

The Horsecatcher

Reader Testimonials

Here, readers have shared their reactions and responses to *The Horsecatcher*. These are both personal and critical responses, formal and informal. To write your own testimonial, think of book clubs, blogs and other places where people express their responses to what they read. Here are some specific areas you might respond to:

- What were your most favorite/least favorite parts of the novel?
- Is the novel well-written? Point to specific examples to illustrate, yes or no.
- Can you relate to the characters in the narrative? How so?
- Can you relate to the setting of the narrative? How so? (does living in Nebraska affect your response)?
- What larger issues do you think Sandoz was trying to investigate in the novel?
- Do you see any of the themes and issues that we ourselves have been exploring in this course at work in this novel?

Amber Maire

I really enjoyed reading this book because it discusses the ways of the Indians many years ago and helps me grasp the idea of all the fighting that went on. I also enjoyed reading about how Young Elk tried to catch all the wild horses while staying away from “the bad guys.” I felt many different emotions while reading *The Horsecatcher* because Young Elk had some very close calls, which made the book intense, but also sad because his colt had to suffer at times. People would not look at him in the beginning because they believed he would not become a big strong warrior. But he wanted to be a horsecatcher. Then, in the end, they all praised him. Young Elk had to work very hard to get what he wanted, so the lesson is to never let go of your dreams.

I think anyone can relate to this novel no matter your age or gender because it points out many great life lessons.

Chyrel Remmers

Sandoz’s *The Horsecatcher* is a literary accolade to the power of the individual. Young Elk’s quests were undertaken singularly; he depended only on his own power, his own wit, and his own ingenuity to snare his beloved horses, to escape his captors, to overcome setbacks that befell him. Although Young Elk is “lonesome” at times on the stark Nebraska prairie, he is not lonely. Rather he is comfortable in his own solitude.

Young Elk’s singularity is evident in his sensitivity to killing/harming animals. He vows early in Chapter 1 to “harm no living thing.” He is ashamed to kill even a snake (p.115.) Even at the risk of his own safety, Young Elk has, as his foremost concern, the welfare of his horses. He calls it a “grieving thing to see the hurts” of the dun stallion (p.102). He is pained to hobble the horses (even when it is only to tame them) because hobbling them leaves them defenseless against their enemies. At a time when Young Elk is encouraged to conform to the reputation of his warrior family, he is cognizant of the “softness” within his own heart for all living things.

Although his family does not necessarily understand him, he carefully balances their hopes for him with his own vision of himself. He is his own man, dedicated to his own vision. He can not be corralled into being the warrior for the sake of his family; he has a duty to himself. Just as the White One cannot be captured, so too, does Young Elk remain free to follow his own path. As Henry Ward Beecher said: “A man in the right, with God on his side, is in the majority, though he be alone.”

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Judith Johnson

For me, this is a very powerful book. My favorite part of the novel exemplifies this. When Young Elk finally captures the White Horse, he is everything that we all want to be: successful and at the pinnacle of his craft. He has achieved his goal; he will be able to come back to the village with his head held high and he will finally receive the accolades of those who matter most to him. At the height of his success, he must make the choice to let it all go in order to protect his people, and he does. He chooses to make that sacrifice in order to care for his friends and family and even those who don't understand his way of life. He chose his love for people over his own success.

People have talked about Mari Sandoz as being a difficult author, but I think this novel is well written and accessible for young people. The plot line is something to which young adults can relate, the struggle to find his/her own identity. Young Elk struggles with following the direction his heart wants to take and doing what the rest of his world believes is the right thing. With the help of his mentor, he does find his way, creating his own place in that world—a place no one else has occupied in exactly the same way before. This is symbolized at the end when he receives the names of both his father and his mentor.

I grew up working with horses, and I loved reading the passages where he was using the horse's own curiosity to draw him closer. I loved experiencing the joy of riding a horse like his Blue Runner as fast as he could go and doing it for the pure exhilaration that it gave. I knew his frustration and worry as I have worked with orphaned colts, hoping they would learn to drink and would survive the loss of their mothers.

I could relate to the setting of the narrative, but I am sure that living in Nebraska has affected my response. My heart swells when I see the long grass rippling in the breeze. I love the smell of the prairie after a thunderstorm has passed through and the golden light is shining out from under the clouds and hitting the dark midnight blue of the retreating storm. Sandoz does an incredible job of capturing that imagery on the printed page. I can hear the little bird twittering at Young Elk; I heard the horses whinny during the stallions' battle; I felt the extreme cold and hunger of the winter.

I believe that Sandoz was exploring several issues, but I think one of them was near and dear to her heart: what path do you follow when your heart's desire makes your family unhappy with you? Mari's strained relationship with her father and his well-known dislike of 'writers of fiction' combine in this narrative, but she explores it in such a way to be accessible for younger readers. Along with this theme, she is also exploring what it means to be a good citizen. Which laws do we follow? Why do we follow them? What are the consequences for other people when we don't?

All through this book, Mari's knowledge of Indian ways shines through. Her deep rooted respect for those who were her friends during her childhood enables this book maintain its integrity. In this book, she explores the joy that Young Elk felt in being a Cheyenne and an Indian. He feels pride in the accomplishments of his people and is glad that he is part of them. Set largely before the time of white control, the book examines their daily life and gives insight many other books can't give (even though Mari is not of Indian descent.)

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Penny Wikum

“Earth, we are a part, of you,” the Arrow Keeper’s wife said softly over and over. Gray Thunder, Keeper of the Sacred Arrows had been killed. When this man of peace, who kept the Arrows of great power, fell in battle his wife was nearby as was her duty. She could not stop to mourn or even compose the face of her man. She had made a vow to protect the Arrows with her life and deliver them safely into the hands of the headmen of her people. Young Elk rode to protect her as she fled to the prairie.

Sandoz writes, “And as he ran he saw that not all the courage, all the brave heart, was back there among the fighters. Perhaps this was a stronger thing here, and done without fighting, without blood upon the ground...” Young Elk had yet another female relative that was to have great impact on forming his mind and spirit. The Keeper’s wife in breath-bursting runs moved fast and long over the exposed ground. Nothing would hold her. Her legs would give way. She would sink down only to rise a few minutes later like a startled deer.

The next evening Elk again rescued his aunt. He found her in “an aimless shamble as though wounded to dying...face gaunt and sunken...feet bleeding and swollen thick with cactus thorns.” This is universal a commonality among women of all culture. Young Elk returned with his aunt to Fort Bend. The Sacred Arrows handed over for renewal and transferred to a new Keeper. Perhaps Sandoz related suffering and self-sacrifice to her audience knowing the strength that comes of from such hardships.

The reader is involved with Young Elk emergence into self. Body, soul, and spirit Elk evolves and becomes. He explores the natural world of creation and creatures, and the supernatural as all this is considered important by Sandoz.

I appreciate the way she portrays strength in this older Indian woman, as a duty and a belief. Even though the task was demanded of her by the culture it was still her personal or interior response to mankind to run the “Arrows.” All the women in the book taught, ministered, and encouraged Elk. They were strong, had great impact and influenced the formation of his ideals. Sandoz endured many hardships and perhaps some are revealed on the pages of the “Horsecatcher.”

She was burdened with heavy responsibility at a young age. She understands that generosity, determination and courage are glad companions. I recognize these women of the prairie and give them love and honor.

Leah Church

I enjoyed reading Mari Sandoz’s *The Horsecatcher*. In fact, this was the first book I read that was written by this acclaimed author, and now I would like to read more of her stories. This novel’s recommended audience is juvenile; however, the book’s straight-forward language as well as the author’s knowledge has made *Horsecatcher* an easy read for adults. Adolescents and adults will appreciate Sandoz’s frank style of describing Young Elk’s many adventures of capturing wild horses and to read her insightful portrayal of life and culture among the Cheyenne and other notable Mid-Western tribes. Also, the story’s themes were not hard to grasp and many readers would like how the main character, Young Elk, balanced his individualistic values with the needs of his tribe.

The amount of detail the author put into each one of the Young Elk’s successful horse catches almost ran the risk of being tedious as reading a how-to manual. Then just in time, she would transition smoothly into a new suspense or into Young Elk’s tribe. Also, Mid-Western people could relate to Sandoz’s freely expressed details about the landscape and climate of the prairies. As a native Nebraskan, I am very aware of the drastic weather patterns of this area and since I used to live near the Platte River, I liked it whenever Sandoz mentioned it. Overall, this was a good story.

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Melinda Wright

Mari Sandoz' novel *The Horsecatcher* definitely caught me! I was engrossed in Sandoz' characterization and setting from the beginning of the novel. Young Elk moved as "the wolf travels, where he would not be silhouetted against the sky and yet where he could search the wide slopes of prairie on both sides, and vanish quickly in either direction if need be" (7). I am always intrigued by prairie or Plains settings because I enjoy reading unique and varied descriptions of where I live. The connection I made with the young, Cheyenne, main character occurred during his first capture of a wild foal with the bear marking on its side. The scene description and the young man's tenacity were enough to pique my interest for the rest of the book. I had to find out what happened next!

Sandoz' writing style makes the novel as straightforward as possible in the telling of her tale. She relates the story directly. Her third person limited narrator is believable in sharing characterization, plot, and setting. "The smoke from the evening fires crept in long blue layers under the golden sun. It was the time for laughter and games, but Young Elk had to stand before his father and the other councilors, be shamed by their reminding words, . . ." (22). Sandoz also uses colorful imagery that's not overdone, yet depicts the beauty of a prairie sunset, just what she wants the reader to visualize.

My favorite and least favorite scene in the novel *The Horsecatcher* was Young Elk's witnessing of the battle between the wild stallions. The scene fascinated and repelled me at the same time, and I wondered what Young Elk thought. "It was the wildest, fiercest battle Young Elk ever saw, with the air full of dust and flying earth, the horses cut and torn, covered with dirt, blood dripping" (99). I also appreciated the scene with the gentling of the bay after the blue roan beats him. For Young Elk, "It was a grieving thing to see these hurts, these woundings. His skin, which had been a dun rich as sunlight on fall bunch grass, was torn and scarred and swollen so that barely one spot the size of the palm remained sound" (102). Sandoz' description of Young Elk's care of the bay made me think carefully about the time, effort, and energy the young man puts into capturing the small herd of wild horses. His motivation and goals were clarified for me in this scene.

Sandoz clearly tells a coming of age story in this novel. Young Elk becomes "Elk River, the Horsecatcher" by the last page of the story (192). The two adults who have the greatest impact on the young man's life are his two fathers, and they are the ones who give him his new and honored name. The theme of finding oneself and coming of age in *The Horsecatcher* reminds me of Zitkala-Sa's stories of her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. She doesn't always see eye-to-eye with her mother, just as Young Elk doesn't always agree with Elk River. Another similarity between Zitkala-Sa and Young Elk is that neither one is willing to compromise their strong beliefs to reach a goal. The young woman continues to pursue rights for Indians and leaves her teaching post because she knows she cannot change the Indian School by staying there. Similarly, Young Elk has to give up his dream of bringing home a white stallion because he is not willing to take a human life in exchange for it.

Janelle Wallinger

Sandoz's *The Horsecatcher* is an easy and enjoyable read for individuals of all ages. As a native Nebraskan I felt connected to the landscape Young Elk explores as he pursues the wild mustangs. The description of the water pool in Chapter 9 reminded me of the flow well which bubbles with cold, clear water. My imagination was able to run through the hills as Young Elk is trying to avoid being caught by enemies. I also felt the sting of the sand burrs as Many Moccasins ran with the Sacred Arrows.

While there were several themes Sandoz wove throughout her narrative, I felt this is a great novel about perseverance and discipline. Each time Young Elk goes out to capture horses he learns valuable lessons which force him to better discipline himself. This is a valuable theme for our modern world and for readers of all ages. Despite pressure from his family and tribe, Young Elk pursues his goals and does not compromise his innate value for life.

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Julie Hoadley

In *The Horsecatcher*, Mari Sandoz gives readers a skillfully crafted story with vivid descriptions of both the physical setting and the daily activities of Native Americans. She gives us a human account of a group of human beings who have historically been misunderstood, misrepresented, and stereotyped. Young Elk is not only a likable character, but admirable and lovable. We are allowed to travel with him as he searches for the best way to earn respect from his tribe while conducting himself according to his own personal morals and values. I was drawn to this story because of Young Elk's integrity.

I appreciated that he had the courage to stay true to his heart, pursue his dreams, and at the same time consider the needs and safety of his people. He was teased and belittled for his beliefs but never abandoned them. In some ways, Young Elk was the embodiment of Native Americans as they should be portrayed, as well as a positive role model for everyone. His love and concern for his family and tribe, his connection to and appreciation for nature, the care he uses when interacting with all things he shares the earth with, and his devotion to his principles are all qualities everyone could use more of.

Thomas Oleksy

In my opinion, keeping in mind that this work fits under the umbrella of "adolescent literature," I believe it is well written. It is a very effective novel for adolescents for many reasons. The main reason that it is effective and therefore well written for adolescents in my opinion is because many aspects make it a good transitional novel for adolescents into "adult" literature (for lack of a better word). I thought the actual writing was pretty mature for being considered for adolescents, as well as some of the thematic elements.

The major theme that I thought could be a nice transition for adolescents is the idea of the internal struggle for identity. This is a theme that is mature and is prevalent in many adult pieces of literature, such as "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" by Tolstoy or even more contemporary work such as "The Joy Luck Club" by Amy Tan. The fact that this theme is still very prevalent in literature today, especially in more mature literature, means that Young Elk's struggle would be a great way to introduce such a theme to the adolescents that read the book.

A second way that "The Horse Catcher" is a good transitional novel for adolescents into more mature literature is through the writing itself. I am sure that for many of us this work was a moderately easy read. However, if you take time to really examine the language it is not only pretty substantial for an adolescent, but it is also very poetic.

A line from even the very first paragraph of the novel will demonstrate this. An example reads "He [Young Elk] moved as the wolf travels, where he would not be silhouetted against the sky and yet where he could search the wide slopes of prairie on both sides, and vanish quickly in either direction if need be" (7). Wow, this sentence is not only packed with beautiful, intelligent language, but it also has poetic images such as traveling as the wolf, or trying to avoid being silhouetted.

I think it is important for adolescents to be exposed to this intellectual, poetic language at a young age not only to be ready for the more mature work that is assigned in college, but also just to improve one's own speech and comprehension. With these elements in mind, I think that "The Horse Catcher" is a well written novel that serves its purpose for adolescents. I am glad that we read it for class.

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Megan Horn

For the most part, I enjoyed reading Mari Sandoz's *The Horsecatcher*, and found it to be an engaging and exciting work. Not only did I like the main character, but thought his progression was realistic. My favorite parts of the book were the horse-catching scenes and the general information given about the horse aspect in the Cheyenne society along with other tribes (Kiowa, Sioux, and Comanche). The importance of horses to these tribes was unspeakable, and the dynamics of the warrior societies depended on the training and use of horses. Without the horse-catchers, there would have been no warriors, and I think this point was made clear through Young Elk's infatuation with the horses and also the description of day-to-day life. In scenes like the butchering of the buffaloes in the northern country, there could have been no way to kill and butcher as efficiently as they did the vast number of buffaloes killed. The horses, though not valued as they should have been, keep the warrior societies going.

My least favorite parts of the novel were probably any mention of Red Sleeves. To me, she represented the vast portion of his tribe that was grossly ignorant to the way in which their tribe is sustained. She wants him to be a warrior, but he (I think for the sake of the tribe) must be the next horse-catcher.

For the most part I relate to Young Elk and his desire to find himself. I think anyone can identify with this universal theme, especially those of its target audience. I did have a few problems with Sandoz's writing, basically her lack of emphasis on any subject. She seems to treat everything the same in terms of description or explanation. More important scenes seem to get just as much emphasis as lesser scenes. The horse-catching where he gets the blue racer and the whole pack of wild horses get three chapters devoted to it while the other horse-catching expeditions get maybe one or two pages devoted to them. It might just be me wanting more details, but it is frustrating reading something that seems important to the story but is given only a few sentences.