TEACHER NOTES

The Hills Pony

by Katelyn Prendiville

ABOUT THE BOOK

Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Clara Mackenzie has wanted a pony her whole life, but she has only ever read about them. Then one Christmas brings twelve weeks of riding lessons at Sunridge, a small riding school on the road to the hills, and everything changes.

Clara learns the most important lesson in horsemanship: how to listen to what a horse is telling you. She makes a best friend in Emma, a farm kid who has grown up around animals. And she meets Bilbo, a fat, fleabitten grey pony who has been left forgotten in a paddock for three years.

But it is a long, dry summer in the hills. The paddocks turn to dust, the dams drop and the bush waits. When fire sweeps down the valley one night, Clara must trust her instincts, and her pony, like never before.

A story about the extraordinary bond between a girl and her pony, set against the rugged beauty of the Australian bush.

At a glance

Recommended ages	9 to 13 (Years 4 to 7)
Length	19 chapters, around 40,000 words
Setting	Perth's coastal suburbs and the jarrah forest of the Perth Hills, from one Christmas to the following autumn
Sensitive content	A riding fall (Ch. 14); a frightening bushfire, with children alone and animals in danger (Ch. 15–17); a parent who has left the family (Ch. 9); climate anxiety (Ch. 18)

Key themes

- Friendship and trust, between people and between people and animals
- Friendship across different worlds: money, class and what really matters
- Courage and resilience in the face of danger
- Listening: paying attention to what animals and people need
- Caring for animals and the land
- Living with fire in the Australian bush
- Drought and a changing climate

Curriculum links: English (literature), HASS Geography (Year 5: bushfires and how communities respond), Science (Year 6: natural hazards), and the Sustainability cross-curriculum priority.

Discussion questions

Ten questions in four groups, with the chapters each draws on. Pick two or three per session, or give each literature circle group one set.

Character and relationships

1. CH. 5 & 9 — On the trail ride, Emma says Clara's complaint about the pool is "such a rich person thing to say". Later, Clara realises "nobody got the full set". What does each girl envy about the other's life? What is each one missing?

2. CH. 4, 12 & 14 — Amber has the most expensive pony at the club, but Clara never sees her enjoying herself. Why do you think that is? Why does Clara end up feeling sorry for her?

3. CH. 13 & 19 — Why do Clara and Priya drift apart, while Clara and Jess become close? What makes a friendship last?

Decision-making and resilience

4. CH. 14 — At the water jump, Clara knows Bilbo needs another second, but does what Oliver tells her. Why is it so hard to trust your own judgement when an adult you admire disagrees? Have you ever been in a similar situation?

5. CH. 15 — With the phone dead, Clara stops herself from panicking and asks, "What did she want us to do?" What choices do the girls make next, and why do they work? What would you have done?

6. CH. 15 & 17 — Karen told the girls not to try to save anything. They took the horses anyway. In real life, the safest choice is to have a plan and leave early. How does the book show both the bravery and the danger of what they did?

The natural environment

7. CH. 11, 13, 14 & 15 — Find the warning signs the author plants before the fire: the dam, the fire danger board, the rooster weathervane, the early heat. How does she build tension through the landscape?

8. CH. 16 & 19 — At the dam, kangaroos, birds, snakes and horses stand together in the water. What does this scene tell us about how fire affects every living thing in the bush? What came back after the fire, and what didn't?

Themes and interpretation

9. CH. 10 — Jan says that when a horse does something bad, "you don't ask how do I stop him. You ask what's he trying to tell me." Where else in the book, and in your own life, could you use that question?

10. CH. 18 & 19 — The counsellor tells Clara, "You don't have to let it be only fear." How does Clara turn her fear about the climate into action? What does she mean at the end when she thinks "the fear was just the love flipped over"?

BEYOND THE BOOK

Activities

1

The Hills Gazette

Create the front page of the local paper the morning after the fire (Ch. 17). Include a headline, quotes from Clara and Emma, a weather box with the Fire Danger Rating, and a short story on how the bush will recover.

2

A plan for the Larsson farm

Using My Bushfire Plan as a model, write the plan the Larssons needed: when to leave, where the horses go and who does what. Compare it with what happened in Ch. 15.

3

Who else lives in Clara's hills?

Choose an animal from the dam scene (Ch. 16), such as a kangaroo, a black cockatoo or a quenda. Write and illustrate its story of the fire night and how it is recovering a year later.

Further resources

RESOURCE	WHAT IT OFFERS
DFES Bushfire Patrol	Free WA bushfire education program and classroom modules for Years 4 and up
My Bushfire Plan	Step-by-step tool to make a household bushfire plan
Emergency WA	Daily Fire Danger Ratings and live warnings
DBCA LANDSCOPE: Listening to the seasons	Noongar seasons and fire in the south-west
Australian Curriculum: Year 5 HASS	The curriculum content on bushfires and communities

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