

HORSE AND PONY STORIES CANTER INTO CANADIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Flaming Star, Nicky Millard. Illus. by T. Merle Smith. Scholastic-TAB Publications Ltd., 1976. 119 pp. \$1.05 paper.

Lucky, the Horse Nobody Wanted, Doris L. Ganton. Illus. by J. Parrott. Hancock House Publishers, 1976. 143 pp. \$4.95 hardback.

Three-Day Challenge, Joan S. Weir. Illus. by Alan Daniel. Scholastic-TAB Publications Ltd., 1976. 190 pp. \$1.05 paper.

The Year of the Horse, Diana Walker. Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd. 1975. 177 pp. \$8.25 hardback.

Writing in 1961, Margery Fisher wondered if pony books, which had enjoyed great popularity in England for the past two decades, embodied those universal qualities which ensure a permanent appeal, or whether they were already a passing literary fashion.¹ Recently, K. M. Peyton stated bluntly that pony books were out of fashion, and relegated them to our attics as "relics of the nineteen thirties and forties".²

But what is *passé* in one country may well be *avant garde* in another. The pony story seems just to be arriving in Canada, the thirty year Atlantic crossing no longer than that of many other literary influences and fashions. The growing popularity of the pony story in Canada is a reflection of conditions within our own shores as well. Riding is becoming an increasingly popular recreation, a sign of economic prosperity. Canadian youngsters throng enthusiastically to their weekly Pony Club lessons in ever-increasing numbers. This organization, which helped democratize the sport of kings in post-World War II England, is now counteracting élitism in Canada.

Horse stories fall into one of two broad categories. When the author's main function is to plead for the humane treatment of horses, we have what one can call the horse story proper. The main protagonist is a horse; human characters are secondary and float in and out of the story as we follow the vagaries of the horse hero's life. The plot is episodic, the time scheme extended to a good part of the life span of a horse, the whole structure generally loose and formless. When the writer's subject is the powerful affection which can grow between a horse and its rider, the narrative is more aptly named the pony story, because the rider is usually adolescent, and the mount a pony (under 14.2 hands), rather than a horse. The dual protagonists, horse and rider, share star billing, their special relationship a vehicle for a wish-fulfillment pattern intensified through repetition. The heroine gets what she wants initially — a horse — and achieves

her final goal ultimately – success in some form of competition – in both cases overcoming enormous obstacles. The plot is concentrated into a relatively short time span: one event, one year's training. Unity is provided by the immediacy of the goals – acquiring the horse, winning the competition.

Writers of horse and pony stories, linked as they are by their subject matter to a two-thousand-year-old tradition of didactic animal stories, sometimes forget that their stories will have authenticity only so long as they depict an animal objectively, and that as soon as they allow distinctively human qualities as part of the animal personality, they are open to the charge of sentimentality. Horse story writers are the more successful in avoiding the problem, aided by their purpose, which necessarily emphasizes the differences between horses and the humans whose responsibility they are. Pony story writers often seem less able to make the distinction, reflecting, perhaps, the intense emotional attachment of their adolescent readers to a beloved horse, whom they consistently regard as a sentient moral being.

Black Beauty (1877) at once set the standards and established the pattern of the horse story for the imitations which followed. Of the four Canadian stories here under review, *Flaming Star* by Nicky Millard and *Lucky, the Horse Nobody Wanted* by Doris L. Ganton are in the tradition of *Black Beauty*. They have the episodic pattern of their kind, and they attempt to focus on the adventures of a single horse whose unpredictable fate always includes some masters who are kind and some who are cruel.

Flaming Star is so short as almost to preclude a sufficient number of episodes to convey the theme. Its brevity may in fact be an inducement to the reluctant reader, but it is packed with enough exciting incidents (a stable fire, a ride through a flood-swollen river) to entice all compulsive horse story readers. The illustrations deserve mention: not only do they reflect an accurate knowledge of horse anatomy, and a sensitivity to the spirit of the story, but they convey the immense power and brute strength of the horse. The true horse lover, perhaps, never knows whether he responds most to the beauty or the strength of this animal; but it is the latter quality of which young readers (and riders) need continually to be reminded.

Nothing is specifically Canadian about this book. *Flaming Star's* adventures take her from the English racing stable where she was born and trained, to a country vicarage where she is the beloved pet of the vicar's daughter, who is pathologically competitive. Even the delightful touch of Puffer, the Jack Russell terrier who befriends Star, is "foreign". Although these hardy little individualists in their thousands pursue the pleasures of life throughout the dales and downs of England, the breed is almost unknown in Canada.

The opening is weak through an initial lack of focus. Purporting to be the adventures of one horse, the narrative concentrates first on the stable boy, Jago, and then on his love for Selina, a brood mare. Her last foal, the filly *Flaming*

Star, does not appear until well into the story.

The treatment of the human characters as flat, rather than well rounded, is necessitated by the briefness of the tale. Jago, Star's first rider, is remembered by the horse because he was kind; he is remembered by the reader because he is a gypsy (again, gypsies are not a feature of Canadian life, although one still sees their caravans parked by the wayside, among the moors of North Yorkshire). The young reader is enthralled by Jago's exoticism and independence; he has lived everywhere and nowhere, he has never been to school and cannot read or write, he speaks to the horses in the Romany tongue and he understands them instinctively, as do all his mysterious race.

Ms. Millard knows about the training of and the caring for of horses, and some of this special knowledge, one of the appeals of all good horse books, she conveys to her readers. She knows how a lazy stable boy's neglect to rub down Star and cool her off after a demanding work-out — the most necessary and boring of horse care routines — leads to Star's near-fatal illness. Furthermore, she claims neither too much, nor too little, for Star's intelligence, in emphasizing the horse's ability to remember Jago, her first master. Horses are not among the brightest members of the animal kingdom, but they do have good memories. Ms. Millard illustrates how all the principles of schooling a horse depend on the knowledge of this fact, and she provides a thread of unity to her theme, as Star remembers Jago through all the years of their separation, ending the story with a firm grip on the theme.

Birth and death are tactfully treated, also, in *Flaming Star*. Without editorializing, Millard explodes both the romantic notion that birth is a beautiful experience, and the idea that because it is natural, only harm can result if knowledge comes to aid in the process. After all, death is "natural", too, but no more "beautiful" as a physical spectacle, than is birth. Emphasis is placed where it should be, not on the process, which leads to suffering and death for the mare Selina, but on the product, the miracle of a new life, the filly Star.

Lucky, the Horse that Nobody Wanted also illustrates the lesson that horses should be treated humanely, but the writer, Doris L. Ganton, has more difficulty finding her theme than does Nicky Millard. The indecision which mars this first book in her series of Lucky stories arises because Ms. Ganton is not sure which of two things she wants to do, write a horse story or write a pony story. She resolves this problem only at the end of *Lucky, the Horse that Nobody Wanted*, when the mare finds a first purchaser, young Sharon Scott.

Lucky tries to be a horse story, although we do not meet Lucky until almost half way through the book. The callous mistreatment of a hackney mare called Coquette is the actual subject of the story, which follows her from stable to the wilds, where she gives birth to Lucky. Mare and foal share an adventurous existence for another three years, but the author never gains control of her narrative line. Although the reader may legitimately anticipate the delights of sur-

prise in a plot, he should not be misled. In this case, the reader does not find his bearings until the midway point, and even the second half lacks convincing signposts.

Ms. Ganton, who knows her subject well, employs her knowledge of the training and nature of horses to illustrate her theme with graphic detail. Coquette starts life as one of the favourites at her stable. Kindly but firmly schooled, of impeccable blood, she responds by giving her best for her masters. She is a winner. She cannot understand the cruelty of her second master; unable to interpret cruel aids, she responds inappropriately. A vicious cycle of failure and abuse results, which culminates with the mare running away in terror. Permanently injured during her escape, wild and distrustful of people, Coquette is now of no value to men; she suffers almost as intensely from the consequent neglect as she did from the initial abuse. The mare's suffering points up that ani-abuse and neglect is immoral. Furthermore, it is not only wrong, but short-sighted. Those who earn their living by exploiting horse flesh in various ways are defeated by their own stupidity and cruelty.

But a thorough knowledge of horses and their training cannot disguise poor writing. Unconvincing characters inhabit a ramshackle plot, the narrative rambles on with no attempt at variety in technique or pacing, no evidence that one episode is of more importance than another. Thus, the chance for a big scene — the escape of a large herd of horses (and for some humor, as well) — is passed over with the same degree of attention as, say, the method of feeding horses in a forest. The result is a boring sameness of style. The text is further marred by errors in typography, spelling and grammar.

Although competitive horse showing may not be in the forefront of the Canadian sporting consciousness, *Three-Day Challenge* and *The Year of the Horse* reflect the growing popularity of horses, casual riding, and professional horsemanship. These two pony stories concentrate on the relationship between a horse and its young rider, with plots that move from the uncertainties of acquiring and keeping a horse to the suspense of the horse show circuit.

Three-Day Challenge has a fast-paced narrative and a credible and well-balanced group of characters, complemented by illustrations which capture nuances of human personality and convey artist Alan Daniel's obvious pleasure in the beauty and power of horse flesh. Three-day eventing is a highly specialized subject matter, however. Author Joan Weir's detailed descriptions of the nature and function of dressage, endurance, and stadium jumping events, while a recommendation to the competition devotee, may be outside the interest range of the average pony-clubbing girl reader.

The event has brought the eighteen-year-old heroine, Janey Stewart, to London, Ontario, to compete for the first time at the international level. Ms. Weir male competitors, the one-upmanship and bravado of the young men, the agony and out of competition. Tension mounts as Janey and her rivals meet, at the

end of each day's event, for results to be posted. In the evenings, the human drama assumes the forefront, as Janey, unaccustomed to male attention of any kind, is swept off her feet by the handsome but unscrupulous Dickson Millingford, while repeatedly snubbing the sincere but socially gauche Red Tomlinson. The whole gamut of teenage insecurities – the digs and rivalries among the female competitors, the one-upmanship and bravado of the young men, the agony of knowing no one in a crowded room – is depicted during the round of obligatory social functions. Janey's personal life begins to assume a satisfying fullness, after a series of disappointing but illuminating encounters.

Ms. Weir's knowledge of horses is conveyed through Janey's attempts to repair the physical and psychological damage which her thoroughbred Storm had sustained as a result of a single ill-judged decision made over a year earlier. The foolish decision to take Storm over a high down-hill jump at a full gallop has left Janey with a badly injured horse, terrified of any jump which presents similar conditions. Will Storm refuse the down-hill jump in the cross country? Because she knows horses and their long memories, Ms. Weir is able to communicate Janey's authentic fear as she approaches the cross-country event.

Although the time span of the story is brief, and the setting mainly the one locale of London, *Three-Day Challenge* captures something of the Canadian ethos. It capsulates one myth on which our history is founded, the myth of east-west rivalry. Janey, who has rarely been off her brother's cattle ranch near Nanton, Alberta, goes "down east" with the engaging openness and pioneer optimism of the true westerner, to win her spot on the team. The east radiates smug superiority – no one has heard of Janey Stewart; she is not a known threat. The east is not ready for Janey. Her conscientious years of honest preparation, her devotion to hard work, her incredible efficiency, mark her for victory. But ironically, Janey is not ready for the east. She discovers that this is where the action is, where it's always been. Thus, the Canadian myth is renewed, through the process of epitomizing our larger national history in a small personal story.

The book is topically Canadian too, in a way that is perhaps most refreshing for the western reader. Weir's regionalism is not parochial. Sound knowledge of Alberta and Albertans – the competition among speculators for real estate south of Calgary, the eagerness of cattlemen to raise Charolais herds – gives authenticity to the story. *Three-Day Challenge* is a welcome book, providing not only the usual ingredients of the pony story – knowledge of horses and competitions, and an engaging set of characters working toward a clear-cut and immediate goal – but also an authentic interpretation of these characteristics as part of the Canadian experience.

The Year of the Horse is totally unpretentious, a kind of un-pony pony book. The heroine, Joanna Longfellow, becomes an equestrian almost by accident. Her mount is so ignoble as to elicit only the name of Horse. Furthermore, although Joanna has two pro-horse kid brothers, she also has a delightfully conventional anti-horse elder sister. Together, they make a most entertain-

ing family, and as they move *en masse* into the hastily marshalling ranks of the established horse world, they provide a welcome sense of proportion, with their balanced sense of priorities, something which is often needed amongst the tipped equilibria of horsey enthusiasts.

Like the other three stories (and indeed, like all good juvenile adventures), *Year of the Horse* keeps its pages uncluttered by the parental presence. Authorial ingenuity in ridding children of this universal affliction is admirable. Jago's parents have long been dead from undisclosed causes, Sharon's parents are alive but never met by the reader of *Lucky*, Janey's parents have been killed three years earlier in an automobile accident, Joanna's parents are somewhere in Mexico, where her father, a free-lance writer, is completing an assignment. Thus, all these children and adolescents are free to work out their own fate, untrammelled by the restricting voice of authority.

Like so many pony story writers, Diana Walker follows a fairy story formula. Far too many things which are too good to be true happen to Joanna Longfellow. Just when her interest in John Holmes makes her wish desperately that she had a horse and could ride, Horse comes to hand. When riding, at first a means of access to John's world, becomes an end in itself which Horse will no longer serve, the millionaires next door decide to train Joanna as a rider to show their extremely valuable horses. When this perfect existence is threatened by the return of her absent father, a man who has been bored with the country all his life, he unaccountably becomes enamoured of country living. Country life assured, she needs a real horse, the kind that only the wealthy can afford. It suddenly becomes evident that Horse is in foal; the sire could only have been the prize stud from the Holmes' stable.

The fairy tale formula is the only jarring note in a book which otherwise relies on the skillful use of the conventions of realism, such as the first person point of view. In telling her own story, Joanna unconsciously reveals the expanding and maturing of a young, receptive personality. A well-adjusted, take-it-or-leave-it teenager, Joanna's capacity to respond, and to notice, suddenly flowers after her meeting with John. Her loving nature is reflected in her affection for her zany family, from Maxwell and his refrigerated frog spawn, to Margaret and her posturings as a budding writer. Her initial interest in Horse gradually deepens into real affection, and widens to encompass all animals. Gradually, a picture of the gentle southern Ontario countryside is built up through eyes opened by appreciation and affection, until Joanna becomes so attached to her surroundings that she finds she cannot leave them. Her wry documentation of her haphazard progress as a rider does not disguise the fact that she works hard to achieve the goal which gradually takes shape before her — competing in the "Royal". She joyfully takes on the job of mucking-out stables every Saturday morning to pay for Horse's board, just like every pony-mad girl in the country, revelling in the hard work, the "atmosphere". Her experiences are, in large measures, those shared by other young riders who will read and enjoy *Year of the Horse* for its imaginative evocation of the familiar.

Given the rigidity of a necessary connection between intention and structure in the horse and pony story, the number of variations over the years is surprising, rather than disappointing, and the fact that more than a few first rate works have appeared is gratifying evidence that the formulas allow for the expression of at least a small segment of life's richness and variety. These Canadian contributions to the genre justify the belief in the vigor of the form when it reflects a vigor in the life of its readers. At the same time, the belief is tempered by the hope that although some good writing has been achieved, better will follow in this young tradition in Canadian children's literature.

NOTES

¹Margery Fisher, *Intent Upon Reading* (Brockhampton Press, 1961) p. 183.

²K.M. Peyton, "On Not Writing a Proper Book", *The Thorny Paradise*, ed. Edward Blisshen (Krestrel Books, 1975), p. 126. Her belief, however, had not prevented Peyton from writing one of the best of all pony stories, *Fly-by-Night* (O.U.P., 1969), nor from then turning her hand to its equally distinguished sequel, *The Team* (O.U.P., 1976). Both are models of their genre: absorbing, lively reading for young teenage girls, beautifully paced and structured narratives, proof to writer and critic that conventions are as liberating in the hands of a skilled writer and critic as they are restricting in the hands of a poor one.

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