HC: 9781536239256
Ebook: 9781536247572
Also available in audio

About the Book

After witnessing the tragic death of a racehorse, eleven-year-old Halle finds herself caring for the horse's best friend, a grieving pony named Rocky. A heart-tugging story of patience, love, and hope.

Halle thinks starting sixth grade in a brand-new school might help her forget about what happened at the racetrack. But she's wrong. She can't sleep at night because when she closes her eyes, she sees the last moments of Carver d'Esprit, a horse who died the day Halle went to watch the races with her family. When Halle learns Carver came from nearby Oak Creek Stables, she is compelled to go there and learn more about him. The owner introduces her to Carver's best friend, a pony named Rocky. Rocky is standoffish at first, but as Halle cares for him, they both begin to open up. When Halle finds out that Oak Creek Stables is suddenly on the verge of being sold to a housing developer, she feels everything slipping out from under her—what will happen to the horses, to Rocky, and to the memory of Carver d'Esprit? This heartfelt story of loss and light follows Halle as she experiences the interconnectedness of endings and beginnings and learns that love still multiplies, even during grief.

Instructional Standards

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the instructional standards for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.

Discussion Questions

1. Identify the main conflict of the novel. When is it first introduced? What specific scenes reinforce the conflict? How is the conflict resolved?

2. Halle is starting sixth grade at the beginning of the novel. What are her apprehensions about Noble Middle School? Discuss the changes that she faces.

3. Emma and Paige have been Halle's friends throughout elementary school. How does their friendship change in middle school? Why does Halle feel that they are moving on without her?

4. Describe the friendship Halle has with Norah and Ava. How is Halle's friendship with them different from the relationship she had with Emma and Paige? In what ways are Norah and Ava more genuine? Explain what Halle means by "Swinging together doesn't mean you're friends, but choosing to swing with someone means something" (p. 26). Chart the people and animals that Halle chooses to "swing with" in the novel.

5. It takes a while before Halle tells Ava and Norah about Rocky and Oak Creek Stables. Explain why she wants to keep the stables private. At what point does she tell them? Describe their reaction and how Halle feels about it.

6. How does Halle's relationship with Brenna, her older sister, change now that Brenna is in high school? In what way is their relationship typical of adolescence? At what point does their relationship improve? Brenna comes to Oak Creek Stables, and Halle teaches her to play soccer with Rocky. Discuss whether this is a turning point for the sisters.

7. Halle has Mrs. Delgado for language arts. What does Mrs. Delgado hope to accomplish by assigning her students a CREX (Creative Expression) notebook? Explain how Mrs. Delgado is supportive and nonjudgmental. How do her comments in Halle's CREX notebook contribute to Halle's growth as a character?

8. Halle and her family go to the racetrack over the summer and witness a horse go down. Explain how the accident involving Carver d'Esprit haunts Halle. Why is she desperate for an explanation? How does her need for answers lead her to Oak Creek Stables? Discuss what Halle means by "As sad as that [Carver's death] was, so much had begun from that ending" (p. 249).

9. How does Halle deal with her sadness about Carver's death? Explain how the CREX notebook is a vehicle for expressing her grief. Point out the poems she writes that reveal sadness. How does Mrs. Delgado respond to Halle's expressions of grief?

10. Trace Halle's relationship with Rocky, the pony that was Carver's stablemate. Cite evidence that Rocky is grieving Carver's death. Explain what Gale means when she says "Rocky was Carver's sedative" (p. 55).

11. Discuss the conversation between Halle and her mom about depression and grief. Why does Halle think that Rocky is suffering from depression?

12. Describe Gale Gunnar. Discuss how Halle's relationship with Gale evolves. At what point does Gale really see and understand Halle? What is Gale's final gift to Halle after she sells the stables?

13. Gale keeps a supply of SweeTarts to give to the horses as a treat. Describe Halle's fascination with the words on the SweeTarts. Explain the following statement: "What I wanted and what Gale wanted were opposites. Like words on a SweeTart" (p. 127).

14. Gale teaches Halle that trust is very important when dealing with horses. How does Halle gain Rocky's trust?

15. Halle is very upset that Gale is selling Oak Creek Stables. Why does Gale feel the need to move on? How does the sale work out in the end? Rocky is once again a "gift with purchase." What does this mean for Halle?

16. Petra, an equine veterinarian, takes care of Oak Creek Stables while Gale is away. Describe the relationship that Halle develops with Petra. What are some of the ways Halle helps out at the stable?

17. Explain the following simile: "I opened my eyes to clouds hanging low in the sky like a curtain closing on the green pasture in my imagination" (p. 177). Point out other times in the novel when Halle calls upon specific images to reveal what she is thinking or experiencing.

18. The climax is the high point, or turning point, in a novel. What is the climax of this novel? Cite specific scenes to support your thoughts.

19. What is the central theme of the novel? Identify the secondary, or minor, themes. Discuss how the minor themes contribute to the central theme.

Writing Activities

Mrs. Delgado introduces various poetry styles and provides writing prompts for her students to respond to in their journals. Students can use Mrs. Delgado's prompts to write about their own experiences or feelings. Suggestions include: Who are your friends? What makes you sad? When have you felt brave? What is your favorite book?

Students can also use the prompts below to extend their thoughts about Halle and the overall themes of the book through poetry.

Prompt #1
Write a rhyming poem about Halle's first impression of Oak Creek Stables.

Prompt #2
Draw a picture of an animal and write a haiku that describes the picture.

Prompt #3
Halle chooses a SweeTart that says PROUD/HUMBLE. Write an acrostic poem using PROUD/HUMBLE as the spine words.

Prompt #4
Odes are poems about someone you love or admire. Write an ode to Gale that Halle might give to Gale at the end of the novel.

Prompt #5
A ballad is a poem that tells a story and typically rhymes and may be set to music. Write a ballad that chronicles Halle's work at Oak Creek Stables from the beginning of the book to the end.

About Kara Thom

Kara Thom is the author of the Go! Go! Sports Girls series and the picture book *See Mom Run*, illustrated by Lilly Golden, as well as books for adults. Her poetry has been published in literary journals and anthologies. She lives with her family in Minnesota, where she is a substitute media specialist at her local school district and a bookseller at Excelsior Bay Books. This is her first middle-grade novel.

This guide was created by Pat Scales, a retired school librarian and independent consultant in Greenville, South Carolina.