

The Red Pony

JOHN STEINBECK

Level 4

Retold by Nancy Taylor

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Pearson Education Limited
Edinburgh Gate, Harlow,
Essex CM20 2JE, England
and Associated Companies throughout the world.

ISBN 0 582 43473 4

First published in the UK in 1938 by William Heinemann Ltd
This edition first published by Penguin Books 2001

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Cover design by Bender Richardson White

Typeset by Ferdinand Pageworks, London
Set in 11/14pt Bembo
Printed in Spain by Mateu Cremo, S. A. Pinto (Madrid)

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ناشر: _____ مباحله

تیراژ: _____ ۵۰۰۰ جلد

نوبت چاپ: _____ اوّل ۱۳۸۵

لیتوگرافی: _____ نینوا اسکندر

چاپخانه: _____ سلمان فارسی

مرکز پخش تهران: ۶۶۴۱۶۶۰۴ - ۶۶۴۰۰۹۲۷

قیمت: ۷۵۰ تومان

Introduction

It was a strange, mysterious time for Jody, like a dream. When he first had the pony, he worried every morning during his trip to the barn. Was Gabilan really in there? Was he really his? Was he still alive? Jody always ran the last little way to the barn.

The Red Pony tells the story of a young boy named Jody Tiflin, who is growing up on a small ranch in California early in the twentieth century. Jody knows very little about the world outside his valley, but he dreams of something more, something out there.

In the four stories in *The Red Pony*, Steinbeck shows Jody as a thoughtful, lonely boy. He doesn't have any brothers or sisters, and there are no neighbors close to the family's ranch. Jody is often alone.

Jody watches people and listens to their conversations, and he begins to grow up. He loves the people around him very much, but he doesn't always understand the things that they do. He thinks about what is right and wrong and learns some difficult lessons about life and death, about families and about getting old.

Jody also feels strongly about animals and about the natural world around him. His love for the red pony, Gabilan, changes his life completely. The great mountains also excite and scare Jody. They are almost alive to him. He becomes wiser, but also sadder, as he tries to understand some of the mysteries of life.

Steinbeck's simple style and strong feeling for the place and people in *The Red Pony* give the reader a true picture of a piece of American history.

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California in 1902. Some of the best scenes in Steinbeck's stories take place around the Salinas Valley. He grew up in this part of the west and understood the problems of small ranchers and their families.

As a young man, Steinbeck attended Stanford University and then moved from job to job. He picked fruit, painted houses, worked on new buildings, and was a reporter for the *New York American*, but he soon returned to California. His early work experience gave him a deep understanding of hard-working men and women.

When he was a famous writer, somebody asked, "When did you begin to write?"

Steinbeck answered, "I don't remember a time when I didn't write."

In the early 1950s, Steinbeck wrote to a friend, "I have one little room and a kitchen and a bed and a table. That's all I need with paper and boxes of pencils." In each of his homes, his writing room became his special, private world. Once he even used an old car as an office because his house was too noisy. He drove to a quiet place each morning and sat in the car and worked.

Steinbeck's first book, *Cup of Gold* (1929), wasn't a success. But then he looked back at the valleys of California and found the places and characters for his books. He began to write about the close tie between ranchers and the land. He wrote about the happy times and the sad times in the lives of poor families in the western part of America.

Steinbeck's first popular success was *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a book about the adventures of a group of *paisanos*. *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937) tell the serious stories of young men in difficult times. Steinbeck understood the problems of people who can't live their dreams.

Steinbeck also wrote true stories about farm workers for the *San Francisco News* in the 1930s. These homeless workers didn't own any land and had to move from farm to farm to find enough work. Their stories gave Steinbeck the idea for his most famous book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. It opened many people's eyes to the situation of poor farm workers for the first time. *The Grapes of*

Wrath won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940 and was made into a very popular movie the next year.

After the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* as a movie, John Steinbeck wrote stories for other movies and for the theater. The people in them had hopes and dreams, and they worked very hard, but they often had problems and made mistakes. Instead of finding happiness, they often became outsiders in a rich and successful country.

Steinbeck worked for a number of years on *East of Eden* (1952), a long story that ends at the time of World War I. In this book he wrote about his mother's family and showed the difficult feelings between a father and his sons and their understanding of right and wrong. It was made into a movie in 1955, with James Dean as the star. *The Red Pony*, too, became a successful Hollywood movie in 1949. It was made into a movie again in 1973, with Henry Fonda as Carl Tiflin.

In 1962, Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Today he is remembered because he told real stories about real people. He understood the idea of "the American dream," but he knew that it wasn't possible for everyone. Steinbeck wrote about the poor and lonely people who many people forgot.

John Steinbeck died in New York in 1968.