

Wind Rider

By
Susan Williams

A Brief Study Guide to Accompany the Book



Questions for Discussion:

1.) The Trail Guide for the Gila Cliff dwellings in New Mexico states that "In many ways, these people were much like ourselves. They laughed, wept, loved, sang, feared, and fought. In other ways their lives were so different as to be unimaginable. Still, it is only through the imagination, with a little help from archaeological studies, that we can ever enter the foreign country that is our past."

Wind Rider takes place in an entirely different part of the world and a different time period, yet some features of primitive cultures are almost universal. What might have been the same, and what might have been different in the lives of steppe-land hunter gatherers and the lives of southwestern cliff dwellers? Do you think it would be reasonable to base some research on what is known about primitive cultures in general?

2.) The author, Susan Williams, says that "One might call Wind Rider a work of science fiction. Looking backward into prehistory is just as mysterious, enticing, and difficult as peering into the future." What part of the story would be easy to research and what might be difficult? How would you go about it? How might the author know or guess that primitive people traded children's clothing? How would she know that Little Brother might carry his tattered wolf's tail everywhere? What would be the same or different when you compare Fern's world with your own?

3.) Fern takes issue with her role as a female in her culture. Do you think she is right, or sometimes exaggerates when she is angry? Life was pretty harsh then; would you rather have been a man or a woman six thousand years ago? How do you feel about being male/female in the twenty-first century? How are chores divided in your home?

4.) In Wind Rider, both Fern and her twin brother, Flint, become adults. Most cultures have coming of age ceremonies. Do you think they are important? What sort of coming of age ceremonies do we have in modern American culture? What would your own ceremony be like if you could make one up for yourself?

5.) Fern says that she and her twin brother are as different as the sun and the earth, yet as connected. Why does she use these images? In what ways are the brother and sister different and in what ways are they similar, or connected?

6.) At one point in the story, Fern calls her twin, "bison turd of a brother." People have probably used not-so-nice words and phrases that express anger and frustration for a long time, certainly since the time of Moses and the Ten Commandments. But many of the words we use today are modern slang. How does a writer of historical fiction choose authentic sounding curses?

7.) Names are very important in *Wind Rider*. In cultures with a high infant mortality, children are sometimes not named until they have passed the time of highest risk. Williams decided to have Fern's people follow this practice. How do you feel about it? Would not assigning a name to an infant make it any easier to lose that child? If you had been named on your third birthday, what name and totem might you have had?

Naming an animal somehow changes the relationship we have with that individual creature. When an animal is intended for slaughter, we seldom name it. Some people feel that bestowing a name signifies taking responsibility for that animal. Williams says that to avoid mixing up characters, and to keep things uncomplicated, she chose not to assign names in the Proto-Indic European (PIE) language that is thought to have been spoken in this region and time period. Why do you think she deliberately chose the names she did for her human and animal characters? Why might these names sound similar to Native American names?

8.) There are many challenges when writing a story which takes place in prehistory. Why might the author use the phrase *ferns sprouts* instead of *fiddle heads*? How does she describe the passage of time without clocks and calendars?

9.) Think about the word *drive*, as used in the phrases: *drive cattle*, *drive a horse*, and *drive a car*. The word *ride* may have existed in some way before people rode horses, but it certainly must have changed its meaning and significance at that time. Can you think of other words that have changed their usage or meaning with changes in history? (examples: shoot/shot, record, window)

10.) What do you think happens inside Fern's head when she is imprisoned in the dark of the purification tent? What does her decision for action say about the importance of faith in human relationships and the choice she makes at the end of the story?

Further Reading

Fiction:

The Clan of the Cave Bear Series, by Jean Auel
Julie of the Wolves, and *Julie*, by Jean Craighead George
Lady of Horses, by Judith Tarr
I Rode a Horse of Milk White Jade, by Diane Lee Wilson
Dar and the Spear Thrower, by Marjorie Cowley
The Boy of the Painted Cave, by Justen Denzel
Maroo of the Winter Caves, by AnnTurnbull

Nonfiction:

The Mummies of Urumchi, by Elizabeth Wayland Barber
Who Harnessed the Horse, the Story of Animal Domestication, by Margery Facklam
Horsewatching by Desmond Morris
Never Cry Wolf, by Farley Mowat
People of the Deer, by Farley Mowat
Horses through Time, edited by Sandra Olsen
The Man Who Listens to Horses, by Monty Roberts
Out of the Wild, the Story of Domesticated Animals, photographs and text by Hope Ryden
Early Humans, Eyewitness Books,
The Human Dawn, Time Life Books
From Wolf to Woof, The Evolution of Dogs, National Geographic, January 2001

Websites

<http://silkroadcaravan.blogspot.com/>

http://www.livescience.com/animalworld/061024_ancient_horses.html

<http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?chanID=sa003&articleID=8BC32BC7-E7F2-99DF-33BAB01C6B5B7E79>

<http://kazakhstan.neweurasia.net/?p=190>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/unearthingmysteries_20021105.shtml

<http://www.treemail.nl/takh/> (Foundation for the Preservation and Protection of Przewalski Horse or Takhi)

<http://www.thunderbirdatlatl.com> (New York State builder of reproductions of ancient spear throwers)

<http://www.kyhorsepark.com/imh/othersit.html> (The International Museum of the Horse)

<http://users.hartwick.edu/iaes/index.htm> (The International Institute for Ancient Equestrian Studies)

http://www.carnegiemuseums.org/cmag/bk_issue/2004/septoct/cmnh.html (Ancient Bronzes of the Asian Grasslands)

http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2006/10/20/horse_arc.html?category=archaeology&guid=20061020161530

(Horses First Domesticated in Kazakhstan?)