



Buck Discussion Guide

Director: Cindy Meehl

Year: 2011

Time: 88 min

You might know this director from:

BUCK is Cindy Meehl's first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

BUCK presents Buck Brannaman, the man who inspired the novel and film, both titled "The Horse Whisperer," with his uncanny ability to understand a horse through empathy and sensitivity. Buck travels throughout the U.S. running horse clinics to teach owners how to lead their horses and build a relationship of trust and respect, rather than rely on a dynamic of fear and punishment. Buck says his empathy comes from his own experience of an abusive childhood and violent father. He learned how to feel trust and safety with his foster mother, and Buck seeks to teach horse owners to become better parents as well, a metaphor he uses throughout the film.

Mesmerizing and heart-rendering, BUCK isn't just a story about horses. By simply observing a horse's behavior, Buck can understand a lot about its owners. Those who enroll in Buck's workshops must be prepared to face the truth of why their horses behave the way they do. For some, this can be therapeutic and transformative, both for owner and horse. For others, Buck's training forces owners to confront their own deep-seated issues, reflected in their relationships to their animals. As filmmaker Cindy Meehl says in her Director's Statement, "Buck has a unique ability to help people reconfigure the way they perceive both horses and humans, and the principles he teaches can become life altering. How he treats and works with these animals reverberates beyond the round pen and the arena."

FILM THEMES

BUCK is about how we communicate with animals and with each other, and how we reveal ourselves through our interactions.

HEALING

The film highlights how Buck transcended his traumatic childhood and chose for himself what kind of life he wanted. In an interview, he said, "I knew what kind of human being I hoped to be, and it was going to be so different from [my father]... Eventually, at some point, everybody has to decide which way they're gonna allow their life to go." Buck also says in the film that he chooses to live in the present, rather than the past. He'll never forget his memories, but he can't live in two places. Buck does not dwell in the past or succumb to fears of repeating his father's violence. Instead, he embraces the life he wants and becomes the father and husband he chooses to be.

COMMUNICATION

Buck is able to communicate with horses because of his great empathy and sensitivity, which allows him to understand a horse's fear and lack of trust. The ability to empathize with an animal or person requires honesty and self-acceptance. By demonstrating deep honesty, humility and grace, Buck is able to connect with horses, their owners, and anyone he speaks with. Ultimately, Buck teaches us that before we can expect others to listen to us, we must try to understand ourselves and try to understand the perspective of others.

NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

Buck is a proponent of Natural Horsemanship, which seeks to train a horse with leadership and sensitivity to its nature, as opposed to the traditional method of "breaking" a horse through force and punishment. Buck teaches Natural Horsemanship in his clinics, which teaches owners how to better communicate - both with their animals and with other people. Techniques such as Natural Horsemanship have been incredibly successful and have led to other questions about the relationship between people and animals of all kinds.

CARETAKING

When a violent, dangerous horse arrived at his clinic, Buck became very emotional. "Someone could have helped that horse understand right from wrong, how to fit in, and how to get along in the world. But nobody had been there for the horse to teach him that. It's about taking responsibility and being a responsible parent or a caretaker of an animal, and helping them to learn because you can really have a great effect on them." Perhaps Buck could see himself in that horse. No one took responsibility for him either... until foster mother, Betsey Shirley, came into his life and taught him how to forgive and move forward in life.

"Your horse is a mirror to your soul, and sometimes you may not like what you see. Sometimes, you will."

Buck Brannaman

"They say nerves heal real slowly. Lots of things about us heal real slowly."

Buck Brannaman

FILM FACTS:

- BUCK won the U.S Documentary Competition Audience Award at Sundance Film Festival 2011.
- The film was recorded over two and a half years with more than 300 hours of footage. After editing it down to an 88-minute documentary, the filmmakers had over 10 hours of extra footage that they used to create the educational DVD series, "7 Clinics with Buck Brannaman."
- Buck has held more than 1,700 clinics throughout his career.
- 9 months a year, Buck travels the country helping horses with "people problems." He also works as a motivational speaker.
- In 2012, Buck was named "Horseman of the Year" by "Western Horseman."
- Though it was difficult for Buck to discuss the biographical elements of the documentary, he was pleased they served a purpose in helping others who had similar experiences.
- The abuse of the Brannaman boys was well known in their community, but neighbors didn't get involved. Eventually a female companion of Buck's father left the house, taking the boys with her. She abandoned them at an Ennis motel.
- Madison County Deputy Sheriff Johnny France was Betsy Shirley's first foster child from a very young age. That is how he knew that the Brannaman boys would have a good home with foster parents, Forrest and Betsy Shirley.
- When a court ordered custody of the Brannaman boys to the Shirleys, Buck's father got very angry. He didn't allow the boys to take anything from their home, not even their clothes. Each year, he sent Buck a birthday card threatening to kill him and his brother once they reached age 18. Madison County sheriff, Johnny France, ordered him to leave Montana. Buck later made peace with his father through letters.
- A few years ago, Buck suffered a serious injury while playing basketball. It could have confined him to a wheelchair due to excessive nerve damage, but thankfully Buck did recover.
- Buck and Robert Redford became good friends while filming "The Horse Whisperer" in 1998. Buck did not ask Robert to participate in the documentary. "I don't want to put him in a position that if I ask him to do something he doesn't really want to do, he would say yes because of our friendship," said Buck. Cindy Meehl asked Redford if he'd like to be included in the film and he was very eager to do so.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others an opportunity to be inspired and strengthened by Buck's life.
2. Learn more about the person and techniques of Buck by watching [7 Clinics with Buck Brannaman](#), which includes more than 10 hours of cut film footage.
3. Support victims of child abuse in your community, perhaps by providing a foster home or becoming a mentor to abuse victims.
4. Be respectful to the animals you interact with. Take the time to learn more about how they live naturally in the wild and what is actually good for them. Use your capacity as a human being to treat other people and animals as humanely as you would like to be treated and try to live in a way that respects their unique nature and needs.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.