

# Night Cry Short Guide

## Night Cry by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

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## Overview

Night Cry is both a suspenseful novel and the story of a thirteen-year-old girl learning to differentiate between what is real and what is imagined. Left alone on a five-acre farm while her father travels selling calendars, Ellen must rely on herself and sort out her fears of the horse that has thrown and killed her brother, of an old woman's eerie predictions, and of a stranger who works on the farm for food. When a celebrity's son is kidnapped, Ellen must overcome her fears and suspicions to rescue the boy. Clues along the way support a satisfying ending to the drama.

## About the Author

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor was born January 4, 1933, in Anderson, Indiana, the daughter of Eugene S. and Lura Schield Reynolds. Her midwestern upbringing and summer visits to her grandparents in rural Maryland have provided colorful backdrops for many of her stories. As a young girl during the depression years, this prolific writer wrote stories on the blank side of used paper she found in the trash can. At the age of sixteen, Naylor was asked by a former teacher to write a story for a Sunday School paper, and she discovered she could be paid for doing what she loved best. By the time she attended college, she earned a large part of her tuition money by selling her writing to magazines. To date she has written some two thousand magazine stories and articles. Between graduating from Joliet Junior College in 1953 and obtaining a psychology degree from American University, Washington, D.C., in 1963, Naylor worked as an elementary school teacher, as an executive secretary for an educational association, and as an editorial assistant for the NEA Journal.

After graduation, she gave up thoughts of becoming a clinical psychologist to concentrate on writing.

Three years later her first book was published. The range of Naylor's seventy some books include fiction and nonfiction and are written for all reading levels from pre-school to adult. The author works on several projects at a time, perhaps working on a picture book in the morning and a young adult book in the afternoon.

Before she writes a book, Naylor starts not just with an idea, but with a mood. For example, her own experience with horses was limited to riding lessons she took on Saturdays during her first year in high school. Reaching back into her past, she remembered that she was terrified of horses, and the suspenseful mood of *Night Cry* was set.

The young girl in the story is afraid of a certain horse and even thinks it is a demon. The plot idea flowed from that mood.

*Night Cry* won the 1984 Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America. Another young adult title, *A String of Chances* (1982), was awarded both a Young Adult Services Division Best Book for Young Adults citation and a Notable Children's Book citation by the American Library Association; Notable Children's Book in the Field of Social Studies citation; and South Carolina Young Adult Book Award in 1985. *Shiloh* (1991) won the Newbery Award in 1992.

# Setting

This contemporary story is set in the remote backwoods of northeastern Mississippi. Ellen and her father live on the five-acre farm where he was born.

The land includes some tillable soil, a pasture for the horse, and hills. Ellen has never left the immediate area, only traveling the five miles to the nearest village of Crow's Point Junction for supplies and to the larger town of Millville where she attends school. This suspense novel takes place during a three-week period at the end of July and the first part of August.

# Social Sensitivity

Class distinction is apparent in Naylor's novel in the contrast between the people who live in the backwoods hills and those who live in Millville, home of a junior college and a new auditorium for the performing arts. Material differences abound. Ellen cooks on a wood stove not a modern one and lives in a "dog-trot" house. She orders her clothes from a catalogue instead of shopping at stores. Her neighbors share a party telephone line and listen in on each others' conversations. The distinction between rural and town dwellers is also in attitude. Lack of travel opportunities and social events causes Ellen to feel unsure of herself when she is away from familiar territory.

## Literary Qualities

Complex characterization is a Naylor trademark. Through subtle hints the reader gets an overall picture of an individual. By Joe Stump's attitude toward his new selling job and by comments his wife had made about him, the reader knows he is an optimist. By the advice he gives to Ellen, the reader knows he has good common sense. On the other hand, Joe knows that his lane is rutted with holes as deep as water buckets, but he can maneuver his car around them. It may occur to the reader that Joe should fill the holes, but Joe does not think of doing it.

This type of information gives the reader a round picture of a character.

Ellen Stump is a self-starter and a hard worker. The author does not tell the reader this. Instead, she shows Ellen at work. Ellen washes curtains, paints cupboards, and walks forty-minutes each way to check on Granny Bo. She is inquisitive, asking questions when she does not know answers and watching the news for information. The reader gets to know Ellen as the point-of-view character, not only because of her thoughts, but because of her actions.

Another strength of Naylor's is her ability to create a mood and sustain it through the use of vivid, precise imagery. In *Night Cry*, descriptions of thick vines that smother the trees and the fences and the telephone wires, of the steep bluff where Billy was killed, of the dark horse with the demon eyes, of the unearthly sound of the night cry, all contribute to the dreadful mood and tell the reader that something horrible is going to happen. Naylor's use of colloquialisms also enhances the tone of the story. "Couldn't speculate," "gets tiresome," "set herself down," "comes for a spell," and "this here," add a southern flavor to the story.

Naylor attempts dialect only in the occasional dropping of a "g" when Granny Bo speaks, which sets Granny apart from the other backwoods people.



## Themes and Characters

Thirteen-year-old Ellen Stump has never been out of the hill country of Mississippi, but has traveled vicariously through watching the News at Noon with newscaster Maureen Sinclair. Ellen feels self-conscious and out of place when she ventures into the closest town and does not have many friends because of her isolated home.

For most of her life Ellen has been content on the farm, the closed-in feeling giving her a sense of security. But during the last couple of years, she has begun to feel trapped as she sees the wide open world of the newscaster.

Sleet, the thunder-shy horse that had brought such pleasure to Ellen and her younger brother Billy, is now Ellen's personal demon. During a storm a year before the novel begins, Sleet threw Billy, who died of a broken neck. He was buried beside Ellen's mother under the chinaberry tree up the hill. Now Ellen will not go near the horse and her fear of the large animal begins to overwhelm her.

Granny Bo, the Stumps' closest neighbor, lives a forty-minute walk away. The old woman's log cabin has no electricity or phone, so Ellen checks on Granny Bo a couple of times a week. Granny has a reputation for seeing into the future and had correctly predicted Ellen's mother's death. Her superstitious ways influence Ellen's thoughts. Granny fuels Ellen's fear of the horse by saying that the devil came out of old man Keats when he died and went into the horse. She also furthers Ellen's uneasiness of staying alone by telling her about hearing a night cry that forebodes something evil, and Ellen will somehow be involved.

Joe Stump, former truck farmer, bricklayer, painter, gas station attendant, and now calendar salesman, adds a touch of logic and common sense to his daughter's fearful existence. Ellen believes he can "see a silver lining in a sink hole," and his penchant for becoming discontent with his jobs could be attributed to his having lived in one place his entire life. Although he feels uneasy about leaving Ellen alone at the farm, Joe rationalizes that it will not be for long and that he will bring home a good living for them.

Gerald Hawkes, the stranger who asks for food for his mentally ill wife and himself in exchange for manual chores around the farm, adds another dimension of evil to a world that is beginning to suffocate Ellen. Gerald's stories do not agree with what Ellen knows to be true, and although her doubt of his veracity grows, she trusts him because her father is gone and Gerald is the only adult around to help her.

A couple of times a week JimmyClyde rides his bike up the Stump's pot-holed lane and delivers groceries from the junction store. Although the boy is a year older than Ellen, his mental age is around eight, and Ellen's description of him suggests that he is a victim of Down's Syndrome. Ellen has stood up for Jimmy-Clyde when children in the village make fun of him, thus revealing her caring personality.





Jimmy-Clyde helps Ellen at the climax of the story when she saves a kidnapped little boy from Gerald and his wife.

These characters interact throughout the book to stress Naylor's theme of learning when to trust and when to doubt. Ellen is caught on a see-saw of emotions, her dread overcomes her good judgment, and several times she makes wrong choices. Her feeling of isolation combines with her fears of the horse and the unknown evils that Granny Bo sees in the backwoods.

Staying alone while her father is gone magnifies night noises and multiplies the apprehensions building inside her.

When forced to confront her fears, Ellen realizes that she is in control of her mind and imposes its limitations. Does she want to be hemmed in by superstition or open to the world around her?

After the exciting rescue of the child, when Ellen courageously triumphs, the author systematically enumerates the factors that caused Ellen's fears and lays them to rest. "Coincidence of place and time and weather on the day Billy died had caused her to change a horse once loved into a demon undeserving of charity or forgiveness. Gossip about a lonely old woman had made her afraid of Granny Bo and her stories.

And finally, resentment of her father's leaving had allowed Ellen to suspect the man she cared about more than anyone else in the world."



## Topics for Discussion

1. Ellen's mother has been dead for several years before the story begins.

Her headstone is a quartz stone she kept on the window sill so she could watch the sun shine through it. From this fact alone we have a picture of her personality. What was she like?

2. What is a "dog-trot" cabin? Describe Ellen's house.

3. What is a night cry? Why does that make a good title for this book?

4. Joe Stump says that folks make up stories and superstitions because they do not feel easy not having answers.

He thinks they should just say they don't know and shut up. Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?

5. Ellen displays a proud independence that matches the independence of Granny Bo. Compare the two characters by giving examples from the book.

6. Why does Ellen think she will always stay at Crow's Point? Does she love it so much or does she feel out of place anywhere else?

7. Does the author's use of colloquialisms and dialect enhance the book or detract from it? Give examples from the novel.

8. Rural communities commonly have party phone lines. How does that phone system work at Crow's Point?

Are there private conversations?

9. Why does Granny Bo say that her fifth child is dead? What is her reaction when the investigators discover that Gerald Hawkes is actually her son, Sam Goff?

10. Who does Ellen trust and who does she doubt at the beginning of her father's first trip? During his second trip? At the end of the story?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Why is Ellen afraid of Sleet? What did Granny Bo say about the horse?

Why did Ellen's father not get rid of Sleet? What is meant by "Whenever she approached the stall, her fear went before her and riled the horse, so that when they confronted each other, eye to eye, he wasn't a horse at all?"

2. Contrast Ellen's isolation with her fascination with newscaster Maureen Sinclair's flair for delivering news of foreign places.

3. Naylor excels at descriptions that create moods. Give examples from the book.

4. What statements does Gerald make that cause Ellen to doubt his word? Why?

5. After the storm at the end of chapter ten, Ellen "moaned in the terror she had created..." Give examples of other times Ellen creates her own terror.

6. Learning who to doubt and who to trust is a difficult lesson for Ellen. Why does she doubt her father and believe him guilty of kidnapping?

7. During her rescue of the frightened boy, Ellen has a feeling of surrender. "One fear had numbed the other.

She was afraid of everything, and she was afraid of nothing." Explain this paradoxical passage.

8. At the end of the novel, the reader is not told whether Ellen will leave Crow's Point or stay. Which do you think she will do? Support your opinion.



## For Further Reference

Chevalier, Tracy, ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989. John D. Stahl lists Naylor's books and an overview of her writing. He believes her characters have "depth, individuality, and complexity."

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 12. Detroit: Gale, 1977. This article presents a short autobiographical section.

Draper, Charlotte W. "Night Cry."

*Horn Book Magazine* (June 1984): 331.

This reviewer believes the setting is integral to Ellen's suspenseful story.

Evory, Ann, and Linda Metzger, eds.

*Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale, 1983.

This article contains a brief biography of Naylor and lists her works.

Holtze, Sally Holmes, ed. *Fifth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1983. The volume presents an autobiographical sketch of Naylor and her philosophy on writing.

Phelan, Carolyn. "Night Cry." *Booklist* (July 1984): 1550. The reviewer says Naylor's skillful portrayal of Ellen makes the book believable.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. "Newbery Acceptance Speech." *Horn Book Magazine* (July/August 1992): 404- 411.

Naylor won the 1992 Newbery Medal for *Shiloh*. She delivered her speech at the annual meeting of the American Library Association.

Naylor, Rex. "Phyllis Reynolds Naylor." *Horn Book Magazine* (July/August 1992): 412-415. The author's husband gives his view of his wife's work.

Salvadore, Maria. "Night Cry." *School Library Journal* (April 1984): 126. The reviewer calls Naylor's characters "consistent and well developed."

Straub, Deborah A., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series. Vol. 24.

Detroit: Gale, 1988. This article lists Naylor's works and awards and includes an autobiographical sketch.

Sutherland, Zena. "Night Cry." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* (March 1984): 132. In this favorable review, Sutherland states that "readers will enjoy the tension and the action."

## Related Titles

Naylor knows the setting of *Night Cry* because she spent many summers in a small town visiting her Maryland grandparents, who originally came from Mississippi and who brought southern mannerisms and inbred warmth with them to their new home.

Naylor has used this background in two adult novels, *Revelations* and *Unexpected Pleasures*, and another young adult novel, *A String of Chances*.



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