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MY FIRST LOVE

By Melinda Beck

As a child sitting in a musty-smelling classroom in the early 2000s, the windows open, hearing the sounds of the world passing me by, I watched the clock tick. I couldn't wait to get outside. With only fifteen minutes left, the teacher handed us a book and assigned weekend reading. I couldn't have been more disappointed!

I thumbed through the book, smelling the dusty pages, stopping briefly to read the back, and for a moment I was lost in time. The bustle of the classroom was suddenly blocked from my mind as I so intently focused on *Where the Red Fern Grows*. This book made me learn to love to read, to get transported into a book, and taught me that hard work and dedication are always worth the rewards. Most importantly, perhaps, it taught me about my first love.

Reading this book somehow transported me to Eastern Oklahoma as if I were there in the moment. I laughed and cried and worried about every character. This book could catch my attention so well, I would come to feel as if I could hear the baying of the Coon dogs, actually feel the Oklahoma wind on my face, and smell the earthy scent of the great outdoors.

I felt the love a boy had for his dogs and even the connection the dogs had with each other. I found myself feeling so many emotions, from cheering Billy

Coleman on during competitions, to getting frustrated with other characters when they did him wrong, and feeling proud when he earned his money to buy his beloved hounds. This book made me feel every high and low, and it was the first to transport me in the middle of a book. I found no greater joy than reading, even to this day.

Billy Coleman taught me that dedication and hard work pay off, no matter what the circumstances are. I was in complete shock at how a boy near my age could accomplish so much when, in life, he had so little. This book could take me there to feel the pain, anger, and joy with him while he worked so hard to earn money to get what he wanted, and I felt the pain of him making simple childhood decisions between saving his money or buying a nickel candy, knowing it will only prolong earning the money he needed to buy the dogs he so desperately wanted. I felt joy with him when he began seeing his hard work pay off—seeing that with dedication to his daily training, alongside his daily chores, he could accomplish so much. Though Billy was met with so many challenges, obstacles, and even tragedy, he never lost hope or gave up; he persevered through and he taught me if something is in your heart, you will stop at nothing to achieve it.

The writer explores the connections between her love for a book, her love for hunting, and her beloved memories with her father.

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This also helped me with the loss of my own father just a few years ago.

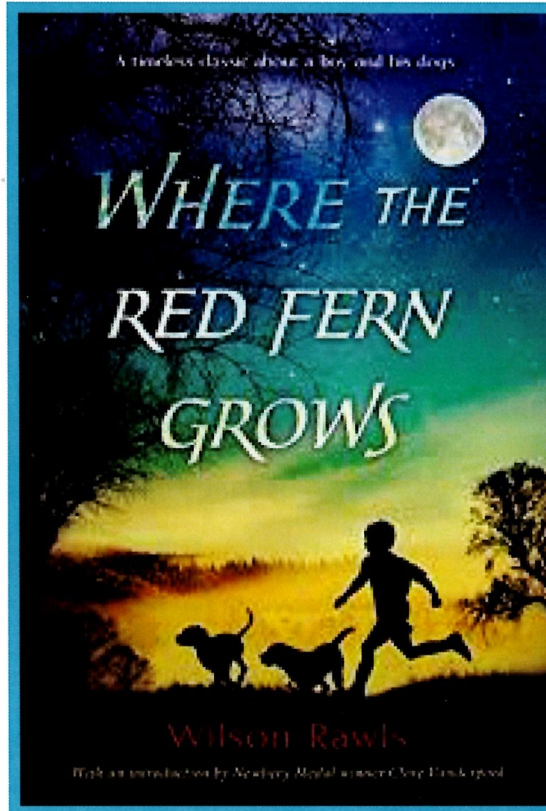
I sat back and remembered this book.

Being raised in the city, this book taught me my love for the great outdoors and hunting; my first love! I learned from Billy's love of raccoon hunting, training his hounds, and finally competing with Little Ann and Old Dan. His love for the hunt never waiver I became an avid hunter, too.

I'll never forget going hunting with my dad and my own set of dogs, "Missy" and "Shadow." Walking through the woods when the dogs pick up the scent of a raccoon and the chase was on, I would run behind the dogs, jumping over obstacles.

"Hurry, Melinda!" I would hear my father yelling. "Go get them! You are almost there! Keep going!"

I could hear the baying of my hounds and feel the wind blowing on my face. I was instantly transported back to this book, and I could feel the smile spread across my face as I caught up with my hounds.



I yelled to my father, "I got them, Dad! I got them! We did it!"

I then fully understood the joy Billy felt and even the tragedy of losing my own hounds, and then again when losing my father.

To this day, when I'm hunting and see a doe and her fawn or even a monster buck, I am reminded of this book and how it gave me my first love, my love for hunting with my father, sitting in the stand hearing nature bring forward the memory. I know with hard work and perseverance, I can achieve anything if it's in my heart.

With every book I read, I can transport myself as a character in the story, and I appreciate *Where the Red Fern Grows* just a little more. This book has meant, and still means so much to me, and has become like a part of me. William Feather wrote: "Books open your mind, broaden your mind, and strengthen you as nothing else can."