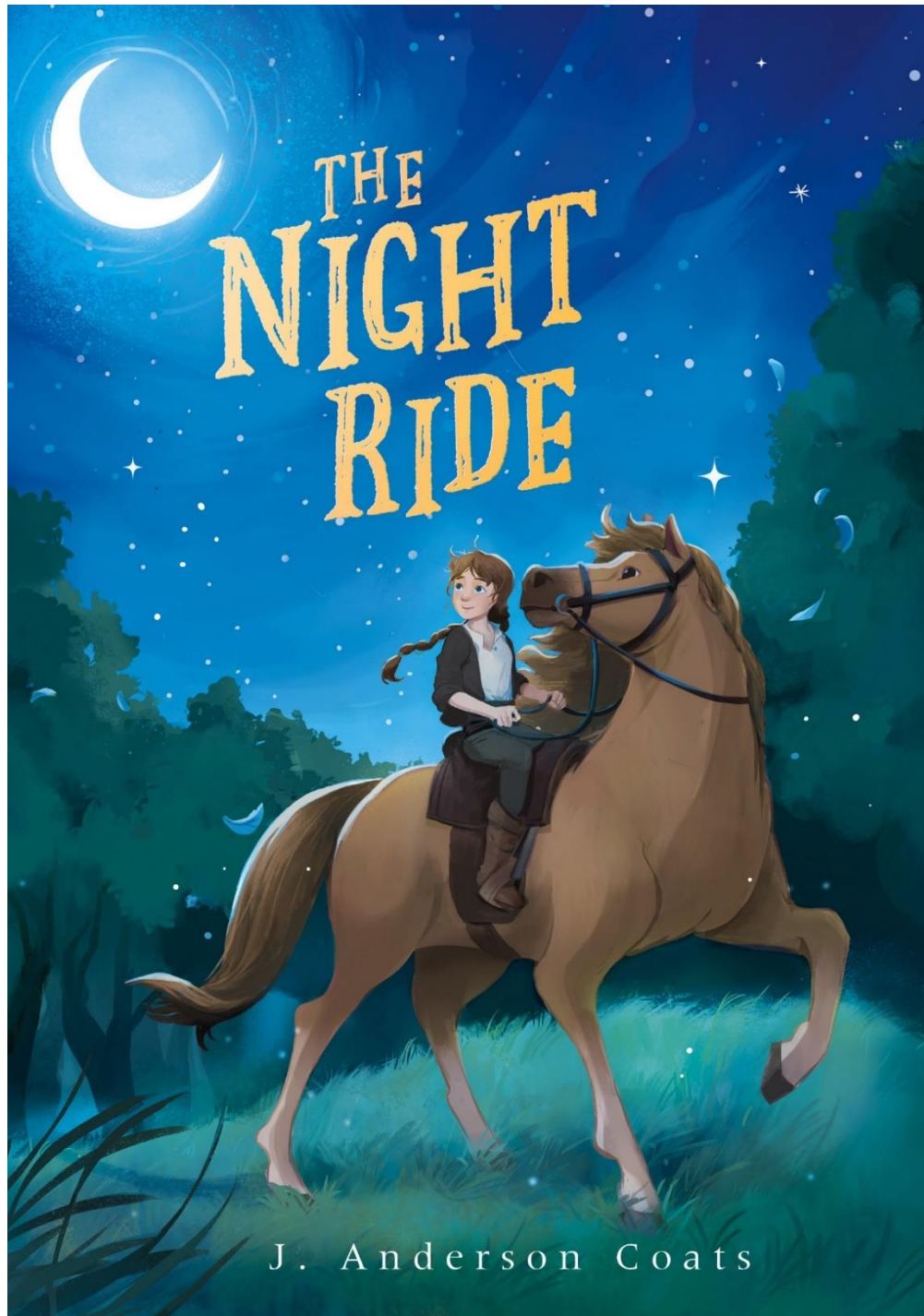


The Night Ride
Teaching & Discussion Guide



If you are a teacher or librarian using this guide as part of a class discussion or a book group, feel free to contact the author with questions - jandersoncoats@gmail.com

Remote and in-person visits can be arranged. Please visit <http://www.jandersoncoats.com/author-visits/schedule-an-authorvisit/> for details.

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Book Overview

Sonnia of Edge Lane loves horses more than anything, but growing up in a hardscrabble neighborhood means getting used to the idea that what you love may not be in your future.

Sonnia loves all horses, but her favorite is Ricochet, a chestnut gelding who's currently part of the king's fleet of courier horses. She's been saving her pennies forever to buy him, even though she knows people from struggling families like hers are rarely so lucky.

When Ricochet is moved to the racetrack across town, Sonnia reconnects with Deirdre, her childhood babysitter. Deirdre seems to have overcome the poverty of the neighborhood they both grew up in, and now she has a coveted position as a jockey at the king's stables. When Deirdre offers her a job at the racetrack, for the first time in—well, *ever*—Sonnia sees a specific path forward, out of an uncertain future and into one that offers a chance at a good life while surrounded by beautiful horses.

As Sonnia befriends the other stablehands, she learns that they're part of a club called the junior racing cadre, training to become jockeys, but it's not long before she discovers their secret: when the moon is bright, they compete in the Night Ride, a dangerous and highly illegal race in the darkest hours before dawn. Every race puts the horses at risk.

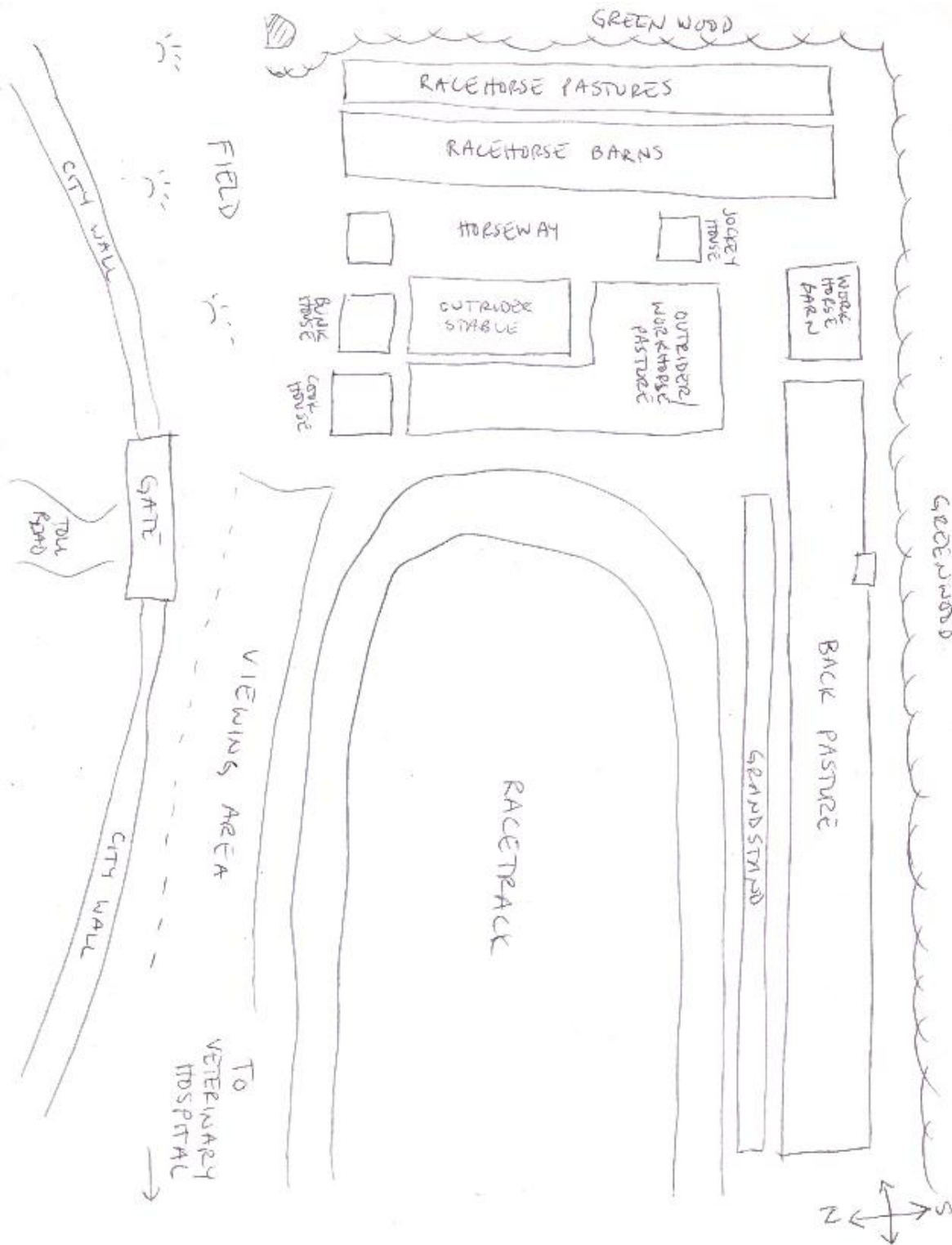
Making too many waves will alienate her further from a group of kids she would very much like to belong to, and becoming a jockey is her best chance at a good life. Perhaps her only chance.

Sonnia tells herself she won't do the Night Ride forever. Just long enough to earn enough money to buy Ricochet and keep him safe. But soon Sonnia must decide which is more important—her own future security, or the safety of outrider horses who, much like a poor kid from the wrong side of town, someone powerful considers expendable.

The Night Ride is a fast-paced, action-driven story suitable for grades three and up about loyalty, friendship, and hard choices, and addresses themes such as:

- The ways in which attachments to people and animals influence decision-making
- How people apply ethics when making choices
- Sibling relationships and issues of parity within families
- The nature of risk and the different factors that determine who must take risks and who is sheltered from them
- The ways in which structural inequity impacts access to opportunities
- The formation, composition, and dynamics of groups—inclusion, exclusion, and cohesion

Map of Mael Dunn Racetrack Complex



Teaching/Discussion Suggestions

Early in the story, Sonnia reveals that she is saving to buy a horse named Ricochet. On p. 4, she explains, “Ricochet is worth fifty gold dinars. There are one hundred coppers in a dinar. So to buy him, I will need five hundred coppers.”

- Ask students to identify Sonnia’s mistake, then have them calculate how many coppers she really has to save. Allow them to use words and/or pictures.
- Have students describe how this line acts as foreshadowing.
- Ask students to predict what they think is going to happen when Sonnia figures out her error, then have them write their predictions on sticky notes. Assemble the sticky notes somewhere in the classroom, then ask students to read others’ predictions and put a small star in the corner of three that they agree could happen.
- Individually or in small groups, have students come up with a way to help Sonnia understand where she went wrong in her calculation. Have the students share their explanations with the class. Discuss how there is more than one way to illustrate a concept like this, and situate the discussion in a context of peer support.
- In their reading/writing journals, have students respond to this prompt: Think of a time when you decided to save up for a big purchase. What were you saving for, and why? What were some challenges you faced? What were some strategies you used to keep from being tempted to spend your savings early? Were you able to get enough money?
- Have students write letters to Sonnia, encouraging her to keep saving and sharing their tips, advice, and experiences.

On pp. 8-9, Sonnia tells us that not just anyone can get a job at the royal stable. You have to be born into a family that has always worked at the royal stable.

- Organize the students into groups and have each group write a response to one of the following questions. Ask each group to share their responses with the class, then assemble the responses where all students can see them.
 - What do you think of this system?
 - Who do you think developed this system?
 - Why do you think the system exists this way?
 - Does it remind you of any other systems from different times in history that you have learned about? What about systems that exist today?

- Using these responses as a starting point, ask students to imagine what it might be like to grow up in Mael Dunn. Allow them to express their thoughts in words and/or pictures.
- Ask students to identify what they hope to do with their future, then have them make a collage of images that represents that life. Hang the collages around the classroom and/or post them on a class blog.
 - Ask students to consider how they would feel if they were in Sonnia's position, and their hopes felt out of reach.

On p. 17, Sonnia says, “[I]f one girl jockey rides racehorses for the king, that means there could be another someday. Then another, and another, and if there’s enough of them, people might leave off the *girl* part and start just calling them jockeys.”

- Organize students into small groups and ask them to discuss what Sonnia means here. What is the difference between being a girl jockey and being a jockey? When the discussions have concluded, ask students to freewrite on this question: What is the effect of using language this way?
- Ask the students to consider whether Sonnia’s phrasing feels familiar. Either individually or in small groups, challenge the students to think of some instances in our world that are similar – either from the past or from right now.
- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Think about a time when someone used language in a way that made you feel excluded. How did being excluded make you feel, and how did you respond? Are things you wish you would have done or said differently?
- Individually or in small groups, ask the class to reflect on ways in which someone can make others feel included. Ask students to write their responses on the board. Have each student choose one of these ways and make a poster depicting it. Hang the posters around the classroom and/or scan them and share them online in a way that makes sense for your class.

In Mael Dunn, a number of things impact what opportunities you’ll have, including your social class, gender, and where you live. Do you think the same is true of our world?

- Divide the class in half and organize a debate. Allow students to present evidence in a variety of forms – written, visual, skits, music, etc.
 - If necessary, remind students that a good debate involves points and counterpoints, not personal attacks. It’s okay to challenge someone’s idea or conclusion, but it’s never okay to be intentionally hurtful.

- At the end of the debate, bring the class together and collaboratively make a list of the points brought up. Ask the students to look for common ground. Encourage them to reflect on the complicated nature of the issue.
- In their journals, have the students make a list of things that would improve access to opportunities for people in general. Have them put a star in front of those they believe are the most important. Give students who are interested the chance to share with the class.

Consider gender norms and gender roles in Mael Dunn.

- Have students write down what they think the terms *gender norms* and *gender roles* mean, then ask them to look the terms up. Have each student write a definition for each term in their own words. Then, as a class, come up with definitions that everyone (or at least most people) agrees on.
- As a class, brainstorm some gender norms and gender roles that are common in Mael Dunn. Ask students to put a star next to any of them that feel familiar.
- Both Sonnia and Deirdre believe that being a girl in the lanes is harder than being a boy in the lanes.
 - Ask students to reflect on this question: In our world today, is it harder to be a boy or a girl? Have students decide which position they want to support, then write three examples supporting it.
 - After they've finished, ask students to write three examples that support the other position, with an eye to broadening individual perspectives and creating empathy.
 - It is important to remember that gender is a complex and interconnected series of roles and identities that vary across culture and time. The presentation of a binary for this exercise shouldn't be read as exclusive.

Deirdre offers Sonnia a job at the racetrack as a stablehand.

- Compare and contrast the conditions of the job that Deirdre offers Sonnia with the conditions of a hiring fair contract. Use examples from the text and those that can be implied from context. What about this stablehand job is appealing to Sonnia? Why is a hiring fair contract unappealing?
- In their journals, ask students to create a diary entry that Sonnia might have made after taking this job, describing some of her hopes for the future and

excitement about the opportunity.

- Have students predict what they think is going to happen when Sonnia takes this job, then ask them to write their predictions on sticky notes. Assemble the sticky notes somewhere in the classroom, then ask students to read others' predictions and put a small star in the corner of three that they agree could happen.
- Deirdre tells Sonnia that the racetrack has different rules than the royal stable.
 - Take a class poll on this question: Given what you know about Mael Dunn, do you believe Deirdre? Once the poll is complete, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.
 - If Deirdre is telling the truth, what do you think is special about the racetrack? Why might the rules be different? Ask students to predict what might happen next, and discuss how this moment acts as foreshadowing.

Consider Sonnia's initial interactions with the stablehands.

- Have students reread the passage in which Sonnia first encounters the stablehands (pp. 29-30).
 - Ask students to draw a picture of the scene and label each character by name. Near Sonnia's head, draw four thought bubbles and fill each one with her impressions of Ivar, Marcel, Astrid, and Lucan.
 - If students have time, encourage them to draw thought bubbles for the stablehands and fill them in with each character's impression of Sonnia. Encourage them to use clues from the text or invent their own.
 - Have students turn to a neighbor and explain their drawing, describing Sonnia's impression of the other stablehands.
 - If students are not confident artists, remind them that their drawings don't need to be perfect, but they have to show that some effort has been put into them. The drawings must show *intent*.
- Take a class poll on this question: Were you surprised that there was a girl among the stablehands, given what you know about gender norms/roles in this world? When the everyone has voted, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class. Some questions to encourage participation:
 - What makes Astrid different from the other stablehands?
 - What does Sonnia think of her?
 - What does Astrid symbolize to Sonnia?
 - How do you think Astrid got to be a stablehand?

- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Think of a time when you joined an established group (a club, a team, a class, etc). How did the first meeting go? Were you made to feel welcome? If you had a time machine and you could go back and give yourself advice, what would it be?

On p 31, Astrid gently pushes back when Lucan uses the word “guys” to refer to their group of stablehands.

- Ask students to write down what they think the word *guy* means, then have them look up the definition. Have each student write a definition in their own words. As a class, come up with a definition that everyone (or at least most people) agrees with.
- Pose this question to the class, then allow students to write down an answer anonymously: Why do you think we use the term *guys* to describe a group of people when there are people in that group besides men and boys?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider who is included and who is left out when someone uses the word *guys*, and how small changes in the way people use language promote inclusion.
 - If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- In their journals, ask students to imagine and describe the first conversation in which Astrid asks the boys not to use the word “guys.” How might she have convinced them to use a different word instead?

When Sonnia goes home to ask permission to keep her new job, her sister Greta is not exactly excited for her.

- As a class, brainstorm a list of words that describe how Greta is feeling. Put stars or checkmarks next to any words that come up more than once. Ask students to reflect on why they think Greta feels the way(s) she does.
- Create a chart in which each student records their birth order in their family: Are they the oldest? The youngest? Somewhere in the middle? The only?
 - In their journals, ask students to freewrite about how they feel about their birth order. Do they feel there are any advantages to being the oldest/middle/youngest/only? Any disadvantages? Would they prefer to have a different birth order?

- If this subject is difficult for a student, allow them to opt out, or to share their thoughts in a more abstract way.
- Ask students to create a diary entry from Greta’s point of view that takes place immediately after Sonnia returns to the stable. Have them integrate information they learned from the text with details they infer or invent.

Sonnia learns about the Night Ride and confronts the other stablehands.

- Have students compare and contrast how Sonnia feels about the Night Ride and how the other stablehands feel. Encourage them to use examples from the text as well as those they can infer from context. Ask the students whether they find Sonnia’s reasoning more convincing, or the stablehands’, and why.
- Individually or in small groups, ask students to make a list of ways in which Sonnia tries to convince her fellow stablehands to give up the Ride, and ask them to reflect on why the stablehands refuse.
- Ask students to predict what they think will happen if Sonnia continues to refuse to go along with the Night Ride, then have them write their predictions on sticky notes. Assemble the sticky notes somewhere in the classroom, then ask students to read others’ predictions and put a small star in the corner of three that they agree could happen.
- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Why doesn’t Sonnia tell someone about the Night Ride as soon as she realizes it’s happening? What do you think about this reasoning? What would you do if you were her?
- Have students write down what they think the term *ethics* means, then have them look it up. Ask each student to write down a definition in their own words, then as a class, come up with a definition that everyone (or at least most people) agree on.
- Ask students to summarize why they think the other stablehands decide not to pressure Sonnia to join the Night Ride, and how the stablehands think this problem will be resolved instead.
 - Using their summaries as a starting point, have students freewrite on these questions: Do you think the stablehands understand Sonnia’s point of view? How do you think they feel about the ethics of the Night Ride?
- Pose this question out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: Given what you know about the Night Ride, do you feel that it’s ethical for the stablehands to participate?

- Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider the reasons people have for making decisions, and how those reasons can be influenced by factors other than a sense of right and wrong.
- If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.

Once Sonnia knows about the Night Ride, her relationships with the other stablehands become more difficult.

- Individually or in small groups, ask the students to compare and contrast the following: What are some of the ways in which Sonnia fits in with the stablehands? What are some ways she's different from them? Encourage students to use examples from the text and those that can be implied from context.
- In their journals, ask students to respond to this prompt: Do you think that someone has to be just like the other members of group to get along? What *does* a group need to get along?
- As a class, ask the students to brainstorm different ways a group can benefit from a variety of opinions and experiences. Have students choose one of these ways and create a piece of art around it. Allow as much creativity and freedom of interpretation as possible when it comes to medium. Hang the art around the classroom, and if possible, invite other classrooms to view the gallery.

Consider the scene on pp. 75-77 when Sonnia confronts Astrid.

- Individually or in small groups, ask students to identify and describe what Sonnia means when she says that Astrid is "one of the guys [...] in all the ways that matter." How is Sonnia using language to suggest inclusion and exclusion?
- In their journals, ask students to freewrite on this topic: What do you think Astrid means when she says she "earned" a place in the formerly all-male group? Do you think the boys see things the same way?
- Ask students to reflect on how Sonnia responds when she learns that the other kids in the junior racing cadre are lane kids like her. Have them predict whether this will change how she feels about her place in the group, then write their predictions on sticky notes. Assemble the sticky notes somewhere in the classroom, then ask students to put a small star in the corner of three other predictions that they agree could happen.

- Have students create a diary entry from Astrid’s point of view that describes the events of this scene. Challenge them to draw from what they know about Astrid and invent aspects of her backstory that the author did not include.
- Take a class poll on this question: Do you think the other kids kept their origins a secret on purpose, or did it just not come up in conversation? Once the poll is complete, give students who are interested a chance to share their reasoning with the class.
- Ask students to think back to the discussion about opportunity in Mael Dunn, then have them describe how this interaction contributes to our understanding of choices made by kids from impoverished backgrounds like Sonnia and Astrid.
- Ask students to reflect on why this is an important moment in the story. Allow them to express their thoughts in words and/or pictures.

Consider what happens on payday (pp. 85-87).

- Individually or in small groups, have students identify and describe why Sonnia so upset. How does this outcome change things for her?
- In their journals, ask students to respond to this prompt: Do you think what happened was fair? Does Sonnia have a good reason to be upset?
- Have students reread the scene on pp. 23-24 where Deirdre offers Sonnia the stablehand job, then break them into groups and have each group write a response to one of the following questions. Ask each group to share their responses with the class. Once all the groups have shared, as a class have students brainstorm ideas on what someone might do if they are in a similar situation.
 - Exactly how was payment for this job described?
 - What questions might Sonnia have asked?
 - Why do you think she didn’t ask those questions?
 - Why might Deirdre not have offered the information?
- Individually or in small groups, have students brainstorm a list of things a reader learns about Deirdre and the things she values during this conversation.
 - Once the lists are complete, ask students to move to different groups and discuss why they think Deirdre reacts the way she does when Sonnia gets upset.
 - After the discussion, ask students to think back on the earlier exercise when they imagined it was like to grow up in Mael Dunn. Allow them to

add to or change that description if they choose.

- Have students create a diary entry where Sonnia shares why she decides to keep her job, even knowing she won't be paid the entire amount she was promised.

Sonnia discovers how much Ricochet really costs.

- Ask students to draw a picture that captures this scene, then have them turn to a neighbor and explain their drawing. (Remind students who are not confident artists to take their time and work with intention.)
- Have students think about the predictions they made at the beginning of the story, then ask them to freewrite on how did their predictions matched up to what happened.
- Sonnia is upset that Master Harold didn't correct her on this subject. Take a class poll on this question: Should Master Harold have told Sonnia the truth? Once everyone has had a chance to vote, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.

When Sonnia goes home to give her earnings to her family, things don't go as she planned.

- Take a class poll on this question: Do Father and Greta have a point? Is it fair for Greta to keep doing all the pony rides now that it's clear that Sonnia's job at the racetrack can't make up the difference? Once everyone has had a chance to vote, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.
- Arrange the students into groups and have them discuss why they think Sonnia brings up Torsten's job at the royal stable. Ask them to think back on the earlier discussion of gender norms/roles and discuss whether *Sonnia* has a point, considering how Master Harold had a choice of which sibling to offer this valuable position to?
- Have students summarize how Sonnia resolves the situation, then have them freewrite on the following questions: Do you agree with what she did? Would you make the same decision? Why or why not?
- There are many places in our world today where kids and teens have to get jobs to help support their families. Pose this question out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: What opportunities do you think young people miss out on if they have to work at an early age?

- Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider how limiting opportunities when people are young impacts them throughout their lives, and what changes might lead to a greater range of opportunities for people who struggle for this reason.
- If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.

Consider the scene in which Sonnia finally joins the Night Ride.

- On p. 57, Sonnia said she wanted nothing to do with the Night Ride. Individually or in small groups, have students create a list of events in the story that may have influenced Sonnia's decision to change her mind.
 - Using their lists as a starting point, have students to create a visual representation of how these events interrelate, then explain their drawing to a neighbor. (Remind students who are not confident artists to take their time and work with intention.)
- Ask students to freewrite on this topic: How can this moment help us have empathy for other people's decisions, even though we might not agree with them?
- Sonnia's initial plan is to simply return Ricochet to the stable after the other kids start the race. Have students create a diary entry from Sonnia's perspective in which she describes why changes her mind.
- Ask students to describe their own feelings about the Night Ride. Allow them to use words and/or pictures.
- In their journals, ask students to respond to this prompt: Think of a time when you did something you weren't 100% sure was right. What was the situation, and what were your feelings as you moved through it? What were some reasons you made the choice you made? What advice would you give someone trying to make a similar decision?

After competing in her first Night Ride, Sonnia's goals change.

- Individually or in small groups, ask students to identify and describe the realization Sonnia comes to concerning Ricochet.
- Have students compare and contrast Sonnia's initial goal when she took the stablehand job with her new goal that results from competing in the Night Ride. Ask them to use examples from the text as well as those from context.

- Ask students to describe how Sonnia plans to accomplish her new goal. Allow them to use words and/or pictures.
- Have students review the class definition of the word *ethics*. Pose this question out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: Is Sonnia's decision to continue doing the Night Ride ethical? Why or why not?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider how social and economic pressures influence people's thought processes when they are making decisions. Encourage them to ask questions instead of making snap judgements when evaluating other people's decisions.
 - If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- Ask students to predict what will happen as Sonnia competes in the Night Ride over the following weeks, then have them write their prediction on a sticky note. Assemble the sticky notes somewhere in the classroom, then ask students to read others' predictions and put a small star in the corner of three that they agree could happen.

On p 127, Sonnia learns that Deirdre doesn't get a room in the jockey house like the male jockeys do.

- Think back to (or reread, p. 15) Sonnia's observation about the difference between *jockeys* and *girl jockeys*. Ask students to freewrite on how exclusions in language can lead to exclusions in other ways.
- Pose this question out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: Does simply being included make you an equal part of a group? If not, what would?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider how inequities and inequalities in a wider world are often replicated in smaller groups, and how individuals can push back against that in big and small ways within that group.
 - If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- In their journals, ask students to respond to this prompt: Think about groups you are a part of. Are there people in that group who aren't treated the same as everyone else? What can you do to help those people feel welcome?

Consider the scene in which Sonnia lets Julian take her place on post parade, and the resulting fallout.

- Have students identify and describe how a stablehand wins the opportunity to go on post parade, then take a class poll on this question: Does this new information change your opinion of the junior racing cadre? Once everyone has had a chance to vote, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.
- Ask students to write a diary entry from Julian’s point of view that recounts the events of this scene. Encourage them to use details about Julian from the text and those they can infer or invent.
- Pose this question out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: What can this scene tell us about the nature of “choice” when it comes to people with limited access to opportunities? What can it tell us about who must take risks and who is shielded from them?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider when a “choice” really isn’t a choice. Encourage them to have empathy for people who are struggling as a result of limited opportunities.
 - If students don’t want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don’t share* or something similar at the top of their paper.

Sonnia determines that the track stablemaster must be the mastermind behind the Night Ride.

- Individually or in small groups, ask students to make a list of the evidence Sonnia has, and how she has gained it. Have them use examples from the text as well as those that can be implied from context.
- Ask students to evaluate the quality of Sonnia’s argument. In other words, does it make sense? (In necessary, remind students that they don’t have to agree with an argument in order to judge whether it makes sense.) Have them freewrite their response in their journals.
- Take a class poll on the following question: Do you agree with Sonnia that the track stablemaster is behind the Night Ride? For students who vote no, encourage them to share who they think it is, and why.

- Have students identify what Sonnia plans to do now that she has this information. Group the students and ask them to discuss whether they agree with her decision, and if they don't, what decision they would make instead.

Consider Sonnia's relationship with the other stablehands and her place in the junior racing cadre.

- Ask students to describe how Sonnia's opinion of the stablehands changes once she learns about the Night Ride, and as she competes. What does this tell us about her character?
- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Have you ever had a friend who made choices you didn't agree with? What choices were those, and how did your opinion differ? Was it the kind of choice that you could accept (even if you didn't agree), or did the choice put your friendship at risk? How was the situation resolved? How do you feel about the resolution?
- Have students reread the passage when Gowan joins the junior racing cadre (p. 76), then break them into groups and have each group write a response to one of the following questions. Ask each group to share their responses, then discuss each group's conclusions as a class.
 - Why has Gowan joined the cadre, and why is Sonnia upset?
 - How is Gowan joining the cadre different than Sonnia joining?
 - Why do you think the rules were different for Sonnia than they were for Gowan?
 - What can this tell us about gender norms and gender roles in this society?
- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Think of a time when you were treated differently than another person in an unequal or inequitable way. What was the situation? How did you feel, and how did you respond? Describe how the situation was resolved, and how you wish the situation had been resolved.
- Have students freewrite on this topic: Why doesn't Sonnia ever seriously consider quitting the junior racing cadre, especially when she learns about the Night Ride?

On p. 153, after Hollyhock is injured, Benno says, "They're just outrider horses. There's more where they came from."

- Individually or in small groups, have the students create a list of adjectives and/or phrases that describe how they felt when they read this line. Acknowledge that this sentiment is difficult to read and give students space to process their feelings in pictures or writing if necessary.

- Have students write a diary entry from Julian’s point of view describing this scene. Challenge them to draw on what they know about this character based on how he appears in the text and by using details they can infer or invent.
 - In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Have you ever made a decision that you wish you could do over? Was the decision entirely your own, or were you influenced by someone or something? Write down three things that you could do now to prepare yourself for a similar situation in the future, to help you make a better decision.
- Ask students to consider why the stablehands race outrider horses in the Night Ride instead of racehorses, and why the stablehands are doing the riding instead of the jockeys. Have each student come up with a brief response to each of the following questions:
 - Which horses must take risks, and who benefits?
 - Which people must take risks, and who benefits?
 - Do you think this is fair?
 - Why do you think this is happening?
- Ask students to think about what they know about the hiring fair system and how people get work in Mael Dunn. Place the students in small groups and ask each group to respond to all three questions below. As a class, discuss each group’s conclusions.
 - Do you think everyone in the city has equal value placed on them? If not, why are some people considered more valuable?
 - What parallels can you draw between horses and people in Mael Dunn?
 - What parallels can you draw between this world and our own?
- Have students use words and/or pictures to describe why this is an important moment in the story.

Consider the scene in which Sonia speaks to Paolo about Deirdre (pp. 162-167)

- Ask students to draw a picture of this scene. (Remind students who are not confident artists to take their time and work with intention.) Then have them share their picture with a neighbor, discussing the following questions:
 - Where are the characters, and what has just happened?
 - Why is it important that this scene take place how and where it does?
 - What does Sonia intend to say to Paolo? What does she learn instead?

- On p. 165, Sonnia has this thought: *I still don't want to be a bandit, but I can see how a girl from the lanes might. I can see how Deirdre would.*
 - Given what they know about Mael Dunn, ask students to come up with reasons why a girl from the lanes might want to be a bandit, then ask them to do the same for boys from the lanes. Have students create a Venn diagram to organize this information, and reflect on the section in the middle where the reasons overlap.
 - It is important to remember that gender is a complex and interconnected series of roles and identities that vary across culture and time. The presentation of a binary for this exercise shouldn't be read as exclusive.
 - Individually or in small groups, have students consider what they know about Deirdre, then come up with a list of reasons she in particular might have for wanting to be a bandit, using specific examples from the text and those they can infer from context. As a class, list the reasons on the board, then ask each student to choose their top three reasons.
- Ask students to identify and describe why Paolo thinks Astrid got a chance to be a stablehand. Have them evaluate the quality of Paolo's argument. In other words, does it make sense? (In necessary, remind students that they don't have to agree with an argument in order to judge whether it makes sense.) Have them freewrite their response in their journals.
 - In their journals, have students write a scene or poem in which Astrid learns that Paolo's suspicion is true. Remind them to consider what kind of character Astrid is, and challenge them to capture her feelings and voice.

Consider the moment when Paolo suggests that Deirdre is behind the Night Ride (pp. 165-167).

- Ask students to create a diary entry from Paolo's point of view that recounts this conversation. Encourage students to summarize Paolo's evidence for his claim and suggest how his perspective is different from Sonnia's, and why is this important.
- As a class, have students make a "pro" and "con" list from Sonnia's perspective on whether or not she should believe Paolo. Encourage them use specific examples from the text as well as reasons they infer from context. What is working against her accepting his conclusion? What experiences or realizations lead her to consider it?

- Group the students and ask them to identify moments in the text where Sonnia missed or overlooked something Deirdre did or said that may have led her to suspect Deirdre was behind the Night Ride. Ask them to reflect on how those moments acted as foreshadowing.
- Paolo and Sonnia have a different kind of friendship than Sonnia has with the members of the junior racing cadre. Have students freewrite on this question: How has Sonnia’s friendship with Paolo evolved in a way that makes him more credible?
- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Think of a time when you were presented with information that was hard to accept. What was the situation, and how did you respond? Describe some of your feelings as you considered what to do. How did you resolve the situation?

Consider the scene in which Sonnia confronts Deirdre after realizing the truth about the Night Ride.

- Ask students to create two pictures side by side. (Remind students who are not confident artists to take their time and work with intention.) In one picture, have them draw how Deirdre characterizes babysitting for Sonnia and her siblings, and in the other, have them draw how Sonnia remembers being babysat. Ask students to reflect on how one person’s memories can differ so significantly from another’s, and how this difference can shape a reader’s perception of a character.
- In their journals, ask students to freewrite on how they think Sonnia feels, hearing Deirdre describe her babysitting experiences in that way.
- Pose this question out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: Does Deirdre have a point? Is it ethical to significantly underpay a person to do a difficult job just because they have no choice but to accept low wages?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider how ethics are related to power, and what sorts of changes might be necessary to create better opportunities for all people.
 - If students don’t want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don’t share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- At one point, Deirdre refers to the junior racing cadre as “my stablehands” (p. 140). Given what they know about how people get jobs in Mael Dunn, ask students to come up with reasons why is this significant.

- On p. 23, Deirdre points out that track stable operates differently than the royal stable.
 - Divide the class in half and ask one group to list ways in which this statement was accurate, and ask the other group to list what it left out.
 - Bring the class back together and have each group report their findings.
 - As a class, ask students to reflect on how the statement might act as foreshadowing.
- Deirdre insists that the way she treats “her stablehands” is better than opportunities she had as a girl from the lanes. Create polling stations around the room and allow students to anonymously place an X under “Yes” or “No” for each question, then collect the polls and share the results with the class. Give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.
 - Does knowing something of Deirdre’s motivation change your opinion of her?
 - Do you think Deirdre created the Night Ride and the junior racing cadre simply to help kids from the lanes?
 - Do you think the opportunity Deirdre has created is worth the risk the stablehands – and the outrider horses - must take?
- Ask students to identify and describe how Deirdre’s actions in this scene help Sonnia make a decision. Allow them to use words or pictures, then have them answer this question: What decision does Sonnia make, and why is this an important moment in the story?

Consider Sonnia’s decision to tell the king what’s been going on at the racetrack.

- Individually or in small groups, have students summarize the realization(s) that Sonnia come(s) to that helps her make this decision.
- Pose these questions out loud to students, then ask them to write down a response anonymously: What can Sonnia’s decision tell us about who must take risks in Mael Dunn? Can you identify any parallels with our own world?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider how exposure to risk is related to access to opportunity, and what sorts of changes might be necessary to create better opportunities for all people.

- If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- Divide the class into small groups. Assign one of the following questions to each group and ask the students to come up with a response collaboratively. When all groups are finished responding, ask a representative to share their group's response with the whole class. As a class, discuss each group's conclusions.
 - Why do you think think Sonnia didn't decide to tell the king when she first learned about the Night Ride? What has changed to make this a viable option?
 - What is complicating Sonnia's plan to tell the king? Why can't she just use her toll road tokens and ask for an audience? What are some of the obstacles she will face?
 - What can this moment tell us about Sonnia's growing understanding about the scale of the Night Ride and what's going on to cover it up?
- Take a class poll on the following question: Do you agree with Sonnia's decision to tell the king? Once everyone has had a chance to vote, allow students to share their reasoning. For students who voted "No," encourage them to share what Sonnia should have done instead.
- By telling the king, Sonnia is sure she will destroy the junior racing cadre.
 - As a class, brainstorm words or phrases that describe Sonnia's feelings about this, especially considering how at least a few of the stablehands are her friends.
 - Have students think back to the discussion about opportunity in Mael Dunn. Ask students to describe (using words and/or pictures) what is likely to happen to the stablehands if there is no more junior racing cadre.
 - Ask students to freewrite on these questions: What kind of well-being is most important – physical safety, mental health, or economic security? What do you make of a situation in which someone would have to choose?

Consider the conversation that Sonnia and Paolo have in the meadow (pp. 195-196).

- Individually or in small groups, have students identify and describe why this is a difficult moment for Sonnia. What has she realized about the choices she's been making?

- Have students write a diary entry from Paolo's point of view in which he describes this scene. Encourage students to identify how Paolo is feeling here and how he sees his friendship with Sonnia.
- Ask students to predict what they think Sonnia will do next, then have them write their prediction on a sticky note. Assemble the sticky notes somewhere in the classroom, then ask students to read others' predictions and put a small star in the corner of three that they agree could happen.
- In their journals, have students respond to this prompt: Have you ever been in a situation where you weren't sure what to do next? Did you ask for help, or did you work out what to do on your own? What do you wish you would have known in that moment, and how can you use that feeling to plan for the next time you're in a similar situation?

Reread the paragraph on p. 195 when Paolo describes what a person's choices are when they learn something that challenges what they've always thought.

- In their journals, ask students to freewrite on this topic: Why do you think it's hard for some people to change their minds?
- In small groups, ask students to brainstorm a list of things that some people might be less willing to change their minds about. Once the list is complete, ask students to review each item on the list individually and write a few lines about why someone might be unwilling to change their minds about that thing. Encourage them to include more things if they think of them during the exercise.
- Pose this question to the class, then allow students to write down an answer anonymously: Do you think Paolo is saying a person should *always* change their mind if their current beliefs are challenged? What are some reasons this might not be a good idea? What are some ways you might know when it's a good time to change your mind?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to reflect on how it's important to carefully consider why you believe what you believe, and that changing your mind when you learn something new is not only okay, but how we grow and mature.
 - If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.

Now consider the paragraph in which Paolo describes why some people don't change their minds (p. 196).

- Take a class poll: Do you think this is the reason why people are unwilling to change their minds? Once everyone has voted, give students who are interested a chance to share their reasoning.
- Individually or in small groups, ask students to brainstorm a list of reasons some people might have for believing it's better to never change your mind. Ask them to choose one or two of their (or their group's) most convincing reasons, then create a list on the board.
- In their journals, ask students to respond to this prompt: Have you ever encountered anyone with this mindset? What is/was your response? If you haven't met anyone like this, freewrite on how you might respond if you ever do.
- Pose this question to the class, then allow students to write down an answer anonymously: Does changing your mind imply your original belief was "wrong"? How else might it be possible to describe this process?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider some challenges people face when they choose to change their minds. Encourage them to respond to friends or loved ones who change their minds by asking questions instead of making assumptions.
 - If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- Ask each student to summarize the decision that Sonnia makes at the end of her conversation with Paolo in the meadow, then place students in small groups and ask each student to choose one of the following questions to answer. Once each student has answered their question, have them share their response with their group members.
 - Why do you think she is making this decision now, instead of at any earlier time?
 - Why is this an important moment in the story?
 - Make a prediction about her plan: What will it look like? Will it be successful?

Consider Sonnia's interaction with the king.

- Have students reread the section that describes how Sonnia spends her time before this meeting (p. 201). Then ask them to rewrite this section from the king's point of view. Challenge them to use what they know about the king to capture

his voice, personality, and concerns.

- As a class, brainstorm words or phrases that describe Sonnia’s behavior during her conversation with the king. Ask the class what they can infer about her character based on this scene.
- Individually or in small groups, ask students to identify changes that resulted from Sonnia’s decision to prove to the king that the Night Ride was happening. Then ask them to move to different groups and have them describe these changes – positive, negative, somewhere in between. Ask them to explain their reasoning using examples from the text or what they can infer from context.
- Even when she’s sure she’s about to be punished, Sonnia tries to keep the junior racing cadre out of trouble, even though she disagrees with them strongly on the ethics of the Night Ride.
 - Take a class poll: Would you make the same decision? Once everyone has had a chance to vote, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.
 - In their journals, ask students to respond to this prompt: Should you stay friends with someone who made different choices than you and experienced different consequences? When might it be better to move away from a friendship, and when is it worth keeping?
- Have students identify the reward that the king offers to Sonnia, then ask them to freewrite on these questions: Why do you think he offers her a reward instead of punishing her? What can you infer about the king from this decision?

Describe the scene where Sonnia resolves the situation with Greta.

- Individually or in small groups, ask students to think back on (or reread, pp. 100-106) the last interaction Sonnia had with Greta before this one and come up with a list of unresolved issues that exist between them. Encourage them to refer to specific examples in the text.
- Have students write a diary entry from Greta’s point of view that describes what she’s been doing during this time, how she’s been feeling, and what she imagines her future will be like.
- Take a class poll on this question: Do you think Greta will take Sonnia up on her offer to pay for the academy? When everyone has had a chance to vote, give students who are interested the chance to share their reasoning with the class.

- Pose this question to the class, then allow students to write down an answer anonymously: What can Greta's worries tell us about how limited access to opportunity can affect someone's understanding of what is possible and what they're capable of?
 - Collect the responses and read a few out loud. Ask the class to consider how limited access to opportunities impacts not just the choices people make in the moment, but what choices they make over the course of their lifetimes.
 - If students don't want their response to be shared with the class, allow them to opt out by writing *please don't share* or something similar at the top of their paper.
- Ask students to reflect on where else in *The Night Ride* they have encountered a character who wanted something that felt beyond their reach.
- Have students freewrite on this topic: Why is this conversation important to the story?

Ask students to use words and/or pictures to respond to these questions: What did you think about how this book ended? What do you think happens next for Sonnia?

Praise for *The Night Ride*

“Coats’s fast-paced tale ... absorbs with **meticulously observed horsey details** and a tender interspecies relationship.” ~ Publisher’s Weekly

“Sonia is an engaging character with grit and determination, dreaming of the impossible while trying to survive in a hardscrabble world. **Engaging, true-to-life horse content.**” ~ Kirkus Reviews

“**Things get interesting** when Sonia makes the morally dubious choice to join the Night Ride, and finds out just how expendable the animals she loves are, in the eyes of the world.” ~ The New York Times

About the Author

J. Anderson Coats has received two Junior Library Guild awards, two Washington State Book Awards, and earned starred reviews from Kirkus, School Library Journal, the Horn Book Review, and Shelf Awareness. Her newest books are *The Night Ride*, a middle grade action-adventure about a girl determined to protect horses in danger, and *Spindle and Dagger*, a historical YA set in medieval Wales that deals with power dynamics and complicated relationships. She is also the author of *The Green Children of Woolpit*, *R is for Rebel*, *The Many Reflections of Miss Jane Deming*, and *The Wicked and the Just*.