

Love to Read



Black Beauty

1877

Anna Sewell

The story focuses on episodes in the life of Black Beauty, giving an insight into animal welfare in the 1800s from the point of view of a horse. An accessible read, though some technical language about horse equipment will need explanation.



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'There is no religion without love, and people may talk as much as they like about their religion, but if it does not teach them to be good and kind to man and beast, it is all a sham.'



Overview for teachers

Context

About the author

Born in Norfolk to middle-class Quaker parents, Sewell was educated at home in her formative years by her mother, herself a successful children's author. Moral values, compassion and an appreciation of natural history were at the heart of her upbringing, so it is no surprise that her only novel, *Black Beauty* (originally written for those who worked with horses), was concerned with highlighting the poor treatment received by horses at the hands of humans. It is credited with ending the use of the bearing rein on horses.

Suffering from poor health for most of her life and unable to walk without the aid of a crutch after an accident, Sewell travelled throughout Europe, mixing with artists and writers. She died five months after *Black Beauty* was published. At her funeral, the horses used to pull her coffin were wearing bearing reins until her mother insisted they be removed.

What's the story about?

Black Beauty is an autobiography of a horse, recounting the many and varied examples of treatment bestowed upon horses by humans. *Black Beauty* begins the novel in idyllic conditions with a good, kind owner and grooms who genuinely love horses and understand how to treat them. Whilst at Squire Gordon's the reader meets and hears the stories of other horses treated less kindly, highlighting the damaging effect this can have on a horse's nature. After the Squire is forced to sell his horses when his wife falls ill, the tone of the novel changes and the future for the horses becomes bleaker.

At his next home, Earshall Park, *Black Beauty* has a good but weak groom who cannot stand up to the mistress' demands that the horses should follow the fashion of the day and wear the excruciatingly painful and physically damaging 'bearing rein'. This harness forced the horses' heads into their necks so that their necks were 'elegantly' arched even though it caused breathing problems. Whilst at Earshall Park, *Black Beauty* is involved in an accident when, ridden by a drunken, neglectful, stand-in groom, he falls on his knees after losing his shoe, killing the groom in the process. Even though *Black Beauty* is cleared of any inappropriate behaviour he is nonetheless sold because his scars make him undesirable.

At his next home he suffers at the hands of bad, morally corrupt grooms and the owner, realising that he does not know enough about keeping horses to prevent future mistreatment, sells *Black Beauty* again, this time to a London cab driver, Jeremiah Barker (Jerry). *Black Beauty* is very well looked after even though the work is hard. The novel shifts in focus at this stage, concentrating more on the hard life endured by London cab drivers eking out a living. When Jerry becomes ill and is forced to leave cab-driving, *Black Beauty* is once more sold, first as a work horse and then as a cab horse again but, in contrast to his time with Jerry, he is ruthlessly and relentlessly used. Fortunately *Black Beauty* is saved from being sent to the knacker's yard by being sold to a kind home where he lives out the rest of days, reunited with one of the kindly grooms from his days at Squire Gordon's.

Themes to look out for

- Animal welfare
- Value of kindness and compassion



Literary techniques

Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



Characters

Black Beauty

A 'first-rate' thoroughbred horse, Black Beauty is the narrator of the story and commentator on human morals and behaviour. Beautiful in temperament, handsome in looks with '...such a fine intelligent eye...', he is loyal, hard-working and stoical - even to those owners who are less than kind. He represents the idea that even the best of horses can needlessly descend in status and value as a result of neglect and cruelty.

Ginger

Ginger is an example of the effects of ill-treatment on horses from a young age. Although a thoroughbred like Black Beauty, she does not possess his calm temperament but is instead suspicious and resentful of humans, causing her to lash out and be skittish and rebellious. It is through Ginger that Sewell shows the value and effect of kindness on a bruised disposition. As a result of John Manley's humanity and kindness towards her, she begins to trust again and achieves an inner peace she has never known, allowing her to fulfill her potential. However, all does not end well for Ginger. After she is sold and ill-used once more, her former damaged temperament re-emerges and she is seen later in the novel, her spirit pitifully broken and not long after ignobly placed on the back of a knacker's yard cart, dead.

Merrylegs

Good-natured and happy, Merrylegs shows the positive effect kind treatment has upon a temperament. She wholly understands how comfortable her situation is and does not tolerate Ginger's grumbles about life at Birtwick Hall. Although she is sold on to the vicar for his wife, there is a suggestion towards the end of the novel that even the lovely Merrylegs may not have escaped a dismal end.

John Manley

A humanitarian and head groom for Squire Gordon at Birtwick Hall. He is portrayed as being the best of men, concerned for the horses' welfare, winning their trust and loyalty. His departure from the novel at the end of Part 1 signals a change in the destiny and welfare of all the horses.

Joe Green

He is the apprentice groom at Birtwick Hall, trained by John Manley and sharing his humanitarian qualities. His reappearance at the end of the novel is life-affirming and for Black Beauty is a signal of hope.

Mistress of Earls Hall Park

'A tall, proud-looking woman', she is mocked by Sewell for insisting that the painful bearing rein be applied to the horses in order to satisfy her desire for style and fashion.

Jeremiah Barker (Jerry)

Another humane and moral figure in the novel, Jerry is a London cab driver with a very loving and supportive family. Sewell uses him to reflect the difficult life cab drivers had to endure to earn a living and survive without compromising their own values or the welfare of their horses. He is contrasted to Nicholas Skinner later in the novel, who mercilessly overworks Black Beauty almost to the point of death.



Setting

The setting can

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress



The mid 1800s

Incorporating most of the different uses of the horse during the early Victorian era, *Black Beauty* dwells upon the social rather than the physical setting. All classes are covered - upper, middle and working class - highlighting that there is no link between class and kindness and calling attention to the widespread abuse of horses that existed then. Sewell demonstrates with examples of poor animal treatment across all class settings. The upper classes are derided for prioritising fashion over animal welfare; the emergent middle classes are scorned for purchasing horses to reflect their improved economic status without knowing how to properly look after them, and the working classes are attacked for the ruthless and merciless exploitation of the horses in order to earn a living.

Birtwick Hall vs Earlshall Park

Both places have the best of facilities, but while Birtwick Hall is governed by a sympathetic Squire with grooms of a similar mind, Earlshall is at the mercy of the mistress whose desire for style inflicts unnecessary pain and suffering upon the horses.

Livery stables vs Mr Barry

Whipped and generally ill-used at the livery stables, Black Beauty is bought by Mr Barry, an unmarried business man who is kind and compassionate but ignorant and therefore easily duped by his grooms who wilfully neglect and steal food from Black Beauty, causing him to greatly suffer and become ill.

London: Jerry vs Nicholas Skinner

Black Beauty is treated well by Jerry who refuses to use the whip, drives him steadily around the streets of London and gives him a rest on Sundays. This is in contrast to the harsh treatment he receives at the hands of Nicholas Skinner where he is whipped and never rested to the point when Black Beauty, the figure of stoical resilience, shockingly wishes himself dead.

Narrative techniques

Choosing a horse to narrate the novel in the first person, Sewell is more able to engage the reader's sympathy with the welfare problems and subsequent suffering experienced by horses during her lifetime. Giving horses a 'voice' provides a platform in which to be heard, their feelings considered and their experiences recounted. Since the animals use human emotions, it more readily invites the readers to identify with their poignant stories; strengthening the bond between animal and reader.

Structure

Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



Held together by Black Beauty's narrative, the novel depicts a series of harrowing and heart-rending individual stories of poor treatment, enabling the theme/ moral issue of animal welfare to be constantly addressed.

There are four parts to the novel:

Part One shows Black Beauty's formative years at his first home and at the upper-class Birtwick Hall, laying the foundations for supreme animal welfare against which all future owners of Black Beauty can be measured.

Part Two shows Black Beauty changing hands, entering the middle classes and being improperly cared for. The immense contrast in welfare to Part One serves to build a sense of outrage at his treatment.

Part Three moves to the working-class life of a London cabbie, showing the gruelling work forced on horses by those who sometimes have little choice if they wish to survive. In this section, although Sewell shows an understanding of the cabbies' 'need' to overwork their horses, she does not condone it presenting instead an alternative in the morally upright Jerry.

Part Four is brief and presents the ideal end for a horse: Black Beauty reunited with Joe Green in a secure, happy environment.

Language

Sewell chooses to have Black Beauty speak in simple language, presenting him as an innocent, making his subsequent ill-treatment appear even more upsetting and shocking for the reader. The simple language clearly promotes Sewell's animal welfare ideas in a way that is direct, easy to follow and undeniable.

Precise, technical equine language is used throughout the novel since Sewell's original intended audience was one who worked with horses. It also helps the reader appreciate the horses' experience, giving an authentic feel and providing a platform for the reader to react to '...he got the bit into my mouth, and the bridle fixed, but it was a nasty thing!...'.

In order to elicit an empathetic response from the reader, Sewell uses emotive language to get her point across. Black Beauty uses the childlike words 'nasty' and 'bad' many times in the novel in response to the conditions he has to endure. The bit is '...a nasty hard thing...very bad! yes, very bad!...' and '...those who have never had a bit in their mouths, cannot think how bad it feels...' whilst the crupper is '...a nasty stiff strap...'.

A variety of sentences structures are used depending upon the point Sewell wishes to make. Complex sentences are used when she is explaining situations or listing to emphasise a point, while simple sentences are used when she wants to be more direct and unambiguous.

Special feature

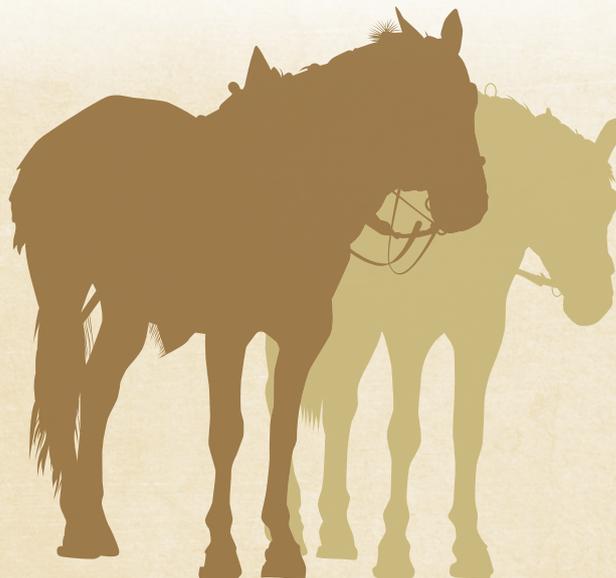
Sentimentality

Sentimentality is designed to produce an emotional response from the reader



Sentimentality occurs when the writer is more concerned with manipulating an emotional response from the reader rather than showing a development in character or an advancement of action or plot. Heartrending language and scenes of distress and compassion run throughout the novel, best seen in the emotionally-charged chapter entitled 'Poor Ginger'. Sewell portrays the unrecognisable and significant changes in Ginger as a result of poor treatment and the pathos is furthered when, after wishing herself dead, she is seen a short time afterwards in the back of a cart with '...The head hung out of the cart-tail, the lifeless tongue was slowly dropping with blood; and the sunken eyes. But I can't speak of them, the sight was too dreadful....O! If men were more merciful they should shoot us before we came to such misery'.

Critics have condemned Sewell's use of the sentimental in *Black Beauty*, but it could be argued that the emotional impact of the novel motivated people to take action and change animal welfare laws.





Activities for children

Before reading

Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

Life in the 1800s

How many different ways were horses used in the 1800s?

Find out about all the different equipment horses had to wear to do their jobs.

How were animals treated in the 1800s?

How did fashion influence the way an animal looked in the 1800s?

What were the differences in lifestyles between the upper, middle and working classes in the mid 1800s?

How should a horse be looked after?

What must it have been like to be a London cabbie in the 1800s?

Debate

How important is kindness?

How does the way you are nurtured affect the way you behave towards others?

How should animals be treated by humans?

Is animal welfare important?

What is the most effective way of preventing animal cruelty?

Laws or education? Or is there another way?

What's your opinion of animals?

What animal welfare laws would you like to see introduced?

Pictures and objects

Explore a range of pictures of horses from the 1800s in their various jobs and imagine what it must have felt like for the horses. Which type of work might have been hardest for them?

Facts

Find out about the work of the RSPCA.

What is a bearing rein and what was it used for?

When was the use of the bearing rein made illegal?

Find out ten facts about Anna Sewell's life.



During reading

Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques



Read to the end of Chapter 3
My Breaking In

Focus on...

- *First impressions of the novel*



Things to discuss

Themes: What themes do you think have been established in the story so far? Do you agree with hunting? How do you think the author feels about hunting? What do you think of the way the animals are treated in the novel?

Character: How is the master presented? How is Black Beauty presented? How is Black Beauty's mother presented? Who do you side with in the novel? Whose side were you on during the hunting scene in Chapter 2? How are humans presented?

Structure: What questions do you have about the opening of the novel? Did the opening of the novel grab your attention? Explain why or why not. How did you feel about the hunting scene in Chapter 2? Why does the author include it at the beginning of the novel? What effect did it have on you hearing rather than seeing the deaths of the hare and horse? How do these three chapters set the scene for the novel?

Language: How is Black Beauty's 'breaking in' presented?

Prediction: What kind of story do you think this is going to be? What type of man do you think the Squire will be?

Story: What has caught your attention so far? Has anything in the novel made you feel any differently towards horses or animals?

You could...

Begin making notes on the presentation of all Black Beauty's owners and make comparisons, ranking the best to worst owners, giving reasons for your opinions.

2

Read to the end of Chapter 9 Merrylegs

Focus on...

- The presentation of Ginger and Merrylegs
- Theme of kindness



Things to discuss

Theme: What comments is the author making about the way animals were treated in her lifetime?

What do you think of the idea behind John's Birtwick horse-balls philosophy?

How important is a good beginning in life?

Describe your feelings towards Black Beauty's situation in life as presented in the novel.

Character: Explore the ways Ginger and Merrylegs are presented. How do you feel about each horse? How do they compare?

Do you have a favourite horse?

What do you think of Ginger's story? Can you blame her for the way she has behaved in the past?

Setting: What is your impression of the Squire's place? Will Black Beauty be happy here?

You could...

Re-read Ginger's story, noting down whenever you have an emotional response to any of the words, phrases or passages. Note down what the emotional response was each time.

(Teacher note - It might be useful to provide a range of vocabulary for pupils to select from)



3

Read to the end of Part One, Chapter 21 *The Parting*

Focus on...

- *Episodic structure*
- *Use of emotive language*
- *Author's viewpoint*



Things to discuss

Character: Discuss how John Manley is presented. Do you agree with his philosophy on life?

He considers ignorance to be the worst thing in the world next to wickedness. What's your opinion?

How important is Black Beauty so far?

Did James make the right decision to leave? Do you think the reader will see him again?

What do you think of Joe?

What are your impressions of the Squire?

Narrative: The novel is written in the first person from the point of view of the horse. How does this make you feel about the horse's plight?

Is the story meant to be educational? Who for?

Structure: Which is your favourite episode in the novel so far? What are the advantages and disadvantages of telling a story through episodes?

Why did things need to change at the end of Part One?

How would you sum up Part One?

Story: Is there a plot to the novel?

What do you think the novel is about?

Is it turning out as you expected?

Is there anything that has surprised you so far?

What do you think will happen to Ginger and Black Beauty in Part Two?

You could...

Find examples of language which make the reader feel emotional. When do they occur? What do they reveal about the author's views about the treatment of animals?



4

Read to the end of Chapter 23 *A Strike for Liberty*

Focus on...

- *Changes in the novel*



Things to discuss

Character: What are your impressions of Black Beauty's new owners?

What changes do you see in Ginger and Black Beauty?

How do you feel about these changes?

Who do you sympathise with?

Narrative: What emotions did you feel when Black Beauty told you about the effects of the bearing rein?

Structure: Why do you think a change has occurred at this point in the novel?
What would you have done?

Tone: How has the tone changed?

How has the author created a sense of foreboding?

Prediction: What kind of future do you think Black Beauty, Ginger and Merrylegs will have?





Read to the end of Part Two,
Chapter 31 *A Humbug*

Focus on...

- Narrative voice
- The story



Things to discuss

Character: How do you feel about Black Beauty's situation? What is your opinion of the way the horse copes with every situation? How would you cope? Do you recognise any human characteristics in the horses?

Narrative: What effect does having an animal's perspective have upon you as a reader?

Does an animal viewpoint reveal more about the human behaviour?

Language: The language is not as emotive in Part Two as in Part One. What reasons might there be for this? What does it tell you about Black Beauty's reactions to events now?

Story: How would you sum up Part Two? How did it compare to Part One?

Prediction: What do you think will happen to Black Beauty in Part Three?



6

Read to the end of Part Three,
Chapter 45 *Jerry's New Year*

Focus on...

- Presentation of Jerry and the life of a London cab driver
- The focus of Part Three



Things to discuss

Character: How are Jeremiah Barker (Jerry) and his family presented? What do you think of Jerry?

Tell me what the life of a London cab driver was like at this time.

What did you think about the deaths of Ginger and Captain?

Why do you think the author has included the suggestion that it might be Merrylegs Black Beauty saw in Chapter 41? Would you be surprised if it was?

Viewpoint: What is the author's attitude to war in Chapter 34?

Structure: What was the focus of Part Three and why?

Prediction: What would you like to see happen to Black Beauty in Part Four?

You could...

Go through the novel making notes about the presentation of each horse and sum up their experiences. What do they have in common? How do they differ? Which horse do you feel most and least pity for?



T

Read to the end of the novel

Focus on...

- How the novel ends
- Your response to the novel as a whole



Things to discuss

Character: Could you imagine Black Beauty? Did he seem real?

Tell me about the human characters in the novel.

Which was your favourite horse?

Who was your favourite human character in the novel?

Which horse or human interested you the most?

Which horse's story moved you the most?

Narrative: Was Black Beauty the best horse to choose as narrator?

How might the story be different if it had been told through the eyes of

Ginger or Merrylegs?

The Story: Is it the type of story you expected?

Do you think the novel had a message? If so, what do you think it was?

How might you improve the story?

Did you enjoy the story?

What episode did you enjoy most/least?

Structure: How appropriate was the ending?

How did the four parts compare?

Was there a reason for dividing the novel into four parts?

Theme: What was the most important theme in the novel?

Which theme did you identify with the most?

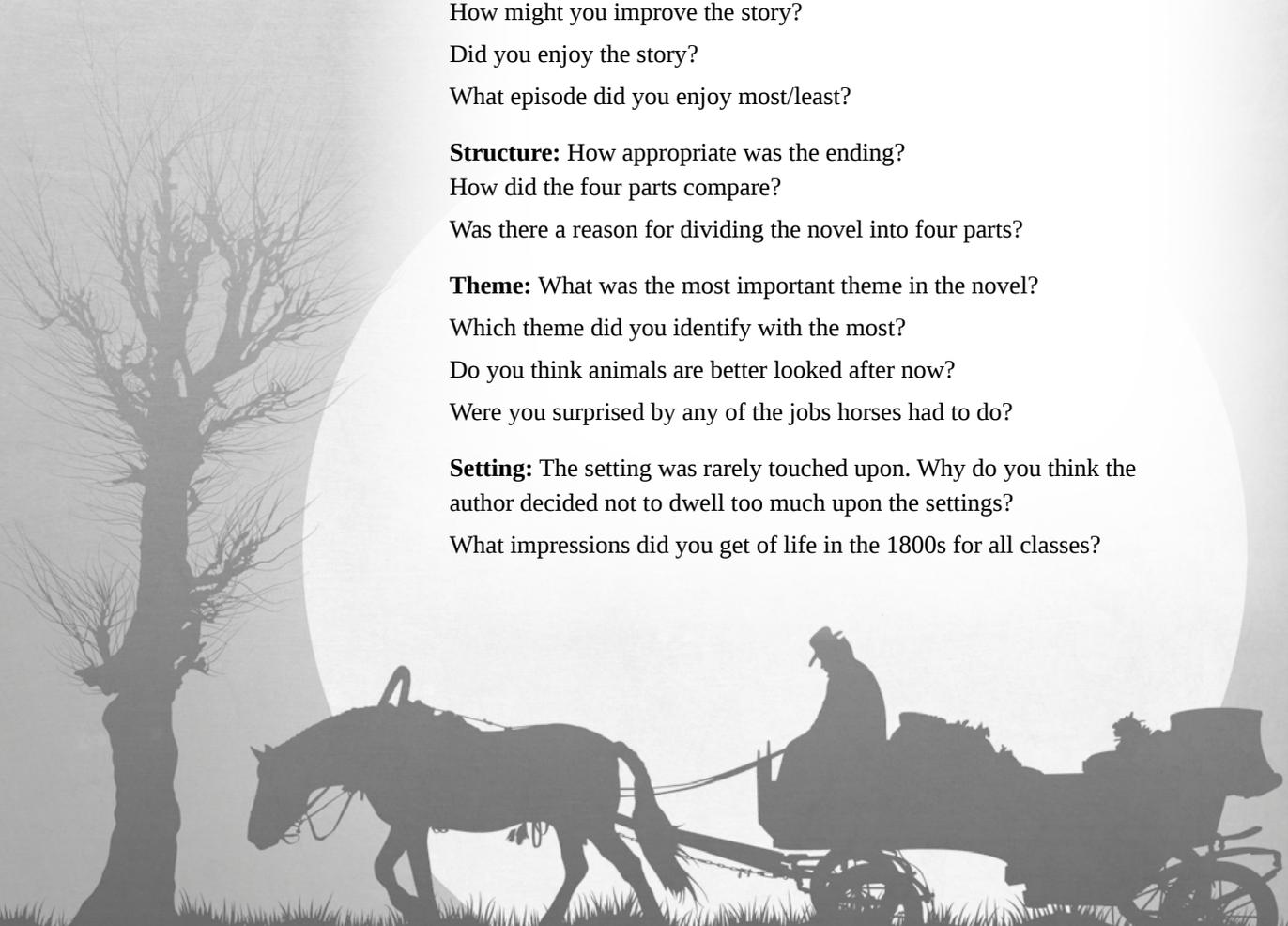
Do you think animals are better looked after now?

Were you surprised by any of the jobs horses had to do?

Setting: The setting was rarely touched upon. Why do you think the

author decided not to dwell too much upon the settings?

What impressions did you get of life in the 1800s for all classes?





After reading

Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

Animal welfare debate

Sewell wrote the novel to persuade others to treat horses better. Use persuasive skills to debate an animal welfare issue that interests you. Some suggestions might be: Should animals in a circus be banned? Is the Grand National too cruel to continue? Is it right to cull badgers? Is there still a place for zoos in today's society? Use a combination of emotive language, repetition, personal anecdotes and facts to help convince others of your argument.

A Day in the life

Think about animals and different situations they find themselves in: kept as a pet, on a farm, working for the army or police, used for entertainment in the circus or racing, or a wild animal. Write a section of their autobiography or a 'day in the life...' highlighting how they feel and what they think about their situation. Do they enjoy it? What do they find hard?



Animal care

Imagine you work for the RSPCA and write a care manual for an animal of your choice. Your manual should offer help and advice on how to look after an animal responsibly. Don't forget to use imperative and conditional verbs, and remember to refer to your readers in the second person, 'you'.

Cruelty and kindness

Working in pairs or small groups, develop a script or story in which one or more of the characters demonstrate cruel behaviour towards an animal. Decide who the characters might be and why they are behaving in this way. Include a character who challenges the cruel behaviour and saves the animal from distress.

Memorable quotes

'My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.'

'If a thing is right it can be done, and if it is wrong it can be done without; and a good man will find a way.'

'It is good people who make good places.'

'We call them dumb animals, and so they are, for they cannot tell us how they feel, but they do not suffer less because they have no words.'

'Only ignorance! only ignorance! how can you talk about only ignorance? Don't you know that it is the worst thing in the world, next to wickedness? -- and which does the most mischief heaven only knows. If people can say, 'Oh! I did not know, I did not mean any harm,' they think it is all right.'

'Why don't they cut their own children's ears into points to make them look sharp? Why don't they cut off their noses to make them look plucky? One would be just as sensible as the other. What right have they to torment and disfigure God's creatures?'

'Oh! if people knew what a comfort to a horse a light hand is...'

'Oh! Pray do not whip your good horse any more; I am sure he is doing all he can, and the road is very steep, I am sure his is doing his best.'

'I was quite happy in my new place, and if there was one thing that I missed, it must not be thought I was discontented; all who had to do with me were good, and I had a light airy stable and the best of food. What more could I want? Why, liberty!'

*My troubles are all over, and I am at home;
and often before I am quite awake, I fancy I am
still in the orchard at Birtwick, standing with
my friends under the apple trees.*



'Anna Sewell's classic paints a clear picture of turn-of-the-century London, its message is universal and timeless: animals will serve humans well if they are treated with consideration and kindness.'

Goodreads

'With fifty million copies sold, 'Black Beauty' is one of the best-selling books of all time.'

The Times

'I loved this book so much. I like how it makes you feel like you are actually there with the horse.'

Fay, aged 10

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