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POLO COWBOY

by **G. NERI**

illustrated by **JESSE JOSHUA WATSON**

ABOUT THE BOOK

When Cole decides to move in with his dad, Harp, he thinks life will be sweet—just him and his horse, Boo, hanging out with Philadelphia's urban cowboys. But when Harp says he has to get a job, Cole winds up as a stable hand for the polo team at George Washington Military Academy, where the players are rich, white, and stuck-up—all except Ruthie, the team's first and only Black girl. As Cole and Ruthie become friends—and maybe more—he starts imagining his future. But between long workdays, arrogant polo players, and a cousin trying to pull Cole into his questionable business, that future seems remote. Will Cole find the courage to stand up and be seen in a world determined to keep him out? With striking illustrations by Jesse Joshua Watson, celebrated author G. Neri's follow-up novel to *Ghetto Cowboy* and its movie adaptation, *Concrete Cowboy*, weaves themes of tenacity and community into a rousing sports story inspired by Philadelphia's real-life urban cowboys and polo players.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) 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 in writing prompts for independent work.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On page 3, Cole's mom says, "World's a tough place, Cole. Ain't got no room for young black men." What does she mean by that? If there is no room for young Black men, how can Cole be successful?
2. On page 87, Ruthie says, "They might be looking, but they aren't seeing. I want you to *see*." Can you look at someone and not see them? What does Cole finally see?
3. What do people see when they look at you? What is something that you wish people could see about you?
4. Using evidence from the text, describe Cole's school. Is your school similar or different? How?
5. On page 18, Harp says, "But I heard they had to close down the sports program 'cause other teams were too afraid to come here." Why would anyone be afraid to go to a neighborhood? Should anyone be afraid to go into any neighborhood?
6. Cole's school has metal detectors. George Washington Military Academy does not. Why do only some schools have metal detectors? Should all schools have metal detectors? Why or why not?
7. Smush says that Harp has too many rules. Why do you think Harp has those rules?
8. Students at George Washington Military Academy are expected to go to college. Students at North High do not have the same expectations. Why do schools have different expectations for students? Should all students have the same expectations?
9. Harp tells Cole he has to go to college and leave the neighborhood. Is that the only way to be successful? Are there other ways for Cole to be successful?
10. What does it mean to make something of yourself? Does that look the same for everyone?
11. Cole is offered a polo scholarship to George Washington Military Academy. Do you think he should take it? Why or why not?
12. Do you think the positive response to the polo team at North will open the door for other extracurricular activities? What impact do you think it will have on the students in the long run?
13. Do you think Smush would have stayed in school if North had a polo team when he was there?
14. At the end of the book, Cole's mom says she has a job interview in Philly. Do you think Cole, Harp, and Cole's mom will be a family again like Cole suggested in the beginning?
15. The story is inspired by the only African American polo team in the US, which plays in Philly. Why is it important for people to know about them? How might this story inspire others?
16. Smush is very protective of Cole. Why do you think he acts this way?



17. When Smush dies, his family doesn't have a funeral. Why do you think they refuse to have one? What do you think of their choice?
18. Why do the players on the polo team at North call themselves the Misfits?
19. On page 124, Ruthie says, "When you get good, ponies will follow your lead when you just look or think something. Like mind-melding—use your brain, and they pick up on your thoughts." Do you think the horses can read the players' minds? Why is it important to mind-meld with the horse when you play polo?
20. On page 209, Maverick says, "What were you thinking, Cole? Spots told us you were trying to get into the Academy? Are you kidding? You aren't Cavalry material—not by a long shot. Not even for charity. You'll never be one of us." What do you think makes someone Cavalry material? Why do you think Maverick says Cole isn't Cavalry material?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G. Neri is the author of the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* along with many other books for young readers, including *Ghetto Cowboy*; *Hello, I'm Johnny Cash*; and *When Paul Met Artie: The Story of Simon & Garfunkel*. His books have been translated into multiple languages in more than twenty-five countries. He lives with his family on the Gulf Coast of Florida.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Jesse Joshua Watson is the illustrator of many books for young readers, including the *New York Times* best-selling Hank Zipzer series, written by Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver, and *Ghetto Cowboy* and *Chess Rumble*, both written by G. Neri. He lives with his wife and sons in Washington State.

These questions were prepared by Nicholl Montgomery, a PhD candidate in the curriculum and instruction department at Boston College and part-time lecturer in the children's literature department at Simmons University. She is a former middle school and high school English teacher in Boston.