

The Guest Ranch

A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,249

LEVELED BOOK • X

THE GUEST RANCH

Connections

Writing

Write a letter from Zach to Mitch, thanking him for his help and highlighting the memorable experiences from the trip.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about the cowboys mentioned in the book. Create a poster showing what you learned.

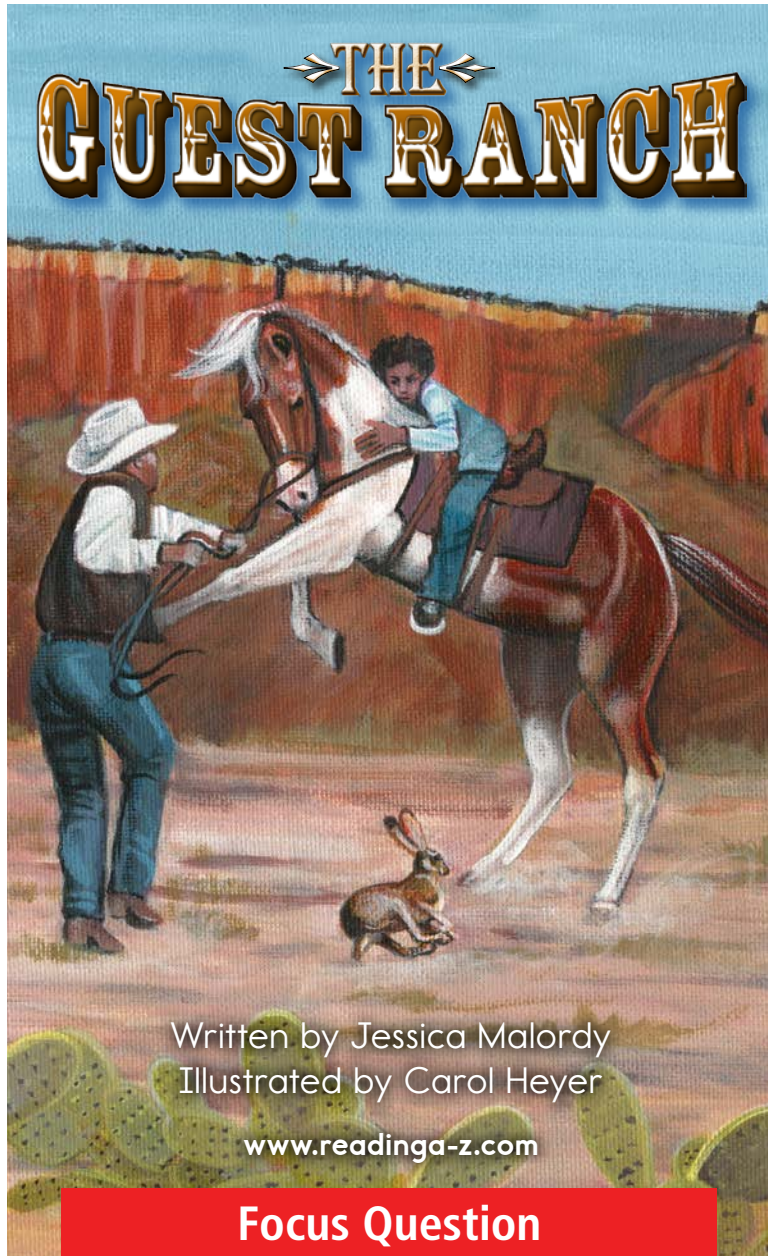
Reading A-Z

Visit www.readinga-z.com
for thousands of books and materials.

Written by Jessica Malordy
Illustrated by Carol Heyer

www.readinga-z.com

**MULTI
Level
R•U•X**



Focus Question

How does the setting influence Zach?

Words to Know

- casita
- cattle drive
- dismount
- grueling
- loped
- mantra
- meanderings
- posture
- reverie
- rummaged
- trotting
- veered

The Guest Ranch
Level X Leveled Book
© Learning A-Z
Written by Jessica Malordy
Illustrated by Carol Heyer

All rights reserved.

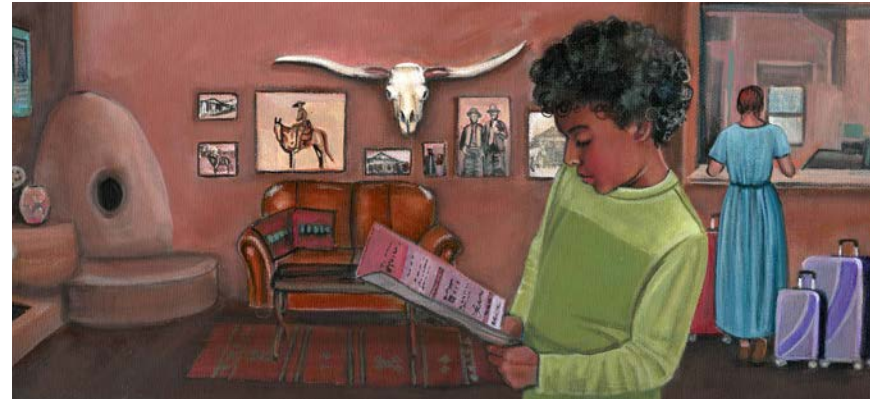
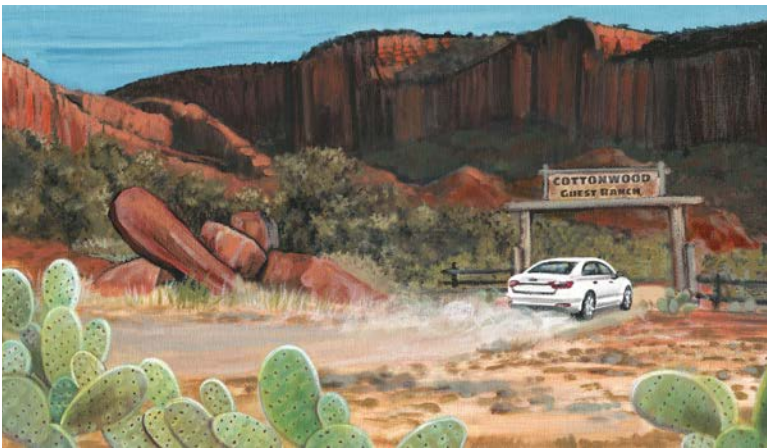
www.readinga-z.com

Correlation	
LEVEL X	
Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40

Cottonwood Guest Ranch appeared suddenly: a long, low building the same burnt color as the desert soil it sat on. Zach squinted as the car rumbled forward, kicking up clouds of dust with every bump; his mom's sedan was not designed for these New Mexico roads. Through the bug-speckled windshield, he could see a man sitting in a rocking chair, wearing a cowboy hat.

Zach rolled his eyes. "Why are we on vacation in the middle of nowhere?" he grumbled, flicking his thumb idly across his smartphone's screen. "The map doesn't even get a signal."

"To take a break from all that!" Zach's mom replied, reaching over to pluck his phone from his hands. "To relax! To experience nature!" She lowered the window and took a deep breath. "Smell that? That's fresh air out there!"



To Zach, the air smelled like horses and cows. He could even see the horses tossing their manes as he and his mom parked and headed into the main building. Inside, old-timey photographs of rodeo riders lined the walls beneath a massive longhorn skull.

While his mom checked in, Zach leafed through his guest packet, taking in the scope of the week's activities: horseback riding and hiking, river rafting and rodeo skills, culminating in an authentic **cattle drive** on the last day. He had to admit that the activities looked pretty cool, especially the horseback riding. All day, he had been struck by the vastness of the desert, and also by the strangeness of traversing it by car—metal and glass and air conditioning shielding him from the elements. It would be different to cross the desert on horseback. You would be more than just a passerby in the landscape—you'd be a part of it.

Still, Zach felt a little uneasy as he grabbed his bag and followed his mom to their **casita**. “Mom, are you sure this place is for us?” he ventured. “I mean, the other guests and the people in the photos don’t exactly look like us.”

In response, his mom threw open the door to their casita and plopped down on one of the beds with evident relief. “Give it a chance,” she urged, kicking off her shoes. “Your uncle Grant said they had a great time when they came here last summer.”

The next morning, Zach embarked on his first horseback-riding lesson, fighting back a yawn. What sort of vacation required you to wake up with the Sun? While the experienced kids saddled up for a trail ride, Zach and the other beginners learned the basics—the parts of the horse, the parts of the saddle, how not to get stomped or chomped on. The ranch-hand instructors made riding seem effortless, but Zach’s horse, Gizmo, had other ideas. He refused to walk where Zach directed, no matter how fiercely he tugged on the reins. Why had nobody ever warned Zach just how big horses were in real life? Gizmo’s teeth were monstrous, his muscles hard as marble. No wonder Zach couldn’t get him to obey.

The afternoon hike was a relief in comparison: Zach peered up close at cacti, listened for birdcalls, and learned to identify different kinds of scat. But he felt a bolt of envy as the experienced riders came **trotting** back halfway through his group’s nature walk. Poking around for deer poop while the plants stabbed you with their spines was considerably lackluster compared to an honest-to-goodness ride through the desert. Lumped in with the “Little Wranglers” as young as five and six, Zach felt extra conspicuous. He kicked grumpily at the dirt, then choked on the dust cloud he’d created.

“Tell me about your day, honey,” implored his mom after dinner.

“Can I have my phone now?”

“Zach,” she groaned. “Really?”

“You’ve been at the spa all day! I need a break, too,” Zach insisted, and though she frowned, she handed over the phone and let him play games until bedtime.

UUUU

Zach’s stomach sank as he dragged his feet back toward the stables the next day. Gizmo whinnied apprehensively as soon as he spotted Zach. It was going to be a **grueling** week.

Just then, a tall African American man in a white Stetson hat **loped** by. “All right, where are my beginners?” he boomed.

Zach blinked. A black cowboy? Working as a ranch hand in New Mexico?

“Saddle up,” the man instructed, and everyone leapt into action except for Zach, who was still staring. The ranch hand gave him a wink. “The name’s Mitch,” he said, tipping his hat.

“Zach,” Zach replied. He had no hat to tip.

“Pleasure to meet you, Zach. Now hop to it!”



By the end of class, it was clear that Zach was not keeping up. The other Little Wranglers were trotting, while Zach could barely direct Gizmo’s **meanderings**. “Giddyup,” Zach growled, digging in his heels and wishing he had spurs like a real cowboy. But Gizmo stayed still.

“Why don’t we spend a little time with Gizmo one-on-one,” Mitch suggested as class ended, “and see if we can get you two up to speed?”

Zach’s face grew warm with embarrassment. “That’s okay,” he mumbled. “Horseback riding isn’t really my thing.”

“That’s a load of manure,” Mitch replied promptly. “I’ll see you here after lunch, bud.”

The stables were empty in the afternoon, the grownups out on a trail ride until dusk and the kids at arts and crafts or the pool. Mitch was waiting with a smile. “Here’s the first secret to cowboying,” he said and slipped a sugar cube into Zach’s hand. “Keep your palm flat, now.”

Gizmo gobbled up the sugar cube as fast as a jackrabbit. Zach grinned.

“Now the rest is up to you,” Mitch proclaimed. “Saddle up!”

Once Zach was astride, Mitch corrected his **posture**, adjusted his knees, and told him to loosen his grip on the reins. "You're in charge of the horse," he said. "Always remember that."

Slowly, Zach took Gizmo for a walk around the pen. This time, Gizmo followed his lead. "Now that's what I'm talking about! You're a natural," Mitch exclaimed.

Zach took three more loops around the pen, a little faster each time, before Mitch told him to bring Gizmo back in. Zach straightened up, clutched the reins, and clucked his tongue—and this time, Gizmo **veered** wildly off course. Mitch caught the reins just in time.

"Whoa, boy. Whoa," he cooed, gentling the horse. "Just a rabbit underfoot. That's all. Easy, now." Carefully, he helped Zach **dismount**.

As soon as he reached the ground, Zach realized he was shaking. "I don't know," he said, looking out over the land, remembering his earlier daydreams of galloping through the desert on horseback. "I might not be cut out for this ranch stuff."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean—I mean—well, come on," Zach exclaimed. "Being a cowboy isn't for black folks, is it?"

"You don't think I'm a real cowboy?" Mitch asked pointedly.

"Well, yeah, I guess," Zach said, rolling his eyes.

"Don't you roll your eyes at me, son. What do they teach kids at school these days? There's a long history of black cowboys! As a matter of fact, in the old days, one out of every four cowboys was black—including some of the most famous ones."

"No way!" Zach replied, but even as the doubt popped out of his mouth, in its place he felt a tiny sprig of hope pop up. Maybe cowboying could be for him, after all.

"Yes way," Mitch said as he led Zach and Gizmo back to the stable. "There was Bose Ikard, a famous tracker in the early Texas cattle drives. Charley Willis—born a slave, died a bronco buster. John Hayes, 'the Texas Kid,' fought segregation across the Wild West. Rodeo star Bill Pickett started cowboying after fifth grade!"

"Wow," Zach breathed, even as he lugged a bucket of water over to Gizmo's stall.



Mitch chuckled. "It's true. For more than a hundred years, black cowboys found a special kind of freedom out here in the West. Sometimes they had to do the dirtiest work, the hardest work—pinning down the cattle for branding, rounding up wayward herds—but still they thrived. Persisted against all odds. Proved themselves, and rode with the other cowboys—white, Mexican, Native American, you name it. All equals out under the desert sky. The Wild West is your history, too, bud. Just as much as anyone else."

By this point, Mitch was kneeling, looking Zach straight in the eye. Zach took a deep breath. Only that morning, he had believed there was no place for him in the cowboy story of the West. Suddenly, everything was different. The little sprig of hope took root.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"No problem, bud," Mitch said, then swept his giant white Stetson off his head and plunked it down on top of Zach's.

The rest of the week, the only thing Zach could think and talk about was riding. Every morning he got to the stable early to feed Gizmo a sugar cube. He started skipping the afternoon activities—rock climbing, nature walks, a shopping trip to town—to practice for the cattle drive on the last day. His mom skipped the shopping trip, too, and chitchatted with Mitch instead while Zach and Gizmo rode round and round, up and down, tackling the easiest trail back behind the bunkhouses. Every night, Zach rode Gizmo across the desert, chasing cattle like Bose Ikard all through his dreams.

He had a goal, now: to ride in the cattle drive. He might not be ready yet to learn to lasso or barrel ride like some of the other kids, but Zach knew if he practiced every day—persisted, like Mitch said—he would be able to prove himself a ranch hand.

That didn't stop his nerves, of course. The morning of the cattle drive, he looked out over the landscape at all the cacti he could topple into, all the rocks that could make Gizmo trip—and, nevertheless, squared his shoulders, donned his white Stetson, and saddled up his horse.

"You ready, bud?" asked Mitch.

“We’re both ready,” Zach replied, resting a hand on Gizmo’s warm neck—and then they were off.

At first, all Zach could think about was his riding. *Back straight, knees up, eyes ahead, reins held low with thumbs up.* Mitch’s advice looped through Zach’s head like a **mantra**: *You’re in charge, but trust the horse.* All around him rode the ranch hands, kids from his class, and adult guests, plenty of whom were also beginners, Zach realized. They, too, seemed to be muttering mantras and adjusting their posture. His mom was among them, trotting cautiously alongside Mitch and his horse, Maggie, catching up to Zach.

“Feel that breeze?” she called. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

It was. Zach could smell the cattle on the wind, but he didn’t mind—not out here in the desert. Gizmo trotted confidently through the scrub, flanks rising and falling beneath Zach’s legs. They weren’t galloping, no, but they were keeping pace! When they reached the herd, the cattle meandered, not sure where to go, just like the guests. Zach glanced at his mom, wondering if she knew what happened next. How did a cattle drive work, exactly?

The cowboys knew. “Hang tight!” Mitch shouted as he and the other ranch hands spurred their horses on. They surrounded the herd and began funneling the cattle toward fresh grazing land. The drive proceeded smoothly, like a well-choreographed dance. Excitedly, Zach gave Gizmo a little kick.

“Stick to the back!” Mitch called, and Zach scowled. Why should he?

Then he understood. After Mitch had helped coax the herd forward, he circled back to Zach and his mom. “Now we round up the stragglers! That’s the best part.”

Zach beamed. The pace at the back was perfect for him and Gizmo, and whenever a lazy steer or distracted cow wandered off, he and Mitch and his mom worked together to push it back into the herd. Cowboying was hot, sweaty, dirty work. It was challenging, keeping an eye on all the cattle and coordinating Gizmo’s movements, all while swallowing most of the herd’s dust—but it was more fun than Zach had ever had in his life.

That night, nothing could dim Zach’s smile, though he was so sore that it hurt to walk. At the evening campfire, he collapsed beside his mom and crowed, “Best day ever!”

“You were awesome out there,” she said, smiling proudly. “Do you want to see?” She **rummaged** in her pocket, and out came the last item Zach expected—his phone.

There was the cattle drive, captured in vivid detail: Zach and Gizmo trotting off toward the horizon; Zach and Gizmo creeping up on a wayward steer; Zach dismounting, covered in dust.

“Oh man, wait until my friends see these!” Zach exclaimed.

But the words jerked him out of his digital **reverie**. The photos would make for great memories, sure, but they were stealing him away from the here and now: his achy legs, the toasting marshmallows, the starlit sky beneath which the ranch hands crooned cowboy songs. Across the fire, Mitch shot him a wink.

“Tomorrow, I mean. When we go home.” Zach popped a melty marshmallow into his mouth and turned to his mom. She seemed to understand his words perfectly, despite the goo, judging by her wide smile.

“Right now,” he said, “I don’t want to be anywhere but here.”

Glossary

casita (<i>n.</i>)	a little house; a cottage (p. 5)
cattle drive (<i>n.</i>)	the roundup and guiding of cattle from one location to another (p. 4)
dismount (<i>v.</i>)	to get down from something one has been riding, such as a bicycle or an animal (p. 9)
grueling (<i>adj.</i>)	extremely difficult; exhausting (p. 6)
loped (<i>v.</i>)	moved with long, easy strides (p. 7)
mantra (<i>n.</i>)	a sound, word, or phrase that a person repeats as a way to meditate or pray (p. 13)
meanderings (<i>n.</i>)	winding paths or courses; acts of wandering (p. 8)
posture (<i>n.</i>)	the way someone holds his or her body when sitting or standing (p. 9)
reverie (<i>n.</i>)	a state of being lost in pleasant thoughts or a daydream (p. 15)
rummaged (<i>v.</i>)	searched thoroughly for something in a disorderly or undirected way (p. 15)
trotting (<i>v.</i>)	moving at a speed between walking and running (p. 6)
veered (<i>v.</i>)	suddenly turned or changed direction (p. 9)