All the Pretty Horses
By Cormac McCarthy

NOTE TO TEACHERS

"A book of remarkable beauty and strength, the work of a master in perfect command of his medium....Like classic literary journeys before it--from Jason and the Argonauts chasing the golden fleece to Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi—this is a trip that covers much more than just geography. It covers the distance from childhood to adulthood and from innocence to experience."—Washington Post Book World

John Grady Cole, the last in a long line of west Texas ranchers, is, at sixteen, poised on the sorrowful, painful edge of manhood. When he realizes the only life he has ever known is disappearing into the past and that cowboys are as doomed as the Comanche who came before them, he leaves on a dangerous and harrowing journey into the beautiful and utterly foreign world that is Mexico. In the guise of a classic Western, All the Pretty Horses is at its heart a lyrical and elegiac coming-of-age story about love, friendship, and loyalty that will leave John Grady, and the reader, changed forever.

When his mother decides to sell the cattle ranch he has grown up working, John Grady Cole and his friend Lacey Rawlins set out on horseback for Mexico, a land free of the fences and highways that have begun to invade west Texas, a land where the boys are not able to read the look in a man’s eye. As they approach the Rio Grande, they are joined by the youthful and mysterious Jimmy Blevins, whose fine horse, hot-blooded temper, and talent with a pistol are as certain an omen of trouble as the desolate and forbidding landscape stretching out before them.

In a violent and freakish thunderstorm, Blevins loses all his worldly possessions; and the foolhardy attempt to recover them soon brands the boys as horse thieves. On the run, they split up, with John Grady and Rawlins finding refuge on a hacienda where few questions are asked and a talent for breaking horses is still a source of honor, and where they fall into a routine as familiar to them as the shape of their saddles.

At night, John Grady rides the patron’s prized sire through the mountains beyond the hacienda in the company of Alejandra, the patron’s beautiful daughter. But in a land as bound by honor and reputation as this is, the white-hot love between John Grady and this girl is as dangerous as anything they will face.

When soldiers arrive to take John Grady and Rawlins away, the boys know it has nothing to do with Jimmy Blevins, but is instead because of some deeper, more elusive transgression that John Grady has committed in the name of love. With no one to plead their case, their fate is dire indeed. John Grady and Rawlins find
themselves in a Mexican prison governed by stark violence. But in the hands of Cormac McCarthy this place takes on a dreamlike quality; it is not right or wrong, good or evil, but merely as inevitable a part of life as the sun setting in the West, something that must be faced in order for one to survive.

*All the Pretty Horses* is the first volume in the Border Trilogy (the second volume is entitled *The Crossing;* and the third, *The Cities of the Plain*), and this name implies that the text is as much about the arid and desolate landscapes and blood-red skies of the great Southwest as it is about the people who inhabit the region. Together the land and sky form a lyrical tapestry that colors and alters the narrative in subtle and unexpected ways.

John Grady's journey leaves him wiser but saddened, yet out of this heartbreak comes the resilience of a man who has claimed his place in the world. Written with the lyricism that has made McCarthy one of the great American prose stylists, *All the Pretty Horses* is at once a bittersweet and profoundly moving tale of love, loss, and redemption and a stunning commentary on the nature of fate and the weight of manhood.

**TEACHING IDEAS**

The following questions are designed to guide students through this rich and evocative story. They are broken into questions of "Comprehension" that will draw out some of the larger themes. These themes will be explored more directly in "Questions that further understanding." A deceptively simple tale, *All the Pretty Horses* deftly couples an American Western vernacular with some of the most moving and powerful prose in American literature. Much can be learned from the interplay of John Grady's taciturn voice and the rich and evocative descriptive passages that come together to create one of the few true modern classics. A remarkable blend of the Western, the coming-of-age novel, and the picaresque tradition, *All the Pretty Horses* is an ideal choice for classroom study, with depth and complexity and a compelling narrative that is certain to engage your students.

**DISCUSSION AND WRITING**

**Comprehension**

*Chapter I*

1. What is the occasion at the outset of the book, and what does it mean to John Grady?

2. After his grandfather’s funeral, John Grady Cole rides along an old trail, dismounts at the crest of a rise, and stands "like a man come to the end of something." [p. 5] What has John Grady come to the end of? What might the future hold for him?
3. Why does John Grady's grandfather reflect upon primogeniture (inheritance by the first-born son)? [p. 7]

4. How would you characterize John Grady's relationship with his father? What do their conversations consist of? [pp. 8, 9]

5. What do we know about John Grady's father? About his mother?

6. What does John talk to Mr. Franklin about? What is it John wants? Is he able to accomplish it?

7. What does John Grady expect to find out when he watches his mother perform on stage? In contrast, what does he learn?

8. "...as if were he begot by malice or mischance into some queer land where horses never were he would have found them anyway." [p. 23] What does this mean? What is the author trying to say about John Grady?

9. What is Goshee? Why was John’s mother so important to his father while he was there?

10. In the first chapter, John Grady's father tells him two things he has never told him before. [p. 25] What are they, and why does he choose this opportunity to tell him?

11. Why do John Grady and his father study the two horsemen who pass the cafe window? [p. 25] What does this tell you about father and son?

12. What does Rawlins mean when he says, "I could understand if you was from Alabama you’d have ever reason in the world to run off to Texas. But if you’re already in Texas. I don’t know?" [p. 27]

13. Who is Mary Catherine, and what is John Grady’s relationship to her?

14. "He stood back and touched the brim of his hat and turned and went on up the street. He didn’t look back but he could see her in the windows of the Federal Building across the street standing there and she was still standing there when he reached the corner and stepped out of the glass forever." [p. 29] What does McCarthy mean by this?

15. Why is Rawlins worried about his father catching him? [p. 30]

16. What does McCarthy mean by "ten thousand worlds for the choosing?" [p.30]

17. John Grady and Rawlins set out on this trip together. Who instigated it and why?
18. Why don't John Grady and Rawlins want to ride with the Jimmy Blevins? Why do they think someone is hunting the horse he's riding, and why do they let him come along?

19. When they find out Blevins can shoot, does it change their attitude toward him?

20. Why does Blevins abruptly leave the Mexican household? How do John Grady and Rawlins feel about his leaving? How do you feel about it? Was it an appropriate response to the situation?

21. What do you think of the zacateros they encounter, who are riding up into the mountains? [pp. 61, 62] How are they dressed? What are their skills as horsemen? What does John Grady think of them, and what does this tell you about him?

22. How does Blevins lose his horse, gun, and clothes? What do you think of this scene? Is it comic or tragic?

23. Why does Rawlins want to leave Blevins? [p. 76]

24. How do John Grady and Rawlins feel when they arrive at the hacienda? Why do they feel that way?

Chapter II

1. Have John Grady and Rawlins broken horses before? Do they seem knowledgeable about it?

2. Why does John Grady talk to the horses before he rides them? Why is this effective?

3. John Grady sets out to break all sixteen horses. Why is this important to him?

4. Does John Grady tell Don Héctor about Blevins? Why not? Does this seem like a wise choice?

5. John Grady shares with Don Héctor the belief that "other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man." [p. 127] Why do they believe this? What does it say about them?

6. What does Alejandra mean when she says, "You are in trouble?" [p. 131]

7. What does McCarthy mean by "Real horse, real rider, real land and sky and yet a dream withal?" [p. 132]

8. "Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real." [p. 135] What does dueña Alfonsa mean by this? Do you agree with her?
9. Why is John Grady so confused by his conversation with dueña Alfonsa?

10. Compare the game of chess with the grandmother and the game of pool with the father.

11. What is John Grady’s relationship with Alejandra? What do they have in common, and what sets them apart?

12. What does Don Hectór mean when he says, "Beware gentle night there is no greater monster than reason?" [p. 146]

13. Why do the soldiers come to take John Grady and Rawlins away? Was this situation avoidable?

14. Why do you think Rawlins will not meet John Grady's eyes as they are taken away by the Mexican soldiers?

Chapter III

1. Describe the image of Blevins in jail.

2. How would you describe Blevins' code of honor? What do you think of his leaving the house of the Mexican family after falling over backward? What about getting his horse back and then returning for his gun? Are his actions partially responsible for the trouble they all face?

3. Discuss John Grady's "horse dream" on pages 161-62. What does this dream mean to him?

4. Why doesn’t the captain believe Rawlins is who he says he is?

5. Why is Rawlins so angry at Blevins? Is he fair to blame Blevins for their predicament?

6. When they stop at the abandoned estancia, Blevins is nervous. Why does Blevins give John Grady his money?

7. How do John Grady and Rawlins feel about the execution of Blevins? How do you feel about it? Is it just?

8. "Yet the captain inhabited another space and it was a space of his own election and outside the common world of men. A space privileged to the men of the irreclaimable act which while it contained all lessor worlds within it contained no access to them. For the terms of election were of a piece with its office and once chosen that world could not be quit." [p. 179] What does McCarthy mean by this?
9. What does the captain mean when he tells them to "make arrangements?" What does he expect of John Grady and Rawlins?

10. How would you describe the prison in Saltillo?

11. What does John Grady mean when he says, "Horse had nothing to do with it?" [p. 185] Do you agree?

12. How would you describe the boy John Grady has a knife fight with? What caused it, and was there anything John Grady could have done to avoid it? How does he feel about it afterward?

13. What does McCarthy mean when he describes the prison as "So like some site of siege in an older time, in an older country, where the enemies were all from without?" [pp. 208-9]

14. Who gets John Grady and Rawlins out of prison? Why?

Chapter IV

1. Why does John Grady return to the hacienda?

2. "And after and for a long time to come he’d have reason to evoke the recollection of those smiles and to reflect upon the good will which provoked them for it had power to protect and to confer honor and to strengthen resolve and it had power to heal men and to bring them to safety long after all other resources were exhausted." [p. 219] What do you think of this passage? What does it mean for John Grady?

3. Why do the people from the hacienda treat him so indifferently when he returns?

4. Discuss the passage about dreams on page 225.

5. What does the aunt mean by "The societies to which I have been exposed seemed to me largely machines for the suppression of women." [p. 230] Do you agree about this in her case? What about your own?

6. What does Grady learn in the final confrontation with the aunt? What do you think of the aunt in the wake of their discussion? What does John Grady think? Why does the aunt reject John Grady’s plea for Alejandra?

7. "Those whom life does not cure death will." [p. 238] What is the meaning of this passage?

8. What does John Grady discuss with the children on page 244? Why? What do the children think of his predicament? How does the Mexican culture of the time affect
their reaction?

9. What do we learn about John Grady's capture from the grandmother? Do we believe her?

10. "He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all." [p. 254] What does this mean for John Grady? Is this further commentary on the role of fate in the novel?

11. "He saw a light over a doorway in the corrugated iron wall of a warehouse where no one came and no one went. He saw a vacant field in a city in the rain and in the field a wooden crate and he saw a dog emerge from the crate into the slack and sallow lamplight like a carnival dog forlorn and pick its way brokenly across the rubble of the lot to vanish without fanfare among the darkened buildings." [p. 255] How are John Grady's feelings reflected in this paragraph?

12. Why does John Grady go to retrieve his horse? Would he have taken this action at the beginning of the novel?

13. How does he get away from the posse?

14. Why does he take the captain with him? Is John Grady planning to kill him?

15. What happens when he is awakened by "the men of the country?" Why do they take the captain, and what is his ultimate fate?

16. What does the wedding near the end represent? What does it mean to John Grady? What is McCarthy implying here?

17. Why does John Grady confess to the judge?

18. What does he tell the reverend? Why?

19. The reverend says "There's a purpose for everything in this world." [p.296] In light of this statement, discuss the reverend's philosophy.

Questions for further discussion

1. Compare and contrast John Grady, Rawlins, and Blevins. Is one of them the leader? If so, who and why?

2. John Grady experienced a number of profoundly significant events in the course of the novel. How do they affect him? What qualities does John Grady develop as he matures during the course of the novel? What role does the killing of the boy in prison play in his development?
3. Why does John Grady feel he needs to return the horse? Would he have gone to such lengths at the beginning of the story?

4. In chapter one Rawlins tells Grady "Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision made before got me into it." Do John Grady and Rawlins do any dumb things that cause them harm?

5. Dueña Alfonsa discusses two views of fate. The first, regarding the connectedness of things, is shown in the example of a "tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the dye in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed." And then: "For me the world has always been more of a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upward he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which trace upward in turn, and so on." [pp. 230-31] Discuss these two passages and the meaning of fate in the novel.

6. Do Blevins’s fate and John Grady’s confrontation with the boy in prison seem inescapable? What purpose does violence serve in the narrative?

7. What is the role of death in All the Pretty Horses? The novel opens with the death of John Grady’s father and closes with the death of Abuela. Why do you think this is the case?

8. All the Pretty Horses is set in 1949. Why that year? Could this story take place today? How would it be different? How does the time period affect the story?

9. What do you think of McCarthy's portrayal of Mexico in 1949? Do you think it is like the Mexico of today? What role does Mexico itself play in the narrative?

10. What does the judge represent? Compare him to the captain. What does this say about Mexican law versus that of the United States? How would a Mexican have fared in Texas in 1949?

11. What is the nature of religious beliefs in All the Pretty Horses? Compare and contrast the roles of the judge and the reverend. What does this say about the respective places of religion and law within the narrative?

12. Why all the blood-red imagery? Why are the landscapes often described as blood-red? On page five you find images of blood and the recent frontier, and the threat of Comanche warriors still echoing in the air. What feeling is McCarthy trying to create?

13. What role do horses play in the novel? Do they represent anything beyond what they are?
14. The dreams in this novel are suffused with images of horses. What do the dreams represent?

15. Discuss the role of the landscape in the narrative.

16. How would you describe McCarthy’s language? Does he use the vernacular often? And what about the passages that are not delivered in the voice of the characters?

17. Read Faulkner’s short story "Spotted Horses" and compare the role of the horse in this to All the Pretty Horses.

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian, Child of God, The Crossing, Cities of the Plain, The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark, and Suttree; Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn; Robert Louis Stevenson, Treasure Island; William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury and Light in August; Ernest Hemingway, In Our Time and The Old Man and the Sea; Homer, The Odyssey; Larry McMurtry, The Last Picture Show and Lonesome Dove; William Maxwell, So Long, See You Tomorrow; Jim Harrison, Legends of the Fall.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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