Riding Freedom Short Guide

Riding Freedom by Pam Munoz Ryan

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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".

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".

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Contents

Overview

Frustrated by the rules restricting her from horses and the domestic labor she is expected to perform at a nineteenth-century New Hampshire orphanage, Charlotte Parkhurst aspires to run away from controlling authority figures. Her talent with horses provides her a means to escape and seek freedom and adventure. Although she makes friends, Parkhurst relies on herself to survive injury and overcome obstacles when she moves west to California. Because females at that time had few legal rights, Charlotte disguises herself as a boy named Charley to pursue her goals of buying land and establishing a successful business. As a result of her charade as a man, she became the first woman whom historians believe voted in a national election.

About the Author

Pam Munoz Ryan was born on Christmas Day 1951, in Bakersfield, California, the oldest of three daughters. Her parents, Esperanza Munoz and Don Bell, raised her in California's San Joaquin Valley surrounded by an extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Ryan's multicultural family broadened her awareness of how people live and think in other parts of the world. Her mother is the daughter of Mexican immigrants, and her father's parents are Italian. She also has Spanish and Basque ancestors. Ryan describes herself as an American because of her varied ethnic heritage. Ryan's maternal grandmother, Esperanza Ortega, spoke only Spanish, and Ryan became bilingual, appreciating how languages convey culture, history, emotions, and rhythm.

As a child, Ryan listened to her grandmother's stories about life in Mexico and the hardships she had experienced. She also was aware of her father's struggles as a migrant worker who moved from Oklahoma to California when he was a boy during the Depression in the 1930s. These memories would later be crucial for Ryan's storytelling. Her California experiences also gave her regional insights that aided her gift for writing detail. Because of the mild climate and abundance of produce, she picked fruits and nuts from backyard orchards, watched grapes being made into raisins, and enjoyed presents of special regional and ethnic foods that neighbors and relatives gave to her family. She savored noisy family celebrations where she could indulge in Mexican delicacies and learn about native customs and festivals. Ryan often spent summer days in the air-conditioned public library and became an enthusiastic reader.

Studying child development, Ryan graduated with a bachelor's degree from San Diego State University and was determined to have a career related to books. She was employed as a teacher, then as an educational administrator. Ryan completed a master's degree in education from her alma mater. While Ryan was in graduate school, a professor and a friend both praised her writing assignments and encouraged her to develop her talent to write a book. She accepted this challenge and began to prepare a manuscript to submit for publication. Ryan published three books for adults before she wrote for younger readers.

Her first published children's book was the board book One Hundred is a Family (1994). Because she had been upset seeing American flags displayed inappropriately in a grocery store, Ryan's next book, The Flag We Love (1996), was created to help children become aware of America's heritage. She soon wrote more nonfiction picture books: The Crayon Counting Book (1996), Armadillos Sleep in Dugouts: And Other Places Animals Live (1997), A Pinky Is a Baby Mouse: And Other Baby Animal Names (1997), The Zebra (1999), Hello Ocean (2001), and Amelia and Eleanor Go For a Ride (1999), which was based on a true airplane flight by Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt and was named the Los Angeles Times 2000 Best Book of the Year. Stressing original research, Ryan visits zoos and consults experts on topics about which she is writing.

Ryan wrote two Hispanic-themed picture books, Mice and Beans (2001), featuring a Mexican proverb, and Esperanza Rising (2000). The latter book is based on Ryan's

grandmother's experiences, contrasting her wealthy, happy life in Mexico with the poverty and despair she endured while living on company farms in the United States after her family suddenly became poor and emigrated from Mexico. This story stresses that friendship helps hopes and dreams survive despite agony.

For a Japanese publisher, Ryan wrote three picture books about Internet etiquette that were not translated into English: Netty, Netty Goes to School, and Netty Goes around the World. In addition to her picture books, Ryan has written chapter books such as Doug Counts Down (1997), Doug's Treasure Hunt (1999), Where's Porkchop? (1999), and Funnie Family Vacation (1999) which is based on "Doug," a Disney television cartoon series. Ryan's picture books have won numerous awards from the International Reading Association and Children's Book Council and been distinguished for praise by the American Library Association, American Booksellers, the New York Public Library, Publishers Weekly, Bank Street, Parenting Magazine, and the Smithsonian.

Ryan's first novel, Riding Freedom, was inspired by her research for her nonfiction book, California Here We Come! (1997). She read a reference to a nineteenth-century stagecoach driver called Six-Horse Charley who had voted in a federal election when only property-owning white males were permitted to vote, and was later discovered to be a woman named Charlotte Parkhurst.

Intrigued, Ryan sought to learn more about this person. She consulted primary records held at the Santa Cruz Historical Society.

Parkhurst's property deeds were issued to the masculine name she used, and voting records also listed that name. Ryan read a copy of Parkhurst's obituary and newspaper articles concerning how she had disguised her gender and was a prominent citizen. She then read secondary sources to understand the context of Parkhurst's life.

Initially, Ryan submitted this story as a nonfiction picture book, but Tracy Mack, her editor at Scholastic, encouraged her to write a historical novel based on facts. Ryan created characters and invented information to explain information she was unable to locate or verify, such as how Parkhurst was orphaned and why she ran away. To supplement her reading about Wells Fargo stagecoaches, and in order to be authentic, Ryan visited a barn at Knott's Berry Farm, a popular tourist attraction with historical reenactments. She watched workers prepare and harness horses to a stagecoach in which she rode and held the reins like Charlotte would have.

Riding Freedom was selected for prestigious prizes, including the Reading Magic Award for 1998's Most Outstanding Books, the National Willa Cather Award for Best Young Adult Novel 1999, and the 1999 Teacher's Choice Award. More than 500,000 students cast votes in favor of Riding Freedom for the book to win the 1999-2000 California Young Reader Medal, and the novel received the 1999-2000 Arizona Young Reader's Award. The Southern California Center for Literature for Young People presented Riding Freedom an award of merit.

Ryan lives by the Pacific Ocean in Leucadia, California, near San Diego. She married Jim Ryan, and they have four children, including a set of twins. Ryan frequently visits Mexico, especially where her family lived at Oaxaca and Aguascalientes, to practice local dialects and to immerse herself in that country's culture. An avid reader, Ryan continues writing for all age groups. Wanting to excite children about reading, Ryan lectures about writing and literacy at school visits and conferences and posts information and updates about her work on her Web site: http://www.pammunozryan.com. She presents workshops in which she discusses how she develops picture and chapter books from idea to finished product. Ryan emphasizes how she daydreams, pretends, observes people, and makes lists to inspire her imagination and stresses the need for research for nonfiction and historical fiction.

She attempts to make history intriguing for readers by including obscure details most readers would be unfamiliar with and may find entertaining.

Setting

Contrasting settings emphasize Charlotte's transformation from a dependent orphan to an autonomous citizen who is involved in and valued by her community.

Readers are introduced to Charlotte when she is two years old as her parents' wagon crashes in rural New Hampshire. The area is rugged, with tree-covered hills, rocky ledges, and boulders, symbolizing her toughness. The "bumpy road" foreshadows Charlotte's trials. Charlotte's parents die when their wagon is dashed on rocks after their horses become spooked in a thunderstorm.

Charlotte survives because she falls in a patch of soft grass, which provides her a temporary sanctuary. This setting parallels the glade where she transforms herself into a boy by cutting her hair and changing her clothes. It is also similar to the harsh California environment that challenges her and the peaceful farm she purchases.

Charlotte is taken to an orphanage, where her life is not as sheltering as nature. Charlotte resents being assigned kitchen chores because she is the only girl orphan. "Being in the kitchen was a thorn in Charlotte's side," Ryan explains, "and she hated it worse than falling in a real briar patch."

Charlotte washes dishes and pots, peels potatoes, and cooks mush. When people come to examine the orphans for possible adoption, Charlotte is forced to hide silently in the "dark, crowded" potato bin so that no one will choose her and deprive the orphanage of free kitchen help. This bin represents her intolerable entrapment and yearning for release. Charlotte picks beans and vegetables in the garden outside the kitchen, which provides her some freedom from the confines of the kitchen and places her closer to her beloved horses.

The orphanage stable is Charlotte's favorite place and provides her escape from the rigid structure within the orphanage.

Charlotte finds happiness when tending to horses in the stable where the "smell of the sweet, dank hay and the horses comforted her like an old quilt on a cold day." She slips away from her duties at the orphanage to talk to her friends and care for the horses, even sleeping in the barn to help a mare that is foaling. The pasture is the site of races where Charlotte competently guides her steed to victories, defeating boys and capturing public attention about her abilities. These pasture races also are the catalyst for Charlotte to abandon the orphanage.

Stagecoaches are important because they transport Charlotte to places where she can develop her skills and attain autonomy. She also proves how capable and responsible she is by carefully guiding a stagecoach over a weakened bridge and driving the wheels over gold coins tossed onto the ground as targets. Stagecoaches provide Charlotte the means to pursue and secure her goals of owning her own land and establishing a way station.

Worcester, Massachusetts, is the "end of the line," where Charlotte begins her new life. In Worcester, Charlotte finds shelter, becomes a stable hand, and learns how to drive a stagecoach. Her move to What Cheer Stables at Providence, Rhode Island, represents her maturity as Charlotte is promoted from a stable boy to a coach driver at her employer's new stable. What Cheer symbolizes Charlotte's optimism as she immerses herself into a busy schedule of caring for horses and hauling passengers.

During her Rhode Island tenure, Charlotte is considered the "best and safest driver on the whole Atlantic Coast." On a route from this station, she encounters the orphanage overseer, Mr. Millshark, who tormented her, and is able to avenge satisfactorily her mistreatment.

California, a continent away from the orphanage, finally assures Charlotte of security and seemingly unlimited opportunities and possibilities. She lives in a storeroom instead of the bunkhouse at the California Stage Company to protect her secret. Earning money despite her eye injury, Charlotte is able to buy property known as Rancho Corralitos where she intends to establish a way station and raise horses. She also buys a neighboring property to help a widow who is facing foreclosure. Together, Charlotte and Margaret create an oasis with orchards, poultry, livestock, and kittens.

Most of all, California represents freedom.

When Charlotte first arrived in Sacramento, she encountered a suffragist whom the crowd mocked. The polling place at a hotel is also antagonistic. A girl and boy fight about whether the girl should be allowed to play ball. Charlotte's decision to vote emphasizes that she is aware she can make a difference and should stand up for herself and all of the other disenfranchised people she has known.

Social Sensitivity

Ryan's novel presents social concerns of the nineteenth century that have universal importance to modern readers. Charlotte is a role model because she is true to herself by knowing what interests her and pursuing her aspirations. She perseveres and works diligently to follow her dreams and attain her goals. Charlotte is blind to race and class and is loyal to her friends, remembering promises even when miles and time separate them. She never forgets who she truly is and seeks to improve life for all people, but she especially caters to women and children who have few rights at that time. Charlotte is well aware of how men and women are treated differently, based on her experiences publicly as both genders. She also knows that children have minimal control over their immediate future. Charlotte is respected by her community, and mutually respects people unless they wrong her or others. She stands up for herself.

Because Charlotte promotes fairness, opportunity, and equality and overcomes oppression, she could be considered a heroine. Her actions to protect her passengers from falling through the bridge seemed heroic. She is rebellious and does not conform to societal conventions. The novel's third section reveals how Charlotte voted in the 1868 presidential election. Her disguise emboldens her to approach the suffragist to ask her questions about political candidates and take one of her handbills.

Charlotte tells her, "You are much braver than me," thinking about her own reliance on disguise to seek her desires. She is courteous to the suffragist, calling her "ma'am" and shaking her hand. Charlotte refuses to let her male companions bully her about being polite to the suffragist. She votes on behalf of women and other disenfranchised groups such as African Americans. Ryan emphasizes the importance of one person's vote, but does not reveal who Charlotte supported, thus showing respect for her privacy and to show that Charlotte knew her own mind and was capable of making decisions without anyone's interference.

The suffragist's conversation provides factual information about the women's rights movement, placing Charlotte's vote in context. Historians believe Charlotte was the first California woman to vote in an election and probably the first woman to cast a vote in an United States presidential election at least half a century before it was legal for American women to have the right to vote. Ryan includes historically accurate information about early suffragists in Wyoming, although references to other women who attempted to vote or run for president in the nineteenth century, including Susan B. Anthony, Victoria Woodhull, and Belva Lockwood, would have enhanced readers' awareness of the courage it took for Charlotte to dare vote in 1868.

Literary Qualities

Ryan crafts Riding Freedom by dividing the novel into three parts: "In the Beginning," "In the Middle," and "In the End."

Each section contains chronological scenes featuring crucial events when Charlotte is a toddler, child, and young adult. This arrangement guides readers to follow Charlotte's adventures as she matures from a girl in New England to a woman in California and emphasizes the separate, although related, phases of her life. The book is Charlotte's fictional biography told by an omniscient narrator. Ryan based her protagonist on a historical figure who lived in the nineteenth century. Because she likes to present information unfamiliar to readers to intrigue them, Ryan emphasized Parkhurst's childhood and early adulthood to create an appealing heroine participating in exciting adventures.

Facts are important to the novel's plot development. Ryan carefully researched the life of Charlotte Darkey Parkhurst and studied the era and places where she lived.

Because she realized some crucial information about Parkhurst was missing in primary and secondary sources, Ryan used artistic license to fill in those gaps, such as how Parkhurst became orphaned and why she decided to run away from the orphanage. Ryan also created supporting characters such as Hayward, Vern, and Ebeneezer as Parkhurst's friends and Mr. Millshark, Mrs. Boyle, and William as her antagonists.

She moved Charlotte's lifespan within the nineteenth century to make her younger when she voted in 1868, than the real Parkhurst, so that most readers could identify with Charlotte.

Names and naming are important literary devices Ryan uses to create a sense of character. Charlotte's name was unchangeable, but other characters were appropriately named. Vern, like many African Americans at that time, does not have a last name.

Hayward's name might refer to his wayward condition as an orphan. Mr. Millshark is as sly as a shark and expects Charlotte to labor at the orphanage as if she were a mill worker. Mrs. Boyle's name might refer to the word "boil," whether as a cooking task involving rising temperatures, like her temper, or an uncomfortable body sore. Ebeneezer might remind readers of Ebeneezer Scrooge, although Ebeneezer is more generous than his gruff nature might suggest. The horses have names, such as Freedom, Justice, and Thunder, reflecting aspects of Vern's and Charlotte's life. Ryan uses the name Charlotte consistently for readers and only calls her protagonist Charley or by the courtesy title Mr. when she is in public and people are unaware that she is a woman.

Ryan's use of figurative language conveys meaning. She uses storms to alert readers to trouble. For example, Charlotte's parents are killed in a thunderstorm. Charlotte successfully transports the stagecoach across the river during a storm before the bridge

collapses, which symbolizes her initiation into her profession. The twin foals almost die in a breech birth during a storm. It is raining when Charlotte goes to the polls, but the sun shines when she votes. Charlotte looks into pools of water at two important moments, to examine not only her physical appearance, but also to reflect on her future. First, when she shears off her hair and puts on Hayward's clothes, she glances at herself in the stream and says goodbye to her old life as a female and welcomes her new life as a boy. Her hair ribbons float away like "silky snakes," and although Charlotte had not thought much about her hair, "now she ached for it as it disappeared." Secondly, she looks at her face in a water barrel after she has been kicked while trying to shoe a horse. Charlotte sees that her "left eye was crooked and twisted. Her face had weathered. Her hair was straight and too long." "Hardly recognizing herself," she realizes that she has changed since she first saw her image in the stream. Recalling her dreams and ambitions, she was "frightened clear to the bone" that she might lose sight of her goals, symbolized by the eye patch she must wear.

Subtle details reveal Charlotte's sentimentality. She cleans her face with Vern's handkerchief fashioned from an old shirt, remembering his admonition to listen to her heart. Charlotte splits her piece of rein that she wears around her wrist to give to Hayward when he is adopted. She drives over gold coins tossed into the road, realizing that people treasure ones her wheels touch as good luck tokens. Ryan shows how Charlotte practices driving with one eye to retain her job by memorizing landmarks and developing her already keen senses, including her sixth sense for horses.

She practices like she first did with Ebeneezer, and after ten successful trips, Charlotte deems herself competent.

Characters sometime speak with slang words such as "ain't" or drop endings like "runnin'" and "workin'," which indicates their lack of formal education. Dialect like Vern's "fussing a blue streak" bring characters to life. Patterns of speech also reveal subtle internal traits that contrast with behavior to portray complex characterizations, such as stern Ebeneezer kind-heartedly telling Charlotte, "Don't you get harmed out there. And you need anything, you holler."

The suffragist speaks in educated, formal sentences, while Charlotte says "them men."

Characters' stories, such as Hayward's memories of his parents and Vern's tales about running away, contribute to plot development and characterization.

Themes and Characters

Charlotte Parkhurst personifies strength and resiliency. She boldly and stubbornly faces challenges and does not allow her spirit to be broken. As a baby, Charlotte withstood fevers, then survived her parents' fatal wagon crash. She underwent developmental phases ahead of normal babies, foreshadowing her pioneering achievements. Charlotte only cries when something she values is taken away, such as Hayward being adopted, hearing that Vern died, or injuring her eye. Her doctor described Charlotte as "determined as a mule and tough as a rawhide bone." Charlotte grasped the rein of her parents' horse, which could be interpreted as her attempt to hold onto her heritage and guide her future. The same doctor kindly cuts a section of this rein for Charlotte to wear to connect her to her past.

Wanting a more interesting life, twelveyear-old Charlotte realizes that she will have more options as a boy and could clean stables or groom horses to earn money, which is symbolic of her shedding her previous life for a new persona. Her tomboyish nature enables her to slip into the role of a male easily. Only by hiding her true identity and initiating this masquerade can Charlotte take care of herself. Action and intelligence are themes as Charlotte cleverly plans how to escape. Previously, she had prepared a plan to earn money when she was old enough to leave the orphanage, then come back for Hayward and buy a ranch where they would raise horses. Although mostly quiet, Charlotte can also be mischievous and play tricks on people, like taking Mr. Millshark's boots or feigning her own drowning when she ran away.

Home and family are important themes because the orphaned Charlotte is always searching for a place and people she can rely on for shelter and moral support. Charlotte craves privacy, which she equates with independence and respect, both of which are absent from her life at the orphanage, and dreams of having land where she can post a "Private Property" sign. Charlotte cares for her passengers, reassuring them, insisting they leave the stagecoach during dangerous bridge crossings, and helping women and children find the most comfortable seats. Loneliness and isolation are also significant themes because Charlotte's deception removes her from traditional female and male roles and socialization. When Charlotte is injured by the kicking horse, her partial blindness symbolizes how she ignores normal femininity and how society is blind to her true gender.

While many people thought Charlotte would quit driving after she was injured, she was courageously determined to overcome this obstacle and prove she could learn to rely on her other senses and memorize landmarks to travel routes safely. Most people would have quit trying and not persevered. Like she had as a young girl at Ebeneezer's stable, she vowed to develop the best driving skills possible. Symbolically, Charlotte's driving represented her taking control of the reins of her life. Her customers and area residents agreed that Charlotte, whom they called One-Eyed Charley, was the best driver they knew.

Self-esteem is an essential theme because Charlotte thrived due to her accomplishments and personal bravery, emboldening her to seek daring dreams for a woman of that time such as owning land and voting.

Ryan does not tell readers much about Charlotte's parents except that they were farmers. Charlotte barely remembers her mother holding her. When the family is traveling to their home by wagon, Charlotte's mother sings to her toddler to comfort her. She clings tighter to Charlotte as the thunderstorm intensifies and the horses panic. Charlotte's father futilely tries to stop the horses from bolting as lightning and thunder fill the sky. These sketchy details and a few lines of dialogue resemble Charlotte's inability to recall specific memories of her parents.

Vern, the escaped slave who is the stable master for the orphanage stable, is Charlotte's surrogate father. Kind, gentle, and quiet, he rarely talks to people except for Charlotte. Vern shares stories about his escape from a Virginia plantation and the meaning of each horse's name. He emphasizes the theme of friendship and tolerance.

His running away from abuse and achieving freedom foreshadows Charlotte's escape and metamorphosis. Charlotte trusts Vern and can confide in him. She knows that he will help her flee from the orphanage. Vern affectionately gives Charlotte his handkerchief and asks her to place pebbles in a certain place to assure him that she safely left the orphanage. He is wise and advises Charlotte to follow her heart.

Hayward is Charlotte's best friend. A physically unattractive boy sporting turnip-colored hair and "ears as big as saucers," he is a couple of years younger than Charlotte and dotes on her. Charlotte hopes Hayward's large ears will keep anyone from wanting to adopt him. Although Hayward is adopted by the Clarks, adding to Charlotte's grief about Freedom's death and being forbidden to work with the horses, he remains in contact with her and remembers their plans to own a ranch and raise horses.

He unsuccessfully tries to convince the Clarks to adopt Charlotte. True to his word, Hayward follows Charlotte to California.

A Pony Express rider, Hayward promises to return to Charlotte after resettling his adopted parents from Missouri to the West Coast. His gentleness is revealed when he plays with the abandoned kittens. Hayward's sincerity is represented by the "Private Property" sign he pounds into Charlotte's land. He seems to understand why Charlotte perpetuates her charade. Their friendship seems unconditional and hints of possibly blossoming into romance and a life-long commitment.

Ebeneezer, the owner of the Massachusetts and Rhode Island stables where Charlotte works, admires her for her tenacity and innate ability to communicate with horses. Although he is initially skeptical of hiring Charlotte, he values her work ethic, evidenced by how she cleaned the stables and equipment. He realizes that Charlotte is capable and resourceful. Willing to give her a chance, Ebeneezer teaches Charlotte how to drive teams pulling stagecoaches.

He acknowledges her achievements by advancing her from a stable boy to a stagecoach driver.

Known for his "belly-aching," Ebeneezer complains a lot, which Charlotte realizes means he is actually content and accepting of others, particularly Charlotte. When Charlotte says she is planning to move to California to work for Ebneezer's former stable boys, James Birch and Frank Stevens, during the Gold Rush, he tries to discourage her. Like a father, he warns her about the possible dangers and discomforts of her job. As she leaves, he tells her that she reminds him of his deceased daughter who was the only other person he knew who was as gifted with horses as Charlotte.

Ebeneezer hints that he knows Charlotte is not who everyone thinks she is and asks her to tell him her true name. He also moves to California to be with Charlotte and helps fix fences and coops on her farm. Significantly, he is present when the twin foals are born.

Mr. Millshark is the strict orphanage director with a "cold heart" who tries to repress Charlotte's joyfulness. A narcissistic, pretentious man, Mr. Millshark is concerned about image not substance. When the adult Charlotte encounters him, she is amused to see that he is wearing boots which are designed to make him appear taller than he really is. He unfairly denies Charlotte access to horses because she is a girl. Mr. Millshark is an older version of William, who is Charlotte's nemesis at the orphanage. He is jealous of Charlotte's talents with horses and bitterly seeks Mr. Millshark's support to deny Charlotte stable privileges. William abuses horses and lacks respect for people and animals. The orphanage cook, Mrs. Boyle, has the "shape and personality of a very large toad" and lacks a "mothering bone in her body." Her cooking must not taste good because Hayward tells Charlotte that they will find a good cook when they have their ranch. Mrs. Boyle considers Charlotte as her personal servant and even sits on the potato bin to prevent Charlotte from meeting prospective adopters.

In contrast, Margaret, a mother figure, helps Charlotte. Their relationship stresses the themes of altruism and sharing. The women respect each other, which is an important theme, whether respect involves mutual courtesy between people or people and animals. The banker who helps Charlotte buy her land and the doctor who tends to her eye are also helpful, but pose potential risks. The doctor realizes Charlotte is a woman and says he will not tell anybody, describing why other women he had treated assumed male identities. The banker is unaware and is a threat if he knew Charlotte is female and exposed her true gender publicly. He seems unsympathetic to Margaret's plight, stating that she was unable to pay and "business is business" before shaking Charlotte's hand and congratulating her.

Charlotte's capacity to bond with horses helps her to discover her own strengths.

She has an intuition for horses and knows how to communicate effectively with them.

Horses represent themes of nurturing and protection. They stood guard over Charlotte when she was a toddler and have been consistent companions throughout her life.

Horses provide her a means to earn income and prove her capabilities. They boost her self-esteem. Horses also reveal her vulnerabilities, such as when Freedom dies.

Symbolically, Charlotte is present at two significant foals (births), one when she is a child and the other as an adult. She helps the first Freedom be born then assists that horse's namesake and her brother Vern's Thunder into the world.

The suffragist represents the theme of equality, which Charlotte has been seeking throughout her life. Anonymous characters reject Charlotte as a toddler by refusing to adopt her. Other unnamed characters are significant in shaping Charlotte's sense of self-approval by praising her driving abilities or betting on her to win races. Some characters question her talents, which strength ens her resolve to prove them wrong. The young girl fighting for the right to play ball parallels Charlotte fighting William at the orphanage. The men who taunt the suffragist and the idea of women voting provide readers insight into the mind-set of the mid-nineteenth century.

Topics for Discussion

1. Should Charlotte have disguised her gender? Is it realistic to believe that only a few people detected that she was female? Is a person's gender important to their communication with animals?

2. How does the novel's literary style enhance readers' awareness of adventure and suspense?

3. Discuss how characters' names provide clues about their personalities.

4. Do the historical facts that the author includes seem intrusive, or do they enhance the story?

5. Is Charley a role model? Do you think her contemporaries would have respected her abilities if they had known she was a woman?

6. Are any of the human and animal characters similar? If so, do you think the author created this parallel on purpose?

7. Compare descriptions of Charley's homes in New England and California. How has the author used language and tone to depict loneliness, despair, freedom, and hope?

8. Why is voting symbolic to conclude the novel? If Charley had not attempted to vote and had just been a successful stagecoach driver, would that have been a satisfactory resolution to Charley's transformation?

9. Discuss the importance of liberation to three characters and whether the results of their attempts meet their expected goals. Describe several ways that Charley is liberated from her past.

10. How are money, freedom, and power linked together in this novel? Does Charley aspire to become wealthy, or is she content with being able to afford her basic needs? How does money assure her the right to vote?

11. Compare the attitudes of Charlotte and the men in the crowd toward voting. What do their comments reveal about their opinions toward women? How do you think they would react if they knew Charlotte was a woman?

12. Why is it significant that Charlotte "felt like a monster" when her eye was injured? Why does she find her appearance so disturbing? Is this out of character for her?

13. Discuss the role of death and birth in this novel. Why is it ironic that the book begins with death and concludes with birth? What might this symbolize?

14. What do you think the future will be like for Charlotte, Hayward, Ebeneezer,and Margaret? How would public awareness of Charlotte's gender change people's perception and treatment of her? Why do people who know the truth protect her?

15. Compare Charlotte's strengths, as well as those of Vern, Hayward, Margaret,and Ebeneezer, with the weaknesses of Mr. Millshark, Mrs. Boyle, and William. What strengths and weaknesses do characters such as the suffragist, banker, and anonymous people including stagecoach passengers and critics of women's rights exhibit?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Interview people in your community with unusual professions or who have overcome obstacles like Charley and create an oral history documenting their achievements and noting their significance to local history.

2. Research who the real Charlotte Parkhurst was. Compare her with the activities of two women, American or other nationalities, who were suffragists or political leaders during the nineteenth century. Find out how Susan B. Anthony successfully voted in the 1872 presidential election and the court case that resulted from her actions. Where were American women able to vote in local and state elections prior to passage of the 19th Amendment?

3. On a map, trace Charlotte's travels from the east to the west during her life (from the orphanage to the stables or from those stables through the Panama Canal to Sacramento). Select five places she might have stopped and learn more about the geography of those areas.

4. Locate information about nineteenth-century stagecoach routes. Were any near your community? If so, research and write a historical paper about that route and why it was significant. Perhaps get permission to mark it as a hiking trail if it has not already been so designated.

5. Write a report about the role of horses in nineteenth-century America for transportation and labor.

6. Study the daily life of pioneers living in frontier California. Use costumes, poster board, and other materials to design period clothing, tools, quilts, and any items or animals you wish to use as props for a reenactment of a scene in the novel after Charley moves to California.

7. Find information about the rules stagecoach passengers were expected to obey.

Learn about the culture of stagecoaches, locating songs, stories, and poems, including tales about stagecoach bandits and robberies. Build a model of Charlotte's stagecoach.

8. Compose a script for a readers' theater based on incidents in Charlotte's life.

9. Research what medical care would have been available to Charley when she became injured. What veterinary care was available for horses at that time?

10. Compare Charlotte Parkhurst's gender deception with other women in history who have disguised themselves as men.

When, where, and why have women chosen to lie about their gender?

11. How did girls of varying social classes, ethnicities, and locations live during the time Charley was a child? What restrictions did they obey? In what ways did they have more freedom than modern girls?

12. Study the history of voting and voters in the United States. How do American elections compare with the political systems in other countries? Where are women still forbidden to vote?

13. Write journal entries telling what you would do if you were Charlotte at different points in her life.

14. Consulting newspapers from the late 1860s, devise a budget based on prices listed in advertisements for food, livestock, and other necessary goods. How much did horses cost? Do the papers provide information about any stable and feed costs? Plan a trip by stagecoach or steamboat and figure how much money you will need for travel expenses for a round-trip journey to both near and distant destinations.

15. Research the Pony Express and compare that postal system with the use of stagecoaches to deliver mail. What are the benefits and drawbacks of each method?

For Further Reference

Carden, Karen. "Stories of Character and Courage." Christian Science Monitor, vol.

90 (May 28, 1998): B7. Comments about Riding Freedom are included in an essay about children's books featuring capable female protagonists. The reviewer says, "Adventure-seeking, horse-loving kids will revel in Riding Freedom."

Decker, Charlotte. "Mysteries, Fantasy, Science Fiction." Library Talk, vol. 11 (May/ June 1998): 26-29. Decker offers a positive review of Riding Freedom, the first book reviewed in this collection. She says, "The writing is smooth, and the plot is tight, with good characterizations," and summarizes that the "plot is the classic story of an oppressed person overcoming insurmountable odds to achieve her goals." Declaring that "it is too good a book to miss," reviewer comments that "Ryan has chronicled the life of this obscure person and has created a strong heroine and role model."

Edwards, Carol A. Review of Riding Freedom. School Library Journal, vol. 44 (March 1998): 218. Edwards recommends this "straightforward text" because the "author provides a compact and exciting story about real people who exemplify traits that readers admire."

Farris, Pamela. Review of Riding Freedom.

The Reading Teacher, vol. 53 (November 1999): 255. Farris suggests that this "welltold biography of a spirited heroine" might be incorporated in history or women's study curricula or as a "literature response book" for students to discuss the protagonist's choices and decisions.

James, Helen Foster. "Talking With . . . Pam Munoz Ryan." Book Links, vol. 6 (January 1999): 40-43. This interview discusses how Ryan researched Riding Freedom and her other children's books. She comments how her family influenced her writing and provides other biographical details relevant to her career.

King, Mary, and Shelley Glantz. Review of Riding Freedom. Book Report, vol. 17 (November/December 1998): 57. This review praises "this lively historical fiction" with its "well-paced plot" for presenting the realities of nineteenth-century life. It emphasizes the symbolism of the word "freedom" as Parkhurst travels "her own road to liberty" in this novel and suggests that many readers "will be amazed at the restrictions placed on women of her time."

Roback, Diane, with Jennifer M. Brown and Cindi Di Marzo. Review of Riding Freedom. Publishers Weekly, vol. 245 (February 2, 1998): 91. This review offers the following praise: "With a pacing that moves along at a gallop, this is a skillful execution of a fascinating historical tale."

Commends Ryan's "ebullient and tautly structured novel" with "fully realized" characters.

Rochman, Hazel. Review of Riding Freedom.

The Booklist, vol. 94 (January 1/January 15, 1998): 814-15. Rochman states that "Middle-schoolers will love the horse adventures and the stories of her trickery" in this "lively historical novel."

Related Titles/Adaptations

A short story adapted from Chapter 5 of Riding Freedom appeared in the February/ March 2000 issue of Storyworks magazine.

In 2001, a Spanish edition of Riding Freedom, Un caballo llamado libertad, translated by Nuria Molinero, was published.

Books by other authors present similar themes, plots, and characters. A nineteenthcentury California woman disguises herself as a man to obtain her goals in Sammy Keyes and the Curse of Mustache Mary (2000), by Wendelin Van Draanen. Holly Hughes, Hoofbeats of Danger (1999) is an American Girl mystery featuring the pony express. In Margaret Peterson Haddix's Running Out of Time (1995), Jessie is worried about the diphtheria epidemic in her 1840s village and is stunned to learn that her community is actually a living history tourist site where authorities have ordered victims not to receive medical care. Jessie escapes for help and, like Charlotte assuming a new role, pretends to be familiar with modern culture as she tries to save her family. Nancy Antle's, Beautiful Land: A Story of the Oklahoma Land Rush (1984), shows the importance of land to Annie Mae, who stakes a claim with her family. Many children's books feature orphan protagonists, with Anne of Green Gables (1908) by L. M. Montgomery being one of the best known. Anne is mistakenly sent to a couple who wanted a boy, and, unlike Charlotte, she is able to make a place for herself without abandoning her female identity. Avi's, The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle (1990), depicts another strong character named Charlotte who survives an 1832 transatlantic journey with a mutinous crew and bloodthirsty captain.

In Ann Rinaldi's Girl in Blue (2001), Sarah Whitlock disguises herself as a man to escape an unhappy home by enlisting for service in the Civil War. Historically, women have assumed male roles as soldiers for a variety of reasons. Sarah E. Edmond's,Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army (1999), introduction and annotations by Elizabeth D. Leonard, and E. J. Guerin's Mountain Charley; or the Adventures of Mrs. E. J. Guerin by E. J. Guerin, Who was Thirteen Years in Male Attire (1985) are two accounts of nineteenthcentury women who posed as men. Guerin was also known by the name Charley and lived on the Colorado frontier. Richard Hall's Patriots in Disguise: Women Warriors of the Civil War (1993) elaborates on why women chose to represent themselves as men.

Other nonfiction books that are useful in understanding Charlotte's adventures and ambition to own land include Jo Ann Levy's, They Saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush (1992); Elliot West's, Growing Up With the Country: Children on the Far Western Frontier (1989); H. Elaine Lindgren's, Land in Her Own Name: Women Homesteaders in North Dakota (1991); and Christiane Fischer's, Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West, 1849-1900 (1977).

Marguerite Henry wrote many novels featuring horses and the people who valued them. King of the Wind (1948), and Polio: The Wildest Horse Race in the World (1976), are titles most relevant to Charlotte's story.

Women's efforts to secure the right to vote has been discussed in numerous nonfiction books and portrayed fictionally.

Emily Arnold McCully's, Ballot Box Battle (1996), presents information about suffrage as Elizabeth Cady Stanton gives riding lessons to a young girl and teaches her not to form her identity based on other people's often unrealistic expectations and to follow her dreams. Miriam Grace Monfredo's, Seneca Falls Inheritance (1994), is a historical mystery for older readers that features the challenges faced by suffragists living at the same time as Charlotte.

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