

# Reading Guide



EREWHON



## ✧ About the Author ✧



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**J. M. LEE** spent his formative years searching for talking animals and believing he could control the weather. After pursuing nerdy interests in comparative film studies, screenwriting, and Shakespeare, he graduated with a much nerdier degree in linguistics. In addition to writing novels, he enjoys teaching his dog new vocabulary words and updating his snooty coffee blog.






## ★ Author's Note ★

In spite of being one of the most iconic national events that took place during the westward migration, the Pony Express is so unclearly documented that no one even knows for certain who was the first rider out of St. Joe's on the fateful first day of the Pony. Although neckties are often seen in illustrations depicting Pony Express riders, there is no clear evidence that the riders had any uniform whatsoever, and if they did, what it was. In reality, most of what we commonly know about the Pony is oral myth, reinforced by historical figures who wrote and said great and wonderful things about it.

Both at the time and in retrospect, though the value of it has become more informed as time moves ever onward, the Pony Express in many ways encapsulated the essence of the colonial settler mentality of "winning the West." In retrospect, we can still find this to ring true: the Pony may indeed have had a sharper impact than other migratory trails due to its specific role in carrying mail. Its role in maintaining (or the fantasy that it maintained) communications between settler communities, establishing "control" of the continent from east to west, was an emotional and logistical source of power for the colonial community.




Documentation indicates that the ages of the riders varied, usually in the range of fifteen to twenty-five, although some were documented to be much older, and some younger. Many accounts have Buffalo Bill (William Cody) as a rider at age thirteen, but many other accounts, including that of his own sister, dispute whether or not he was actually a rider, in spite of his many grand claims of having been the greatest Pony rider ever (I encourage you to look into what we know about the circumstances under which this claim was made). Only white boys and men appear on what limited roster documents have survived to the digital age. Actual hiring processes are unclear, and I could find no documentation of female or non-white riders.

So how likely is it that a genderqueer AFAB and/or a biracial rider could have joined the Pony? Probably unlikely. And how likely is it that these two bright, resilient youths might be able to uncover and understand the tremendous, divisive power of the Pony, even once they had embarked upon it? Even more unlikely, but not impossible.

And so in that moment of uncertainty, I've written this book.

The below is an informal and incomplete list of the objects and ideas that informed *The Nightland Express*, and a suggestion about the veracity or believability of it.

**Probably objectively true:** The Pony Express was founded by William H. Russell, William B. Waddell, and Alexander Majors. It was in various states of operation from April 1860 through October 1861. The Pony's trail raced alongside many other historical trails, including the Oregon Trail, the California Road, the Mormon Handcart Trail, and others. Ironically,




the enterprise financially ruined its pioneers. Many legends famously declare that the operation was finally put out to pasture on October 24, 1861, the day the transcontinental telegraph was completed (maybe one day I will write about telephones and fairies as well).

**Also probably true, or at least mostly factual:** The Pony Express hired young people to carry mail on assigned routes between St. Joseph, Missouri, and California. The endpoint stations changed over time, but for the most part the route ended in either Placerville or Sacramento—a distance of roughly seventeen hundred miles. In this book, I’ve maintained some of the place names that we are familiar with today in an effort to help the reader visualize the geography. That being said, many of the locations in this book, while inspired by real world locations, either are completely fictional, or—in spite of being real places—are not actually near enough to the Pony to have been encountered by Ben and Jesse.

Each rider was equipped with a mochilla, which would be quickly swapped off the old horse onto the new horse. Riders were given mere minutes to change horses at each station. Every one hundred miles or so, there was a home station, where the riders could sleep before performing the return route.

**Also most likely true:** Alexander Majors did, in fact, give each of his riders a special Pony Express Bible. The oath that Jesse and Ben swear on the Bible is the official rider oath. Of course, the oath they swear to Declan is a different one.

**Some horse facts of the probably true variety:** Various breeds of horses were used on the Pony Express, depending on



the region of the route. It is estimated about four hundred to five hundred horses were involved. Morgans and thoroughbreds were predominantly used on the eastern plains, pintos often in the rockier regions of the middle section, and mustangs for the western desert. The horses would be changed about every ten miles at stations, and ridden a pace of roughly twenty miles per hour.

From all this it is both specifically documented, and can easily be imagined, that many horses (and other animals) died during, and because of, the Pony. This fact often goes without reflection when people consider the amazing feats of the humans who did the riding; I could not conscionably let it go without comment in *Nightland*.


**And so, finally:** This book was meant to be a pocket dimension investigation exploring something Jesse says in the desert: The Express just carries mail. But as always, it is not the whole story, just one part of it; a snapshot of something that is dynamic and, like everything else, inevitably transient. In the end, history is what we make of it, and this book is what I made of a particular moment and idea at the time that I wrote it. I hope the glimpse sheds some light elsewhere for you.




## ★ Book Discussion Questions ★

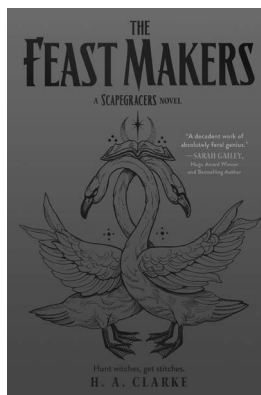
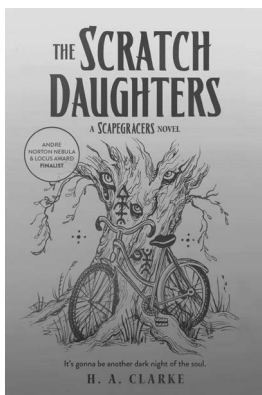
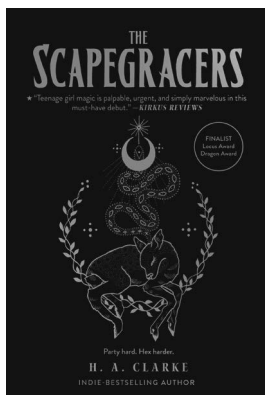
These suggested questions are to spark conversation and enhance your reading of *The Nightland Express*.

1. This book is written from the perspectives of two characters, Jesse and Ben. Have you read other books written from multiple points of view? How does telling the story this way change the reader's experience? Did you identify more with one perspective than another?
2. *The Nightland Express* takes place in 1860, right after the California Gold Rush. Where in the book does gold appear, and what role does it play? Who has gold, and who does not? What do you think gold might represent within the story?
3. Many of the locations in the story are places in the real world. What ideas did you have about these places before reading this book? Have you visited any of these locations? If so, how were your impressions the same or different from the characters'?

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4. In chapter 3, Ben and Jesse must prove themselves to win the Nightland Express assignment. How do their actions during the test demonstrate their values and temperaments? How do their actions and personalities change (or not) as the story progresses?
  5. There are many real people from history mentioned—and some introduced—throughout the book. What names did you recognize? How did the depictions of those characters in the book compare to what you know about the real people they are based on? What new questions do you have about American history after reading the book?
  6. Jesse uses both she/her and he/him pronouns. How does the use of pronouns in certain passages affect the way a reader might interpret the character or story? What did you notice about which pronouns Ben uses to refer to Jesse? Did you notice any characters in the book who are not referred to with any pronouns at all?
  7. The term “double-good” is used throughout the book to describe both Jesse and Ben. How would you define double-good, based on the text? Are there any other characters in the book who might be described as double-good? Are there any places in your life where you feel like you are double-good?

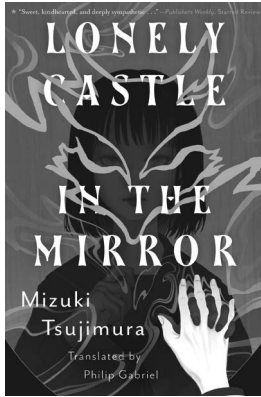
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8. Ben is often described as having a shape, or a creature, stirring inside him. What do you think this creature represents? What did you notice about how this creature awakens, and how the creature changes over the course of the book? What kind of shape might a creature inside you take?
  9. Promises are an important part of this story. Which characters make promises, and which characters break them? What magical consequences would you give people for broken promises, if you could?
  10. How are the spirits, like Mock, Shrike, and Snow, depicted differently from the faeries (or Fae) you have read about in other stories or books? What do they have in common? Why do you think they are depicted this way?
  11. In chapters 23 and 24, Ben and Jesse hear two different explanations for what is happening between the spirits and the mortal world. How do the explanations, given by Shrike and Snow, differ? What do they have in common? What do you think the truth is?
  12. In the beginning of the book, Jesse and Ben refer to each other by their last names. By the end of the book, they are on a first-name basis. When did this change, and why do you think it happened in that part of the story?

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