About the author

John Steinbeck is one of America’s best known authors. He was born in Salinas, California in 1902. Many of his stories are based around the Salinas Valley. He attended Stanford University and then did a number of jobs – picking fruit, painting houses and working as a journalist. His first book, Cup of Gold (1929) wasn’t a success, but he achieved popular acclaim for his second book, Tortilla Flat (1935). This was followed by In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937) and The Red Pony (1937). Much of his work concerned the plight of America’s rural population. His most famous book, The Grapes of Wrath (1939), tells the story of a dispossessed family from Oklahoma, who make a difficult journey to California to find work. East of Eden (1952) is set at the time of the First World War and tells the story of the difficult relationship between a father and his sons. During the Second World War, Steinbeck worked as a war correspondent. During the period of the Cold War, he was widely criticized for his support of the underprivileged and his attention to social issues. His books Of Mice and Men, The Grapes of Wrath, and East of Eden have all been made into very successful movies. The Red Pony was first made into a movie in 1949 and then again in 1973. Steinbeck married three times in 1930, 1943 and 1950. In 1962, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in New York in 1968.

Summary

The four stories in The Red Pony are about a ten-year-old boy, Jody Tiflin, growing up on a small ranch in California early in the twentieth century. He lives with his mother, Ruth, his father, Carl, and the cow-hand, Billy Buck. Carl is a stern unemotional man whereas Billy is warmer and spends a lot of time teaching Jody how to look after the horses. Jody is a thoughtful but lonely boy. He doesn’t have any brothers or sisters and he spends a lot of time alone. Jody listens to people’s conversations and starts to grow up, but he doesn’t always understand the things that happen around him. He thinks about what is right and wrong and learns some important lessons about life, death and growing old.

Story 1 The Gift (Part 1): One September morning Carl Tiflin and Billy Buck ride into town with six milk cows. They return home very late and Carl tells Jody that he is going to need him in the morning. After breakfast the next day, Carl takes Jody out to the barn and shows him a red pony colt. The pony is a gift for Jody, who has to promise to look after him. Jody calls the horse Gabilan after the nearby mountains and Billy offers to help him to take care of the horse. After school that day, Jody brings his friends back to the ranch and proudly shows them the pony. From that day on, Jody gets up very early to spend time with his pony. At first, it is like a dream for him. He worries on the way to the barn that the pony won’t be there. Then he begins to understand the pony with Billy’s help. He notices everything about him, the way he moves, sleeps and drinks water. In the early fall, Jody and Billy begin to train Gabilan. They want to get him used to wearing a saddle so that Jody can ride him at Thanksgiving.

Story 1 The Gift (Part 2): Winter arrives and Jody has to keep Gabilan in the barn so that he doesn’t get wet. One day, the sun comes out and Jody decides to leave Gabilan out in the fields when he goes to school. Billy promises to put him back in the barn if it rains. By the afternoon, it is raining heavily and when Jody gets back from school, he finds the pony standing sadly in the field. Billy had been away from the ranch all day. Jody dries the pony and tries to feed him, but he’s not interested. The next day, Gabilan is sick, but Billy promises he will get better. When Jody gets back from school later that day, the pony is worse. He has a big lump under his chin. Billy cuts the lump and lets the poison run out the next day and Jody stays with the pony all day and night. The next day, the pony can’t breathe and Billy cuts a hole in his throat. At first, the pony finds new strength but then he gets worse and Jody knows there is no hope. That night, the pony escapes from the barn and goes off into the hills to die.
The Red Pony

Story 2 The Great Mountains: Jody is fascinated by the high mountains to the west of the ranch. His father and Billy tell him there is nothing there, but he feels they hold a mysterious secret and he longs to explore them. One day, an old man arrives at the ranch. His name is Gitano (Spanish for gypsy) and he claims he was born in a house on the ranch, which has now disappeared. He says he has come home to die and wishes to stay there until that day arrives. Carl says it is impossible, although he does agree to let him stay one night. Gitano tells Jody that he has been to the great mountains but he remembers very little. That night, Jody secretly visits Gitano, who has a beautiful silver knife in his hands. He says he got it from his father. Jody goes back to bed, believing he mustn’t tell anybody about the knife so as not to destroy some special truth.

The next day, Gitano has gone. He has taken the family’s oldest horse and a neighbor says he saw him riding into the brush with something shiny in his hand.

Story 3 The Promise: Carl and Billy decide that Jody should have another horse, raising it from birth. Carl says that Jody must take their mare, Nellie, to a neighboring farm to mate. This will cost five dollars, so Jody has to promise to work all summer to pay his father back. After Nellie has mated, Jody waits impatiently to see some sign of change in the horse and he worries that something will go wrong as it did with Gabilan. Billy feels bad about this. A year passes and eventually Jody sees that Nellie’s stomach is big and tight. Billy promises to let Jody help him when the time comes for Nellie to give birth. Unfortunately, things don’t go well and Billy has to kill Nellie and deliver the colt by cutting a hole in Nellie’s stomach.

Story 4 The Leader of the People (Part 1): Carl arrives home one day with a letter from his father-in-law saying that he is coming to visit. Carl is not happy about this because he always tells the same story about Indians and when he led a wagon train across the country. When he arrives, Jody is very pleased to see him and asks him if he wants to go on a mouse hunt. Grandfather finds this very amusing. That evening, over dinner, Grandfather begins to tell his stories but Carl interrupts him, making his wife angry.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Research: Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to do some research using the Internet about the Salinas Valley in California. Ask the other group to do some research about America in the early twentieth century. Get feedback in class.

2 Guess: Explain the stories are about a young boy who lives on a rural ranch in California in the early twentieth century. Put students in groups to discuss the following questions: What animals do you think they have on the ranch? What work do the people do? What do you think they eat? What do they do in their free time? How do they get from place to place? Is life easy or hard? Would you like to live like this?
The Red Pony

Story 1 (Part 1)
Before reading
3 Discuss: Write GIFT on the board and check the students understand it. Put the students in small groups to discuss the following questions: How often do you receive gifts? Who from? How often do you give gifts? Who to? What's the best gift you've ever received? And the worst? If you wanted to get your teacher a gift, what would you buy?

After reading
4 Pair work: Remind students that Carl got angry because he thought that Gabilan was acting like a pet. Put them in pairs to discuss the following questions: Have you got or have you ever had a pet? Why do people keep pets? What sort of animals make the best pets? Is it sometimes cruel to keep animals as pets?

Story 1 (Part 2)
After reading
5 Discuss and write: Tell the students that they are going to imagine they are Jody and that they have to write a story about Gabilan at school. Put them in pairs to discuss what they would write. Encourage them to talk about how Jody feels at different times. Get feedback and then have students write the story individually.

6 Pair work: Write CARL, RUTH, JODY and BILLY BUCK on the board. Ask students to think of adjectives to describe each character. Get feedback and then ask the students to discuss the type of relationships they have with each other. Then students can talk about their own family members and how they get along with them.

Story 2
Before reading
7 Discuss and write: Focus students on the title of the story and tell them that Jody is fascinated by the great western mountains. Ask students to discuss the following questions in small groups: What do you think the mountains are like? Why do you think Jody is so interested in them? What views do you like to look at? How would you describe your favorite view? Why is it interesting or beautiful? Then ask students to write a short piece about a view they know and find interesting.

After reading
8 Pair work: Put the students in pairs and ask them to answer the following questions: Where were you born? Have you lived in any other places? Would you like to spend your last years in the place you were born? Why do you think Gitano returned to the ranch? What do you think is going to happen to him at the end of the story?

Story 3
Before reading
9 Describe and guess: Put students into groups of three. Ask one student to look at the picture on page 43, one to look at the picture on page 51, and one to look at the picture on page 53. Tell students to describe the pictures to each other and then ask students to guess what is going to happen in the story.

After reading
10 Write and ask: Write ‘What kind of animal was Jody’s first prisoner?’ on the board and elicit the answer (A toad). Ask students to write another question about something in Story 3. Check their work as they do this. Now have students walk around the classroom, asking and answering each other’s questions.

Story 4 (Part 1)
After reading
11 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: permission, letter, wagon, suit, porch, meat. Ask the students to talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Story 4 (Part 1).

12 Discuss: Put students in small groups to discuss the following questions: What were your grandparents like? What jobs did they do? What did they talk about? How were their lives different from yours? Did they visit you often? Did you and your family have a good relationship with them?

Story 4 (Part 2)
Before reading
13 Guess: Remind students that Grandfather led a wagon train across the country to the coast and often tells stories about this. Ask students to discuss in pairs what kind of stories they think he told. Get feedback from the whole class.

After reading
14 Discuss: Put students in small groups to answer the following questions: Why does Ruth get angry with her husband? What did Grandfather want the wagons to carry? Why did Carl apologize? Why didn’t Jody kill the mice? Why was the ocean a problem? Why was Jody sad at the end?

15 Write and guess: Write “Jody got the name for his pony from the river.” on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (mountains, not river). Now students choose a sentence from any of the stories and rewrite it, changing one word. Students walk around the classroom sharing their sentences. The other student has to identify and correct the mistake.

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