

Following Atticus: Discussion Guide

Tom Ryan, a disillusioned journalist discovers fulfillment in rising to the challenge of hiking all the 4,000-footers in the White Mountains – in winter!. His companion is a little dog with a big heart, who demonstrates the courage and wisdom the author seeks. This is a saga about navigating not only the physical wilderness but also the wilderness of human relationships. Following Atticus, Tom gains physical fitness, spiritual affirmation and the wisdom to heal family relationships. We all need an Atticus to follow.

1. What new avenues did Max and Atticus open for Tom? How did that happen?
2. In many parts of the book, Tom returns to advice given him by the dog breeder, Paige Foster: “Carry him with you wherever you go.” Explain how this advice trained both Atticus and Tom.
3. What fears did Tom have to face in hiking? How did Atticus help? What fears did Atticus have to face? How did Tom help?
4. What was the relationship between Tom and Vicki Pearson? Why did Tom dedicate his first hiking season to raising money in her name?
5. How did Atticus change Tom’s relationship with his friends? With his family? Even with people he never met, such as Paige Foster?
6. What did Tom get from climbing and, especially, summiting mountains?
7. Freedom is a theme Tom focuses on. Atticus has the freedom to be outside without a leash. What freedoms does Tom have? What limits his freedom?
8. Tom clearly saw Atticus as his equal. What do you think of the idea of equating humans and canines?
9. Tom’s relationship with his father was a complicated one. How did hiking help him understand his father?
10. Hiking the 4000-footers in the White Mountains is strenuous. Why did hiking them bring peace to Tom?
11. Why did Tom call Atticus “the Little Giant”? “the Little Buddha”?
12. How did hiking connect Tom with “the savage in man”? (p. 119)
13. Note the many authors Tom quotes (Edward Abbey, Mark Twain, Thomas Starr King, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Joseph Campbell, A.A. Milne and many others). He has read widely and found many connections between what he has read, his relationship with Atticus, and hiking. Which quote struck you as particularly apt? Why?

14. The White Mountains area is known for its temperamental weather. What was the effect of weather, both good and bad, on Tom and Atticus? How did various weather conditions change Tom's understanding of himself? His relationship with Atticus? His relationship with his father?
15. Tom used the mantra "There is strength in numbers" as a way to continue on difficult hikes. Despite, or perhaps because of that, Tom valued his hikes alone with Atticus (his favorite mountain is "Any mountain where Atticus and I can be alone on top." p.215). Why did he choose to hike with Atticus as his sole companion? Why did he follow Atticus?
16. What was irrational about Tom's actions? What impact did seemingly irrational thoughts and actions have on Tom and those connected with him?
17. Tom writes of religion in a number of different areas of the book. He prays while hiking often. His theology evolves over the course of the book. How did it change and what did Atticus and the mountains have to do with that change?
18. Tom re-invented himself through his relationship with Atticus. Explain. How can a relationship with a non-human change individuals?
19. How did Atticus' illnesses expose the vulnerable in Tom? How did he react to that exposure?
20. When he discovered Atticus' blindness, Tom became acutely aware that Atticus had been hiking blind and doing it for him. He also became aware that people now treated Atticus differently. What challenges did Atticus' illnesses bring to their relationship? Why did people donate money to help pay for the medical care Atticus needed?
21. Why did Paige tell Tom to take Atticus to the mountains when the dog was ill?
22. In *Following Atticus*, love enters the picture in many ways. Explain the expansive nature of love as explained by Tom.
23. Tom constantly thinks of his father while hiking. Why? How did hiking help build a bridge between Tom and his father?
24. Peace comes to individuals in a variety of ways. How did Tom find peace?
25. Why are we so attracted to the story of a man hiking the White Mountains with a small dog?

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