

A Mother in Mannville



Marjorie Rawlings

About the Author

Marjorie Rawlings was an American novelist and short story writer who spent most of her adult life in Florida. Her best-known novel, *The Yearling*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize and made into a popular movie in 1946, starring Gregory Peck and Jane Wyman. Marjorie Rawlings died in 1953.



Something to Think About

How does our imagination help us cope with reality? What is perhaps an orphan's greatest wish?



Words to Keep in Mind

(The numbers in parentheses refer to the paragraphs in which the words first appear.)

rhododendron (3) shrub with pink, white, or purple flowers

hemlocks (3) poisonous plant with small white flowers

malaria (5) (literally, "bad air") disease transmitted by mosquitoes

corn shocks (5) stalks of corn stacked together to dry

mangled (12) mutilated, crippled

stoop (14) porch or step in front of a house
asters (14) plant with purplish flowers that bloom in fall
suffused (20) spread throughout
kindling (23) small pieces of dry wood used to start a fire
subterfuge (28) plan to hide the truth
treacherously (32) dangerously
impelled (45) driven
parturition (49) childbirth
thistledown (71) white, fluffy down formed on thistle, a weed with prickly leaves and stems and purple flowers
trifle (73) a little
abstracted (73) absent-minded
anomalous (73) abnormal
ecstasy (74) extreme happiness
vermilion (74) bright red

The orphanage is high in the Carolina mountains. Sometimes in winter the snowdrifts are so deep that the institution is cut off from the village below, from all the world. Fog hides the mountain peaks, the snow swirls down the valleys, and a wind blows so bitterly that the orphanage boys who take the milk twice daily to the baby cottage reach the door with fingers stiff in an agony of numbness.

“Or when we carry trays from the cookhouse for the ones that are sick,” Jerry said, “we get our faces frostbit, because we can’t put our hands over them. I have gloves,” he added. “Some of the boys don’t have any.”

He liked the late spring, he said. The rhododendron was in bloom, a carpet of color, across the mountainsides, soft as the May winds that stirred the hemlocks. He called it laurel.

“It’s pretty when the laurel blooms,” he said. “Some of it’s pink and some of it’s white.”

I was there in the autumn. I wanted quiet, isolation, to do some troublesome writing. I wanted mountain air to blow out the malaria from too long a time in the subtropics. I was homesick, too, for the flaming of maples in October, and for corn shocks and pumpkins and black-walnut trees and the lift of hills. I found them all, living in a cabin that belonged to the orphanage, half a mile beyond the orphanage farm. When I took the cabin, I asked for a boy or man to come and chop wood for the fireplace. The first few days were warm, I found what wood I needed about the cabin, no one came, and I forgot the order.

I looked up from my typewriter one late afternoon, a little startled. A boy stood at the door, and my pointer dog, my companion, was at his side and had not barked to warn me. The boy was probably twelve years old, but undersized. He wore overalls and a torn shirt, and was barefooted.

He said, “I can chop some wood today.”

I said, “But I have a boy coming from the orphanage.”

“I’m the boy.”

“You? But you’re small.”

“Size don’t matter, chopping wood,” he said. “Some of the big boys don’t chop good. I’ve been chopping wood at the orphanage a long time.”

I visualized mangled and inadequate branches for my fires. I was well into my work and not inclined to conversation. I was a little blunt.

“Very well. There’s the ax. Go ahead and see what you can do.”

I went back to work, closing the door. At first the sound of the boy dragging brush annoyed me. Then he began to chop. The blows were rhythmic and steady, and shortly I had forgotten him, the sound no more of an interruption than a consistent rain. I suppose an hour and a half passed, for when I stopped and stretched, and heard the boy’s steps on the cabin stoop, the sun was dropping behind the farthest mountain, and the valleys were purple with something deeper than the asters.

The boy said, “I have to go to supper now. I can come again tomorrow evening.”

I said, "I'll pay you now for what you've done," thinking I should probably have to insist on an older boy. "Ten cents an hour?" 16

"Anything is all right." 17

We went together back of the cabin. An astonishing amount of solid wood had been cut. There were cherry logs and heavy roots of rhododendron, and blocks from the waste pine and oak left from the building of the cabin. 18

"But you've done as much as a man," I said, "This is a splendid pile." 19

I looked at him, actually, for the first time. His hair was the color of the corn shocks and his eyes, very direct, were like the mountain sky when rain is pending—gray, with a shadowing of that miraculous blue. As I spoke, a light came over him, as though the setting sun had touched him with the same suffused glory with which it touched the mountains. I gave him a quarter. 20

"You may come tomorrow," I said, "and thank you very much." 21

He looked at me, and at the coin, and seemed to want to speak, but could not, and turned away. 22

"I'll split kindling tomorrow," he said over his thin ragged shoulder. "You'll need kindling and medium wood and logs and backlogs." 23

At daylight I was half wakened by the sound of chopping. Again it was so even in texture that I went back to sleep. When I left my bed in the cool morning, the boy had come and gone, and a stack of kindling was neat against the cabin wall. He came again after school in the afternoon and worked until time to return to the orphanage. His name was Jerry; he was twelve years old, and he had been at the orphanage since he was four. I could picture him at four, with the same grave gray-blue eyes and the same—independence? No, the word that comes to me is "integrity." 24

The word means something very special to me, and the quality for which I use it is a rare one. My father had it—there is another of whom I am almost sure—but almost no man of my acquaintance possesses it with the clarity, the purity, the simplicity of a mountain stream. But the boy Jerry had it. It is bedded on courage, but it is more than brave. It is honest, but it is more than honesty. The ax handle broke one day. Jerry said the woodshop at the orphanage would repair it. I brought money to pay for the job and he refused it. 25

"I'll pay for it," he said. "I broke it. I brought the ax down carelessly." 2

"But no one hits accurately every time," I told him. "The fault was in the wood of the handle. I'll see the man from whom I bought it." 2

It was only then that he would take the money. He was standing back of his own carelessness. He was a free-will agent and he chose to do careful work, and if he failed, he took the responsibility without subterfuge. 2

And he did for me the unnecessary thing, the gracious thing, that we find done only by the great of heart. Things no training can teach, for they are done on the instant, with no predicated experience. He found a cubbyhole beside the fireplace that I had not noticed. There, of his own accord, he put kindling and "medium" wood, so that I might always have dry fire material ready in case of sudden wet weather. A stone was loose in the rough walk to the cabin. He dug a deeper hole and steadied it, although he came, himself, by a short cut over the bank. I found that when I tried to return his thoughtfulness with such things as candy and apples, he was wordless. "Thank you" was, perhaps, an expression for which he had had no use, for his courtesy was instinctive. He only looked at the gift and at me, and a curtain lifted, so that I saw deep into the clear well of his eyes, and gratitude was there, and affection, soft over the firm granite of his character. 2

He made simple excuses to come and sit with me. I could no more have turned him away than if he had been physically hungry. I suggested once that the best time for us to visit was just before supper, when I left off my writing. After that, he waited always until my typewriter had been some time quiet. One day I worked until nearly dark. I went outside the cabin, having forgotten him. I saw him going up over the hill in the twilight toward the orphanage. When I sat down on my stoop, a place was warm from his body where he had been sitting. 3

He became intimate, of course, with my pointer, Pat. There is a strange communion between a boy and a dog. Perhaps they possess the same singleness of spirit, the same kind of wisdom. It is difficult to explain, but it exists. When I went across the state for a weekend, I left the dog in Jerry's charge. I gave him the dog whistle and the key 3

to the cabin, and left sufficient food. He was to come two or three times a day and let out the dog, and feed and exercise him. I should return Sunday night, and Jerry would take out the dog for the last time Sunday afternoon and then leave the key under an agreed hiding place.

My return was belated and fog filled the mountain passes so treacherously that I dared not drive at night. The fog held the next morning, and it was Monday noon before I reached the cabin. The dog had been fed and cared for that morning. Jerry came early in the afternoon, anxious.

"The superintendent said nobody would drive in the fog," he said. "I came just before bedtime last night and you hadn't come. So I brought Pat some of my breakfast this morning. I wouldn't have let anything happen to him."

"I was sure of that. I didn't worry."

"When I heard about the fog, I thought you'd know."

He was needed for work at the orphanage and he had to return at once. I gave him a dollar in payment, and he looked at it and went away. But that night he came in the darkness and knocked at the door.

"Come in, Jerry," I said, "if you're allowed to be away this late."

"I told maybe a story," he said. "I told them I thought you would want to see me."

"That's true," I assured him, and I saw his relief. "I want to hear about how you managed with the dog."

He sat by the fire with me, with no other light, and told me of their two days together. The dog lay close to him, and found a comfort there that I did not have for him. And it seemed to me that being with my dog, and caring for him, had brought the boy and me, too, together, so that he felt that he belonged to me as well as to the animal.

"He stayed right with me," he told me, "except when he ran in the laurel. He likes the laurel. I took him up over the hill and we both ran fast. There was a place where the grass was high and I lay down in it and hid. I could hear Pat hunting for me. He found my trail and he barked. When he found me, he acted crazy, and he ran around and around me, in circles."

We watched the flames.

"That's an apple log," he said. "It burns the prettiest of any wood."

We were very close.

He was suddenly impelled to speak of things he had not spoken of before, nor had I cared to ask him.

"You look a little bit like my mother," he said. "Especially in the dark, by the fire."

"But you were only four, Jerry, when you came here. You have remembered how she looked, all these years?"

"My mother lives in Mannville," he said.

For a moment, finding that he had a mother shocked me as greatly as anything in my life has ever done, and I did not know why it disturbed me. Then I understood my distress. I was filled with a passionate resentment that any woman should go away and leave her son. A fresh anger added itself. A son like this one—The orphanage was a wholesome place, the executives were kind, good people, the food was more than adequate, the boys were healthy, a ragged shirt was no hardship, nor the doing of clean labor. Granted, perhaps, that the boy felt no lack, what blood fed the bowels of a woman who did not yearn over this child's lean body that had come in parturition out of her own? At four he would have looked the same as now. Nothing, I thought, nothing in life could change those eyes. His quality must be apparent to an idiot, a fool. I burned with questions I could not ask. In any case, I was afraid, there would be pain.

"Have you seen her, Jerry—lately?"

"I see her every summer. She sends for me."

I wanted to cry out, "Why are you not with her? How can she let you go away again?"

He said, "She comes up here from Mannville whenever she can. She doesn't have a job now."

His face shone in the firelight.

"She wanted to give me a puppy, but they can't let any one boy keep a puppy. You remember the suit I had on last Sunday?" He was plainly proud. "She sent me that for Christmas. The Christmas before that"—he drew a long breath, savoring the memory—"she sent me a pair of skates."

"Roller skates?" 56

My mind was busy, making pictures of her, trying to understand 57
her. She had not, then, entirely deserted or forgotten him. But why,
then—I thought, "I must not condemn her without knowing."

"Roller skates. I let the other boys use them. They're always bor- 58
rowing them. But they're careful of them."

What circumstance other than poverty— 59

"I'm going to take the dollar you gave me for taking care of Pat," 60
he said, "and buy her a pair of gloves."

I could only say, "That will be nice. Do you know her size?" 61

"I think it's 8½," he said. 62

He looked at my hands. 63

"Do you wear 8½?" he asked. 64

"No. I wear a smaller size, a 6." 65

"Oh! Then I guess her hands are bigger than yours." 66

I hated her. Poverty or no, there was other food than bread, and 67
the soul could starve as quickly as the body. He was taking his dollar
to buy gloves for her big stupid hands, and she lived away from him,
in Mannville, and contented herself with sending him skates.

"She likes white gloves," he said. "Do you think I can get them 68
for a dollar?"

"I think so," I said. 69

I decided that I should not leave the mountains without seeing her 70
and knowing for myself why she had done this thing.

The human mind scatters its interests as though made of thistle- 71
down, and every wind stirs and moves it. I finished my work. It did
not please me, and I gave my thoughts to another field. I should need
some Mexican material.

I made arrangements to close my Florida place. Mexico immedi- 72
ately, and doing the writing there, if conditions were favorable. Then,
Alaska with my brother. After that, heaven knew what or where.

I did not take time to go to Mannville to see Jerry's mother, nor 73
even to talk with the orphanage officials about her. I was a trifle
abstracted about the boy, because of my work and plans. And after my
first fury at her—we did not speak of her again—his having a mother,
any sort at all, not far away, in Mannville, relieved me of the ache I

had had about him. He did not question the anomalous relation. He
was not lonely. It was none of my concern.

He came every day and cut my wood and did small helpful favors 74
and stayed to talk. The days had become cold, and often I let him
come inside the cabin. He would lie on the floor in front of the fire,
with one arm across the pointer, and they would both doze and wait
quietly for me. Other days they ran with a common ecstasy through
the laurel, and since the asters were now gone, he brought me back
vermilion maple leaves, and chestnut boughs dripping with imperial
yellow. I was ready to go.

I said to him, "You have been my good friend, Jerry. I shall often 75
think of you and miss you. Pat will miss you too. I am leaving tomor-
row."

He did not answer. When he went away, I remember that a new 76
moon hung over the mountains, and I watched him go in silence up
the hill. I expected him the next day, but he did not come. The details
of packing my personal belongings, loading my car, arranging the bed
over the seat, where the dog would ride, occupied me until late in the
day. I closed the cabin and started the car, noticing that the sun was in
the west and I should do well to be out of the mountains by nightfall.
I stopped by the orphanage and left the cabin key and money for my
light bill with Miss Clark.

"And will you call Jerry for me to say good-by to him?" 77

"I don't know where he is," she said. "I'm afraid he's not well. He 78
didn't eat his dinner this noon. One of the other boys saw him going
over the hill into the laurel. He was supposed to fire the boiler this
afternoon. It's not like him; he's unusually reliable."

I was almost relieved, for I knew I should never see him again, 79
and it would be easier not to say good-by to him.

I said, "I wanted to talk with you about his mother—why he's 80
here—but I'm in more of a hurry than I expected to be. It's out of the
question for me to see her now too. But here's some money I'd like to
leave with you to buy things for him at Christmas and on his birthday.
It will be better than for me to try to send him things. I could so easily
duplicate—skates, for instance."

She blinked her honest spinster's eyes. 81

- “There’s not much use for skates here,” she said. 82
 Her stupidity annoyed me. 83
 “What I mean,” I said, “is that I don’t want to duplicate things his 84
 mother sends him. I might have chosen skates if I didn’t know she
 had already given them to him.”
 She stared at me. 85
 “I don’t understand,” she said. “He has no mother. He has no 86
 skates.”



Focusing on the Story

1. Why has the narrator come to the Carolina mountains? What is her occupation? What time of year is it? What do the mountains look like?
2. Who is Jerry and how does he meet the narrator?
3. The narrator says that Jerry has integrity. What does this term mean?
4. One day Jerry tells the narrator something that greatly shocks her. What does he tell her?
5. The narrator decides to go to Mannville to find out about Jerry’s mother but then changes her mind. Why does she want to see the mother? Why does she change her mind?



Interpreting and Evaluating

1. At the beginning of the story, we learn that the narrator has contracted malaria in the subtropics and later that she’ll close her place in Florida and travel to Mexico and Alaska. What can you infer from these comments about the narrator’s lifestyle and economic status? What else can you say about the narrator?
2. When the narrator gives Jerry little gifts of candy and apples, Jerry is speechless. Why may he have trouble saying a simple “thank-you”?
3. Why does Jerry lie about his mother? Would you call Jerry a regular liar who should be punished? Explain.
4. Why does the narrator believe Jerry so readily? Does she really understand Jerry? How would you have reacted to Jerry’s story?

5. How do you think the narrator feels after she has talked to Miss Clark at the orphanage at the end of the story? What does the narrator learn about people from this experience?



Ideas for Writing and Further Discussion

1. “A Mother in Mannville” contains some beautiful descriptive paragraphs. Reread the first page, and pay close attention to the descriptions. Then write two or three paragraphs describing a favorite place of your own at different times of the year. Start with a general sentence that expresses your feeling toward the place.
2. Does fantasy sometimes provide an important escape from a harsh reality? Write an essay about an incident in your life when your fantasy helped you cope. If you don’t want to write about yourself, write about someone you know instead. What happened? How did the ability to dream or fantasize help you deal with the situation? It’s not necessary to write a formal thesis statement in a narrative essay, but you may wish to start with a general statement that expresses an attitude toward the experience.
3. The author uses the anecdote about Jerry and the broken ax handle to illustrate the meaning of the word *integrity*. Choose an abstract word such as *courage*, *friendship*, or *maturity* that cannot be adequately defined by a simple word or phrase. Illustrate its meaning with an anecdote or a brief story. You may start by stating the dictionary definition of your word, and then tell the anecdote that illustrates what the word means to you.
4. The narrator admires Jerry for his many positive character traits. Even though he’s only twelve, he appears instinctively courteous and gracious, sensitive to the needs of the narrator, independent, and mature. Write an essay in which you discuss some of his most admirable qualities and illustrate each quality with examples from the story.
 Suggested *thesis*: two or three qualities *or* two or three groups of similar qualities that the narrator admires in Jerry.
 Each *body paragraph* should illustrate one such quality (or group of related qualities) with details from the story.