

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Smoky the Cow Horse by Will James

## Book Information

Will James, Smoky the Cow Horse

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Interest Level: MG

This is the story of the cow horse Smoky, and Clint, the man who trained and loved him.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Animals, Horses

## Main Characters

chicken man a man who purchases Cloudy from the livery owner; he plans to have Cloudy made into chicken feed when his usefulness is gone

Clint the bronco buster of the Rocking R outfit who breaks Smoky to the saddle without breaking his spirit

horse thief a man from across the Mexican border who lives by stealing horses and cattle to sell for profit; he is abusive to Smoky

Jeff Nicks the cow foreman of the Rocking R outfit, who understands Clint's affection for Smoky

livery stable owner a man who keeps horses for hire; he buys The Cougar from the rodeo operators, renames him Cloudy, and uses him as a stable horse for tourists to ride

Mammy Smoky's mother, a range mare, whom Smoky respects

Old Buckskin a saddle-horse that was allowed to return to the open range as a reward for his years of good service; he tolerates Smoky's boundless energy as a youngster, and they become companions

Old Tom Jarvis the superintendent and co-owner of the Rocking R outfit who wants Smoky for his own

Pecos Smoky's brother

Smoky the principal character of the story; the spirited mouse-colored mustang whose appearance and abilities are admired by many

vegetable man the man who buys Cloudy from the chicken man to pull his wagon; he is an abusive owner who whips Cloudy and feeds him poorly

## Vocabulary

**coulee** a deep gulch with sloping sides

**eddication** slang for education

**fillies** young female horses

**foundeder** to have utterly failed

**gelding** a castrated horse

**hackamore** a halter with a wide band that can be lowered over the eyes of a horse being broken to bridle

**hazed** forced to comply

**remuda** the herd of horses from which a rider chooses his mount

**wallow** a depression or pit produced when animals roll about

**withers** the high part of the horse between the shoulder blades

## Synopsis

Smoky is a jet-black colt born on a spring morning out on the range in the open areas of the West. He and his mother are separated from the herd with which his mother usually travels. He is a curious, determined, and strong fellow, learning quickly to stand, nurse, and walk. As he explores his world, his curiosity overpowers his instinctive wariness, and he narrowly escapes being killed by a coyote only because his mother is alert and comes to his rescue. When Smoky's mother rejoins her herd, an old buckskin-colored horse wins the job of acting as guardian of Smoky when his mother is busy. He plays with Smoky and keeps him out of trouble. During this time, Smoky learns about the range and its other animal residents -- porcupines, calves, bears, and rattlesnakes.

A round up occurs when Smoky is four months old. He sees another pony being lassoed and ridden and is confused by the sight. To Smoky's dismay, he is also lassoed and branded at this time and then turned loose to winter on the range.

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When spring arrives, Smoky has a new brother, Pecos, whom he welcomes with affection. As Smoky remains curious, he encounters, but successfully dodges, a mountain lion and a rattlesnake. Because of his youth, strength, and personality, he is becoming conceited even though the older horses try to teach him etiquette. The herd eventually meets with a black stud that cuts Smoky and the old buckskin out of the group. Smoky and the old buckskin wander and eventually challenge another stud. They defeat the stud and join its group of mares and colts for a couple of years. One winter is especially harsh. Wolves follow and ultimately attack the herd, but the buckskin and Smoky fight them off. Spring arrives, and with it, the end of Smoky's freedom. He is now a four-year-old mouse-colored colt, and the time has come for him to earn his keep.

At the round up Smoky is herded into a corral and lassoed by a cowboy named Clint. Clint is a seasoned bronc buster. He can tell Smoky is a special horse, intelligent with tremendous spirit. Clint is patient and cautious while he breaks Smoky to a saddle, making sure he does not break his spirit. Smoky is especially wary of humans but eventually learns to trust Clint, tolerate the rope and saddle, and herd cattle. He shows his devotion to Clint when he gently brings Clint back to camp after Clint is injured. Jeff Nicks, the cow foreman of the Rocking R outfit, witnesses this feat and notices how Smoky protects Clint from him, a stranger. Afterwards, both men realize that Smoky has become a one-man horse. Because of his injury, Clint stops busting broncs and becomes a rider for the outfit. Smoky joins the group of saddle horses and is content when he finds his brother, Pecos, in the group. Smoky is introduced to the round up that fall, where he learns even more about cattle. The horses are turned out to their winter range afterward. Each spring, Smoky is timid around Clint until they get reacquainted.

During the second round up, Old Tom Jarvis, part owner of the Rocking R, admires Smoky and wants him for his own mount. Smoky will not allow Tom to ride him, and in anger, Tom fires Clint and Jeff.

When Tom calms down, though, he rehires the men and assures Clint that he will not try to get Smoky again.

With the passing years, news of Smoky's ability as a cow horse spreads. Tom turns down an offer of \$400 for Smoky, nearly twice the price of even the best horses in those days, because Clint is still the only person able to ride Smoky. The rhythm of Smoky's life continues.

In the winter of his tenth year, Smoky and the herd he stays with are stolen by a horse thief and driven many miles south. The thief is mean-spirited and abuses Smoky because Smoky dodges his lasso and bucks him when he tries to ride. After receiving numerous beatings, Smoky kills the man and runs off. When Smoky is found by some cowboys with a saddle on and spattered with blood, a notice is posted, but no one claims him. He is then billed as "The Cougar" and taken from rodeo to rodeo. No man can ride him. Always wary of humans, Smoky is now full of hatred and would kill many bronc riders were it not for the workers who rescue the fallen riders. After years in the rodeo, Smoky's fighting spirit is broken. He has not been mistreated in the rodeo, but the fight in him dwindles until he becomes a "has-been."

He is sold to a livery stable man who uses The Cougar, now renamed Cloudy, as a riding stable horse for summer tourists. Cloudy is surprisingly gentle and is requested so much that he becomes overused. The winter helps him recover, and in the spring, he is hired out only twice a day. Cloudy becomes attached to a girl who rides him in the afternoons, and they develop a special relationship. Cloudy's days as a stable horse come to an abrupt end when he is ridden hard one day without being watered first. He is sold to a chicken man who plans to sell him soon for chicken feed when his health fails. Cloudy fattens up, however, eating the grass in the pasture. A vegetable man buys him from the chicken man to pull his cart, but the new owner does not feed him correctly and whips him to get him going. The vegetable man goes to town one day to help advertise the upcoming rodeo. Clint happens to

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be in the same town on a cattle-buying trip and recognizes Smoky underneath the scarred hide. Clint rescues Smoky, brings him back to his home up north, and nurses him back to reasonable health. Clint decides to turn Smoky loose with a herd of wild horses thinking it may help his spirit. He is rewarded one morning when he steps out of his house and hears Smoky nicker to him.

## Open-Ended Questions

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

### Initial Understanding

Clint once says, "Some day ... I'm going to meet a horse I'll really get married to...." What does Clint mean, and how is Smoky that horse?

*A marriage relationship, in Clint's mind, is a relationship that is lasting. As a bronco breaker, his job is to give a preliminary breaking to a horse and then pass it on to another cowboy. He usually does not become attached to a horse, for he knows the coming separation would be difficult for him. But Clint loves horses and longs to have one that he can really consider his own. Smoky is the horse that steals his heart. He treats Smoky with special attention, being especially careful to win his trust. When Smoky is stolen, Clint is deeply affected. He does not want to stay at the Rocking R outfit anymore because it will not be the same without Smoky. He yearns for Smoky, looking for him everywhere, and still remembers him years later.*

### Literary Analysis

Why does the author use colloquial language in telling the story?

*The language helps set the story in the West. The use of the vernacular instead of literary English creates well-developed characters that are realistically portrayed. Also, the descriptions, similes, and metaphors help the reader to appreciate both the beauty and harshness of the land on which the horses live.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Why do the older horses of the herd have to work together to protect and train the young colts?

*Like most young creatures, the colts are unaware of the world and dangers around them. Smoky's mother shows her maternal and protective instinct by going off alone to birth, giving her young colt a couple of days to learn to stand, walk, and nurse before bringing him back into the herd. When Smoky joins the herd, he is protected by the old buckskin for a while so that he does not get too much stimulation from all the other horses. As Smoky gains strength, the others are allowed to play with him. The colts are protected as much as possible when predators appear. An older horse will lead the herd away from possible hiding places of predators and will keep the colts running away from the predators if attacked. The older horses make sure the colts get adequate nutrition in the winter and ensure they are protected by moving to areas of shade, water, or protection from storms.*

### Constructing Meaning

If you had the opportunity to go horseback riding, what things would you be aware of that you may have not thought of before reading this book?

*Answers will vary, but responses may include things such as the realization that horses have to be "broken," the age of the horse, the individual personality of the animal, proper feeding and watering, the dangers of overworking a horse, concern about how the horse feels, awareness of the horse's stamina, and restraint using a switch or spurs to get it going.*

## Teachable Skills

**Responding to Literature** Clint and his friend think the local humane officer should do something about the way the vegetable man is treating his horse. Have the students visit or write their local humane society and learn about the services provided for lost, abandoned, or abused animals. They should inquire about the costs of

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animal care and any needs the humane society has in terms of money, food, or bedding donations. If there is a volunteer program that youth can join, inquire if some students would like the opportunity to spend time holding or caring for the animals.

training should also be noted. Differences and similarities between the way the two mediums portray cowboys and horses should be discussed.

**Recognizing Cause and Effect** The horse thief abuses Smoky when he is taking him south because Smoky fears him and will not cooperate. After the horse thief is killed, Smoky deals angrily and viciously with any human he encounters. Similar behavior can be observed in humans. A person who is abused as a child will often become an abuser as an adult. Sociologists and psychologists call this the "cycle of abuse." Assign the students to learn more about the "cycle of abuse" and techniques that are used to break the cycle. They should learn how these methods promote positive behaviors when dealing with others so that a healthy and nurturing environment can be created. Have them write a brief report on their findings.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** Compared to a century ago, most students have a rather limited exposure to horses, their care, and the tasks they may be trained to perform. Divide the class into small groups and assign some aspect of horses to each group to research and present to the class in the form of a poster or demonstration. Some suggested topics are horse breeds and their uses, rodeo riding, horse equipment, common ailments and veterinary care, daily care and feeding, and growth and life span. The class may wish to enhance their newfound knowledge with a visit to a stable, ranch, nearby farm, or veterinary clinic to learn about horses first-hand.

**Comparing and Contrasting** As a class, watch an old Western movie and compare and contrast it with the story of *Smoky the Cow Horse*. The students should list the various aspects of a cowboy's life as well as a horse's existence as portrayed in both the movie and the book. Categories should include a cowboy's food, clothing, wages, amount and type of work, and entertainment. The horse's care, feeding, and