

## **TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *MOONRUNNER***

**Written by Mark Thomason**

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**MARK THOMASON** grew up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. He believes his love of story telling grew from listening to old-time radio programs such as 'Creaking Door' and 'The Shadow' with his sister and brothers, and the horse stories his father told about when he was a young man chasing mustangs in Montana.

Mark's family moved around California, living for a time in Kernville, where many western movies were being made, and Santa Barbara, where he discovered the world of stories and adventure through the city library. After high school, Mark joined the US Navy and at twenty-one went to Oklahoma State University to become a structural engineer. He has worked on many international engineering projects and has lived in Japan, Spain, Puerto Rico, Alaska, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Hong Kong. He has also travelled extensively in Asia and Europe. He and his wife live in Sydney. Mark has written in his spare time for many years. *Moonrunner* is his first published book.

### **SYNOPSIS**

Casey Jenner has just moved from the prairies of Montana in the USA to the farm his dad inherited in Omeo in the Southern Highlands of eastern Australia. In Australia, things are different and Casey has a hard time settling in. At school some of the boys beat him up and say his grandfather stole money to buy the farm.

While running away from school after being beaten, Casey takes shelter from a storm in a rocky cliff. He sees a brumby herd led by a black stallion and names the stallion Moonrunner. For the first time since he's been in Australia, Casey is excited.

Things continue to look up when Casey gets his own horse, Lady. However, as winter approaches, Pa realises there isn't enough feed for all the horses and says Lady must be turned loose to winter with Moonrunner's herd.

In summer, Casey has recaptured Lady but Moonrunner is caught and mistreated by Mr Parkes, a local station owner. In a bid to free the stallion, Casey makes a bet with Mr Parkes: if he wins the Omeo race riding Lady, Casey can have Moonrunner; but if

Lady doesn't win, Mr Parkes gets Lady and her unborn foal. The race is a tie, so Casey keeps Lady but doesn't win Moonrunner. Instead, he buys Moonrunner with his share of the winnings. Casey and Pa nurse the wild stallion back to health, slowly winning his confidence. They release him in autumn. However, with Moonrunner having eaten much of the winter feed, they must again release Lady to be with Moonrunner.

In early spring, Casey goes to fetch Lady but he is caught in a blizzard and nearly dies. Searching and searching, Casey still can't find his mare. Then Moonrunner leads him to Lady's body in the snow—she has perished in the blizzard. Weeks later, Moonrunner brings Lady's foal to the farm. Casey names the filly Little Lady.

### **WRITING *MOONRUNNER***

*Moonrunner* is Mark Thomason's first published novel but is by no means his first writing effort. Mark notes that, 'It's said that a writer doesn't become a writer until they have written the first million words. I have fifteen unpublished manuscripts in the closet.' The story that eventually became *Moonrunner* was originally titled *Casey and the Broomtails*. Mark wrote it on a manual typewriter while travelling around Spain in a van. It was based on stories his father had told him about a black mustang stallion in Montana and about a mare named Lady that ran so fast 'her belly almost touched the ground'.

Years later when working in Hong Kong Mark met and married an Australian teacher. This gave him the idea of reviewing his manuscript and setting the story in Australia. After much research, he decided to set the story in Omeo in the highlands of Victoria in 1895. The town suited the story because it had brumbies and an annual rodeo and horse race. There was also a gold rush in Omeo in the 1850s that gave his main characters, the Jenners, a reason to move from Montana to Australia.

Once this setting was chosen, Mark undertook more detailed research. He used the Internet while living in Hong Kong to research Omeo. When he visited Australia he searched bookstores for factual books about the life in the mountains of Victoria in the late nineteenth century, and especially about cattlemen and brumbies. Mark also travelled to Omeo to get an impression of the countryside and to visit the local museum.

Much of Mark's original research on wild horses in America remained valid. For instance, he still included the fact that horses break the ice in the winter with their hooves and the cows, which can't do this, follow them around so they can drink.

Changing the novel's location meant Mark had to pay special attention to using Australian English rather than American English. He sent the original manuscript to Brumby Watch, a group that protects brumbies, and they made useful suggestions about including Australian horse jargon. For instance, corrals in America are yards in Australia, barns are sheds, outhouses are dunnies, biscuits are scones, canyons or draws are gorges, ridges are spurs, a ranch is a station and mustangs (or 'broomtails' because their tails are often short from being caught in the brush) are brumbies.

Mark's love of horses lies at the heart of *Moonrunner*. His father told stories about mustangs in Montana and Mark's family always had horses in the Californian mountains. He has also owned horses when he worked in Puerto Rico and Utah. Mark also loves horse stories. He's read *National Velvet*, *The Black Stallion*, *The Return of the Black Stallion*, *Snowy Mountains Saga* and *The Silver Stallion*.

In *Moonrunner* the main character, Casey, has strong bonds with his riding horse, Lady, and the wild black stallion, Moonrunner. While he has a strong urge to look after and ride Lady his relationship with Moonrunner is different. The first time Casey sees Moonrunner the stallion is wild and free; that's the way Casey wants him to remain. Although he helps the stallion recover, Casey has no wish to own or ride him.

The other major focus of the story is on Casey's difficulties settling in to a new life in Australia. In the beginning, Casey struggles with feelings of loss and alienation. As well as having to leave his old friends and his beloved horse Arrowhead behind, he is picked on for being the grandson of a man who is rumoured to have been a scoundrel. Mark used the difference in language between America and Australia to highlight Casey's sense of dislocation. Casey corrects his mother, who uses American terms, showing that he really is trying to adjust to his new life. By the end of the story Casey has changed from a worried, grieving boy to someone with confidence in his own abilities. He has managed to overcome prejudice and accepts the fact that he is in a new country to stay. He even relinquishes his baseball team's photo and is learning cricket, showing his determination to fit in. Mark feels he was drawn to this theme because his own family

moved a lot. His worst experience came in eighth grade when his family moved from a tiny town in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Santa Barbara, a big town on the ocean. Mark says, 'I didn't know how to dress or act like a city kid. My only friends were my brothers and my sister. Three years later, we moved again, so as a twelfth-grader I had to start again with no friends.'

Mark feels it's Casey's determination that gets him through his difficulties, even when it means taking risks: 'Casey doesn't give up fighting Mike, not in earning Lady or finding her after winter, not in winning the race to save Moonrunner.' Casey trusts his own instincts and above all, Moonrunner in his wild freedom, inspires him to keep trying.

### **DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES**

1. The only special thing that Casey could bring to Australia was his baseball bat. If you had to move and could only take one thing, what would it be? Why would you choose it?
2. Moonrunner inspires Casey. Write a list of words that describe how Casey feels about the stallion. Use them to write a short poem about Moonrunner, set either when he is running free or when he is being held captive by Mr Parkes.
3. Make a list of words that describe Casey in the beginning of the novel. Write another list that describes him at the end. What is different about his life? How has he changed?
4. Casey is bullied by some of the boys at school. Discuss what makes them act like bullies and why their attitudes towards him change.
5. Casey's grandfather came to Australia before Casey was born. His actions affected Casey's life profoundly, though Casey never met him. Do you think it is fair that Casey and his parents are judged by what his grandfather is said to have done?
6. Although Casey speaks the same language as the people in Australia, the small differences in language make him feel like a stranger. Pick out three words in the book that are used differently in Australian and American English. See if you can find out a bit about the history of these words and why they are different. Illustrate your research.
7. Casey's parents are sensible and practical. How do they help him with his problems?
8. Do some of your own research on brumbies and mustangs. Make a poster that compares the places they live in, what they are like and their history.