



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **The House of the Scorpion**

Nancy Farmer

**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

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Nancy Farmer

## TEACHER GUIDE

### NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Critical Thinking

Analysis, compare/contrast,  
brainstorming, research,  
evaluation

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting,  
inference, thematic  
development, plot  
development

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,  
applications

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, reports, debate

### Writing

Poetry, prose, TV script,  
précis, sequel, essay, legend

### Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, allusion,  
personification, symbolism,  
foreshadowing, irony,  
characterization, setting,  
theme, genre

### Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, mask, sketch;  
Music—ballad, appropriate  
selections; Drama—TV script,  
interview; Multimedia—  
current events (magazine and  
newspaper articles), research,  
video presentation

**Genre:** science fiction (futuristic)

**Setting:** futuristic country of Opium (also called Dreamland), a small strip of land between the United States and Mexico (now known as Aztlán)

**Point of View:** third-person omniscient

**Themes:** cloning, family (genetic and surrogate), unrestrained power, good vs. evil, tolerance/intolerance, slavery, bravery, man's ego, loyalty, love

**Style:** narrative

**Tone:** apprehensive, uncertain, serious

**Conflict:** person vs. person, person vs. society, person vs. self

## Summary

Matt Alacrán, the clone of the powerful drug lord Matteo Alacrán, a.k.a. El Patrón, lives the first six years of his life in an isolated cottage in the poppy fields with his caretaker, Celia, a loving and religious servant. He spends most of his time alone until some children discover him in the cottage, and Matt breaks a window to escape from his “prison” in order to be with them. They take him to the Alacrán Estate, where he eventually learns the truth about his origin and his ultimate destiny, to provide a new heart for the elderly Alacrán. Though Matt is intelligent and adept and differs from other clones, who have had their intelligence destroyed at birth, most of the residents of the estate treat him with contempt and cruelty. When El Patrón dies at the age of 148, Celia and the compassionate Tam Lin, Matt's appointed bodyguard, help Matt escape to Aztlán, where he is captured and forced into slave labor with other orphans. He eventually escapes and returns to Opium, determined to rid the country of evil and free its captives.

## About the Author

**Personal:** Nancy Farmer was born in 1941 in Phoenix, Arizona, and grew up in a hotel on the Arizona/Mexico border. After graduating with a B.A. degree from Reed College in Oregon in 1963, she joined the Peace Corps and served in India, teaching biology and chemistry, from 1963 to 1965. From 1969 to 1971, she studied chemistry at Merritt College in Oakland, California, and later at the University of California in Berkeley. During the years 1975 to 1978, she worked as an insect pathology technician in Zimbabwe, Africa, where she met and married her husband, Harold. They have one son, Daniel. The family lives in Menlo Park, California.

**Literary Career:** Farmer wrote a short story when her son was four years old. She comments that the story “wasn't good, but it was fun,” and that since then she has “been absolutely possessed with the desire to write.” Her first book, *Do You Know Me?* (1993), was well received by children and critics. She followed this with *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm*, which was named a 1995 Newbery Award Honor Book, a Notable Book, a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association, and an Honor Book by the Golden Kite Awards, given by the Society of Children's Writers and Illustrators. Her other Newbery Honor books are *A Girl Named Disaster* (1996) and *The House of the Scorpion* (2002), which was also named a National Book Award Winner, a Michael L. Printz Honor Book, and an ALA Notable Book. Other books include *The Warm Place* and three picture books for children.

## Characters

### The Alacrán Family

**Matt:** a clone of the powerful drug lord Matteo Alacrán

**El Patrón:** the original Matteo Alacrán; cruel, manipulative; takes pride in Matt because he is a duplicate of himself; enjoys watching Matt grow up but intends to harvest his heart to prolong his own life; dies at age 148

**El Viejo:** grandson of El Patrón; father of Mr. Alacrán; aged man who dies rather than allow organ transplants from his clone

**Mr. Alacrán:** great-grandson of El Patrón; husband of Felicia; father of **Benito** (oldest son) and **Steven** (second son); cruel; hates Matt

**Felicia:** wife of Mr. Alacrán; mother of Benito, Steven, and **Tom**, her youngest son, whose father is Mr. MacGregor; despises Matt and plots against him

**Felipe:** El Patrón's son; died years before plot begins

**Fani:** Benito's wife; hates her husband but was forced to marry him

### Slaves and Servants at the Alacrán Estate

**Celia:** servant who takes care of and loves Matt; instills in him a value system; deeply religious

**Tam Lin:** bodyguard for El Patrón and Matt; kind and compassionate; arranges for Matt's escape

**Daft Donald:** bodyguard for El Patrón

**Rosa:** housekeeper; Matt's jailer; cruel and vindictive

**Willum:** chief doctor for Alacrán family; Rosa's lover; concerned primarily about himself

**Mr. Ortega:** Matt's piano teacher; deaf

**Matt's Teacher:** an eejit who teaches by rote

### Visitors and Associates of the Alacrán Family

**Senator Mendoza:** politician from the United States; powerful and inflexible; father of **Emilia**, who marries Steven Alacrán, and **María**, who befriends and helps Matt

**Esperanza:** Senator Mendoza's estranged wife; Emilia's and María's mother; disappeared when María was five; reunites with María and assists Matt

**Mr. MacGregor:** drug lord; recipient of his clone's organs

### People in Aztlán

**Raúl, Carlos, Jorge:** the Keepers of the Lost Boys; cruel, manipulative

**Chacho, Fidelito, Ton-Ton:** Lost Boys who befriend Matt and escape with him

**Flaco:** the oldest of the Lost Boys

**Luna:** Lost Boy in charge of the infirmary

**Guapo and Consuela:** old man and woman who rescue Matt in San Luis

**Sister Inéz:** nurse at the convent

### Additional Characters

**Furball:** María's dog, whom she dearly loves

**Eejits, a.k.a. zombies:** people with computer chips in their brains to control them

# Conflict

The **conflict** of a story is the struggle between two people or two forces. There are three main types of conflict: person vs. person, person vs. nature or society, and person vs. self.

**Directions:** Matt experiences some conflicts in the story. In the spaces provided, list conflict types Matt experiences. Identify the conflicts and then explain how each conflict is resolved in the story.

Type:

Conflict	Resolution

Type:

Conflict	Resolution

Type:

Conflict	Resolution

## Chapters 1–3, pp. 2–24

Matt Alacrán, the clone, is “harvested” and hidden away in a cottage for six years under the care of Celia, a servant of El Patrón. He is injured when he breaks free after some children discover him in the cottage. The children take him to the Alacrán Estate, where he is thrown out of the house when his true identity is revealed.

Vocabulary
lunar (8)
consternation (17)
shards (19)
rivulets (19)

### Discussion Questions

1. Examine information about the “droplets of life.” Note the significance of this information. (*“Droplets of life” is a metaphor for embryonic cells under the care of Eduardo, who carefully monitors the laboratory setting in which they are being cultivated. Initially, all 36 cells seem to be perfect, but eventually all die except one. Eduardo’s fear about being sent to the Farms if all the embryos die foreshadows expectations on the Alacrán Estate, i.e., failure is unacceptable. The cells have been frozen for over 100 years, indicating that cloning is an established practice. Conditions of the brood cows into whom the embryos are implanted imply a highly mechanized society. The reference to an injection to blunt the intelligence of newborns foreshadows the purpose for which the clones are harvested. Lisa’s warning not to inject this one because it is a Matteo Alacrán alludes to Alacrán’s power and reveals the identity of this clone. The information about cloning and the reference to a lunar colony infer a futuristic setting. pp. 2–4, 8*)
2. Discuss information about Matt’s first six years of life and analyze its implications. (*Matt has always lived with Celia, his caretaker, in a cottage in the poppy fields. The doors and windows are always locked, and he is never allowed outside. He is isolated from other human contact, except for a monthly visit from the doctor, and entertains himself while Celia works long hours in the “Big House.” Matt is intelligent and eager to learn, but his life is mundane and boring. Watching children interacting on television shows stirs in him the desire to be with the other children he sees riding horses in the poppy fields. Some children discover the cottage and see Matt inside, but he is so terrified he cannot utter a single word. The arrival of the children intensifies Matt’s desire for companions his own age and foreshadows Matt’s breaking free of his “prison” in spite of Celia’s dire warnings. pp. 5–10*)
3. Analyze the metaphor, “You must stay hidden in the nest like a good little mouse. There’re hawks out there that eat little mice” (p. 5) and the correlation between Matt and Peter Rabbit (p. 7). (*The “nest” is the cottage, the “mouse” is Matt, and the “hawks” are those who would destroy Matteo Alacrán’s clone. Celia’s warning foreshadows what happens to Matt when he leaves the “nest.” Matt is a metaphor for Peter Rabbit. This allusion foreshadows Matt’s “fate.” Just as the rabbit is caught and imprisoned when he enters Mr. MacGregor’s garden, Matt will be caught and imprisoned when he enters the Alacrán manor. Both the rabbit and Matt have many adventures and face death, but they eventually escape.*)
4. Examine information about Celia. Discuss her impact on Matt. (*Celia’s role as a servant of Matteo Alacrán, in addition to cooking in the “Big House,” is to care for Matt’s physical needs and to protect him from harm. She loves Matt but refuses to allow him to call her “Mama” and tells him he is only loaned to her. She is deeply religious, e.g., crucifix, picture of Jesus, statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe. pp. 5–14*)
5. Discuss what Celia tells Matt about the Alacrán and Mendoza children. (*The Alacrán children are lazy, ungrateful, demanding, and disrespectful. Benito, the oldest, is 17 and is a “real devil.” Steven, 13, is not so bad, and Celia thinks perhaps he has a soul. Tom, who is ten, looks innocent and charming, but is cruel and manipulative. He is especially adept at tormenting María Mendoza.*)

The Mendoza children are visiting the Alacrán estate with their father, a politician from the United States. Emilia is 13, and María is about Matt's age. Matt realizes that Steven and Emilia are the children who came to the cottage. pp. 12–14)

- Examine the cause and effect of Matt's meeting with the children. Note the role of each one. (Cause: Steven and Emilia return, bringing María to see the boy in the cottage. Effect: Matt is speechless but communicates with them through his actions. Cause: They turn to leave because María is angry and begins to cry when Matt won't talk. Effect: Matt breaks the window and begins his rehearsed speech. Cause: María wants to play, but the others start to leave. Effect: Matt jumps through the broken window. Cause: Matt is seriously injured. Effect: The children carry him to the Alacrán "Big House." Cause: While Rosa is tending Matt's wounds, María discovers writing, "Property of the Alacrán Estate," on Matt's foot. Cause: Mr. Alacrán enters, becomes enraged, calls Matt a little beast, and whispers something in Rosa's ear. Effect: Rosa dashes outside and dumps Matt on the lawn. pp. 15–24)
- Prediction:** What has Mr. Alacrán revealed about Matt to cause Rosa's reaction?

### Supplementary Activities

- Begin a list of similes and metaphors. This is an ongoing activity, and examples are given in the Supplementary Activities of each section where applicable. **Simile**—"The chupacabras sucked your blood and left you to dry like an old cantaloupe skin" (p. 10); see also pp. 9, 21, 22; **Metaphors**—Celia: mouse; Big House: butter (p. 11)
- Write a metaphor depicting what the cottage represents to Matt.
- Design a pin like Rosa's (p. 21) and explain what you think it symbolizes.

### Chapters 4–5, pp. 25–49

Matt is banished to a "prison" in the Alacrán manor, where he is treated like an animal. Tom seriously injures him with a peashooter. María, who had earlier befriended him, brings Celia to him. Celia plots to secure his release.

Vocabulary	
clone (26)	
warren (27)	
tetanus (28)	
Illegals (32)	
covey (35)	
senile (37)	
disconsolately (38)	
taut (39)	
cowered (41)	
trundled (42)	

### Discussion Questions

- Analyze the revelations about Matt and compare/contrast him with other clones. (Clones are viewed as animals, and Steven refers to Matt as "it." Steven has known about Matt's existence but thought he lived in a zoo. The law states that clones' brains are to be destroyed at birth, but El Patrón supersedes the law to allow Matt, his own clone, to grow up like a real boy. Everyone treats Matt like an animal. pp. 26–28)
- Examine the cause and effect of Matt's treatment for his injuries. (Cause: The doctor, whose job is to make sure "it" stays healthy, orders Matt taken inside where he can tend his wounds. Effect: Matt is taken to a room in the servants' quarters and suffers great pain as the glass is removed. Cause: Rosa maliciously treats him like an animal. Effect: Matt asks for Celia. Cause: Rosa tells

him Celia will not be allowed to see him and leaves Matt alone in a silent, dimly lit room. Effect: Grief-stricken, Matt cries dejectedly. Cause: He remembers the Virgin. Effect: He falls into a deep