



Pony Club Secrets Series

by Stacy Gregg

A classroom English unit from  HarperCollinsPublishers

Mystic and the Midnight Ride and *Blaze and the Dark Rider* are the first two highly appealing releases in an eight-book series by New Zealand writer Stacy Gregg, published internationally by HarperCollins. Stacy Gregg is best known as a no-holds-barred fashion writer and former fashion editor of *Sunday Magazine* in the *Sunday Star-Times* and founder of cult fashion website *runawayreporter.com*. Stacy has always been 'horse-mad' and has combined her personal experiences with her considerable writing prowess to produce an exciting series of junior fiction with immediate appeal to all girls, especially those who love horses. The added hook of mystery, challenge and non-stop action will also appeal to boys. Most suited to personal and shared reading in the 9 to 14 year-old age group.

Story synopsis

In *Mystic and the Midnight Ride* we meet Issie and horse-mad friends Kate and Stella, all members of the Chevalier Point Pony Club. Every spare moment is spent caring for, training and grooming their ponies. Mystic, Issie's beloved grey gelding, along with Kate's and Stella's Toby and Coco are being loaded on to a horse truck when the rather 'uppity' new club member, Natasha, spooks her horse Goldrush by hitting it with her riding crop. Toby and Coco break free and together with Goldrush they gallop towards a road. Issie gallops after them but after safely gathering up the fleeing horses, a truck bears down on her. Mystic saves Issie by throwing her clear but Mystic is killed by the truck. The distraught Issie never wants to ride again.

Chevalier Point riding instructor Tom Avery rescues a mistreated chestnut mare and persuades Issie to nurse it back to health. Gradually a tight bond between Issie and the horse (Blaze) develops and Issie again delights in training and riding horses. One night, Mystic appears to Issie in a real-life form, heralding danger to Blaze. Mystic and Issie ride down to the River Paddock in time to rescue Blaze from being stolen by two horse thieves who are arrested by police. Job accomplished, Mystic vanishes. The exciting climax involves Issie and the team from Chevalier Point Pony Club as they compete in a one-day event against other clubs. Issie and Blaze win the competition at the final show-jumping stage.

In *Blaze and the Dark Rider*, Issie and her friends visit the El Caballo Danza Magnifico (Magnificent Dancing Horses) Show that comes to town. They are amazed at how similar Issie's Blaze is to these magnificent mares. Françoise, head of the troupe, agrees to visit Blaze and Issie is very surprised at Blaze's strange reactions to special commands given to the horse by Françoise.

Tom Avery picks a team to compete in a 'must win' competition which includes Issie and her friends. Natasha and a new arrival at the club, Morgan Chatswood-Smith, are reserves. Morgan is feeling the pressure of living up to her famous rider-mother's expectations. Riding gear is sabotaged at the club and there are other strange happenings. Mystic again appears to Issie, and fearing Blaze will be stolen, Issie rides to the club to see a dark-haired woman running away. Françoise is suspected. Blaze is proved to have been stolen from the horse troupe and is returned to Françoise. An 'unknown benefactor' purchases Blaze back from the horse troupe and gifts Blaze permanently to Issie. A chastened Morgan is found to have caused the sabotage in an effort to be picked for the team. Blaze and Issie lead the Chevalier Point team to victory.

Teaching and learning activities

- **Survey.** Conduct a class and school-wide survey to find out the popularity of horses amongst students. As a class, discuss and formulate survey questions, eg popularity, how many have ridden horses, know how to care for horses etc. Discuss best methods of displaying responses, eg graphic form, by age group, by gender group. List outcomes/findings of survey.
- **Horse Care.** Develop the idea that we all have responsibilities for animals in our care. Do students know about the *five freedoms*? List (www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm) and discuss these. How would we apply these to horses? Have students conduct web research to find out what special measures are necessary for the care and well-being of horses at: www.horses-and-horse-information.com/horsecare.shtml
- **Vocabulary.** During reading of the story have students keep an on-going record of specific words and terms relating specifically to horses, horse care and pony club activities. Have students visit: www.horses-and-horse-information.com/horsedictionary.shtml and prepare a horse terms multi-choice quiz for other class members.
- **Personalities.** Have students write a thumbnail sketch on the personality of Natasha. What incidents in the story can they find to back up their sketch? Can they suggest any reasons why Natasha would behave as she does towards her horse and towards Issie and her friends? Can the students find any reasons to excuse the behaviour of Morgan? How responsible for her behaviour do they feel her mother was? Why and how did Morgan's relationship with her mother change for the better?
- **Benefactor.** Have students speculate on the identity of the anonymous benefactor who bought and gave Blaze to Issie. What reasons could have motivated this person?
- **Mystic.** Under what circumstances does Mystic appear to Issie? Do students think that Mystic is real or just a figment of her imagination? Why do they think Issie has not mentioned the appearances of Mystic to anyone?
- **Pony Clubs.** Have students contact and invite a member of a local pony club to talk to the class about all the activities and benefits of joining a local pony club. Have them prepare questions to ask the visitor (find your nearest pony club at: www.nzpc.org > select your area). Have each student design a poster or flyer that promotes the benefits of membership.

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