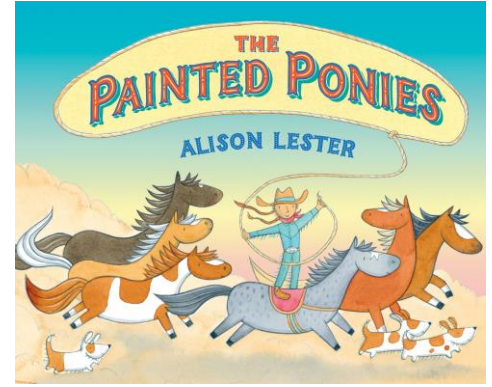


# The Painted Ponies

By Alison Lester



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Hardcover  
Recommended for 4-7-year-olds

## Summary

This story of friendship and freedom will touch the hearts of readers young and old. Supporting the beauty of her words are Alison Lester's signature-style illustrations, featuring lots of gorgeous sunset colours and adorable animals.



Matilda visits her Grandma Lucky's house and discovers six small carved, painted ponies kept in a wooden wagon. Grandma Lucky explains that her parents owned a travelling show when she was a child, and that she and her family toured all over the country. One summer, when crossing the Smoky Mountains, they spied six wild ponies – a gold palomino, a chestnut, a bay, a pinto, a brown and a dappley grey – and fell in love immediately. Lucky's father insisted the ponies were wild and shouldn't be tamed, but that winter Lucky's mother and uncle returned to the mountains to find the ponies shivering with cold and captured them so they could become part of the show.

Each pony proves to be clever and brave and learns a different trick. They are a huge hit in the show but, as time goes on, they begin looking sadly in the direction of the mountains, and Lucky knows they should be free to go home. When the show reaches the mountains again, she lets them out one moonlit night and watches them gallop away...except for her favourite, the dappley grey, who slows to a trot, then finally turns and comes back to stay with her.

## Use in the curriculum

*The Painted Ponies* can be enjoyed as a Read Aloud book or read individually in order to savour the illustrations and story.

Most of the text is prose, apart from a repeated rhyming refrain:

*The gold palomino, the chestnut, the bay...  
...the pinto, the brown and dappley grey.*

The story refers back to a time when travelling shows and circuses were more common. Children may not have encountered these outside of storybooks. The vocabulary is relatively sophisticated, with many terms to do with horses: *clairvoyant*, (horse) *stall*, *guitar*, *lasso*, *shimmering*, *swirling*, *bucked and danced*, *deep of winter*, *huddled*, *stamped and whinnied*, *moonlit night*, *sliprails*, *out of the gloom*.

Themes of the bond between humans and animals and the idea that wild animals should be free will lead to interesting discussions for young children. The endpapers complete the story for curious children in an intriguing way.

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## Themes

- horses
- Australian bush
- circus
- friendship with animals
- animals
- respect for wild animals

## Discussion questions

### Prediction and comprehension

Show the cover of *The Painted Ponies* to your students, reading the name of the book out loud, and ask the following:

- What sort of costume is the girl wearing?
- What is she holding in her hand?
- Why might she be standing on one of the ponies?
- Where might you see someone like this perform?
- How many ponies can you see here? How many dogs?
- The girl is standing on the only pony wearing something on its back. What is it called?
- What do you think this story might be about?

Now turn the cover over and show the back of the book to your students, reading out loud what the book will be about.

- Does the image of the large tent and trucks give you more clues about why the girl might be standing on the pony on the front cover image?

Now read the story to your class and, when finished, start a discussion with the following questions:

- Why did Lucky and her mother want to capture the ponies?
- Why didn't Lucky's father think they should capture the ponies?
- Do you think capturing the ponies was the right thing to do, if they were cold in the winter?
- Do you think the ponies were happy in the travelling show?
- Why did Lucky let the ponies return to the mountains at the end of the story?
- Do you think she did the right thing letting them go?
- How do you think she felt when the ponies were set free?
- How do you think she felt when the dapple grey came back?
- Lucky is a grandmother now. Why do you think she owns six painted wooden ponies so many years after the events of the story?

### Visual Literacy

Turn to the first double-page spread image of the ponies in the Smoky Mountains in summer. Can you tell whether the ponies are happy in this illustration? How does the book's

creator show us that they are happy? [*Answer: they are playing in the first illustration, jumping about; it is warm, and there is plenty of grass for them to eat.*]

Now compare this image with them in the winter, a few pages later. Are they happy here? How has the book's creator shown us that they feel this way? [*Answer: their heads are bowed, they are peppered with snow, and there is nothing to eat but the food that Lucky's mum brings in the bucket.*]

Between these images there is a page where Lucky explains that she and her mum dreamed about the ponies after they first saw them. How does the illustration show us that they thought about the ponies? [*Answer: the thought-bubble above the image of Lucky and her mum driving.*]

Turn to the last page of the story. The page has no words, but the image tells us a lot about what Grandma Lucky and Matilda do on the farm. Encourage students to describe this in their own words. Before moving on to read the final endpaper spread, ask them who they think the horse on the final page might be, and why.

## After reading

Ask students to choose one of the ponies and tell the story from that animal's point of view. Encourage them to think about how that pony felt when they lived in the mountains, what their special talent was in the travelling show, how they felt about living in captivity, and why they wanted to return to the mountains (or not, if they are pretending to be dapple grey). Before reading the closing endpaper spread, ask the students to pick a name for the pony they chose.

Compare the front and back endpapers and ask students to describe what is different about the two. Now focus on the images of Star and Luna on the back endpapers and see if students can tell where each gets its names from? Also ask the students which they preferred: their chosen name for the pony they wrote about above, or the name here.

Discuss with your students the fact that only certain types of animals – domestic ones – are featured in the travelling show. Ask them why they think the creator decided not to include any exotic animals such as lions, tigers or bears. [*Answer: because it is inhumane to keep wild animals in captivity.*] Ask the students to pick their favourite out of the show animals besides the ponies: the Yakandandahs (footy-playing dogs), dancing goats, clairvoyant hens, or Hercules, the biggest horse in the world.

Ask your students what they liked about this story. What didn't they like about it? How would they describe the book to their best friend who hadn't read it yet?

## From the author

'I have never been part of a travelling show, but I've been fascinated with them all my life. When I was a little kid, the local show was a big event every year. The kids who travelled with the show always came to school for the week they camped at the show grounds, and I was so envious of their life, travelling all over Australia with their families and animals. Dad always entered some of his stud Herefords in the show, and he'd squeeze our ponies in the back of the cattle truck so we could compete in riding events. We never won much, but we loved it and especially loved the side shows and rides.

'I've met quite a few show families as I've worked around Australia, often in remote places, and I still envy that lifestyle and their can-do attitude, training animals and working with them, fixing things on the go, getting schoolwork done on the road.

*(continued over page)*

'The Queensland show school even came to visit me once! The Queensland Education Department had a classroom bus that travelled the show circuit so the kids could have a regular school.

'Another influence while writing the book was my love of animals, especially horses and ponies, and the fun we had as kids trying to do tricks on them. And also, the old story about how the greatest Arabian horse of all was chosen: after a long trek in the desert, a mob of horses was charging towards water, and when the horse master called them, just one – his favourite – came back.

'Some things need to be free.'

— Alison Lester

## About the author

Alison Lester grew up on a farm by the sea, and first rode a horse as a baby in her father's arms. Her picture books mix imaginary worlds with everyday life, encouraging children to believe in themselves and celebrate the differences that make them special. Alison is involved in many community art projects and spends part of every year travelling to remote Indigenous communities, using her books to help children and adults write and draw about their own lives.

In 2012, Alison became Australia's first Children's Book Laureate, a position she shared with Boori Monty Pryor. In 2016, she was awarded the Dromkeen Medal for her outstanding achievement in the creation of Australian children's and young adult literature, and in 2018 she became the first children's book creator to win the Melbourne Prize for Literature, for her outstanding contribution to Australian literature and cultural and intellectual life. In 2019, Alison was awarded an Australia Post Legends Award and featured on a stamp, as well as being the recipient of a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the 2019 Australia Day Honours list.

