

The Truth About Horses, Friends, & My Life as a Coward

Reader's Guide

More info available at: www.sarahpgibson.com

INTRODUCTION

“When they find out my family owns horses, they sit next to me at lunch and try to be nice. They munch away on their sandwiches, looking all dreamy-eyed...I know that even though she’s sitting right beside me, she’s actually far away—riding on a galloping horse, usually pure white, across a field of waving grass. The sun is shining and the wind is blowing the hair back from her face. Only I know about that rock the horse is going to trip on, or that the horse’s tail is up because he is farting in the wind, or that the lovely shirt that the girl is wearing will be forever covered in horse hair and smell of sweat.”

— from **The Truth About Horses, Friends, & My Life as a Coward**

Eleven-year-old Sophie Groves is *not* one of those girls who always dreamed of having a horse. Ever since the day that her family’s grumpy Shetland pony, Really, took Sophie and a new (and quickly former) friend on a bumpy, jumpy cart ride, she’s tried to steer clear of large, four-legged animals. Sophie’s mom wasn’t daunted, though: the family quickly welcomed two more “horses with personality:” Sweetheart, a spirited Arabian, and huge, galumphing, Fancy Free. Life on a small Maine Island means slim pickings for friends, but her horses help Sophie forge friendships with a new girl and an old “enemy”. Ultimately, learning how to handle stubborn horses helps Sophie deal with stubborn humans. Sarah Gibson’s debut novel is a funny, charming story about a plucky girl who learns how to corral her fears, sit tall in the saddle, and enjoy life’s wild rides.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Q. One thing Sophie is afraid of is obvious: horses. Another thing that’s hard for her is making and keeping friends. Do you think those difficulties are related to each other?

Q. Is Sophie a pessimist: someone who always looks at the negative side of things, or is she just being practical when she figures out all the ways that things can go wrong? Why or why not?

Q. Do you think Sophie is more like her father or mother? What about her sister, Sharon? Who does Sharon take after? Give some examples.

Q. Sophie is much braver at the end of the story than at the beginning. What are some of the experiences that help her feel less afraid?

Q. The Carpwel kids are unruly and rude. Why does Sophie go along with their bad ideas? What changes when she goes riding on their new four-wheeler without a helmet? Name some reasons she agreed to do such a dangerous thing.

Q. Sophie describes herself as pretty unpopular. She and Rachel knew each other for a long time before they became friends. Why do you think that was?

Q. When Sophie finally has two good friends, Melissa and Rachel, they don't like each other. Why do you think the three of them can't get along?

Q. Why does Melissa agree to try and be friends with Rachel? What changes on Halloween night?

Q. Even though Gramp knows that Sophie is afraid of many things, he and his friend Bob tell Sophie stories about horse and farm accidents and laugh about them. Why would he do that? Is he trying to scare her even more?

Q. Mr. Richards at the riding stable gives Sophie the slowest, laziest horse for many lessons in a row. Why do you think he didn't put her on a faster one, once he saw her skills improve? Why does he have her lead the class the first time they canter? What did the slowest horse teach Sophie that the faster horses didn't teach the other riders?

Q. Early in the book, Sophie thinks her horse mishaps are tragic. By the end of the book, she has learned to laugh at them. Why do you think her attitude changes?

Q. Describe Sophie's three horses. Which one does she prefer? Which one, if any, do you like best?

Q. Do you believe Sophie will keep riding horses in the future? Do you think she will ever choose to own horses when she is an adult? Why or why not?

RELATED ACTIVITIES

Math & Problem Solving

1. At the end of the story, Sophie decides she is going to offer kids riding lessons on Sweetheart (in the ring!). Using the following numbers, figure out how much money Sophie will make over the summer.

Each lesson will be \$15.00

Students will receive two lessons per week

Riding lessons will be held for eight weeks

There will be 5 students

2. Lots of kids want a horse or pony of their very own. Not many realize how much money it costs to buy and care for such a large animal! With the help of a grown-up (a librarian is always helpful!), do some research to find the answers to these questions and make a budget.

hint: Google 'cost of owning a horse'

Purchase Price	
Pre-Purchase Exam	
Tack & Equipment (Annual)	
Health Care (Annual)	
Farrier (Annual)	
Insurance (Annual)	
Feed & Bedding (Annual)	
Supplies (Annual)	
Total Full Care Boarding (Annual)	
Riding Lessons (Annual)	

Divide your expenses into two categories: one-time fees (the costs to get the horse), and monthly costs, which you will have as long as you own the horse. Most people are surprised by the totals!

Now, if those costs seem too expensive for you, brainstorm ways you might lower the costs. Are there some things you can buy used? Can you lease a horse instead of buying one while you figure out if you really want a horse forever? Could you swap stable work in exchange for some of the boarding costs? What about sharing a horse with a friend?

See my *So, You Want to Own a Horse* if you are serious about wanting a horse and need some advice on how to make it happen. ([link](#))

Science & Synthesis

1. What are the differences between a draft horse, pony, and mini-horse? Make a poster with labels. Write an essay: Which animal would you prefer to have? Why?

2. Horse stories will often use words only know to horse lovers. For example, 'withers'. Research the different parts of a horse, draw and label the different areas. How are horses like other large animals such as a cow? How are they different? Can you list these differences?

3. If you have a horse, do an equine experiment with supervision. Choose several kinds of treats, for example, apple wafers (from the feed store), real apples, carrots, or sugar cubes. Figure out a test to determine which treat the horse likes best. For example, if you give small pieces of the treats all at once, does the horse always eat one kind first? Or, if you space the treats out on the stall door, which one does the horse choose first? Use your results to train your horse to do something it doesn't like to do—for example, step over a garden hose, or stand still to have its hooves picked.

Language Arts

1. Biographies that are well written appear as though they are easy to write. The truth is that it is harder to create scenes for characters that are 'real'. My book is based on real events however there is one chapter that is completely fictional. My editor asked me to write it because she felt the book needed this scene. Can you guess which chapter it is? Why?

2. Try and write a story from your life in three pages or less. Did you find it hard to fill the pages or could you have written more? Was it a funny story or a sad one? Think about the scene you chose to write about. Answering this question will tell you what kind of person you are and what is important for you to communicate.

3. My writing style has been described by my editor as 'pithy', meaning I like to get to the point and not use a lot of description. Do you like this style? Do you wish there was more description of the characters, setting, etc? Look over your description of Sophie's horses or your 2 page biography (see above). Are you 'pithy' like me or are you a descriptive writer?

4. Do you have a horse story to share? If so, please submit it to me ([link](#)) and I shall post it on the website. Please make it 200 words or less!

5. Wordplay: "Coward"

- What are some **synonyms** for *coward*? What are some **antonyms**?
- *Cowered* is a homonym of *coward*. It sounds the same, but means something different. What is the definition for *cowered*? Does a *coward cower*?
- What are some words that **rhyme** with *coward*? Hint: you can use the past tense of words that end in "-ower" or "-our".
- Write a poem about Sophie Ballard, who *used to be a coward*.

6. Vocabulary: What do these horse words mean? *Paddock, pasture, canter, frog, bloat, bit, colic, reins, tack, curry comb, jodhpurs, farrier.*

Social Studies & Spatial Awareness

1. Draw a map of the island region where this story takes place. Include: Sophie's house, the fish-shack, the new barn, the pasture, the Point, the Narrows, Gramp's house, the Bowden's dairy farm, school, Melissa Maloney's house, the beach, Mr. Richard's stables, the woods, and Mrs. Pelletier's house.

Creative Arts

1. Build a small scale set-up for your dream horse. You can make a shoebox diorama and use cardboard and magazine pictures, or build a structure using cardboard, felt, and popsicle sticks.
2. Draw each of Sophie's three horses. Compare and contrast size, color and shape.

Social Skills & Reflection

1. Sophie is afraid of horses and has trouble making friends. She gets over these problems by trying new things. What is something you're afraid of or which is hard for you? How do you think you might get over it? Who could help you improve in this area? Set a goal and make a plan to accomplish it. Tell your family and friends so they can help you. Once you achieve your goal, reflect: was it easier or harder than you imagined? Did you ever stumble? What helped you get back in the saddle and be ready to work on your goal again?