Old Yeller

by Fred Gipson

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Genre

Historical fiction is fiction that takes place in the past. What clues tell you that Old Yeller takes place in the past?

Question of the Week

How can we help protect those we love?
The year is 1867 on the frontier of Texas. Fourteen-year-old Travis takes charge of the family homestead while his father is away. Left behind with Travis, his mother, and five-year-old brother named Arliss, is a stray yellow dog. The family calls him Old Yeller.

That little Arliss! If he wasn’t a mess! From the time he’d grown up big enough to get out of the cabin, he’d made a practice of trying to catch and keep every living thing that ran, flew, jumped, or crawled.

Every night before Mama let him go to bed, she’d made Arliss empty his pockets of whatever he’d captured during the day. Generally, it would be a tangled-up mess of grasshoppers and worms and praying bugs and little rusty tree lizards. One time he brought in a horned toad that got so mad he swelled out round and flat as a Mexican tortilla and bled at the eyes. Sometimes it was stuff like a young bird that had fallen out of its nest before it could fly, or a green-speckled spring frog, or a striped water snake. And once he turned out of his pocket a wadded-up baby copperhead that nearly threw Mama into spasms. We never did figure out why the snake hadn’t bitten him, but Mama took no more chances on snakes. She switched Arliss hard for catching that snake. Then she made me spend better than a week taking him out and teaching him to throw rocks and kill snakes.

That was all right with Little Arliss. If Mama wanted him to kill his snakes first, he’d kill them. But that still didn’t keep him from sticking them in his pockets along with everything else he’d captured that day. The snakes might be stinking by the time Mama called on him to empty his pocket, but they’d be dead.
Then, after the yellor dog came, Little Arliss started catching even bigger game. Like cottontail rabbits and chaparral birds and a baby possum that sulked and lay like dead for the first several hours until he finally decided that Arliss wasn’t going to hurt him.

Of course, it was Old Yeller that was doing the catching. He’d run the game down and turn it over to Little Arliss, then Little Arliss would come in and tell Mama a big fib about how he caught it himself.

I watched them one day when they caught a blue catfish out of Birdsong Creek. The fish had fed out into water so shallow that his top fin was sticking out. About the time I saw it, Old Yeller and Little Arliss did too. They made a run at it. The fish went scooting away toward deeper water, only Yeller was too fast for him. He pounced on the fish and shut his big mouth down over it and went romping to the bank, where he dropped it down on the grass and let it flop. And here came Little Arliss to fall on it like I guess he’d been doing everything else. The minute he got his hands on it, the fish finned him and he went to crying.

But he didn’t turn the fish loose. He just grabbed it up and went running and squawling toward the house, where he gave the fish to Mama. His hands were all bloody by then, where the fish had finned him. They swelled up and got mighty sore; not even a mesquite thorn hurts as bad as a sharp fish fin when it’s run deep into your hand.

But as soon as Mama had wrapped his hands in a poultice of mashed-up prickly-pear root to draw out the poison, Little Arliss forgot all about his hurt. And that night when we ate the fish for supper, he told the biggest windy I ever heard about how he’d dived ‘way down into a deep hole under the rocks and dragged that fish out and nearly got drowned before he could swim to the bank with it.

But when I tried to tell Mama what really happened, she wouldn’t let me. “Now, this is Arliss’s story,” she said. “You let him tell it the way he wants to.”

I told Mama then, I said: “Mama, that old yellor dog is going to make the biggest liar in Texas out of Little Arliss.”

But Mama just laughed at me, like she always laughed at Little Arliss’s big windies after she’d gotten off where he couldn’t hear her. She said for me to let Little Arliss alone. She said that if he ever told a bigger whopper than the ones I used to tell, she had yet to hear it.

Well, I hushed then. If Mama wanted Little Arliss to grow up to be the biggest liar in Texas, I guessed it wasn’t any of my business.
All of which, I figure, is what led up to Little Arliss’s catching the bear. I think Mama had let him tell so many big yarns about his catching live game that he’d begun to believe him himself.

When it happened, I was down the creek a ways, splitting rails to fix up the yard fence where the bulls had torn it down. I’d been down there since dinner, working in a stand of tall slim post oaks. I’d chop down a tree, trim off the branches as far up as I wanted, then cut away the rest of the top. After that I’d start splitting the log.

I’d split the log by driving steel wedges into the wood. I’d start at the big end and hammer in a wedge with the back side of my axe. This would start a little split running lengthways of the log. Then I’d take a second wedge and drive it into this split. This would split the log further along and, at the same time, loosen the first wedge. I’d then knock the first wedge loose and move it up in front of the second one.

Driving one wedge ahead of the other like that, I could finally split a log in two halves. Then I’d go to work on the halves, splitting them apart. That way, from each log, I’d come out with four rails.

Swinging that chopping axe was sure hard work. The sweat poured off me. My back muscles ached. The axe got so heavy I could hardly swing it. My breath got harder and harder to breathe.

An hour before sundown, I was worn down to a nub. It seemed like I couldn’t hit another lick. Papa could have lasted till past sundown, but I didn’t see how I could. I shouldered my axe and started toward the cabin, trying to think up some excuse to tell Mama to keep her from knowing I was played clear out.

That’s when I heard Little Arliss scream.

Well, Little Arliss was a screamer by nature. He’d scream when he was happy and scream when he was mad and a lot of times he’d scream just to hear himself make a noise. Generally, we paid no more mind to his screaming than we did to the boggle of a wild turkey.

But this time was different. The second I heard his screaming, I felt my heart flop clear over. This time I knew Little Arliss was in real trouble.

I tore out up the trail leading toward the cabin. A minute before, I’d been so tired out with my rail splitting that I couldn’t have struck a trot. But now I raced through the tall trees in that creek bottom, covering ground like a scared wolf.

Little Arliss’s second scream, when it came, was louder and shriller and more frantic-sounding than the first. Mixed with it was a whimpering crying sound that I knew didn’t come from him. It was a sound I’d heard before and seemed like I ought to know what it was, but right then I couldn’t place it.

Then, from way off to one side came a sound that I would have recognized anywhere. It was the coughing roar of a charging bear. I’d just heard it once in my life. That was the time Mama had shot and wounded a hog-killing bear and Papa had had to finish it off with a knife to keep it from getting her.
My heart went to pushing up into my throat, nearly choking off my wind. I strained for every lick of speed I could get out of my running legs. I didn’t know what sort of fix Little Arliss had got himself into, but I knew that it had to do with a mad bear, which was enough.

The way the late sun slanted through the trees had the trail all cross-banded with streaks of bright light and dark shade. I ran through these bright and dark patches so fast that the changing light nearly blinded me. Then suddenly, I raced out into the open where I could see ahead. And what I saw sent a chill clear through to the marrow of my bones.

There was Little Arliss, down in that spring hole again. He was lying half in and half out of the water, holding onto the hind leg of a little black bear cub no bigger than a small coon. The bear cub was out on the bank, whimpering and crying and clawing the rocks with all three of his other feet, trying to pull away. But Little Arliss was holding on for all he was worth, scared now and screaming his head off. Too scared to let go.

How the bear cub ever came to prowl close enough for Little Arliss to grab him, I don’t know. And why he didn’t turn on him and bite loose, I couldn’t figure out, either. Unless he was like Little Arliss, too scared to think.

But all of that didn’t matter now. What mattered was the bear cub’s mama. She’d heard the cries of her baby and was coming to save him. She was coming so fast that she had the brush popping and breaking as she crashed through and over it. I could see her black heavy figure piling off down the slant on the far side of Birdsong Creek. She was roaring mad and ready to kill.

And worst of all, I could see that I’d never get there in time! Mama couldn’t either. She’d heard Arliss, too, and here she came from the cabin, running down the slant toward the spring, screaming at Arliss, telling him to turn the bear cub loose. But Little Arliss wouldn’t do it. All he’d do was hang with that hind leg and let out one shrill shriek after another as fast as he could suck in a breath.
Now the she bear was charging across the shallows in the creek. She was knocking sheets of water high in the bright sun, charging with her fur up and her long teeth bared, filling the canyon with that awful coughing roar. And no matter how fast Mama ran or how fast I ran, the she bear was going to get there first!

I think I nearly went blind then, picturing what was going to happen to Little Arliss. I know that I opened my mouth to scream and not any sound came out.

Then, just as the bear went lunging up the creek bank toward Little Arliss and her cub, a flash of yellow came streaking out of the brush.

It was that big yeller dog. He was roaring like a mad bull. He wasn’t one-third as big and heavy as the she bear, but when he piled into her from one side, he rolled her clear off her feet. They went down in a wild, roaring tangle of twisting bodies and scrambling feet and slashing fangs.

As I raced past them, I saw the bear lunge up to stand on her hind feet like a man while she clawed at the body of the yeller dog hanging to her throat. I didn’t wait to see more. Without ever checking my stride, I ran in and jerked Little Arliss loose from the cub. I grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him up out of that water and slung him toward Mama like he was a half-empty sack of corn. I screamed at Mama. “Grab him, Mama! Grab him and run!” Then I swung my chopping axe high and wheeled, aiming to cave in the she bear’s head with the first lick.

But I never did strike. I didn’t need to. Old Yeller hadn’t let the bear get close enough. He couldn’t handle her; she was too big and strong for that. She’d stand there on her hind feet, hunched over, and take a roaring swing at him with one of those big front claws. She’d slap him head over heels. She’d knock him so far that it didn’t look like he could possibly get back there before she charged again, but he always did. He’d hit the ground rolling, yelling his head off with the pain of the blow; but somehow he’d always roll to his feet. And here he’d come again, ready to tie into her for another round.
I stood there with my axe raised, watching them for a long moment. Then from up toward the house, I heard Mama calling: “Come away from there, Travis. Hurry, son! Run!”

That spooked me. Up till then, I’d been ready to tie into that bear myself. Now, suddenly, I was scared out of my wits again. I ran toward the cabin.

But like it was, Old Yeller nearly beat me there. I didn’t see it, of course, but Mama said that the minute Old Yeller saw we were all in the clear and out of danger, he threw the fight to that she bear and lit out for the house. The bear chased him for a little piece, but at the rate Old Yeller was leaving her behind, Mama said it looked like the bear was backing up.

But if the big yeller dog was scared or hurt in any way when he came dashing into the house, he didn’t show it. He sure didn’t show it like we all did. Little Arliss had hushed his screaming, but he was trembling all over and clinging to Mama like he’d never let her go. And Mama was sitting in the middle of the floor, holding him up close and crying like she’d never stop. And me, I was close to crying, myself.

Old Yeller, though, all he did was come bounding in to jump on us and lick us in the face and bark so loud that there, inside the cabin, the noise nearly made us deaf.

The way he acted, you might have thought that bear fight hadn’t been anything more than a rowdy romp that we’d all taken part in for the fun of it.
Think Critically

1. On page 36, when the bear is charging at Little Arliss, Travis says, “I think I nearly went blind then...” What can you infer about the relationship Travis has with Little Arliss? Compare their relationship to that of brothers in a different story you have read. [Text to Text]

2. Reread the incident with Little Arliss and the bear cub, paying special attention to the verbs the author uses to describe the action. Make a list of five of these verbs and explain their effect on the reader. [Think Like an Author]

3. Analyze how the setting of Old Yeller contributes to the story. Could this have taken place in a setting such as a desert? a city? Explain. [Literary Elements]

4. Look back to page 32 and reread the passage that describes Travis splitting rails. When you visualize this scene, how do you picture Travis? Describe what you see. [Visualize]

5. Look Back and Write Look back at page 30. Write a paragraph using your own words to describe the setting of this scene of Old Yeller. Provide evidence to support your answer. [Test Practice Extended Response]