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READING GUIDES

## Hot Potato by Alyssa Brugman

Random House Australia, March 2006  
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Reading Level: Independent Readers 9+ (8-13)

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### SYNOPSIS

*Hot Potato* is the sequel to *For Sale or Swap* and *Beginner's Luck*, 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 needed to find money to pay for Blue's agistment, since he was evicted from the vacant block the family had been using as a paddock. But her adventures trying to photograph the legendary 'Matchstick Town', an abandoned movie set down a steep-sided gully, lead her into danger. Her friend Lindsey is hurt and Shelby has to find a way to get her to safety.

In the third book of the series, *Hot Potato*, Shelby is working hard at the stables, helping Lindsey look after the horses as a way of paying for Blue's agistment. But as hard as she tries, Shelby just can't stay out of trouble. This time, she and her friends Lindsey and Erin visit the horse auctions with Clint (the farrier from *For Sale or Swap*). While Clint is away from the sale floor, the girls see a beautiful young pony that is going cheap. They figure out that they can afford it if they pool the money in their wallets. The girls are sure that, between them, they have the skills to give the horse some light training and sell it on for at least three times the money.

The problem is, none of the girls are allowed to have a new horse. They each tell their parents that the new horse (which they call 'Hot Potato') belongs to one of the other girls. Unfortunately 'Hotty' is not as easy to hide, or train, as they had imagined. She's okay to ride bareback, but as soon as the girls saddle her, she goes crazy! And that's not the end of their problems, because with broken saddles, a fake agistment entry and some suspicious parents, their secret is getting harder to hide. Worse, Shelby finds \$50 on the stable floor and pockets it – intending to use it to pay for her share of Hotty, and replace it in the stable when she can find the money. But finding \$50 isn't easy for Shelby ...

*Hot Potato* 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.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### 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. *For Sale or Swap*, the first of Shelby's adventures, was released in January 2005, and *Beginner's Luck* was released in July 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’.

## 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 and her friends are keeping a big secret from their parents. Should you tell your parents 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, taking the fifty dollars from the stable floor.)
- Alyssa bases some of the events in the story on her own experiences, and that helps her to describe them. For example, reading *Hot Potato* you can tell that Alyssa has been to a horse auction because she describes it so vividly. 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?
- Shelby often thinks about what she wants to be when she grows up – and they’re always horse-related careers, such as managing stables, or becoming a horse vet or chiropractor, or becoming a trainer and riding teacher. She doesn’t think there school is helping her achieve these goals, but she does find that there are things she needs to know – she would need maths if she ran stables, to do the accounts, or she would need science to become a horse chiropractor. Do you know what job you would

like to do when you grow up? Who is your role model, just as Mrs Edel and the horse chiropractor are role models for Shelby? What subjects at school can help you achieve your goal?

## PRAISE

### *Beginner's Luck*

'Another beautifully written horse story from this award-winning author.'  
Australian Booksellers Association *Kids' Reading Guide* 2005–2006

'*Beginner's Luck* is an interesting story about a girl named Shelby who is a teenager that loves riding horses ... I enjoyed reading this story and think that this book will perhaps appeal to children aged from eight or nine years old and up, particularly kids who enjoy reading about horse related adventures. I think that this novel is well written and easy to understand ... This book has many exciting surprises lurking between the pages. I liked all of the thrills, dangers and wonders that were cleverly weaved into the story by the author. At some stages, I found that I couldn't put the book down because of the intensity of the story. I can recommend this book to other young readers with an interest in girls and their horses.' Caitlin, aged 13, Canberra, ACT, from the <http://www.goldcreek.act.edu.au/yara/> website

### *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 places 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