

# **Taming the Star Runner Short Guide**

## **Taming the Star Runner by S. E. Hinton**

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# Characters

The novel is told from the point of view of Travis Harris; as he tells the story, his conflicting feelings about family, friends, and himself emerge, but the reader also watches him grow into acceptance of his complex situation. Ken, Travis's uncle, is undergoing a divorce as well as financial troubles, but he gradually makes room in his life for Travis and for their relationship, as he helps Travis gain a new perspective on their family. Teresa, Ken's wife, and their young son Christopher are minor characters but their presence in the book broadens it to include other kinds of life and other points of view besides that of the teen-age male.

Casey Kincaide is skilled, tough, demanding, and determined to tame the wild stallion, Star Runner. Travis admires her grit, and eventually confesses to her that he loves her. Although she refuses him, his admiration continues and their friendship deepens.

Casey is one of Hinton's best-drawn female characters, suggesting dimensions and depths that are not fully explored in this novel. Eleanor Carmichael, the editor, is also distinctly individual. The richness of these two characters shows that Hinton's skill at depicting women has grown.

Joe, Travis's friend from back home, shows what Travis might have become had he stayed there. Star Runner, the huge and powerful horse, represents the part of Travis that cannot be tamed.

## Social Concerns/Themes

Many of the social concerns and themes that characterize *Taming the Star Runner* closely resemble those in other Hinton novels: adolescent loneliness and the need to belong (which find outlets in gangs); the inevitability of change and the loss of innocence as the protagonist grows up; and Oedipal conflicts, worked out both in actual and in surrogate families. Travis Harris, age fifteen, has gone to live with his uncle in Oklahoma rather than go to juvenile hall as punishment for assaulting his stepfather with a poker.

Although he misses his inner-city friends and occasionally feels frustrated by his loneliness in his new school, he is a stubborn loner. He usually prefers the company of his cat, and tells himself he is grateful for his uncle Ken's seeming lack of interest in him.

Gradually, however, Travis comes to appreciate the family ties that Ken represents and accepts his own need to grow up.

As with earlier Hinton books, drugs and sex remain on the periphery of the story, although Travis knows he is attractive to girls and is himself attracted to Casey, an eighteen-year-old horse trainer who works for Ken. When his friend Joe arrives unexpectedly, running away from involvement with a drug pusher and the murder of two of his friends, Travis summons the courage to get Ken's help and to send Joe back to face his punishment. Teenage drinking is treated as a fact, however; Travis sometimes longs for a drink at his uncle's, and once goes on a bender from which Ken must rescue him.

Unlike Hinton's earlier novels, *Taming the Star Runner* has distinctly autobiographical elements. Travis has written a novel and sent it off to a publisher. An editor contacts him, comes to visit, and tells him his book, after a little revision, will be published. Hinton has obviously drawn on her own experience here, having published her first novel when she was in her teens.

Hinton is also a lover of horses, and her knowledge of riding is evident in her descriptions of riding classes, a horse show, and Casey's activities. The language in the novel is generally rougher than in Hinton's previous work, and is a more accurate representation of teen-age speech.

Awareness of social class, especially as adolescents experience it in school, has been a hallmark of Hinton's fiction.

In *Taming the Star Runner* Hinton contrasts Casey's social class with that of the girls she teaches riding. Travis finds these girls unbearably silly, with their giggles, their piano and ballet lessons, and their clothes-consciousness. Casey works hard to support herself, and Travis respects and admires her for that. But the clear class distinctions

that characterized *The Outsiders* (1967) are subdued in this book and are more suggested than described.

Also unlike Hinton's other novels, the world of *Taming the Star Runner* is not populated solely by teenagers.

Travis interacts with his uncle Ken (who at thirty-seven seems very old to Travis), with the editor of his book, and with eighteen-year-old but very independent Casey. The immediacy and sense of living completely in the present that characterizes *The Outsiders* are considerably tempered in this novel by a sense of the past and of the future, represented by these older characters and by Travis's sense of his own future as a writer.

## Techniques/Literary Precedents

The most striking change in Hinton's technique is that *Taming the Star Runner* uses third person, rather than first person narration. Although the novel is firmly anchored in Travis's perceptions and actions, this shift suggests a new perspective on Hinton's teenage narrators.

The autobiographical elements in the novel also herald a shift in Hinton's approach, offering a certain playfulness, a hint that she is more comfortable with her own identity. They are not inserted gratuitously, however, but are an essential part of Travis's character and of the plot.

Hinton's editor has said that she submitted the story outline for this novel to him nine years before she wrote the book, and that the outline changed very little. Hinton herself, however, has changed in the interim; she said in a recent interview, "I'm older and I'm a parent. My writing is changing."

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) are still classic literary precedents for Hinton's work, but this novel, with its third person narration and its emphasis on Travis's growth into a writer, also suggests James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

## Related Titles

Taming the Star Runner shares some surface details with Hinton's *Tex* (1979), such as the rural setting and the emphasis on horses. It also shares many of the same themes which mark Hinton's work and make her popular with young adult readers. However, *Taming the Star Runner*, with its larger world and its more interrelated concerns, is subtler than her earlier novels.

The autobiographical elements suggest Hinton's more mature self-consciousness as a writer, and the more fully realized female figures demonstrate her growing confidence in her powers of characterization.

# Copyright Information

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