

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Misty of Chincoteague by Marguerite Henry

Book Information

Marguerite Henry, Misty of Chincoteague
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A breed of wild horses inhabit an island, and one is befriended and tamed by the love of two children.

Award: Newbery Honor

Topics: Animals, Horses; Natural Environments, Islands; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8

Main Characters

Grandpa Beebe the children's grandfather, a kind and knowing Chincoteague horseman, whose colorful regional speech and sayings add great interest to the dialogue

Maureen Beebe Paul's younger sister, a hard-working girl who shares her brother's dream to own a certain wild pony from Assateague Island

Misty Phantom's beautiful and curious colt, who grows accustomed to her new life with the Beebes on Chincoteague

Paul Beebe the principal character in the story, an imaginative and self-reliant boy living with his grandparents on Chincoteague Island

The Phantom a wild and mysterious mare from Assateague who, after avoiding capture for years, is rounded up with her new foal by Paul Beebe

Vocabulary

foal a young horse

galleon a large Spanish sailing ship of the 15th and 16th centuries

scow a large, flat-bottomed boat with square ends

withers the highest part of the back of a horse

described carrying Moorish ponies to the King of Peru. The ship strikes a shoal, spilling its live cargo into the sea. The ponies swim to Assateague Island, find plentiful food and, over the years, flourish and populate the island with wild horses.

Switching to the present, a boy and girl are pictured walking down the beach on Assateague, finding a piece of wreckage from the ancient galleon. Paul and Maureen Beebe live with their grandparents on neighboring Chincoteague Island, and both children share a fascination for the mysterious mare called "The Phantom." On Pony Penning Day of each year, Assateague ponies are rounded up on the uninhabited island and brought over to Chincoteague. The children formulate a plan to buy the Phantom and keep her for their own on Grandpa's pony ranch.

Paul is allowed to join the roundup for the first time this year. Because of the Phantom's new foal, she is unable to keep up with the others and is captured. The children are overjoyed that their dream is coming true.

After Paul spends a frightening night with Phantom and her colt during a thunderstorm, the children are crestfallen to learn that both Phantom and Misty have been sold out from under them. Later, however, the buyer changes his mind - the two horses are theirs!

Phantom and her colt are painstakingly "gentled" by the two children. Misty is friendly and happy, but they notice something "far away" about the formerly wild Phantom. A year goes by and Phantom enters the next annual Pony Penning Day race. She wins, just because of her joy in running free. One day, the Beebes hear a ringing neigh coming from the direction of Assateague Island. It is Phantom's mate from her wild days. The Beebes are shocked to see the Pied Piper swimming the channel in search of his lost mare, and the story climaxes when Paul makes a conscious decision to set her free.

Synopsis

At the beginning of the story, a Spanish galleon is

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Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Dialogue in this book makes generous use of regional expressions and colorful language to flesh out the characters. Find several examples in the book to support this statement.

Paul to Maureen, p. 99: "Why, they're as close packed as oysters in a barrel!" Grandpa to children, p. 38: "Seems as if the devil is allus sittin' cross-legged of me." Grandpa to Grandma, p. 92: "Ef'n you had whiskbrooms in yours ears, maybe you'd be twittery too." Fire Chief to Children, p. 102: "When I was risin' atwixt a youngster and a grownup."

Literary Analysis

This book was written in the 1940s, when gender roles were more defined and accepted. How might the story be different if it was written in our own time?

The characters of Paul and Maureen might be presented differently, with Maureen more of a doer and less of a follower. Maureen might have been allowed to stay with Paul during the night of the thunderstorm. Women and girls might participate in Pony Penning Day.

Inferential Comprehension

If Paul had not given Phantom her freedom, do you think she would have "settled down" eventually? Why or why not?

Probably not. A major theme in the book is the nobility of wild things and their right to exist and have a place of their own. The author makes it clear that the Phantom was "just a legend" and that man really never had a hold over her.

Constructing Meaning

The idea of growing up is a major subtheme running through the book. In what ways is this idea explored with respect to both the wild horses and the Beebe children?

The children, especially Paul, are learning to grow up and doing so without their mother. Paul becomes accepted "as a man" when he rounds up the legendary Phantom. A parallel is observed in the fire chief's explanation of how the captive colts "have to grow up sometime." Finally, Misty is left to grow up on her own after the Phantom departs for Assateague. After she leaves, Maureen echoes the words of the chief, saying, "Colts have to grow up sometime."

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Plot Paul and Maureen were bitterly disappointed to learn that, after all their hard work, the Phantom and her colt had been sold. Have students write a brief description of the biggest disappointment they can remember facing. Encourage them to describe their emotions (i.e., grief, anger), how the crisis was resolved or how they dealt with a situation that could not be changed.

Recognizing Setting The story's setting is one of the most interesting aspects of this book. Students outside the southeastern United States may not be aware of the unique barrier islands that exist in this part of the country. To learn more about the setting, request that students research the physical geography of Chincoteague and Assateague Islands using encyclopedias, atlases, state maps or the Internet. Ask them to sketch the location and shape of the islands relative to each other and to the coast of Virginia. Students may discover that the actual layout of the two islands and Chincoteague Bay is different than what they pictured as they read about the Pony Penning Days of the past.

Understanding Literary Features The major theme of the book involves the nobility of wild things and their right to exist without interference

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from man. It may serve an instructional purpose to ask students to think of any wild things that they have attempted to capture, keep or tame. Most students will likely have kept an insect, bird, raccoon, turtle or butterfly for at least a brief time. Ask them to share with the class how long they kept the animal, and how they felt both while the animal was in captivity and once it was set free. Students will be able to draw parallels between this experience and the brief "captivity" of the Phantom.

Understanding the Author's Craft The author uses the technique of flashback to tell the story of how the wild ponies were first swept ashore after the shipwreck of the Spanish galleon. Later, Paul imagines the shape of the ancient ship in the clouds as he stands on the very spot where pieces of the wreckage washed ashore. As a class, consider what went on in history in the very city or state in which you live. Imagine standing in the spot where a famous event took place - what it might have looked like, what people were wearing, what sounds might be heard. Encourage students to discuss everything they can imagine during their "flashback" to a previous time in local history.