

# **All the Pretty Horses Study Guide**

**All the Pretty Horses by Cormac McCarthy**

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# Plot Summary

In four sections, *All the Pretty Horses* introduces the coming of age tale of John Grady Cole. Chapter 1 begins in 1949 and the story starts with Cole returning from attending his grandfather's funeral. Left to his grandfather's care by parents unable to raise the boy, sixteen-year-old Cole had been living on his grandfather's ranch in San Angelo, Texas. Cole's mother is an actress of little acclaim and is set to inherit her father's ranch; a ranch she does not want. The boy's father suffers physical and mental illness resulting from the Second World War. Cole is faced with losing the only home he has ever known.

Chapter 1 of *All the Pretty Horses* introduces the first of many trials of John Grady Cole and his friend Lacey Rawlins. Unable to stop the sale of his grandfather's ranch, Cole sets out with seventeen-year-old Rawlins for parts unknown. On horseback, through south Texas and into Mexico, they travel in 1949. The two friends set out with stars in their eyes and myths on their minds. Shortly before crossing into Mexico, Cole and Rawlins are joined by a third youth, Jimmy Blevins, mounted on a fantastic horse and claiming a false identity. It is traveling through the small towns and rural regions of Mexico that Blevins loses his horse, pistol, and clothes during a thunderstorm. The three discover the youth's horse in a nearby town and Blevins steals the horse, pursued by armed men. Cole and Rawlins are separated from Blevins during the chase. With the addition of Blevins to their company, Cole and Rawlins have embarked upon a path that would ultimately cost them their innocence and most of their youthful ignorance.

John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins continue their travel south through Mexico. It is in Chapter 2, that the two friends arrive at the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. With their knowledge of ranching and Cole's talent for training horses, the two young men are employed at the hacienda for many months. During his time there, Cole becomes enamored of Alejandra, the beautiful black-haired daughter of the hacienda's owner Don Hector Rocha y Villareal. Disregarding warnings from the girl's aunt, the Duena Alfonsa, to stay away from Alejandra, Cole and Alejandra become lovers. One night, after a camp trip, John Grady Cole and Rawlins are arrested and taken from the hacienda in manacles.

It is Chapter 3 and in the town of Encantada, where John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins again see Jimmy Blevins. Blevins has been arrested after having attempted to steal back the pistol he had lost during the same thunderstorm in which he had lost his horse. In the process of stealing the pistol, Blevins had murdered one of the rurales, a Mexican peasant. In an attempt to ease his plight, as he had been severely beaten, Blevins had given Cole and Rawlins' names to the Mexican captain as co-conspirators in the recovery of his horse. Many areas of Mexico in the early twentieth century are still lawless. The father of the man Jimmy Blevins' killed decides the youth's fate. A payoff to the captain ensures only Cole and Rawlins survive to arrive at the Mexican prison in Saltillo. The captain on arriving at the prison informs the two young men that the only way for Cole and Rawlins to leave the prison is if arrangements are made. Americans must agree to these arrangements or they do not do so well. In the prison, they meet a



political exile name Perez, who has been a prisoner for some time. Perez explains that the arrangements the captain had been referring to involve the payment of large sums of money to Perez. The money must be paid by one of the American prisoners' rich relatives or friends. This is the only manner in which an American will be freed from the prison. During prison fights, Lacey Rawlins is gravely injured and Cole kills a man to escape a similar fate. After seven weeks, the two men are released without being told why. Cole discovers that it was Alejandra's aunt who secured the release of the two young men. After their release, Cole and Rawlins buy food and clothing. After a brief discussion it is decided that Lacey Rawlins will return to his family's home in San Angelo, Texas. Cole declares his intention of returning to the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion and seeing Alejandra.

Chapter 4 begins Cole's solo journey back to the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. Alejandra's aunt explains to Cole the agreement she and the young girl have made. The aunt would arrange for the young men to be released from prison if Alejandra agreed never to see Cole again. Cole travels to where Alejandra is. In their final meeting, Alejandra explains she has chosen to remain with her family and says farewell to Cole. Disheartened and disillusioned, Cole begins his journey north. He determines that he will not leave his horse in Mexico and returns to the town of Encantada. With the loss of his ideals, Cole feels he has nothing to lose and takes the captain hostage while he sets out to retrieve his and Rawlins' horses. Cole also finds and reclaims Blevins' horse that was ultimately the cause of much pain and death.

Heading into the hills with the horses and the captain, Cole is overtaken by brigands, who seize the captain. Arriving in Texas, Cole returns Rawlins' horse to his friend. Cole is taken to court attempting to return Blevins horse to its rightful owner. False charges were made by men who wanted to claim the horse themselves. Finding no owner and hearing Cole's case, a judge listens to the tale of John Grady Cole and rules in his favor. The story concludes when Cole returns to San Angelo, Texas to discover both his father and childhood nurse dead. He has arrived in time to witness her funeral. *All the Pretty Horses* ends as it had begun: with John Grady Cole attending a funeral. Having left Texas with his innocence and youthful ignorance intact, Cole has returned with little to his name and less of his ideals.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

*All the Pretty Horses* is the tale of a year in the life of young John Grady Cole. It is a year filled with experiences that promote the growth and maturation of a sixteen year old, whose life is turned upside down by the death of a beloved family member and the loss of his home. The story begins as Cole enters the ranch home he has shared with his grandfather, after he returns from that grandfather's funeral. Friends and family mourned Cole's grandfather. A ranching family is assisted in its housekeeping by staff that continues its work from generation to generation. These are the duties of Luisa, Arturo, and Cole's old nursemaid, Abuela. Abuela had been the nursemaid to his mother and his mother's mother before him. For eighty-three years, the Grady family had ranched that land. Cole's mother was the last of the Grady line and the Grady name died with his grandfather.

After the funeral, Cole meets and tells his father that his mother has gone to San Antonio. They share coffee, a meal, and arrange to meet later in the week to go riding. Before leaving, Cole's father gives his son a Hamley Formfitter saddle as an early Christmas present. Cole's mother returns about a week later and Cole approaches her to discuss the disposition of the family ranch. He understands that she has no liking for the ranch life and offers to lease it from her. She says there is no money and the ranch is not self-supporting. She further says that he being sixteen years old, cannot run a ranch. A trip to the family lawyer provides the information that Cole has no right to the property as it was left to his mother. In addition, any rights his father had were given up when Cole's parents' divorce became final shortly before the old man's funeral. It was shortly after Christmas that same year that Cole finds his mother acting in a small playhouse and visiting another man in his hotel. It is in early March that he sees and rides with his father for the last time. They mention the boy's mother and Cole's latest female interest. They end their conversation and meeting discussing the state of the country.

There is a brief respite where Cole and Rawlins are relaxing one evening. Cole mentions the recent sale of the ranch and the new owners will take over in June. Cole declares his intention to leave. There is some small discussion of God and destiny. During a short trip to San Angelo to have some horse tack fixed, Cole brings to closure his relationship with a local girl. Before sunup on a morning shortly after his stop in the town of San Angelo, Cole and Rawlins head out on horseback. They leave neither word for their family or for their friends. It is many miles and a day later the two young men discuss the little care for the life they have left behind. Along the route they have chosen, Cole and Rawlins see further evidence of industrialization, as they must share the road with motorized conveyances. As they near the border between Texas and Mexico, Cole realizes they are being followed. Lying in wait, Cole and Rawlins confront Jimmy Blevins. The two young men recognize the excellent quality horse that Jimmy Blevins is riding and ask him where he got it. Blevins replies in a manner that Cole



believes implies he is lying about who he is, what age he is, and where Jimmy Blevins got his horse. Cole and a less enthusiastic Lacey Rawlins agree to let Jimmy Blevins join them on their travels. The three together cross the river into Mexico.

Once across the border, the three young men are caught in a thunderstorm. Blevins' is deathly afraid of lightning and storms and takes off on his horse into the storm. Cole and Rawlins seek cover in a nearby copse of tree and stone. Blevins' ultimately loses his clothes, weapon, and his horse. They eventually locate the weapon and horse. Cole and Rawlins become conspirators in stealing the fantastic horse from Mexican peasants. The noteworthy horse is missed and the three are sighted fleeing from the village. Separated and running from the armed peasants, Cole and Rawlins continue heading south. Blevins' fate after the encounter is not yet revealed.

Traveling south, Cole and Rawlins cross the path of vaqueros. The two young gentlemen are seeking work and are directed to the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. Before heading to the hacienda to apply for work, Cole glimpses a beautiful black-haired girl riding along the road. The caporal escorted the two young men to the gerente and spoke on their behalf.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

*All the Pretty Horses*, Volume One of the *Border Trilogy*, begins the tale of John Grady Cole. As a youth, his grandfather raised Cole. Cole's parents had separated. His mother leaves to pursue a career in acting with limited success and Cole's father is physically and mentally impaired from injuries sustained during the Second World War. Ripe for parental guidance, Cole's grandfather's values and experiences were imprinted on the youth. At the age of sixteen, when his grandfather died, Cole is in transition between child and adult. To further complicate matters, he is coming of age during a time the country is in transition. The changes in Cole's world are in conflict. The traditional values imparted by his grandfather and a rancher's life are coming to an end in an era marked by the conclusion of the Second World War and the change affected by industrialization.

Cole lost his beloved grandfather, mentor, and his home. His state of mind was further established after he conducted two separate familial meetings, one with his mother and another with his father. His mother and father were his only surviving relatives and the two who should have been responsible for his upbringing. His parents, having separated and leaving their only son to be raised by another, placed the distance between them and all that would mark Cole's future relationship with them. Cole's mother pursued an acting career with a degree of self-interest that increased the distance between her and her son. Cole's entreaty, to his mother, not to sale the ranch and her insistence in doing so, was the proverbial straw. Cole would have no further contact with his mother nor is there any thought of her when he is later imprisoned and facing death. Of Cole's father, the meeting is underscored with the visible illness his father is suffering from. It is quickly ascertained that the father and mother will be no comfort to the boy in the situation Cole now finds himself.



In dealing with these personal losses, Cole makes the first of his "adult" decisions in a story fraught with his experiences of learning to live as a man thrust into his adulthood. Cole and his friend, Lacey Rawlins, leave home behind and have only what they can carry, each other, and their horses to call their own. The decision to strike out on one's own was more common in 1940s America. It occurred here, in 1949, when the family unit was making a comeback after its near eradication by two World Wars. This is a significant decision for the sixteen year old Cole to make.

Deciding to head south and ultimately into Mexico, is evidence of Cole's attachment to the traditional values and life of ranching. He is most comfortable on horseback and feels an affinity for horses like he feels for no other. This affinity is what gets him involved in the misfortune of Jimmy Blevins.' Cole recognized immediately the quality of horseflesh that Jimmy Blevins' claimed as his own. It is perhaps one thing that induced Cole to help Blevins steal the horse from the Mexican peasants who had it after the thunderstorm. Conspiring to steal the horse and being seen doing it, are the beginning of a series of misfortunes for Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*. At the conclusion of this Chapter, is another milestone that will mark the maturation of Cole. He sees Alejandra and his attention is immediately caught.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Cole and Rawlins were now employed by Don Hector Rocha y Villareal. Working the ranch, Cole discovers the identity of the beautiful black-haired girl. She is Alejandra, the daughter of their employer. Finding his niche on the ranch, Cole has demonstrated an ability to break wild horses gently. With Rawlins assistance, Cole establishes himself in the eyes of the Don in this area. Both young men are given a certain amount of respect from the other vaqueros on the ranch that observe and acknowledge their skill. Cole's ability demonstrates his personal respect for the animals with which he is working.

On a trip into the mountains to acquire more wild mares, Cole has a chance to converse with the older vaqueros. They discuss the history of Mexico and the role the horses played. There is tremendous respect the vaquero shows the horse, more so than many men will earn from these workers. The Don himself recognizes Cole's success on his trip into the mountains. Upon Cole's return, the young cowboy is asked by the Don to assume an important role in the training and breeding of the hacienda's horse stock. Cole accepts after speaking with his friend Lacey Rawlins about the opportunity. Cole wants to ensure there is no animosity between he and his friend as a result of the Don's offer.

Rawlins becomes aware of Cole's interest in their employer's daughter. Rawlins warns Cole that Alejandra is out of their league. Cole admits that she may be used to beautiful things, but it didn't matter to him. At a dance in La Vega, the beautiful Alejandra accepts a dance with Cole. Each recognizes their interest of one another. While out riding the Don's prize stallion, Cole is approached by Alejandra and ordered to release the stallion to her. She says she will return it to the hacienda and he should walk her horse. Cole's arrival on a different horse does not go unnoticed at the hacienda.

Alejandra's aunt becomes aware of the two's interests and meets with Cole. She does not deny the evolving relationship, but warns him to beware the customs of Mexico. Her cautions go unheard. Lacey Rawlins questions Cole on the relationship and the possibility of it endangering their position on the ranch. Again, Cole ignores the warnings about the growing relationship with the beautiful daughter of the Don. Cole and Alejandra become lovers. Don Hector Rocha y Villareal is unaware of the relationship. Alejandra's aunt is not. On a morning before sunup, Cole and Rawlins are taken into custody. The two men are removed from the hacienda in manacles. They are unaware of the circumstances surrounding their arrests, but Rawlins believes the arrest has to do with the relationship between Cole and Alejandra. Cole is less certain and questions the armed men. He is told nothing except to mount and ride. The armed men and their prisoners head out.





## Chapter 2 Analysis

Cole has discovered that which he was seeking, a hacienda or Mexican ranch, and the opportunity to work with horses. Arriving at the hacienda of Don Hector Rocha y Villareal, the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion, Cole and Rawlins have been offered the opportunity to work and a place to eat and sleep. There are few questions asked and neither young man offers any of the possible answers. Cole and Rawlins friendship is tested is when the Don offers Cole the opportunity to work with some rare horses. Rawlins positive response to Cole's opportunity proves the test of their friendship. It is a friendship that will stand strong even under future duress.

Alejandra's meeting with Cole occurs. Cole is definitely interested. Alejandra proves amicable to Cole's advances. Alejandra's aunt does not encourage nor discourage their interest at this early juncture. The aunt's attempt to explain Mexican traditions and expectations to Cole pass on to deaf ears. Alejandra and Cole become lovers. There are several meetings between Cole and the Don regarding the horses on the hacienda. The Don is a very proud man and has many ambitions for his hacienda. It is assumed that he has similar ambitions for his daughter. Alejandra's father is unaware of the young man's relationship with his daughter. However, the aunt is not.

In his meetings with the Don, Cole is circumspect answering questions about his past. He is not untruthful until questioned about his traveling into Mexico. Cole has denied crossing the border or traveling with anyone other than Lacey Rawlins. While not claiming a close acquaintance with Jimmy Blevins, this failure to mention him at all will ultimately incriminate Cole in Don Hector Rocha y Villareal's eyes. This will lead to problems for Cole, as the Don might have been able to help him and Rawlins before they were arrested and removed from the hacienda in manacles.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Arriving in the town of Encantada, Cole and Rawlins are reunited with Jimmy Blevins. Blevins has been arrested and charged with murder. The captain has used force to compel Blevins to admit to the charges for his arrest and seeks to do the same with Lacey Rawlins. Rawlins is beaten while Cole is discovering from young Jimmy Blevins that Blevins had identified Cole and Rawlins as co-conspirators in the horse theft. The three men are manacled and placed into the back of a pick-up truck. They are en-route to the Mexican prison in Saltillo. After many hours in the truck, they are pulled off into a deserted area. The captain and another man take Jimmy Blevins into the tree line and a couple of shots are heard. The two older men return without Blevins. Cole and Rawlins know that young Jimmy Blevins has been killed.

Arriving at the prison, the captain explains about arrangements. In Mexico, everyone is making arrangements. In the case of Blevins, it was the father of the murdered man that paid the captain to kill the boy. For Cole and Rawlins, the captain explained that Americans did not stay in the prison as arrangements were always to be made. Once inside, Cole and Rawlins discover that their names are not on the list of prisoners. For several days they must fight to stay alive. After a week, a political exile and prisoner named Perez calls them to a meeting. Perez explains the arrangements that must be made by Americans at the prison. Freedom can be gained by payment to Perez for release. It was expected and accepted by Perez that all Americans were expected to have a rich family or friend. Having no family and certainly no money to his name, Cole explains that he and Rawlins would just have to stay awhile.

There are more fights. Rawlins is severely injured by a knife-wielding prisoner and Cole must seek medical attention for him. Cole uses what little money he has to secure a weapon of his own. Cole is later attacked by the prisoner with a knife. Cole is also severely injured, but kills the man in the process. After being patched back together, Cole and Rawlins discover that someone has paid for their release.

Leaving the prison, the two men acquire food and clothing. Without a horse and even less to his name than at the start of this fateful journey, Lacey Rawlins declares his intention to return home to San Angelo, Texas. Cole is committed in his feelings for Alejandra and insistent that she will feel the same way and come with him. The two friends part ways. Lacey Rawlins returns to Texas and Cole heads south again to the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

In Chapter 3, the situation that involves into the arrest of Cole and Rawlins occurring at the end of Chapter 2 continues. As the conditions of the arrest remain unclear, so



continues the test of the friendship shared by Cole and Rawlins. Arriving in Encantada, the two young prisoners are reunited with their conspirator in the horse theft, Jimmy Blevins. They learn that their meeting with the young Blevins was truly ill fated from the beginning. Blevins who had been arrested for murder had named Cole and Rawlins as the conspirators in stealing the horse from the Mexican peasant.

Cole is quickly faced with another milestone and the reality of life in Mexico. First, Blevins lack of loyalty in the face of his misery is a lesson in itself. Rawlins had forever been Cole's friend and confidant. Second, Rawlins is beaten for information leading to the three young prisoners' complicity by the captain who holds them captive. The lawlessness of the region quickly becomes apparent. It is when they are transported to the prison in Saltillo, that the greatest lesson is learned. The captain and a peasant's father arrange to kill Blevins, who was being held for murdering the Mexican peasant. Rawlins and Cole had not been witness to such a cold-blooded act before this.

Their options on arriving at the prison were few. A feeling of hopelessness was one option. Disbelief definitely had its place. It was explained that money would be required to get them of this place. There was no death for prisoners other than what was arranged. Their names were not read from the list of prisoners and it is said those who don't exist, won't be missed. There was no thought or mention of parents, family, or friends by either of the two comrades. It does not appear to have even been a consideration. The days following the arrival of Cole and Rawlins in the prison were marked with violence. The two young men had been thrust firmly from childhood and were living solely based upon their readiness and willingness to kill.

Prison became the truest test of their friendship, loyalty, and courage. They fought back to back, protecting themselves and each other. Rawlins chose to blame the horse. Cole knew better. It had nothing to do with the horse. There is a meeting with a political exile named Perez and then the two young prisoners confirm they are penniless to save themselves this fate. When Rawlins is severely injured, Cole must give all that he has to secure a weapon. It is in Chapter 3, that Cole loses the last of his innocence as he is forced to take another man's life.

Cole and Rawlins' release is secured through Alejandra's aunt. It was not requested and was unexpected. Lacey Rawlins, who has barely survived his injuries, has lost his horse and is almost penniless, tells Cole as he is heading home. Cole is confident that Alejandra will share his feelings and his life and heads out for the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion to claim the girl and find his horses.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Arriving at the hacienda, Cole is able to reclaim his belongings and arrange a meeting with Alejandra's aunt. Alejandra is not at the hacienda. Her aunt is even less enthusiastic at this second meeting with young Cole. The Duena Alfonsa discloses the terms of an agreement that Alejandra made with her. The two young men would be released from the prison. The young woman's aunt would pay the Americans' ransom on the condition that Alejandra would agree not to see Cole again. She explains the situation her family had found itself in when she was a young girl and the one that Alejandra finds herself in now. The aunt explains again the traditions and societal expectations of Mexico. The Duena Alfonsa admits her knowledge of the affair between Cole and Alejandra. It is her claim that Alejandra will honor her pact with her aunt and not continue her association with Cole.

Cole collects his belongings and acquires the horse that the aunt has given him. The aunt had divulged Alejandra's location and Cole makes arrangements to meet the young girl. Alejandra meets Cole and hears the complete tale of how he came to Mexico up to the time of his release from the prison. Alejandra is in tears, but as she explains to Cole, she cannot turn her back on her family. Alejandra has told her father that she was Cole's lover and she is ashamed. Having seen the lawlessness that can exist in Mexico, Cole understands that he came close to dying at the hands of Alejandra's father. She spends the night with him and then boards a train to return to her father's hacienda.

Alejandra's rejection is a painful lesson for Cole. He gets drunk and passes out from a bar fight. Upon waking, he collects his things and his horse and heads north. It is while traveling and without a particular destination in mind, that Cole passes a sign declaring the direction to Encantada. Feeling he has nothing further to lose; he has lost his love and been forced to kill a man, Cole determines that he will not lose his horse, Redbo, too. He throws caution to the wind when recovering the lost horses. In the town of Encantada, the place of recent memory where Cole, Rawlins, and Blevins were temporarily imprisoned, Cole will take the captain hostage. Entering Encantada, Cole is circumspect as he breaks into the building where the captain will come to work later in the morning. Cole lies in wait and takes the captain hostage as the man enters the building. Forcing the captain to tell him the location of his equine companions, the former prisoner sets out with his hostage to reacquire the lost horses. Cole survives a gunfight to reclaim his horse as well as Junior, Lacey Rawlins' horse, and the fantastic horse of Jimmy Blevins.

Cole continues his ride north with the three horses and his hostage in tow. While outrunning the armed men following him, he is shot in the leg and decides to release the horse given to him by Alejandra's aunt. He cauterizes the wound in his leg using a hot pistol barrel. One evening, after the armed men had given up the chase, bandits



surround his campsite and take the captain away in manacles. It is unclear what the fate of the captain might have been, but Cole presumes later that the captain is dead.

The young man spends many weeks traveling through the American Southwest attempting to find either relatives of Jimmy Blevins or the rightful owner of Jimmy Blevins' horse. While doing so, he is brought up on charges by three men who attempt to claim Blevins' horse as their own. He explains his story from leaving Texas until this current situation to the judge. The judge is amazed at the tale he has heard and asks to see the wound on Cole's leg. Finding it proof enough of his story, the judge drops the charges and releases the horse to the young Cole.

In San Angelo, Texas, Lacey Rawlins is amazed not only that Cole is alive, but that he returned his friend's horse Junior as well. Rawlins tells Cole of Cole's father's death and the illness of Cole's nursemaid, Abuela. When asked where he will go, Cole explains that he has no country and leaves. Cole remains until the funeral of Abuela. After the services, he sets out again for parts unknown.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Cole observed more on his return trip to the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. The outlook of a man is different than that of the younger, more innocent, man who had passed this way the first time. He watched the children playing in the streets and the peasants working in the fields. He no longer slept in the comfort offered by those whom he passed on his way. Cole became a solitary individual and kept to himself. He slept outside on a park bench or under the trees. Arriving at the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion, no one was surprised to see him return, not even the Duena Alfonsa, Alejandra's aunt.

Speaking with the vaqueros while awaiting a meeting with Alejandra's aunt, Cole explained in full the circumstances that had brought him to this place. It was the most honest he had been to this point, with himself and with anyone other than Lacey Rawlins. There might be some disbelief in the telling as though he was observing all that had gone before as if it had happened to someone else.

Cole remains ignorant in ways men and women relate and share their stronger feelings. When faced with the pact the aunt has made with Alejandra, Cole is insistent that their young love will remain true and be strong enough to overcome the promise Alejandra had made to her aunt to never see him again. He is, of course, mistaken. Mexican traditions make the family unit the strongest in love and loyalty. Arranging to meet Alejandra without the knowledge of her family, Cole is disillusioned to find this is exactly the case. She has chosen her family's acceptance and love over that of Cole.

It is with the disillusionment of rejection from a first love and the swift maturation that comes from having killed a man, that Cole's state of mind is one where he feels he has nothing to lose. Taking a hostage, he sets out to steal back the horses: Redbo, Junior, and Blevins' fantastic horse, that had been lost due to the three young men's



imprisonment. Having recovered the horses, it is with loyalty, courage, and an abiding friendship that he seeks to find the true owner of Blevins' horse and return Junior to his friend, Rawlins. Any perceived connection that existed with San Angelo, Texas is lost when Cole returns to discover his father dead and Cole has returned in time to attend the funeral of his nursemaid and family friend, Abuela. He has no family he will acknowledge and no home he can return to. Older and wiser, John Grady Cole has had a coming of age tale that has taken him firmly from childhood and set him on a path of personal discovery in courage, friendship, and the human spirit.



# Characters

## John Grady Cole

John Grady Cole is sixteen years old and the main character of this story. Raised by his beloved grandfather on his mother's side, he is frustrated at the loss of the only home he had known. His mother had inherited and then sold the ranch when her father died. Cole is a young man who has lived a rancher's life for sixteen years. Although mature for his age, he is unprepared for the changes overtaking America as traditional values are being replaced with modernization and industrialization. Knowing his home is gone and no family of which he would speak, Cole takes his horse Redbo and leaves. *All the Pretty Horses* is his coming of age tale. He is homeless and has only the possessions with him to claim as his own. Traveling into Mexico, he will find work with horses, his first love, until he meets Alejandra. He falls in love, takes a lover, is imprisoned for stealing a horse, and must kill a man to defend himself. His story comes full circle as Cole returns to San Angelo, Texas and can again be found beside a gravesite. His nursemaid has died and he attends her funeral. He had also discovered upon his return his father had died while Cole had been in Mexico. With no attachments, little personal wealth, and a measurable loss of innocence and youthful ignorance, a more mature, John Grady Cole leaves again for parts unknown.

## Lacey Rawlins

A seventeen-year-old male, Lacey Rawlins is the childhood friend of John Grady Cole. Lacey Rawlins leaves his home to travel with Cole south and into Mexico. He finds work with the same employer and is implicated in the same crimes. Being imprisoned with his best friend is perhaps the best thing that could have happened. In a true test of courage, loyalty, and friendship, Lacey Rawlins and John Grady Cole must fight for their very lives once inside the prison in Saltillo. Rawlins is severely injured in a knife fight and it won't be until Cole is injured, that the two young men are released from the prison. Lacey Rawlins, now horseless and almost penniless, leaves John Grady Cole in Mexico and returns to his home in San Angelo, Texas.

## Jimmy Blevins

Jimmy Blevins followed Cole and Rawlins before they have crossed over the river into Mexico. Realizing they were being followed, John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins wait and confront the young Blevins. Claiming to be a sixteen-year-old and from Uvalde County, Jimmy Blevins says he is headed to Langtry. The young man later says he is seventeen and has left home because his stepfather has been abusing him. He rides, what the other two young men feel to be, a fantastic horse. The horse was certainly too much horse for the young Blevins. Cole and Rawlins believe he stole it. Lacey Rawlins is more distrustful of Jimmy Blevins, but doesn't disagree when Blevins becomes their



companion on the trip. The three travel into Mexico together. Blevins later loses his horse during a thunderstorm. The three are separated after Blevins steals the fantastic horse back from a Mexican peasant. The three men are reunited when Blevins is arrested for murder and incriminates Cole and Rawlins as co-conspirators. The father of the man Blevins was responsible for killing pays the Mexican captain to shoot Jimmy Blevins on the way to the prison in Saltillo. Young Jimmy Blevins dies revealing neither what his real name is nor where he had got the fantastic horse.

## Alejandra

Alejandra is the beautiful daughter of Don Hector Rocha y Villareal. She is seventeen years old. Her father is the owner of the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion and John Grady Cole's employer. Alejandra has been educated and is a frequent traveler overseas. Her mother lives in Mexico City in a villa provided by Alejandra's father. Alejandra loves horses and prefers the life at the hacienda to the one she would have in Mexico City. John Grady Cole meets and falls in love with Alejandra. Alejandra claims to feel the same and the two become lovers. After Cole's imprisonment, Alejandra makes a pact with her aunt. Alejandra agrees to never again see Cole if her aunt will pay the ransom for Cole and Rawlins' release from the Mexican prison in Saltillo. Upon Cole's release from prison, Alejandra agrees to meet with him in secret. The young woman rejects the overtures of John Grady Cole. She claims her rejection is based upon her need for her family's love and acceptance. Cole is devastated.

## Duena Alfonsa

The Duena Alfonsa is the grandaunt and godmother to Alejandra. She is chaperone and all that is traditional about Mexico and its family values. In two attempts, she will warn Cole that Mexican traditional values are not to be trifled with in his relationship with her niece. Cole is ignorant of Mexican customs and strong familial ties. His interest in Alejandra is, for him, almost as consuming as his interest in horses. Senorita Alfonsa will become aware of the illicit affair of Alejandra and Cole. She does not reveal her knowledge to the Don Hector Rocha y Villareal, Alejandra's father. After Cole and Rawlins are arrested, it is Senorita Alfonsa, who will make the pact with Alejandra. It is agreed between the two women that the aunt will pay the ransom to ensure the two young men's release from prison if Alejandra will agree not to see Cole again. Alejandra agrees. The Duena Alfonsa's second meeting with Cole will provide more insight for the young man into the traditions of the Mexican family and the aunt's personal experience trying to live with the oppression that Mexican women face as a result. Cole is deaf to explanations and seeks only to see Alejandra, as he is insistent that she will choose him over the traditions and her family.





## **The Captain**

The captain is the officer of the state, from Encantada, that arrives at the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion to arrest young John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins. Taking them from the hacienda in manacles, the captain will not tell the two young men what the arrest is for. This captain is responsible for later killing Jimmy Blevins in cold blood. The father of the peasant Blevins is accused of murdering has paid the captain for the murder of the boy. Cole returns to Encantada and takes the captain as hostage to recover his lost horses. The captain remains the hostage of John Grady Cole until bandits take the captain from Cole in the desert. It is presumed the bandits kill him.

## **Perez**

A political exile and prisoner in the Mexican prison in Saltillo, Perez is the man who explains that it will take a ransom for Cole and Rawlins to be freed. It is presumed that Perez is also the man who arranges for the knife-wielding prisoner to kill both Cole and Rawlins.

## **Abuela**

The mother of Arturo and Luisa, Abuela was the nursemaid to John Grady Cole. She had worked on the ranch of Cole's grandfather for fifty years as nursemaid to Cole's own mother. Abuela had served in many capacities while working on the ranch and her guidance served as a female influence in Cole's life. Cole's return to San Angelo, Texas is married by the illness and eventual death of Abuela. He remains long enough to attend her funeral and pay his respects before heading again for parts unknown.

## **John Grady Cole's mother**

John Grady Cole does not live with his mother and she did not raise him either. His mother's father, on the Grady family ranch near San Angelo, Texas, raised the young man. Cole's mother separated from his father when Cole was just a young boy. She is an actress with limited success who performs in the smaller acting houses in Texas. Cole traveled to see one of her performances in San Antonio. At her father's death, she announces her intention to sell the family ranch. This decision is the proverbial straw that defines her future relationship with her son. When Cole leaves home, he will not think of her again.

## **John Grady Cole's father**

The father of John Grady Cole wasn't much involved in the raising of his son. Called to action in the Second World War, Cole's father experiences a form of post-traumatic



stress upon his return. He is demonstrating physical maladies as well and Cole recognizes that his father is very ill. Unable to care for his son or emotionally support a needy wife, Cole's father has permitted his son to be raised by his wife's father and his marriage has fallen apart. Cole still maintains a relationship with his father until the younger man leaves San Angelo. It is upon Cole's return to Texas that he learns of his father's death from his friend Lacey Rawlins.



## Objects/Places

### His grandfather's funeral

*All the Pretty Horses* begins with the funeral of John Grady Cole's grandfather. It is at his grandfather's funeral that Cole begins to leave childhood behind.

### His grandfather's ranch

This is the only home John Grady Cole could remember. Inherited by his mother, after his grandfather's death, the ranch was sold. In 1948, Cole was sixteen and still a cowboy. Facing the maturation of a country recovering from War, he saw the traditional values were changing and ranching and horses were not staying the common or popular way of life. Leaving his beloved horses was never a consideration and after the sale of the ranch, Cole has nothing to stay for and sets out on horseback for parts unknown.

### San Angelo, Texas

San Angelo, Texas is near the Texas and Mexico border. This is where this story begins and where this volume, Volume I, of the *Border Trilogy* ends for John Grady Cole. It is in San Angelo, Texas that John Grady Cole had spent much of his life. He lived there on his mother's father's ranch until the older man's death. Cole has just returned to the ranch from his grandfather's funeral as *All the Pretty Horses* begins. After a painful period of growth and maturation, traveling by horseback to parts unknown in Mexico, Cole returns to San Angelo, Texas as *All the Pretty Horses* concludes. His return is marked by the realization that his father has died and Cole has arrived in time to the funeral of his nursemaid and close family friend, Abuela.

### Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion

Located in Mexico, this hacienda is a ranch of eleven thousand hectares situated along the Bolson de Cuatro Cienagas in the state of Coahuila. This is the home of Don Hector Rocha y Villareal, his daughter Alejandra, and her aunt. It is the place that John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins will work during much of their time in Mexico. Cole meets and falls in love with Alejandra during his months working here.

### Encantada

Encantada is the location that the two young prisoners, John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins, are reunited with their ill-fated companion Jimmy Blevins. They are temporarily



detained here before being moved to the prison in Saltillo. The captain of Encantada has made arrangements with the father of the man Blevins has been accused of murdering. It is the captain, who will murder Jimmy Blevins enroute to the prison. Encantada is where John Grady Cole must return to recover the horses the three young men lost while being confined and where he will take the captain hostage to do so.

## Prison in Saltillo

A Mexican prison located in Saltillo. This is the location that John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins are taken when they are arrested for conspiring to steal Blevins' horse. Cole and Rawlins are involved in many prison fights. The captain, who takes them to the prison from Encantada, says the two young men must make arrangements to leave the prison. Americans are not safe there. A political exile, Perez, is a prisoner in Saltillo and explains that the arrangements must be in the form of a ransom that all Americans can acquire from rich relatives. When Perez is told there are no rich relatives and there is no money, he leaves it is up to them to survive until a method of payment for their release from the prison is found. The two young men will demonstrate tremendous courage and loyalty in the face of their adversaries at this prison. Fighting back-to-back, they will fight to survive. The prison is where Cole will cross the line of innocence lost as he is forced to kill a man.

## Redbo

Redbo is the name of Cole's horse. It is the horse he takes with him when he leaves his grandfather's ranch in San Angelo, Texas for the last time. Only his friendship with Lacey Rawlins is close to the respect John Grady Cole shows his horse. Redbo is the horse that Cole is determined not to leave in Mexico and for which he takes the captain hostage to reclaim.

## Blevins' horse

Jimmy Blevins' horse becomes the object of much pain and death. Upon meeting Jimmy Blevins for the first time, Blevins' horse is recognized immediately as a fantastic horse by both John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins. In Chapter 2 of *All the Pretty Horses*, Jimmy Blevins, John Grady Cole, and Lacey Rawlins are arrested for stealing the Blevins' horse from rurales. That arrest leads to the death of Blevins and the dismissal of Cole as a possible suitor for Alejandra. In the border country north of the border between Texas and Mexico, while attempting to find the horse's rightful owner, Cole has false charges brought against him for the second time over this horse. Three men attempt to claim the horse for themselves and Cole must go to court and relate his story to prevent being jailed. Ultimately, the judge decides in Cole's favor and the horse becomes his as no owner of the horse or family member of Jimmy Blevins can be found.



## Abuela's Funeral

John Grady Cole returns to San Angelo, Texas nearing the end of this story. He has come full circle when he returns to find his father has died and his nursemaid very ill. Cole remains in San Angelo only long enough to find out Abuela's fate and attend her funeral. Abuela had been a mother figure to the young man. Her death brings closure to any familial tie he had remaining in the region. As *All the Pretty Horses* began, so it ended, with John Grady Cole leaving another funeral.

## Social Sensitivity

The primary social concerns of *All the Pretty Horses* seem to center on marriages and the love relationship between John Grady Cole and Alejandra.

John Grady Cole's parents are divorced because his father loves the rugged lifestyle of a cowboy on a ranch, whereas his mother is an aspiring actress who craves the culture, refinement, and sophistication of life in the city. This same male/female dichotomy is exemplified in Alejandra's parents.

Her parents are not divorced, but her father, Don Hector Rocha, spends much of his time at his ranch while his wife remains in Mexico City.

Although John Grady Cole and Alejandra fall passionately in love, there are tensions in their relationship that eventually break it apart. There are potentially ulterior motives for the relationship on both sides. Alejandra may partly wish to rebel against her father and her grandaunt, the Duena Alfonsa. And John Grady may not only "have eyes for the daughter" but also "eyes for the spread," the large, prosperous ranch owned by Alejandra's father. It is John Grady's dream and ultimate goal to own or manage just such a ranch.

The main forces, however, that prevent the marriage of the young lovers are social. They are from different countries, different cultures, and different economic classes. When Alejandra confesses their premarital lovemaking, her father loses respect for his daughter and becomes enraged at her lover. Because Alejandra's guardians enforce traditional values, they refuse to tolerate any endangerment to the reputation of the young, aristocratic woman in their charge, and they make it clear that they expect her to make a more appropriate marriage match.

*All the Pretty Horses* also narrates some of the historical details of the Mexican Revolution, thus providing a backdrop of violence, betrayal, and rebellion on a national level. This history lesson is continued in *The Crossing* (1994).



# Techniques

This award-winning best seller has a more conventional plot and structure than is typical of most McCarthy novels. The concluding paragraph with its image of a bull rolling in the dust may make the novel seem open-ended, but the novel actually employs some conventional structures. The final image is of John Grady Cole riding off into the sunset, a typical ending for a Western.

There is also a circularity to the novel since it begins and ends with funerals, both of which cause dispossession and alienation. After his long trek, John Grady winds up at the end of the novel basically where he began — in Texas.

This novel also has a love story as a significant subplot, and besides the funeral McCarthy places another ceremony near the end of the novel — a wedding, which would be the conventional ending of a happy love story or comedy. But appropriate to the mood of this novel, the wedding is described in very antiromantic terms.

One of the techniques that McCarthy employs to balance his pessimistic world view, a technique that probably contributed to the novel's popularity, is the inclusion of a great deal of humor.

There is slapstick humor from Jimmy Blevins's vividly described pratfalls and from the fact that John Grady is asked to drop his pants for an official.

There is much gently teasing leg-pulling humor, and there is a certain amount of satire, as for example when John Grady hears the radio evangelist snoring soon after he announces, "I got to go to work. The Lord dont take no holidays."

Another technique that makes this novel so readable is the incredibly wide variety of styles that it includes.

Alternating with the clipped dialogue of young, laconic cowboys are flowing passages of beautiful description. The fifth paragraph of the opening section begins with three simple sentences averaging only eight words each in a classic Hemingway style. Then Faulkner's influence takes over and the next sentence describing the passing of a train is a rolling, tumbling hundred words long. McCarthy is a master of suiting style to mood, as for example when he employs poetic repetition in the scenes where romance is blossoming between John Grady and Alejandra.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Young John Grady Cole is only sixteen years of age when he leaves the only home he has ever known. *All the Pretty Horses* is the tale of this young man's coming of age. As a young man enters adulthood, there are moments when a parent might question the sanity of having had a child and other moments when that same parent experiences the thrill of victory as the child succeeds. A teenager's first kiss, first love, the thrill of victory in competitive sports, the bonding of lifetime friends, and even a high school graduation are the moments most remembered, as adulthood approaches. For Cole, little of this is experienced in the comfort of familiar surroundings or with the support of family. There will be no high school graduation for Cole. He leaves school behind when he sets out accompanied by his closest friend, Lacey Rawlins, looking for purpose and a future. As they head south towards Mexico, their intent to cross the border and seek ranch work is expressed. Unbeknownst to either of the young men is the extent of the trials each will face as a result of their fateful meeting with Jimmy Blevins. Cole and Rawlins become conspirators of Blevins' in the stealing of a horse. That single act leads to great disillusionment, pain, and even death for one of the three young men.

There is great change occurring in the environment John Grady Cole was raised in. He has always known a rancher's way of life and the traditional values learned from a grandfather, who served as his mother, father, and mentor. America is changing and the traditional values are being replaced. With his home gone, the rancher's life is quickly slipping away. Mexico was Cole's perceived opportunity to start anew. Meeting Alejandra introduced the emotional element involving two young people who believe they are in love. Cole is ignorant of the societal differences and family expectations placed on Alejandra. He had been discarded by parents incapable of emotionally or physically caring for him. Cole did not have the ability to comprehend the warnings of Alejandra's aunt. The young woman's rejection of him in the face of her family's disapproval hits Cole strongly. He feels only the rejection and cannot perceive how his own actions led to that moment or understand her reason for denying him.

*All the Pretty Horses* is the story that Cole mostly likely repeated for the benefit of the judge in Chapter 4. In speaking with the judge, Cole expressed his confusion. Returning to San Angelo, Texas at the conclusion of *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole is a changed man. There were lessons that Cole learned as no one could learn them for him. There was pain and confusion he felt that no one else could understand but him. This is the story of John Grady Cole and the loss of innocence and his coming of age.

## Transfiguration of America

As the story unfolds, a transfiguration of America is occurring. The traditional patterns of early America are changing from rural towns and conveyances to motorized vehicles





and industrialization. There is an array of descriptors used by the author to convey the landscape of poverty and isolation in San Angelo, Texas in the late 1940s. The author describes the milieu of these changes that are taking place in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Young John Grady Cole begins his travels in this story by relying on the help of others; expecting and finding people willing to aid him on his journey and hitchhiking from town to town. As his story continues, Cole and his friend, Lacey Rawlins, depart their homes on horseback for parts unknown and a future yet unwritten. They ride upon roads shared by automobiles. The story explains their crossing of the river into Mexico as though this was a commonplace occurrence and with no law to stop or suspect their comings and goings. Neither young man is questioned about his age, his parents, or his schooling. They speak to Jimmy Blevins, jokingly, of killing him and of stealing his horse. There are moments clearly depicted which indicate a movement towards a more modern America. Yet, there remains the evidence that Cole is living in and trying, at times desperately, to hold the more traditional values instilled in him by his grandfather.

## Importance of Friendship

Through his relationship with Lacey Rawlins, John Grady Cole learned the importance of friendship. Having lost his beloved grandfather, Cole was faced with losing the only home he had ever known. His grandfather raised him when his parents separated. His mother was an actress with little acclaim and Cole's father was mentally and physically impaired from the Second World War. There was little love and no understanding expressed in either of his relationships with his parents. It was his relationship with his best friend and confidant, Lacey Rawlins, which would sustain Cole throughout this tale. There was the unexpressed love of young men, as close as brothers, who grew up together and shared a common bond in their love of ranching and all things relative to horses. There is a loyalty that exists in the strong bonds of friendship. This loyalty would bring Cole to fight for and defend Rawlins in prison. His commitment to this friendship and the loyalty he felt drove Cole to steal back Rawlins' horse in Mexico and return it to his friend in Texas. Cole didn't have any family he would welcome and in Rawlins, he had a friend closer than any family he could claim.

## A Cowboy Myth

There exists the myth of the cowboy leftover from the early twentieth century. A cowboy's life is one that exists for a man to believe there is no care in the world other than a good horse to ride, a cigarette to smoke, maybe a drink, and the occasional woman to spend the night with. The life of the cowboy, before the industrialization of America, made ranching an expensive endeavor. It was in fact, a difficult one. Fortunately, many ranches provide the room and board with a minimal wage. It was enough to get by on for the typical cowboy, but not enough for a family. And there was always a woman in the picture somewhere. Many a woman would break a good



cowboy. Once the woman became a permanent fixture in a certain cowboy's life, there were no more late nights out with the guys, no more drinking and carousing, and certainly no other women. The cowboy became a ranch hand or a foreman or a manager. The freewheeling lifestyle with no ties to anything other than a horse was gone for good. Like a knight on a trusty steed, the cowboy's horse was his best friend, companion, and confidant. The cowboy wasn't a cowboy without his horse. Cole loved and respected the horse. There was great pride in his accomplishment in ranching, training, and breeding of horses. Turning his back on the modernization occurring in America and the oil wells and platforms popping up all over Texas in the 1940s and 1950s, Cole knew what he was looking for as he headed south into Mexico. He was a rancher who became a cowboy and for a brief time and for the love of a young woman, would have gone back to being a rancher. If he couldn't have the ranch he wanted, he would take his horse and find a ranch that wanted him.

## Societal Expectations and Norms

On two occasions, Alejandra's aunt attempts to explain Mexico's societal expectations and norms to Cole. Possibly as a result of being a young in-experienced male in the matters of the heart, and in the throws of his first love, Cole turns a deaf ear. Alejandra, and her aunt, cannot afford to do so. Cole is ignorant in his youth. He ignores the strong family ties and expectations that persist in Mexican society because he is unwilling to acknowledge their existence in the face of his own needs and wants. America may have been undergoing a transformation, but Mexico was not. The traditional values are very strong and never more so than in the case of a young, unmarried girl. Young and unmarried, women from well-to-do families are highly prized by their relatives. Great store can be placed in good matrimonial matches between families with strong names, connections, and wealth. Through his ambition, Alejandra's father had made sure that he had all of these and his expectations of Alejandra were true to the Mexican society's expectations of her. Alejandra's aunt explains that while a man might overcome his beginnings, a young girl might never be forgiven a transgression, particularly one that damages her chances of making a good match. The young girl will reject her lover to assure her family's love and acceptance. The disillusionment Cole must deal with will be a hard life lesson that he must learn.

## Loss of Innocence

Cole loses his innocence in this story of his coming of age. It is not the taking of a first kiss or the finding of his first love that will cost him his innocence. The loss of anything is to have experienced pain. Cole will lose the only home he has ever known. Beyond his control, Cole's mother inherits her father's ranch and sells it. The pain her son will feel is not one she considers as she makes the decision to refuse him the opportunity to work the ranch himself and live there. The decision she makes will cost Cole's mother her only son. Cole will find his first love in Alejandra, his Mexican employer's beautiful daughter. Alejandra and Cole will develop a relationship and become lovers despite the warnings of Alejandra's aunt about the societal differences between the two young



people. Alejandra's rejection of him in the face of her family's disapproval will cause Cole much pain and disillusionment. While Alejandra's rejection will cause him some growing pains, the total and complete loss of innocence will come at the expense of a man's life. Cole risked everything by killing a man while imprisoned. The taking of that life assures the loss of innocence, ignorance, and any last claim to childhood.

## Making Decisions has Consequences

This tale of courage and the human spirit thrusts Cole, somewhat unknowingly, into adulthood. He leaves home an inexperienced youth on the verge of adulthood. He has made his first adult decision in the tale when he makes the choice to leave home, without permission or even acknowledging that at sixteen the decision wasn't entirely his to make. This is youthful ignorance. Allowing another to make all the decisions with a youth's disregard for the consequences, as many youth are prone to do, is the value of innocence. Decision making always has consequences. Cole's first decision is the one he makes entirely on his own and the consequences will at times be painful and confusing for him. Cole makes the decision to withhold the information from Don Hector Rocha y Villareal that Jimmy Blevins traveled to Mexico with he and Rawlins. The consequences of that decision will affect all his future dealings with the Don and his family. As surely as he withheld the information, the Don accepted it as a lie because the older man knew the complete answer before asking the question. Cole makes the decision to have a relationship with Alejandra, the Don's beautiful daughter, despite the warnings from Alejandra's aunt. This is a decision the consequences of which will cause Cole much pain. Alejandra rejects him in favor of her family and he can't say he wasn't warned.

All the Pretty Horses is a quintessential initiation novel focusing on John Grady Cole as he passes through various rites of manhood. John Grady begins a new life in Mexico after he is "baptized" in the Rio Grande; he begins his sexual life in another kind of baptism scene; and he is again irrevocably changed after a pseudo-death when he is nearly killed in prison. Not only does he experience firsthand the cruelty and evil of others, but when he kills his would-be assassin, and when he later feels murderous impulses toward the Encantada captain, he is forced to face up to the capacity for violence within himself. As a result of his adventures, some of John Grady's romantic illusions are shattered, and he becomes much less optimistic. He finds out that he cannot always have whatever he wants; he gets neither wife nor ranch. But to some extent at least he does preserve his integrity and prove his manhood.

Closely related to the initiation theme is the question of courage. John Grady is told in prison, "The world wants to know if you have cojones. If you are brave." Indeed, his physical courage and willingness to fight are repeatedly tested, and he passes the tests with flying colors, as when he incredibly cauterizes his own gunshot wounds. John Grady's trials reflect the opinion stated in the novel "that nothing can be proven except that it be made to bleed." In this novel, horses, even more so than guns, are symbols of manhood, so it is significant that John Grady recovers his confiscated horse and returns to Texas on horseback — symbolically with his manhood intact.

All the Pretty Horses also reflects a nostalgia for a past, simpler lifestyle.

The journey down into Mexico from one view is a pastoral retreat, and from another view it is a trip back in time.

John Grady and his friend, Lacey Rawlins, are drawn to the basic, natural lifestyle of camping out and bronco busting, although for a short time John Grady begins to be seduced by creature comforts after he is promoted at Don Hector's ranch.

# Style

## Point of View

*All the Pretty Horses* is told primarily in the first person, but the author expands the point of view of the story using a first person active voice for the current protagonist. Although expected that the point of view of this story of Cole to be his, additional insight into the main character and his state of mind are provided through interaction with Lacey Rawlins, Jimmy Blevins, Alejandra's aunt, the captain, Perez, and the judge in the border country. This point of view gets the reader involved with the story, its action, and its emotion. As the direction of the story changes and additional characters are introduced to affect and influence Cole, the reader is seeing the world of Cole as he lives it. This is a story of courage, loyalty, and friendship; of loving, living, and of dying. Speaking in the first person, the author evokes feelings in the reader all the while his characters are living and feeling them.

## Setting

*All the Pretty Horses* began with Cole returning from the funeral of his grandfather in the South Texas town of San Angelo. It is 1949 and Cole is sixteen years old. The landscape is described in detail as the old tribes of the Native Indians would have experienced it. These are Cole's memories the author chooses to share. There is a remote and rural feeling and the dust that covers everything.

There is an allusion to poverty that is enhanced by the stages of change that Cole is seeing in the nearby towns in this period after the Second World War, which followed closely on the heels of the Great Depression. The lands of the southwest, and particularly the borderlands of Texas, were largely influenced by the people of Mexico. Even the languages were shared. The differing family values had been the single greatest difference seen in this tale. As Cole and Rawlins traveled south to Mexico, the land became more rugged and survival depended largely upon the individual's ability to hunt.

Living off the land as much as possible ensured the meager funds each man had were not exhausted on items that could be acquired through other means. People they passed were curious, but not enough to question why two young men were out of school and traveling on horseback alone through the countryside. If asked, many will offer aid to the young men willingly and again without too many questions. Entering into Mexico, they are now three traveling together, somewhat briefly.

Cole and Rawlins eventually approach a vaquero about work. It is considered a common thing for the caporal, or foreman, to speak on the behalf of those cowboys looking for work. This caporal does so and the gerente, or manager, of the hacienda agrees to give them work, food, and living space. The hacienda is a large operation and



the Don is an ambitious man. Cole's ability with horses is quickly discovered and the two friends are set to the task of breaking the wild horses recovered from the hills of the hacienda. These abilities are highly prized by the hacienda's owner.

As their past with Blevins' catches up with them, the young men find themselves once again on the road. This time they are in manacles, chained in the back of a truck, and headed for prison. The lawlessness of the rural areas of Mexico become apparent as Blevins' is killed for his crimes. That feeling is increased when the captain explains that arrangements would have to be made as Americans would not find it easy in a Mexican prison. The two young men acquired an understanding of the running of the prison and the possibilities of their release after speaking with Perez, a political exile and prisoner himself. People died daily in the prison and ransom was required for freedom. They have their ransom paid by Alejandra's aunt. Leaving the prison, Cole and Rawlins acquire food and clothing before deciding that Rawlins will return home and Cole is going to find Alejandra.

It is with a heavy heart, considerable disillusionment, and pain that Cole hears Alejandra's rejection of him in favor of her family's love and acceptance. Cole has ran headlong into the most basic and entrenched of Mexican customs and familial expectations. He returns north and arrives again in San Angelo, Texas at the conclusion of *All the Pretty Horses*. Cole had settled his affairs with all before leaving San Angelo. He is not surprised to find his father has died and his nursemaid, Abuela ill. The story of John Grady Cole comes full circle when Cole is found attending another funeral at the end of the story. The last of Cole is seen as he is on horseback, with Blevins' fantastic horse in tow, headed for somewhere else.

## Language and Meaning

The writing style of Cormac McCarthy in *All the Pretty Horses* is at first difficult to follow. The language is typical of the western genre of literature that espouses early Americana. There is a common style of speech that is shared by this community of characters. Where the reader is not at first an included member of the community, the meaning of certain terms can be unclear. This is a story intended for the inclusion of the reader. There is tremendous power in the words used by Cormac McCarthy to express the sights, sounds, and feeling of a particular setting throughout this story. As the reader becomes engrossed in the tale of human courage and friendship, that power is felt more and the grammatical style of speech. The telltale quotations become less a problem to follow. There are evoked feelings of vastness, poverty, and potential in the author's description of the landscape in Texas and Mexico. The peasants and children in the towns and along the roadsides, the workers at the hacienda, and the party-goers at the Mexican wedding are made real to the reader as though the author and even the reader had lived it himself.

There is considerable use of Spanish throughout the story. This use of Spanish vernacular by this American author is not unexpected. Cormac McCarthy spends considerable effort and time to research and delve into the setting in which he puts his



books. Living in the south of Texas himself and later in the state of New Mexico, McCarthy had become fluent in the Mexican dialect of the region. This is a dialect used on both sides of the border. Spanish is blended seamlessly with the English and is appropriate for the setting and the tale. There is no translation of the verbiage used. The lack of translation is a concern until it is understood that this is a story that cannot simply be read. The story of John Grady Cole in *All the Pretty Horses* must be felt; and it must be treasured for the courage, the loyalty and friendship, and the capacity of human spirit expressed.

## Structure

The story of John Grady Cole is separated into four chapters and comprises more than three hundred pages. Each chapter depicts a milestone in the education that Cole will receive in this coming of age tale. The first chapter, Chapter 1, in *All the Pretty Horses* follows Cole's return from his grandfather's funeral, leaving of the only home he has ever known, and traveling south to Mexico. Enroute to Mexico, Cole, who is accompanied by Rawlins meets Jimmy Blevins. The three young men begin a fateful companionship that will lead to pain and death.

In Chapter 2, Cole and Rawlins find work at the Hacienda de Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion. It is in this chapter that Cole will find the work he has always dreamed of, the woman he has always wished for, and he will lose it all when he is arrested as a co-conspirator for the stealing of a horse. Cole will demonstrate tremendous courage and experience the truest loyalty in friendship in Chapter 3 of *All the Pretty Horses*.

After the arrest of Cole and Rawlins at the end of Chapter 2, the two men are moved to the Mexican town of Encantada. It is here, they are reunited with Jimmy Blevins, who had been arrested for murdering a peasant. In the course of their relocation to the prison in Saltillo, Jimmy Blevins is murdered by the Mexican captain. Cole and Rawlins must fight for their very lives in the prison. Chapter 4 concludes this part of Cole's story. Cole is released to find only more frustration, disillusionment, and pain. Alejandra has rejected him in favor of her family's acceptance. Cole eventually returns to San Angelo, Texas. He arrives in time to attend the funeral of his nursemaid and discover his father has died. He has returned his friend's horse and no family ties to claim in San Angelo, Texas. Cole takes his horse and the fantastic horse of Blevins and heads out.



## Quotes

"The wind was much abated and it was very cold and the sun sat blood red and elliptic under the reefs of bloodred cloud before him." Chapter 1, pg. 5

"What he loved in horses was what he loved in men, the blood and the heat of the blood that ran them." Chapter 1, pg. 7

"...which carried their figures and bore them up into the swarming stars so they rode not under but among them and they rode at once jaunty and circumspect, like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing." Chapter 1, pg. 30

"Way the world is. Somebody can wake up and sneeze somewhere in Arkansas or some damn place and before you're done there's wars and ruination and all hell. You don't know what's goin to happen. I'd say He's just about got to. I don't believe we'd make it a day otherwise." Chapter 1, pg. 92

"Finally he said that among men there was no such communion as among horses and the notion that men can be understood at all was probably an illusion." Chapter 2, pg. 111

"...his thoughts were of horses and of the open country and of horses." Chapter 2, pg. 118

"Horses still wild on the mesa who'd never seen a man afoot and who knew nothing of him or his life yet in whose souls he would come to reside forever." Chapter 2, pg. 118

"But there were two things they agreed upon wholly and that were never spoken and that was that God had put horses on earth to work cattle and that other than cattle there was no wealth proper to a man." Chapter 2, pg. 127

"Beware gentle knight. There is no greater monster than reason." Chapter 2, pg. 147

"They all seemed to be waiting for something. Like passengers in a halted train." Chapter 3, pg. 179

"Underpinning all of it like the fiscal standard in commercial societies lay a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill." Chapter 3, pg. 182

"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." Chapter 4, pg. 219





"By the time I was sixteen I had read many books and I had become a freethinker."  
Chapter 4, pg. 232

"...those who have endured some misfortune will always be set apart but that it is just that misfortune which is their gift and which is their strength and that they must make their way back into the common enterprise of man for without they do so it cannot go forward and they themselves will wither in bitterness." Chapter 4, pg. 235

"...I'd always known. That all courage was a form of constancy. That it was always himself that the coward abandoned first. After this all other betrayals came easily."  
Chapter 4, pg. 235

"...in his new boots and shirt he began to feel better than he'd felt in a long time and the weight on his heart had begun to lift and he repeated what his father had once told him, that scared money cant win and a worried man cant love." Chapter 4, pg. 247

"He saw very clearly how all his life led only to this moment and all after led nowhere at all. He felt something cold and soulless enter him like another being and he imagined that it smiled malignly and he had no reason to believe that it would ever leave."  
Chapter 4, pg. 255

"Captain, he said. You just fired a shot for the common man." Chapter 4, pg. 271

"He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower." Chapter 4, pg. 283

"...it was good that God kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they'd have no heart to start at all." Chapter 4, pg. 285

"...and for a moment he held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young or rich or poor or dark or pale or he or she."  
Chapter 4, pg. 301

# Adaptations

All the Pretty Horses. Random House audio-book. New York, 1993.

Abridgment. Read by Brad Pitt.



## Key Questions

Because McCarthy is so reserved in his characterization techniques, it should prove especially interesting to discuss the motivations of his characters and the extent to which they should be admired. There is plenty of room for controversy. Is John Grady's determination to retrieve his horse heroic, or is he feeling recklessly self destructive because Alejandra has just broken his heart? Is Alejandra to be viewed as a strong female character or is she ultimately weak-willed? Is Jimmy Blevins a sympathetic, fated boy, or does he get what he deserves?

It should also be fruitful to compare the male and female characters in this novel. McCarthy is not noted for his creation of strong female characters, but, as one scholar has observed, in this novel John Grady's mother, Alejandra, and the Duena Alfonsa all have a certain amount of power and control.

1. What is the effect of the title, which is taken from a lullaby?
2. What is the point of the nakedness motif?
3. What do horses symbolize in this novel? Specifically, what is the significance of John Grady's exchanging mounts with Alejandra, allowing her to secretly ride the stud stallion?
4. What does John Grady Cole learn about Mexico during the course of his adventures? How does his view of this foreign country and culture change?
5. Do you feel that the mixture of comedy and tragedy in this work is appropriate? Does the novel succeed at being both funny and sad at the same time? Consider, for example, the stories Jimmy Blevins tells about his relatives being killed by lightning.
6. Which passages in the novel are the most humorous?
7. Is John Grady's loyalty to Jimmy Blevins primarily admirable or foolish?
8. What does John Grady learn about romantic love through his experiences with Alejandra and Mary Catherine, his earlier girlfriend?
9. What tests of bravery does John Grady fail? Is he aware of his failure?
10. Is John Grady honest to a fault or not honest enough?



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the historical significance of the setting in which this book was written. How would the story have changed had it been set ten years earlier? Ten years later?

Discuss the significance of Jimmy Blevins' character to the story.

Discuss the situation John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins discovered themselves in at the prison in Saltillo.

What was the significance of Alejandra's rejection of John Grady Cole to his state of mind so closely following upon the heels of the young man's release from prison?

Discuss the significance of the deaths of John Grady Cole's nursemaid and father to the end of the story.

Flash forward one year. Where do you imagine Lacey Rawlins is and what is he doing?

Compare the societal values in the late 1940s America with those of Mexico as expressed by Alejandra's aunt in the Duena Alfonsa's second meeting with Cole.

What closure did John Grady Cole seek in speaking with the border judge after the charges were dropped?

In the title *All the Pretty Horses*, are horses used metaphorically? If so, what might they be used to represent?

Explain what might have happened had John Grady Cole inherited his grandfather's ranch?



## Literary Precedents

This novel has all the makings of a good film Western, and it may be one some day. In the tradition of characters played by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, John Grady Cole is a strong, laconic cowboy who has trouble with women. The novel includes good fighting, good riding, and good shooting.

About the only thing Hollywood has to complain about is the lack of a happy ending.

All the Pretty Horses also proves once again that American authors have excelled at the bildungsroman genre. Like Huck Finn, John Grady Cole grows to prefer a more natural, more primitive lifestyle so that he too seeks the frontier at the end of his novel. Like Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, John Grady matures partly through tests of his physical and moral courage.

Critics have noted the importance of myth to an understanding of this novel. As one points out, the Biblical myth of the Garden of Eden is brought to mind since the boys at first think of parts of Mexico as an unspoiled paradise — and like the Genesis story, John Grady's story is also about a loss of innocence. As another critic points out, this novel has remarkable parallels to the Orpheus myth. Like Orpheus, John Grady descends into an alien underworld and tries unsuccessfully to bring his beloved back up into his own world.

## Related Titles

All the Pretty Horses is the first of what publishers are calling McCarthy's Border Trilogy. The second installment of this trilogy, *The Crossing*, presents a completely new slate of characters but repeats many of the earlier novel's patterns and themes.

*Blood Meridian* (1985), the McCarthy novel that immediately preceded this one, is also a Western involving a young male character who travels into Mexico, but that is about where the similarities end. The graphic violence and horrifying evil in *Blood Meridian* are utterly relentless. The youth, known only as "the kid," joins a gang of scalp hunters led by the obsessive Captain Glanton and the satanic giant, Judge Holden.

A much closer literary relative for John Grady Cole can be found in McCarthy's first published novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), where even the protagonist's name sounds similar — John Wesley Rattner. Although he is not a cowboy, John Wesley is a frontiersman, a heroic rescuer of animals, and a rebel against corrupt civil authority.



# Copyright Information

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