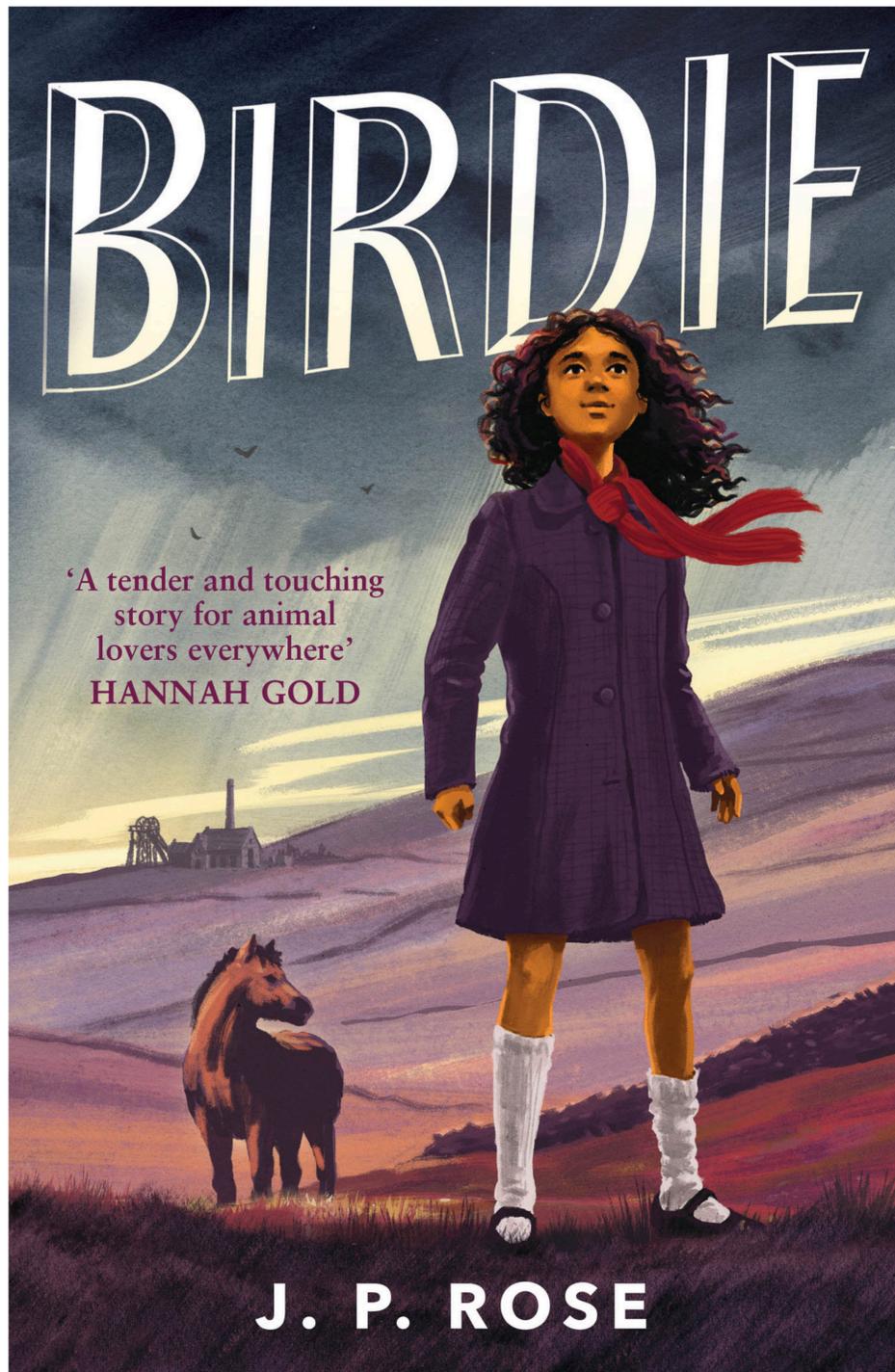


The Carnegies



The Carnegie Shortlist 2026 Shadowing Resources



Birdie

Carnegie Medal for Writing

Author: J.P. Rose

Age range: 9+

Description:

Set in Yorkshire during the 1950s, Birdie Bagshaw has spent much of her short life being looked after in a care home. Everything changes when she is summoned to live with her great-aunt in a rural, mining community. Birdie is treated with suspicion by many of the locals, but develops a deep bond of friendship with pit pony, Mr Duke. A thoughtful novel which offers profound comments on change and identity and reads as a beautiful love letter to living up North.

Themes:

- Identity
- Children's home
- Looked after children
- Belonging
- History (1950s)
- Adapting to change
- Racism – a mixed-race post-war experience
- Animals
- Respect
- Empathy

Shadowing Ideas:

1. Have you ever been on the Yorkshire Dales? They are a very different environment compared to other rural counties in the UK. Try to locate a recent photo of the Yorkshire Dales using travel guides and online sources. Use this image to help you write a poem from Birdie's point of view as she escapes the school. What do you feel? What do you see? What do you smell?
2. At which point in history were ponies first used in the mines? When did it stop? Where else in the UK were/are there mining communities? Share your findings with the group. If you are local to one of these areas, see if you can visit a local history centre or museum to find out more.
3. Birdie grew up in a children's home for mixed race children. Read the author's historical note at the end of the book for more information about this and the attitudes of the time. The book begins in 1952, yet the 1948 Nationality Act encouraged Black people from the Caribbean (later known as the Windrush Generation) to settle in the UK. Research more about this and segregation in the USA and share your findings with your group. What other fiction books that navigate these issues might you recommend?

For Students

About these Resources

All of these resources are designed to be completed in small discussion groups, ideally your school's Carnegie Medal for Writing Shadowing Group. However, they can easily be done individually. Instead of talking about the tasks, you can write down and keep a record of your ideas.

Before Reading

- Discuss what you think *Birdie* will be about based on these extracts. You should structure your discussion around the questions below.
 - What other novels do you think it will be like?
 - What genre of novel do you think it will be?
 - What sense do you get of where and when it will be set?
 - If you had to identify three likely themes, what would they be?

Spend 10-20 minutes on this activity.

1. 'Help me! Help! Please help me!' Birdie began to scream, louder and louder and louder and louder. 'It's me, Birdie, please help me! Help me, someone help!'

2. Birdie chewed the inside of her cheek and gave it some thought. She wasn't one to tell fibs, not like her friend Rita, who always told great big whopping ones and said she didn't, which made that a fib too. Yet the cross look in her aunt's eyes meant Birdie found the truth catching at the back of her throat. 'I ... I think, well I ... I, maybe I ...'

3. Mrs Dudley cleared her throat, but it didn't shift the worry Birdie could hear in Mrs Dudley's tone. ' ... Well, how can I put it ... you'll be mixing with folk who ... who might not think of themselves as the same as you and your friends. They might think of you as different to them and that may take some getting used to.'

4. Birdie ran round the back of the Winterbottoms' cottage. She didn't want anyone to see her, and she leaned on the wall, taking in the cold air. Well, there was no way now she was going to bother going to school, and she didn't care if she got into trouble – not with her aunt and not with Miss Hartley, either.

5. Birdie heard laughter and turned. A group of older lads was sitting on the stone wall, swinging their legs. The vicar was marching on obliviously ahead and didn't seem to have heard them. One of the boys gestured at her.

During Reading

Warning: Don't read the questions before reading each section.

Read up to the page number listed and then answer the questions. You will probably need to spend about 5-10 minutes answering each set of questions.

The page numbers are based on the Andersen Press edition of the book, first published in the UK in 2024.

Read chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

- What do you learn about Birdie in these chapters? What do you think lies in store for her in the chapters to come? How can you tell?
- What's your response to seeing a young character having to travel alone to a relative she doesn't know?
- What do you notice about how people in the book speak? What are your thoughts about this?

Read chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8

- How do people in Barrington Dale respond to Birdie when they first see her? Why do you think the writer chooses not to say explicitly what is 'different' about Birdie? What do you think about her choice?
- What are your first impressions of Great Aunt Mabel?
- How do you imagine Birdie felt after Mrs Bradley's visit?

Read chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12

- Chapter 10 contains the first open example of racism in the book when a group of boys make racist comments to Birdie as she goes to school. What is your reaction to this and how it is presented by the writer, J.P. Rose? What do you think of the boys' behaviour compared to the previous behaviour of Mrs Bradley and Great Aunt Mabel?
- By the end of chapter 12, lots of characters have been introduced. What are your first impressions of each and what role do you think they'll play in the rest of the novel? Mrs Dudley, Great Aunt Mable, Mrs Bradley, Reverend Hepplethwaite, Brian, Miss Hartley.

Read chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16

- What did you think about the chapter in which Birdie found herself in a mine? How was this chapter written?
- Some positive things happen to Birdie in these chapters. What are they and what do you think their impact will be on the rest of the novel?

Read chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20

- What did you think about Birdie going back down the mine again? What does it tell you about her character?
- What did you learn about Great Aunt Mabel in these chapters? In what ways did your opinion of her develop?
- What did you learn about Birdie's background? What are your thoughts and feelings about her now?
- The book is set in the 1950s. What do you notice that is different about the world then – in terms of how people live and their attitudes?

Read chapters 21, 22, 23 and 24

- What are your thoughts about Mr Walter? Why do you think he and Birdie get on so well?
- What did you learn about the history of the pit in these chapters? What are your thoughts about its ownership?

Read chapters 25, 26, 27 and 28

- How does Great Aunt Mabel change in this section? What are your thoughts about this?
- How are the rest of the Barrington Dale community treating Birdie now? Do you think this will be the end of her being called racist names?
- Do you think Birdie has told lies to Mr Walter and Great Aunt Mabel? If so, what do you think about them and what would they think about them?

Read chapters 29, 30, 31 and 32

- What do you think about how Mr Walter and Great Aunt Mabel hid news of the knackerman from Birdie? Was this the right thing to do? Was Birdie justified in acting how she did?
- What are your thoughts at this point about how the novel will end for Birdie and Mr Duke?

Read chapters 33, 34, 35 and 36

- What do you think about Birdie running away with Mr Duke? How is it presented in the book?
- What are your thoughts about Mr Lofthouse? Did anything surprise you or seem unusual about his meeting with Birdie and how they talked to each other?

Read from chapter 37 to the end of the novel

- What are your thoughts about events down the coalmine in these chapters? How were they presented in the novel?
- What are your thoughts about the book's ending? Did it tie up loose ends in a way that you found satisfying?

After Reading

Initial thoughts

Spend 10-15 minutes discussing the questions below.

- What are your overall impressions of this novel?
- Which moments stick most in your memory and why?
- Which characters do you like best and why?
- Which other novels does it remind you of and why?
- How gripping did you find the story?
- What are your thoughts about how the book was written?
- Based on reading *Birdie*, how likely are you to read other novels by J.P. Rose?

What's *Birdie* about?

- Spend one or two minutes writing down a single sentence that begins: '*Birdie* is about ...'
- If you are working in a group, share your different sentences and discuss.
- Next read the sentences below that give further ideas about what the novel is about.
- If you are working in a group, spend 5-10 minutes ordering the sentences, from the one you agree with most to the one you agree with least.
- Finally, decide on the statement you agree with most. It can be one from the list or your own. Write down a few ideas about how *Birdie* relates to your chosen statement.

Birdie is about ...

- Not being afraid of difference
- Standing up for what you believe in
- The close relationship between humans and animals
- The ability to heal after a traumatic event
- The importance of family
- Telling the truth
- Being brave
- Seeing the good in people
- Being open to new experiences.

Exploring the Novel Further

Other characters

Birdie is the main character in the novel, which takes her name. There are several other characters who play a significant role.

- Write two or three sentences in the voices of three or four of these characters, expressing their thoughts and feelings about Birdie.
 - Mr Walter
 - Great Aunt Mabel
 - Brian
 - Julie
 - Mrs Bradley
 - Mr Bradley
 - Mr Duke
 - Mr Lofthouse

Spend 15-20 minutes on this activity.

Exploring *Birdie*

The winning novel

Imagine that the Carnegie Medal for Writing judges decide that *Birdie* is the winning novel for 2026. Write a short speech in the voice of the head judge announcing their decision.

You might like to consider:

- What they liked about the book's storyline
- What they liked about how the book was written
- What they want young readers to take away from this book.

Spend 20-30 minutes on this activity.

Promoting animal welfare

You have been asked by an animal rights group to research books that promote animal welfare so that they can put together a reading list for schools.

- Write a report for the group, explaining how *Birdie* promotes animal rights. Your report needs to consider the following four areas:
 - Realism of the storyline
 - Emotional impact of the storyline
 - How the book promotes change
 - Human-animal relationships in the novel.

Spend 20-30 minutes on this activity.

Reading the reviews

The extracts, below, are all from reviews of *Birdie*.

- Read all the reviews and discuss which comes closest to your own view of the book.
- Working individually, write your own paragraph expressing your views.
- If possible, share your reviews with others.

You can submit your reviews to the Carnegie Shadowing Scheme website. This can be accessed at:

carnegies.co.uk/writing-shortlist-2026/

Give yourself 30-60 minutes to complete this activity.

A.

This is a sumptuous novel, reminiscent of the classics of children's literature, in that its protagonist Birdie, is magnetic from the start – an orphan, lost and lonely, shifted to a new position with supposed family, but initially shunned and unwanted. Her propensity to over-talk, her openness and naivety as well as her kind-heartedness and generosity of spirit all lend her an appealing and simpatico vulnerability, which in turn, makes her story compelling.

Clare, www.amazon.co.uk

B.

Birdie was a touching story that both myself and my daughter enjoyed. Parts where poor Birdie faces discrimination were so believable and tragic that they had me weeping as I read it aloud to my little girl. The book was occasionally overlong and it could have been edited slightly more carefully but we came to adore the pit pony and the girl who wanted to rescue him.

Philippa, www.goodreads.com

C.

I wasn't sure about the book's approach to race at the start. It was obvious to the reader that Birdie was being treated in racist ways, but the book never came out and said it. But as it went on, I saw that the author was cleverly letting the reader experience the world through Birdie's eyes. As an innocent, kind, warm-hearted girl, she couldn't understand why she was being treated in this way.

D.

The book really came to life when Birdie entered the coalmine for the first time and met Mr Duke. After that, while it was a bit far-fetched, there was a real sense of adventure and intrigue. Would Birdie manage to rescue Mr Duke? What would happen when she went back into the coalmine? What would happen at the end? Well done to J.P. Rose for creating such an exciting storyline.

Writing Activities

On your own, or with a partner, complete one or more of these writing activities to help you develop your thoughts about *Birdie* further.

You will need 30-60 minutes for each activity.

If a horse could talk!

- Imagine that Mr Duke could talk! Write a few paragraphs in his voice, expressing his thoughts and feelings about the life he led in the mine, his relationship with Birdie and his hopes for the future.

Exploring darkness

- Write a poem about what it would be like to find yourself in a mine, in total darkness. If you like, you can borrow words and phrases from *Birdie* and draw on experiences from the book, such as descending a mine shaft and finding Mr Duke.

Writing back to Mrs Dudley

- As Birdie, write a letter to Mrs Dudley expressing your thoughts and feelings about your new life in Barrington Dale. You can tell her about events that happened in the novel or, if you like, you can set the letter a year or so after the novel ends.