



A DIFFICULT BOY & MENDING HORSES

by M. P. Barker

GRADES 5 UP

A Difficult Boy

HC: 978-0-8234-2086-5

Mending Horses

HC: 978-0-8234-2948-6

Both are available in e-book format.

ABOUT THE BOOKS

M. P. Barker weaves historical fiction with gripping adventure!

In *A Difficult Boy*, Ethan Root is only nine years old the summer of 1839 when his father sends him to be an indentured servant for Mr. George Lyman, a wealthy merchant and landowner. It's very hard for Ethan to leave his family; but it's even tougher for him to make friends with Daniel, the other indentured servant. Daniel, called Paddy by Mr. Lyman, is a teenage Irish orphan. Considered a difficult boy, he suffers physical blows from Mr. Lyman. For this reason he sticks to himself and develops special ways of coping. When Ethan learns that Mr. Lyman is a liar and a cheat, he shares his knowledge with Daniel and Silas, Mr. Lyman's son, another victim of his father's wrath. With Silas's help, Ethan and Daniel muster up the courage to challenge their harsh master. What transpires is a life-changing experience.

Mending Horses continues Daniel's journey after Mr. Lyman grants him his freedom. He is looking for honest work when he once again falls victim to prejudices against his Irish heritage. This time he is accused of thievery and murder and held captive in a barn until Jonathan Stocking, a tin peddler, recognizes the boy and comes to his defense. Jonathan sees something special in Daniel and invites the boy to travel with him and Billy, another Irish child. It's not long before the three go to work for a circus—Billy, disguised as a boy, enchanting the crowds with her sweet Irish melodies, and Daniel mending the abused horses. Things get ugly for the threesome when Billy's real father, who is working on the Western Rail Road, recognizes Billy as his daughter, Nuala. Daniel gathers the courage to shield Billy from her father, and helps her to discover the truth about the fate of her beloved brothers.

Mending Horses

- ★ "Barker skillfully evokes the realities of class, racial, and gender oppression in the nineteenth century through a rich cast, lifelike setting, and complex, compelling plot."— Starred, *Booklist*
- ★ "An absorbing look into a patch of past not often examined. . . . Barker's characters are nuanced, difficult, and real."— Starred, *Kirkus Reviews*

A Difficult Boy

IRA Notable Book for a Global Society

"An eye-opening look at indentured servitude in American history."— *School Library Journal*

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to use books in the library, or sites on the Internet, to find out about indentured servants. Have them write down the differences between the lives of indentured servants and slaves, and then share their thoughts in class.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 5-7.7; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5-7.4, 5-7.6.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

FAMILY—Describe Ethan's family in *A Difficult Boy*. At first Ethan doesn't understand why his father is sending him to Mr. Lyman to be an indentured servant. Explain what Ethan's father means when he says, "The truth of it is, son, I need you to go" (p. 1). How is Gideon Root a better father to Ethan than Mr. Lyman is to Silas? Mr. Lyman calls Gideon Root "simple" and "poor." These are fighting words for Ethan. His family doesn't have much money, but they are rich in other ways. Discuss how Ethan and his family might define *rich*.

In *Mending Horses*, Jonathan Stocking tells Daniel how he got Billy. How is Jonathan a better father to Billy than Hugh Fogarty, her real father? At what point do Daniel, Billy, and Jonathan Stocking become a family? Discuss how Daniel might describe his "adopted family" in a letter to Ethan.

FEAR—Discuss what Ethan fears the most about going to work for Mr. Lyman in *A Difficult Boy*. He continues to experience fear throughout the summer. How are he and Daniel the targets of Mr. Lyman's wrath? What does Daniel teach Ethan about fear? At what point does Ethan conquer his fear? What are the events that lead to this moment? Why is Gideon Root afraid of Mr. Lyman?

Discuss how Daniel deals with his fear when he is locked in Chester Ainesworth's barn in *Mending Horses*. How do "old" fears overtake Billy when she comes face-to-face with her father? Explain Daniel's role in helping Billy deal with fear.

COURAGE—Ethan leaves home to work for Mr. Lyman. How is Ethan's courage tested throughout the novel? What is his most courageous act? Silas finally gains courage by the end of the novel. How does Ethan help Silas gain the courage he needs to confront his father?

Discuss Daniel's courage in *Mending Horses*. How do the horses help him gain courage? Explain how music gives Billy courage.

PREJUDICE/BIGOTRY—Discuss the difference between prejudice and bigotry. How does prejudice lead to bigotry? What is Mr. Lyman's attitude toward the Irish? Daniel Linneham, the Irish boy who works for Mr. Lyman, is called Paddy. How is this name a symbol of prejudice and bigotry? Cite the moment in *A Difficult Boy* when it's obvious that Ethan doesn't have any prejudices toward the Irish.

Daniel doesn't escape prejudices when he leaves Mr. Lyman's farm. How is Daniel the victim of prejudice at the beginning of *Mending Horses*? Explain the attitude toward the Irish among the circus performers.

BULLYING—Who are the bullies in *A Difficult Boy* and *Mending Horses*? In *Mending Horses*, Chester Ainesworth grows to regret the way he treated Daniel. Who is responsible for his change in attitude about the boy? Explain what Jonathan Stocking means when he refers to the "other harm" that Daniel endured. Discuss this advice from Mr. Sharp: "Where the other fellow's weak, that's where you've got to be strong. You've got to be quick where he's slow, brave where he's cowardly, clever where he's stupid" (p. 183). Describe how this advice helps Daniel when he faces off with Hugh Fogarty.

A DIFFICULT BOY / MENDING HORSES EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

FRIENDSHIP—At the beginning of *A Difficult Boy*, Daniel isn't very friendly toward Ethan. How does Mr. Lyman try to pit the boys against each other? Why does Mr. Lyman say that Daniel is "envious" of Ethan? Trace the development of Ethan and Daniel's relationship as the plot progresses. At what point do the boys become allies? What other characters in the novel befriend Ethan? Discuss Silas's relationship with Daniel. Daniel gives the wooden horse that his father carved to Ethan as a parting gift. How is this a symbol of a cherished friendship?

Discuss what Mr. Sharp and Daniel have in common in *Mending Horses*. What might they give to each other as a symbol of friendship?

HONESTY/DISHONESTY—At what point does Ethan realize that Mr. Lyman is dishonest? Mr. Lyman believes that a man needs intelligence and discipline. How does Ethan use his intelligence to prove that Mr. Lyman is cheating his father, Daniel, and other citizens of Farmington? What is Mr. Lyman's idea of success? How is his success based on greed and wrongdoing?

In *Mending Horses*, Jonathan Stocking comes to Daniel's rescue because he recognizes a "sense of honor" in the boy. How does Daniel prove him right? Jonathan says that he would never reveal Billy's secret. "If anybody tells, it's got to be her," he says (p. 78). How does this make Jonathan an honorable man? How is Mr. Chamberlain, the owner of the circus, both a "good guy" and a "bad guy"? What is Jonathan Stocking's role in keeping Mr. Chamberlain honest?

FREEDOM—In *Mending Horses*, Daniel is no longer an indentured servant to Mr. Lyman. Explain what Daniel means when he says, "He'd never imagined freedom to feel this way" (p. 4). Why does Daniel feel unprepared for freedom? Discuss why Billy thinks that she will be losing freedom if she works for the circus. Trace the chain of events that finally sets Billy free. What is Jonathan Stocking's role in helping Daniel and Billy find freedom?

Above discussion questions correlate to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 5-7.1, 5-7.2, 5-7.3; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 5-7.1, 5-7.3; Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas 5-7.4.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS—At the end of *A Difficult Boy*, Daniel goes west to work. Silas drafts a letter of reference from George Lyman for Daniel to take with him. He also gives Daniel letters from Ethan's father, Lizzie's father, and Constable Flagg. Ask students to write a letter of recommendation from one of these characters.

Correlate to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5-7.2.

In *Mending Horses*, Mr. Stocking gives Daniel and Billy a primer and asks them to convert it into Gaelic. Have students make a simple Gaelic/English picture dictionary (www.irishdictionary.ie/home) that might help Daniel and Billy learn English.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5-7.4.

Write a poem called "Freedom" from Billy's or Daniel's point of view. Consider all that you know about their journey. Allow time in class for students to read aloud their poems.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5-6.3; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5-7.6.

Review the various types of figurative language. Ask students to explain why the following sentence from *Mending Horses* is an example of personification and simile: "Tonight Jonny's fiddle whispered like the wind behind a ship's sail" (p. 23). Then have them find other examples of simile and personification in both novels. Instruct students to write a simile that expresses Daniel's fears in *A*

A DIFFICULT BOY / MENDING HORSES EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Difficult Boy and in *Mending Horses*. Write a personification that describes his relationship with the horses.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5-7.5.

Divide the class into small groups and ask them to discuss the structure of *Mending Horses*. Explain how Barker tells a story within a story. How does each story come together to create the novel?

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL.5-7.3; Craft & Structure RL. 5-7.5; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 5-7.1, 5-7.3.

SOCIAL STUDIES—In *A Difficult Boy*, it is revealed that Daniel is a Papist. Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to find out about the Papist church. What is the doctrine? How do they worship? Write an editorial for the Farmington newspaper that Mr. Merriwether may write called “The Papist: A Life of Blasphemy.”

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5-7.1; Research to Build & Present Knowledge 5-7.7.

Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to read about the role of women in nineteenth-century America. Have them compare this information to the way women are portrayed in *A Difficult Boy* and *Mending Horses*. Then have them write a short essay called “Female and Irish in nineteenth-century America” for the National Women’s History Museum’s online exhibit (www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits). Instruct them to support their claims with specific scenes or quotes from the novels.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 5-7.9; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5-7.2.

MATH—Ask students to brainstorm scenes from *A Difficult Boy* that might require Ethan to use math skills. Such scenes may include the measuring of fabric at Mr. Lyman’s store, the horse race between Daniel and Mr. Stocking, the monetary damages when dishes are broken, etc. Then have students write at least two word problems for a math textbook that Mr. Stocking might use to teach Daniel and Billy fractions in *Mending Horses*.

Correlates to Common Core Mathematics Standards in Number & Operations-Fractions: Use Equivalent Fractions as a Strategy to Add & Subtract Fractions NF.A. 5.2.

DRAMA—There are numerous scenes in both novels that are very dramatic (e.g., in *A Difficult Boy*, when Ethan confronts Mr. Lyman; and in *Mending Horses*, when Mr. Fogarty recognizes Nuala). Divide the class into groups and ask them to pick a favorite scene from one of the novels and write it as a one-act play. Instruct them to cast the parts and tape the production to be viewed via the school-wide network. Suggest that they use music and appropriate graphics to add to the drama of the play. If possible, conduct a live interactive chat with the actors via the network.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 5-7.3; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 5-7.6; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5-7.5, 5-7.6.

MUSIC—In *A Difficult Boy*, Daniel chants Irish tunes that offer a faint remembrance of his mother. In *Mending Horses*, Billy enchants audiences with her Irish music. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to search the Internet (www.contemplator.com/ireland) for Irish songs from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Select a song that might remind Daniel and Billy of their families and their homeland. Share the song with the class, and state why Daniel and Billy might find comfort or sorrow from the song.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 5-7.7; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 5-7.6.

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Encourage students to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words from *A Difficult Boy* may include: *contempt* (p. 12), *lucifer* (p. 24), *incantation* (p. 30), *cravats* (p. 31), *benevolent* (p. 44), *translucent* (p. 68), *vendue* (p. 100), *trepidation* (p. 119), *blasphemy* (p. 169), *rogue* (p. 208), *satiated* (p. 209), *reprieve* (p. 241), and *mastiff* (p. 268).

Vocabulary from *Mending Horses* may include: *exultant* (p. 4), *canter* (p. 31), *veracity* (p. 41), *compensation* (p. 47), *menagerie* (p. 52), *sacrilege* (p. 71), *insipid* (p. 106), *erudite* (p. 111), *churlish* (p. 119), *perdition* (p. 150), *trepidation* (p. 176), and *contemptuous* (p. 223). Then have students use a dictionary to check the definitions of the vocabulary words.

Correlates to Common Core Language Arts Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 5-7.4.

INTERNET RESOURCES

For more information about the books' time period, check out these sites!

Massachusetts Historical Society
www.masshist.org

Irish Immigrants in America during the 19th Century
www.kinsella.org/history/histira.htm

Circus Historical Society
www.circushistory.org

Old Sturbridge Village
www.osv.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo Credit: Seth Kaye Photography

M. P. Barker has more than two decades of experience as a historian, an archivist, and a writer. She has worked as a costumed historical interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, where she got a firsthand taste of nineteenth-century New England rural life by milking cows, mucking out barns, and doing other tasks that helped her bring realism and immediacy to the setting and characters of *A Difficult Boy* and *Mending Horses*.

After Sturbridge, she became an archivist at the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, where she visited a different time and place with every diary, letter, and photograph she cataloged. M. P. Barker's first novel, *A Difficult Boy*, was an IRA Notable Book for a Global Society. Find out more about her at www.mpbarker.net.

GUIDE TO THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS CITED IN THIS GUIDE

Reading Literature

Key Ideas & Details

RL. 5-7.1 – Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RL. 5-7.2 – Determine a theme of a story from details in the text; summarize the text.

RL. 5-7.3 – Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story, drawing on specific details in the text; compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story, drawing on specific details in the text.

Craft & Structure

RL. 5-7.5 – Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

Integration of Knowledge & Ideas

RL. 5-7.9 – Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

Language

Vocabulary Acquisition & Use

L. 5-7.4 – Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on reading and content.

L. 5-7.5 – Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Speaking & Listening

Comprehension & Collaboration

SL. 5-7.1 – Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led), building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL. 5-7.3 – Identify the reasons and evidence a speaker provides to support particular points.

Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas

SL. 5-7.4 – Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

SL. 5-7.5 – Include multimedia component (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

SL. 5-7.6 – Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, using formal English when appropriate to task and situation.

Writing

Text Types & Purposes

W. 5-7.1 – Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

W. 5-7.2 – Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic, and convey ideas and information clearly.

W. 5-7.3 – Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Production & Distribution of Writing

W. 5-7.6 – With some guidance and support from adults, use technology to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

Research to Build & Present Knowledge

W. 5-7.7 – Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

Mathematics

Use Equivalent Fractions as a Strategy to Add & Subtract Fractions

NF.A. 5.2 – Solve word problems involving addition and subtraction of fractions referring to the same whole, including cases of unlike denominators.