

A man in a red shirt is shown from the chest up, splashing in a river. He is looking towards a waterfall cascading over a mossy rock face. The scene is filled with water spray and green foliage.

# LEEPIKE RIDGE

N. D. WILSON

Praise for

# LEEPIKE RIDGE

A New York Public Library 100 Titles  
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★ "This is a ripping good adventure yarn."

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"While *Leepike Ridge* is primarily an adventure story involving murder, treachery, and betrayal, Wilson's rich imagination and his quirky characters are a true delight. . . . There are enough twists and turns in the plot to keep both seasoned and reluctant readers turning the pages."

—*School Library Journal*

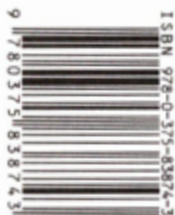
"Wilson sets the scene vividly, from Tom's home to the labyrinth of tunnels and caverns under the mountain, and the central characters' emotional lives develop both naturally and affectingly. . . . [Readers] will appreciate both the fast-paced adventure and Tom's determination to make the impossible journey back home."

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# LEEPIKE RIDGE

N. D. WILSON

A YEARLING BOOK

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*For my boys and my beauties*

# CONTENTS

1. Time (Once Upon A)	1
2. Voyage	17
3. The Mountain's Belly	26
4. The Second Suitor	39
5. Dark Encounter	53
6. Sky Water	65
7. King Fisher	78
8. Infestation	101
9. Reginald Spins His	117
10. Diving for Sunshine	139
11. Circumspected	156
12. 'Dads and Jam	172
13. Easter	204
14. Crazy Berry	219



# LEEPIKE RIDGE

(LONGS-DUNN)

- one -

## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

In the history of the world there have been lots of *onces* and lots of *times*, and every time has had a once upon it. Most people will tell you that the once upon a time happened in a land far, far away, but it really depends on where you are. The once upon a time may have been just outside your back door. It may have been beneath your very feet. It might not have been in a land at all but deep in the sea's belly or bobbing around on its back.

In this case it was in a land, for the most part. If you know of a valley where a small mountain peak once shaped like a crescent moon has tumbled down and disturbed the old willow trees growing beside a slow stream, then this story does not begin far, far away, and you've probably already heard it. But if you, like me,



## leepike ridge

had to be told about this valley and the stream and the old, dry house chained to the top of the enormous rock beside the foot of the mountain, then this story does begin once upon a time in a land most definitely far, far away. Anyone close to this valley is sure to have heard of it.

Our story had already begun when the dust-covered delivery truck found the gravel road leading into the valley and followed it to its end beside the old willow rock. Two men got out and glared at the wooden stairs that crawled up to the house.

"Don't know what sort of people would build up there," the driver muttered.

"People who liked rocks, maybe. Or views."

"Or stairs."

Thomas Hammond, who was down by the stream with a red plastic cup full of leeches, heard them and turned to watch. They fished the large refrigerator box out of the back of the truck and strapped thick belts beneath thicker bellies, preparing to tote it to the top, two more deliverymen in a long history of deliverymen who would sweat and curse their way up the long, curving stairs. Finally, at the top, his mother greeted them and held the kitchen door open as they squeezed the box inside.

Tom had traveled around the sun eleven times when the delivery truck brought his mother's newest



## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

fridge, but a number doesn't really describe his age. His father had been gone for three years, and that made him feel older. He was the sort of boy who had many friends when he was at school, but what they knew about him was limited to his freckles, brown hair, long arms, and the clenched determination that settled onto his face when he was angry or competing. His smile, which was wide and quick, was always surprising, and his laugh, which lived in his narrow belly, was unpredictable. In games, any games, he was the first to dive for a ball, to slide on concrete, or to get a mouthful of dirt. He was taller than many of the boys in his class, but not the tallest, and he always seemed to have scabs.

Wait for the rest of the story, and you will know him better when I am done.

People thought Tom's house was chained to the top of the rock for a reason. Some said the first house in the valley had been built down by the stream and that the spring floods had washed it away. The second house, they said, had been built on top of the rock, but one of the big summer thunderstorms had blown it off. So the third house had been chained to spikes bored deep into the stone. But no one really knew why or when the house had been built, only that it was there now and it had stayed put through lifetimes, though occasional electrical surges were hard on

lightbulbs and appliances. The lightbulbs were easy to replace and the appliances were usually under warranty, so Tom's mother, Elizabeth, didn't mind. She didn't have to carry the new ones up the stairs.

When the truck had gone and the dust had settled, Tom dumped forty-seven confused leeches onto the bank, where he thought the birds would find them and be pleasantly surprised. Cup in hand, he jumped through the long grass and ran up the stairs to look at his mother's shiny new refrigeration. At the top he found the box. It was lying on its side, carefully arranged and waiting for him. He bent over and looked in. A long brick of white foam filled the bottom, and a small stack of cookies sat on it, all the way at the end. Why? Tom wondered. Why does she think I still want to play in boxes?

Tom got down on his knees and retrieved the cookies. Back on his feet, he ate thoughtfully as he kicked at the fridge box and watched it skid across the rock. He kicked again, and the box tumbled down the rock and out onto the breeze. Tom watched plastic packing bags slip out, followed by the large piece of foam. The box bounced in the gravel drive and rolled into the long grass, but the foam floated nicely, clearing the first willow trees. The plastic bags disappeared.

"Hey!" his mother called from inside. "You'd better



## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

get that all picked up before some duck chokes on it! Come in and see the fridge!”

“We don’t have ducks,” Tom said. He stared at the last cookie in his hand, counted the chocolate chips, and then slid the whole thing into his mouth.

It was a nice fridge, too big for the corner of the kitchen where it would live out its electrically dangerous life. It was black and shiny, in sharp contrast to the dingy kitchen, and it had water and ice in the door. The last two fridges had both had the water and ice dispensers in the door but had never dispensed either one. They wouldn’t work without a water line, and a water line had never been run.

“Well, you can head back out,” Elizabeth said when the tour was over. “Try not to be too long, though. Jeffrey is coming to dinner, and I’ll need help setting.” She gave him half of a wide smile. “And see if you can track down all that trash you just spread through the valley.”

She pushed her blond hair behind her ears and turned back to the pile of potato peels in the kitchen sink. Tom stood at the door, looking back at his tall, slender mother with her hands full of potato. He usually liked to watch his mother cook, but he didn’t like watching her cook for Jeffrey.

Tom found the box easily enough. He danced



## leepike ridge

around it, picked his spot, and then kicked it back toward the base of the stairs. He liked the sound it made, and he liked how far one kick could send something so big. Searching for the plastic bags and the foam, he crossed the stream on an old fallen log, wandered into the willow trees, and walked from canopy to canopy, pushing his way through the curtains formed by the weeping branches. Occasionally he could see his house, perched on top of the rock, and occasionally the whole world would disappear and he would be left with nothing but the trunk and branches of a willow and a nest full of noisy birds hanging out over the slow water.

It was in one of these willow worlds that he found the foam. It had landed high up in the tree, and never had Tom seen anything that seemed so out of place, unless he counted seeing Jeffrey at his own dining room table, sitting in his father's chair. Tom tried not to think of Jeffrey or the way he smiled at his mother. He tried hard not to be angry with his mother for smiling back. Instead, he focused on finding rocks he could throw at the foam.

When he had collected a small pile, he began to assault the large foam brick from within the tree. Or at least he tried. A vertical throw is difficult enough without a tangled canopy of branches getting in the way. Tom would lean as far back as his balance would

## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

allow, cock his hand low to the earth, and then, starting with his legs and stomach, he would uncoil, bringing his arm around as hard as he could. The rock would rattle in the branches, and Tom would duck and dart around, trying to avoid getting hit, until it returned to the soft earth with a slap or to the muddy water with a plop.

He was on his second pile of rocks, and his shoulder was beginning to ache, when he finally hit the white slab. The rock bounced off a branch on the way back down and hit him on the arm, but Tom didn't mind. The foam slid down the willow branches like a sled. It slowed, then tripped free and spun out into the water.

Nearly an hour passed, and Tom didn't know it. He traveled two hundred yards beside the stream, assaulting the floating foam with clods, rocks, branches, and mud. At times, he approached the water's edge with a slick lump of willow wood and hurled it at the white craft, sending the foam into the reeds with the splash when it fell short. Sometimes he retreated and bombarded the thing from a distance, assigning the foam a variety of villainous passengers, most of whom drowned.

Tom had almost rounded the bend in the valley when he saw the dust trail of what he knew must be Jeffrey's little car. He then noticed the time and the



grime on his hands, and he wondered if he'd heard his mother yelling for him a little while before. He couldn't be quite sure.

The foam ended up tucked beneath a willow tree, and Tom, breathing heavily, met Jeffrey at the bottom of the stairs. Tom had every intention of being polite. At least, he wasn't planning on calling the man any names.

"You've been playing hard," Jeffrey said, and reached out to touch Tom's head. Tom ducked and then straightened up slowly, looking Jeffrey in the eye.

"What game was it?" Jeffrey asked.

"Nothing," Tom said, and he stepped around him and hurried up the stairs. His mother met him at the top. She was smiling, but Tom saw her glance at his hands and sweaty hair.

"Wash up," she said. "I called for you."

"Sorry," he murmured.

"Hello, Jeffrey." The cheerfulness in her voice bothered Tom. "You got a haircut!"

"I got 'em all cut," Jeffrey said. But Tom heard nothing else because he shut the kitchen door behind him.

Everyone said Jeffrey was a nice man. He was also tall, with lanky limbs and a saggy middle. Worse than that, he had a saggy chest and wore unbuttoned polo shirts. He always smiled, regardless of the situation,



## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

and taught fourth grade at Tom's school. He drove a little green car the color of dry toothpaste. To Tom, he had been Mr. Veatch until this summer, when suddenly he had begun dropping by (from his house near school, about twenty miles away) and wanting to be called Jeffrey. As far as Tom was concerned, having to call him Jeffrey was just one step closer to having to call him Dad.

Over dinner, Jeffrey smiled and nodded. He commented on the potatoes. He said he'd spent his day at the library reading up on local history. He thought the nice weather was due to end and wouldn't last through the rest of the weekend. He had heard storms were on the way for Sunday, Monday at the latest. Then he turned to Tom.

"What have you been up to today?" Jeffrey asked. He was chewing while he talked. I don't even do that, Tom thought. He didn't look up. He was sculpting his potatoes.

"Thomas has been playing with the box from the new refrigerator," his mother answered.

Tom's head snapped up, and he felt his teeth squeak.

"Was he, Elizabeth?" Jeffrey asked. "Was he? Oh, I remember those years. One time, I managed to convince my parents to let me save a box from one of our moves—we were always moving—and I took all sorts

of things in there and had them all arranged like I was selling them. I must have played store in that box for a week before it finally collapsed after a rain."

Tom was incredulous. This man was admitting to having played store in a box for nearly a week. Tom stared at Jeffrey's long head with its curly, receding hair and the small flap of skinny-man fat that hung beneath his chin.

"I did all sorts of things with boxes," Jeffrey continued. Now Tom was staring at his lips, two chapped leeches that belonged in a cup or, better yet, on the bank waiting for the birds. Except the birds would probably be too grossed out to touch them.

Jeffrey was still talking. "It's healthy for a young boy to use his imagination. I often think that those childish games are what made me what I am today. I remember using one box for a pet store for all my stuffed animals, and another time I missed school so much over a summer vacation that I played classroom almost every day. But that wasn't actually with a box. I did that with the blankets on my bed."

"Well," Elizabeth said. She put her elbows on the table, her chin in her hands, and smiled. "I think Thomas was playing a cruder game. I sent him to pick up all the trash that had blown off the rock, and he ended up playing war with a piece of Styrofoam in the creek."



## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

"I wasn't playing war," Tom said. Still, he thought, it was better than selling stuffed animals out of a box.

"You were throwing things at it."

"I was throwing things at it. I wasn't playing war."

Elizabeth smiled. "I opened the window, and I could hear you making all the same noises you make when you play with your army men."

Tom went red on the outside. Inside, he went black.

"I," he said, and arched his eyebrows into his hair, "do not play with army men."

Jeffrey was laughing. "Oh, you don't need to be embarrassed," he said. "It's natural that a boy your age should still be playing with toys. Even war—though a preoccupation with that particular game could be unhealthy."

Tom stood up.

His mother stopped smiling. "Tom?" she said. A thousand thoughts poured through Tom's head. One hundred things to say. He felt his face relax and his jaw pop, creep forward, and lock. Tom stared at Jeffrey through half-lidded eyes and knew that, just like at school, he wouldn't say anything. Then, to his surprise, his mouth opened.

"Don't ever touch my mother," he said, and he found himself outside. The screen door banged behind him.

Tom stood on the rock and looked around. His

impulse was to go down to the creek and find the piece of packing foam, but that was not an option. He would not be seen with the foam again. He walked to the back corner of the house and stared at the chains that anchored it. Two chains came off the corner, one at the base and the other higher up, near the edge of the roof. Both were attached to the same spike in the rock. After a balancing act, a slip, and some scrambling, Tom was on the roof. A few seconds later he was on the peak, then sitting on the chimney. He did not intend to move until the dust had settled behind Jeffrey Veatch's car, if then.

It didn't take long. Tom sat on the chimney on the house on the enormous rock and overlooked his valley. He stared down at the tops of willow trees and at the stream. He looked at the meadow grass on the other side, and he waited. One solitary mud hen moved in and out of reeds along the water. It isn't a duck, Tom told himself. And it wouldn't try to eat a plastic bag. Then the kitchen door opened, and Tom stopped overlooking and began overlistening.

"Well, Elizabeth," Jeffrey said, "I'll leave you to think over what I've offered."

"You don't need to go because of Tom." She didn't sound happy. Tom thought she sounded like her arms were crossed.

"I want to give him a little space for now. Don't be



## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

too hard on him. It's normal. He doesn't really dislike me. His anger is with himself."

Elizabeth and Jeffrey ended the conversation with pleasantries, and Tom watched Jeffrey's back descend over the edge of the rock. When the little car began spreading its dust trail, Tom's mother spoke.

"Thomas," she said quietly. "You get off the roof right now. You know what I've said about climbing up there."

Tom held his breath and didn't say anything. His mother stepped into view. Her hands were on her hips, and her eyebrows were up. "Do you think I can't hear something your size slipping around on the roof?"

"Did he know?" Tom asked.

"Well, I thought he did," his mother answered. "It was hard not to notice, but I doubt he'd have said what he did if he knew you were listening. You know, Tom, I don't know what makes you do it. Jeffrey likes you."

"He wants to marry you," Tom said.

"I know. He told me."

"What?" Tom caught himself on the chimney. "What did you tell him?"

"Come down, and we'll talk about it."

"I'm not coming down until you tell me what you said."

Elizabeth sighed. "I told him I would think about it. He's coming back tomorrow."

"Why?"

"To hear my answer. Now come down. You should still eat something." Then Elizabeth stepped back inside and shut the door behind her.

When Tom stepped into the house, she was sitting at the table waiting for him, and she had on her determined look. Her fingers were moving, flexing, and drumming on the tabletop. Otherwise, she sat perfectly still.

"Thomas, come sit down."

Tom did.

"Tomorrow," she continued, "you will apologize to Mr. Veatch."

"Jeffrey," Tom said.

"Jeffrey," she said. "Jeffrey wants to try to get to know you better. He wants to play with you down by the creek. You will be polite, and you will look him in the eye when you answer his questions."

"I'll throw up if you marry him," Tom said quietly.

Elizabeth leaned forward. "And I'll have you know something else, Thomas Hammond. I have not decided what I'm going to say to Mr. Veatch tomorrow, but I'm certainly not going to make my decision based on whether or not you are misbehaving."

Eventually, somehow, the evening ended. Dishes were done. The house was tidied. No one was doing much talking. Tom stared at a book for a while. Then



## TIME (ONCE UPON A)

he stared at the floor, and then at a couch cushion. At some point his mother kissed him, and when he was lying in bed he knew that he had brushed his teeth because he could taste it, but he couldn't remember doing any actual brushing.

He didn't do any sleeping.

The night was not unusual for the summertime. Tom's window was open, and occasionally a breeze that had stumbled between the two ridges and into the valley would come rolling along, billowing Tom's curtains and rocking the house ever so slightly. Tom listened to the quietly straining chains and felt the house shiver.

He couldn't stop thinking about Jeffrey. He knew that his mother would say no. At least, he knew that she *should* say no. He thought about playing with Jeffrey by the creek. Maybe he would fall in. The piece of foam needed to be gone. There should be no sign that it ever existed. He would sit on the bank and watch Jeffrey get leeches when he waded in the water. If he waded in the water, which he probably wouldn't.

He should get rid of the foam.

Tom pulled on his sneakers without socks and grabbed a sweatshirt from his closet. He knew that his mother would hear the creaks in the hall. They were impossible to get around, so he went to the window. It was not a new route for him, and a moment later he

stood on the rock in the warm summer air, pushed by one of the rolling breezes. The moon was up, painting the world silver, making things look just a little more alive.

Tom stared out at the shaggy, moonlit willow heads, and then his feet found the stairs.



~ two ~

## VOYAGE

After a few mouthfuls of moon-flavored air, even the stubbornly drowsy can find themselves wide-eyed. Tom was hardly drowsy, and he took more than a few mouthfuls. By the time he had reached the base of the rock, his senses were heightened nearly to the point of bursting. All the normal noises of life were gone, leaving behind the secretive sounds, the shy sounds, the whispers and conversations of moss disputing with grass over some soft piece of earth, or the humming-birds snoring. Tom could hear his toe move in his shoe and willow leaves brushing against each other fifty yards away. He heard a water rat click its teeth, though he hardly knew what it was. He felt as loud as thunder when he walked, so he broke into a run, jumping in the tall grass and pushing his way beneath the weeping willows.



Elizabeth was not asleep either. She had heard Tom stirring in his room, but she hadn't heard him in the hall, so she didn't get out of bed. She was thinking. Or at least she was trying to make herself think.

Three years without the husband she loved had begun to wear her down. Tom needed a dad. Jeffrey liked her. Jeffrey even liked Tom. Tom hated Jeffrey.

"Tom can just grow up," she said out loud. She shivered and pulled the blankets up over her head.

Tom had planned on being angry. He'd intended to think dark thoughts out in the night, but the night wouldn't let him. The earth smelled pleasant, and the air, freshly exhaled by the grass and trees, filled his chest. He found the slab of foam under the dark willow belly where he had stored it and tossed it into the water, still beneath the tree.

Willow trees are fond of water, and weeping willows love to dip their fingers. Their branches grow thickest on the waterfront, and they frequently reach the bottom of whatever stream or pond they lean toward.

Tom's foam floated toward the ring of branches draped in the stream and then floated back, too light to push through them. Tom stood and stared at the refrigerator-length piece of foam, and he wondered.



## VOYAGE

He stopped wondering, and he tested. He put his foot on the foam. Then he squatted down and knelt on it. It still floated. He pushed off the mud bank and drifted toward the leafy ring. He reached out for the branches and quickly dropped onto his belly when the raft rocked and reeled. The leaves parted in front of him as he left his harbor and entered the moonlight.

Tom floated across the stream and pushed off of a large rock. He ran his hands along the bank until he found a stick large enough and began steering himself a course, pushing off of reeds and occasional rocks. His neck grew sore looking up while on his belly, so he got onto his knees but couldn't get comfortable, over-balanced, and nearly fell in. Finally, after a very cautious operation, he managed to lie on his back with his head upstream. His hood was up and his hands were in the pouch of his sweatshirt, though one still gripped his stick. The heels of his shoes skimmed the water's surface.

Tom stared at the stars and the moon and felt as if he'd been awake forever, watching enormous worlds of flame, tiny in the distance, travel through the sky. But then he remembered that *we* are the ones doing the traveling. And that there were as many stars beneath him as there were above. His mind slowed down as he pictured himself floating above an upside-down sky full of stars.

## leepike rfdge

The moon was bright, and as his eyes began to water, he shut them.

The world has seen many men sail down rivers or out to sea lying on rafts or in boats, even on large pyres on the wooden decks of battered warships. These men were usually dead and gripping swords, not sticks, and wearing armor. Sometimes their ships were on fire, and sometimes the men were surrounded by trophies or treasures taken from enemies. Tom was the first one to ever strike such a pose on this stream, though it had been taught the routine by its grandfathers, and it treated him honorably. And while he was definitely the first in history to make such a voyage on white packing foam, being alive when he made it was not terribly original. Plenty of Viking kings had awakened to discover themselves alone on a burning ship with lots of gold. And at least three different men had been roused to consciousness by being dumped over waterfalls, only to drown in the pools below, pulled down by the weight of their armor.

But Tom was still unique, and the water guided him well. He brushed against the reeds but never stopped, and when he came against a rock, the water softened the blow and turned him around to travel headfirst for a while.

Over the years, Tom had followed the stream quite



## VOYAGE

a ways, well beyond the first curve of the valley. When he had walked beside it, it had always been day, and there had been frogs to catch, small pools to dig, trees to climb, or rocks to roll down the bank into the water. Now, sleeping and carried by the stream's undistracted pace, he traveled much more steadily. And though the stream may have appeared slow, it had always believed that appearances do it an injustice.

Tom made it around the valley's first curve in under an hour, beyond the second in under two, and farther down the stream's course than he had ever traveled in exactly two hours and thirty-seven minutes. He slept soundly. The emotions of the day had drained him, and the initial rousing effect of the night air now soothed his lungs and kept his sleep deep. He dreamt of sailing, and as he dreamt, the valley narrowed, the ridge that led to his own small peak closed in on the stream, and the water quickened.

Tom woke to the sound of human voices and the sensation of falling backward. He was moving fast. The stream had pulled the nose of the foam raft low in the water, and as he jerked awake, it dipped under, spilling water down his back. He was already very cold. The chill of the water, only inches away from him for hours, had crept into his bones.

"What is that?" Tom heard a man ask, and he

## leepike ridge

looked up the bank. The moon was near the horizon now but still bright. Two men were staring at him. He was passing them backward and quickly. He tried to sit up.

"Hey!" one of the men yelled, running after him. Tom tried to turn around, dipping the sides of the raft under and making himself colder. He tried to angle toward the bank, but the stream was much too wide and the current kept him in the middle. He took a deep breath, preparing to roll off the side and swim for the bank. Before he could, the water bubbled up beneath him and cracked his shoulders and head against a rock. He went all the way under, clutching at the foam. He was being pulled hard, and his legs swung up and under him until they banged against a rock ceiling.

For a moment, he got his face back into the air. One arm was hooked over the white raft, and the other grabbed at the rock's surface, only it wasn't just a rock. It was a rock face, almost a cliff, and he was being pulled under it. His body was already horizontal, and everything but his arms and face were under the stone. He opened his mouth to yell and swallowed frothing water. Another breath, and another mouthful of stream. The men on the bank had caught up and were now just watching. Tom's hand slipped, and he shot



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