



## **The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw**

Lois Peterson

Interest level: ages 8–11

978-1-55469-203-3

120 pages

AR Quiz # 136793

**Consider the following question as you read *The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw*:**

Knuckles McGraw invents a new life for himself as a cowboy, and imagines a horse he'd ride away on when things get tough. How do you manage when life is difficult, at home or at school?

### **Story**

After eight-year-old Kevin Mason's mother abandons him, he takes refuge in his fantasy of becoming Knuckles McGraw. He's a tough cowboy, roaming the plains on his legendary horse, Burlington Northern. But instead of riding the range, Kevin is stuck in a foster home with a pierced and tattooed teenager named Ice and a mute girl named Breezy. While he waits to be claimed by the father he barely remembers or the mother who left him a goodbye note in his lunchbox, Kevin (aka Knuckles McGraw) tries to communicate with Breezy, learns to get along with his bunkhouse-mate Ice, and discovers that memories can be as deceptive as family secrets.

### **Author**

**Lois Peterson** wrote short stories and articles for adults for twenty years before writing her first children's novel, *Meeting Miss 405*. She was born in England and has lived in Iraq, France and the United States. She now lives in Surrey, British Columbia, where she works as a fundraiser and in a public library, writes, reads and teaches creative writing to adults, teens and children.

### **Author Website**

[www.loispeterson.net](http://www.loispeterson.net)

## Connecting to the Curriculum

### *Language Arts*

- Kevin Mason imagines he's a cowboy roaming the plains on his horse Burlington Northern. Suggest each student makes up a cowboy (or cowgirl!) name for themselves using their own initials, and a name for their horse. Have students write a short paragraph about the first time they met their horse.
- Have students spell their cowboy names backward, like Knuckles McGraw does (WARGCM SELKCUNK). Who's got the funniest name? Take this opportunity to teach students about *palindromes*—words that are the same spelled forward or backward (*radar*). Advanced students could also delve into *anagrams*, a type of word play where letters that form a word or words are rearranged into a different arrangement of words. Example: fir cones = conifers; the eyes = they see.
- Read two or three cowboy stories or poems to the class. Encourage children to make up one using their cowboy name. Don't forget to include the horse!
- Explain that a ballad is a story told in song. Ballads were used long ago to pass along knowledge and recollections from generation to generation. Classic examples are "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" by Gordon Lightfoot, or "Kettle Valley Railway" by Dave Baker. Share with the class other narrative poems that tell stories. Discuss how we pass along knowledge and recollections nowadays. How is our modern way of communicating different from the ballad?
- Share a campfire story with the class, then "pass it around" the circle and have each student add or change a detail until a new story emerges.
- Have students imagine that they are one of the young characters in *The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw*. Their task? To write a letter to their parents. Encourage students to think of the types of questions their particular character would want to ask his or her parents in the letter. What kinds of things would the kids want to share with their parents about their new life in Joe and Liddy's foster home?

***Art***

- The bandanna is one iconic item of a cowboy's wardrobe. Show the students a traditional red or blue bandanna, discuss the characteristics of the design (two-colored, repeated design, etc.), then ask each child to create their own design on a 12-inch-square sheet of paper. Display them around the room.
- Create a template of a boxcar. Have students decorate them. Next, have students graffiti their imaginary cowboy name across their boxcar, to create a "herd" of boxcars around the classroom walls. See Online Resource list below.
- Show the students a variety of images of icebergs, then have them each draw, make a paper model or create a collage image of one.

***Health/Personal Planning***

- Have students research the foster care system in your state, province or region. Questions to investigate: what is foster care? Why do children sometimes need to be put into foster care? How might being placed in a foster home be a positive experience? Why might a child be sad about being fostered out? Why do our parents mean so much to us, even if they're not always the best people to raise us?
- Joe and Liddy are vegetarians. That means everyone eats vegetarian meals in their house. This can be a very healthy lifestyle. Discuss the food guide, and have students research vegetarianism. How can vegetarians make sure they have a balanced diet and get all the nutrients a body needs? Have students share their findings with the class.
- Engage students in a discussion about self-reliance. Talk about how Kevin had to learn to be self-reliant at an early age. How self-reliant do your students feel when they compare themselves to Kevin? Is it appropriate for Kevin to be so self-reliant at age eight? What do they think? You may choose to have students answer these questions in a personal reading response journal.
- Cowboys' traditional clothing includes a bandanna, leather chaps, cowboy boots, a cowboy hat...Brainstorm with students a list of other professions. Ask them to determine specific clothing that fits the type of work these people do. What kinds of things do they envision themselves wearing when they enter the adult working world?

*Science*

- Knuckles McGraw's bunkhouse buddy Ice is fascinated with icebergs. Suggest students research five facts about them and create a poster displaying what they have learned.
- Initiate a discussion or short research project about climate change and global warming. In pairs, have students research changes in the arctic ice over the past 20, 30 and 40 years. How have icebergs and ice floes changed over time? How are arctic organisms being affected by these changes? What are scientists predicting about how climate change will impact the arctic ice in the future? Students should present their findings to the group.

*Social Studies*

- Knuckles McGraw runs away from Joe and Liddy's. Once he gets to his school, he knows the way home. Have students make a map of the route they take from home to school, noting and naming landmarks and street names.
- Engage students in discussion about which levels of government are responsible for what. Which level of government looks after our oceans (federal)? Which looks after garbage collection (municipal)? What about foster care (provincial/state)? Divide students into small groups. Give each group chart paper and markers. Have them brainstorm responses to the following (you will need to circulate and help children with their reasoning if this is a new topic): What is the role of government? Of each level of government? Why do the different levels of government divide up their responsibilities? Why should the provincial/state government be responsible for overseeing foster care? Share as a group.

**Connecting to the Text**

- Identify the different ways in which Liddy, Breezy and Ice each support and comfort Knuckles McGraw when he joins the family.
- Have students choose a character from *The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw* and create a character web. Include his or her personality traits, physical characteristics, likes and dislikes...and maybe even his or her secrets or fears.
- Ask students to list ten details of the cowboy life that Knuckles McGraw imagines.
- In the first chapter, Lois Peterson uses descriptive language to show impatience on the part of “the welfare lady.” Find five words that show us how she’s in such a big hurry.
- What does Knuckles McGraw carry in his *Wagon Train* lunch box? Ask students to list three special things of their own that they might carry with them to remind them of home.
- An *archetype* is a character we recognize based on certain predictable characteristics. Sometimes archetypes are also stereotypes. As the story goes on, Knuckles McGraw builds on his archetype of a cowboy: a quiet, tough one-man show who eats beans, drinks coffee, treats his horse as his best friend and doesn’t ever cry. What other archetypes have students met in other books? Have you met a little old lady? A bully? Have students draw up an archetype map for that character.
- When Knuckles McGraw asks his foster dad whether he’ll be staying with his grandparents, Joe says, “How about we cross that bridge when we come to it.” That’s an *idiom*—an expression that means something more than just the words it’s made up of. Other examples of idioms include “I rest my case” or “at death’s door.” Have students find out what each of these idioms really means. In small groups, have students brainstorm a list of idioms to share with the class. Expect laughter!
- In the ballad that Kevin’s grandpa wrote for him, Burlington Northern leaves Knuckles McGraw to go off and help others. Why does he do this? Can students think of other examples of songs or stories where the hero eventually finds his or her feet and no longer needs to rely on the strength or guidance of another?
- When Knuckles McGraw first meets his grandparents, they share a plate of cookies. Knuckles McGraw refuses to take the last one when it’s offered to him. Why does he do this? What other examples of “company manners” can students think of?
- In pairs, have students determine the message (the “Big Idea”) of *The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw*. Have students share their thoughts with the class.

**Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions**

1. When in your life has someone other than your mom or dad helped you out of a tough situation?
2. Do you ever wish you had the ability to just...reinvent yourself? How would you change? Would you move to a different place or just assume a new identity?
3. If another child joined your family temporarily, what secrets would you be willing to share? What would you want to keep private?
4. If you've never thought of being a cowboy or riding a horse—how would you get out of town when the going got tough? On a skateboard? A helicopter? A zipline?
5. As you see it, are there too many rules at Joe and Liddy's place? Why do they have all these rules?
6. Knuckles McGraw is a cowboy. Riding horses is second nature to him. But in real life, Kevin is nervous around the big horses at the barn. Have you ever experienced this problem, where you thought something would be so easy but when you got right up next to it, it suddenly began to look hard?
7. What do you think happened to Kevin's mother to make her decide she could no longer take care of him? Do you think this was an easy decision for her, or a difficult one?

**Author's Note**

Dear Reader,

I was sitting in my car waiting for a train to go by when I saw the words *Knuckles McGraw* in graffiti on the side of a boxcar. Then I noticed that the train belonged to a company called Burlington Northern. It was a long train, and I had a long time to wait. By the time it went by, I'd imagined who Knuckles McGraw might be and that Burlington Northern might be a good name for his horse.

I didn't plan the rest of the story; I just started writing. Then along came Ice and his tattoos and leather clothes, and Breezy standing on her head, and Liddy with sawdust scattered all over her shoulders.

When I think hard, I may remember people a little like each of them.

Most writers sprinkle their stories with bits and pieces of their memories, even if they can't remember what the connection might be. That's what Knuckles McGraw did, with his emerging memories about "horsey" rides and cowboy songs—he built them into a story that explained something about his life—and his father—that he didn't quite know but hoped was true.

Once I write a story down, I pass it along to the readers. You can decide if Breezy ever learns to talk, or whether Ice melts into being a little easier on himself and everyone else.

And will Knuckles McGraw's mother show up anytime soon?

I don't know. Maybe you do.

It's your story now. It can turn out any way you want it to be.

Meanwhile you'll be in good company. Whether he's called Knuckles McGraw or Kevin Mason, this story is about a brave boy who makes sense of his world the best way he can. Just like most kids do, everyday. Wherever they are.

Happy trails.

Lois Peterson

## Resources

### Books

#### *Fiction*

- Byars, Betsy. *The Pinballs*  
Crebbin, June. *Horse Tales*  
Cullen, Sean. *Hamish X and the Cheese Pirates*  
Kellogg, Steven. *Pecos Bill*  
Scroggs, Kirk. *Grandpa's Zombie BBQ*  
Silverman, Erica. *Cowgirl Kate and Cocoa* series  
Steig, Jeanne. *Tales from Gizzard's Grill*  
Stein, David Ezra. *Ned's New Friend*  
Wedekind, Annie. *Wild Blue: The story of a mustang Appaloosa*

#### *Nonfiction*

- Arndt, Jim. *How to Be a Cowboy*  
Clutten, Brock. *Eyewitness Horse*  
Hopkinson, Deborah. *Home on the Range: John A Lomax And His Cowboy Songs*  
Latreille, Francis. *Wonders of the North Pole*  
Simon, Seymour. *Icebergs and Glaciers*  
Woodford, Chris. *Arctic Tundra and Polar Deserts*  
Heidbreder, Robert. *See Saw Saskatchewan: More Playful Poems from Coast to Coast*  
Drake, Janet and Heather Collins. *Kids Campfire Book; The Official Book of Campfire Fun*



**Online**

How Stuff Works: Iceberg Alert!

<http://express.howstuffworks.com/wq-iceberg.htm>

ABC Teach Directory: Cowboy Rodeo

[http://abcteach.com/directory/theme\\_units/cowboyrodeo\\_theme](http://abcteach.com/directory/theme_units/cowboyrodeo_theme)

Story-lovers cowboy stories

[www.story-lovers.com/listscowboystories.html#cowboysos](http://www.story-lovers.com/listscowboystories.html#cowboysos)

Cowboy poetry

[www.cowboypoetry.com](http://www.cowboypoetry.com)

Horse fun

<http://horsefun.com>

How to draw graffiti names

[www.wikihow.com/Draw-Graffiti-Names](http://www.wikihow.com/Draw-Graffiti-Names)

Mapmaker, Mapmaker, Make me a Map

<http://pr.tennessee.edu/ut2kids/maps/map.html>

Anagram fun

[www.fun-with-words.com/anagrams.html](http://www.fun-with-words.com/anagrams.html)