

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Taming the Star Runner

by  
S.E. Hinton

## Book Information

S.E. Hinton, Taming the Star Runner  
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Book Level: 4.7  
Interest Level: UG

Sent to live with his uncle after a violent confrontation with his stepfather, sixteen-year-old Travis, an aspiring writer, finds life in a small Oklahoma town confining until he meets an eighteen-year-old horse trainer named Casey.

**Topics:** Animals, Horses; Careers, Writer; Family Life, Stepfathers; Family Life, Uncles; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Work it Out: Conflicts

## Main Characters

Casey Kencaide an assertive, tough-minded, eighteen-year-old horse trainer and riding instructor, whose intensity and drive capture Travis's heart

Christopher Ken and Teresa's young son, whose cloying behavior is a constant annoyance to Travis

Joe Travis's closest friend from back home, who falls in with a violent adult and eventually witnesses the murder of two of their friends

Ken Travis's uncle and temporary caretaker; a busy lawyer with a troubled marriage, who sees the substance in his young nephew

Teresa Ken's estranged wife; a former free spirit who, according to Ken, has become entirely too materialistic

Travis a tough and independent sixteen-year-old, who is driven to violence by an abusive stepfather and who hides a secret love of writing

## Vocabulary

**bay** a reddish-brown color, or a horse of that color

**canter** in riding, a smooth, easy pace like a moderate gallop

**glib** speaking in a smooth, easy manner, perhaps too smooth to be considered sincere

**irony** a circumstance or result that is the opposite of what is expected or considered appropriate

**posting** in riding, the rising up of the rider in the saddle in time with the horse's trot

**roan** a grayish-yellow, tawny color, or a horse of that color

## Synopsis

As the story opens, Travis is about to board a plane destined for his uncle's horse ranch in Oklahoma. He is leaving behind an abusive stepfather and a charge of attempted murder. On arrival in Oklahoma, Travis notices that Ken barely seems to notice his presence. He is shunned in school, and even his letters home to Joe are not returned. Desperate for company, Travis heads down to Ken's barn one afternoon, where Casey Kencaide gives riding lessons and trains jumping horses. Casey's first impression of Travis is poor--he accidentally floods the barn with water--but she eventually gives him a job helping with the horses.

Disaster strikes one day at the barn when the Star Runner, Casey's wild and unpredictable jumping horse, charges a student and her horse. The student's leg is broken, and as the ambulance wails in the background, Star Runner jumps the paddock and heads for the hills. As Casey gazes, transfixed, at the retreating horse, Travis falls deeply in love with the young horse trainer.

As Travis begins to settle in with his uncle, he receives news that would change everything--a New York editor wants to publish his book! Travis celebrates by hitchhiking to town, getting drunk, and receiving a sound beating from a local doorman. The next day is full of repercussions, surprises, and pitfalls. First, Travis kills a poisonous snake at the barn and is sickened by the sight of its disembodied head clamping onto his shovel. Next, Travis is furious to learn that his stepfather, Stan, wants to read his book. Thinking that Stan wants to stop his publishing deal, Travis throws the phone across the room and is nearly thrown out of his uncle's house.

After Travis meets his editor, his life seems to

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improve. Travis learns that Stan won't stand in the way of the book, and as he spends more time with Casey, they acknowledge a special understanding between them. Travis seems to be the one person who understands Casey's admiration for the strange, disquieting horse, the Star Runner.

A climax to the story occurs after the Star Runner, in the midst of a shrieking wind and lightning storm, jumps the paddock and races into the storm. With inexplicable exhilaration, Casey and Travis leap into Casey's Jeep to follow the horse. Briefly, the chase becomes a joyful union with the horse as the vehicle and animal run together through the storm. In the end, all that is left is the overturned Jeep and the smell of burning flesh.

After the storm that took the Star Runner's life, Travis feels differently about a few things. He loves Casey, but the intensity is replaced by a close friendship. He seems to look forward to everyday things, such as summer school and dating, and for the first time since leaving home, he approaches the typewriter to write again.

### Open-Ended Questions

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

#### Initial Understanding

When Teresa told Travis, "What they don't tell you is, every time you turn around, there's another damn fork..." what did she mean?

*Teresa was making reference to the well-known Robert Frost poem, "The Road not Taken," which is concerned with choices made in life--one road taken and another passed by. Teresa appears to be saying that there isn't just one crossroads to be faced in life, but many difficult choices, one after another.*

#### Literary Analysis

For all their differences, Travis and Ken seem to have an unspoken, almost telepathic, understanding between them. Find several examples from the book to illustrate this point.

*p. 100 Just when Travis thinks to himself that Ken may lapse into a lecture about his behavior, Ken startles him by saying, "Achilles says: What sometimes sounds like a lecture, is sometimes just the truth." p. 106 Ken seems to be reading Travis's mind when he asks if he's been avoiding Christopher. p. 58 While they are discussing why each wanted Travis to come to Oklahoma, the same thought goes through both Ken's and Travis's mind: "I thought you'd be Tim."*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Summarize Travis's approach to writing as he explained it to Ms. Carmichael.

*The main point Travis made to the publisher was that he wrote about what he knew. "I don't know what girls do, so I don't write about them," he told her. He also made the point that his book was about kids, and even though Ms. Carmichael thought the book "should" feature a sympathetic adult, Travis disagreed, saying, "What have adults got to do with it?"*

#### Constructing Meaning

What did the "Cuisinart" signify to Ken about Teresa's character and the nature of their relationship?

*Travis attempts to extract from both Ken and Teresa the meaning of Ken's cryptic remark, "It all started with the Cuisinart." To Ken, the Cuisinart, an upscale kitchen appliance, seemed to be a symbol of Teresa's acquisitiveness and their growing materialism, a trend in their marriage that greatly disturbed him. In contrast to their younger days, when the two backpacked around Europe, Ken and Teresa began to blindly follow popular trends, such as Brie and chocolate. Ken expressed dissatisfaction with this kind of life by saying, "I'm sick of 'stuff'."*

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### Teachable Skills

**Understanding the Author's Craft** In the early part of the story, Travis's feelings about living with his uncle are revealed to the reader through use of letters home to Joe. Travis seems able to express his feelings clearly through this medium. As an exercise in understudying the author's use of this technique to reveal a character's state of mind, assign students to write another letter, this time from Travis to Joe in prison. The letter should describe the incredible storm, the death of the Star Runner, and Travis's life in the aftermath.

**Extending Meaning** When Teresa makes reference to the Robert Frost poem, "The Road not Taken," she assumes readers have read and understood the content of this poem. It may serve an instructional purpose to examine this poem in review or for the first time. Read the poem aloud to the class, and lead a classroom discussion on the poem. Include the following topics: What is the major message conveyed by the poet? What feelings are evoked in the reader? Does the poet seem to regret his choice or cherish it?

**Describing Actions or Events** This story climaxes with the dramatic sequence in which Travis and Casey chase the Star Runner through a deadly, yet strangely exhilarating, storm. The author describes the final moments of this scene in an abstract manner, not referring directly to events or actions, but to their immediate aftermath. For example, the reader must infer what happened to the Star Runner as the narrator describes "...the smell of something burning ... flesh burning." To better understand an author's choices in describing a pivotal scene, ask students to re-write the storm/chase sequence in two different ways: as a matter-of-fact re-telling of events in sequence and as a first-person narrative from Travis's point of view.

**Responding to Literature** After the tragedy of the twins' shooting is revealed, Travis is struck by the horror of how things might have been for him had he never left home. His mind races with

explanations of why "it could never happen to me." When Ken hears this, he reminds Travis that Fate and Will have baffled better minds than his. As he explained, "Fate's what happens to you, and Will is what you make happen to you." As Travis contemplates Fate and Will, he is able to categorize the events in his life and assign them to one category or another -- as Fate kept him from Stan's murder, surely Will would have kept him from this one. During a class discussion, call on students to complete this sentence: "Fate gave (or made) me \_\_\_\_\_, but Will gave (or made) me \_\_\_\_\_." As students consider this distinction, they may better understand these two forces as they relate to their own lives.