

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for National Velvet by Enid Bagnold

Book Information

Enid Bagnold, National Velvet
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In this beloved tale, a fourteen-year-old girl rides her piebald horse in the Grand National.

Topics: Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; Animals, Horses; Classics, Classics (All); Popular Groupings, College Bound; Series, Charming Classics; Sports/Recreation, Horse Racing

Main Characters

Dan Taylor Mi's deceased father; he coached Araminty when she swam the Channel

Donald Brown Velvet's four-year-old brother, who is a mischievous, loving boy

Edwina, Malvolia (Mally), and Meredith (Merry) Brown Velvet's older sisters

Jacob the Browns' terrier dog

Mi (Michael) Taylor Mr. Brown's assistant, who is also the son of Mrs. Brown's former swimming coach; he encourages and arranges for Velvet to race in the Grand National

Miss Ada the Browns' old carthorse

Mr. Brown Velvet's father, who supports his family as a butcher

Mr. Cellini an old man who wills his horses to Velvet just before he commits suicide

Mr. Ede the owner of the piebald, who raffles the horse at an auction after becoming frustrated with its numerous escapes

Mrs. Araminty Brown Velvet's mother; she is a former swimmer of the Channel who supports Velvet's determination to race the piebald

Sir Pericles, Mrs. James, George, Fancy, and Angelina the horses Velvet acquires from the estate of Mr. Cellini

the piebald the horse Velvet wins in a raffle and rides to win the Grand National

Velvet Brown the principal character of the story; a girl of fourteen with a passion for horses who is determined to bring glory to her piebald horse

Vocabulary

gelded castrated

gymkhanas contests held to test the skills of competitors in horsemanship

piebald a horse that is spotted or patched, usually in black and white

toffs elegantly dressed young men

Synopsis

Velvet Brown is a fourteen-year-old girl who has a passion for horses. She has cut pictures of champion horses from various magazines, and she spends her time between school and chores daydreaming and going through the motions of caring for them. She and her family live at the edge of town in a house that is partitioned to separate her father's butchering business from the living quarters. Her mother, Araminty Brown, once renowned for swimming the English Channel, cares for the family, which includes Velvet's three older sisters, Edwina, Malvolia, and Meredith, and a little mischievous brother, Donald. A young man named Mi Taylor, the son of Araminty's former swimming coach, also lives with the family and helps Mr. Brown in his business.

Recently, a piebald horse has been escaping its enclosure and terrorizing the area. Its owner decides to raffle it to avoid any further problems for himself. Velvet and her siblings purchase chances. On the day of the raffle, Velvet delivers meat to a rich landowner, Mr. Cellini. They speak about horses and Mr. Cellini realizes Velvet's passion for them. He shows her his stables, asks for a pencil and gives Velvet a paper to sign, then leaves and commits suicide. Velvet becomes the heir to his five horses. When she returns home, she also learns she has won the piebald horse in the raffle.

With the acquisition of six horses, Velvet's dream now expands. After riding the piebald and seeing him jump, she envisions riding him in the Grand

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National horse race to bring him the glory he deserves, next to all the former champions she has read about. She shares her dream with Mi, who at first discourages her since girls are not allowed to ride in the race. But then she convinces him she could pass for a boy. Together they conspire to enter the race. They get the entrance fee from Araminty, who gives her prize money from her swimming days, and they use an alias to obtain registration papers. Velvet informs her mother of her intentions to race the horse herself just as she and Mi are to leave for Liverpool where the race will take place.

Once in Liverpool, Velvet becomes sick with excitement. Mi preps her for the race, explaining the various jumps and rules. In the dressing area, the other riders question them suspiciously, but they avoid detection. As the race begins, a thick mist covers the course. Even so, Mi sees that Velvet and her horse are one of four to complete a difficult jump. At the end, Velvet and the piebald are victorious, yet an objection is raised because Velvet fainted and slipped off the horse before entering the unsaddling area. She is taken to the race course hospital where a nun discovers she is a girl. Velvet is whisked from the course to a city hospital, with the press in hot pursuit. The objection is sustained and another horse is declared the winner. The fact that she is a fourteen-year-old girl astounds the media and captures international attention. Velvet and Mi are brought before a commission for fraud charges, which are eventually dropped because the crowd assembled outside the meeting place is so adamant about her defense. When the clamor dies down, Velvet returns to her innocent existence as a girl with a horse.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does paying the entrance fee in gold sovereigns raise eyebrows?

Sovereigns are not the usual currency during the time period of the story, and gold sovereigns are worth more than the amount necessary for the entrance fee. Mi's insistence on paying the entire amount instead of paying in increments and his resoluteness in paying in sovereigns instead of exchanging the gold for currency brings suspicion on him.

Literary Analysis

How does the mist that shrouds the racecourse contribute to the tone and mood of the race scene?

The mist shrouding the racecourse echoes the mystery shrouding the race. It lends a sense of excitement, anticipation, and surprise. It also adds suspense since the ending of the race is not obvious and needs to be unraveled slowly as Velvet becomes more conscious of her surroundings.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Araminty confident Velvet's stomach will settle by the time she is sixteen?

Since Araminty's and Velvet's temperaments are somewhat the same, Araminty may have faced a similar nervous condition in her youth that went away as she matured or gained self-confidence. It is also possible Araminty just says it will disappear, thinking the less Velvet focuses on her condition, the better it will get. She may just be planting a seed for positive thinking.

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Constructing Meaning

Velvet has a passion for horses, and she fulfills her competition dream. What is your passion and dream? What would you need to accomplish it?

Answers will vary. Students should state an interest and goal they would like to achieve. It may require getting something, just as Velvet needs to acquire the horses before her dream can be fulfilled. Once acquired, the students should recognize that practice and determination are part of reaching the goal. They may meet with failure along the way.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting Oftentimes when a book is made into a movie, a screenwriter alters the story to better accommodate the story to a screenplay. Obtain the film version of *National Velvet*. Students can compare the book with the movie, noting any similarities or differences between their impressions of characters from their reading to the character on screen. Set aside time for a class discussion to share observations.

Recognizing Detail Velvet spends an enormous amount of time dreaming about horses prior to actually owning any. She meticulously cuts pictures of champions from magazines and then cares for them as if they are real. Encourage the students to learn all they can about horse care. They can make posters that show the various tools and equipment needed for grooming, feeding, and health care.

Responding to Literature The Browns' butcher shop is separated from the family living quarters by a partition. It was quite common in years past and still is common under some circumstances for families to live behind or above their place of business. Ask students how their family life would be different if their parents' place of business was adjacent to their home. In what ways might they have to help with the family business? What restrictions might they have to comply with that may not be regulated now -- noise level? phone use? cleanliness? Have students write a brief

response on the changes in their daily routine that might occur.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Velvet enters the Grand National in England. She knows about the history and the former champions of the race. Many other races and contests take place all over the world, not only in horse racing or swimming, as was the case with Mrs. Brown, but in many other sports or skills. Have the students choose a contest or race and research it. They should learn about the history of the race, the rules and rule changes over the years, and the chronology of the winners. Students can then choose one of the winners and write a short biography about him or her.