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Title: An introduction to The Horse Whisperer

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Example citation: Kimber, G. (2009) An introduction to The Horse Whisperer. In: Hamilton, G. and Jones, B. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of American Popular Fiction*. New York, USA: Facts on File. pp. 158-160.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Accepted version

Official URL: <http://www.infobasepublishing.com/Bookdetail.aspx?ISBN=0816071578&Ebooks=0>

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/4892/>



***The Horse Whisperer* Nicholas Evans (1995)**

The Horse Whisperer, the debut novel by Nicholas Evans, was an immediate publishing sensation, earning the author a huge advance with a 600,000 copy first printing. It spent 38 weeks on the bestsellers list of *Publishers Weekly*, going on to sell 15 million copies worldwide, translated into 36 languages. The film rights were snapped up by Robert Redford for \$3 million, which in 1994, was the largest amount ever paid for rights to a first novel.

The story obviously has mass-market appeal, encompassing as it does an old-fashioned tale of forbidden love, within the day-to-day dynamics of family life, enmeshed in the trauma of a horrific road accident and a physically and psychologically damaged horse and young girl.

Young teenager Grace Maclean goes riding on her horse Pilgrim with her best friend Judith, on a beautiful snowy morning in rural upstate New York. A short-cut proves disastrous as both horses and young riders find themselves hurtling uncontrollably down a steep slope (which is in effect an ice sheet), masked by the newly fallen snow, ultimately careering headlong into the path of a forty-ton truck. Judith and her horse are killed outright. Grace has to have a partial leg amputation and remains traumatised, unable to come to terms with the horror of the accident. The story now centres on the severely injured horse, Pilgrim, who, instead of being put down, is kept alive on the orders of Grace's mother, workaholic magazine editor Annie Maclean, for whom the accident proves to be a wake up call to prioritising her life. She quickly comes to an understanding that the salvation of her daughter lies in the physical and mental recovery of the horse.

Thus begins the search for a 'horse whisperer' who will be able to work a miracle on the injured animal, which takes mother and daughter away from New York

and lawyer husband/father, crossing the continent of North America to reach the Montana ranch of 'horse whisperer' Tom Booker. As the days go by, the scars – both physical and mental – of Pilgrim and Grace begin to heal, under the watchful eye of Booker.

It now becomes the turn of the mother, Annie, to confront her own personal issues as she and Booker fall in love. When Robert Maclean arrives in Montana after an absence of several weeks to see the progress made by his daughter, Evans moves towards an exciting denouement, in keeping with the quasi-mystical redemptive tone of the rest of the novel.

Three fundamental themes running through the novel are trust, love and the dynamics of family relationships. At the start of the novel, the Maclean family are already dysfunctional and untrusting. As the novel unfolds, we see how the physical effect of the accident on both family and horse is overtaken by the spiritual effect the result of the accident now has upon all of them. It starts with Annie's unreasonable and almost foolish desire not to have Pilgrim put down: 'Perhaps this need she felt to keep Pilgrim alive, to find someone who could calm his troubled heart, wasn't about Grace at all. Perhaps it was about herself' (101). This is not just a novel about healing a severely injured horse as Annie soon works out: 'It wasn't only Pilgrim's fate that was to be determined today by this stranger, it was the fate of all of them. Grace's, Robert's and her own' (133).

And so begins a journey of self-discovery for Annie which leads her to the door of Tom Booker, who 'understood the languages of horses in the same way he understood the difference between colors or smells' (112). With the character of Booker, Evans introduces a mystical element to the novel: '[Tom] felt himself simply part of a pattern, a cohesion of things animate and inanimate, to which he was

connected both by spirit and by blood' (124). The impression given is that Booker is not quite of this world, that he is different from other men and therefore not bound by their rules.

There is nothing arbitrary about the choice of Pilgrim's name: 'It was then [Annie] noticed, among the pile of books and magazines [...] the copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* Liz Hammond's cousins had given her' (284). This book by John Bunyan, first published in 1678 is an allegorical novel, which sees the protagonist, Christian, (whose name was previously 'Graceless'), via a series of adventures, make his way from the "City of Destruction" – Earth, to the "Celestial City" – Heaven. Through the story of the horse Pilgrim's gradual recovery from his terrible injuries, we see hope for all the Maclean family too, not so much in a religious sense, but rather with the character of Tom Booker as their salvation. It was the memory of Bunyan's book that had led Annie 'to call Diane to ask if she and Grace could come to church. However, the urge [...] had little, if anything to do with religion – it had to do with Tom Booker' (285).

In the last 100 or so pages, Evans gives the novel an almost fatalistic quality – the characters assume a puppet-like stature, trusting in Booker the puppet master, as the novel moves inexorably towards its fateful conclusion. Annie is the only character other than Booker who becomes aware that events are happening beyond anyone's control and that trust is the only key to salvation: 'It seemed to Annie, and would always seem, that in what followed there was no element of choice' (311). Her growing love for Tom is juxtaposed with her guilt over betraying her husband, yet her power to turn away from Tom is beyond her: 'And in the sharing quiet of that moment Annie knew she could not leave this man' (375).

Once more Evans hints at the denouement with his repeated references to the ethereal, mystical quality of Tom Booker and his quest: ‘There was just something about him, some sad foreshadowing that was almost fatalistic’ (394). Tom’s ability to understand the situation he and Annie are in, to predict the future, will eventually help Annie to come to terms with all that has happened and will happen: ‘She told him she couldn’t live without him and saw no portent when he told her that this was true for him but not for her’ (397).

In 1998, Robert Redford directed and starred in the lead role of the film of the same name, which also featured Kristen Scott Thomas as Annie, Sam Neill as Robert and a young Scarlett Johansson as Grace. The film was a commercial success, grossing \$187 million worldwide, with even critics hostile to the film acknowledging the beauty of its cinematography, depicting the visually stunning Montana landscape. At nearly three hours in length, it gave Redford the opportunity to explore most of the novel’s plot, but with a more pedestrian, depressing ending than in the original novel.

Evans is an English author and screenwriter, born in 1950. He has published three further novels since *The Horse Whisperer - The Loop* (1998), *The Smoke Jumper* (2001), and *The Divide* (2005), which have all been international bestsellers.

- Gerri Kimber

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