



Chancey of the Maury River

BY GIGI AMATEAU

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Age 9 and up

ABOUT THE BOOK

ON THE NIGHT THAT CHANCEY IS BORN, a “fire star” gallops across the sky, a signal that a great horse has entered the world. But it will take many years of slights and hardships before the orphaned albino will believe that the prophecy is truly meant for him. First he must find a home at the Maury River Stables and a girl named Claire, who needs him as much as he needs her. Then, when his aching joints and impending blindness bring an end to their training together, he must start a new chapter as a therapeutic horse, healing people with wounds both visible and unseen. In the manner of a latter-day Black Beauty, Chancey’s observant voice narrates this absorbing story, filled with fascinating details of life at the stable and keen insight into equine instinct, human emotion, and the ineffable bond that connects them both.

Told through a horse’s eyes, here is the entrancing tale of an Appaloosa who finds a chance to renew his trust, and of the humans he helps to restore.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Chancey, the narrator: an albino Appaloosa horse

Claire Dunlap: Chancey’s friend and owner, ten to thirteen years old

Mrs. Isbell Maiden: proprietor of the Maury River Stables and instructor of therapeutic riding

Mother (Eleanor Dunlap): Claire’s mother

Macadoo: a Belgian draft horse, Chancey’s friend

Trevor Strickler: a student at the therapeutic riding school



DISCUSSION POINTS

1. *Chancey of the Maury River* begins with the story of Chancey's birth and the prophecy that Chancey will grow to be great, wise, and beautiful. Chancey himself seems to have very specific ideas about how he might fulfill this prophecy. In chapter 5, he recounts that in his lifetime he has never been mistaken for beautiful, never been loved as any child's favorite, never saved the life of human or beast, and never carried a champion on his back (p. 42). Does Chancey's statement foreshadow how events will unfold for him? Does Chancey achieve each of these tasks by the end of the book? Would you agree that these accomplishments would render a horse great, wise, and beautiful? Do you think that by the end of the book Chancey has become great, wise, and beautiful?
2. *Chancey of the Maury River* is set in Rockbridge, Virginia, between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains, where the Maury River runs. Chancey calls these mountains "my blue mountains." What roles do the mountains and river play in Chancey's life, and how do those roles change as Chancey changes? How do Claire and Trevor interact with the "blue mountains" and the river?
3. *Compassionate. Cruel. Inclusive. Exclusive.* Which of these words best describes how the horses treat each other in *Chancey of the Maury River*? Is it fair to use adjectives such as these to describe the animal world? In chapter 6, Claire intervenes to stop Daisy from kicking Princess too many times (p. 50). Is she right to do so? Why or why not?
4. Consider the following clichés about friendship: opposites attract, or like attracts like. Do either of these fit Chancey and Claire's friendship? How so? What is a soul mate? Would that term describe Chancey and Claire? In chapter 4, we learn they both have blue eyes (p. 30). In chapter 2, we learn that Chancey has taught as a school horse for his entire life (p. 5), and in chapter 5, Claire tells Chancey that she dreams of becoming a teacher, too (p. 38). Would you say that Claire and Chancey mirror each other? How are they alike, and how are they different from each other?
5. Discuss the idea of mothering. Mothers and mothering are present throughout *Chancey of the Maury River*. Chancey often recalls his mother, Dam, and uses his memories of her for inspiration or comfort. In chapter 5, Chancey's recollections of Dam help him guide Claire through her grief. Think about other images of mothers and mothering in *Chancey*. In chapter 13, Chancey recalls wishing for Saddle Mountain "to bend over me and swaddle me" (p. 125). Can a mountain or a river really mother us? Can animals? Which characters are portrayed with mothering characteristics? Are they all female? Are they all "good" mothers? Name some of the mothering traits of the characters in *Chancey*.
6. Friendship is another theme in *Chancey*. The friendship between Claire and Chancey is a central focus of the story. In chapters 4 and 5, Claire acts as Chancey's nurse by nurturing him back to health. In chapter 10, Chancey calls Claire his "wings" (p. 92). Talk about the other roles Claire fills in their friendship. What roles does Chancey fill in Claire's life? Think of other examples of strong friendships in the story. Are there instances of friends arguing? What about friends telling each other the truth, even when the truth is not easy to tell? Do the friends in this story have to work at being friends? How are the friendships in this book like or unlike your own friendships?

7. Think about how nature and the weather are used in *Chancey*. Does anything from nature ever foreshadow a coming event? How might the weather be used symbolically in the story? In chapter 3, Chancey is engulfed by dense fog. In chapter 13, he colics during a frightful storm. What occurs in the plot while the weather acts up or clears up? In chapter 15, Chancey saves the life of an albino buck. Why do you think the albino buck appears at this point in the story?
8. Consider the voice of Chancey, the narrator. Is he literally speaking English or figuratively so? Do there seem to be any rules the author uses regarding this literal or figurative language? Can Trevor or Claire hear Chancey? Can Gwen, Macadoo, and Joey the donkey? What about animals outside of the genus, such as the beagle puppy, the llama, or the white buck? Do all of these animals hear Chancey or speak directly with him? When Chancey doesn't "speak" to another animal, how does he communicate? How does he communicate with people? Why might the author have written dialogue between some animals but not others? If you were writing a story from an animal's perspective, what dialogue rules would you establish?
9. Chancey repeatedly makes reference to "my Creator." In chapter 12, Chancey says, "At Tamworth Springs I asked for Claire. In fact, I begged for Claire" (p. 115). To whom is Chancey addressing his pleas in this scene? Describe Chancey's relationship with his creator and the earth. Are the two interchangeable to Chancey? Can you find some examples to support your ideas?
10. In chapter 14, Claire returns to the Maury River Stables to visit Chancey after falling off during a horse show at Tamworth Springs. At the end of the chapter, she plays "Ode to Joy" for Chancey and the horses. What might this song symbolize?
11. When Chancey begins teaching in the therapeutic riding program, he seems confused as to why some students are in the therapeutic school and some are not. Read chapter 19 again. In your own words, what is Chancey saying about people and our differences? If Chancey were a person, would he be considered an individual with a disability? Why or why not? What does Chancey learn from Kenzie, Zack, and Trevor? Would you say that riding was therapeutic for Claire?
12. Claire sometimes stutters because her grief over her parents' divorce has caused her to lose confidence and withdraw into herself. Her stutter is worse at times and disappears altogether at other times. In chapter 23, Mrs. Strickler tries to give Chancey Trevor's blue ribbon, and Claire's stutter immediately returns. Why? What has Claire lost in chapter 23? When do you notice Claire stuttering? Does Chancey have any traits that could be viewed similarly to Claire's stuttering? When do they appear?
13. The concepts of vision and seeing in *Chancey of the Maury River* are sometimes used literally and sometimes metaphorically. How so? As Chancey loses his eyesight, what does he begin to see more clearly? Or stated differently, as Chancey's vision in his eyes diminishes, what kind of new vision grows stronger?
14. On the outside, Chancey is old, blind, and arthritic. Is this the entirety of Chancey? What else is Chancey on the outside? What else is he on the inside? How does this story address the question of how we look at or see each other? What is more important to Chancey: how he looks on the outside to others, or who he is on the inside? Does his perspective change throughout the story? Are we always the same on the outside and the inside?

15. When a life event affects us deeply, we may not talk about it frequently or casually. In chapter 24, does Chancey mention Trevor directly? How do you think Trevor's death might have changed the friendship between Chancey and Claire? What do Chancey and Claire do to honor Trevor? What element of nature do you think Chancey and Claire forever associate with Trevor?
16. In chapter 24, Chancey attributes his good life, ultimately, to the love of Dam and Claire. He thinks he has fulfilled the story of his birth because of his mother's prayers and Claire's love. Do you agree with Chancey? Do you have a special story about your birth, too? Would you say *Chancey of the Maury River* is a more of a horse story or a love story?

EXTRA ACTIVITIES TO DO ON YOUR OWN

1. *Chancey of the Maury River* is narrated as a first-person account told in the past tense. The opening and closing chapters are narrated at essentially the same moment in time, with Chancey reflecting back on his life. Read chapters 1 and 24 back-to-back as a single piece of work. Does this change your perspective at all?
2. Find a recording of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" and listen to it. In the story, Claire plays this piece on a single violin for an audience of twenty horses. What do you think would happen if someone really did this? Could this have happened? How does "Ode to Joy" make you feel? What do you think about when you listen to "Ode to Joy"?
3. The author says she played "Gabriel's Oboe" from Ennio Morricone's soundtrack for the film *The Mission* while writing the first draft of *Chancey*. Find this piece of music, close your eyes, and listen. Can you picture Chancey? Where or how do you imagine him while "Gabriel's Oboe" is playing? If you could choose a song or musical work to represent your life, what would you choose today? Why?

OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Horse Tales

collected by June Crebbin, illustrated by Inga Moore

For anyone with a passion for horses, this collection is the perfect equine companion.

Fire, Bed, and Bone

by Henrietta Branford

In 1381 in England, a hunting dog recounts what happens to his beloved master, Rufus, and his family when they are arrested on suspicion of being part of the peasants' rebellion.

Eye of the Wolf

by Daniel Pennac, illustrated by Max Grafe

This fable of a boy and a wolf who dare to meet each other's gaze unfolds with humor, poignancy, and philosophical resonance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GIGI AMATEAU was born in Tippah County, Mississippi, and spent her early childhood and summers there with her grandparents. She grew up in Mechanicsville, Virginia, just outside of Richmond, and still lives in Richmond with her husband and daughter. She says, “The time in my life that I felt happiest, and like I most belonged, was as a little girl with my grandparents in Mississippi. Whether I’m writing about girls, horses, or fishing, my characters are all trying to find that place of most belonging.”

Passionate about the treatment of animals and the effect animals can have in therapeutic settings, Gigi Amateau has long wanted to write a book about a horse. It was her own horse, she says, that inspired the main character in *Chancey of the Maury River*.

A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in urban studies and planning, Gigi Amateau has worked for nearly twenty years in Richmond’s nonprofit community serving people with AIDS, older adults, and people who are homeless. She loves reading about John Adams, riding horses in the mountains, gardening with native plants, and chasing birds.