



Photo by Edward Linsmier

A street-smart tale about a displaced teen who learns to defend what’s right—the Cowboy Way.

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Also available as an e-book and in audio

CHARACTERIZATION

Cole is a dynamic character who transforms during the novel. Track and make note of Cole’s traits and the various ways he changes.

In what ways is Cole challenged and changed in <i>Ghetto Cowboy</i> by ...	
Harper	
Mama	
The Ritz-Carlton community	
Smush	
Boo	

HIDDEN HISTORY OF BLACK COWBOYS

Any unit teaching about westward movement and Western history is incomplete if it does not include the history of Black cowboys in the American West. Read the following passages from *Ghetto Cowboy* aloud to students and invite them to discuss this hidden history.

Passage	Consider ...
“Look, you guys might think y’all is cowboys, but all I know is, real cowboys is white” (page 40).	Why might Cole believe this? When you think about cowboys, what images and names come to mind? Where do these images come from?

Passage	Consider . . .
<p>“That’s Bill Pickett, son of a slave and the most famous black cowboy of all. Back then, there was almost nine thousand black cowboys out West, working cattle and driving ’em up the Chisholm Trail and such. And these cowboys was so good that eventually, the whites took the name <i>cowboy</i> for themselves. Stole it, really. Now we’re just trying to take it back, is all” (page 41).</p>	<p>Why has the history of Black cowboys been erased? Who and what benefits from this erasure?</p>

The history of Black cowboys is absent from most textbooks. Help students access this information by teaching about the hidden history of Black cowboys in the American West, using resources such as the ones below. Because history is most meaningful to young people when it is linked to their lives today, connect this history to the contemporary legacy of Black cowboys.

- Who was Bill Pickett CC (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJyKR1_IPRM)
- Rodeo Celebrates Black Cowboys and Cowgirls in History of the American West | NBC Nightly News (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJR_zfnsLtI)
- Roping as a Way of Life: The Proud History of Texas’ Black Cowboys (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLSwRx_9HbQ)

Ghetto Cowboy is partly inspired by the Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club. Learn about the club and its founder, Ellis Ferrell (El-Dog).

- Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club (<http://fsurc.com/>)
- Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club: “El-Dog” (<https://youtu.be/OFpvxUhoWNo>)

NARRATIVE WRITING

G. Neri’s use of imagery helps readers to imagine what at first seems unimaginable—horses and cowboys on the streets of Philadelphia. Invite students to study a section of the text. For example:

The horse’s big ol’ nose is sniffing me. I can feel it huffin’ and puffin’, its nostrils opening up like they gonna suck me right in. Then it raises its head and CHOMP, these giant teeth start pulling at the hay in my hand, chewin’ away, his big ol’ eyes staring at me. It bites closer to my hand, and I let go. He follows the hay to the ground and keeps eating, like I ain’t even there.

This thing is huge. I just stare at his giant yellow teeth as they crunch away. He do kinda act like a dog, so I slowly put my hand on his neck like Harper done. He don’t flinch. His hair is rough like doll hair, but the fur on his neck is soft and smooth (page 53).

Discuss Neri’s use of the senses—sight, sound, smell, and touch—to bring this horse to life across the pages of the novel. Encourage students to locate key descriptive passages and then use these passages as mentor texts for their own narrative writing.

SYSTEMIC RACISM

The strength and resilience of Black people is powerfully juxtaposed with the disinvestment in poor Black communities, racial displacement, gentrification, and how the media often portrays disenfranchised communities. Help students to recognize systemic racism at work in the novel and in the world. Revisit the following passages with students:

Chapter 32	Chapter 33	Chapter 34
<p>“Now, most people on the outside may not understand our ways. They see these neighborhoods and think it’s no place for animals. They think it’s okay for us to live here, but poor folks can’t have horses! They’re used to horse owners with money, living the country life. But horses is like people: some come from money; some come from nothing. For these horses, the only thing between them and a can of dog food was us. They’re the unwanted, just like us” (page 179).</p>	<p>“We decided you can’t destroy our way of life. Y’all never cared about this neighborhood, but these people here made something good for the community—from nothing but a bunch of empty, neglected lots. And we want it to stay that way” (page 183).</p>	<p>“But the City don’t care that this tradition has been going on for decades! Instead of celebrating something unique in this city, they just want us out of here so they can build a buncha new houses that we can’t afford to live in!” (page 189).</p>

Invite students to discuss how systemic racism affects the characters and community in *Ghetto Cowboy* as well as people and communities in their own lives. Ask:

- *What are you learning about disinvestment, the purposeful withdrawal of investment in communities by local and state powers? How does this impact communities?*
- *How does gentrification affect people who have lived in neighborhoods for generations?*
- *In what ways do Black and Brown people respond to and resist systemic racism and injustices?*

GHETTO

“We may look like we’re in the ghetto. But we’re all working people, doing what we can to survive. We got our ways, and we got our traditions. Here on Chester Avenue, that means horses” (page 179). Discuss the meaning, use, and misuse of the word *ghetto* in the novel *Ghetto Cowboy* and across history, including today. Ask students: *Why is this significant?*

GHETTO COWBOY AND CONCRETE COWBOY

The movie *Concrete Cowboy* is based on the novel *Ghetto Cowboy*. Invite students to watch the movie. Then encourage them to compare and contrast the novel and the movie. Ask students: *What do you notice about the plot changes in the movie? Why do you think these changes, as well as the title change, were made?*



Watch the Candlewick Black Creators series to learn more about G. Neri.
[BlackCreatorsSeries.candlewick.com](https://www.candlewick.com/blackcreatorsseries)

Tip sheet developed by Dr. Sonja Cherry-Paul, founder of Red Clay Educators