



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA
READING GUIDES

Beginner's Luck by Alyssa Brugman

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Reading Level: Independent Readers 9+ (8-13)

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SYNOPSIS

Beginner's Luck is the sequel to *For Sale or Swap*, but it can also be read as a stand-alone story.

In *For Sale or Swap* readers were introduced to Shelby, a 12-year-old girl who owns a reliable but ugly paint pony called Blue. Shelby's parents aren't wealthy, so it's a constant struggle for her to keep up with her friends Erin and Hayley, who can afford riding lessons, expensive showing outfits and saddles, and beautiful ponies.

In *Beginner's Luck*, Shelby's pony, Blue, is evicted from the vacant block the family has been using as a paddock. Now he's in the back yard, eating all of Shelby's dad's plants. Shelby's parents have threatened to give Blue away to the local riding school, unless Shelby can find a new place fast. It seems the 'Matchstick Town Challenge', a competition to find an abandoned movie set in the gully near Shelby's home, could be the answer to all her problems. Shelby knows where the Matchstick Town is – but first she has to sneak away from her friends, and then she has to take a photo of the Matchstick Town to win the prize. But why is Shelby's friend Lindsey trying to stop her? It seems the

Matchstick Town has a secret. Is it a bunyip, or just an old man who doesn't like his neighbours?

Beginner's Luck is an exciting story about girls, ponies, riding and friendship from an acclaimed Australian author. But it's not your average pony book – there's a depth of story, character and description here that takes this series to a new level.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Alyssa Brugman's first novel, *Finding Grace*, has been shortlisted for several awards, including the NSW Premier's and Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and the CBCA Book of the Year (Older Readers). It was a Commended Book in the 2002 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and has been translated into Dutch (for which it has been shortlisted for the 'Gouden Zoen' Award), Danish and German. *Walking Naked*, Alyssa's second novel, has been shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, awarded Honour Book in the 2003 CBCA Book of the Year (Older Readers) and is distributed in the US, UK, Germany and Belgium. Alyssa's third novel for young adults, *Being Bindy*, was released in mid-2004 and is a 2005 CBC Notable Book, and *For Sale or Swap*, the first of Shelby's adventures, was released in January 2005.

Before becoming a fiction writer, Alyssa worked in marketing and public relations. She now lives in the Hunter Valley, where she writes full-time and keeps four horses. Shadow, her first pony, is a bay mare in her early thirties. Istana Kazrah is a chestnut Arab mare. Greenwood Elizabeth is a five-year-old grey Riding Pony mare. Reddy is a bay thoroughbred gelding who belongs to Alyssa's sister.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Alyssa says:

'When I sat down in front of the blank screen I decided to write the sort of book that I would have enjoyed reading when I was about eleven or twelve. My mother bought me my first pony when I was that age, and I read lots of pony books, but they were mostly English and used expressions that weren't commonly heard here. The girls in them went hunting, and rode on bridle paths. They went to blacksmiths, and all their horses were stabled. Many of the books – enjoyable as they were – outlined a series of events that were quite unreal and foreign to me. I sometimes wondered whether the people who wrote them actually owned horses and knew what they were talking about.

'I wanted to write about ponies in a way that Australian readers would recognise. It was important to me that readers could become immersed in the story, and feel torn by the dilemmas that Shelby faces, without the distraction you get when you don't believe that the incidents in the story could really happen.

'To make it more real, I went for lots of rides in the bush around Sydney, and tried to incorporate what I saw, smelt, heard and experienced while I was out there. I also competed in a few local shows to refresh my memory and see what had changed since I was last in the show ring.

'Most of my stories have been about relationships, but I wanted this one to be an adventure as well, and so to make the story more exciting, every time Shelby was faced with a situation I thought, "What is the worst thing that could happen, within the bounds of reality?" and that's what I made take place.

'I had great fun writing this book, and I hope that energy comes through in the story.'

STUDY NOTES / POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Shelby sometimes can't afford all the expensive gear her friends have. What are some of the costs of keeping a horse?
- Shelby promises to help her mum with the housework, so that her mum can study and find a part-time job – but Shelby doesn't do the things she's promised. Have you ever promised to help someone, but you didn't keep your promise?
- Shelby and her friend Lindsey keep secrets from each other, and it gets them into trouble later on. Should you tell your best friends everything?
- Shelby doesn't always do the right thing. What does she do wrong in this book that gets her into trouble, and what should she have done? (For instance, yelling at her parents for leaving Blue in the front yard before she asked them if he'd been looked after; entering the competition by forging her mum's signature; going into the storm water tunnel when there's water flowing through it; and going into the Pocket without thinking first about how to get herself and Blue out.)
- Shelby imagines the mysterious person in the Pocket might be a bunyip, a monster said to inhabit Australia's swamps and billabongs. You can find more information, games and activities about bunyips at <http://www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/bunyips/>
- How does the old man, Frank, survive in the gully? What are the advantages of living by yourself, with no family or friends or neighbours? What are the disadvantages?
- Frank tells each of the girls a different version of his story. Do you think there is anything true in what he says? Are there times when you've told the same story two different ways? Can a story change over time?
- Alyssa bases some of the events in the story on her own experiences. For example, she once saw emergency services rescuing someone who had been in an accident and fallen down into a gully, so this helped her

imagine the scene when Lindsey is rescued. What experiences have you had that you could use in a story?

- Alyssa tried to incorporate what she 'saw, smelt, heard and experienced' when she was out riding in the bush. Does it make the story feel more real to read about Shelby smelling and hearing and tasting things, not just seeing them?

PRAISE FOR *FOR SALE OR SWAP*

'Although this story is primarily for aficionados of horse stories, it has enough substance and suspense to engage other readers. It takes place in a strong if cash-strapped family setting with a close-knit group of friends – all girls – who react and interact in a manner typical of younger teenagers.' Joan Zahnleiter, *Magpies*, March 2005

'This is the most fantastic book for pony lovers – and every other girl for that matter! ... A great read for girls aged 9–12.' *Launceston Examiner*

'This pacy adventure for younger girls who love animals, especially horses, is a real departure for the edgy and talented young Australian author Alyssa Brugman' Judith Way, *Fiction Focus* Vol 19 No 1 (2005)

'Brugman's novel flows beautifully, and you can almost believe that Shelby the heroine is sitting next to you, confiding her story into the reader. The story is heartfelt and meaningful, with an underlying message that appears more and more as the story progresses – beauty is only skin deep ... Above all, I think the best thing about this book was its heroine. Shelby reminded me of what we all are: human. She makes mistakes and has a lot of faults, but among them are some values that we can all learn from: honesty, friendship, courage, persistence and particularly loyalty. I would recommend this book for readers aged 9 to 12. Nine stars!' Mikaella, aged 12, Adelaide, South Australia, on the <http://www.goldcreek.act.edu.au/yara/> website