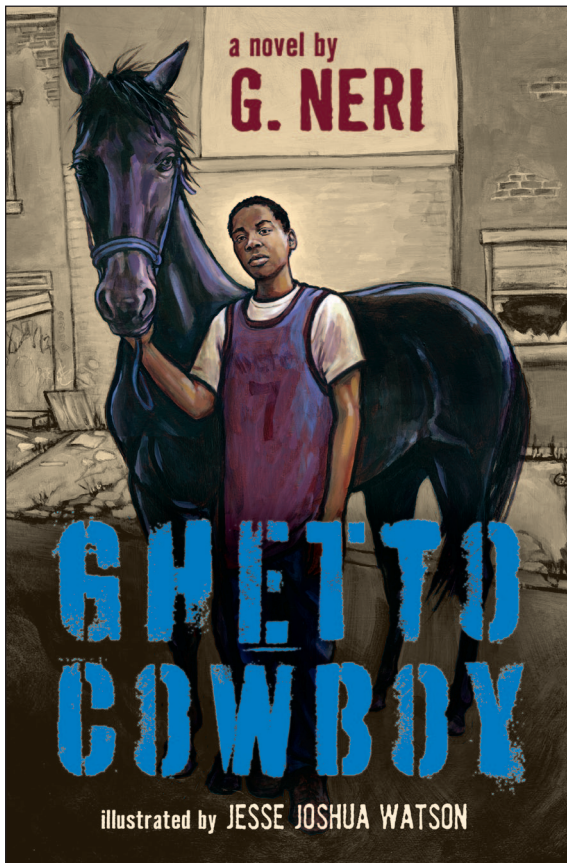


GHETTO COWBOY

by **G. NERI** illustrated by **JESSE JOSHUA WATSON**



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Also available in audio

When Cole's mom dumps him in the streets of Philadelphia to live with the dad he's never met, the last thing Cole expects to see is a horse, let alone a stable full of them. He may not know much about cowboys, but what he knows for sure is that cowboys ain't black, and they don't live in the inner city. But in his dad's 'hood, horses are a way of life, and soon Cole's days of skipping school and getting in trouble in Detroit have been replaced by shoveling muck and trying not to get stomped. At first, all Cole can think about is how to ditch these ghetto cowboys and get home. But when the City threatens to shut down the stables—and take away the horse Cole has come to think of as his own—he knows that it's time to step up and fight back.

Inspired by the little-known urban riders of Philly and Brooklyn, this compelling tale of latter-day cowboy justice champions a world where your friends always have your back, especially when the chips are down.

READING AND ACTIVITY GUIDE

BEFORE READING

1. Ask students if any of them have ever visited Philadelphia. Do they have any impressions of the city? Then select one of the following two short videos to show the class a tourist's view of Philadelphia. While they watch, ask them to come up with one or two words to describe their perceptions of the city based on the video. Does it look anything like where they live?

“97 Reasons to Visit Philly”

<http://tiny.cc/6e358>



“Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Travel Video Profile”
<http://tiny.cc/ibrjt>

Next, tell the students that Cole, the young man they’re going to meet in *Ghetto Cowboy*, is going to see a slightly different version of Philadelphia—something more like this video, which shows the streets of North Philadelphia and the horses that are part of the community:

“This American Life: Horses in North Philly”
<http://tiny.cc/2dv0z>

After showing the video, ask students what they expect Cole to experience in this setting.

2. Explain that in the book, Cole learns about the cowboys’ code of conduct, “The Cowboy Way.” You could read them the passage on page 119, where Cole first hears about it. Then have students work in small groups to create a short list of rules for the class, to be called “The Student Way.” Post their lists around the classroom.
3. Ask students if they’ve ever wondered how a visual artist gets motivated to illustrate a story. Invite them to read Jesse Joshua Watson’s blog post at <http://jessewatson.blogspot.com/2010/10/ghetto-cowboy.html> to get an idea of what motivated him while creating the artwork for *Ghetto Cowboy*. Discuss his post as a class, then have students examine some of his drawings in the book and on the cover. What story do they tell? What details are included? How does he bring emotion into the drawings? Can the students suggest a soundtrack for any of the scenes?

DURING READINGG

The following sets of questions will allow you to meet your students’ individual reading needs. These questions will ensure basic comprehension of the story and may also lead to further conversation. To motivate reluctant readers, you might post the questions via Twitter or other social networking services.

Chapters 1–5

1. Why does Cole’s mother say she needs to take Cole to live with his father?
2. Why did Cole stop going to school?
3. What options did the principal give Cole?
4. How does Mama go about leaving Cole with his father?
5. What color hat does Jamaica Bob wear? What does this color hat represent in cowboy stories?
6. What is Cole’s full name? His father’s?
7. What does Cole see inside his father’s home?
8. What falls on the picture of Cole and his mother? Where did it come from?

Chapters 6–10

1. Why does Cole take twenty dollars out of the envelope?
2. Why is Cole told not to leave this block of Chester Avenue alone?
3. In the illustration in chapter 7, Harper is holding his arm up. Why does he do this?
4. What is the Ritz Carlton?

5. Where did black cowboys originate, according to Tex?
6. How does Tex know Cole's mother?
7. What is "restarting a horse"?
8. Who owns the building where the horses are kept? Who owns the land?
9. What is homesteading?
10. What does Cole see under the tarp?
11. Why is there no need for Harper to call Cole's mother?

Chapters 11–15

1. How does Cole find his way to McDonald's?
2. Why does it take Cole a long time to fall asleep at the end of chapter 11?
3. Why does Cole name his horse Boo? What else might calling the horse Boo mean?
4. Where did Harper get the boots he gives to Cole?
5. What are the four things needed to ride a horse?
6. What's depicted in the mural on Horseman Way?
7. What does Cole use to give Boo some bling?
8. What evidence is there of how Cole feels riding with the children?

Chapters 16–20

1. What is Churchill Downs?
2. What is the Chester Avenue tradition?
3. How does Cole get Boo to move?
4. What does Harper do with his money from the horse race?
5. Describe the relationship between Leroy and Harper.
6. Harper starts off by telling Cole, "If you wanna run away, be my guest. I understand" (p. 104). Does he want Cole to stay or to leave?
7. What scares Boo? What calms him?

Chapters 21–25

1. Why does Cole go up on the roof?
2. Why did the Cowboy Way develop?
3. What are the rules that the cowboys live by?
4. What does the City plan to do?
5. What evidence does the City find that the horses are in danger?
6. What makes it impossible for Cole to tell his mother to come get him?

Chapters 26–30

1. What do Snapper, Smush, and Cole plan to do?
2. How is their plan in keeping with the Cowboy Way?
3. Describe the "jail" where the horses are being kept.
4. What do the boys plan to do with the horses after they take them?
5. What does it mean to ride bareback?
6. When the boys are leaving with the horses, Smush has to jump down off his horse. Why?

7. Why does Cole get a nickname?
8. Is Harper proud of Cole for being an outlaw?

Chapter 31–Epilogue

1. How does Harper find Cole?
2. How does Cole plan to save the stables?
3. Identify the individuals in the drawing on pages 176–177, left to right.
4. What is a cavalry? Who is Cole calling “the cavalry”?
5. What do honest working people on Chester Avenue do to survive? What do other honest working people in the ghetto do to survive?
6. Why is Leroy at the showdown?
7. Why does Harper feel that he has a right to the land?
8. What things does Cole learn to do during the week they have to save the stables?
9. Why does it look like the city will eventually take the stables?
10. What living arrangements are made for Cole?

AFTER READING

These more analytical questions are appropriate for discussion in the classroom or on blogs.

1. Reread the scene on page 15 that begins “‘Hey!’ I yell, running over,” and continues to the end of the chapter. Retell the scene for clarity. This scene can be viewed as an allegory for what is going on among the human characters in the story. Looking at the scene this way, who would the horse represent? What would the action of hitting the horse and leaving it represent?
2. Mama is one of the few characters in the book who isn’t named, and she is one of the only women in the book. Why are there so few women in this story? Does their absence feel real? How would the presence of more women change this story?
3. Despite the fact that at different times both parents walk out on Cole, they both love him, and he comes to realize that. How do Mama and Harper communicate to Cole that he is loved?
4. Trust is an important aspect of the Cowboy Way. When does Boo begin trusting Cole? When does Cole begin trusting Harper? When does Cole begin trusting himself?
5. In chapter 2, Cole says he stopped going to school because he didn’t think he’d ever do anything great in his life. Later in the story, Harper tells Cole that “you never know what someone will do with his life once he finds himself” (page 84). What does Cole find in this story? What are some of the things Cole accomplishes in the story that allow him to feel he can do anything? How do other young men find themselves? What can communities offer young people besides horses? What does your community offer?
6. At first glance, cowboys may seem like outlaws because they defy authority. But cowboys do not consider themselves outlaws, because they are honest and live by a code—the Cowboy Way. Find examples of individuals in the book who live by the Cowboy Way.
7. A minor theme in the book is how groups with little or no power can lose their identity by losing their history and their culture. Because so few people know the history of the black cowboys or about the presence of the horses, it seems easy for the City to move in and take over the stables. Cole comes up with a plan to temporarily save the horses, but it is only a short-term solution. Describe what it really takes to save them. Who is involved? How long does it take? How can groups with little or no power fight injustice?

8. One thing Philadelphia offers Cole that Detroit didn't is an entire community to support him. Identify the members of the cowboy community and explain their role in supporting Cole.
9. How does this story relate to you and your life?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. This activity is meant to be incorporated into the reading of the book. Several of the chapters can be enhanced by introducing them with videos. The following is a list of suggestions. The music, in audio or video format, could be played before class begins to set the mood for the reading.

Chapter 17: "Celebration" by Kool & the Gang
<http://tiny.cc/htriv>

Chapter 21: "Cowboys Come in Black Too!"
<http://tiny.cc/hdbj6>

Chapter 24: "After the Rain" by John Coltrane
<http://tiny.cc/3fnnu>

Chapter 32: "We Will Rock You" by Queen
<http://tiny.cc/9zofo>

Chapter 34: "I'm Spartacus" from the movie *Spartacus*
<http://tiny.cc/id3ut>

Epilogue: "Wild Wild West" by Will Smith (a cappella)
<http://tiny.cc/ko8x1>

2. Examine Jesse Joshua Watson's artwork in the book. Discuss the scenes he chose to illustrate and why he may have chosen them. Divide the class into five or six groups and ask each group to select a scene that is not illustrated in the book. (Each group should select a different scene.) Have the students illustrate these scenes on a class mural.
3. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are organizations that offer many ways for young people to become successful. Invite local scout leaders to visit your classroom and inform students about their organization.
4. Where would someone go in your area to learn how to ride a horse? Do some research to find out what stables are near you and what services they provide. Do they offer lessons? Board horses? Visit schools? Have the class create a brochure to inform others in the school about horses in your community.
5. Consider supporting your local culture and giving kids something to do with their time by planning a community fair. Invite local organizations that teach young people dance, painting, sports, music, foreign languages, or other self-empowering skills. Invite other classes from your school to attend. If it is not possible to stage a live event, have the students create a website or video to share information about these groups.



ABOUT G. NERI

G. Neri is a storyteller, filmmaker, artist, and digital media producer. He began writing for kids in 1999 and has won several awards for his books *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* and *Chess Rumble*. G. Neri lives off the Gulf Coast of Florida with his family. He spends most of his time in his studio but also likes to troll the rivers by his house looking for alligators.

For interviews with G. Neri, plus additional articles, slideshows, and videos about inner-city horsemen, visit: <http://gregneri.com/cowboy.html>.



ABOUT JESSE JOSHUA WATSON

Jesse Joshua Watson is an award-winning, *New York Times* best-selling illustrator and author whose work includes *Hope for Haiti*, *Chess Rumble*, and the Hank Zipzer series.

Jesse Joshua Watson lives with his wife and their boys in Washington State. In addition to writing and illustrating books, exhibiting fine art, and teaching art to kids, he is infatuated with growing bamboo, plays soccer religiously, and surfs the chilly Northwest waters as often as he can.

This teachers' guide was written by Edith Campbell, a high-school librarian in Indiana whose work has taken her to diverse places, including Saudi Arabia and Taiwan, but not yet to Philadelphia. Edith Campbell also maintains a blog about improving the literacy of students of color.



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