy, Cloyd bristles, thinking that Walter expects him to fail. So Cloyd finishes the post holes quickly and then insists on learning how to use the chain saw so that he can start on the posts. Impressed by his determination, Walter obliges him but worries that Cloyd is overworked. Working feverishly on the posts, Cloyd still falls short of his goal of finishing the fence as June ends. He feels like a failure and yearns to return to his home in Utah. He receives a letter from his sister but, ashamed of his illiteracy, cannot bring himself to ask Walter to read it to him. Finally, at dinner one evening he confesses that he can't read the letter. Spurning Walter's offer to read it, he storms off, humiliated.

Chapter 8. A party of hunters pulls up to the farm, and Walter introduces Cloyd to the flinty red-haired outfitter, Rusty, whose condescending attitude angers Cloyd. Concerned that the hunters will hunt down and kill the bear he saw, he rubs his bearstone and wishes that he could go home. He glares angrily at Walter, who has given the hunters permission to go after the bear. Cloyd's vow of vengeance on Walter if the bear is harmed underscores his **conflict** with Walter and the hunters. That night, Cloyd begins packing his duffel bag, thinking that he has angered Walter and outworn his welcome.

Chapter 9. The next morning Cloyd is surprised when Walter greets him cheerfully. Cloyd offers to continue working on the fence posts. He sees the hunting party return with a bear strapped atop one of the horses, and his **conflict** with Walter and the hunters erupts. Enraged by the sight of the dead bear, he takes the chain saw and saws through twenty-two of Walter's beloved peach trees. Then, contemplating the posts he erected, he realizes that their only purpose is to keep people and animals from roaming the land freely, as he had done in Utah. He razes half the posts and then staggers off toward the mountains, sinking ever deeper into despair and remorse over his destructive frenzy. Though he did not like his teachers at the home, he does like Walter, and now he thinks Walter will want to send him away.

Chapter 10. That evening, when Cloyd returns to the house, an enraged Walter takes Cloyd's prized bearstone and prepares to smash it with his hammer. He relents but tells Cloyd to clear out of the house. Late that night, as he drives Cloyd to the group home, Walter asks to see the bearstone again. Examining it closely for the first time, Walter realizes that Cloyd cut down the peach trees after the hunters returned from the bear hunt. He then offers to take Cloyd home to Utah rather than back to the group home. Arriving at his grandmother's house, Cloyd is unable to express his deep feelings for Walter and just waves goodbye. As the truck pulls away, he begins weeping. He tells his grandmother about Walter: "He's the best man I ever knew." All at once he realizes that he must return to Walter, and he sets out to hitchhike back to the ranch.

Chapter 11. Back home, Walter chastises himself for having failed Cloyd, for having given him only work when what he really needed was a home. Cloyd returns to the ranch and the two exchange apologies. Walter tells Cloyd that there will be no more farm chores; he's going to lease out the farm and try to live the dream of reopening his mine in the mountains.

Chapter 12. Cloyd and Walter wake up early to pack supplies for the trek into the mountains. On the way Walter stops at his wife's grave, and Walter and Cloyd speculate on life after death. Cloyd tells Walter how he found the bearstone and reveals to Walter his secret name, Lone Bear.

Chapter 13. Early the next morning they set off again, coming upon a sign that reads "Weminuche Wilderness Area. No motorized vehicles beyond this point." Cloyd says that his family comes from the Weminuche branch of the Utes. Observing Blueboy, Cloyd asks Walter if it's true, as Rusty told him in their last encounter, that horses really don't get emotionally attached to their masters. Walter isn't sure, but Cloyd murmurs affectionately to Blueboy, who seems to respond. Cloyd's growing attachment to Blueboy anticipates his growing ability to open up emotionally to Walter, an important **theme** of the book.

Chapter 14. After resting for two days, they set out for the mine. Along the way Cloyd sees a great peak and realizes at once "he'd found what he'd been looking for." Walter identifies it as the Rio Grande Pyramid, the point of origin of the Rio Grande River. He says that someone saw a grizzly bear up there ten years ago, but the last authenticated grizzly was killed more than thirty years ago; it's now illegal to kill them. As Walter discusses the search for a fissure vein in the mountain, Cloyd recalls that the Utes were driven out of the mountains when the white men discovered gold in them, a reminder of Cloyd's **conflicts** with Walter and the hunters. Walter tells Cloyd that they will have to drill by hand to make holes for the dynamite.

Chapter 15. They spend three days clearing the entrance of the mine. After a week of drilling, they set off the dynamite and discover that the blast has cleared out only four feet and has not yielded any good ore. Cloyd is demoralized at the prospect of another round of tedious drilling, but Walter, obsessed with the gold, is eager to push on with the second round of drilling, forgetting that he had wanted to introduce Cloyd to the mountains. He then offers to continue the work alone and sends Cloyd to Rio Grande Pyramid with Blueboy.

Chapter 16. Cloyd, atop Blueboy, sets off for the mountain with a packhorse in tow. Detouring to ride into a spectacular rock formation, Cloyd and Blueboy must cross a bog. Blueboy hesitates, but Cloyd coaxes him on. The horse falls into the deep mud, and restraining his instinct to kick, which might have crushed Cloyd's skull, Blueboy slides down a steep slope.

Horried, Cloyd scrambles after him and discovers that the horse is unharmed. Back at camp, Cloyd rebukes himself for risking his own life and Blueboy's and begins to have misgivings about his quest to climb the mountain. The next morning, he vows to see it through and pushes to the very peak of the Pyramid. Suffused with an exalted peace, Cloyd wishes Walter could be there to share the moment so that he could show he cares for Walter as a son cares for a father. Recalling an ancient Ute ceremony his grandmother taught him, he holds up the bearstone and offers it "in turn to the Four Directions, then to the Earth and the Sky."

Chapter 17. On his way down Cloyd sees a huge brown bear, which rears back and then runs off. His heart pounding, Cloyd runs after it but can't find it. Returning to camp, he is distressed to find Walter sitting over coffee with Rusty. He halfheartedly tells them about the bear, fearing that Rusty will go hunting for it. Rusty greets the story with scornful disbelief, embarrassing Cloyd and angering Walter. Fearful of Rusty's intentions, Cloyd vows to undo his mistake.

Chapter 18. The novel reaches its **climax** as Cloyd sneaks out at night in hopes of intercepting Rusty. He spots him riding up the Pine trail and follows him on foot. As Cloyd watches him string his bow, he looks for a place from which he can observe Rusty without being seen. Meanwhile, Walter goes by himself to the mine to set off another dynamite blast.

Chapter 19. Later in the day, as storm clouds gather, Cloyd spots Rusty in hot pursuit of the bear. He then sees three riders in bright yellow rainslickers—evidently Rusty's brothers, who are competing with Rusty for capture of the bear. When Cloyd spots Rusty stalking in a crouch nearby, he shouts desperately—but against the wind, so neither Rusty nor the bear hears him. The bear takes two arrows—one in the neck, a second in the chest—and then goes roaring toward his attacker before collapsing. After basking in his brothers' congratulations, Rusty realizes that he has killed a grizzly, a crime punishable by a fine of one hundred thousand dollars and a year in jail. It could also cost him his hunting license and therefore his livelihood. Rusty decides to report the killing but claim it was self-defense. Cloyd, who has overheard the brothers' conversation, approaches the bear when they have departed and begs its forgiveness.

Chapter 20. Back at the mining camp, Cloyd notices that Walter's sleeping bag is empty. Rushing into the mine, he finds Walter unconscious and bleeding at the end of the tunnel, injured by the dynamite blast. As he drags Walter to the tent, he sees a helicopter coming to retrieve the bear carcass. He mounts Blueboy and races toward the landing helicopter. Desperately waving his arms, Cloyd catches the occupants' attention and tells them about Walter. Rusty looks genuinely concerned and promises to take care of Blueboy as Cloyd takes off to tend to Walter. When the game warden asks Cloyd

how he knew they were there, Cloyd considers betraying Rusty, but peering down at the ravaged peach trees, he realizes he has had enough of revenge. He says nothing, rejecting revenge and reaching a **resolution** of his inner conflict and bitterness.

Chapter 21. When Cloyd sees Walter at the hospital, he tells him that he wants to give him the bearstone. Walter is deeply touched. Cloyd begins school in September and tells Walter that he has a special teacher to teach him to read. He learns that Walter will be disabled for a long time and may have to give up the farm. He resolves to move to the farm to help Walter, but Susan James tells him that because of his improved attitude the tribe has decided to take him back. When Cloyd says he wants to live with Walter, Susan asks him to think it over carefully. Reflecting on the bearstone, the peach trees, the mine, and the Rio Grande Pyramid, Cloyd realizes that Walter has become the father he has always longed for, and he knows he must stay with Walter.

Chapter 22. Walter's leg is still in a cast, so he offers instruction and encouragement to Cloyd as they work together on the farm. After lunch one afternoon a truck bearing the words "Durango Hardware and Nursery" pulls up to the house. Cloyd glows with pleasure as the driver hands Walter seedlings for twenty-two peach trees.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is its spectacular natural **setting** in the mountains of Colorado. The conflicts in the story are directly connected with that setting: As Cloyd wages his battle against bitterness, he slowly develops compassion based on the love of nature that comes from his people's ancient traditions. (The novel is an excellent adjunct to courses in geography, geology, or biology or to social studies courses on American Indian culture and history.)

1. Investigating the Historical and Geographical Background

Young readers might ask, "Is Cloyd's life a typical one for American Indians in that part of the country?" That question could lead to an investigation of several features of the novel's setting and background:

- family life in American Indian cultures
- control over young American Indians by the tribe
- animistic religious beliefs of American Indian tribes

2. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend ideas in the novel:

- What forms of prejudice do American Indians still face today?
- How many American Indians still live on reservations? Does that way of life help or hinder them in their quest for equality?
- What can contemporary American society learn from traditional American Indian belief in the sacredness of nature?

MEET THE WRITER

Will Hobbs (1947–), a graduate of Stanford University, is a former teacher who now writes full time from his home in Durango, Colorado, where he enjoys backpacking with his family on the Continental Divide.

READ ON

Robert Lipsyte, *The Brave*. Bored with life on the reservation, Sonny runs off to New York City, where he finds nothing but trouble. Fortunately, Sgt. Albert Brooks believes in him and wants to help him realize his dream of becoming a champion boxer.

Sandra Markle, *The Fledgling*. Kate runs away to North Carolina to find a grandfather she didn't know she had. He turns out to be a Cherokee who initially spurns her.

Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*. Brian Robeson, on the way to visit his father, is still reeling from his parents' divorce when the pilot suffers a heart attack and Brian has to land the plane by himself. He now must survive in the Canadian wilderness, armed only with a hatchet and his ingenuity.

Maya Angelou, "Mrs. Flowers" from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. An autobiographical account that paints a portrait of the woman who taught the author "lessons in living."

Borden Deal, "Antaeus." A famous short story about a country boy whose love for nature and the earth is so great that he creates a garden on a tar roof in the middle of a city.

Mary Whitebird, "Ta-Na-E-Ka." A well-known short story about a girl who applies the traditions of her Kaw ancestors to her daily life in creative, up-to-date ways.

Laurence Yep, "We Are All One." A folk tale that teaches the importance of kindness and concern for everything in nature, no matter how small and seemingly inconsequential.

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