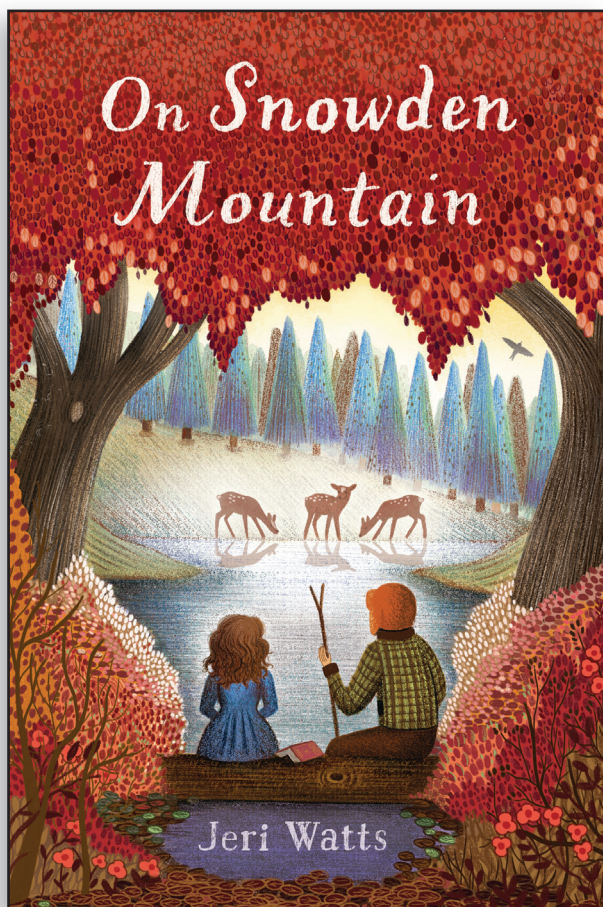




ON SNOWDEN MOUNTAIN

Jeri Watts



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Also available as an e-book and in audio

About the Book

How can a twelve-year-old girl take care of her depressed mother alone? When her father volunteers to fight in World War II, twelve-year-old Ellen is left in Baltimore with her mother, who rarely gets out of bed anymore. Ellen turns to the only relative she has: a no-nonsense aunt she has met only once. But Ellen is shocked when Aunt Pearl bundles them away immediately to her home, a tidy white cottage at the base of Snowden Mountain. Adjusting to small-town life isn't easy: the school is a single room, one of her classmates smells of skunks, and some of the neighbors whisper about Ellen's family. But even as she worries that depression is a family curse to which she might one day succumb, Ellen slowly begins to carve out a space for herself and her mother on beautiful Snowden Mountain.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



Discussion Questions

1. What is Ellen like when she first moves to Snowden? How does she change over the course of the story? At the beginning, she says of Snowden, “It would never be my home” (page 13). How does that compare to her feelings at the end of the book?
2. What is Ellen’s opinion of Aunt Pearl when they travel from Baltimore to Snowden? How does her opinion change, and what factors bring this about? What are some surprising facts about Aunt Pearl that Ellen learns?
3. Describe Ellen’s mother throughout most of the story and how she starts to change near the end. What are some of Ellen’s memories about her mother in happier times? What does Ellen learn about her family history that’s related to her mother’s condition? Discuss Ellen’s worries that she, too, will have mental health problems. What do Russell and Aunt Pearl think about that possibility?
4. In the year before the story, after her mother went away for some “fresh air” days, Ellen’s friends quit playing with her (page 7). Why do you think that happened? Similarly, Aunt Pearl says that Ellen’s father “couldn’t handle the shame of . . . mental problems in his house” (page 181). Why do you think it was considered shameful?
5. Compare Ellen’s life in Baltimore with her new life in Snowden. What’s similar? What’s different? What does she miss about Baltimore? Describe some of the hardship and poverty in Snowden that she’s never seen before.
6. What does Ellen come to appreciate about Snowden? Give specific examples about people, customs, the mountain itself, and other aspects of life that she comes to love.
7. How does Ellen initially feel about Russell, and how does she treat him at first? How do his fellow classmates treat him? How does her opinion of Russell change, and what makes it change? What does she learn from him?
8. Ellen delivers food to Russell’s house and meets his parents. Describe his mother and explain her connection in the past with Ellen’s mother. Why does Russell’s mother eventually visit Aunt Pearl’s house? How does she try to help Ellen’s mother?
9. Describe Russell’s father and how he treats his wife and son. What is Aunt Pearl’s explanation for his behavior? What is her opinion of him? Describe some of the encounters that Ellen has with him.
10. After Russell’s father injures his wife, Russell fetches Ellen to help his mother. What does she do to help? Discuss why she says afterward, “I realized I wasn’t the only outsider in these mountains” (page 55).
11. After Ellen offers to teach Russell, she thinks, “He didn’t matter at all” (page 86). But then she thinks, “Which meant that I might not matter either.” Why does she say that? Why does she think that neither of them matters?



Discussion Questions

12. In chapter eight, Russell talks to Ellen about what keeps him going despite such a cruel father and unfriendly classmates. Explain why he says, “I know things’ll be fine. Not that they’ll be fine right away. But that, well, that I got hope” (page 109).
13. Explain where Ellen’s father is and how she feels about his leaving the family. Analyze his letter to her in chapter five. Why does he say it’s time for him to grow up? Talk about the phrase “the world’s been cracked open” and what he might mean by that (page 65).
14. Discuss the relationship of Ellen’s parents in the past and how it has sometimes affected her negatively. What are some of the things that Aunt Pearl says about Ellen’s father? How has her opinion of him changed over the years?
15. Describe Moselle Toms, her house, and how she treats her husband. What interactions does Ellen have with her? What does Ellen think about Moselle when they first meet, and how does that change? What does Aunt Pearl think about Moselle?
16. By the end of the story, Miss Spencer and Aunt Pearl have changed their views about Russell. What does Miss Spencer regret about her treatment of him? Explain why Aunt Pearl says in chapter thirteen, “We should have helped him before” (page 178).
17. What makes it possible for Russell to stand up to his father at Thanksgiving? Why do you think Russell’s mother refuses to leave her husband? What do you think will happen to Russell in the future?
18. Discuss the importance of the setting to the story. Find passages in the text with vivid descriptions and talk about what makes them effective at conveying the place and time.

These questions were prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and now presents professional development workshops for educators on new books for young people.



About the Author

Jeri Watts was a public school teacher for twenty-seven years, then a college professor, and is now a full-time writer. She is the author of numerous short stories and the novel *Kizzy Ann Stamps*. She received an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award for her picture book *A Piece of Home*, illustrated by Hyewon Yum. Jeri Watts lives in Lexington, Virginia.

