

RICOCHET RIVER STUDY GUIDE

WELCOME TO RICOCHET RIVER STUDY GUIDE

Readers of *Ricochet River* now have a convenient collection of discussion questions, arranged according to the chronology of the novel, complete with thematic analysis and active learning activities. At the end of the discussion guide, you will also find several pieces of supplemental material written by Robin Cody to help add context to some important elements of the story.

INTRODUCTION BY AUTHOR ROBIN CODY

When I began writing this book I was a high school teacher, parsing classic young narrator texts such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My sharpest students were quick to criticize my wanting to explain too much, to be too scholarly about themes and metaphors and such, to get in their way of enjoying a fine story.

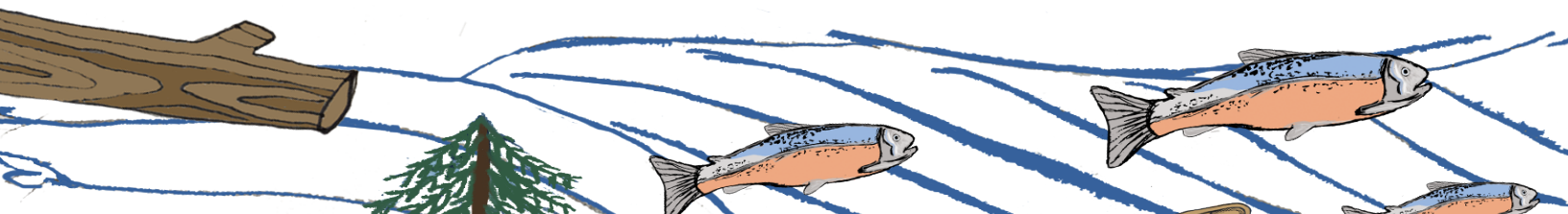
“We get it, Mr. Cody.”

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, I’ve discovered that students are curious about how *Ricochet River* got made. Why did I do this or do that? It’s an opening. With a poke here and a nudge there, I can help teach my own book.

The following are some chapter-by-chapter pokes and nudges— questions to ponder and might find useful while exploring the story. Don’t let me get in your way.

—Robin Cody



ONLINE TEACHING UNIT

Everything teachers need for a complete before, during, and after English language arts teaching unit is provided on the Ooligan website: ooliganpress.pdx.edu/ricochetriver/teacherguide. What follows is an outline of what teachers can expect to find in the online teaching unit.

The unit is organized for easy use in the classroom, and a simple CCSS checklist allows for easy curriculum rationale and confidence in meeting language arts academic proficiency requirements. Teachers should pick and choose the right assessments and activities for their unique students and classroom dynamic.

SPACE FOR INSTRUCTOR'S NOTES

PACING GUIDE FEATURES

- Unit introductions with pre-reading K-W-L exercises for generating discussion and making predictions
- Quick writes and discussion prompts for introduction to a variety of cumulative writing assessments, including literary analysis essay, argumentative essay, informative essay, and creative prompts.
- Chapters are grouped in segments convenient for online discussions (Edmodo.com or another electronic blackboard service) or paper and pencil reading responses
- Suggested genre novel list for compare/contrast and thematic analysis across distinctive texts
- Supplemental nonfiction readings for establishing context knowledge within the setting and themes of the novel
- Think, Pair, Share scenarios, flash debates, “hot seat” impromptu speaking scenarios, and additional collaborative classroom activities
- ACT/SAT-formatted reading response quizzes for formative assessment learning check-ins and encouraging familiarity with standardized testing format, either via traditional pencil-and-paper format, Google Classroom.com app for education, or another ecommunication delivery system
- Creative writing prompts for reader-text connection building
- A variety of brief video clips selected for text-to-visual connections and multi-media analysis
- Interactive vocabulary builders and quizzes
- Visual organizers for cross-text comparisons and thematic analysis
- A complete list of reproducible classroom handouts, graphic organizers, etc.
- Peer review active-listening exercises
- Sequenced catalog of Microsoft PowerPoint or Google Presentation files for grammar skill building and warm-up activities
- Common Core State Standards Proficiency Checklist

See the full **Ricochet River Teaching Unit** at: ooliganpress.pdx.edu/ricochetriver/teachingunit

NOTES

NOTE A: ON CELILO (SE-LYE-LO) FALLS

Wade tells Lorna he was only ten or eleven when he saw Celilo Falls. He then goes on to explain how they looked and sounded and smelled. In real life I was twelve or thirteen when I saw the big falls, and the scene still plays in my head like a 3-D movie with surround sound and smell, just the way Wade tells it. All true. Not a bit like what you see today at Multnomah Falls or Bridal Veil Falls, Celilo is where *the whole Columbia River* came thundering through swift narrow channels in its broken riverbed. In 1957 a new dam—just upstream from The Dalles—closed its floodgates. Up rose the water behind the dam, drowning Celilo village and silencing those roaring falls.

Wade was amazed at the dip-net fishing. He's a good reporter, but he had no way of knowing what the loss of the falls would mean to the native tribes. Celilo Falls, along with Kettle Falls much farther up the river, was a center of far-west civilization for ten thousand years, or for as long as humans have fished the big river. Native people came from all over to greet spring and fall runs of Pacific salmon, watery tribes who had to pause in their upstream migration before leaping (or failing to leap) the falls. The first salmon to arrive each season was greeted with respect and ceremony, as Jesse says later in *Ricochet River*. From the east to Celilo Falls came people hoping to trade buffalo hides for cedar baskets or whatever else the coastal Indians might bring. Elders swapped stories. At games and dances, young people from different bands could check each other out. While salmon meant food and worship, this frequent regathering of thousands of people also made for an all-time great Cascadian marketplace, dating site, arts exhibit, and entertainment center.

The loss of Celilo and Kettle Falls came suddenly and without a fight, as if today a massive tsunami wiped out Portland and Seattle.

It is said among the tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation that after the water rose at Celilo, the people who'd lived there could not sleep at night for lack of sound.

NOTE B: DARWIN BACKWARDS

The Life of Steelhead and Sockeye.

Those pathetic, landlocked salmon at the Calamus millpond have parallels in real life.

Kokanee are a landlocked version of sockeye salmon. They are the same species but with different behavior and stunted outcomes. Sockeye make a living in the wild. Kokanee are domesticated.

They live all of their lives in the clear, cool waters of far-inland reservoirs instead of migrating to sea and back. Feeding on plankton, Kokanee have no biological drive to develop the muscle and size of sea-going sockeye. They commonly weigh less than two pounds and are just as lazy and submissive as Link describes the millpond's landlocked salmon.

Likewise, rainbow trout and steelhead are of the same species but have different lifestyles. Trout live in freshwater only. A trout the size of your forearm is a big one. A kindergartner could reel it in. A steelhead, by contrast, migrates out to sea and returns weighing eight to twelve pounds. On the end of a fishing line, a steelhead is a holy terror. It's also much more likely to be blocked from its spawning grounds or eaten when it returns from the ocean. Same species, different behavior. One is tame as if domesticated; the other, wild. In drive and spirit, trout and steelhead are as different from each other as lapdogs and pit bulls.

NOTE C: HYDROELECTRIC DAMS

Because our story has a lot to do with fish passage—outgoing and homecoming—*Ricochet River* comes down hard on hydroelectric plants. It's true that dams are as unnatural as anything humans have inflicted on fish, right up there with over harvest, water pollution, and habitat loss. Never mentioned in the book, though, is why we have dams at all. Dams like the one at Calamus generate electricity. As long as the river runs, falling water will kick the flywheels that churn out the juice that lights our schools and homes. Like solar power and wind power, hydroelectric power is a renewable resource. The more hydro, the less we need to burn fossil fuels, the cleaner our air, and the smaller our human contribution to climate change.

Good things, both: electricity and fish. So there's been a major push to have our hydropower *and* our healthy fish runs. Federal laws require electric companies to upgrade their fish passages or lose their licenses. Is their dam worth a damn? The Clackamas' [Calamus'] River Mill Dam is owned by Portland General Electric Company and spins out enough electrical current to run ten thousand homes. To keep its license, PGE spends hundreds of millions of dollars on projects such as a vastly improved fish ladder that draws adult coho and chinook salmon up and over the dam.

Twenty years ago it was unthinkable that some Northwest rivers might go undammed, but here we go. In 2006, explosive charges at the concrete base of Condit Dam, a ninety-six-year-old hydroelectric plant, freed the White Salmon River to blast through to its original riverbed. Accessible now to salmon and steelhead are large stretches of upriver spawning and rearing beds that salmon and steelhead could not reach before.

K-W-L EXERCISES: KNOW, WANT TO KNOW, LEARNED.

One effective way to introduce a novel is to establish a sense of the theme or themes readers wish to analyze throughout reading and responding to the text. Below are examples of K-W-L exercises for some of the novel's major themes. These are some of the lenses through which you can view the story. We hope they help you make connections with your current knowledge and life experience and encourage some self-reflection once you've finished reading.

1. Wildness vs. tameness. Jesse oversteps all of the societal expectations that keep local sports hero Wade on the straight and narrow, and he does it with ease, for a while. If Jesse represents the wildness that Wade admires, at what point do we draw the line and accept a sense of domestication for the greater good?
2. Relationships are important in each of our lives. Sometimes in a relationship, both parties give and get. Friends in a mutual relationship do things for one another; they are loyal and they treat each other with dignity and respect. Identify and explain the necessary elements, traits, or characteristics of a successful mutual relationship.
3. What do you know about the treaties cordoning Native American land into reservations? How did it come to pass that the First Nation tribes of the Pacific Northwest and Oregon were relegated to reservations? How did the forced move affect the tribes of the Pacific Northwest?
4. What does it mean to be innocent? What are the differences between innocence and experience? How do we measure the difference between childhood and adulthood? Is experience synonymous with cynicism?
5. What are the economic costs and benefits of damming natural rivers? What are the ecological costs and benefits? What factors should developmental planners consider when making high-impact decisions regarding the environment?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

ACTIVE LEARNING

The activities in this study guide have been developed by local Oregon teachers and road-tested with Robin Cody's input over the years. They have helped many classrooms find enjoyment and a deeper understanding of the material. We hope they will do the same for you.

ACTIVITY 1: WILD-TO-TAME SCALE

Nearly everything in the book revolves around the Mankind-in-Nature theme. You can explore this idea by drawing a straight line across a blank paper or whiteboard and calling it the Wild-to-Tame Scale. Link and wild fish are at one extreme on the W-T Scale. Wade's parents and school are at the other end. Try placing other characters (and settings and concepts) on this W-T scale and watching how things change, if they do, as the story unfolds. The following are some questions you can ask yourself about this scale as you work your way through the story:

- Where would the dam fall on your Wild-to-Tame Scale?
- In Chapter 6, where (and why) would you put Link and his bunkhouse? What about Wade's mother and her paintings? Where would you put Jesse? Lorna? Wade?
- Where do Coyote stories and Miss Drees fall on your W-T Scale?
- Where would you put landlocked salmon? Where would you put the returning adult salmon?
- Where would you put the millpond itself, as opposed to free-flowing waters?
- Where, on your W-T Scale (and why) would you place the young Duncan from Chapter 20 that Wade recalls driving the Barlow Road? And the Duncan who works at NWG?
- By the end of the story, how have Wade and Lorna's positions on the scale changed?

There are other scales you might think about while reading, such as Natural-to-Civilized, Rivers-to-Reservoirs, Woods-to-Town, Individual Freedom-to-Social Responsibility, or Spontaneity-to-Calculation. All these are cousins on the Wild-to-Tame Scale.

ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY 2: SPEAR FISHING AND BASE-BALL

Tom Abbey, a 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 and how the Oregon side favors right-handers. Try this yourself. Jesse had lived on both sides of the river. Besides the physical advantages when it comes to baseball, how else might this duality have affected Jesse?

ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY 3: CHARACTER SILHOUETTES

Jill Colasuonno in North Clackamas, Oregon, uses this activity to help her students explore character motivation. Divide your classroom or reading group into small groups. Each group should choose a different main character and then trace a life-sized outline of them onto poster paper. Inside the body outline, write key quotes or passages about that character as well as their traits and goals. Outside the body, write or draw all the influences that impact the character.

If you're in a classroom setting, present your work to the class. You can hang your posters around the room for reference or as an ongoing project as you move through the text.

If you are reading the book on your own, you can do the same exercise on a smaller scale by drawing a simple shape that represents each character on a regular piece of notebook paper. Give each character their own page and complete the activity as described above.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTERS 1-2

1. “Dumb Indian,” Wade tells us. “Jesse wasn’t very smart.”
 - Talk about the difference between a narrator and an author. The author might think Jesse is the smartest guy in the boat. Wade is still figuring things out. Is it fair to call Wade an unreliable storyteller?
 - What is the importance of having a prejudiced narrator?
 - What tone does this set for the introduction of the book’s main characters? Is it formal or informal? Why do you think the author chose this tone for his introduction?
2. Readers are immediately confronted with the distinction of déjà vu and vujà dé. How are mirror images and reversals function- ing in the novel so far? Be on the lookout for mirror images and reversals all through this story. What are some additional themes that have already been introduced in the text? Identify one or two.
3. Contrast Lorna’s view of Calamus to Wade’s. Cite examples from the text.
4. Jesse has come to Calamus from Celilo Falls, the ancient fish- ing grounds on the Columbia River. Celilo was where native people had gathered for some ten thousand years, not just to fish but also to worship, to socialize, and to trade goods with other tribes, from the Pacific coast to the inland plains. Celilo Falls disappeared when The Dalles Dam flooded it in 1957, just three years before our story takes place. (See Note A for background on Celilo Falls.)
 - If Celilo Falls and the Native Americans who lived there were still present, do you think they would consider them- selves a part of the United States? Why or why not?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 3-4

1. What themes do you notice with respect to dams and fish? The dam at Calamus, like the dam that drowned Celilo Falls, had a big effect on ocean-going salmon. (See Note B after the study guide for background on the life cycle of Pacific salmon and steelhead.)
 - How do you see these aspects influencing the rest of the novel? Brainstorm a list.
2. Note Jesse's blind spot about consequences. He's surprised, after hitting golf balls across the river, that the golf balls are gone. What effect do you think this characteristic will have on Jesse's character arc? Can you make some assumptions about where his narrative will lead?
3. *Ricochet River* is called by some a book about place, about how a place—its rivers, its woods, its natural setting—shapes its people. And Jesse has big money coming because he's been dis-placed. The government paid native people for lost lands and fishing sites, including Celilo Falls. That part of Ricochet River is true to real life. Money for your place.
 - How good a deal is that for Jesse?
 - How great would it be for you?
 - Who in the current global community is being displaced? What are some similarities and differences between their situation and Jesse's?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 5-7

1. There are continuing themes of reversals and mirror images in these chapters. Can you identify two?
2. Why would Jesse get so spooked inside a dam? (See Note C after the study guide for more on hydroelectric dams.) Does this relate to any themes that have been discussed so far? If so, what is the relationship between Jesse and these themes?
3. Assume “Link” is not an accidental name. What could Link be a link to?
4. On the raft trip, the river “ricochets down the valley, deflecting and echoing what it wants to say.” This metaphor reflects Wade’s style of narration. What effect does Wade’s narration style have on the story? Why would Robin Cody choose a less reliable narrator to tell this story? Would you make the same choice? Why or why not?
5. Jesse’s reports his failure to find a special place. Wade wonders if the river itself could be a special place. *You’ll know it when you see it*, the old man had said. Do you have a special place? If not, where would you look for one?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 8-10

1. Wade is shocked at Jesse's thievery of the snacks. He swears he would have gone back to return them if he could have. But he ends up eating some of the stolen food. What would you have done in that situation?
2. Flashback to Link and Wade going out to sea to meet the salmon. In what ways is Link, more than Wade, in tune with nature?
3. Jesse has a deep respect for fellow creatures. The First Fish ceremony is practiced in real life today by many tribal people. How has Jesse's background prepared him, or failed to prepare him, for life in Calamus?
4. Jesse is a natural quarterback, but in Calamus, 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? In what way is Wade caught in the middle?
5. Jesse: "Mama said I was a dove among vultures, and I better go learn about vultures." What is Reno really saying here? Do you think she's right?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 11-13

1. These are three sharp young people. If Lorna is book-smart, what kind of smart are Wade and Jesse? In what ways do these different forms of intelligence relate to the codes of behavior and expectations that they face in society? Are these barriers relatable to your real world? Find examples in the text.
2. Jesse “did whatever he felt like doing, and trouble couldn’t catch him.” Is that a formula for success in Calamus? Or anywhere? “This is bad behavior,” Lorna says, as if she’s worried for Jesse. Are you? Identify places in the text where the author has used Jesse’s “bad behavior” to build tension. What are some other methods the author is using to create suspense?
3. Coyote stories don’t seem to fit in English class. How does this situation relate to themes of place, wildness and nature, cultural expectations, and other themes you have identified in the text? How, if at all, is Jesse *like* Coyote?
4. Discuss Lorna’s theory about school and town forcing people into boxes. Is that true in schools and communities today? If so, what are your boxes called? How hard is it to bust free of your box in high school? Would you want to?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 14-16

1. Chapter 14 starts with landlocked salmon and the size of trout in Tom Creek (at the millpond and upstream). Some of them get out and migrate to sea. The ones that get out can't get back. How does the life-cycle of these salmon relate to the town of Calamus and to Wade, Jesse, and Lorna in particular?
2. Discuss Link's reverse Darwinism. Unnatural selection. The stunted and spiritless 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. Survival of the timid. How could this be used as a metaphor for American culture today?
3. Why does Lorna hate Calamus so much? Why does Wade like it so much? Given their differences, how could these two be so in love with each other?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 17-18

1. 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? What do you think Jesse's fate will be, and how will his conclusion relate to the overarching themes?
2. What effect has his family's habit of playing Trying-to-Say had on Wade? Find examples in the text where this effect has manifested both in Wade's behavior and in his narration. Do people in your life play Trying-to-Say? Why do you think they do it? What effect does it have on you?
3. "Jesse never calculated," Wade tells us. "He never thought ahead." Do you agree with Wade? Why or why not?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 19-21

1. What is the significance of the white stone in clear water imagery that begins and ends Chapter 19?
2. Wade says the trouble is that Jesse doesn't have a place. Lorna says the trouble is Jesse's own fault. Who do you agree with? Cite examples from the text.
3. Wade panics at Duncan's NWG building. Why? What about the surroundings might have contributed to Wade's agitation?
4. Wade puts capital letters on Back East and Out West, as if these terms mean more to him than geography. Discuss the absurdity he sees in the reversal.
5. Reno explains the First Fish ceremony. "The fish were people." Name some of the creatures that occur in the text that are of a prior natural world.

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 22-23

1. Wade is surprised that Jesse thought the three of them were really going to run the river out of Calamus.
 - Were you surprised that Jesse thought this? Why or why not?
 - Can you think of other times when Jesse seems to be driven by stories? Are stories real to Jesse?
2. What is more important now to Wade than college? How is it related to his nausea at Duncan's office? List examples in the text that foreshadow this reversal in Wade's priorities.
3. What is the significance of the duckling and the dog in the story that opens Chapter 23?
 - Which characters might be represented by this story?
 - How does this story make you feel about the direction the characters are headed?
4. 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?

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW

CHAPTERS 24-25

1. Robin Cody tried, and discarded, many alternative endings for Jesse. What do you think of Jesse's fate? Could Jesse have gone off to college? Could he have gotten a job? Gotten married? Was Jesse doomed? Why?
2. Wade says he could have been a stronger friend to Jesse. How? What would you have done differently?
3. "I'll get back to it," Wade says. "We'll get on with it." What's *it*?
4. How (if at all) have Wade and Lorna changed from when the story began? Identify moments in the plot that helped create the people they are at the end of the book.

WRITE YOUR THOUGHTS BELOW