

The Scorpio Races

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By Maggie Stiefvater

Modern Fantasy

Senior Teens: (ages 15-19)

On the island of Thisby, November is the month of the Scorpio races: the month where the deadly water horses are captured from the sea, the month where racers gamble their lives and tourists flock to watch, the month that both Sean Kendrick and Puck Connolly risk everything. Told from their two perspectives in alternating chapters, this story presents a fascinating blend of magical fantasy and modern living, with the mythical water horses ceaselessly drawn to the island, and the magic of the races thrumming in the blood of the island folk from the dawn of time.

Puck (Kate) Connolly has never ridden a water horse before, but when her older brother Gabe decides to leave for the mainland, Puck declares in a fit of defiance that she will ride in the Scorpio Races. The Connolly kids are orphans, and Puck is desperate to keep her little family together, at least for one month longer, even if it means jeopardizing everything she loves (including their house and her horse Dove, not to mention her life). She is often "in the mood to be terrifying" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 397), but despite her savage courage, her sharp tongue, and the support from her younger brother Finn, finding a water horse and being accepted as a racer is harder than anticipated. She is, after all, the first woman to ever compete in the Scorpio races, despite it being the 21st century, and the islander men are not pleased: "there has never been a woman on that beach and you're wanting us to make this the first year for it?" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 197).

Nineteen-year-old Sean Kendrick, on the other hand, has no trouble being acknowledged as a racer, having won the Scorpio Races four times already. An orphan himself, he works for Malvern at the largest stables on the island of Thisby, his steady quietness and keen perception making him invaluable. Even though Sean is known everywhere as the Scorpio champion and as one of the best horsemen on the island, no one really knows him; he speaks little and keeps his emotions buried deep, his only loves being the sea and Corr, Malvern's blood-red stallion and the fastest water horse in captivity. But for Sean, the race this year is different, and not just because of the ginger-haired girl with the fierce frown and breathtaking bravery. Sean has made a deal with Malvern: "Sell me Corr, and I'll race for you one last year" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 119). If he wins, he keeps Corr; if not, he loses both his horse and his job. But the desire to win becomes more complex for both characters as Sean comes to know Puck's family and Puck falls in love with Corr; they cannot both win, after all.

This story is beautifully written; Sean and Puck's voices are contrasting and distinct, the first-person perspective providing direct access to the thoughts of two

Introduction

A brief synopsis

Thesis presented
(highlighted in
yellow)

First perspective
explained in
detail with
supporting
quotes and
examples from
the book.

Second
perspective
enhanced with
quotes and
examples from
the book.

of the most fascinating characters I have ever read. Puck and Sean's story is punctuated with a relatable and engaging support cast, including Puck's nervous but loyal younger brother Finn, George Holly, an enthusiastic and surprisingly clever American tourist, three supportive sisters who have adopted the Conolly kids, the mysterious island wife Peg Gratton, and of course, the beautiful waterhorse Corr and Puck's island pony Dove. While being one of my favourite novels due to the complex character development, breathtaking prose, and engrossing world-building, this story is darker: the main characters have to deal with loss, abandonment, various family issues, and cruelty (Puck is discriminated against for being the first girl to ride; Sean is treated cruelly by Malvern's jealous son). The book also contains descriptions of violence, blood, and some gore (the water-horses are savage and carnivorous; some do not differentiate between human and animal, especially when scared or angry). In many ways though, the darker elements make the story all the more powerful and add to its raw energy; and as Sean says, "this island runs on courage, not blood" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 198).

The writer's opinions stated and supported with examples from text.

Other themes briefly discussed.

Maggie Stiefvater effortlessly intertwines this modern adventure with timeless legend, overlaid with the ancient heartbeat of Puck and Sean's island, the island that is their lifeblood, a "cunning and secretive thing" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 254). If Puck is the island, "grown from the rocks and dirt around her" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 359), wild and untamed, Sean is a "reminder of what the horses mean to the island - a bridge between what we are and that thing about Thisby that we all want but can't seem to touch" (Stiefvater, 2013, p. 357). Like the island and waterhorse, the main characters Puck and Sean are drawn to each other in a complex and perilous dance, an echo of this ancient love. The terrifyingly dangerous Scorpio races provide a vivid background for the deeper and more meaningful story of Sean and Puck and what they learn of courage, sacrifice, and the importance of family.

At the end of the essay, include a recommendation of your book. To whom would you recommend it?

Reference list

Stiefvater, M. (2013). The scorpio races. Scholastic, Inc.

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