



Black Beauty

Anna Sewell



About the author

Anna Sewell was born on 30 March 1820 in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, England. Her father was a bank manager and her mother was a popular writer of books for young people. The family were Quakers and strongly believed that they should show love for all and compassion for those in less fortunate circumstances. This also included the animals that shared their lives.

In Victorian England, horses were used in industry, and were often treated badly. Anna and her mother were appalled if they saw a horse being mistreated and often showed their disapproval to the horse's owner.

When she was fourteen, Anna suffered a fall in which she injured her knee. This never healed and left her unable to walk without the help of a crutch. Over the following years, she became increasingly disabled. However, she learnt to drive a horse-drawn carriage and took great pleasure in taking her father to and from the station on his way to work. She was a very skilled driver and was known for her ability to control the horses by the sound of her voice alone. She often drove with a very loose rein and never used a whip.

Anna was very concerned about the humane treatment of animals and her Quaker beliefs meant that she was opposed to tormenting animals for pleasure and to hunting for sport. After reading an essay on animals by Horace Bushnell (a leading American theologian), Anna declared that she wished 'to induce kindness, sympathy, and an understanding treatment of horses'.

Sewell's introduction to writing began in her youth when she helped to edit her mother's books. During the last seven or eight years of her life, Sewell was confined to her house due to her failing health. She spent this time writing *Black Beauty*, a fictional autobiography of a gentle horse,

which drew on all her memories of the abusive treatment she had seen. Unfortunately, Sewell never saw the eventual success of her book. She died on 25 April 1878, only a year after *Black Beauty* was published. Ironically, at Sewell's funeral her mother noticed that all the horses in the funeral procession were wearing bearing reins and she insisted that they be removed.

Summary

Black Beauty, a horse, tells the story of his life in his own words. It is a story of how he was treated with kindness and love when he was young, but how his treatment changed at the hands of different owners: some were kind and cared for him properly, but others were careless or unkind, and this led to illness and injury.

Chapters 1–5: *Black Beauty* spent his young life with his mother on Farmer Grey's farm. Farmer Grey was a good, kind man and the horses had a good life. His mother told him that not all people were good and she gave him some advice: 'Always be good so people will love you. Always work hard and do your best'. *Black Beauty* tried to follow this advice all his life.

First, he went to live at Birtwick Park with Mr Gordon and his family, who treated their horses well. He became friends with two other horses, Merrylegs and Ginger. He was cared for by a groom called John Manly, who never used a whip. His wife gave him the name of *Black Beauty*. He learnt to carry a rider and pull a carriage.

Chapters 6–8: The stable boy, James, got a better job with a nearby farmer so he was trained by the head groom. One day, when he drove the carriage led by *Black Beauty*, they nearly had an accident. Thanks to the clever horse, they avoided a broken bridge and got home later but safe.

On another occasion, on a trip to Oxford they stopped for the night. A careless man smoked in the stables and caused a big fire. *Black Beauty* and Ginger were rescued by James but both he and Ginger were unwell after that and had to rest.

Chapters 9–11: *Black Beauty* saved Mrs Gordon's life when he ran very fast to bring the doctor to her. He then became ill himself because a new groom didn't look after him properly when he got back.

The Gordons moved abroad and *Black Beauty* and Ginger were sold to Lord Westland at Earl's Hall. They had a good groom, but Lady Westland was unkind and made the horses wear bearing reins so that they held their heads up high, which was fashionable in London.



Black Beauty

Chapters 12–15: One day, a groom called Reuben Smith was left in charge of the horses. He got drunk and rode Black Beauty very hard and used a whip. Black Beauty lost a shoe and eventually fell. Smith was killed in the accident and Black Beauty's legs were badly cut. He survived but his legs were scarred and Lord Westland decided to sell him. Black Beauty's next home was with a London cab driver, Jerry Barker.

Chapters 16–18: Jerry and his family treated Black Beauty very well, but the work was hard and the hours were long. Jerry became ill and had to sell Black Beauty to a farmer, who promised to look after him and find him a good home. The farmer took him to some women at Rose Hall. There, Black Beauty was reunited with Joe, the young groom who used to look after him at Mr Gordon's home. The women wanted to keep Black Beauty, so once again he had a kind and happy home.

The original text

Published in 1877, *Black Beauty* is one of literature's best-loved classics and is the only book that Anna Sewell ever wrote. Four films of the book have been made, the most recent in 1994.

The book gave readers a unique insight into equine life. The character of Beauty was based on her brother's horse, Bessie, and Merrylegs was based on Sewell's own much loved grey pony. Although the book only earned Sewell twenty pounds at the time it was published, it was instrumental in abolishing the cruel practice of using the bearing rein. It had a strong moral purpose and highlighted the need for a more humane approach in the treatment of animals.

Today some critics think that *Black Beauty* is too sentimental, but it has sold over thirty million copies since it was published and is a favourite with animal lovers.

Background and themes

Treatment of horses: Society was unequal in nineteenth century England, and great poverty existed alongside the wealth of the aristocracy and the middle classes. The Industrial Revolution led to the growth of towns and cities as the rural population moved into urban slums to work in the factories and mills owned by wealthy families. Horses played a vital role at this time.

Horses worked in coalmines, pulled barges along canals, ploughed fields and also provided transportation. However, they were often mistreated. They were beaten by their owners and made to pull over-loaded wagons. Many died of exhaustion where they stood in their harnesses. There were also some very cruel fashions, including the

'docking' (cutting short) of the horse's tail to improve its appearance.

This was extremely painful for the horse and prevented them from swatting flies away, causing them to be stung and bitten.

There was also the bearing rein, which was used to pull the horse's head in towards the chest in order to give a noticeable arch to the neck. This was considered to be a very desirable look, much sought after in carriage horses, but it meant that the animal was unable to breathe properly and would later develop respiratory problems. The method also meant that horses were unable to look from side to side and found it difficult to pull their loads properly. In *Black Beauty* this mistreatment of horses is vividly portrayed and the text eventually led to the abolishment of the bearing rein.

The value of kindness: This can be a hard-to-find value. Ask students the following: *Are you kind to other people? And to animals? How do you show this? Is it important to be kind? Why (not)?*

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Films

Ask students if any of them has seen the film 'Black Beauty'. If so, ask them to tell the other students about it. *Did you like the film? Did you like the story?*

2 Discuss: Horses

Have students discuss horses in their culture. Ask students to do research, and work in pairs to discuss these questions: *What are horses used for nowadays? What jobs did horses do in the nineteenth century? Did people use horses in your country in the same ways as in England?* Then have them discuss their ideas as a class.

3 Match: Photocopy the pictures on pages 3, 5, 13, 19, 25 and 29 as many times as necessary. Cut off the captions. Put students into groups. Hand out a set of photocopies to each group. Ask the groups to match the pictures with the captions.

Chapters 1–5

Before reading

4 Discuss: The author

Ask students to read the last paragraph of the Introduction and discuss the following question: *Did Anna Sewell have a sad life?*

While reading

5 Write: Have students read page 3. Black Beauty gets his bit and saddle and starts his lessons. Mr Gordon and Farmer Grey teach him. Ask students to imagine they are Mr Gordon and write a set of guidelines to train horses.



Black Beauty

- 6 Discuss:** Good advice?
Have students read the last paragraph of Chapter 2 and discuss this in pairs: *Is this good advice for a horse? And for a person?*

After reading

- 7 Role play:** Ask students to imagine Black Beauty meets his mother on one of his days without work. Ask them to role play the conversation when Black Beauty tells her about his life with the new owners at Birtwick Park.

Chapters 6–8

Before reading

- 8 Predict:** Is Black Beauty going to be happy for ever?

While reading

- 9 Role play:** Ask students to read page 9. Mr Gordon has a new job for James. He asks him to talk to his mother. He wants his answer after dinner. Ask students to role play the conversation between the stable boy and his mother.
- 10 Discuss:** Happy horses
Have students read page 11 and discuss the following questions in pairs: *What things help a horse? What things make it happy?*

After reading

- 11 Write:** Ask students to imagine they are Little Joe Green. He is very happy with his new job and learns quickly. He writes a letter to James Howard and tells him about his work and the horses.

Chapters 9–11

Before reading

- 12 Predict:** Have students speculate what may happen to the horses now their groom, James, is leaving Birtwick Park. *Will life be the same for Black Beauty with a new groom?*

While reading

- 13 Discuss:** Good to horses?
On page 15, Mr Gordon says, 'You can come home when Black Beauty is ready for the journey.' Have students discuss this: *Is Mr Gordon good to horses? Is he good to Black Beauty? How do you know?*
- 14 Role play:** On page 17, John says 'What did we do to you?' Have students imagine they are Black Beauty talking to John. *What's Black Beauty's answer?*
- 15 Guess:** Ask students to read Chapter 9 and check their predictions in Activity 12. *What is life like now that James is not the horses' groom?*

After reading

- 16 Discuss:** Kind to horses?
Ask students to discuss who is kind to horses and who is not in Birtwick Park and in Earl's Hall. Have students discuss why it is important to be kind to horses.

Chapters 12–15

Before reading

- 17 Predict:** Have students read the title of Chapter 12 and speculate why Ginger is angry. *What makes Ginger feel angry, do you think? Is she angry with Black Beauty? With the new grooms? With her new boss?*

While reading

- 18 Discuss:** Bearing reins
Have students discuss the reasons for and against horses having bearing reins. *Why did people want horses to have bearing reins?*
- 19 Write:** Ask students to imagine they are the groom at the White Horse hotel. He writes a letter to another groom about the incident when Reuben Smith stops at the hotel for a few hours.
*Dear friend,
The other day something terrible happened at the White Horse hotel. A man left his horse and ...*

After reading

- 20 Check:** Have students answer the following questions:
- York pulled Black Beauty's and Ginger's heads back with the bearing rein: how did the horses feel?*
 - How did Ginger show she was angry?*
 - What made York angry?*
 - What in Lord Westland made York angry?*
 - What are bearing reins bad for horses?*

Chapters 16–18

Before reading

- 21 Predict:** Have students speculate: *What will life in London be like for Black Beauty?*

While reading

- 22 Discuss:** Happy or sad?
Ask students to discuss in pairs: *What things make Black Beauty happy and what makes him feel sad when he is in London?*

After reading

- 23 Discuss:** A different cab driver
Have students discuss in pairs: *In what way was Jerry different from other cab drivers?*

Extra activities

- 24** Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss each of Black Beauty's owners. Then they choose which owner they like best, and give reasons. Have a class vote on the best owner.
- 25** In small groups, students talk about the life of horses at the time of the story compared with the present. What sort of work do horses do now? Are horses ever treated badly now?

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.