

Background about the Book – The House of the Scorpion

Matteo Alacrán was not born; he was harvested. His DNA came from El Patrón, lord of a country called Opium -- a strip of poppy fields lying between the United States and what was once called Mexico. Matt's first cell split and divided inside a petri dish. Then he was placed in the womb of a cow, where he continued the miraculous journey from embryo to fetus to baby. He is a boy now, but most consider him a monster -- except for El Patrón. El Patrón loves Matt as he loves himself, because Matt is himself. As Matt struggles to understand his existence, he is threatened by a sinister cast of characters, including El Patrón's power-hungry family, and he is surrounded by a dangerous army of bodyguards. Escape is the only chance Matt has to survive. But escape from the Alacrán Estate is no guarantee of freedom, because Matt is marked by his difference in ways he doesn't even suspect.

From Simon and Schuster www.SimonSays.com

About the Author



Biography

Award-winning novelist Nancy Farmer is the author of juvenile novels and picture books that demonstrate her talent as a storyteller and her interest in African culture. The seventeen years Farmer spent in central Africa proved to be critical to her writing career. "The character, viewpoint and zany sense of humor of the people I met there have had a major effect on my writing," she once recounted for *Something about the Author (SATA)*. Indeed, many critics have applauded her work for her characterizations, humor, and depiction of locale. A sure measure of Farmer's success is that *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm* and *A Girl Named Disaster* were both named Newbery Honor books and have been translated into other languages.

Farmer grew up during the 1950s in a small town on the Arizona-Mexico border, where she lived in the hotel her father managed. Although her school friends were not allowed to visit her in the rough neighborhood in which the hotel was located, "life at the hotel was a wonderful preparation for writing," Farmer remembered in the *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*. "I worked at the desk from age nine, renting rooms and listening to the stories the patrons told each other in the lobby." Among the colorful characters at the hotel were cowboys, railroad men, rodeo riders, and circus performers. "My father took me to the American Legion hall on bingo nights, and I heard a lot more stories there," she once told *SATA*. "People were able to spin tales back then, and they taught me a lot."

Although she was not interested in school and often played hooky, Farmer eventually earned a bachelor of arts degree from Reed College in Portland, Oregon. In search of adventure, she spent two years in India as a Peace Corps volunteer. Then Farmer traveled for two more years before returning to California, where she studied at Merrit College and the University of California at Berkeley. Again she was seized with the desire to travel, and in 1971 she and a friend sailed to Africa on a freighter. "We planned to sail from port to port, get jobs when we ran out of money, and hopefully meet a lonely Greek shipping tycoon," Farmer remembered. "We arranged passage on a yacht that was actually in the process of being stolen. We didn't know this. The coast guard arrested the 'captain' as he sailed out under the Golden Gate. We were upset, but they probably saved us from being dumped overboard somewhere."

From 1972 to 1988, Farmer worked at a variety of jobs in Mozambique and Zimbabwe (formerly called Rhodesia). While in Zimbabwe, Farmer met her future husband, Harold Farmer, an English professor at the University of Zimbabwe. They married in 1976, and it was when their son was about four years old that Farmer was inspired to start writing. "I had been reading a novel by Margaret Forster and thought: *I could do that*. Three hours later I emerged with a complete story. The experience was so surprising and pleasant I did it again the next day." In the following four years, Farmer re-fined her craft. She studied works by Roald Dahl, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, P. D. James, Ruth Rendell, and Stephen King. According to Farmer, it takes a minimum of four years to learn to write. "The horrible truth is that one's first efforts are amateurish," she once commented. "It takes time, practice, and objectivity to correct this problem. I have never understood why people think they can write well without effort. No one expects a first-year medical student to transplant a kidney."

After publishing several novels and a picture book with a Zimbabwean press, Farmer found her writing stalled. For the sake of their son, Daniel, the Farmers decided to move to the United States, and for a time after the move Farmer was still unable to write. Finally, she made her American debut with *Do You Know Me?*, a novel that is set in Zimbabwe and revolves around Tapiwa and her Uncle Zeka, who moves from the country to the city. Reviewers praised the novel for its characterizations and humor. Remarking on the universal theme, "carefully drawn" characters, and humorous outcome, *Horn Book* contributor Lois F. Anderson asserted that Farmer "manages to deal with serious issues and at the same time provoke laughter." Calling Farmer a "born storyteller," a *Publishers Weekly* critic applauded her "astute ear for dialogue, ... deft hand with plot twists and ... keen, dry wit."

<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/1658/Farmer-Nancy-1941.html#ixzz0liMeBxUM&D>

Reviews – The House of the Scorpion

Newbery Honor author Nancy Farmer wows us with this riveting sci-fi thriller about a young clone struggling for acceptance in his tumultuous, sheltered world.

Matt's last name is Alacrán, which means that he belongs to a powerful family that controls the drug Farms between the U.S. and the former Mexico. But Matt's different; he's a clone in a world filled with dangers for his kind. His only protection from the brutal surroundings are El Patron, the elderly patriarch/drug lord kingpin from which he was made, his caretaker Celia, and a bodyguard who has been assigned to him. Things fall apart when Matt learns the real reason for his creation and he makes a harrowing escape to a promising -- yet frighteningly insecure -- world.

With all the makings of a modern classic, *The House of the Scorpion* is both shocking and intense, particularly because it looks toward an all-too-possible future. Matt is a courageous, sympathetic character, but his strong-willed fits of anger, which mirror El Patron's, leave a bittersweet taste amid his good intentions. Another impressive book from Farmer, this novel is true science fiction genius.

Barnes and Noble.com

May I gush for a moment about Nancy Farmer? Please bow, one and all, for the premiere sci-fi children's author of the day. The successor, to my mind, of Madeline L'Engle with a hint of Mildred Taylor for flair. She won me over initially with her extraordinary "The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm" and reeled me in completely with "House of the Scorpion". In this, her latest offering, the moral implications of cloning and the drug wars are brought to terrifying extremes. And yet who knew that organ farming could be so readable? The main character, Matteo, is followed from his very conception to the age of fourteen. The book does not, surprisingly, dwell too closely on the nature of existence and Matteo's own appearance on the globe. Instead, it chooses to simply lay out a world in which the drug lords of South America have created their own land and laws. The book abounds with interesting characters and ideas. Though I found it odd that member of the Alacran clan would openly despise their leader's clone before him, there are few missteps in this powerful novel. That it was a Newberry Honor Book impresses me especially. Some parents will undoubtedly find the depictions of violence that spot this book (and they do certainly crop up at regular intervals) too much for younger children, just as older kids will adore the gorier details. Like "The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm", this is a wordy tale. It is 380 pages in length and it feels it. And truthfully, the first false climax, when Matt escapes the land of Opium, seems as if it should be the end of the book, only to open up into a whole new story. I would be very interested to know if any teachers have read this book to their students. Just the same, consider this book highly recommended and Ms. Farmer a master of wordplay. E.R. Bird
"Ramseelbird"

Amazon.com

Read Alikes –The House of the Scorpion

The Diary of Pelly D. by L. J. Adlington

Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card

The City of Ember by Jeanne DuPrau

The Ear, the Eye and the Arm by Nancy Farmer

Hole in the Sky by Pete Hautman

Discussion Questions: The House of the Scorpion

1. Matteo Alacrán is the clone of El Patrón, the lord of the country called Opium, and lives in isolation until children playing in the poppy fields discover him. Why is he so eager to talk to the children, after he is warned against it? Why is Mariá especially attracted to Matt?
2. Describe Matt's relationship with Celia. Why is she the servant chosen to care for Matt? Celia snaps at Matt when he calls her mama. Then she says to him, "I love you more than anything in the world. Never forget that. But you were only loaned to me, mi vida." Why doesn't she explain the term loaned to Matt? Celia really believes that she is protecting Matt by keeping him locked in her cottage and ignorant about his identity. Debate whether this type of protection is indeed dangerous for him. How does Celia continue to protect Matt throughout his life on the Alacrán Estate?
3. After the children discover Matt, he is taken from Celia and imprisoned in a stall for six months with only straw for a bed. How might prison be considered a metaphor for his entire life? Who is the warden of his prison? Discuss the role of Mariá, Celia, and Tam Lin in helping him escape his prison.
4. Rosá describes El Patrón as a bandit. How has El Patrón stolen the lives of all those living on his estate? Which characters are his partners in evil? Debate whether they support him for the sake of their own survival. Explain what Tam Lin is trying to tell Matt when he says, "If you are kind and decent, you grow into a kind and decent man. If you're like El Patrón...just think about it." Considering that Matt is the clone of El Patrón, debate whether environment influences evil more than genetics.
5. El Patrón celebrates his 143rd birthday with a large party. Though Matt was "harvested," and doesn't really have a birthday, the celebration is for him as well, since he is El Patrón's clone. How does Matt imitate El Patrón's power when he demands a birthday kiss from Mariá? Discuss how El Patrón encourages Matt's uncharacteristic behavior. Why is Mariá so humiliated by Matt's demand? How does Matt feel the crowd's disapproval?
6. El Viejo, El Patrón's grandson and the father of Mr. Alacrán, is a senile old man because he refused the fetal brain implants based on religious and moral grounds. Debate his position. Why does El Patrón consider Mr. Alacrán rude when he mentions El Viejo's religious beliefs? Celia is also a deeply religious person. How is this demonstrated throughout the novel?

7. At what point does Matt realize that Tom is dangerous? He remembers what Tam Lin had told him, "If you didn't know Tom well, you'd think he is an angel bringing you the keys to the pearly gates." How does Tom mislead Mariá? Discuss why Tom takes Matt and Mariá to see the screaming clones. How is this a turning point for Matt and Mariá's friendship? Why does Celia feel that Matt deserves the truth once he has seen the clones?
8. What gives Celia the courage to stand up to El Patrón and refuse to let Matt be used for a heart transplant? What does El Patrón mean when he says to Celia, "We make a fine pair of scorpions, don't we?" Explain why she is insulted by this comment.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be applied to any book. You can tweak the questions for your specific book. They can be cut into strips and passed around in a basket to help facilitate discussion.

My favorite part of the book was...

A better title for this book would be...because...

(Name of character) reminds me of myself because...

My least favorite character was...because...

If I were (name of character, -----) I would (wouldn't) have...

(Name of character) reminds me of someone I know because...

I changed my mind about...because...

I would (wouldn't) like to read another book by this author because...

This book made me think...When I finished this book, I still wondered...

This book reminded me of...

I'd like to tell the author...

What happened in this book was very realistic (unrealistic) because...

This book was better (worse) than the movie version because...

When I started reading his book, I thought...

I didn't like...because...

This book made me realize...

If I could talk to (name of character), I would say...

One thing I have noticed about the author's style is...

If I could be any character in the book I would be...because...

I was surprised when...

I think the main thing the writer was trying to say was...

The most important thing about this book is...

I predicted that...

I think the writer must be ...because...

I would change the ending...