The Horse Whisperer

Nicholas Evans

About the author

Nicholas Evans was born in Bromsgrove, Birmingham, England in 1950. He studied law at Oxford University and then started a career as a journalist. He worked on a newspaper before moving into television, producing films about American politics. In 1993, he met a man who told him about horse whisperers, people that cured traumatised horses. This inspired him to start work on what was to be his first novel. *The Horse Whisperer* was published in 1995 and has now sold around 15 million copies across the world. He now lives in London with his wife and three children.

About the film

Robert Redford starred in and directed the 1998 film adaptation of the book. The film did very well at the box office as it appeals to many people: horse lovers, romantics, those who love good photography and of course Redford fans. However, some fans were annoyed that the ending of the film (Tom wasn't killed) differed from that in the book.

Summary

Chapters 1–2: Two girls, Grace and Judith, are riding their horses through the snow. As they are going up a hill one of the horses slips and falls on the horse behind, dragging them onto a road. Judith hits her head. Suddenly a truck appears. Grace's horse, Pilgrim, jumps at the window of the truck and Grace is thrown into the road. Grace's mother Annie is told the bad news by her husband Robert at the hospital. Judith is dead and Grace is seriously ill. The doctors have to remove her right leg. Someone from the stables tells them that Pilgrim is severely injured and should be shot. Annie refuses to allow this. The horse is behaving strangely and is put into a building away from the other horses. The MacLean family prepare for an uncomfortable Christmas. Grace says that Pilgrim should go back to his home in Kentucky. She and the family go to see him one last time and are appalled at the condition he is in.

Chapters 3–5: Annie is worried about Pilgrim, her daughter and herself. She decides to contact Tom Booker, someone who has spent his life curing horses. He realises that the problems often lie with the owners and not with the horses. Annie persuades him to come to New York to see Pilgrim. He is very concerned about the aggressive behaviour of the horse and angry when he sees the conditions the horse is kept in. He returns to his home in Montana. Annie tries unsuccessfully to persuade him to return a second time. Then she decides to take Grace and Pilgrim on a long car journey to Montana. Grace and her mother have a very strained relationship. Grace is silent most of the time and enjoys hurting her mother's feelings, and Annie is having problems understanding her own feelings. They arrive at Tom's ranch and Tom agrees to see Pilgrim again. Tom realises that Annie, Grace and Pilgrim are all suffering together, and that if he can help the horse he can help them too. Diane, the wife of Tom's brother Frank, is angry that Tom has agreed to help.

Chapters 6–7: Tom and Annie are beginning to have romantic feelings towards each other. Tom has a training session with Pilgrim, which convinces him that the horse could get better, but he wants Grace to tell him everything about the day of the accident, which she does. Tom realises that he really wants to help the horse and Grace, but that his real motivation for doing so is linked to Annie. We learn that Annie had lost several babies after Grace's birth and that had encouraged her to become a successful businesswoman on a magazine. She receives a message from her husband Robert saying he wouldn't be able to visit her at the weekend. She is pleased about this and worried at the same time. Annie has a dinner party and Grace gets upset when one of the children implies that she and Joe, Tom's nephew, are boyfriend and girlfriend. This opens the door for a heart to heart talk between mother and daughter, which begins to heal the problems in the relationship. Meanwhile, Tom realises he is in love with Annie.

Chapters 8–9: Grace and Tom go to see Pilgrim. Tom does some manoeuvres with the horse and finally Grace is able to get very close to Pilgrim. One night, whilst out on a cattle drive, Tom and Annie kiss each other. The next day Robert calls to say he is coming to visit. Tom feels

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awkward and spends all his time looking after Pilgrim, who he eventually manages to ride. Robert arrives at the airport and is impressed with the improvement in Grace's spirits. That night, when Robert touches her, Annie knows her marriage is over. She can only think about Tom. Grace tries to ride a horse, in preparation for riding Pilgrim, but her false leg is broken and she is in pain. They decide to fly to New York for a replacement leg but there are only two plane tickets. Annie decides to remain behind. She will be alone because Frank and his family are going to Disneyland, and Tom to Wyoming. That night Joe is showing a trick to Robert with a piece of rope that belongs to Tom. Annie suddenly wants him to stop because she wants to learn the trick herself, thereby revealing her feelings for Tom.

Chapters 10–11: Tom says goodbye to Annie and sets off. He drives for a while and then turns around and comes back. They both know now that they love each other. Tom and Annie decide to go for a ride to the place where they first kissed. They spend the last day together before the family return and Tom shows Annie the rope trick. The day arrives when Grace has to ride Pilgrim. At first the horse refuses but then Tom violently pulls the horse to the ground, which upsets Grace and her mother. Then he tells Grace to stand on the horse. She can't understand his tactics and Tom tells her Pilgrim has the choice to fight against life or accept it. He chooses to accept it. Then Tom says something that puzzles Annie, though she knows it has something to do with their relationship. Later, Grace rides Pilgrim to the delight of the people watching. A farewell party is arranged for Grace and Annie. Grace overhears a conversation about her mother and Tom, which suggests that they are having a relationship. Tom and Annie meet outside the party and he tells her their relationship must end for the sake of Grace.

Chapters 12–13: The next morning Grace is missing, Tom and his brother go to find her. She is riding Pilgrim and is very upset about Tom and her mother. She decides to kill herself. When Tom finds Grace she is surrounded by horses, and two horses, Pilgrim and a white stallion, are fighting. Tom separates the two and confronts the stallion. He seems to want the stallion to kill him. It smashes Tom's head with its feet and runs away. A year later, Annie is back in New York and she has a three-month-old baby. She learns from a letter from Tom's brother has sent that Tom has been buried next to his father. With this letter is another from Tom. Inside is the piece of rope and the words 'never forget'. Annie tells her husband everything. When the baby is born, Robert tries to believe it is his. We understand that Annie knows that Tom was the father. At first Robert and Annie live separately. Then, slowly, they come closer together again.

Background and themes

People's relationship with animals: Tom knows that horses have feelings and he is able to communicate with them. He also knows that the physical damage to Pilgrim has affected the horse mentally and has highlighted the problems Annie has with her daughter. If he can cure the horse, he will also solve human problems.

Romantic love: Tom and Annie fall hopelessly in love, but whereas Annie is prepared to sacrifice all, even the hard earned healing of her relationship with Grace and the feelings of her husband, Tom knows this cannot happen. At the end he orchestrates his own death to avoid the pain of separation from Annie and to remove himself from being instrumental in the break up of a family.

Parenthood versus career: Annie throws herself into her work in an attempt to get over the pain of having lost several babies. This is one of the main reasons her relationship with her daughter is so strained.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

1 **Discuss:** Tell the students that the book is going to have many references to animals in it. Then put them in small groups to discuss the following questions: *Do you like animals? Which animals do you like? Do people in your country keep animals as pets? Why do people keep animals as pets? Do people keep dangerous animals?*

While reading (p. 3, after 'He couldn't stop the truck.')

2 **Write:** Tell the students to imagine they are a journalist who has just arrived at the scene of the accident. They have to write a report for their newspaper. Elicit words that they may want to use and put them on the board, adding some of your own. Tell them to include an interview with the truck driver and to invent his answers. See key for possible questions.

After reading

3 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapters 1–2. Tell then to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

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Chapters 3–5

Before reading

4 **Predict:** Tell the students that Tom Booker is a very important character in the book. Put them in pairs and ask them to look at the picture on page 15. Ask them to predict the answers to the following questions about him: *What country is he from? How old is he?*
Is he married? Has he got any children? What is his job? Is he a nice person?

While reading (pp. 21/22, after 'We've come nearly 2,000 miles and you haven't spoken a word.')

5 **Group work:** Put students in small groups and ask them to talk about a long journey that have made. Ask them to consider the following questions: *What was the reason for your journey? How far did you travel? From where to where did you travel? Did you travel alone, with friends or with family? How did you travel? Did you enjoy the journey?*

After reading

6 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *ticket, message, university, magazine, officer, wood*. Ask the students to talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapters 3–5.

Chapters 6–7

While reading (p. 44, after 'After the meal, the children went to play games on Annie's computer.')

7 **Discuss:** Put the students in small groups and ask them to talk about computer games. Ask them to consider the following: *Do you like games? What type of games do you like? How often do you play games? Do you play on the Internet? Do you think games can make problems for some people?*

After reading

8 **Write:** Put the students in small groups and give them five minutes to write down all the things they can see in the pictures in Chapters 6–7. The group with the longest list wins. Tell them to include parts of the body and clothes in their lists. See key for words.

Chapters 8–9

While reading (p. 58, after 'Things could never be the same again.')

9 **Role play:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to role play a conversation between Annie and Robert. Annie tells Robert that she is in love with Tom and she wants to leave him. Robert is angry and tries to change her mind. See discussion key for a possible start to the conversation.

After reading

10 **Write, ask and answer:** Write '*Where did Annie and Tom kiss?*' on the board and elicit the answer (By the river.). Now tell students to write similar questions about Chapters 8–9. Students then mingle as a group, asking and answering each other's questions.

Chapters 10–11

While reading (p. 76, after 'I'm going to leave Robert.')

11 **Discuss:** Put the students in groups of four. Tell two of them that they believe Annie should leave Robert and two believe she shouldn't. Give them time to think of their arguments and the advantages and disadvantages. Then they have a discussion.

After reading

12 **Draw:** Put the students in pairs and ask one to look at the illustration on page 68 and one to look at the illustration on page 73. One student then describes the illustration to their partner who has to draw it. Then they reverse roles. How accurate are the drawings?

Chapters 12–13

While reading (p. 81, after 'And her body inside it.')

13 **Write:** Tell the students to write a letter from Grace to her mother explaining how she feels and why she is doing what she is doing. Elicit words that they may want to use and put them on the board, adding some of your own.

After reading

14 **Research:** Tell the students that the book was made into a film. Ask them to look for information on the Internet about the film. The students then give an oral presentation of what they have found.

15 **Discuss:** Put students in small groups ask them to think about the books they have read and the films they have seen that have animals as the central theme. Then ask them to describe the film or book and to discuss the following: *What animals were in the book or film? Were they good or bad? Did the animals talk to people? Were they friendly or did they attack people? Was the story sad or happy? Did you like the film/book?*

16 **Game:** Put the students into small groups and ask them to write ten questions about any part of the book. When they've finished each group reads out their questions and the other groups have to write their answers on a piece of paper. The group with the most correct answers wins.

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