

Study Guide prepared by
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Barter Playwright-in-Residence

Where the Red Fern Grows

Adapted by Brian Guehring from the novel by Wilson Rawls

*Especially for Grades 3-10

By the Barter Players, Barter Smith Theatre Fall, 2023

(NOTE: standards are included for reading the novel *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, seeing a performance of the play, and completing the study guide.)

Virginia SOLs

English – 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 3.9, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 4.9, 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.9, 7.1, 7.2, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.9, 8.1, 8.2, 8.4, 8.5, 8.7, 8.9, 9.1, 9.3, 9.4, 9.6, 9.8, 10.1, 10.3, 10.4, 10.6, 10.8

Theatre Arts – 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.17, 6.18, 6.21, 7.6, 7.7, 7.18, 7.20, 8.5, 8.12, 8.18, 8.22, TL.10, TL.11, TL.13, TL.17, TH.6, TH.9, TH.12, TH.15, TH.17

Tennessee/North Carolina Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts – Reading Literature: 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 5.1, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6, 6.1, 6.4, 6.6, 6.7, 6.10, 7.1, 7.4, 7.6, 7.7, 7.10, 8.1, 8.4, 8.6, 8.7, 8.10, 9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.7, 9-10.10

English Language Arts – Writing: 3.1, 3.3, 3.7, 4.1, 4.3, 4.7, 4.9, 5.1, 5.3, 5.7, 5.9, 6.1, 6.4, 6.6, 6.7, 6.9, 7.1, 7.3, 7.7, 7.9, 8.1, 8.3, 8.7, 8.9, 9-10.1, 9-10.3, 9-10.7, 9-10.9

TCAPS

Theatre – 3.6.1, 3.6.4, 3.7.1, 3.7.2, 4.6.1, 4.6.4, 4.7.1, 4.7.2, 5.6.1, 5.6.4, 5.7.1, 5.7.2

Theatre 6-8 – 3.2, 6.2, 7.1 **Theatre 9-12** – 1.3, 7.1, 7.2

North Carolina Essential Standards

Theatre Arts – 3.A.1, 3.AE.1, 3.CU.2, 4.A.1, 4.AE.1, 5.A.1, 5.AE.1, 6.A.1, 6.AE.1, 7.A.1, 7.AE.1, 8.A.1, 8.AE.1, 8.CU.2, B.A.1, B.AE.1, B.CU.2, I.A.1, I.AE.1

Setting

A farm in the Ozark Mountains, early 1900's...



Characters

Billy Colman – A 12-year-old boy

Papa – Billy’s father; a farmer

Mama – Billy’s overprotective mother

Grandpa – owner of the town store

Old Dan – a coon dog, aggressive

Little Ann – a coon dog, playful

Station Master’s Wife

Head Judge – judges championship

Raccoons

Mountain Lion



Note: Cast Size and Doubling of Actors

In this production of *Where the Red Fern Grows*, we will be using six actors; some actors will be playing two roles. Doubling of actors requires distinction between characters. In this production, characters will be distinguished by costume, voice and other physical character traits.

Vocabulary Words

sacred

legend

patient

kennel

depot

horehound

desperate

determination

intend

outskirts

aggressive

courage

championship

depend

ringtail

treed

will power

scarecrow

limber

devotion

torture

bottoms

mysterious

hogtie

slick

paralyzed

miracle

metallic

gurgling

fame

jackpot

celebration

loyalty

Define each of the vocabulary words listed above then write sentences using them. Remember: anyone reading your sentence should be able to understand the word from the context in which it is used.

Synopsis

Billy Colson is a young boy living with his parents on a farm in the Ozark Mountains. One day Billy hears a coon dog baying, and he determines from that moment on to get two coon dogs of his own. When he asks his father, he reminds Billy that they are too poor to afford the cost. Billy's mother encourages Billy to pray for what he wants, but Billy isn't sure God exists. His mother explains that the existence of a red fern is proof of God's existence; she then recounts the legend of two Cherokee children who were pure of heart who got lost in a blizzard and died. When their parents finally found them the next spring, a red fern had grown up between them. The Cherokee had never seen a red fern before, and they considered this spot a sacred place. Billy prayed and prayed, until his grandfather reminded him that "God helps those who help themselves." He encouraged Billy to earn the money for the pups himself. And after working two years of working various jobs, Billy finally has enough. Billy's grandfather helps Billy send away for the



dogs. But instead of being delivered to his farm, the pups are delivered to the train depot 20 miles away. Rather than wait a week for a ride to the depot, Billy decides to walk. He retrieves his yet-unnamed puppies and starts back for home. Night descends and Billy camps in a cave with his two new friends. A mountain lion howls at them all night, and the male pup bays back at it, fiercely protective of his new owner. The next morning, the female pup barks at a tree, upon which are carved the names "Dan" and "Ann." Billy decides to name the dogs Old Dan and Little Ann. The three soon become inseparable, and with the help of his grandfather, Billy trains them to hunt raccoons. Soon Old Dan and Little Ann are out hunting with Billy every night, and Billy is bringing back enough raccoon hides to help his family pay the bills. They hunted in all sorts of weather, and on one winter's night, Little Ann falls through the ice and would have frozen to death if Billy hadn't managed to drag her ashore by her collar. The dogs become so famous that Billy's grandfather decides to enter them into a coon hunting competition. Billy, his father, and his grandfather compete the dogs during a winter storm and despite freezing temperatures, manage to bring in four "ringtails," making them the champions. Billy wins a gold cup, and the three hundred dollar prize money. He and Old Dan and Little Ann continue to hunt when they get home.

One night, they are attacked by a mountain lion. Old Dan and Little Ann fight to protect Billy, and Old Dan dies. Billy and Little Ann are heartbroken. Billy buries Old Dan on a hill overlooking the valley. The next morning, he finds Little Ann with her head resting on Old Dan's grave – she has died of a broken heart. Billy buries Little Ann next to Old Dan. The next spring, using the money Billy and his dogs won, the family decides to leave the farm and move into town. Before they leave, Billy walks up the hill to the graves of Old Dan and Little Ann in order to say goodbye. When he gets there, he sees a red fern growing from the spot between them.



Biography of the Author

Woodrow Wilson Rawls was born on September 24, 1913, in the rural Ozark Mountains near Scrapper, Oklahoma. Because there were no schools nearby, his mother taught him with books she ordered through the mail. Rawls wasn't interested in the "girl stories" he heard, but then his mother read him Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, and his imagination was fired by this story of a man and his dog. As a teenager and young adult, he traveled throughout the country working on construction jobs. During, he began writing stories. Embarrassed by his poor grammar and spelling skills, he kept his efforts locked away in a trunk.



In 1958, Rawls married Sophie Styczinski. When Sophie learned about his stories, she helped him edit one of them, which he then submitted to the *Saturday Evening Post*. The magazine serialized the story in three parts in 1961, calling it "The Hounds of Youth." Later, Doubleday published it as a book titled *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Soon, Rawl's reputation as a storyteller grew to equal that of his idol, Jack London.

Rawl wrote one more book, *Summer of the Monkeys*, which was published before he died in Marshfield, Wisconsin, in 1984.

Biography of the Playwright

Brian Guehring is the playwright-in-residence of the Omaha Theater Company for Young People. He has written plays for professional theater companies to produce



for young audiences, large cast scripts for youth ensembles, and small touring plays to connect to curriculum. His work has been honored by NYU, The Kennedy Center, Nebraska Arts Council, American Alliance for Theater and Education and more. His plays *The Many Disguises of Robin Hood*, *Sherlock Holmes and the First Baker Street Irregular*, *The Brave Little Tailor*, *Stronger than Strong: Great American Tall Tale Heroines*, *King Chemo* and *The Bully Show* are published by Dramatic Publishing Company. Brian was honored by the Children's Theater Foundation with the Orlin Corey Medallion Award in 2017.



A Brief History

Barter Theatre was founded during the Great Depression by Robert Porterfield, an enterprising young actor. He and his fellow actors found themselves out of work and hungry in New York City. Porterfield contrasted that to the abundance of food, but lack of live theatre, around his home region in Southwest Virginia. He returned to Washington County with an extraordinary proposition: bartering produce from the farms and gardens of the area to gain admission to see a play.

Barter Theatre opened its doors on June 10, 1933 proclaiming, “With vegetables you cannot sell, you can buy a good laugh.” The price of admission was 40 cents or the equivalent in produce, the concept of trading “ham for Hamlet” caught on quickly. At the end of the first season, the Barter Company cleared \$4.35 in cash, two barrels of jelly and enjoyed a collective weight gain of over 300 pounds.

Playwrights including Noel Coward, Tennessee Williams and Thornton Wilder accepted Virginia ham as payment for royalties. An exception was George Bernard Shaw, a vegetarian, who bartered the rights to his plays for spinach.

Today, Barter Theatre has a reputation as a theatre where many actors performed before going on to achieve fame and fortune. The most recognized of these alumni include Gregory Peck, Patricia Neal, Ernest Borgnine, Hume Cronyn, Ned Beatty, Gary Collins, Larry Linville and Frances Fisher. The list also included James Burrows, creator of *Cheers*, Barry Corbin, and the late Jim Varney.

Robert Porterfield passed away in 1971. His successor, Rex Partington, had been at Barter in the 1950s as an actor and in the 1970s as stage manager. Rex returned as chief administrator from 1972 until his retirement in 1992. In March 2006, he passed away.

Richard Rose was named the Producing Artistic Director in October 1992. During his tenure, attendance grew from 42,000 to more than 163,000 annual patrons. Significant capital improvements were also made, including renovation of the main stage (now Gilliam Stage) in 1995 and the 2006 addition of The Barter Café at Stage II (now the Smith Theatre). Rose retired in December of 2019 and Katy Brown, who had been at Barter since 1998 as the Director of the Barter Players and as an Associate Artistic Director, was named the fourth Producing Artistic Director – and is the first woman to hold the position.

Barter represents two distinct venues of live theatre: Barter Theatre’s Gilliam Stage, and Barter’s Smith Theatre. Gilliam Stage, with over 500 seats, features traditional theatre in a luxurious setting. Barter’s Smith Theatre offers seating for 167 around a thrust stage in an intimate setting and is perfect for more adventurous productions. Barter Theatre is also home to The Barter Players, a talented ensemble of actors who produce plays for young audiences throughout the year.

History is always in the making at Barter Theatre, building on legends of the past; Barter looks forward to the challenge of growth in the future.

Questions/Activities

1. What is a coon dog? How did the coon dog get its name? Why does Billy want two coon dogs? What does he plan to do with them and why? **Discuss.**



This story is set in the Ozark Mountains in the early twentieth century. How would this story be different if Billy grew up in Chicago? The grasslands of Nebraska? What if this story took place in the 1970's, when most Americans had access to phones and automobiles? **Discuss how time and place affect story.**

2. In this story, a legend revolves around the red fern tree. What is it? How does that legend compare to the legend of the dogwood? The legend of the ash tree (Great Britain)? Why do you think people attach special meaning to plants and trees? **Discuss.**

3. What is your favorite scene from *Where the Red Fern Grows*? **Illustrate this scene** using paint, markers, colored pencils, pen and ink, charcoal, colored paper, photographic collage, etc. **Be prepared to explain to the class** why this scene is your favorite.



4. **Write a letter to your favorite actors** from this production. Tell them what you liked about the play, their performance, etc. Mail your letters to:

The Barter Players
c/o Barter Theatre
P.O. Box 867
Abingdon, VA 24212-0867
ATTN: Where the Red Fern Grows

5. In the northwest corner of Alabama you will find the Key Underwood Coon Dog Memorial Graveyard, a cemetery exclusively used for coon dogs. Every dog buried there has a marker with an epitaph written on it.

epitaph: a phrase written in memory of something or someone who has died

For example, an epitaph for a coon dog named Black Ranger reads “He was as good as the best, and better than the rest.” **As Billy, write epitaphs for Old Dan and Little Ann.** Remember to include the traits that made them special.



personification: *a literary device in which human traits are given to non-human objects.*

6. Personification is used throughout every great story. Phrases like “the trees danced” allow us to identify – to visualize – the behavior of non-human objects. Using the book as a guide, **cite examples of Wilson Rawls’ use of personification in *Where the Red Fern Grows*.**

7. Because Billy’s parents are poor, Billy is forced to earn the money for his coon dogs himself. How do you think this affected his relationship with the dogs? What do we appreciate more – things we are given, or things we have worked for? Is there anything you wanted that you had to save for yourself? How long did it take? Was I worth it? **Discuss.**

8. Many folks question Billy’s abilities in the coon dog championships because he is so young. How did this make Billy feel? How does it make you feel when an adult questions your ability to do something because of your age? **Discuss.**

9. Characters in a play always have a reason for doing what they do – this is called their “motivation.” **Make a list of all the characters in *Where the Red Fern Grows* and next to each name write down that character’s motivation.** Compare your list with the rest of the class. Are all the motivations the same? Is it possible for a character to have more than one motivation? **Discuss.**

From the Page to the Stage!

How does a book become a stage play? Here are some of the elements that went into the Barter Players' production of *Where the Red Fern Grows...*

1. Script

It all starts here. A playwright (in this case, Brian Guehring) turns the prose of literature into dialogue and dramatic action. This is called "adapting". Sound easy? **Try it yourself!** Pick a scene from your favorite story and adapt it into a scene for the stage. Try not to use the narrative voice – focus instead on creating "dialogue" between the characters.

2. Director/Actors

The director and actors begin the rehearsal process. The director "blocks" the play, which means he tells the actors where to move and stand and sit. The actors work on learning their lines, finding their character's motivation and creating the world of the play. The length of a rehearsal process for a Barter Player production ranges from 30 – 40 hours spread out over 3-4 weeks, depending on the play.

3. Set Design

The set designer designs a set that will not only serve the aesthetic needs of the production by creating visuals that represent the various locations in the story (i.e. the woods, the store, the depot) but also function as a safe environment upon which the actors will move (or be moved). A good set design will also allow the action to flow from one scene to another smoothly, with seamless transitions. **Try it yourself!** Using the scene you adapted, design a set that will both visually serve the story and function effectively for the actors.

4. Costumes/Wigs

The costume designer is responsible for creating a different look for each character while maintaining the overall aesthetic of the production. Each actor's costume must be tailored to fit and be built to take the wear-and-tear of 6 shows a week! Also, in a show where the actor is required to play more than one character, the design must incorporate a method to facilitate "quick changes".

The wig designer is responsible for designing, building and styling the wigs that will appear in the show. Like the costumes, wigs are necessary to help distinguish characters. **Try it yourself!** Design a costume/wig for the character in your scene. Make sure your costume includes a mechanism to make "quick changes possible."

5. Props

The money Billy earns! Billy's ax! Grandpa's rifle! These are a few examples of the props designed and built by Barter's props department for this production. A **prop** is defined as an object used on stage by actors for use in the plot of a theatrical production. **Try it yourself!** Design and build the props you will need for your scene.

6. Lights/Sound

Lights not only illuminate the actors and pull focus to various spots on the stage but, together with sound, help create a mood. Lights and sound can also, along with the set, help establish location. The sound of hounds baying, the moonlight through the trees and voila! We are hunting with Billy and his dogs! **Try it yourself!** Put together a soundtrack for your scene that establishes place and mood. Feel free to use recorded music/sound effects or perform it live!

7. Stage Manager

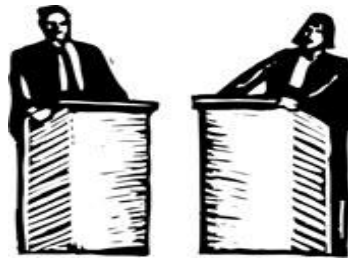
The Stage Manager attends all the rehearsals and once the show goes into production, is "in charge", calling all the sound and light cues and maintaining the integrity of the piece during its run.

10. Billie Colson is a young boy when we meet him. Other famous male literary characters of that age include Tom Sawyer (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*), Mowgli (*The Jungle Book*) and Harry Potter (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*). **Compare and contrast** the adventures Billy takes with his dogs to the adventures Tom, Mowgli, and Harry take in their various stories. What traits do these literary figures have in common? What makes them different? **Discuss.**

11. Describe the set used for the Barter Players' production of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. How realistic was it? How were the set pieces used to convey place? Time? Mood? **Discuss.**

12. After reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* and seeing the play, compare the passage of time in each. How much time elapses between the opening scene of the book and the last page? Does the same amount of time pass in the play? How is the passing of time handled in the play? **Discuss the difference between dramatic action and exposition.** Does this explain why time may seem "collapsed" in a theatrical adaptation of a novel?

13. At the end of the play, Billy and his family leave the farm and move to town. Do you think Billy will be happy there? **Is it better to live in the country or in the city (town)? Divide the class into two teams and debate this topic.** Support your position with stories from newspapers, magazines, books, etc. What was Wilson Rawl's opinion on the subject?



14. When Billy's pups are delivered to the train depot miles and miles away, Billy walks to pick them up without telling his parents. The Station Master's Wife tries to convince Billy to spend the night; instead he opts to camp out in a cave, where a mountain lion stalks them all night long. Pick between the characters of Billy, Mama, and the Station Master's Wife. **Write a journal entry as that character the night Billy spends in the cave.** Compare your journal's entries with those made by the other characters. **Discuss how point-of-view influences the documenting of an event.**

Be Descriptive!

Read Wilson Rawl's description of Billy's home in the Ozark Mountains...

"Mama had picked the spot for our log house. It nestled at the edge of the foothills in the mouth of a small canyon, and was surrounded by a grove of huge red oaks. Behind our house one could see miles and miles of the mighty Ozarks. In the spring the aromatic scent of the wildflowers, redbuds, papaws, and dogwoods, drifting on the wind current, spread over the valley and around our home. Below our fields, twisting and winding, ran the clear blue waters of the Illinois River. The banks were cool and shady. The rich bottom land near the river was studded with tall sycamores, birches, and box elders..."



Students:

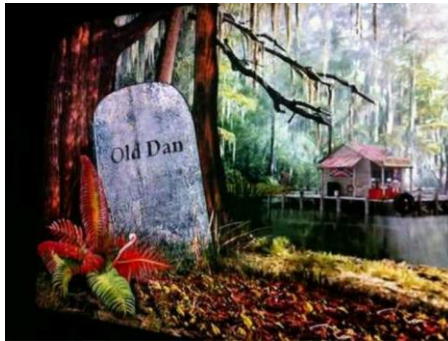
Find a picture of a person, place or thing from a magazine and **write a description of him/her/it in your own words.** Be as descriptive as possible.

Teacher:

Number the pictures and place them on one wall of the classroom. Give the students copies of the descriptions and see if they are able to match them to the appropriate picture!

Write a critique of The Barter Player's production of *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Be sure to include descriptions and analyses of the individual performances, the directing/staging choices, and the design elements (costume, set, props, & sound). Why do you think some of these artistic choices were made? How would you have done it differently?



How did the play compare to the novel? How do the structural elements of a play (using dialogue and action to tell the story) differ from that of prose? Discuss.

In this play, some of the actors has to change quickly from playing character to character. What movements, gestures, and other forms of physical expression did she use to accomplish these changes? Did you think they were effective?

How were costumes used? **Discuss.**

Define *comedy* and *tragedy*.

Is *Where the Red Fern Grows* a comedy or a tragedy? **Cite three samples from the book to support your position.** How much does a character's point-of-view determine whether an event is comic or tragic? **Discuss.**



Word Search

Find the following words in the puzzle below: **Billy, ringtail, puppy love, Ozark Mountains, Old Dan, Little Ann, Grandpa, depot, mountain lion, raccoons, coon dog, Wilson Rawls, hunt, championship, gold cup, devotion, red fern, tracking, sacred, legend**

W T P Q L I A T G N I R J S G
G I R U D N E G E L D O Q N O
U R L A C E R E D F E R N I D
F V A S C D S D S T P M C A N
E Y W N O K L N M M O K K T O
N V R L D N I O O D T I I N O
O S O N P P R N G O M G B U C
I A W L J L A A G O C I T O W
T C K U Y D V P W Y L C V M H
O R Q W D P M U W L I Q A K U
V E M L K W P M Y S S E V R N
E D O D A E I U Y F M U Z A T
D P I H S N O I P M A H C Z D
L I T T L E A N N K Z I Y O Q
N O I L N I A T N U O M Z Q L

True and False

Write **T** if the statement is **True** and **F** if the statement is **False**.

1. ____ *Where the Red Fern Grows* is a novel written by Wilson Rawls.
2. ____ Billy can't wait to leave the mountains and move into town.
3. ____ Billy's father works two years to earn the money to buy Billy his pups.
4. ____ Billy's grandfather owns a store in town.
5. ____ Billy's mother tells him the legend of the red fern.
6. ____ Brian Guehring is the Producing Artistic Director of Barter Theatre.
7. ____ Old Dan and Little Ann fight unless they're hunting.
8. ____ A ringtail is another name for a mountain lion.
9. ____ Billy and his dogs win the coon hunting championship.
10. ____ While on the trail of a coon, Little Ann breaks through the ice.
11. ____ Billy's father walks miles and miles to pick up the pups.
12. ____ After little Ann is killed, Old Dan dies of a broken heart.
13. ____ Billy's grandfather helps Billy train his dogs.
14. ____ The sacredness of the red fern is an old Scottish legend.

Matching

Draw a line connecting the noun with its corresponding description.

- | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Old Dan | a. falls through ice |
| 2. Little Ann | b. playwright |
| 3. Mama | c. owns a store in town |
| 4. Papa | d. hardworking farmer |
| 5. Wilson Rawls | e. killed by mountain lion |
| 6. Billy | f. Producing Artistic Director |
| 7. Katy Brown | g. author |
| 8. Brian Guehring | h. dreams of life in town |
| 9. Grandpa | i. infected with puppy love |

Suggested Further Reading

Old Yeller by Fred Gipson

The Incredible Journey by Sheila Burnford

Call of the Wild by Jack London

White Fang by Jack London

Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Big Red by Jim Kjelgaard

Lassie Come Home by Eric Knight

Sunder by Willima H. Armstrong

Because of Winn-Dixie by Kate DiCamillo

