
Book Review: *Horse* A Novel

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As horse people we are always looking for the next horse related thing. The next book, movie, artist or what have you. So, I was particularly excited when I saw a “must read” book popping up all over aptly titled “Horse.” “Horse” by Geraldine Brooks however is more than just the story of a Horse, it is a masterpiece of historical fiction exploring some of the darkest aspects of humanity.

Geraldine Brooks has a deep love of horses and this book is set around one of the most famous racehorses of all time, Lexington. Horse, however, is a captivating novel that spans nearly 2 centuries, starting in 1850 and bringing the reader up to modern day. In celebrating the most famous horse of the 19th century, Brooks brings to light the conflict between North and South in the 1850s and 60s and its legacy in the divisions that still plague American society today.

The novel is aptly titled because a thoroughbred stallion named Lexington ties together the disparate strands of the tale across nearly two centuries. The real-life Lexington (1850-75) won fame for the astounding speed and stamina that enabled him to win six of the seven races he ran. But he won his greatest fame after he was put out to stud. He compiled a record that may not ever have been matched since in America. The sheer number of champion racehorses he sired is astounding. But it is the people around him, and those in the 21st century who learn about him through their academic studies, who are the focus of Brooks’ storytelling skill.

First we meet the two people who anchor the story in the 21st century. Theo is a US-born Nigerian-American graduate student in art history at Georgetown University. One day he rescues an old painting of a horse from the trash across the street from his apartment. Meanwhile, Jess, a zoologist who specializes in old bones for the Smithsonian, is on the trail of a horse skeleton in storage in the museum. The two will meet and their investigations converge when they learn that the object of their interest is the same famous 19th-century racehorse, Lexington.

In the 19th century, the cast of characters is headed by “Warfield’s Jarret,” a young Black slave who is the son of Harry Lewis, a freedman who had bought himself out of slavery. Jarrett’s first owner, Dr. Elisha Warfield, and his second, Richard Ten Broeck, figure prominently in the tale, as does the prominent equestrian painter, Thomas J. Scott. Jarret, Theo, and Jess are all fictional creations. Brooks pulled Dr. Warfield, Ten Broeck, and Scott from the pages of history.

Today few Americans understand how confused and uncertain was the period in our history from 1850 to 1875—the years when Lexington lived. We tend to think the country neatly divided between those who supported slavery and those who opposed the institution—and that the Civil War confirmed the rigid separation. But of course it was much more complicated than that. Brooks’ portrayal of life in northern Kentucky shows the conflict brewing from county to county and home to home, as families came apart under the strain and those who wished to remain neutral came under increasing pressure to take sides. And her depiction of the experiences of the graduate student, Theo, who is African-American, brings to light all the knee-jerk racism and police violence that so vividly stains the American conscience today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geraldine Brooks is the author of the novels The Secret Chord, Caleb’s Crossing, People of the Book, March (which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2006) and Year of Wonders, recently optioned by Olivia Coleman. She has also written three works of non-fiction: Nine Parts of Desire, based on her experiences among Muslim women in the mideast, Foreign Correspondence, a memoir about an Australian childhood enriched by penpals around the world and her adult quest to find them, and The Idea of Home: Boyer Lectures 2011.

Brooks was born in 1955 and educated in Sydney, Australia, and began a career in journalism with the Sydney Morning Herald. She moved to the United States to obtain a master’s degree from the Columbia University School of Journalism and married Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian and Journalist Tony Horwitz. She worked as a foreign correspondent for The Wall Street Journal, winning major awards in the process. Her husband died in 2019, ending their marriage of 35 years. She now lives on Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts with two sons, a horse named Valentine and a dog named Bear.

