



*Leading a Discussion on  
Watership Down*

*Mary Frances Loughran*



Cana Academy® Guide

LEADING A DISCUSSION ON  
*WATERSHIP DOWN*

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*Nuthanger Farm*

### ***WATERSHIP DOWN***

Richard Adams (1920-2016)

Grade Level: 7- 9

471 pages

ISBN: 978-0-7432-7770-9

Recommended hours: 17

### **INTRODUCTION**

“I want to emphasize that *Watership Down* was never intended to be some sort of allegory or parable. It is simply the story about rabbits made up and told in the car” (Introduction, xvi). So says Richard Adams about his classic tale of adventure and friendship. Adam’s daughters convinced him to put pen to paper and to publish what had developed into a full-length story of an extraordinary group of rabbits who, having escaped a warren doomed for destruction, make their way in the wider world. Joined by others along the way, the group benefits from the unique skills of each of its members. The friendships developed, insights gained, and exciting exploits carried out by the band make for a gripping story full of endearing characters making their way to a better life. Interspersed throughout are the tales of El-ahrairah, their legendary hero. Stories within the story, these tales further reveal the attitudes, sentiments, hopes and fears of the rabbits. While Adams may have intended to write nothing more than a simple story about rabbits, *Watership Down* offers a richly layered and enduring story that raises important issues for discussion.

This guide includes the following:

- A brief biography of Richard Adams
- Getting started: practical advice for teachers on how to approach this text and on how to use this guide
- A glossary of terms
- Discussion questions
- Broader questions suitable for larger discussions and writing assignments

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Born in Wash Common, England, in 1920, Richard Adams attended Worcester College, Oxford to study modern history. Two years into his studies, he was called upon to serve in the British Army. Although he served in multiple locations throughout the war, Adams did not see direct combat during his six years of military enlistment.

Upon leaving the service, he returned to Worcester College, completing his degree over the following two years. Graduating in 1948, Adams married in 1949 and found employment with the British Civil Service, where he continued working until he retired in 1974 to focus exclusively on writing. He had completed his MA in 1953. He and his wife had two daughters to whom he began to tell the stories that became his first successful novel, *Watership Down*.

## **GETTING STARTED: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR THE TEACHER**

First and foremost, *Watership Down* is an adventure story with all of the attendant features of such a tale: formidable challenges, finely drawn characters, and expansive and breathtaking descriptions of nature. Teachers should dwell on all of these elements in discussion, and many of the questions included in this guide will help the students imagine the setting and the unique character of each member of the adventurous band of rabbits.

In addition to these elements, teachers should help students notice the features of the various rabbit communities the explorers encounter in their search for a new warren: Sandleford, Cowslip's warren, Efrafa, and Nuthanger Farm. The students will notice the effects of each of these arrangements on the rabbits and how each situation reinforces or changes the fundamental rabbit nature. Reflection upon and discussion of these departures from nature are crucial in understanding the character of these places. Furthermore, the journey of Hazel and company requires, at times, deviations from their natural inclinations, habits, and practices. Adams has been deliberate in his study of rabbits, noting the characteristic instincts of rabbits and their habits while leaving room for such departures from what is considered normal or instinctual. Necessity truly is the mother of invention for this indomitable little band.

From the start, students should be directed to make notes on the individual characters, developing an index of references so they can paint a fuller picture of each personality. The budding relationships that grow among the rabbits can also be noted in this manner. Each comes to rely on the others' gifts, and, in doing so, they develop bonds of friendship which become the foundation for a new community of rabbits.

Teachers will also need to direct the students' attention to the lovely descriptions throughout. The teacher should provide pictures, refer to the map at the beginning of the book, and read some of the longer descriptions aloud to the students. In this way, the students will see, hear, and feel the seasons as experienced by the rabbits on the Down.

The three dialects included may also require the assistance of the teacher. Reading aloud the conversations between the rabbits and Kehaar and those with the mouse will facilitate better understanding of what is being discussed.

Finally, interwoven with the plot, the tales of El-ahrairah's exploits fill out the picture of rabbit life, including their myths and origins as well as their aspirations.

## **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

Most students can read roughly twenty-five to thirty pages of this book in an hour. This book is divided into four parts. We have further divided these parts into sections, including the number of chapters suitable for a one hour reading assignment. Depending on the amount of class time available for discussion, teachers may decide to have students read more than one of these sections or even an entire part before discussion. To make this determination, the teacher may want to review the questions, as some sections will have more material for discussion than others.

Some discussion questions will lead the students to imagine more fully the world of the story. By eliciting concrete details and by directing students to consult the glossary and map, these questions will encourage the students to imagine the setting, action and characters they meet. Other questions will suggest more substantive topics for reflection and discussion. (Please see the Cana Classical Guide *Teaching Fiction from the Inside Out* for a more detailed explanation of the principles that inform this approach.) We have included only a few questions that address the epigrams with which each chapter begins. Teachers should, of course, feel free to include more such questions.

These discussion questions are not written to test student comprehension, nor are they study questions to be given in advance of discussion. Teachers, picking and choosing from among them, will find them helpful when discussing the story with the students.

It would be a mistake to direct the students to look for specific themes. The teacher may want to encourage students to keep a watchful eye for repeated details, for character development, and for growing relationships. These are opportunities for training students on how to mark a text for later discussion. Since this is an adventure story, students will enjoy being read to

on occasion. We suggest that teachers read aloud chapters containing more complicated plot developments, conversations with foreign dialects, or beautiful descriptions of nature.

Finally, a list of broader questions at the close of this guide should be consulted occasionally since their relevance may arise in the discussions earlier than anticipated. These questions are suitable for both larger discussions and writing assignments.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Whenever possible, the teacher should provide pictures of the Down, the plants and animals that reside there, and any other geographical information that would be helpful for building an imaginative vocabulary. Adams uses real locations as the backdrop for his story. Teachers should be sure to refer students to the map at the beginning of the book.

Adams has developed a vocabulary for the rabbits. The short glossary in the back of the book will help students keep track of these references.

We have included the following glossary for other words that may be unfamiliar to the students.

**Beech hanger:**

A wooded area, in this case of beech trees, located on a slope

**Black-headed gull:**

Migratory bird found all across Europe; reaching fifteen to seventeen inches in length with a thirty-seven to forty inch wingspan and a dark brown head

**Bog asphodel:**

Member of the lily family; yellowish bog flower

**Cathay:**

Historical name for China

**Centaury:**

Low growing thistle-like herb with pink flowers

**Charlock:**

Wild mustard; grows in bunches with small yellow flowers







*Bog asphodel*



*Charlock*



*Cowslip*

**Combe:**

In this context, a large hollow area on the side of a hill

**Cowslip:**

Primrose with fragrant yellow flowers

**Dog's mercury:**

Found in the shade, it is a slightly poisonous perennial with green-toothed leaves

**Down:**

Rolling hill country covered in grass



*Watership Down, Hampshire, England*

**Fleabane:**

Purple flower with an orange center known to drive out fleas

**Fumitory:**

Delicate herbaceous plant with gray leaves and purple spikes

**Larch:**

Deciduous conifer that loses its needles in the fall after turning yellow

**Loosestrife:**

Primrose with yellow flowers

**Lousewort:**

Low growing plant with yellow flowers; incorrectly believed to be a source of lice found on sheep

**Mullein:**

Dense spikes of yellow flowers on tall stems with fuzzy leaves

**Mustelidae:**

Any member of the family of carnivorous mammals that includes minks, badgers, otters and weasels

**Myxomatosis:**

Infectious disease introduced into Britain to reduce the rabbit population

**Pellets:**

Rabbits excrete two kinds of pellets: one pellet containing waste products, another soft pellet that is re-ingested to obtain more nutrients from difficult to digest plants

**Punt:**

Small boat, flat on the bottom, with a square bow; used on the River Thames

**Rabbit traps:**

Although some traps are meant to simply capture a rabbit, the one described in Chapter 17 is meant to kill the captured rabbit using a spiked clamp triggered by a wire; the wire is secured by a long peg buried deep in the ground

**Rabbit warren:**

A network of individual burrows connected by runs



*Rabbit warren*

**Ragged robin:**

Low-growing perennial with pink flowers primarily found in marshy or wet areas

**Red campion:**

Low-growing, flowering plant with clusters of dark pink flowers

**Scrape:**

A hastily scraped out area in the ground providing minimal shelter

**Scut:**

Short tail

**Self-heal:**

Member of the mint family with violet flowers

**Soapwort:**

Five petaled pink flowers that grow on a woody stem

**Stitchwort:**

Also known as stellaria; small flowering plant with white petals

**Sundews:**

Carnivorous plant that grows in bogs and feeds on insects caught in its sticky hairs

**Tormentil:**

A species of potentilla, it is a low growing, bright yellow, flowering plant

**Yellow hammer:**

Species of bunting; yellow in color

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PART I — The Journey

#### Section One

#### Chapters 1 - 7

1. Describe the scene as the story opens. Where are we? What time of year and day is it?
2. Who are the first two rabbits we meet? Describe Hazel and Fiver, including impressions you gather from their conversation. (Begin to keep a list of each of the rabbits by name with page number references for each.) Fiver and Hazel have an exchange with Toadflax. What is the nature of their exchange? What is the Owsla?
3. What is the significance of the posted sign? What is Fiver's dream? What is his track record for predicting future events? How do Hazel, Blackberry and Dandelion each react to Fiver's warnings?
4. Describe Bigwig. Who is the Threarah? How did he earn his position? How does he respond to Fiver's warnings? What happens to Bigwig as a result of the help he gives Fiver and Hazel?
5. At the beginning of Chapter 4, there is a description of how groups move together. Describe the analogies provided for this kind of "telepathic feeling."
6. Add Pipkin, Hawkbit, Buckthorn, Speedwell, Acorn and Silver to the list of rabbits you are compiling. Include descriptions for each as they are introduced. With whom do the departing band scuffle? Where do they go and will Holly follow them?
7. Begin to note the gifts and positions within the company of each of the rabbits. For example, who is the apparent leader? How does this develop? What are some examples of decisions he makes for the company? Who seem to be his close advisors? What visions does Fiver have? When and how are they realized?
8. Who is El-ahrairah? Who is compared to him? Why? What do we learn of El-ahrairah from the first story told about him in Chapter 6?
9. What are some of the unnatural things the rabbits do in these first hours after leaving the warren?
10. After translating the epigram at the beginning of Chapter 7, explain how it relates to the action of this chapter.

## **Section Two**

### **Chapters 8 - 11**

1. Describe the scene and the dilemmas with which the rabbits are faced at the beginning of Chapter 8. What is Fiver's vision? What is Hazel's predicament? Remember to keep track of the characters and what we discover about each: for example, Bigwig's lack of self-concern or Hazel's "sense of adventure and mischief" (40). What does Blackberry discover? What does his discovery reveal about him?
2. Hawkbit, Acorn and Speedwell want to return to Sandleford Warren. Why? How do Hazel and Bigwig respond?
3. Describe Watership Down as it is first seen by Fiver. Immediately, however, Fiver also senses what he describes as a "mist." What is the significance of this vision? Make note of this vision in order to return to it later.

## **Section Three**

### **Chapters 12 - 14**

1. With what analogies does Chapter 12 begin? Explain how these apply to the rabbits.
2. What intelligence has Bigwig gathered regarding their current location? Why does Hazel take Blackberry, and not Bigwig, to greet the stranger? Describe Cowslip. What questions does Fiver pose to Cowslip? In the discussion that evening, what is Fiver's opinion on how they should proceed with respect to Cowslip and his warren? What is decided?
3. Chapter 13 begins with an epigram from Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters." Who are the Lotos-Eaters? Why is this a fitting epigram for this chapter?
4. Describe the strange behavior of the rabbits in Cowslip's warren. (Keep track of other unnatural or peculiar practices taking place in this warren as you continue to read.) What clues about the dangers of this warren are revealed but not fully understood by Hazel and his companions? What is the origin of the strange behaviors and practices? What kinds of questions are interrupted? How do they respond to the suggestion that Hazel provide an account of their adventures since leaving Sandleford Warren?
5. How do rabbits sense their surroundings? How do they communicate?
6. Describe Strawberry and Nildro-hain. What do we learn of them?
7. Where is Fiver? Why? How does Hazel react to Fiver's behavior? What does Bigwig discover?

## **Section Four**

### **Chapters 15 - 17**

1. Tell the “Story of the King’s Lettuce.” Who are Prince Rainbow, King Darzin and Rabscuttle?
2. Continue to note un-rabbit-like behavior. How do Hazel and the others react to these behaviors in Cowslip and the other members of the unnamed warren?
3. Who is the new voice that is heard after the telling of the El-ahrairah tale? What poem does he recite? How does Fiver respond to this vision? Why doesn’t Hazel pay attention to Fiver’s fears?
4. What is Hazel’s dream? What is Fiver’s plan? How do Hazel and Bigwig each respond to Fiver’s decision?
5. What happens to Bigwig? How do each of the rabbits contribute to freeing him from the trap? How do the rabbits in the warren respond to the request for help? Once Bigwig is freed from the trap, what do he and the other rabbits want to do? Who stops them? How and why does Fiver stop them from attacking? What is the story he tells, the “one for El-ahrairah to cry at” (115)?
6. Who joins the company as they leave? What has happened to him that convinces him to leave the warren?

## **PART II — On Watership Down**

### **Section One**

#### **Chapters 18 - 20**

1. Describe Watership Down. Refer to the map at the beginning of the book to see its location and to measure how far the rabbits have come from Sandleford Warren. How long has it been since they left Sandleford? Is that surprising?
2. Recall Fiver’s vision in Chapter 11. What parts of the vision have been realized? What is still unclear or unfulfilled?
3. What has happened to the company of rabbits since leaving the “warren of the snares” (122)? On what does their unity depend? How has Strawberry fared? What is the Honeycomb? Whose idea was it to make such a space in their new warren?
4. How has Bigwig changed since being caught in the trap?
5. Chapter 19 is entitled “Fear in the Dark.” What is the fear encountered in this chapter?
6. Who is Bluebell and what gift does he possess that helped him and Holly survive their journey to Watership Down?

## **Section Two**

### **Chapters 21 - 22**

1. What has happened to Holly? What is the story he tells of the destruction of Sandleford Warren? After ending his tale, Holly says, “It wasn’t I who tried to arrest you, Bigwig—that was another rabbit, long, long ago” (160). What does he mean?
2. Chapter 22 begins, “Rabbits (says Mr. Lockley) are like human beings in many ways. One of these is certainly their staunch ability to withstand disaster and to let the stream of their life carry them along, past reaches of terror and loss” (161). Describe this ability and provide examples of how these rabbits have used this ability.
3. What animal does Hazel help? Why?
4. Describe the full moon as it rises over Watership Down.
5. What is the story of El-ahrairah that Blueberry tells? Why does he tell it?

## **Section Three**

### **Chapters 23 - 24**

1. “Then the whole down and all below it, earth and air, gave way to the sunrise. As a bull, with a slight but irresistible movement, tosses its head from the grasp of a man who is leaning over the stall and idly holding its horn, so the sun entered the world in smooth, gigantic power” (179). Unpack this metaphor. Why is it particularly apt in this story?
2. Who is Kehaar? Describe him as we first meet him and later when he takes flight. Why does Bigwig admire him? Why does Hazel want to befriend him?
3. Why do the other rabbits obey Hazel? How has he established his authority among them?
4. What have the rabbits not thought about until now? Why did they not anticipate this need sooner? What does Kehaar discover that may be of help to them?
5. Who is selected to approach the warren Kehaar discovered? Why is Bigwig not chosen?
6. “A spirit of happy mischief entered into Hazel. He felt as he had on the morning when they crossed the Enborne and he had set out alone and found the beanfield”(197). Is this mischief a natural characteristic of rabbits? Is there evidence within the story to support this claim? What does this spirit of mischief lead Hazel to decide?
7. Describe Nuthanger Farm and the rabbits kept there.
8. What happens in the encounter between Hazel and the cat?

## **Section Four**

### **Chapters 25 - 26**

1. Reread the discussion between Fiver and Hazel regarding Hazel's proposal to raid the farm. What arguments does each use? Why is Fiver so adamantly opposed to Hazel's plan? What does he think is motivating Hazel? Is he right? What is the vision he has of Hazel?
2. Describe what happens at the farm during this raid. What happens on the return to Watership Down? What was Hazel doing when he was injured?
3. What is Fiver's dream?

## **Section Five**

### **Chapters 27 - 29**

1. Safe in the Honeycomb, with Hazel, Fiver and Blackberry absent, Holly tells what happened at Efrafa. Why is this chapter entitled "You Can't Imagine it Unless You've Been There" (229)?
2. What kinds of behavior do the rabbits of Efrafa engage in? Are they natural to rabbits? Who is General Woundwort? Who is Captain Campion? Who is Blackavar? How were Holly and the others treated upon their arrival?
3. Strawberry argues before the Council: "Animals don't behave like men. If they have to fight, they fight; and if they have to kill, they kill. But they don't sit down and set their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them. They have dignity and animality" (237). Unpack this claim and explain how it applies in this situation.
4. What was Holly's plan? Did it work? State what the following refers to: "Lord Frith sent one of his great Messengers to save us from the Efracan Owsla" (240). Why was it "far more frightening than being chased by the Efracans" (241)?
5. What are the names of the rabbits freed from Nuthanger Farm? Describe them.
6. Describe Hazel's injury and his return from the ditch. How is the gunshot removed from his hind leg?
7. About what do Hazel and Fiver speculate after their return from the ditch? What does Fiver think about life and death?
8. What is Hazel's hope regarding Efrafa? What are the obstacles and whom does he entrust with devising a plan?
9. How is the epigram for Chapter 29 a fitting description of what follows? How does Hazel lead the others to accept his proposal? Who is consulted before they agree to the daring proposal?



## **PART III — Efrafa**

### **Section One**

#### **Chapters 30 - 32**

1. What is the state of mind of the rabbits as they set off for Efrafa? Who are the leaders of this band, and how has each earned the trust of the others? What change has come over Bigwig? What accounts for this change? What story does he insist on hearing? Why does he want to hear this story now? Is the plan known to us yet?
2. Describe the country through which they traverse. Using the map at the front of the book, track the rabbits' journey.
3. Tell the "Story of El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inle." Why would Bigwig want to hear this story? In the story, El-ahrairah tells Lord Frith, "I am not angry. But I have learned that with creatures one loves, suffering is not the only thing for which one may pity them. A rabbit who does not know when a gift has made him safe is poorer than a slug, even though he may think otherwise himself" (281). To what is he referring?
4. The epigram for Chapter 32 is translated: "A spirit of rivalry and intelligence preserved, more than once, the English army from defeat" (282). How is this a fitting description of the action in the following chapters?
5. What does Bigwig do that angers Hazel? Why did he do that? What happens in the trees?

### **Section Two**

#### **Chapters 33 - 34**

1. Discuss the numerous ways Kehaar helps the rabbits in the raid on Efrafa.
2. Explain the following: "Although there was no enemy or other danger to be perceived, they felt the apprehension and doubt of those who have come unawares upon some awe-inspiring place where they themselves are paltry fellows of no account...There is nothing that cuts you down to size like coming to some strange and marvelous place where no one even stops to notice that you stare about you" (292-293). What is this feeling? Where are the rabbits when they experience this?
3. What problems need to be solved for this exploit to succeed? Have all the problems been addressed? What do Blackberry and Hazel discuss (298)? Imagine the scene as the rabbits approach and cross the bridge to the river. What do they find there? How will it solve their remaining problem?
4. Describe General Woundwort. What is his history? What system did he establish at Efrafa? Why? What have been some recent challenges experienced at Efrafa?

5. Who has approached the patrol requesting admittance to the warren? Is this part of the plan? How do we know?

### **Section Three** **Chapters 35 - 36**

1. In these two chapters, note the contributions of each member of the band of rabbits. Also describe Kehaar's importance to the success of the escape.

2. What do we see of Bigwig's character? Describe the does that become privy to the plan. Which of them may endanger their secrecy? What information does Bigwig gather regarding the warren and its workings? Who is Blackavar?

3. What does Fiver "see" about their escape? What is the plan Bigwig reveals to Hyzenthlay? How does she respond? What is Bigwig's state of mind as the moment for escape approaches?

### **Section Four** **Chapters 37 - 38**

1. What happens in the encounter between Bigwig and Woundwort? What kind of a rabbit is General Woundwort, according to Bigwig?

2. Meanwhile, what are Hazel and the others doing as they await Bigwig's arrival?

3. What snags does Bigwig encounter as he attempts to execute the plan? Describe the escape from Efrafa using the map on page 357.

## **PART IV — Hazel-rah**

### **Section One** **Chapters 39 - 40**

1. Describe the rabbits journey down the Test. How many does did Bigwig rescue from Efrafa?

2. What do we learn of Blackavar's history? What kind of a rabbit does he become now that he is free? How does Hyzenthlay account for Blackavar's odd response to Bigwig after Blackavar's disregarded warnings prove correct?

3. Who do they encounter on their return to Watership Down? Describe the encounter with Campion.

## **Section Two**

### **Chapters 41 - 43**

1. Tell the “Story of Rowsby Woof and the Fairy Wogdog.”
2. How do the rabbits prepare for the attack of Woundwort and the Efrafan Owsla? Try to draw a picture of their preparations. How does Hazel hope to prevent bloodshed? Why does Woundwort pay little heed to Hazel?
3. Describe Woundwort’s leadership of the patrol. Compare his leadership with that of Hazel as the warren prepares for the attack.

## **Section Three**

### **Chapters 44 - 47**

1. What unexpected disadvantage has the Efrafan patrol encountered? What did Woundwort learn from a previous battle that he intends to utilize in this attack?
2. Describe the leadership of both Hazel and Bigwig as the warren prepares for the attack they know is impending. What is their plan? What happens to Fiver? What is going on in this scene? What memory does Hazel recall? How does the recollection play a role in the defense of the warren?
3. Describe the battle between Bigwig and General Woundwort. What mistake does Woundwort make? What does he recollect in the midst of the battle? What does Fiver say to Vervain? Describe Vervain’s state of mind as he encounters “this unaccountable enemy” (453).

## **Section Four**

### **Chapters 48 - Epilogue**

1. What is the meaning of the title of Chapter 48? How does it apply to what happens in this chapter?
2. What is Champion’s role in the aftermath of battle? Describe his ability to lead the survivors back to Efrafa. How has Efrafa changed under his leadership?
3. What time of year is it in Chapter 48? How long has it been since the rabbits set out from Sandleford Warren?
4. Unpack the following claim Holly makes regarding Woundwort: “He was brave, all right. But it wasn’t natural; and that’s why it was bound to finish him in the end. He was trying to do something that Frith never meant any rabbit to do” (467). Is Holly correct? Where else have we seen unnatural behavior from the rabbits? Have Hazel, Fiver, Bigwig and the rest done anything unnatural? If so, why was it not their undoing?

5. Describe Bigwig as we last see him. What story is Vilthuril telling her young ones? What unique gift does Threar possess?
6. What are some of the closing details we learn of the future of the warren and its rabbits?

### **BROADER QUESTIONS SUITABLE FOR LARGER DISCUSSIONS AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

1. How does each member contribute to the successful founding of a new warren? Include those rabbits who later join the original eleven that left Sandleford Warren together. Is any one of the rabbits indispensable? Use examples from the text to support your claim.
2. How does Hazel become the leader of the company of rabbits? How does his personality fit him to the role of leader? For example, recall that Woundwort assumes that Bigwig was the Chief Rabbit. Why isn't Bigwig the Chief Rabbit? Why is Hazel the Chief Rabbit?
3. The Sandleford rabbits encounter other rabbits that act in un-rabbit like ways. The Sandleford rabbits themselves must learn skills that are not part of their nature. What are these deviations from rabbit nature? Why are the practices adopted in each case? Why are some of these practices judged inappropriate and others not?
4. What role do the tales of El-ahrairah play in the community of rabbits? Select some specific stories and write about how those stories inform their decisions and their actions.
5. In searching for a new warren, the Sandleford rabbits seem to be searching for a home where they can live like rabbits. Compare and contrast the other communities they encounter. How do those warrens not act as homes for the Sandleford rabbits? What's missing?

## IMAGES USED IN THIS GUIDE

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