

National Velvet Short Guide

National Velvet by Enid Bagnold

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| National Velvet Short Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Overview..... | 3 |
| About the Author..... | 4 |
| Setting..... | 6 |
| Social Sensitivity..... | 7 |
| Literary Qualities..... | 8 |
| Themes and Characters..... | 9 |
| Adaptations..... | 10 |
| Topics for Discussion..... | 11 |
| Ideas for Reports and Papers..... | 12 |
| For Further Reference..... | 13 |
| Copyright Information..... | 14 |

Overview

National Velvet is a stirring reminder that one does not have to wait until maturity to arrive at greatness; one need not be held back by gender or lack of money. Velvet Brown's story is a timeless account of an individual rising above the conventional views that hold people back from realizing their dreams.

The first-time reader of the book will be happily surprised to see that, like many literary classics, it is written for all ages. It is a young people's story only in that the plot focuses on a teen-ager; the adult world, however, provides the perspective through which the younger world is seen.

About the Author

Enid Bagnold was born on October 27, 1889, in Rochester, England.

Her father was a colonel with the Royal Engineers, and the family moved around frequently because of his varied assignments. When Bagnold was nine, her family moved to Jamaica, where as she says in her 1969 autobiography, she began an inner life: "Beauty never hit me until I was nine." At that time, she began to write, and she continued to write for more than seventy years. In the spring of 1902, her father's command expired, and she moved with her family back to England.

In 1903 she was fourteen, the age of her most famous heroine, Velvet Brown of National Velvet. The great success of that work came in part from Bagnold's memories of what adolescence was like.

She attended Priors Field School in Godalming, England, which was run by the mother of the famous author Aldous Huxley. In 1906 Bagnold left the school and went abroad to Paris for a year.

During her stay in France, she became more sophisticated and more aware of the arts, particularly French literature.

She returned to her family in 1907 and five years later moved to London and began to write professionally. For nine months, she wrote for the famous editor and writer Frank Harris, honing her journalistic and creative skills.

During World War I, she served in an English hospital for two years and then as a driver for the French Army; she kept a diary of the "shocks" she experienced and in 1918 published *A Diary Without Dates* based on her wartime experiences. Bagnold married Sir Roderick Jones, chairman of Reuters, a major news agency in England, in 1920. His work often took the couple to foreign places. As her family grew to include three sons and a daughter, Bagnold continued to write. Three novels for an adult audience came out of these years, and in 1930 she published her children's book *Alice and Thomas and Jane*, with illustrations by her daughter.

Although most of her writings were for adults, Bagnold is remembered most of all for her 1935 novel *National Velvet*, about a fourteen-year-old girl's stunning victory in the Grand National, the foremost steeplechase in the world. The book was an international success and has gone into numerous editions and printings since. It was made into a popular movie, a stage play, and a television series. Never again did Bagnold write anything so well received as *National Velvet*. But her play *The Chalk Garden* debuted on Broadway in 1956 and won the Award of Merit for Drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The Chalk Garden was filmed in 1963, starring Deborah Kerr and Hayley Mills.



In 1962 Bagnold's husband died.

Some months later, she resumed work on her play, *The Chinese Prime Minister*.

At the age of eighty, she published *Enid Bagnold's Autobiography*. She died on March 31, 1981.

Setting

The story is set in England "earlier than 1931," when its heroine, Velvet, is fourteen. Velvet lives in a small village in the southern part of the Midlands. A lover of horses, she inherits five horses and wins a sixth in a lottery. She rides this sixth horse, a piebald, to victory in the Grand National. The race and the investigation that follows take her to other parts of England. The worldwide publicity and attention make her realize how pleasant anonymity is.

Social Sensitivity

In regard to sex roles, *National Velvet* depicts attitudes decades ahead of its time. Mi Taylor is a modern young man with enough self-confidence that he does not feel a need to prove his masculinity. Mr. Brown easily accepts his wife's assertive control of the Brown family; he recognizes, without feeling threatened, that she is a better planner and decision-maker than he. Husband and wife have a mutual respect and affection that show themselves in their actions grand or small. The Brown children learn these endearing qualities from their parents, and the novel shows how charity, beginning at home, extends naturally to the world outside.

National Velvet also promotes equality among social classes. A girl from the middle class wins the greatest steeplechase in the world, leveling traditional distinctions among people. The rigidly upper-class members of the National Hunt Committee have to swallow hard and admit to themselves, if not to others, that good breeding does not depend on money or social position and anyone can achieve grand accomplishments. From a reverence for equality comes an appreciation of individual differences among members of society. This, in turn, extends to an appreciation of self.

Literary Qualities

Bagnold masterfully balances a leisurely style with a suspenseful story line. Her writing is unhurried but forward-moving, thorough but uncluttered. The author unfolds scenes, introduces numerous characters, and blends vivid action with quiet contemplation without ever becoming dull.

Her figurative language is realistic and maintains an awareness of the link among human, animal, and plant life.

Down-to-earth, frank, and honest, Bagnold is also sensitive and poetic; without being sentimental, she remains tender and humane. In portraying characters, she does not tell readers what to feel or how to react; she presents her story and lets the events, dialogue, and character reactions speak for themselves.

Bagnold's writing benefits from the sense of enjoyment she brings to it; her interest in and knowledge of her subject translate into the enchantment of her audience. Her readers cannot but feel that she poured all her mind, heart, and creative memory into her most popular book.

Themes and Characters

Velvet Brown is the center of the novel from beginning to end. Her story presents the central themes: the joy of the struggle, the disillusionment after success. Countering these themes is that of contentment with everyday activities, especially with the ties of family and friends.

Velvet's best friend and coach, Mi Taylor, knows much about the wider world, including the world of racing, and he is unpretentious, considerate, and caring. From the beginning, he shows no biases against Velvet as a rider; he does not have to be persuaded that a female can do what a male can do. His role echoes that of his father, who coached Velvet's mother twenty years before when she swam the English Channel.

Araminty, Velvet's mother, has a character as solid as her huge frame. Unwavering in her affections, she sets the rules for the governing of the Brown household. Dependable, long-suffering, and understanding, she provides Velvet and Mi with their entry fee and expense money and, after the Grand National, goes to bring Velvet home and helps her through the grueling period when she is in the public eye. Velvet's father is a rather shadowy presence in the novel; though somewhat grouchy and bossy, he accedes time and again to his wife's practical decisions. He is always correcting Velvet but seems to favor her above his other children.

Velvet's sisters—Edwina, Malvolia, and Meredith—are seventeen, sixteen, and fifteen, respectively. Edwina is boycrazy, fanciful, romantic, and selfcentered. The literal-minded Malvolia remains sober and straightforward.

Meredith is maternal and loves animals, proving as fond of birds as Velvet is of horses. Velvet's little brother, Donald, the most amusing character in *National Velvet*, brings laughter and freshness wherever he appears.

Figures met only in passing—at the door, in a taxi, on the street, or at the racetrack—come to life with brief descriptions or characterizing remarks.

The last chapter introduces the members of the National Hunt Committee Board, called together to question Velvet and Mi. This scene resembles a short play as all the participants reveal much about themselves by their own comments and reactions; Velvet and Mi are principally characterized by genuineness, decency, and a love of racing for its own sake rather than for glory or money.

Animal figures are also drawn as characters. Miss Ada, the family horse, and Jacob, the family dog, even talk in their own way. The piebald, named "The Pie," has an individualistic spirit that makes him seem almost human.

Adaptations

National Velvet was made into a very popular film by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1944, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Mickey Rooney, and directed by Clarence Brown. Robert J. Kern's editing and Anne Revere's portrayal of Mrs. Brown garnered Academy Awards.

A stage play, television series, and film sequel, International Velvet (1978), followed.



Topics for Discussion

1. What various kinds of life are mentioned in the opening paragraphs? Why does Bagnold bring these to the reader's attention?
2. What is common in the descriptions of Velvet's sisters? In what ways does Bagnold individualize the sisters?
3. Why does Mrs. Brown not like to talk about her great achievement of twenty years before? How does her former experience serve her when Velvet gains worldwide attention?
4. How is Velvet's love for horses first introduced? Is this effective?
5. Why is Donald so appealing to the reader?
6. Referring to chapter 5, discuss the tie between dream and reality. Is Mr. Cellini convincing as a character?
7. Is Velvet's string of successes believable? Why or why not? Is it possible to make good luck "happen"?
8. In entering the Grand National Race, are Mi and Velvet being ethical?
Should Velvet have been disqualified, even though she won the race?
9. What strategy helps Velvet win the Grand National?
10. Contrast the north of England with the south in which Velvet lives.
11. Discuss the hearing that occurs in chapter 17. Why does the National Hunt Committee Board think it best not to prosecute Velvet?
12. Why is Velvet uninterested in the publicity she receives after her victory?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write about a professional female jockey.
2. Watch the films National Velvet and International Velvet and compare them to the original story.
3. Is the "Author's Note" at the end of the book relevant or useful?
4. Write a skeletal history of the Grand National Race.
5. What was going on in the wider English world during the late 1920s and early 1930s?

For Further Reference

Bagnold, Enid. *Enid Bagnold's Autobiography*. New York: Morrow, 1969.

Touches lightly on her writings but concentrates on the escapades of her long life; exciting and educational for the reader of any age.

Butcher, Fanny. "Review." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 27, 1935). Calls *National Velvet* a "delightful whimsy" which, had it been a short story, "would have been one of the best short stories in the language."

Chamberlain, John. "Review." *Current History* (June 1935). A brief appreciatory note describing *National Velvet* as "magnificent entertainment."

Colby, Harriet. "Review." *Books* (April 28, 1935). A lengthy review praising *National Velvet* for its maturity, honesty, language, style, and humor: "Sudden and lovely, it breathes and lives in the unexpected."

Gannett, Lewis. "Review." *New York Herald Tribune* (April 26, 1935). Gannett finds that despite "unfavorable portents" that should have worked against it, *National Velvet* is a book to remember.

MacAfee, Helen. "Review." *Yale Review* (Summer 1935). Reflects briefly on what makes a good horse story.

Morley, Christopher. "Review." *Saturday Review of Literature* (May 4, 1935). A stirring tribute to a "masterpiece," *National Velvet*. The reviewer makes an interesting connection between the mind of the child and the mind of the artist.

Southron, J. S. "Review." *New York Times* (May 5, 1935). A lengthy summary and analysis for readers of all ages.

Wade, Mason. "Review." *Nation* (June 5, 1935). A review primarily for adult readers. Wade provides useful and interesting reflections on child psychology and fictional perspective.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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