

## *The Education of Little Tree* Study Questions

### **Note:**

- *The highlighted questions are the ones I think are the most important and/or interesting questions to reflect on and discuss.*
- *The page numbers given in some questions may differ from other editions of the book.*

### **Chapter 1: Little Tree**

- 1.** What is the significance of the opening words of the chapter—what do they tell us, and how do they affect the reader?
- 2.** Why do you think Little Tree goes to Granpa and refuses to let go?
- 3.** Why does Granpa count the money so carefully when paying for their bus tickets? (Is Little Tree’s explanation accurate?)
- 4.** How do the bus driver and the passengers act toward Little Tree and his grandparents, and why?
- 5.** What does Granpa mean when he says, “It’s better to wear out when ye’ve lost something”? How does he show his compassion for Little Tree?
- 6.** Why do you think Granma’s Indian tune “needed no words for its meaning to be clear”? Why does it make Little Tree feel safe?
- 7.** What does the song just before the end of the chapter express about Indians’ attitude toward and relationship with nature?
- 8.** What clues can you find in the chapter about the family’s economic situation and education level? Note that Little Tree doesn’t comment directly on this; he doesn’t say, “we were very poor.”
- 9.** From what point of view is the story written? (Think carefully; the point of view of the narration is a rather complex issue.) How does the style of the narration reflect this? Find examples in Chapter 1 and explain them.

### **Chapter 2: The Way**

- 1.** What lesson does Granpa teach Little Tree about getting up in the morning? How does he mitigate (soften) the strictness of this lesson? What does this show about him?
- 2.** What is “Mon-o-lah,” and how does Little Tree “get to know her”? What “understanding” do Little Tree and Granpa have about the Earth?
- 3.** What is The Way? How do animals and the Cherokee live according to The Way? What Western idea is this similar to?
- 4.** According to Granpa, what happens when people don’t follow the Way? Explain the historical example of this that Granpa tells Little Tree about.
- 5.** What is Granpa’s way of dealing with people who look down on others or mistreat them? How is their attitude a burden for them, and how is being angry with them also a burden?
- 6.** How does Little Tree show Granpa that he has learned The Way?

### Chapter 3: Shadows on a Cabin Wall

1. In what small but significant ways do Granma and Granpa show Little Tree their love and trust?
2. What does Little Tree do with the stick of candy the librarian gives him, and what does this show about his relationship with Granpa? Why do you think he remembers this incident?
3. Based on his analysis of Macbeth, what ideas does Granpa have about men and women's roles?
4. What attitude does Granpa have toward authority and the "establishment," and why? Do you agree with his statement that politicians were "responsible for just about all the killings in history"?
5. Why does Granma read only the good things about George Washington to Granpa? What thing does she read that disturbs Granpa deeply, and why does he find it so disturbing?
6. Why does the professor behave so strangely (from Granpa and Little Tree's perspective)? What conclusion do they come to about him, and what does this show about them? What realization does Little Tree have about why Granpa accepted the ride?
7. What attitude does Granpa have toward politicians and professors? Do you think his attitude is justified?

### Chapter 4: Fox and Hounds

1. What important lesson about human nature does Little Tree learn from the way Granpa treats Maud? Explain.
2. Describe the way Granpa interacts with nature. How are the white mountain men different from him? What does Granpa think of them, and what do they think of Granpa?
3. Find a few examples of anthropomorphism (likening animals to human beings) in this chapter.
4. Describe Granpa's relationship with his dogs. How does he treat them? What kind of relationship does he have with Slick?
5. Describe the dogs' behavior and the meaning that Granpa and Little Tree draw from it. What lesson does Little Tree learn about "feelings taking over sense"? What lesson does he learn about cheating?

### Chapters 1-4 Summary Questions

1. Describe the personalities of each of the major characters—Little Tree, Granpa, and Granma. What is their relationship like?
2. What kind of education is Little Tree receiving from his grandparents? Describe Granpa's teaching style—how is his teaching so effective? How do they teach Little Tree responsibility and build his confidence? Find examples in the story to support your claims.
3. What relationship do Indians have with the natural world? What does the frequent personification of the natural world in this story show? How are Indians' ideas about the natural world different from European ("white") ideas?

## Chapter 5: “I Kin Ye, Bonnie Bee”

1. What is Granpa’s attitude about speaking with others, and how is it similar to the way he does everything? How is this different from the way most people act today? Do you think there might be something we can learn from him?
2. Why do both Granpa and the woman asking for directions to Chattanooga each think the other is crazy? Explain their misunderstanding. How does this relate to the theme of the chapter?
3. How does Granpa feel about words? How does this attitude reflect his lifestyle and his lack of broad experience or education? What does Little Tree mean when he says Granpa “favors the sound of a word as to its meaning”?
4. How do Granpa and Granma use the word “kin”? Do you agree with Granpa that to love something, you must understand it? Explain why Granpa tells Little Tree the story of ‘Coon Jack. What does Granpa say is the cause of most of the world’s trouble? Explain.

## Chapter 6: To Know the Past

1. According to Granpa and Granma, why is it important to know the past? Explain. Do you agree or disagree with them? Why else might it be important to study history?
2. Explain why the Cherokee insisted on walking on the “Trail of Tears.” Why did they refuse to look at the people lining the roads? Why did they carry their dead?
3. Describe the observers’ reaction to the Cherokees’ march. Why was it given the name “The Trail of Tears”? What is meant by the term “romantic,” and how is the name inappropriate?
4. Why did Granpa’s Pa and Ma have to “reach across a long way”? What did their marriage stick represent, and what would breaking it have meant? What is the significance of the statement that “*neither* of them broke it”?
5. Why did Granpa’s father go to fight the “guvmint,” and what war does this refer to? How was the government a threat to his people?
6. Why did Granpa’s father give the speech to Granpa at the end of the chapter? Why wouldn’t they look at each other? Why was it hard for Pa to say “I kin ye, son”? How did Granpa respond?

## Chapter 7: Pine Billy

1. Describe Little Tree’s family’s work life. In what ways is it different from the way work is done in modern society? How does the experience of plowing *really* “grow Little Tree up”?
2. Explain how Pine Billy’s story about the Chicago criminal is ironic and humorous. What is the real reason that the man was nervous? What do you think Forrest Carter is expressing to the reader through Pine Billy’s stories?
3. Explain Pine Billy’s strategy for winning the Red Eagle contest. Do you think he will win? Why or why not?
4. Describe Pine Billy. What criticisms might you make of him? What do you like about him?

## Chapter 8: The Secret Place

1. What is Granma's philosophy about "good things"? Do you follow this principle in your own life? If so, how?
2. What is unique about the way Cherokees raise their children regarding playing in the woods? What reason can you think of for this? What related observations can you make about the way Granpa and Granma raise Little Tree? What is your opinion of their "parenting style"?
3. What lessons do you think Little Tree learns from watching the umbrella spider?
4. Describe Little Tree's relationship with nature—in what ways is he becoming at home in nature? What signs are there that nature itself accepts him?
5. What is the significance of a "secret place," and why do you think every Cherokee has one? What connection does this topic have with Granma's discussion of the "spirit mind"?
6. What are the characteristics of the human mind—the living mind vs. the spirit mind? What is the Cherokees' explanation for why some people are greedy and mean? What does Granma say about not using one's spirit mind, and why does she teach this concept—what effect does it have on Little Tree? What does it mean to be a "dead person walking around"?
7. What sign was there that Granma's father's spirit mind was large? Do you believe this story? What does it say about the Cherokees' values?
8. Why must Little Tree keep his knowledge a secret—why won't it help him in the "world that is the white man's"?

## Chapter 9: Granpa's Trade

1. What is a "trade" in the sense that Granpa uses the word, and what does he tell Little Tree about trades? What feelings does he have about his own trade and others who practice it? How does Little Tree react to Granpa's sharing the trade with him, and what lesson do you think he learns?
2. Why does Granpa have to keep his still hidden? Keep in mind the year that this story takes place. How do Granpa and Granma protect their still?
3. Why do you think Granpa sends Little Tree away first (after Blue Boy shows up)? Why is Granpa so desperate that he is willing to put Little Tree in that kind of situation? What smart decision does Little Tree make about which direction to run from the policemen?

## Chapter 10: Trading with a Christian

1. After Ol' Ringer dies and Little Tree feels empty, what wisdom does Granpa pass on to Little Tree about loving? What do you think of this advice?
2. Why does Mr. Jenkins have to give Little Tree an old piece of candy? What does Mr. Jenkins say to get Little Tree to accept it, and do you think he is telling the truth?
3. Describe the politician and his speech. Why doesn't he shake Granpa's and Little Tree's hands, and what does this imply about his friendliness to the other people? How does he confirm Granpa's prejudices against politicians—what things does Granpa say to Little Tree after the politician has left? What does this scene tell you about how U.S. society has changed? (Yes, I think it is a realistic scene.)

4. How does the “Christian” convince Little Tree to buy his calf? How has Little Tree been planning to spend the money, and what does this show about him? How does Granpa react to Little Tree’s purchase, and why? How do Granpa and Granma “soften the blow” of losing all his money? What lesson does Little Tree learn from the experience, and how do Granpa and Granma react?

### **Chapter 11: At the Crossroads Store**

1. How does Granpa explain the shootings and window jumpings in New York? Why does he think this way? Do you agree with his analysis?

2. How does Granpa explain the sharecroppers’ situation and way of life to Little Tree? What does he think of the criticisms some people make of the sharecroppers? What is the Indian attitude toward their way of life? How do the sharecroppers deal with their powerlessness and desperation?

3. Think about the way Granpa and Granma live. Why might some people (such as the white sharecroppers) consider them lazy? What do you think—is the difference in their lifestyles due to laziness?

4. Why does the little girl’s father reject Granma’s gift to the girl? Why doesn’t Granpa take offense at his abusive words? What is the point of the story he tells Little Tree about the sharecropper who whipped his daughters?

### **Chapter 12: A Dangerous Adventure**

1. What does Granpa mean when he tells Little Tree that he “had never knowed anything in life that, being pleasurable, didn’t have a damn catch to it—somewheres”? Do you agree with this statement?

2. What analogy do the Cherokee use to explain and describe spring? According to their view, why are there fierce storms in the spring? How is this connected to The Way?

3. How is the way the Indians feed themselves fundamentally different from the whites’ way, and what larger difference between Indians and whites does this reflect?

4. What is the Indians’ attitude toward hunting for sport? Why do you think they feel this way? Why do they stop trapping during the spring and summer?

5. In relation to the novel as a whole, what do you think is the importance of the “dangerous adventure”? Consider, among other things, the last sentence of the chapter. What does the adventure tell us about the characters in the story?

### **Chapter 13: The Farm in the Clearing**

1. Why do you think Granpa watches the poor farmers every day? Why do you think he suspects that the Union soldier is “up to meanness,” and how does he feel about this?

2. Why do you think the sergeant doesn’t bring the mule directly to the farmers? Think back to the father of the girl Little Tree meets at the crossroads store. Why do you think the sergeant and the private decide to help them? Why does Granpa leave the fish for them?

3. What does the tragic ending of the story tell about the farmers and the Union soldiers who help them? How do the Regulators get away with their crime? What do you think is the theme of the story—what does it say about human society and the causes of conflicts and violence?

Relate it to other parts of the novel. What is the significance of the dirt in the sergeant's hand?

#### **Chapter 14: A Night on the Mountain**

- 1.** According to Little Tree's definition, what does it mean to "think Indian"? What is his attitude toward those who think that his way of thinking is naive? Do you think that even if something is naive, it can be good anyway?
- 2.** Describe the Indians' etiquette for giving gifts and greeting people. Explain their reasons for acting as they do. (*Note: See also p. 148.*) How do they feel about the practice of shaking hands?
- 3.** What can you infer that Granpa thinks about the news that two men in the whiskey trade want him to work for them? Describe the men, their behavior, and their attitude. Cite examples—in what ways are they "white," and how can you tell that they're obviously from the city? What is the meaning of their names—what "white qualities" do these names represent? How do you think this encounter affects Little Tree's attitude toward the "white world"?
- 4.** How does Granpa decide to deal with the men? Why does he tell Little Tree to tell Granma about everything the men said? How is it ironic that they argue about who's getting the most fish? How is Little Tree's thanking them ironic?

#### **Chapter 15: Willow John**

- 1.** What suspicion does Granma have about some of the signs that Granpa uses to choose when to start planting? Why does Little Tree think he remembers hearing that a butterfly's landing on a watermelon means that the watermelon is ripe (p. 141)? What do these things say about the nature of superstition? How does Pine Billy's choice of religion reflect this (p. 145)?
- 2.** What historical event does Pine Billy's description of Oklahoma refer to? How is this an example of the wisdom of the Indian way of thinking?
- 3.** What metaphor does Little Tree use to describe Willow John's eyes? What does it mean—why are his eyes like that? Why do Granpa and Granma hold Willow John, and why don't they say anything? What reaction does Willow John have to Little Tree, and why? How does Willow John express his feelings toward Little Tree, and in what way does Little Tree "deserve" it?
- 4.** Why do you think Willow John laughs so hard because of the bullfrog? Why does he cry, and why do you think he cries for so long? Why do you think his eyes always twinkle when he looks at Little Tree after that? Why does Willow John go to church—do you think he believes in Christianity?

#### **Chapter 16: Church-Going**

- 1.** What do the disagreements among the people of different denominations demonstrate about human nature? What is Granpa's attitude toward the situation? (see p. 153, 160, and others)
- 2.** Describe the behavior of the preacher in this chapter. How does he behave toward the Episcopalians, and why? Is he a nice, loving person? What do you think motivates him, and what lesson about human nature does this convey? What does Granpa think of preachers? (see p. 152 and others)

3. Why do you think the church members encourage the practice of public confession (especially the man who always yells, “Tell it all!”)? What often happens as a result of these confessions, and how is this ironic?
4. What philosophy does Granpa have about giving? What maxim have you heard that expresses Granpa’s principle? What does he think motivates those who continually give without teaching, and what is the outcome of this giving?

### **Chapter 17: Mr. Wine**

1. What clues are there in this chapter that Mr. Wine is Jewish? What theme in the book is he connected to as a Jew, and what other characters does he parallel? What stereotype about Jews does this chapter challenge?
2. Describe Mr. Wine. Why is he always forgetting things? In what ways does he show his love for Little Tree? Describe his values—what lessons does he teach Little Tree?
3. What is Mr. Wine’s opinion of technology and modern things? What is Granpa and Granma’s attitude toward Mr. Wine’s camera? Why do you think they have this attitude?
4. How does the passing of time in this chapter parallel the event that is foreshadowed in this chapter? Why do you think Mr. Wine chooses to bring the jacket when he does? For whom is he giving thanks when Little Tree finds him at prayer? What do you think is poignant about the very end of the chapter?

### **Chapter 18: Down from the Mountain**

1. Why does Little Tree see the man and woman who come to deliver the news that he is going to be taken to an orphanage as “politicians”? What reasons are given for their decision to take Little Tree away? In light of later events, what additional reasons do they have? How do you feel about this?
2. How do you think the lawyer, Mr. Taylor, feels about Little Tree’s situation? Why doesn’t he agree to represent them?
3. What common perception of Jews is revealed in this chapter, and how does Granpa feel about Jews and the prejudices against them? Why do you think Mr. Wine left a candle for Willow John?
4. Describe Granpa, Granma, and Little Tree’s various reactions to the situation. How do they deal with it emotionally, and how do they express their feelings? Why do you think Little Tree doesn’t want Granpa and Granma to hear him cry, and why does he keep saying he’ll be back soon? What does Little Tree sense about the mountains as he’s leaving for the orphanage, and why?

### **Chapter 19: The Dog Star**

1. What attitude does the Reverend have toward Little Tree, and what reasons does he give for this attitude? If you could talk with him, how would you respond to these prejudices? Do you think his “charity” in taking Little Tree in is really charity? Why or why not?
2. Why do Little Tree and Wilburn become friends? In what small ways do they demonstrate their friendship? Describe Wilburn’s behavior. Why does he act this way?

3. How does Little Tree get in trouble, and why do you think the teacher's reaction is so extreme? (Consider the time period in which this story takes place.) What do you think is the most fundamental reason for her and the Reverend's strictness, and what major, recurring theme in the book does this relate to? Is the Reverend's beating Little Tree and denying him supper for a week really motivated by a desire for God to prevail, as he puts it? How does Little Tree cope with the pain of the beating?

4. How do you think Little Tree feels about Christmas, and why? What is his reaction to the Christmas tree? What does Wilburn say about why the volunteers come to the orphanage, and what indications are there that he is right? What is the significance of the fact that both Little Tree and Wilburn's gifts are broken?

#### **Chapter 20: Home Again**

1. Why do you think Granpa throws his shoes back at the road? What does he mean when he says that he and Little Tree *are* drunk?

2. How does Little Tree react to being in his secret place again? What does he mean when he says that the wind and the trees and the spring branch and the birds don't say anything about hell or evil?

3. For what reasons does the Reverend sign "give-up papers" on Little Tree? Why does Granpa tell Little Tree not to say anything to Willow John about the beating the Reverend gave him?

4. How does Granpa say he decided to handle Little Tree's being in the orphanage, and what does this show about him?

#### **Chapter 21: The Passing Song**

1. What is the meaning of this chapter's title? Discuss the imagery Carter uses to express Granpa's feelings while waiting for Willow John to die. What is Willow John's attitude toward his own death, and why? Why does he insist on being buried next to the fir-pine, and how does this reflect Cherokee philosophy?

2. What does Willow John mean when he says that they would "feel him in the wind and hear him on the talking fingers of the trees"? How would a psychologist interpret this phenomenon?

3. How does Little Tree deal with Granpa's becoming slower and weaker because of age, and why? What does he mean when he says, "then I knew the world had come to an end"?

4. Why did Granpa never tire of watching the sunrise? How does his mentality differ from that of most people in today's world, and what might we learn from it?

5. Why does Little Tree bury the whiskey still?

6. What do you think Willow John, Granpa, and Granma mean when they say, "It'll be better next time"?