

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Justin Morgan Had a Horse

by

Marguerite Henry

Book Information

Marguerite Henry, Justin Morgan Had a Horse

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Book Level: 5.8

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An unusual work horse raised in Vermont and known originally as "Little Bub" becomes the sire of a famous American breed and takes the name of his owner, Justin Morgan.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Animals, Horses; Places, Farms;
Recommended Reading, California
Recommended Lit., English, 3-5;
Sports/Recreation, Horse Racing; U.S.
States/Regions, Vermont

Main Characters

Emma Goss Joel's gentle mother who cannot protect him from his father

Ezra Fisk the man who rents Little Bub but initially refuses to buy him because he is too small

Ezra Fisk, Jr. Ezra Fisk's son who is with Joel when Little Bub is found; he is outraged at the abuse Little Bub has suffered

Farmer Abner Beane the kind but impoverished farmer who pays his debt to Justin Morgan in horses

Hiram Hawkes the horse dealer who says that Little Bub will never be worth anything

Jacobus Spinks the Justice of the Peace who oversees Joel's contract to be Miller Chase's apprentice

Joel Goss a young boy who loves horses and develops a special relationship with Little Bub

Jonathan Foppington and his friend the haughty gentlemen from New York who challenge Little Bub to race Thoroughbreds

Justin Morgan a sickly schoolmaster who feels honor bound to pay his debts before he dies; he develops an affection for the horse Farmer Beane gave him

Little Bub (Justin Morgan) a small but extraordinarily strong and quick horse who is the start of a new breed of horses

Miller Thomas Chase the kind-hearted miller who takes Joel as his apprentice because he longs for a son

Mistress Chase the often insensitive wife of Miller Chase who makes Joel work hard but occasionally takes pity on him

Nathan Nye a persuasive man who likes to set up contests; he is responsible for the building of the racetrack

Philip Goss Joel's stern father who forces Joel into an apprenticeship with Miller Chase

President James Monroe the president who chooses Little Bub as his mount in a parade

Robert Evans Ezra Fisk's hired man who takes pride in Little Bub's great strength

Sheriff Rice the man who inherits Little Bub after his family takes care of Justin Morgan during his final illness

the Jenks family a farmer and his family who board Justin Morgan; they own a dog that Little Bub detests

the smith the man who tends to horses injured in the war; he allows Joel to become his helper

the teamster the man who sells Joel Little Bub; Joel is appalled at how the man has been treating the horse

Vocabulary

alum a white salt that draws together soft tissues

fortnight a period of fourteen days

harpsichord a piano-like instrument with strings that are sounded by pressing keys

heartily in an eager, sincere way

journeyman a worker who is trained and experienced in a particular trade

militia a fighting force of regular citizens who serve during emergencies

perchance maybe or perhaps

premium a bonus given to encourage a deal or a purchase

tankard a tall mug with a handle and a cover

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throng a large number of people gathered together, a crowd

Synopsis

When schoolmaster Justin Morgan and his student Joel Goss travel to Massachusetts to collect on an old debt, Farmer Beane sadly informs Justin that he does not have the money. Justin needs the money to pay off his medical debts, so Farmer Beane offers him two colts as payment. Justin reluctantly agrees to take the larger colt. Later he notices Joel's expression when Little Bub, the smaller colt, follows them. He decides to take both colts.

When the travelers return home, Joel's father is outraged that they have brought home horses. He loudly announces that he no longer wishes to board the schoolmaster and suddenly decides that Joel is big enough to become Miller Chase's apprentice. That evening Justin informs Joel that he is going to board with the Jenks family. He persuades Joel to gentle Little Bub in his spare time. The next morning Mr. Goss takes Joel to Miller Chase, who quickly agrees to take Joel as his apprentice. At the Justice of the Peace's office, Joel reluctantly signs a contract binding him to Miller Chase for seven years.

After Joel gentles Little Bub, a farmer named Ezra Fisk rents Little Bub from Justin Morgan. He declines to purchase Little Bub because he is so small. One day Joel is working at the mill when Miller Chase tells him that Nathan Nye is setting up a contest. Miller Chase kindly gives Joel time off to watch the activities. After several horses fail to pull a mammoth log, Ezra Fisk's hired man Robert Evans volunteers Little Bub. Joel is worried that Evans is overworking Little Bub; he is amazed along with the rest of the crowd when Little Bub is able to pull the log with three men astride it.

In the following days Little Bub's fame as a puller grows, but when Nathan Nye decides to build a racetrack, many people doubt Little Bub can run fast. On the day of first race Little Bub easily beats the other horses. His fame continues to spread until finally a New York gentleman writes to Justin Morgan challenging Little Bub to race two

Thoroughbreds belonging to the gentleman and his friend. When the race day arrives, most people bet against Little Bub. Joel feels the race is unfair because Little Bub has to race the Thoroughbreds separately. He releases the Jenks's dog on the track on the start of the first race. Little Bub hates dogs and furiously chases the dog to the finish line, easily winning the race. The New York gentlemen claim foul play, but in the second race Little Bub loses a shoe and still outruns his opponent. With the prize money of fifty dollars Justin pays all his debts and gives Joel five dollars.

When Little Bub's term of rental is up, Justin Morgan takes him back and rides him on his teaching circuit. Things go well until Justin falls ill. For months Joel waits for news and finally receives a letter saying that Justin is dying. Justin writes that he is leaving Little Bub to the Rice family, who have tended to him during his last illness. Several seasons pass and one day Little Bub is being offered for sale at an auction. Joel takes his five dollars to buy Little Bub, but he is quickly outbid. Later Joel learns that Little Bub has been sold to a stranger. For years Joel searches for the horse, but he is not able to catch up with him.

By the time the War of 1812 comes, Joel is done with his apprenticeship. He leaves to tend wounded horses on the battlefield in hopes of finding Little Bub. Soon after the bloody battle of Plattsburg, Joel returns home having failed to find Little Bub. One night he goes skating with Ezra Fisk, Jr. As a blizzard is setting in, Joel suddenly thinks he hears Little Bub's distinctive whinny. He rushes toward the sound and finds Little Bub hitched to a freight wagon with several other horses outside Miller Chase's inn. Both men are aghast that the famous horse has been treated so poorly. Joel finds Little Bub's owner and offers to buy Little Bub. The man asks twenty-five dollars for him, and Joel persuades Miller Chase to loan him the money.

In the following months Little Bub flourishes under Joel's care despite his advanced age. Some six months after purchasing him, Joel takes Little Bub to march in the parade when President Monroe comes

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to Vermont. At the parade, the president's horse gets a bee in its ear and cannot be ridden. President Monroe chooses Little Bub as his replacement mount. After the parade people argue about the heritage of Little Bub, who has come to be known as Justin Morgan after the schoolmaster who once owned him. Joel interrupts their speculation to proudly proclaim that no one will ever know who sired Little Bub, but he is American just like them.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Joel feel about the New York gentlemen?

Joel is annoyed by the airs the New York gentlemen put on, and he feels insulted by the attitude they take toward Little Bub. He hopes their horses will be defeated by Little Bub, and he thinks they set up the race fairly. He also feels intimidated by them and their overwhelming confidence in their horses.

Literary Analysis

What is the attitude of most Vermonters toward work?

The people portrayed in this book put a strong emphasis on the value of hard work. They feel that people should work as hard as they can no matter how difficult or dirty the work is. No one, from a young boy to a small horse or a sickly schoolmaster, is given an exemption from this expectation. They greatly admire those who can do their work well or put great effort into their work.

Inferential Comprehension

How are Little Bub and the Vermont soldiers who fight at Plattsburg alike?

Both Little Bub and the Vermont soldiers face extremely difficult tasks. Little Bub is made to work and compete at things small horses are not usually expected to do, and the Vermont soldiers face the British army when everyone is beginning to believe the war is lost. Both Little Bub and the soldiers have doubters who are not certain they should be expected to do these things, yet both are able to decisively triumph despite the odds against them. Ultimately their merits come to stand for what it means to be American.

Constructing Meaning

How do you feel about Justin Morgan leaving Little Bub to the Rice family?

Answers will vary. Some students will feel that Justin Morgan has no choice but to leave the horse to the Rices' since Morgan owes them money. They may also note that Justin Morgan wills them the horse because he believes they will take good care of Little Bub. However, some students may feel that it was unfair of Justin Morgan not to bequeath the horse to Joel, both because Justin and Joel have a close relationship and because Joel loves the horse so dearly. Some students may note that Justin's belief that Little Bub will be comfortable with the Rices proves false when the horse is sold to the highest bidder and falls into the hands of a series of owners who mistreat him.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting When Little Bub races the Thoroughbreds, most people bet on the Thoroughbreds. Have the students read about the different qualities and strengths of Morgan horses and Thoroughbreds. Students can make a chart showing what makes each of these breeds good racing horses as well as what the weaknesses of each breed are.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Joel's father sends him to be Miller Chase's apprentice

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when he is still a boy. Have students research what usually happened to boys when they were apprenticed out and then have the students assess whether Joel's position as an apprentice was good or bad by the standards of that time period.

Recognizing Feelings Joel has great affection for Justin Morgan and is very upset when he reads the letter that informs him Justin Morgan is dying. Have the students write a letter from Joel to Justin Morgan saying good-bye. Have the students include a statement from Joel about what Justin Morgan means to him.

Recognizing Detail Joel makes many personal sacrifices in his efforts to take care of Little Bub. Have the students find at least three instances where Joel put himself in danger or gave something up because he hoped to help Little Bub. Have the students assess the effectiveness of each of Joel's sacrifices.