

Horse, by Geraldine Brooks

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Pulitzer Prize winning writer Geraldine Brooks' prodigious skills as a storyteller are evident in *Horse*, her splendid blend of fiction and fact. *Horse's* equine character is Lexington, the 19th century stallion who was deemed the greatest racehorse of his era.

The novel, whose overlapping chapters go back and forth in time, begins in 2019 in Washington, D.C. Theo, a Nigerian-American art historian, serendipitously received an old oil painting of a horse from his elderly white neighbor. Marveling at the portrait, Theo mused that the artist must have known a lot about horses: "The head of a bright bay colt gazed out of the canvas, the expression in the eyes unusual and haunting." Meanwhile, across town at the Smithsonian, an Australian zoological scientist named Jess was tasked with archiving the bones of horse.

Horse's narrative then reverts to 1850, with the foaling of a new colt at Dr. Elisha Warfield's plantation in Lexington, Kentucky. The foal, named Darley, was "a bright bay colt like its dam, with a white star and a snip on its face and four white feet." Dr. Warfield gave Darley to Harry Lewis, the stable's Black trainer, as part of his wages.

Although Harry was a freedman who had bought himself out of bondage, his thirteen-year-old son Jarret was still enslaved. Harry assigned the boy to train Darley. Soon Jarret and the horse became inseparable: "The colt was turning out intelligent and strong, open to whatever Jarret asked of him. As the horse built strength, they'd go longer and harder. That was how you built a four-mile horse—bone and muscle and wind."

After Darley won his debut race at the Lexington track, Harry saved his earnings to buy Jarret's freedom. However, among the crowd who came to see Darley run was Richard Ten Broeck, a New Orleans businessman determined to buy the fleet-footed bay. Citing a law that it is illegal for Blacks to own or race horses, Ten Broeck forced Dr. Warfield to sell him Jarret and the horse, now renamed Lexington.

Distressed to be traded away from his father, Jarret found purpose in Lexington's success on the track. Despite Lexington's fame, however, Jarret knew that he and the horse were "the stakes, not the stakeholders. Only horses were honest, in the end."

In *Horse's* powerful conclusion, Geraldine Brooks deftly ties together the converging storylines of Jarret, Theo, Jess, and the painting. When 2022 fiction prizes are awarded, *Horse* is a sure bet to sprint to the winner's circle.

(Note: *Horse* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 11.)