The Horse Whisperer

by Nicholas Evans

SUMMARY

The Horse Whisperer is a romantic story about a man with the power to heal horses.

A terrible riding accident leaves 13-year old Grace and her horse, Pilgrim, physically and emotionally damaged. Grace's mother, Annie, takes them - the horse kicking, the girl silent - all the way from New York to Montana in the north-west of the US to see the horse whisperer. Surrounded by the serene magnificence of the mountains, the girl, the horse, and the mother fall under the gentle, healing spell of Tom Booker, the horse whisperer.

Just four days after publication, The Horse Whisperer shot to number three on The New York Times bestseller list. The film 'The Horse Whisperer' was released in 1998, starring Robert Redford as Tom Booker, Kristin Scott Thomas as Annie, and Scarlett Johansson as Grace.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Nicholas Evans got the idea of writing The Horse Whisperer when he heard about a gypsy man who had the ability to calm wild horses just by talking to them. He spent six weeks in America interviewing animal healers and watching them work before returning to London to write his book.

‘It’s not a horsey story,’ says Evans. ‘It’s about people. Relationships. The horsey elements are important, of course. What I wanted, though, was an epic romance.’

Relationships are a fundamental theme throughout the book. We see a family under stress, where tragic circumstances enhance the flaws and tensions which are already there. Mother and daughter are not at all close at the beginning of the book, as Annie works long hours at her job. The one thing that links them from the start, however, is Grace’s horse Pilgrim. After the accident, despite all professional advice, Annie stubbornly refuses to let Pilgrim die, because she can see that he is the tiny thread that connects her with Grace.

Mother, daughter and horse are inextricably intertwined with each other. Tom Booker sees that they are ‘...all joined in suffering. If he could help the horse, perhaps he could help them all.’ Annie and Grace undergo a spiritual journey of self discovery. Their lives are forced to change by a dramatic event which makes them look at themselves, their thoughts and their feelings. As the pain is released things get worse before they get better, but when they come through the pain, they are stronger than before.

Robert, Grace’s father, is a rather shadowy figure in the book, but his relationship with his daughter is strong. If
Grace wants to talk to her mother, but Annie can understand this, because she had a strong relationship with her father and, although he died when she was a child, she still misses him badly. ‘He was the only one who ever made her feel good about herself.’

An important theme underlying the novel is that of trust. Trust is fundamental in bringing about the healing process within Pilgrim, Grace and Annie. Pilgrim slowly learns to trust, first Tom, then Grace; Grace learns to trust, first Tom, then her mother; and Annie learns to trust, first Tom, then herself. In each case Tom offers what he always offers, the gift of trust.

Being at ease in one’s surroundings is a theme that runs through the book. Tom Booker is totally at home in the beautiful Montana countryside, whereas his ex-wife Rachel never felt at home in the countryside. Annie has no sense of belonging - she doesn’t feel at home in England, nor does she feel at home in America. ‘In each country they thought that she came from the other one.’ Once more this theme is linked to relationships. Annie feels that she has had no home since her father died. When she falls in love with Tom Booker, however, Annie begins to discover herself and feel at home with herself.

### Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/group work questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

**ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK**

Photocopy all the illustrations in the book and cut off the captions. Divide the class into small groups and give each group a picture. Students decide what is happening in their picture and write a short caption plus any words that people may be saying. Ask groups to read out their captions.

**ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION**

**Chapters 1-3**

Make separate cards with the names of the main characters on some, and what they do or what they look like, or what their characters are on other cards. Make sure you have a name card for every descriptive card. Photocopy them as necessary. Working in small groups, students deal the cards round the group. They take it in turns to read a card and ask someone for the name to match a description. If that person has that name he/she must hand it over. The winner is the person with the most cards when they have all been matched.

**Chapters 4-6**

Divide the class into small groups. Ask students to re-read the paragraphs about the dreams that Annie (pp 19-20) and Grace (pp 34-5) have. The groups then talk about the meaning of the dreams and what they say about Annie and Grace. Each group tells the whole class what they think.

**Chapters 7-9**

Divide the class into small groups. Each group talks and agrees on what they think are the three most important things that happen in this section of the book. Compare what each group thinks, and try to reach a whole-class decision.

**Chapters 10-12**

Divide the class into small groups. Tell them to write a different story for Chapter 12. Help them with ideas: Imagine that Tom didn’t die, imagine that Annie stayed in Montana, imagine that Grace set fire to the hut, etc. Ask groups to re-read their ideas. As a class, decide on the best one.

**Chapter 13**

Divide students into small groups. Ask each group to write down two things that the characters in this chapter could say. The other groups must say who is talking, who to and why.

### ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Photocopy all the illustrations with their captions. Put students into groups and give a set of illustrations to each group. Ask the groups to write new captions for each illustration.

**Glossary**

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

**Chapters 1-3**

- **clinic** (n) a place where people go for help and medicine
- **horn** (n) the thing in a vehicle which you push to make a noise
- **needle** (n) a very thin metal thing that is pushed into your skin to put medicine into you
- **ranch** (n) a big farm where cattle (see below), horses or sheep are kept
- **rope** (n) this is long and strong and is used for tying things
- **trailer** (n) a vehicle which is pulled behind a car; animals or things are put in it
- **truck** (n) a big lorry
- **trust** (v) to believe that somebody or something will not hurt you

**Chapters 4-6**

- **arena** (n) an area of ground with a wooden wall round it
- **brand** (n) this is burned into an animal’s skin to show who owns it
- **cattle** (n) large animals that farmers keep for their meat and milk

**Chapters 7-9**

- **loop** (n) a shape like a circle
- **trick** (n) a clever game which makes people surprised and amused

**Chapters 10-12**

- **edge** (n) the part of something that is furthest from the centre
- **stallion** (n) an adult male horse
Activities before reading the book

1. Read the Introduction in your book and answer the following questions.
   (a) In which three countries has Nicholas Evans lived?
   (b) Who bought the story to make a film?
   (c) Where does Tom Booker live?
   (d) Who gave Evans the idea for the book?
   (e) Where does the story take place?

2. Evans says that The Horse Whisperer is a book about:
   (a) how to heal sick horses.
   (b) love and self-discovery.
   (c) life on a ranch.

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-3

Chapter 1

1. Put these words into the sentences.
   accident, crazy, shoot, right, horses, father, horn
   (a) Pilgrim seems to go ............................ when the truck driver sounds his ............................ .
   (b) Annie and Grace are both interested in ............................ .
   (c) Grace always turns to her ............................ if she wants to talk.
   (d) Grace loses her ............................ leg after the ............................ .
   (e) Harry Logan wants to ............................ Pilgrim.

2. Work with another student.
   Annie phones Robert to tell him she will be late home. Later, Robert phones Annie to tell her about the accident. Make their conversations.

Chapter 2

1. Correct these sentences.
   (a) Annie and Robert put the Christmas tree up when Grace comes home from hospital.
   (b) Grace wants to ride Pilgrim again.
   (c) Grace does not like any of her Christmas presents.
   (d) Grace wants to send Pilgrim back to Texas.
   (e) Annie is very sad when she sees Pilgrim.

2. 'Things were never going to be the same again.' Write down or discuss with another student how you think life will change for the Maclean family.

Chapter 3

1. Talk with another student.
   Why does Annie think that the life of a damaged horse is so important to Grace’s future happiness?

2. Write down the sentences in the book that show:
   (a) that Tom Booker thinks horses are cleverer than most people.
   (b) that Grace is not getting better in her mind.
   (c) why Tom earns nothing from his work with horses.
   (d) what makes Tom go to New York.
   (e) that Pilgrim is frightened.

CHAPTERS 4-6

Chapter 4

1. Answer these questions:
   (a) Why does Tom Booker refuse to help Pilgrim?
   (b) How does Grace hurt Annie?
   (c) Why does Annie feel she belongs nowhere?
   (d) Why does Annie begin the journey to Montana?

2. Work with another student.
   Imagine that Robert talks to a friend about how Annie acts after Grace’s accident. Make their conversation.

Chapter 5

1. The letters in one word in each sentence are in the wrong places. Put the letters in the right places to make correct words.
   (a) Annie is uvorens when she arrives at the ranch for the first time.
   (b) Grace looks yngar when she opens the door for Tom.
   (c) Tom is ispreruds by Grace’s angry laugh.
   (d) Tom and Frank are very oeslc.

2. Talk with another student.
   Tom thinks that if he helps Pilgrim he may help Annie and Grace as well. How do you think he can do this?

Chapter 6

1. Put the two halves of the sentences together:
   (a) Grace is happy when Tom says ..... (i) ..... the accident.
   (b) Diane is not pleased when ..... (ii) ..... misses Annie and Grace.
   (c) When Pilgrim runs around the arena he ..... (iii) ..... Frank suggests that Annie and Grace live in the river house.
   (d) In New York Robert ..... (iv) ..... that her brand is perfect.
   (e) Grace talks for the first time about ..... (v) ..... watches Tom in fear.
2 Work with another student.
Diane is angry with Frank when he suggests that Annie and Grace live at the river house. What do they say to each other after dinner that day? Have their conversation.

CHAPTERS 7-9

Chapter 7
1 Tom says to Annie, ‘Where there’s pain there’s feeling. Where there’s feeling there’s hope.’ Who is Tom talking about? Write down or discuss with another student what you think he means.
2 Put these names in the place of the words in italics.
   Joe, Annie, Scott, Grace, Robert, Tom
   (a) He helps her to ride Rimrock.
   (b) She is pleased that he has to fly to Geneva.
   (c) He has a fight with Joe at dinner.
   (d) He tells her not to let Grace push her away.
   (e) She tells her that she is the strongest person she knows.

Chapter 8
1 Talk to another student.
   Grace feels that Pilgrim’s show of trust changes everything. Explain why trust is so important to Grace.
2 Who asks these questions? What are the answers?
   (a) ‘Are you going to try to put that rope on him?’
   (b) ‘Are you saying we should come back?’
   (c) ‘Is this a gift?’
   (d) ‘Does the water taste good?’

Chapter 9
1 Write 1, 2, 3 etc next to the sentences to show the order in which they happen.
   (a) Robert tells the clinic in New York that Grace needs a new leg.
   (b) Annie and Grace meet Robert at the airport.
   (c) Grace falls and breaks her false leg.
   (d) Joe shows everyone a trick with matches.
   (e) Grace tries to ride Gonzo.
   (f) Annie stops Joe from doing the rope trick.
   (g) Tom drives Robert around the ranch.
2 Talk with another student.
   What do you think will happen when Annie is alone at the ranch?

CHAPTERS 10-12

Chapter 10
1 These are the answers to questions asked in this chapter. Write down the questions.
   (a) ‘Oh. No thanks. I have to go.’
   (b) ‘Oh. Saturday, I guess.’
   (c) ‘That I love you.’
   (d) ‘Oh yes. We tried. But I was never able to carry them inside me for long.’
   (e) ‘You don’t need it now.’
2 When Annie is with Tom she thinks, ‘Live for now, with no thoughts of the past or the future.’ Write your answer or talk with another student: Is it possible to live like this?

Chapter 11
1 Which word in italics is the right one? Cross out the wrong word.
   (a) When Grace goes to ride Pilgrim she is afraid of falling/falling.
   (b) Tom makes Grace stand/walk on Pilgrim.
   (c) Tom says, ‘The light/day only comes after the darkest hour.’
   (d) At the party Frank and Diane have a fight/discussion.
   (e) Annie loves Robert/Tom and wants to leave Robert/Tom.
2 Work with another student.
   Imagine that Grace phones her father to tell him what happens in the arena the day she rides Pilgrim. You are Grace and her father. Make their conversation.
3 Talk to another student.
   What do you think will happen now? Will Annie leave Robert? Will Tom and Annie be together? What will happen to Grace and Robert?

Chapter 12
1 Put these words into the right order to make a sentence.
   (a) Pilgrim Grace fast rides
   (b) stallion the Pilgrim white and fight
   (c) arms Tom the to opens his horse
   (d) ground the to falls Tom
2 Talk with another student.
   What was Tom thinking about when he stood before the white stallion?

CHAPTER 13
1 Answer these questions.
   (a) What did Tom want to give Grace?
   (b) When does Grace cry? What makes her cry?
   (c) Where does Annie live?
   (d) Where does Robert live?
2 Talk with another student.
   What do you think Annie must ‘Never forget’?

Activities after reading the book

Talk with another student.
What do you think The Horse Whisperer is really about? Trust? Love? Horses?