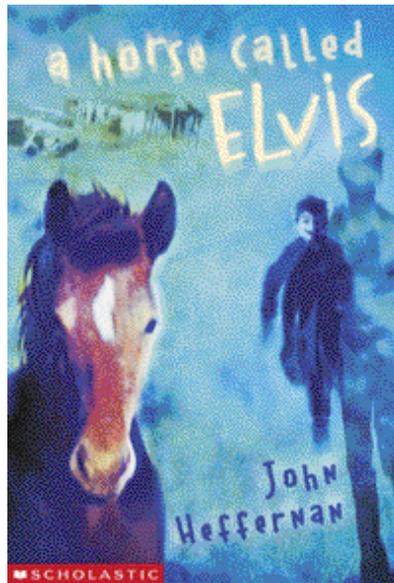


TEACHER NOTES

A HORSE CALLED ELVIS

by John Heffernan



A worn-out mare has been dumped in the paddock near the Turners' house. After school, Matt feeds and brushes her while he listens to his family argue in the house. Two days later, the mare dies. Nick finds a newborn foal beside her. The kids and their dad, Ray, want to keep him, but Mary, their mum, doesn't, because they don't have the money to look after him.

The vet shows them how to look after the foal. When he is a few weeks old, the foal climbs the steps onto the verandah to investigate the noise coming from inside. He jumps around, being bothered by a horsefly. Ray says that the horse looks like he's jiving, and so he earns the name Elvis.

As the colt grows, he begins to cause trouble, dragging washing off the line and digging in the vegetable garden. Mary is angry and the boys decide that the horse needs a yard. Ray helps them at first but he soon loses interest, so they finish it as best they can.

When Mary goes to a dance competition, Ray gets drunk. Elvis is investigating the dogs on the verandah when he tries to bite TriHard's coke-can foot. The dogs attack him. Ray drags the dogs off Elvis and then goes crazy, giving TriHard a beating. When Nick pulls him off the dog, Ray turns on his son.

Ray turns over a new leaf. He makes an effort to cook, to be kind and to clean the place up. He also has a casual job in town and plans to help the boys find out how to look after Elvis properly. But when everyone is out during the day, the two men who have been hanging around steal Elvis.

The family decides to take Elvis back from the two men, who don't live far away. Jaz's boyfriend, Craig, helps out with an old horse trailer. Mary and Jaz drive past the Barnes's place to work out where Elvis is being kept while the trailer is painted and repaired.

That night the Turners go to rescue Elvis. They find him hobbled in the machinery shed. Unfortunately, Guts and TriHard start a fight with the Barnes's dogs. Frank Barnes and his son are alerted. They get into their truck to chase the Turners, who have Elvis in the trailer.

A local police officer is out for a drive when he sees the Turners speed past. He pulls them over. Frank and his son soon catch up. But Sergeant Jenkins is on the Turners' side; he tells the two men to get going.

Teaching Notes

- Elvis means a lot to Matt, even though the horse causes a lot of trouble. Why do you think that Matt is still so desperate to hang on to Elvis? Are friendships between kids and their pets important?
- Nick and Matt are close. Why do you think that Nick is so important to Matt? How does Nick help and comfort him?

- Matt's parents aren't good at getting along with each other. Write a list of the things that they disagree about. What could they do to improve how they get along?
- Nick and Jaz both have disagreements with their father, but Nick knows when to pull back while Jaz keeps pushing until there is a fight. Find examples of scenes where the kids argue with their dad and compare what happens.
- John Heffernan gives us a very clear picture of what the Turners' house and yard look like. Draw a picture of what you imagine them to look like. You don't have to draw everything, you could just choose to draw something like the verandah, the yard or the kitchen. Don't forget details such as the old bomb cars and the record player!
- At the beginning of the story, Matt mentions a photo of himself and Elvis. Imagine what the photo looks like and do a drawing or painting of it.
- The images that the older Matt uses to understand his feelings about his life when he was younger come from his picture book. They involve the sea, an island, sea monsters and a raft. Find some examples in the story where each object is written about. How do the images reflect Matt's feelings? It is interesting how some of these objects can reflect both good and bad feelings. For instance, the sea can be a happy place or, during a storm, can reflect terror.
- At the end of the story, Matt tells us that Elvis helped him to be brave and face life. He says that 'for a brief time he showed us all how to swim together'. This makes us sad because it suggests that Matt's family doesn't manage to stay together. It also makes us wonder what happens next. Write a short plot outline for what you think might happen to Elvis and Matt next.

This need only be a paragraph or so, just enough to get storytelling ideas going. Don't forget that characters that play a small part in *A Horse Called Elvis* could play bigger parts in your sequel. Could Simon Croft become Matt's close friend? Could Frank Barnes and his son try to get back at the Turners?

- In the end, how has Matt helped Elvis, and how has Elvis helped Matt? How important is trust in their relationship?