

# DISCUSSION GUIDE TO RICOCHET RIVER

Prepared by Robin Cody

When I began writing this book I was a high school teacher of literature, lovingly parsing classic American young-narrator texts such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My sharpest students at The American School of Paris were quick to criticize my wanting to explain too much, to ponder why the author did this or did that, to be too Englishteacherish about themes and metaphors and such, to get in their way of enjoying a fine story.

“We get it, Mr. Cody.”

They were good kids. We got along. As much as anything, they just relished giving an overeager teacher a bad time. But there was a lesson for me there, too, and I recall this lesson as I sit down to write a Discussion Guide to *Ricochet River*. The story is what it is. Different readers will come to it from different angles, and if you have to explain the joke, or the book, it’s too late.

And yet . . .

I am still at it. Now that I visit classrooms as the author, not the teacher, I’ve discovered—quite beyond the fact that students are much more wide-awake to a visitor than to their everyday classroom teacher—that they are curious about how this book got made. It’s an opening. We talk about what literature is. With a poke and nudge here and there, rather than going for a headlock, I can teach my own book.

The following will be a chapter-by-chapter suggestion or questions to ponder, clues to note, about what the author had in mind. Take them or leave them.

I do have one strong suggestion, though. There is one overarching theme to this book that makes it what we call Northwest literature. Nearly everything in the book revolves around the Man-in-Nature theme. Teachers and discussion leaders can refer to it time and again without slowing down the story. I would introduce the concept simply by drawing a horizontal line across the whiteboard and calling it the Wild-to-Tame Scale. Link is at one extreme on the W-T Scale. Wade’s mother is at the other end. The fun and instructive part is to place other characters (and settings, and concepts) on this W-T scale and watch how things change, if they do, as the story unfolds. Sometimes the scale might be Natural-to-Civilized, or Rivers-to-Reservoirs, or Woods-to-Town. Individual Freedom-to-Social Responsibility. Instinctive-to-Calculating. All of these are close cousins to the Wild-to-Tame Scale. It’s all the same scale, really. This is the best teaching tool I can think of for getting at what this writer was up to.

Do you get it?!!!

Just kidding. Don’t let me get in your way.

## CHAPTER 1

The opening section, little more than one page, sets up a lot of what follows in this book. Dumb Indian, Wade tells us. Jesse wasn’t very smart. Consider the possibility that the author, as opposed to the narrator, thinks Jesse is the smartest guy in the boat. What we have here is an unreliable

narrator. Wade—like *Huckleberry Finn*, who told us he was going down the Mississippi with a simple runaway slave—doesn’t get it. Maybe he’ll figure it out. Maybe the reader will figure some things out before Wade does.

Mirror images (upside-down fir trees) and reversals (vija de) run to the core of this story. Watch for them as the story unfolds.

The story opens in the summer of 1960. Some of the racial references toward an Indian here might not be tolerated today. Or would they just be more subtle?

## CHAPTER 2

This chapter opens with Jesse's Coyote-dancing story. Why? Wade doesn't get it. Do you?

Jesse has come to Calamus from Celilo Falls, the ancient fishing grounds on the Columbia River. The site deserves more explanation than Wade gives us. Celilo was where native people had gathered for some 10,000 years, not just to fish but also to worship and to socialize and to trade goods with other tribes, from the coast to the inland plains. Celilo was a hub of Northwest civilization, the Seattle or Portland of its time. Celilo Falls disappeared when The Dalles Dam flooded it in 1957, just three years before our story takes place.

## CHAPTER 3

Wade and Jesse check each other out. How are they different from one another? Find examples of how Jesse's Indian background (and the place he is from) contrasts with Wade's world.

Dams and fish are coming into play. The dam at Calamus, like the dam that drowned Celilo Falls, had a big effect on ocean-going salmon.

Note Jesse's blind spot about consequences. He's surprised, after hitting golf balls across the river, that the golf balls are gone.

## CHAPTER 4

Ricochet River has been described by some as a book about place, about how a place—its rivers, its woods, its natural setting—shapes its people. How, in Wade's view, is his mother out of place?

The New York publisher of this book surprised the author by saying what he liked best about Ricochet River was "the Oregonness" of it. What could a New Yorker have meant by that?

Contrast Lorna's view of Calamus to Wade's.

Jesse has big money coming. The government compensates native people for lost lands and fishing sites. Ricochet River is fiction, but that part is true. Do readers see any problem with money for place?

Note for later Lorna's favorite story, about the raft.

## CHAPTER 5

What's this Christmas tree lead-in about? What would be lost if Wade had just come right out and told us that Jesse's story is getting awfully complicated for him?

Tom Abbey, a masters teacher in Calistoga, California, finds it helpful to ask a student or two to demonstrate, near a wall, how left-handed spear-throwers have an advantage on the Washington side of the Columbia. The Oregon side favors right-handers. Jesse had lived on both sides.

It dawns on Wade what Link is so excited about. What is it? Discuss how Darwin's theory of natural selection—sometimes called survival of the fittest—could apply to salmon and to people at Celilo Falls.

## CHAPTER 6

Here we have more reversals and mirror images. Wade introduces Jesse to the dam workers as a great chief. We get Lorna's theory of lake bubbles and reverse rain.

Stalking and shooting the tame goose.

On your Wild-to-Tame Scale, where (and why?) would you put Link and his bunkhouse? Wade's mother and her paintings? Where would you put Jesse? Wade? Keep this scale in mind as the story unfolds from here.

What's this about "the Link factor?" Assume "Link" is not an accidental name. What is Link a link to? Might it be something you could discuss with regard to the W-T scale?

## CHAPTER 7

On the raft trip, the river "ricochets down the valley, deflecting and echoing what it wants to say." Is Ricochet River a good title for the story so far?

Discuss Jesse's report of his failed search for a special place. Wade wonders if the river itself could be a special place. Discuss the whole idea of a special place. You'll know it when you see it, the old man had said. Is it just a story to Jesse, or more than that?

## CHAPTER 8

These short chapter lead-ins don't directly move the story. What do they do? This one is about people in nature.

Wade is shocked at Jesse's stealing. But he eats the candy bar. What would you have done in that situation?

Jesse's world is a little more complicated—or a lot less complicated—that Wade's. Can both be true?

## CHAPTER 9

Flash back to Link and Wade going out to sea to meet the salmon. In what ways is Link, more than Wade, in tune with nature?

Jesse and the First Fish. Discuss the respect for fish as fellow creatures.

## CHAPTER 10

Jesse is a natural quarterback, but the word in Calamus is that "You couldn't have an Indian calling signals." What does this say about Calamus? How do the coaches' codes of behavior clash with Jesse's? Is Wade caught in the middle?

Jesse was kicked out of school at Madras. Discuss his mom's idea: "Mama said I was a dove among vultures, and I better go learn about vultures."

## CHAPTER 11

School. More codes of behavior. Expectations. Wade is good at what adults expect of him, Lorna ignores expectations, and Jesse doesn't even know they exist. True? Find examples.

There are all kinds of smart. If Lorna is book-smart, and Wade is school-smart, what kind of smart is Jesse?

## CHAPTER 12

Jesse "did whatever he felt like doing, and trouble couldn't catch him." Do you think that could be a formula for success in Calamus? Or anywhere? If you were to place Individual Freedom and Social Responsibility on your W-T Scale, where would they go?

“This is bad behavior,” Lorna says. And it is. Jesse isn’t concerned about consequences. Are you worried for him?

Wade decides that Jesse’s stories in English class don’t really apply. But if they don’t apply in class, how do they apply?

How is Jesse like Coyote?

## CHAPTER 13

Discuss Lorna’s theory about school forcing people into boxes. Is that true in schools today? If so, what are your boxes called? How hard is it to bust free of your box in high school?

Jesse, when he was little, got killed. What do we make of this? Was he really killed? Did it happen if Jesse believes it happened? Or is he just putting Wade on?

## CHAPTER 14

This chapter starts with landlocked salmon, the size of trout, in Tom Creek (at the millpond and upstream). Some of them get out, and migrate to sea. But they can’t get back. Review the life cycle of Pacific salmon. The cycle is blocked here by the millpond spillway. Full-grown adult salmon, returning from the ocean, can’t get past the spillway to their spawning grounds.

On your scale of W-T, where would you put landlocked salmon? Where would you put the returning adult salmon?

Where would you put the millpond itself, as opposed to a free-flowing river?

## CHAPTER 15

Discuss Link’s reverse Darwinism. Un-natural selection. The stunted salmon upstream from the millpond spillway are the same, genetically, as the ones who risk the trip out to sea and back.

The ones who don’t make the trip will survive but get smaller with each generation. Will they lack spirit?

Do readers understand natural selection well enough to appreciate the sub-set of a species evolving toward tameness and smallness in a limited habitat such as the millpond? In a book filled with mirror images and reversals, this is the big one. Survival of the timid.

## CHAPTER 16

Why does Lorna hate Calamus so much?

Why does Wade like it so much?

How could these two be so in love with each other?

## CHAPTER 17

By this point in the story, Jesse is flying pretty high. Do you think a soft landing is possible for him, or is he going to crash? Why?

Do people in your life play Trying-To-Say?

## CHAPTER 18

“Jesse never calculated,” Wade tells us. “He never thought ahead.” Or did he?

## CHAPTER 19

What’s this white stone in clear water? The same image begins and ends this chapter.

Wade says the trouble is that Jesse doesn’t have a place. Lorna says the trouble is Jesse’s own fault. Which of them is closer to what you think? The raft story, at McLaren, is “just a story, not something you’d really do.”

Wade panics at Duncan's NWG building. Why? Note the many surrounding unnatural images.

## CHAPTER 20

Wade puts capital letters on Back East and Out West, as if these terms mean more than geography. Discuss the absurdity he sees in the reversal—the idea of going Out East or Back West. Where do Back East and Out West, as ideas, belong on your W-T Scale?

Where on your W-T Scale (and why?) would you place the young Duncan that Wade recalls driving the Barlow Road? And the Duncan who works at NWG?

“These are my people,” Jesse says, introducing Wade and Lorna to his mother and his Indian friends.

Discuss Jesse's powers, where chickens become fish.

## CHAPTER 21

Reno explains the First Fish ceremony. “The fish were people.”

This chapter includes many creatures of a prior natural world. June Hogs. Lawrence White Fish. Buffaloes.

“You are Jesse's friend,” Reno says. She repeats that.

## CHAPTER 22

Wade is surprised now that Jesse thinks the three of them were really going to run the river out of Calamus. Can you think of other times when Jesse seems to be driven by stories? Are stories real to Jesse?

Now, what is more important than college to Wade? Could it have something to do with his nausea in Duncan's office? Is he feeling trapped? Civilized?

## CHAPTER 23

What's this about the duckling following the dog around?

Wade's river-instead-of-college plan makes no sense at the family dinner table, or to Coach Garth. What do you think he should do?

## CHAPTER 24

Who is Jesse's father? Do we need to know?

The author tried, and discarded, many alternative endings for Jesse. Could he have gone off to college? Could he have run off with Lorna? None of these alternatives made any sense. The people making the movie, too, wanted a happy ending. They messed around with it and came back to nearly the way the book ends. But what do you think? Was Jesse doomed? Why? What might you have done differently with him?

## CHAPTER 25

Wade says he could have been a stronger friend to Jesse. How? What would you have done to help?

“I'll get back to it,” Wade says. “We'll get with it.” What's it?

Is Wade a different person than he was when the story began? With regard to your W-T Scale, what's happened to Wade and Lorna?