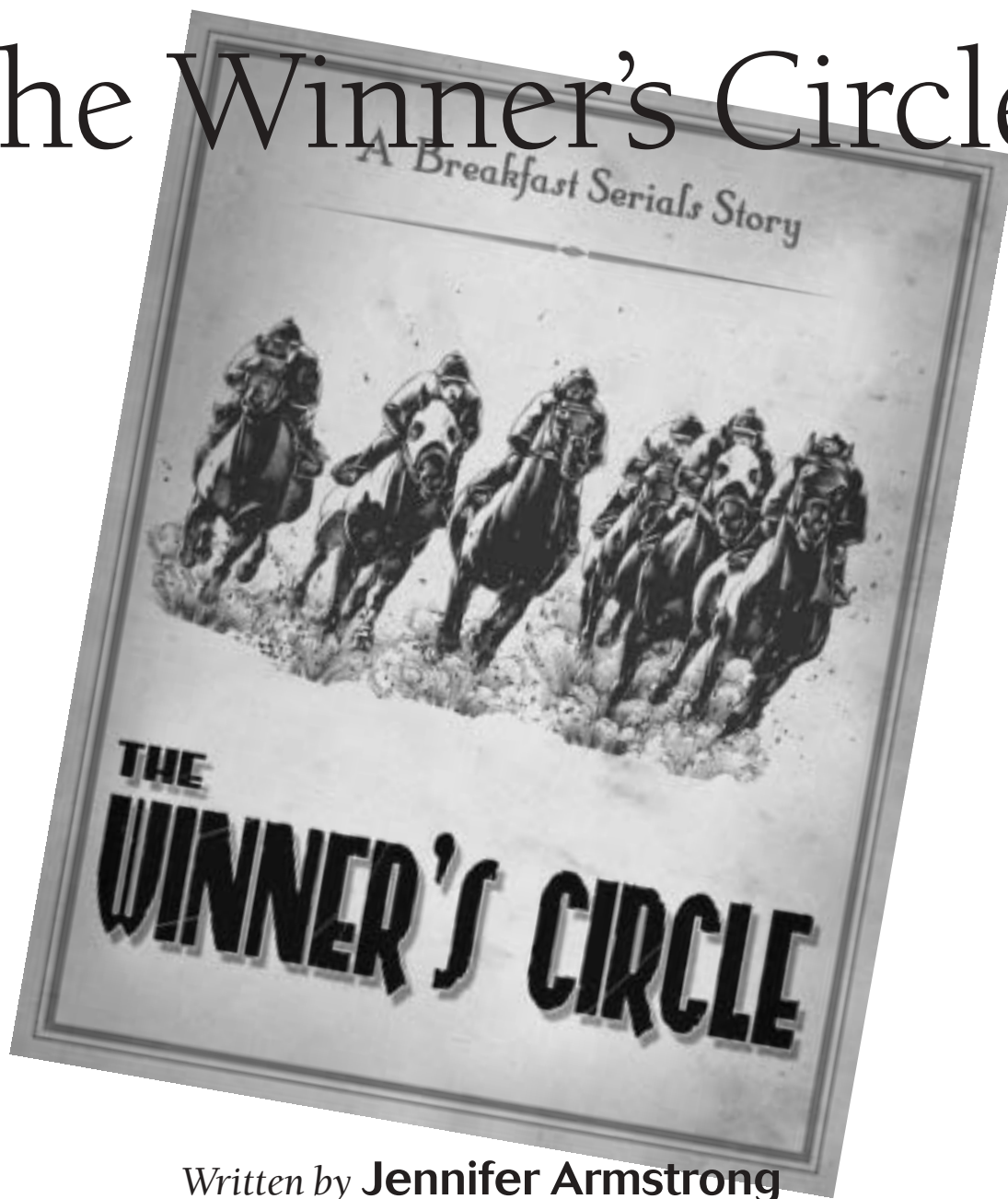


T E A C H E R ' S   G U I D E

# The Winner's Circle



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Illustrated by **C.B. Mordan**

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D I S T R I B U T E D   B Y :

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# Introduction

*The Winner's Circle* Teacher's Guide gives students an opportunity to interact with literature, art, and the newspaper through this story by Jennifer Armstrong. The illustrations are provided by C.B. Mordan.

*The Winner's Circle* is a tale about Ben Quigley, a motherless young man from the city who finds himself in foster care, living on a horse farm after his father is sent to prison for arson. The story follows Ben's adjustment to his situation, with an emphasis on the interpersonal relationships that develop between Ben and the Brennans, the horse owners who run the farm, and their niece Rachel. Along the way, Ben learns about the financial and emotional aspects of horse racing. He develops important personal insights and comes to terms with his father's failure. He also encounters someone who may or may not be a supernatural being.

## **A Note to Teachers**

Two additional instructional aids are included in this teacher's guide:

**What About the Supernatural?** addresses educational concerns about using written works that include supernatural elements. In *The Winner's Circle*, Ben thinks he is encountering the ghost of a young man who committed arson at the Brennans' farm many years before. Ben isn't sure if his experience is with a ghost or a figment of his own imagination.

**Follow the Fire** provides examples of the way Jennifer Armstrong uses allusions to fire in the language of the text. The "fire" theme is carried throughout the story.

## **Lesson Plans**

The lesson plans for each chapter are divided into these parts:

**Vocabulary** identifies important vocabulary words in the chapter. Teachers may use the vocabulary instructional activities they choose, such as identifying phonics elements, using root words and affixes, or determining meaning from context.

**Let's Discuss** questions provide an opportunity to discuss the story with students. Most of the questions require students to obtain meaning across text and to think critically.

**Newspaper Activities** offer real-world connections that relate to the topics and content of each chapter.

## **Additional Activities**

These activities help students explore topics and literary elements in the story.

## **Puzzles**

A crossword puzzle and a word search are provided.

## **Acknowledgements**

This teacher's guide was developed by the Use The News Foundation in collaboration with Breakfast Serials. It was created by Dr. Sherrye Dee Garrett. Use The News Foundation seeks to develop educational projects that provide resources addressing human rights issues such as diversity, character education, health and nutrition, safety, disaster preparedness, the environment, and the elimination of prejudice. Founded in August 1998, the Foundation is a nonprofit public benefit corporation that fosters partnerships with schools, Newspaper In Education programs, and their business sponsors. For information, contact:

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*The Winner's Circle* is syndicated by Breakfast Serials, an organization founded by Avi to promote reading by providing good children's literature for newspapers. For more information, contact:

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# What About the Supernatural?

Parents and some teachers may have concerns about the fact that a supernatural being may be an important element in *The Winner's Circle*. Students, on the other hand, may find the character a compelling feature of the story. A character in *The Winner's Circle* appears to be the ghost of a man responsible for a devastating fire at the Wind Rider Farm. The character, Joe Pastore, appears only to the main character, Ben. The story is ambiguous enough that Joe Pastore could also be someone Ben conjures up from his imagination.

Interest in scary stories is a growing trend in children's reading. This trend is discussed in an article in the May 1999 issue of *The Reading Teacher* – "Don't let a good scare frighten you: Choosing and using quality chillers to promote reading."\* The authors are teachers who conducted informal surveys among students in grades one through eight about the students' interest in and response to scary stories. They found that:

- Primary-grade children have difficulty separating fact from fantasy, so they are more frightened by imaginary creatures, such as monsters and ghosts.
- Intermediate-grade children are more grounded in reality, so they are more frightened of real things that might lead to physical harm, such as accidents, stormy nights, or creaking stairs.
- Students self-select scary books that match their development level.

Many child development specialists and teachers have found that scary books do not make children fearful. In reading scary stories, children experience control over frightening situations. That control helps children develop a sense of mastery over fearful situations in real life.

Perhaps the most important element in scary stories is the sense of closure the reader feels at the end of the story. When teachers had children retell stories they had read, the children did not focus on the frightening elements of the story. They focused on the positive resolution of the story. Children were more frightened by open-ended stories, where the scary character or creature had not been defeated and the situation resolved. They were comfortable with stories that ended in a reassuring way.

How do these ideas apply to *The Winner's Circle*?

- *The Winner's Circle* is written for readers at intermediate level and above. Supernatural or imaginary characters such as Joe Pastore do not frighten these students.
- *The Winner's Circle* has a positive ending. Ben decides he will no longer respond to Joe Pastore. After Joe is caught in another barn fire, Ben is sure he will never return.

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\*Richards, P.O.; Thatcher, D.H.; Shreeve, M.; Timmons, P.; and Barker, S. (1999). Don't let a good scare frighten you: Choosing and using quality chillers to promote reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 8, pp. 830-840.

# Follow the Fire

The story of *The Winner's Circle* revolves around fire. Ben's father is sent to jail for arson. The Brennans' barn had been destroyed by fire years before. Ben finds an unusual number of lighters and matches around the farm. The Brennans' barn is burned again at the end of the story, but the horses are saved. Author Jennifer Armstrong uses language to suggest the fire theme even when the content is not directly related to burning. This is a literary device you may want to study with students. Some illustrations of this fire-theme language are shown on the table below.

Chapter	Language Example
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The sunset made every window on the house look like it <i>framed a fire within</i>.</li></ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The horse of the as-yet unknown rider <i>leaped in an explosion</i> of hooves.</li></ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A challenge from the rider brings out <i>an answering flame of rage</i> in Ben.</li><li>• Ben feels <i>hot anger</i>.</li><li>• Ben feels <i>a hot spark of anger</i>.</li></ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ben feels <i>a cloud of dark suspicion following him like smoke</i>.</li></ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ben felt his face <i>heat at the word</i> fire.</li></ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Something behind Joe's gaze <i>seemed to flare like flames</i>.</li><li>• While talking with Joe, Ben <i>caught a whiff of smoke, like cold ashes</i>.</li><li>• Joe snickers, a sound <i>like flames crackling</i>.</li><li>• Ben plays with a disposable lighter, making sparks that look like <i>fireflies</i>.</li></ul>
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thinking about the Brennans, Ben realizes that <i>they'd been burned once before—literally</i>.</li></ul>
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ben thinks that <i>he wasn't a firebug like his father</i>.</li><li>• When Ben found matches and lighters, he <i>recoiled as if he had been burned</i>.</li><li>• Ben goes running to <i>burn off some of the tension</i>.</li><li>• Air <i>burned in his throat</i>.</li><li>• When Joe told Ben he could be sent away, the <i>unfairness of it flared up in Ben's mind like a bonfire</i>.</li></ul>
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Joe's eyes <i>glittered like coals and the smoke smell grew strong</i>.</li></ul>
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The manure piles at the racetrack <i>steamed like miniature volcanoes</i>.</li></ul>
14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In the race, the horses <i>exploded onto the track</i>.</li><li>• At the track, Joe stares <i>straight up at him with burning intensity</i>.</li></ul>
15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• At the racetrack, a <i>lady with a sunburn</i> dragged a child by the hand.</li><li>• Ben watched a man lighting a cigar, noticing <i>the way the flame shrank and grew</i>.</li><li>• After the man lit the cigar, the end <i>glowed red as a coal</i>.</li></ul>
16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mr. Brennan refers to Gogo as <i>the hottest date around</i>.</li><li>• Ben adjusted the vent in the car so it wasn't <i>blowing hot air</i> at him.</li></ul>
17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• At the fire in the barn, Joe's eyes were two holes that <i>churned with fire</i>.</li></ul>

# Welcome to the Wind Rider Farms

## Let's Discuss

1. Why was Ben Quigley going to Wind Rider Farm?
2. How do you think a city boy would feel about going to live on a horse farm?
3. Why was Wind Rider Farms a particularly good placement for Ben?
4. How did Ben react to the photograph of a scowling young man?
5. What kind of emotions did Ben experience?
6. Early in the chapter, Ben thinks that the light on the windows of the house look like there is a fire inside each one. He says, "Not fire. ... Definitely not fire." What is revealed later in the chapter to make this statement significant?
7. How did the author describe Wind Rider Farm?
8. Where is Saratoga?
9. Discuss: People who make bad decisions and break the law have children who will also break the law.
10. Make a prediction: How will Ben be received by the other people on the farm?



## NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY

Select several photos from the sports pages of the newspaper. Put them in a notebook or scrapbook. Write several sentences describing what is happening in each picture.

### VOCABULARY

**arson, n**

*deliberate burning of a building or property*

**immaculate, adj**

*extremely clean, spotless*

**scowl, n**

*facial expression showing displeasure, with the brow contracted*

**slouched, v**

*moved with stooped head and shoulders*

## Hoofbeats in the Fog

**Let's Discuss**

1. How do you think Ben would feel on his first morning on the farm?
2. What was unexpected about the menu of the dinner the night before?
3. How did Ben picture Leo when he thought about him the next morning?
4. Why had the dinner conversation been so hard for Ben to understand?
5. Why do you think no one tried to get Ben to talk at dinner?
6. What impression of the Brennans had Ben formed during the dinner?
7. How do you think Ben felt walking around in the fog that morning?
8. What shoes was Ben wearing on his morning walk? What kind of shoes should he have been wearing?
9. Why do you think the author compared Ben's predicament on the driveway with that of a mouse in a cat's jaws?
10. Make a prediction: How will the rider of the horse react to Ben?

**NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY**

**Look** at newspaper ads to find clothing items that Ben should use on the farm. List the items and explain why they are good choices.

**VOCABULARY**

**disoriented**, adj

*lost, without a sense of place*

**grimacing**, v

*making a face showing disapproval*

**wreathed**, adj

*encircled*

# The Lashing Whip

## Let's Discuss

1. Who do you think was riding the horse?
2. Why was Ben intimidated by the horse's behavior?
3. Why do you think people had sneered at Ben and his father during his father's trial?
4. Why do you think Ben started shivering during his encounter with the rider?
5. What was the rider's attitude toward the Brennans?
6. Why did Ben suddenly feel anger toward his father?
7. How was Ben's attitude toward the rider changing?
8. Why do you think the rider kept making references to fire?
9. How would you have responded to the rider?
10. Make a prediction: How will Mr. Brennan react to Ben's being out in the fog?



## NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY

**Find** a comic strip in which a character is in an uncomfortable situation.

**Rewrite** the comic strip so that character feels good about his/her situation.

## VOCABULARY

**flank, n**  
*side*

**scornful, adj**  
*in a despising manner*

**sidling, v**  
*moving in a sideways direction*