Geronimo's Ponies Short Guide

Geronimo's Ponies by Harold Burton Meyers

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Geronimo's Ponies is a rite-of-passage tale about a boy's learning to take the initiative to deal with some of life's more unpleasant problems. Davey lives with his father on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico; his father represents the U.S. government in his part of the reservation and must deal with the Navajo's problems with using their land productively, as well as with their resentment against the United States for the government's broken promises.

Davey's mother has died from a long illness. Of her many relatives, only her brother Eph came to visit her. He is an eccentric man who has made and squandered millions of dollars twice and is looking to do so again. In spite of his kindness to Davey's mother, he is a liar and a thief, so it is not surprising that Davey's father refuses to join him in his latest scheme to get rich quick.

Eph believes that Texas lost its greatness when the automobile replaced the horse as transportation. He seems to have a vision of the proud and resolute Texan riding his horse to glory. For him, horses symbolize strength and endurance. He has come up with a plan to enrich himself and bring back the horse to Texas. He has learned through Davey's father's slip of the tongue that the Navajo's will be selling a large part of their pony population; the horses have been overgrazing the land. He comes with Mr. Smart, an expert on horses, to buy the best riding horses among those being sold. After much underhanded maneuvering, he manages to purchase many of the horses.

These he plans to take to Texas and sell as ponies for children to ride. He invites Davey to join him as he travels across Texas, and Davey's father allows the boy to go.

Geronimo's Ponies describes Davey's misadventures as he learns more about his mother's relatives than he would care to, including their propensity to lie about almost anything, as well as including their general mean spiritedness. He discovers that he had a half sister and that his mother's family had treated his mother very cruelly. He also discovers that he has apparently inherited some of his mother's family's ability to scheme and to think quickly under pressure. He is not entirely happy to discover that he can be as underhanded as his Uncle Eph, but this is tempered by the goodheartedness he shares with his mother and father.

About the Author

Harold Burton Meyers was born August 2, 1924, to teachers in Arizona. His parents worked for the United States Indian Service (later the Bureau of Indian Affairs). He grew up in "remote and often desolate places" on the Zuni, Navajo, and Hopi Indian reservations, where his parents strove to provide children with educations that would help them better their lives.

Meyers was taught mostly at home; he and his brothers were able to attend public schools for only a couple of years; most of the time they lived too far from such schools. He attended high school at Wasatch Academy, then a boarding school run by the Presbyterian church in Mt. Pleasant, Utah.

During World War II, he served with the Seabees in the Pacific. After an unsuccessful effort to survive as a writer of fiction in New York City, he attended the University of Colorado on the G.I. Bill. It was there that he "met and eloped with a fellow student," Jean. They have four children and four grandchildren and now live in Williamsburg, Virginia. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of Colorado and then found work as a newspaperman and college teacher.

Eventually, he became a correspondent for Time magazine, covering the civil rights movement, politics in Washington, D.C., and the presidential campaign of 1960. In 1962, he became a writer for Fortune magazine, joining its board of editors in 1970. In 1985, he left Fortune to pursue his interest in writing fiction.

Meyers remarks, "I can't really remember when I didn't want to write fiction." At four years of age, he met author Oliver La Farge, whose book Laughing Boy is still widely read and admired. According to Meyers, La Farge was a striking figure who made a "deep impression" on him. At the age of eight, he wrote his first short story on a typewriter in his mother's classroom at Nava Day School, Newcomb, New Mexico. His first publication was the short story "The Zuni Bow," which appeared in 1944 in Prairie Schooner.

After World War II, until leaving Fortune in 1985, Meyers's publications were all nonfiction, emphasizing his work as a journalist. Even so, he continued to write fiction during those years.

Geronimo's Ponies won the National Novella Award, which is given by the Arts and Humanities Council of Tulsa and Council Oak Books. The award is intended to give recognition to "the novella's increasing popularity and importance in the national culture."

Meyers has written two more novellas related to Geronimo's Ponies, neither one of which has as of this writing been published, and he writes nonfiction articles about American history.

Setting

The action begins on the Navajo Indian Reservation. Davey's father Will has persuaded the local Navajos to sell many of their ponies, which through overgrazing have helped to impoverish the reservation's soil. Without grass to hold it down, the soil blows away. After buying a large number of the ponies, Uncle Eph and Mr. Smart take Davey with them as they load their horses onto a train and then drive to Texas to sell the ponies. In Texas, Eph puts on shows to attract customers to his horse sales. At first he does well, but most Texans do not seem interested in dealing with him. Indeed, some bear grudges against him. The land is hot and dusty, the motels are dirty and disreputable; Davey encounters aspects of life totally new to him.

Social Sensitivity

There is only one curse word in Geronimo's Ponies, but it ties in with what many readers would regard as an adult motif: prostitution. Uncle Eph uses some of his ill-gotten money to purchase the affections of a woman, paying her for sex and paying for lodging for her and her daughter. The relationship, such as it is, comes to an end when Uncle Eph tries to rape the daughter and then beats the mother when she interferes. There is nothing romantic about any of this. Davey is exposed to an unhappy aspect of life and is not inclined to yield to the temptations prostitution offers. The daughter Clotie even seems to trust him because he refuses to purchase her favors when she offers them. She may only be testing him; there are hints after the attempted rape that she may be sexually inexperienced.

The underhanded schemes of Uncle Eph have social implications of their own. Through Uncle Eph, Davey sees how people on the edge of lawful society conduct themselves. He discovers that nearly all of his mother's relatives are ne'er-do-wells of one sort or another. He also learns of their vile treatment of her. Only Uncle Eph treated her with kindness, which explains why in spite of his faults Davey's mother held affection for him; she had good reason for shunning the others. Her teen-age love affair with a soldier may have resulted in his being castrated—even murdered—by her father and brothers; the baby she had as a result of the affair may have been murdered by her father. Even though they put on airs of having once been an aristocratic Southern family, the family is composed of frauds. The father was a deserter, not a major in the Confederate Army; their farm had never really been large; they have the morals of a cesspool. This is all shocking to Davey; part of his growth during the novel involves his learning to accept the hard truths about his relatives.

Not all of the changes in Davey are encouraging. By the end of Geronimo's Ponies he finds himself thinking in the same clever but antisocial manner as Uncle Eph. For instance, he switches license plates on cars in order to confuse the police: "It was not the kind of thing I'd ever have thought of a week earlier, but now the idea just seemed to pop into my head, like stealing a new set of plates to put on a stolen car was the natural thing to do." This seems more of an aberration than a harbinger of Davey's future. When he returns to his father, he seems to have rejected the sordid way of life of his mother's family.

The events take place in a time that probably predates the civil rights advances of the 1950s and later. There are hints of racial prejudice here and there.

Clotie remarks that she regards Indians as "colored," noting that she did not like being mistaken for "colored" because of her dark skin. The Navajos are treated badly by Uncle Eph. Davey's father plainly feels that the Navajos have been mistreated by the government. The attitudes of Clotie and Uncle Eph reflect the attitudes of many whites of their place and era, and seem to be mentioned only to further define their characterization, and their attitudes are clearly not shared by Davey and his father.

Literary Qualities

Geronimo's Ponies is told in the first person by Davey, apparently looking back at events from many years later.

He speaks with a maturity and sophistication that one would normally not expect to find in a young adult on his first adventure in the world. This can sometimes be unsettling; some of the realism of the story can be lost when Davey relates events in a style that notably contrasts with his voice in the 3234 Geronimo's Ponies dialogue. On the other hand, the perspective the older Davey offers allows for ironic commentary, often mixed with humor. For instance, when Davey hears Uncle Eph and Clotie's mother groaning, he is alarmed, thinking them in trouble—readers are likely to realize that Uncle Eph and Clotie's mother do not wish to be disturbed.

Symbolism is used well in Geronimo's Ponies. The ponies themselves are the central symbol: They are for the most part the worst of the horses on the Navajo Indian Reservation. Although they have nothing to do with the Apaches, Geronimo's people, the horses are dubbed Geronimo's Ponies by Uncle Eph. Thus, from the start of Geronimo's Ponies, Uncle Eph is trying to fool people with false images. "Geronimo's Ponies" sounds romantic, something that will attract buyers in Texas.

Throughout the novel, Davey must see beyond such false fronts in order to uncover reality. As the narrative progresses, the best ponies are sold. Near the end of the novel, even the best of the remaining ponies is unridable. This parallels and symbolizes Davey's advancing understanding of his mother's family. Their portraits of themselves as descendants of a Civil War hero and as an aristocratic Southern family are belied by their mean spiritedness, greed, and foolishness. They are no more romantic heroes than the horses are Geronimo's ponies.

Other symbols tie in well with Davey's growth during the novel. Notable is his mother's supposed headstone. This image is used to help unify the narrative, appearing as it does at the beginning, middle, and end. It is first presented in a fuzzy photograph, pictured between the legs of mourners.

Davey's father had sent Uncle Eph money to purchase the headstone.

Later, as Davey learns to penetrate Uncle Eph's lies, Davey visits the graveyard, noting that his mother's grave has no headstone. While there, he also notes a stone for "Nellie" next to his mother's grave. It turns out that Nellie was her daughter, probably murdered at birth by Davey's grandfather. The absence of the stone for Davey's mother represents two significant ideas. One is fairly obvious—again Uncle Eph has put up a false front, in this case a faked photograph. His words are once again empty. The other idea focuses on Davey's mother's place in the family. Given what they did to her, being buried near her parents seems grossly out of place. She shunned them, and they shut her out of family life. Knowing as he does the truth about his wife's past, Davey's father seems to make a terrible misjudgment about where to bury her. But there is the matter

of Nellie's small marker. That is what draws Davey's mother back to a graveyard she might otherwise not have been buried in. It represents certain.unbreakable family ties; no matter how hard one tries to break with the past, there always seems something to tie him or her to it.

In this case, it is Mary's dead infant.

Through his mother, and therefore through Nellie, Davey, too, has ties to a past he might otherwise prefer to avoid. He is astute enough to realize that when his mother stared at him but seemed to see someone else, that she was probably visualizing Nellie, her firstborn. At the end of the novel, Davey's father acknowledges that he suspected Uncle Eph did not put up a headstone. He also acknowledges that he knew of his wife's first lover and Nellie. His motives for allowing Davey to visit his mother's relatives are thus clarified: These were aspects of his ancestry that Davey needed to find out for himself. Will has managed to accept and let go of this unhappy past, suggesting that Davey may be able to do so, too. Thus, the matter of a missing headstone combined with the marker for a dead baby represents Davey's ties to his mother, his ties to his mother's family, and his ability to accept and let go of the past; all this, in turn, serves to show his growth from an innocent to a more worldly and wise young man.

Through Davey, these images have a universal appeal; many people, perhaps all people, have inescapable ties to the past and false pictures that may belie the truth.

Themes and Characters

Davey is an innocent young man. He has known hardship, but he is utterly unacquainted with the part of society to which Uncle Eph introduces him.

His mother's recent death has left him with some unresolved questions. He particularly wonders who his mother seemed to see when she stared at him but did not seem to see him. The only one of her relatives that he is familiar with is Uncle Eph; why her other relatives never visited her is a mystery.

While dealing with the details attendant on his wife Mary's death, Davey'sfather Will carelessly drops a remark about the Navajos having to sell some of their horses. Uncle Eph is inspired by this remark, and Geronimo's Ponies begins with his underhanded, illegal rigging of bidding on the horses so that he and his competing bidders can each get the horses he wants without spending much money. Eph then takes Davey with him in his quest to save Texas and earn himself money.

There are two principal themes at work. One is Davey's self-discovery.

He learns a great deal about what he can do; not everything he learns about himself pleases him. His ability to think quickly on his feet seems good, but that quick thinking involves misleading the police and stealing license plates. The other major theme is that of family. Part of Davey's process of selfdiscovery involves his learning about his mother's family. They are a bunch of eccentric ne'er-do-wells who, with the possible exception of Uncle Eph, were very cruel to Davey's mother.

During the novel, Davey learns about many of his family's darkest secrets, often using his quick mind to deduce what family members withhold from him. Thus the themes of self-discovery and family are interwoven throughout Geronimo's Ponies.

The principal characters Davey and Uncle Eph are developed primarily through their actions. Of the minor characters, Davey's father, Mr. Smart, Clotie, and Clotie's mother are also developed through what they do. The other characters, particularly Davey's mother, are developed through what they and others say about them. Davey is intelligent and is not taken in by his Uncle Eph. When his billfold is stolen, he knows Uncle Eph took it, even though Uncle Eph suggests that Clotie took it. He also is wise enough to look beyond the pretensions of his mother's family to see the truth, or at least to doubt what they tell him. For instance, he is insightful enough to put more trust in his parents' telling of how one of his uncles was killed in a gunfight with robbers than the more glorious account Uncle Eph offers.

Uncle Eph is a scoundrel. His primary redeeming feature is the kindness he gave to Davey's mother. During the novel, he seems to reveal genuine affection for his sister's son. On the other hand, he drinks heavily and is violent when drunk. He lies constantly and will cheat anyone, including his relatives. Considering that he muddles up the truth with lies so that it is hard to separate one from the other, it is odd that he is the source

for Davey's growing understanding of his mother and her family. It is a sign of Meyers's artistry that he makes Uncle Eph Davey's guide to self-discovery. In order to identify the truth, Davey must learn to sort truth from falsehood from what Uncle Eph tells him; this means that he must develop skills for seeing people as they really are. In addition, by learning to distinguish between concrete evidence—such as the missing gravestone at his mother's grave—and false images—such as the faked photograph of the gravestone—Davey learns an important element of thinking for himself.

A significant figure is Davey's deceased mother. His uncovering the truth about her, bit by bit, parallels his personal growth. She had been somewhat mysterious to him. Who did she see when she stared at him oddly?

Why did she avoid her family except for Uncle Eph? She becomes a fully human figure for him as he sorts out the truth from what he sees and is told.

Once a wayward teen-ager with an independent spirit, she had suffered greatly at the hands of her domineering father and cowardly mother. In spite of the great evil her family had done to her, she had managed to break free, rise above her anguish, and make a good life for herself. Her marriage to Will and her raising a son represent a person's ability to make a family a positive force in his or her life. Her poignant suffering is ennobled not just by her courage by her having a good, warm home life. The marked contrast to what she was for Davey and what she had endured shows a person's ability to establish personal independence and to take responsibility for one's own life. After having discovered what a cesspool of relatives he has in his mother's family, it is good that Davey has the example of his mother. Her example shows that he is not doomed to become a liar and a thief, even though he has talent for both.

Clotie is an interesting minor figure.

She serves as a foil for Davey; by contrasting Davey with her, Meyers shows more of Davey's personality. When she offers to have sex with him for a little money, much about him is revealed when he refuses. His innocence is evident, but so is the ethical foundation of his personality. He will help Clotie, but he will not take advantage of her. Further, his native intelligence is shown because he is insightful enough to suspect that she may be testing him. Later, she is able to trust him to treat her respectfully—a marked contrast to Uncle Eph's behavior, which is to abuse her body. His refusal to have sex with Clotie also suggests that Davey is independent from his mother's family—that his parents' good hearts and strong wills are an important part of who he is.

Topics for Discussion

1. Davey narrates the story as if he is looking back on events long in his past.

How does that affect your view of the novel's events? What would a grownup Davey find important in the short period of his life covered in Geronimo's Ponies?

2. What do you think happens to Davey after the end of Geronimo's Ponies? Does he become even more like Uncle Eph? Does he become a better man than Uncle Eph? Does he become more like his father, a caring man who sometimes must do unpleasant work?

3. Prostitution is touched on in Geronimo's Ponies, although in a mostly circumspect way. Is it well handled by Meyers? Is it appropriate for a book that young adults read?

4. Just because a book has a young adult protagonist does not mean it is meant for young adults. Geronimo's Ponies has adult themes in it. Do these make it inappropriate for young adults? Should young adults be prevented from reading this book?

5. At the end of Chapter 11, Davey and Clotie hear "the bedsprings going.

Clotie's ma was moaning and Uncle Eph was calling her dirty names. Then they were both yelling at once." Davey is alarmed: "Something's wrong. I'm going in there," he says. "'Oh, sit down,' Clotie said. 'Ma's just working.'" What does this tell you about Clotie? Why does she have that attitude? What do you think about her attitude?

6. What is the most important thing Davey learns during the novel? Why is it the most important?

7. Why is it significant that Uncle Eph regards the ponies as both a source of profit and the salvation of Texas? Does this represent his family's hypocritical attitudes?

8. Why does Davey cry when Mr. Smart sends him home?

9. Why does Davey's father think Mr. Smart is a level-headed man? Do you think he is?

10. What is the significance of Muffie's wanting to know how many and what kind of table cloths Davey's mother had? What does this tell us about her?

11. Are the depictions of Davey's relatives realistic?

12. Do you learn anything about how some people live from Geronimo's Ponies?

13. What are Uncle Eph's good and bad qualities?

14. Why does Davey's father allow Davey to travel with Uncle Eph?

15. When Uncle Eph's ponies are first being loaded on the train, the Navajo cowboys refuse to cooperate with Uncle Eph's idea about blindfolding the ponies. Eventually, Davey's father tells the Indians what Eph wants them to do. "The men knew what you wanted done ... . They just didn't care for the way you told them to do it," he says to Eph. Why would this be important?

16. Why is Uncle Eph unable to keep money once he has it?

17. Why does Davey not try to have sex with Clotie?

18. Uncle Eph steals from Davey, lies to Davey, and even hits Davey. Why does Davey stay with him, only leaving when Mr. Smart tells him to?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Hosteen Tse says that when he was a child he and his people were imprisoned for a while. "Then General Sherman came and promised to let us return to our homes if we promised to quit fighting and live in peace. This we agreed to do in return for sheep and schools and hospitals." He continues, "We made promises and kept them.

You made promises and did not keep them. Where are the schools for every thirty students? The teachers? The hospitals? The blacksmith shops, carpenter shops, the men who would teach us to farm? Many times have we gone to Washington to ask why you do not keep your promises. All you give us is more promises . . ." Is what Hosteen Tse says true? What exactly was promised the Navajos? Were those promises ever fulfilled?

2. The selling-off of ponies is inspired by their overgrazing. What animals do Navajos now raise on their lands? Are there any horses? What effect do the Navajos' animals have on the soil?

3. Do any Navajos farm on their reservation? If so, what do they grow? Do they earn any money from their crops?

4. Uncle Eph laments the loss of horses to the automobile in Texas.

What is the history of the automobile in Texas? What actually happened to the horses? Did they become fewer in number? Were they used for anything?

5. Trace Davey's journey, starting from the reservation, through all the places he visits. Make a map of the journey.

6. Davey's mother Mary was born into a lower-middle-class family in Texas. What was life like for women, especially teen-age girls, of that class in Texas around the turn of the century? How would people like her family have viewed her pregnancy with Nellie?

7. What was a Model A? How does it help date the events of Ceronimo's Ponies?

8. What was life like on the Navajo reservation in the era of Geronimo's Ponies?

9. Pick one of the towns in Geronimo's Ponies. Describe what it was like in the days Davey's adventure takes place.

10. How important were trains to the economy of Texas in the days described in Geronimo's Ponies? Are they still as important?

11. Uncle Eph is very conscious of how symbolism can affect people. He stages small parades and dresses Davey and Clotie up in costumes designed to attract buyers to his shows.

Meyers also uses symbols to create an impression of time and place, as well as to explain characterization and events. How are symbols, such as dirty hotel rooms, ponies, and gravestones, used in Geronimo's Ponies? What interpretation do you attach to them?

12. Are there any examples in modern life of the kinds of sales tactics Uncle Eph uses? What are some of them, if any? Has Geronimo's Ponies made you more alert to how people might try to manipulate you in order to get your money?

13. Write a short story about what happens next for Clotie.

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Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service, 1980. For the industrious researcher, this document will describe the soil conditions that played a role in the beginning of Geronimo's Ponies.

Pool, William C , Edward Triggs, and Lance Wren. A Historical Atlas of Texas. Austin: Encino Press, 1975.

This resource helps put Davey's travels in their historical context.

Roberts, Willow. Stokes Carson: Twentieth-Century Trading on the Navajo Reservation. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987. Provides some background for the kind of work Davey's father does.

Stephens, A. Ray, and William M. Holmes. Historical Atlas of Texas.

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989. A little more up to date than the Pool, Triggs, and Wren historical atlas, this too helps place Davey's travels in their historical context.

The Trading Post System on the Navajo Reservation: Staff Report to the Federal Trade Commission. Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission, 1973. Explains how the trading posts work.

Related Titles

Geronimo's Ponies tells of a boy's quest for self-knowledge by learning about his family, particularly about the life of his mother. As a quest, his adventure shares a mixture of comic and frightening incidents typical of Don Quixote. Like Don Quixote, Davey finds himself involved in bizarre events, but unlike Don Quixote, Davey is an alert observer endeavoring to make sense out of what he experiences.

Numerous books have presented the idea of learning about oneself by learning about one's ancestors. For example, Alex Haley's Roots (1976) presents Haley's search into his own ancestry, going back seven generations, partly in an effort to show the significance of family relationships to African Americans. A similarly serious approach is taken in Theodore L. Kazimiroff's The Last Algonquin (1982), in which Joe Two Trees struggles to retain his family and cultural heritage by being true to his ancestors' way of life. The search for one's own identity by learning about one's family's past is notable in Gary Paulsen's autobiography Eastern Sun, Winter Moon (1993). In it, Paulsen tells of the unpleasant lives of his parents, as well as of how their lives affected his.

The idea that one's family's history is important for one's understanding of oneself appears in a number of notable books for young people. For instance, Virginia Hamilton's Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush (1982) uses the device of a ghost, Sweet Theresa Pratt's uncle Brother Rush, to inspire Tree's search into her family's past. Like Davey, she learns some appalling truths—in this case, of her mother's abuse of a disabled son—and like Davey she learns to maturely deal with the unpleasant realities of her family's history. Lynn Hall's Flying Changes (1991) presents a young woman who learns in less than a week enough nasty family truths to last her a lifetime; the fierce hatred among her parents, her uncle, and her grandparents turns out to have shaped her life in many ways, including making her at once an independent spirit and someone who is desperate for affection.

The importance of family relationships to a young adult's growth is frequently presented in Margaret Mahy's books. Her The Catalogue of the Universe (1985) is probably the one that most resembles Geronimo's Ponies. In it, Angela May searches for her father and in the process learns much about herself. Whatever its resemblances to other books, Geronimo's Ponies is special, presenting as it does a complex interweaving of themes and symbolism even while telling its story in swiftmoving, engrossing prose.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996