

STUDY GUIDE

THE SUMMER OF THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE HORSE (1940)



FOREVER SAROYAN LLC

“The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse” is the first story in the book *My Name is Aram*, originally published in 1940. The book is concerned with the Garoghlanian tribe, a family of Armenians living in the San Joaquin Valley of California. They are a poor people, but the tribe is widely known for its honesty. The book is regarded as one of Saroyan’s finest works and has won major acclaim since its first publication in 1940.

The stories in *My Name is Aram* reflected, sometimes directly, his experiences growing up in Fresno, California. Many of the characters and situations are based on actual people and events, though some are strictly fictitious. In many ways, Saroyan seems to have taken his personal experience and added a level of nostalgia and optimism to them. This style of writing is sometimes referred to as “saroyanesque.”

A slightly different version of the story appeared as simply "The Beautiful White Horse" in June of 1938 in *Esquire*, before later showing up in *My Name is Aram*. At times, the story has been attributed to Aram Garoghlanian, the fictional title character of the book, instead of William Saroyan.

Synopsis

The story begins with nine-year-old Aram Garoghlanian being awoken by his thirteen-year-old cousin, Mourad, who is riding a white horse. Aram questions where Mourad acquired the horse and Mourad implies he had stolen it. Aram considers this in light of the Garoghlanian tribe’s reputation as being an exceptionally honest family. Mourad convinces Aram to come with him to ride the horse through the fertile orchards that surround their home in Fresno.

Aram asks for a chance to ride the horse alone, and eventually Mourad agrees. When he is alone on the horse, he is thrown off and the boys spend their time bringing the horse back.

Mourad tells Aram that he has a place to hide the horse during the day, a barn on an abandoned vineyard. Mourad has been hiding the horse there, and he keeps hiding the horse in the same barn, giving Aram time to learn to ride, though he continues to be thrown by the horse.

A farmer who lives ten miles away, John Byro, comes to visit the boys' uncle, Khosrove, who tells him to pay no attention to the problem. Byro later encounters the boys on the horse, believing that the horse looks exactly like his horse, even looking at its teeth. He lets the children ride off with the horse, but they return it to Byro's farm the next day.

Setting

The story is set in the San Joaquin Valley of California, located between the coastal range and the Sierra Nevada mountains. The Garoghlanian tribe lives in the city of Fresno, a city where a large number of Armenian immigrants settled in the early 20th century. In Fresno, there is considerable strife between the Armenian community and their non-Armenian neighbors. This tension is a major theme of the work and is evident in the way that outsiders view the members of the Garoghlanian tribe.

The area is defined as highly agricultural with orchards and vineyards, both occupied and abandoned, dominating the landscape. This period saw the Central Valley of California as the most potent agricultural production center of the United States, with grape and raisin production, along with figs, oranges and other fruit, being the major crops. To this day, the largest raisin producing region in the world is Fresno county.

The timeframe of the story is the early 1920s, when Saroyan was roughly 12 years old.

The Garoghlanian Name

'Garoghlanian' is not a name seen among modern Armenian-Americans, but it does have a rooting in reality. Saroyan's grandmother was born Lucine Karoghlanian, though Armenian speakers of the Western dialect pronounce it as "Garoghlanian" since the letter "k" is typically pronounced as "g" among

Western Armenian speakers like Saroyan. Today, Karoghlanian is the more frequently seen of the two spellings in English, and in fact, was the spelling of the name in the version of the story that ran in *Esquire* in 1938. At times, Saroyan used the alias 'Aram Garoghlanian'.

In the introduction to *My Name is Aram*, William Saroyan provides the pronunciation and a glimpse into the name he chose for the tribe –

"The way to pronounce that name is to say Gar, pause, oghlan, slight pause, ian. The name is an Armenian name made of two Turkish words, gar, meaning dark or possibly black, and oghlan, meaning unmistakably and without qualification, son; ian, meaning, naturally, of that tribe. In short, Garoghlanian Aram, meaning Aram of the dark or black sons."

This abutting of fact and fiction is a major thread that runs through the entire book. It is not a true autobiographical work, as it is more hopeful than Saroyan's own childhood had been, but it does take elements of his youth in Fresno and applies them to characters and scenarios that actually existed.

Characters

Aram

In "The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse," Aram Garoghlanian is nine years old. He is a generally happy boy of a poor Armenian family, or tribe. He is close to his cousin, Mourad, who everyone else thinks is crazy. He excitedly rides the horse that Mourad has stolen, but is thrown off.

Aram can be seen as an expression of the author, William Saroyan, with elements of other family members, such as his cousin Khatchik, better known as Archie. In fact, the first version of the story, which appeared in *Esquire*, was attributed to the author Aram Garoghlanian.

Mourad

Mourad is the thirteen-year-old cousin of Aram. He is known as the crazy member of his generation. He has a way with animals, especially horses. He is a bold child and seems to be testing his boundaries with every new escapade.

He and Aram have adventures, and he seems to be willing to create his own set of rules that bend those normally accepted by his tribe.

In the story, Mourad steals a white horse and rides it every night before hiding it in an abandoned barn. He is an excellent rider and begins to ride with his cousin every night as well. When Aram is thrown from the horse, Mourad spends time going after the horse, usually finding it just in time to put it back in his hiding place.

Uncle Khosrove

Uncle Khosrove is shown as a gruff, enormous man with “the largest mustache in the San Joaquin valley.” He is short-tempered and forceful. He often is described as “roaring” when he is annoyed with a conversation. He uses phrases like “it is no harm, pay no attention to it” as a way to end any conversation he sees as unpleasant or unnecessary.

Aspects of Uncle Khasrove’s personality are likely informed by two of Saroyan’s actual Uncles: Aram (his mother’s brother) and Mihran (his father’s brother).

John Byro

Byro is a farmer, poor like the Garoghlanians, but he is an Assyrian and not Armenian. He is shown as a lonely figure who learned the Armenian language so he could connect with the other farmers of the area. He comes to visit the Garoghlanian family, who lives ten miles away, and talks with Uncle Khosrove about the loss of his horse. He eventually sees the boys Aram and Mourad with the white horse, but does not accuse them of theft because of the deeply-held belief that the Garoghlanian family is so honest. The horse is eventually returned to Byro, who remarks that the horse is now stronger and better tempered.

The Immigrant Experience

June, 1928

The Beautiful White Horse

One thing was certain: no member of the honest Karoghlianian family could have ever committed a theft

by WILLIAM SAROYAN

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One day back there in the good old days when I was a boy of nine and the world was full of every imaginable kind of beauty and magnificence and wonder, when life was still a delightful and mysterious dream, my cousin Mourad was questioned every by everybody who knew him except me came to our house at three in the morning and woke me by tapping on the window of my room and whispering my name.

Aram, he said, Aram, I jumped out of bed and looked out the window.

I couldn't believe what I saw. I rubbed my eyes. It wasn't morning yet, but it was summer and with day-break almost around the corner of the world it was light enough for me to know I wasn't dreaming.

My cousin Mourad was sitting on a magnificent white horse. I stuck my head out of the window and rubbed my eyes.

Yes, my cousin said in Armenian. It's a horse. You're not dreaming. Make it quick if you want to ride.

I knew my cousin Mourad was a remarkable fellow. I knew there was nobody else in the world like him. I knew he enjoyed being alive more than anybody else who had ever stayed into this world, but this was more than even I could believe.

In the first place, an event was so exciting and wonderful to me as the horse. My earliest memories had been memories of horses and my first language had been language to ride. This was the wonderful part. In the second place, we were poor. This was the part that wouldn't permit me to believe what I saw. We were poor. We had no money. Our whole tribe was poverty-stricken. Every branch of our family was in the most amazing and continual poverty. Nobody could understand where we ever got money enough to keep us with food in our bellies, not even the old men of the family. Most important of all, though, we were famous for our honesty. We had been famous for honesty for centuries, even when we had been the wealthiest family in what we liked to think was the world. We were proud first, honest next, and after that we were proud in right and wrong. None of us would take advantage of anybody in the world, let alone steal.

Consequently, even though I could see the horse, so magnificent, even though I could smell it, so lovely, even though I could hear it breathing, so exciting, I wouldn't believe the horse had anything to do with my cousin.



Mourad or with me with any of the other members of our family, asleep or awake, because I knew he couldn't have bought the horse, and if he couldn't have bought it he must have stolen it, and I refused to believe he had stolen it.

No member of the Karoghlianian family could be a thief. It just wasn't possible.

I stood first at my cousin and then at the horse. There was a pious stillness, peace, and honor in each of them which on the one hand delighted and on the other frightened me.

Mourad, I said, where did you see this beautiful horse?

Leap out of the window, he said. Just as you are. If you want to ride.

It was true, then. He had stolen the horse. There was no question about it. He had come to wake me to ride or not, as I chose.

Well, it seemed to me stealing a horse for a ride was not the same thing as stealing something else, such as money, and for all I knew it wasn't stealing at all. If you were crazy about horses the way my cousin Mourad and I were, it wasn't stealing. It wouldn't become stealing until we offered to sell the horse, which of course I knew we would never do. What I mean is, I wanted to ride.

Let me put on some clothes, I pleaded. All right, he said, but hurry.

I slipped into my clothes.

I jumped down to the yard from the window and leaped up on the horse behind my cousin Mourad.

We used to live at the edge of town, on Walnut Avenue. Behind our house was the country, vine yards, orchards, fields, and country roads. It is less than three minutes we were on Olive Avenue, and then the horse began to trot. There was no fear in the world to be had. The feel of the horse running was wonderful. My cousin Mourad who was considered the cruelest member of our



family began to sing. I mean, he began to sing the Armenian song about the rides.

Every family has a cruelest streak in it somewhere, and my cousin Mourad was considered the natural descendant of the cruelest streak in our tribe. Before him was our uncle Khosrove, an enormous man with a powerful head of black hair and the largest mustache in the San Joaquin valley, a man so furious in temper, so irritable, so impatient that he stopped anyone from talking by roaring. It is no harm, pay no attention to it.

That was all, no matter what anybody happened to be talking about. Once it was his own way about running eight blocks to the barber shop where Khosrove was having his mustache trimmed to tell him their horse was on fire. Khosrove sat up in the chair and roared. It is no harm, pay no attention to it. The barber said. But the boy says your horse is on fire, and Khosrove roared. Enough, it is no harm, I say.

My cousin Mourad was regarded as the natural descendant of this man, although Mourad's father was a very sensible and quiet man who in theory was supposed to have something about leading people of ill-repute. That's how it was in our tribe. A man could be the father of his son's flesh, but that did not mean that he was also the father of his spirit. The distribution of the various kinds of spirit of our tribe had been from the beginning expressive and vague.

My cousin Mourad sang the song of the rides. For all anybody knew we were still in the old country where, according to certain neighbors, we belonged. We let the horse run as long as it felt like running.

Get down, my cousin said. I want to ride alone.

Will you let me ride alone? I said.

That is up to the horse, my cousin said. Get down. What are you laughing about?

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William Saroyan was a first-generation Armenian-American. Both his parents had come from Bitlis, Turkey, or ancestral Armenia, during the early years of the 20th century.

The Karoghlianian tribe lives in the Central Valley of California, where many Armenians settled starting in the late 1800s, with a major wave arriving following the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1897, and in much greater numbers during and following the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks between 1915 and 1917. This major influx of Armenians to Fresno led to some stern conflict with the largely white population of Fresno.

“For all anybody knew, we were still in the old country where, at least according to some of our neighbors, we belonged,” noted Aram in the story.

One aspect of the immigrant experience that many authors work with is separation leading to difficulties in day-to-day life. Aram's mother explains that his uncle Khosrove acts in such a gruff fashion because though he has a gentle heart, he is homesick. Though John Byro is not Armenian, he speaks Armenian. At the time, Armenian, Spanish, and English were all widely spoken in the more rural portions of Fresno, and though there were certainly other Assyrians in Fresno, there were far more Assyrians in the city of Turlock, a good distance away. Byro decided to learn Armenian as a way of fitting in with his new community; this was a natural friendship for both Armenians and Assyrians, who faced genocide in their home countries at roughly the same time in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Poverty among immigrant populations is frequent, but also often a new experience. Many families who were rich in the old country, such as the Garoghlanians, find themselves in varying levels of financial difficulty when they settle in a new land. This is one of the reasons that Fresno was so popular for Americans to settle in. The Central Valley of California had an abundance of affordable, highly fertile land, many agricultural jobs that typically did not require speaking English, and the ability to create ethnic enclaves where some of the traditions of the home country could be retained. These are all ways in which new arrivals to the United States can make the most of diminished finances, and still maintain a bit of connection to their former residences.

Freedom and the establishment of personal morality

In Mourad, we have a character who is coming into his own adulthood, and thus forming his own sense of personal morals. He has stolen John Byro's horse, but he does not consider it stealing because other than being able to ride it, he has gained nothing tangible. Aram notes, "Well, it seemed to me that stealing a horse for a ride was not the same as stealing something else, like money. For all I knew, it wasn't stealing at all."

Mourad also sees it as not stealing if he intends to return it. He reckons more than a year of keeping it would be stealing, while he will certainly bring the horse back before that.

This butts up against the Garoghlanian tradition for honesty, which is a major and important trait for the family. Mourad may see his taking of the horse as a natural reaction to the love of horses shared by the cousins.

This idea, sometimes referred to as moral relativism, is an important aspect of growing up. Some people will justify bad behavior by attaching their specific circumstances to the action they perform. For example, if someone is hungry, they may well determine that stealing food is not theft at all. This is a frequent theme in coming of age stories.

Once the cousins directly interact with John Byro about the horse, Mourad returns it, which suggests that as long as he wasn't facing direct consequences, it was fair game to keep the horse. It might be that unless he directly encountered the aggrieved party, there was no crime, which was a ma-

part in how he justified it to himself. He seems to be testing the limits of what is and is not stealing, and to a larger extent his own morality in the context of his family's reputation.

Trust & Reputation

The Garoghlanian family has been known for its honesty “for something like eleven centuries.” That statement sets up one of the central intellectual conflicts for the story – reputation vs. performance.

It's hard to argue that Mourad's taking of the horse wasn't a form of theft, even as he and Aram justify it to the reader and themselves. The fact that Aram ruminates on the honesty of their tribe for so long, to the point where he doubts his own senses when seeing Mourad on a horse, shows how powerfully that notion has been embedded in his thoughts.

John Byro, whose interactions with the Garoghlanian family do not span generations, presumably, but have only lasted as long as they have been neighbors in Fresno, has also picked up on the fact that the family has a serious reputation for its honesty. And when he sees the boys riding a horse that is in every way similar to his own, he seems to trust the tribe's legendary honesty over his own senses.

As a reader, there is a dramatic irony to this. On one hand, we know that the horse is the one that was stolen from John Byro, but he either chooses not to believe it, or he legitimately believes it is a different horse. We know that it is the same horse, and we are aware of the contradiction with the legendary level of honesty attributed to the Garoghlanians. This conflict allows us as readers to make up our own minds as to whether or not the reputation is deserved or not. The fact that Mourad returns the horse may be seen in two ways – either as evidence of the honesty of the tribe because he returns it though he obviously did not have to, or as dishonesty since he felt he had to return it to avoid potential trouble.

Style & Technique

William Saroyan is known for being a prose stylist, using many techniques that would make his writing distinctive among twentieth century authors. He often deploys a somewhat stripped-down style, called minimalist. His sentences tend to be short and well-formed, with less adornment than many authors would use. In *My Name is Aram*, he eschews the use of quotation marks, since the stories of the collection are being told by Aram directly to the reader. While he does use italics at times, they are fairly rare and well-timed for maximum impact in the storytelling.

In “The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse,” Saroyan uses direct, evocative language with little in the way of extended metaphor. He also tends to limit physical description, as one might if they were telling the tale directly to another person.

Study Questions

- ◆ Do you think John Byro knew that the horse was his? If he knew, why didn't he confront their family with that information?
- ◆ Why do you think Mourad kept letting Aram ride the horse, even if he was thrown from it every time?
- ◆ How does the choice of Aram as the narrator change the way we view the story? What would the story have been like if Mourad was the narrator?
- ◆ What did Aram mean in the quote, “We had been famous for our honesty for something like eleven centuries, even when we had been the wealthiest family in what we liked to think was the world”?

“Study Guide: The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse”

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