

Novel: *The Hedge Wizard's Apprentice*

Book One of The Unsettled Lands

Overview

A frontier fantasy road story, *The Hedge Wizard's Apprentice* follows Ben Croft — a self-limiting hedge wizard on the open prairie — as he takes on a fourteen-year-old orphan named Cody as his apprentice and rides a five-month circuit through the frontier territories of the Reach. The novel sits at the intersection of the American Western, epic fantasy, and Gilded Age political fiction: horses and spells, frontier towns and land-acquisition schemes, a dry-humored mentor and a watchful boy who asks better questions than most adults.

Beneath its quiet road-story surface, the novel raises questions that will carry through all five books in the series: What does a person give up when they choose to stay small? What does a parent — biological or chosen — owe a child? And what happens when the machinery of a distant power takes an interest in something you've been trying to keep out of sight?

General Discussion Starters

- 1. First Impressions:** The novel's prose is deliberately unhurried — dialogue-forward, laconic, built for the long road. How did the pacing affect your reading? Did the slower tempo feel like a strength, or did you find yourself pushing for more plot?
- 2. The Genre Blend:** The novel draws consciously from the Western, epic fantasy, and Gilded Age fiction. Which of these three felt most present to you? Where did they reinforce each other, and where did you feel tension between them?
- 3. The Core Tension:** Much of the novel's conflict is internal to Ben — his choice to remain a hedge wizard, to do small good, to move on. Did you find this restraint admirable, frustrating, or both? The novel seems to hold both views simultaneously. Does it earn that ambivalence?

Character Analysis

- 4. Ben Croft:** Ben tells Cody, "You cast that wrong. You cast it, though. That's something." This moment — the correction delivered alongside the acknowledgment — captures something essential about him as a teacher. How does Ben show care without performing it? Can you identify other moments in the novel where his actions speak ahead of his words?
- 5. Cody:** Cody is introduced as watchful, patient, and precise — a boy who observes before speaking and asks better questions than most adults. He has no memory of his origins and, crucially, is not haunted by that absence — he simply doesn't have a past. How does this distinction affect your reading of him? Does the lack of a "mystery of my past" arc make him more or less interesting as a protagonist?

6. Harlan Decker: The epigraph belongs to Decker, and his arrival mid-novel carries significant weight. Ben tells Cody that Decker "has been the other kind of person" — someone who operated outside the law before finding his way to the badge. How does Decker's past shape the moral authority he carries in the present? Is his redemption credible, or does it feel too convenient for the story's needs?

7. The Unseen Antagonist: The man at the desk in Caldrath — whose face we never see — appears only in the novel's final pages. His presence reframes everything that preceded it. Did the shift into his point of view feel earned? How does keeping him anonymous change the nature of the threat he represents?

8. Rook and Argument: The horses are treated as genuine characters. Rook's immediate trust in Cody signals something Ben has not yet said aloud. Argument lives up to his name. What does the novel accomplish by giving the horses this much presence? Is it consistent with the Western tradition it draws from, or is something else happening?

Themes & Symbolism

9. The Cost of Staying Small: Chapter 25 takes its title from Ben's central dilemma. He tells Cody about Callum Briach — a man who was right about everything and became dangerous because of it. Ben's response to that lesson has been to constrain himself deliberately. Is this wisdom or avoidance? Does the novel offer a verdict, or does it leave the question open?

10. Magic as Work: The novel depicts magic as specific, physical, and costly — requiring fluency in an ancient language, precise somatic components, and personal energy that can be depleted to dangerous levels. How does this portrayal shape the story's relationship to power more broadly? Is there an argument being made about the nature of skill and mastery, separate from the fantasy context?

11. The Frontier Code: Decker enforces a law that has no formal legal basis — authority derived from reputation and from being, as Ben puts it, "the right person." Ben reflects that the Frontier Code was built to handle individuals and outlaw gangs, not organized state power. What does this tension suggest about the limits of personal virtue as a governing principle? Is the series setting up an argument that good people are insufficient against institutional evil?

12. Harrow's Ford as Thesis: The novel opens and closes in Harrow's Ford. On return, Ben says: "It's still itself." Cody: "Most of it." The town is both unchanged and changing. What is the novel arguing about specific, ordinary places — and about the relationship between preservation and growth? Does the fact that both things are true register as hope or as warning?

13. The Balance: By the campfire late in the novel, Cody suggests that "the ecosystem does what ecosystems do" and that "something intended it to" are not mutually exclusive. Ben doesn't reply — it's not an argument he has a counter for. What does this exchange reveal about the novel's cosmology? Does the series seem to be arguing for a universe that is morally ordered, morally indifferent, or something more complicated?

The Ending & What Comes Next

14. **The Coda:** The novel's final pages shift to a lamplight scene in Caldrath. A man reads a report, makes a four-word note in the margin, and moves on to the next document. We do not see his face or the four words. How did this ending land for you? The novel has been a quiet road story — does the coda's threat feel earned, or does it arrive from a different register?

15. **"Working on it":** When a child asks Cody what he is now that he's no longer technically an apprentice, he says: "Working on it." Ben, in the doorway, looks at the floor for a moment. What is each of them feeling in that exchange? Why does the novel choose to end one of its most significant character moments — Cody's formal advancement — this way rather than making it a scene?

16. **Ben's Argument Lost:** In the final chapter, Ben admits to himself that "appropriate professional distance had never been available to him with this particular situation" and that losing that argument had been "one of the better things he'd lost." Ben does not say this to Cody. Does he need to? What would it change if he did?

17. **Series Anticipation:** The novel ends with two letters written, a second Caldrath operation identified, and Cody's origins still unknown to him. What felt most unresolved as you finished? Which of the novel's questions do you most want the series to answer — and which do you hope it leaves open?

Quotes for Close Reading

"I've been a hedge wizard for twenty years. I'm very good at problems that are exactly this size." Ben says this with complete seriousness. Is it a statement of genuine competence, a way of managing expectations, or a quiet acknowledgment of his own limits? All three?

"He was right about all of it. Being right became the primary fact about him." Ben on Callum Briach. Does the novel suggest that being right is insufficient — or that the problem is something more specific about what being right does to a person over time?

"The resource doesn't go away. The relationship that sustained everyone around it does." Ben explaining Caldrath's land-acquisition strategy. How does this apply beyond the political plot? Is the novel making an argument about what communities actually run on?

"The fish don't argue." Ben, watching a fish surface and disappear during a teaching moment. This is one of the novel's driest jokes, but also one of its clearest statements about the draíocht's philosophy. What does it mean as magical instruction? What does it mean as life advice?

"The frontier will take whatever you bring to it and ask for more." The novel's epigraph, attributed to Decker. By the end of the book, how has the frontier tested Ben and Cody? What did each bring to it — and what did it ask them to give up?

Suggested Activity

The Harrow's Ford Question:

Ben has spent twenty years on the road, doing small good, and moving on before help becomes dependency. Cody ends the novel feeling, for the first time in four years, like he is "going somewhere."

Before your next meeting: identify one thing in your own life that you have limited deliberately — a capability, an ambition, a relationship — and consider what philosophy you have built around that limitation. Is it wisdom? Protection? Both? Bring the answer, or the question, to the group.