



Horse Heaven

Jane Smiley

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"It's not true," says a character in Jane Smiley's funny, passionate, and brilliant new novel of horse racing, "that anything can happen at the racetrack," but many astonishing and affecting things do—and in *Horse Heaven*, we find them woven into a marvelous tapestry of joy and love, chicanery, folly, greed, and derring-do.

Haunting, exquisite Rosalind Maybrick, wife of a billionaire owner, one day can't quite decide what it is she wants, and discovers too late that her whole life is transformed . . . Twenty-year-old Tiffany Morse, stuck in her job at Wal-Mart, prays, "Please make something happen here . . . This time, I mean it," and something does . . . Farley, a good trainer in a bad slump; Buddy, a ruthless trainer who can't seem to lose even though he knows that his personal salvation depends upon it; Roberto, an apprentice jockey who has "the hands" but is growing too big for his dream career with every passing day; Leo the gambler and his earnest son, Jesse, who understands everything about his father's "system" except why it doesn't work; Elizabeth, the 62-year-old theorist of sex and animal communication, and her best friend, Joy, the mare manager at the ranch at the center of the universe—all are woven together by the horses that pass among them: Two colts and two fillies who begin with the promise of talent and breeding, and now might or might not achieve stardom.

There are the geldings—Justa Bob, the plain brown horse who always wins by a nose, a lovable claimer who passes from owner to owner on a heart-wrenching journey down from the winner's circle; and the beautiful Mr. T., raced in France and rescued in Texas, who is discovered to have some unusual and amazing talents.

And then there is the Jack Russell terrier, Eileen, a dog with real convictions—and the will to implement them.

The strange, compelling, sparkling, and mysterious universe of horse racing that has fascinated generations of punters and robber barons, horse-lovers and wits, has never before been depicted with such verve and originality, such tenderness, such clarity, and, above all, such sheer exuberance.

Horse Heaven Details

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From Reader Review Horse Heaven for online ebook

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

This is a book with a HUGE cast of characters. In fact, the first 2 pages is the list of characters, from horse owners, trainers (and their assistants), breeders, jockeys, bettors, the horses themselves, and the racetracks. While the story is linear - even to the sections being dated - it does of necessity skip around to the various groups of characters, many of whom are relatively unknown to each other and who don't interact with the other groups of characters. I was not confused, although there was once or twice in the earlier pages that I needed to have my memory refreshed. ;-)

I believe this is well-researched and everything rings true. But who am I to say? I knew nothing about horse racing when I turned the first page. What was most fascinating to me:

- a. Horse racing attracts people from all walks of life.
- b. Not all owners are filthy rich, although certainly none of them are average Joe's either.
- c. Horses have definite personalities - even to being very opinionated.

The above makes it sound as if this were a treatise on horse racing. I do not want to mislead you. This is an excellent story, fairly well-written, and while the prose is not stellar, it comes with good characterizations. In spite of the stories of the groups of characters being interwoven with each other, it was pretty much a page turner. It included some good horses, no horse won all the time; some good trainers, one was more than slightly dishonest; a few people were beyond "slightly" eccentric, most were normal even if "horse crazy." I will definitely return to Jane Smiley.

Jim says

I'm not really sure how I feel about the book overall. It was excellent in many ways, but sort of pointless overall. It's a soap opera about horses & the people working with them on the track with a sort of beginning & a kind of end, but there was a lot of history & certainly life goes on after the book ends.

The writing was good, engaging & yet there wasn't a single defined plot, so I got a bit lost at times. Toward the middle of the book, I almost gave it up due to characters musing & then it suddenly picked up again. I guess that was the biggest flaw, there was a very realistic unevenness to the story. Tons of crazy things happen, then life sort of drifts along & the cycle repeats.

There are a lot of characters, both horse & human, but there is a pretty good list in the front. It might be worthwhile to make some extra notes. Some of the characters were tough for me to keep separated. For instance, two trainers, Farley & Dick were similar enough that I confused them on more than one occasion, although that didn't really hurt the story at all. Most stood out wonderfully like Justa Bob & Mr. T, super horse characters.

I have enough experience to know that Smiley REALLY knows the business & her take on it, the way she describes the horses & the people, is fantastic. If you like watching any of the big flat races (e.g. the Kentucky Derby) & wonder what sort of life led up to & goes on after, I can't think of a better way to do it.

Stefanie says

Review originally and more completely published at http://www.epinions.com/review/Horse_...

I found Horse Heaven to be entirely too disjointed, jumping from unconnected event to unconnected character every few pages. Smiley did give all her animals very human qualities, making them as integral to the story as the actual human characters. At one point, we even ride around in Eileen the scrappy terrier's mind, hearing her thoughts.

The novel jumps from character to character. Some of these characters are connected in obscure ways, some never meet at all. The main idea circulating through this novel, from page one on seems to be whether the characters "know themselves" and whether or not they ever get to know themselves. In the opening sequence, Epic Steam is noted for being a horse who "knows who he is" whereas Froney's Sis, due to being orphaned at such a young age doesn't quite know who she is. Rosalind finds herself after her affair with Dick. Al loses himself when he finds out about the affair, but then finds himself in re finding his wife of twenty some years. Buddy finds himself when he finds Jesus but then finds his real self when he misplaces Jesus and takes back up his crooked ways.

The novel doesn't really end. I felt there were loose ends that should have been addressed. I wanted to know what happened to certain characters. I was taught that in fiction, if the author presents the reader with a loaded gun, that gun will be shot before the end of the story. I feel that Jane Smiley left me with a loaded gun, safety still on.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

Just loved how Smiley contrasted thoroughbred racing horses - who are born to know what they love and what they are meant to do - with a whole gaggle of self-doubting, identity-conflicted humans. Funny, "sprawling" but controlled, lotsa anthropomorphism but no saccharine sentimentality. Smiley has an insider's knowledge of her milieu, but also respects and trusts her reader enough not to bog the story down in definition or description. Even though they are frequent, her race scenes are never boring. And - the #1 reason I loved this book: she portrays the deep love between humans and animals with respect, knowledge, understanding.

A lovely summer read, for those days you're not at the track. :-)

Eve says

I fell in love with a race horse named Justa Bob...

Cat says

Part of me wants to say that this was just an interminable horse book, and that part of me is speaking with an honest voice (if a condescending and dismissive one). Smiley interweaves the tales of a central set of horses with the proliferating stories of owners, bettors, riders, trainers, breeders, etc., creating a kaleidoscopic effect as the reader glimpses the increasing patterns and events uniting them. Some parts seemed needlessly silly (a horse psychic?), others goofily erotic (not just the comic relief of Elizabeth/Plato and their sex seminars but even the sexual awakening of one of the major characters by a horse trainer who seems to have learned his bedroom technique from a horse masseur...uh huh); much is comfortingly sentimental (every last minute rescue of a horse from a terrible situation reminds you that in fact many or even most horses who go through the racing circuit are abused in some way or form at one point or another and many wind up in the slaughterhouses at the end of the day), and much stretches for the personally and cosmically symbolic in what felt to me like a ham-handed way. Plus, this is incredibly long, and I want long books to earn their pages. This one did not, and I kept wondering where Smiley's editor was. (Perhaps off at the races.)

But there was something that drew me into this book. In fact, I quite enjoyed the beginning. I really enjoyed it for a long time even before the horse racing as symbol for life and society and its ups and downs became tedious and the revelations of the lonely and horse-obsessed became repetitive. The novel is basically about many people who are in love with horses and surrounded by other people who don't understand or treat horses badly. The good guys find each other and often find love and satisfaction. Their interpersonal satisfaction is mirrored in the ultimate triumphs of the horses in whom they find their *joie de vivre*. (I'm glad Smiley wasn't meaner to her readers in terms of narrative and sentiment. Without spoiling anything, she usually pulls back from the precipice when she flaunts what could happen and probably does happen outside of the realm of fiction.)

In this novel, Smiley shows off what realism can do. She includes fascinating detail and trivia about horses and horse-racing (clearly she knows her stuff and enjoys this stuff too--perhaps too much for the non-horse-obsessed reader). She also does what a writer like Dickens does so well and uses the system surrounding horse racing and supporting horse racing to occupy a symbolic space like chancery does in *Bleak House*, a micocosm of society and life. If those nouns feel too abstract, so too do many of the characters' reveries about the symbolic significance of the track. She uses the life stories that she interweaves through the track to establish a moral compass and emotional ideal, and she traces them throughout the novel. Letting horses run the way they want to run and valuing them for character rather than simply profitability = good. It also constitutes the emotional lesson in most of the life stories that she presents to the reader here; each quirky character needs to figure out how to run in their own path, as it were, taking joy in the process, and then they need to appreciate other quirky characters and fully appreciate them and let them be themselves. Alas, this did not seem like a terribly complex or compelling lesson. It certainly did not require six hundred some pages for its exegesis.

And there actually is an interesting tension between the social critique that Smiley sometimes makes in this novel of greed and the astonishing disposable income (the Romneys, anyone?) shown by the owners at the track (as in most Victorian realist novels, it is the middling sorts who come off well and are morally shiny and good in the novel!) and then her total affection for this sport which requires a shocking amount of money to buy horses, care for them, and participate in the competitions. She even includes some good guy rich people to get around this problem of the tension between social critique and horse racing celebration.

Anyway, an incredibly problematic novel and often a really dull one, but also often touching. I think it would have been better as a much shorter short story collection about characters who all love horses. And then there

wouldn't have had to be the narrative acrobatics that Smiley engages in at the end of the novel to bring it all together and wrap up all loose threads in the plot. I often really like Smiley as a writer; *A Thousand Acres* is wonderful, and *Private Life* has a wonderful critique of patriarchal marriage. But this seemed lame (if heartfelt) by comparison. There are some adorably engaging sections from the point of view of a Jack Russell terrier.

April says

Fascinating portrayal of the thoroughbred horseracing world.

How does Jane Smiley do it? Her books are all completely unique. There is no formula; no predictability (you could say she is an anti-Ian McEwan). The story is set in the thoroughbred racing world of Southern California. The story, and the human beings involved are involving. But what set this book apart for me? Two of the main characters are animals. One of the racehorses, and, a dog. A Jack Russell Terrier to be more precise. And let me tell you - these characters are as interesting, and convincing as the humans. Maybe even more.

Note to reader: I grew up surrounded by thoroughbreds and horse-people, and have lived with Jack Russell's for 20 years.

Linda Carroll says

Wonderful book. Smiley artfully made me care and worry about a character that never spoke a word - Justa Bob. She does it without ever anthropomorphizing him.

Robert McKinnon says

I enjoyed *Horse Heaven* so much that when I finished the last page, I turned back to the first.

Lois Tucker says

Gone with the Wind for horses. FUN.

Bronwyn Rykiert says

I really enjoyed this story, though at first I was not sure what I had gotten myself into. It was 22 discs long which for me, is a big book. Half way through the book though I was really enjoying the story.

It is a story about racehorses, the horses, their owners, trainers, assistant trainers, grooms, vets and riders. Jane must really know her horses because when she became the horse and told us how they were feeling, to me, it was quite realistic.

There was Just a Bob, Epic Steam, Residual and Limitless just to name a few. Some of the trainers were Buddy, Farley and Diedra. Some of the owners were the Al and Roselind Mayberick and their jack Russell Irene. William Veil, and Jason and Melanie White. Some owners had owned many racehorses and some were owners for the first time.

My favourite horse was Just a Bob - he came alive in this story.

Not to mention Mr T and Audrey.

I highly recommend this book even if you don't like horses. I read this for a good reads summer challenge and it fit the bill very well.

Debbie Zapata says

March 15 ~~ Review coming tomorrow.

March 16 ~~ I gave this book four stars yesterday but while thinking over my reading experience before sitting to write this review I've dropped it down to three.

The basic idea of the whole thing is compelling: follow the stories of certain Thoroughbred horses during their first three years of life. Will they turn out to be the horses they were expected to be? What kind of drama will surround them and their people? (Because there is always drama around a horse, even a backyard horse.)

Of course I loved the descriptions of the horses, the sense of being at the racetrack, the feel this book gave me of being around the animals again, and I enjoy any book that does that.

But.

As other reviewers have mentioned, there is just too much here. Too many characters, too many shifts from one to the other, and along about page 400 or so I really just wanted the whole thing to be over.

This was my second reading, but the first time through had been so long ago I could only really remember the horse Just a Bob, who was the most memorable this time through also.

Will I ever read it again? Honestly, if I do, I will skim past big chunks and sprint to the finish line instead of plodding more or less patiently for the whole distance.

Susan says

Horse Heaven by Jane Smiley is a novel about horses and their breeders, owners, trainers, grooms, jockeys, traders, bettors and other turf-obsessed humans. It takes place over two-years and chronicles the lives of various horses and their people.

I know a little about horses - that is to say I've ridden horses, been to riding competitions, and been to the race track - but I still found this book particularly hard to get into. You see nothing ever happens, there is no real plot. The entire novel is much more a character epic, and the only redeemable characters are the horses. The horses are quirky and sensitive, and you become attached to them all and feel their ups and downs, their victories and defeats.

The book bounces from character to character, in a way that makes you assume that the stories will converge at some point, but they never really do. They are all loosely related by being in the racing world, but that's it. Every time I felt I had a handle on everyone in the book, Smiley added another set of characters - I couldn't keep up!

In conclusion, let me say this to you: if you enjoy plot-driven novels, this book is not for you; if you enjoy slow-moving character studies, you'll enjoy *Horse Heaven*. My advice is to read this book for the horses, because the humans will disappoint you every time.

Harriett Milnes says

640 pages! Too long. I would have given it 5 stars, but for the length. It's about Thoroughbreds and owners and trainers and horses and love! Very enjoyable, but some of the characters were dropped at a point in the middle and then quickly reintroduced at the end. Some of the chapters felt like a New Yorker story. But, all in all, enjoyable.

Judy says

Jane Smiley's novel about horse racing is one of the best books I have read this summer. It was loaned to me by my sister-in-law, a horse woman herself and daughter of a horse woman. Jane Smiley owns a race horse or two and clearly knows plenty about the subject. A big part of the book's success is the way she makes the horses characters in the story as much as she does the humans.

I knew nothing about the world of horse racing, except that people like to go to the races and bet money. I learned more than I knew there was to know about the individuals who own race horses (usually wealthy), the ones who train them (often fanatical), the jockeys, and the major races of each year along with their locations and prizes. Smiley provides a list of characters and horses but not a glossary, so I kept my iPhone handy and the terminology is easy to find on the web.

For the most part, reading the book was a perfectly painless way to learn because the facts are couched in the stories of individuals, including their dreams, their interpersonal troubles, the highs and lows of the racing life, and the many, various ways that these persons relate to horses.

Smiley takes on the big issues and questions of live, love, business, ethics, etc. Her novel is sprawling and long and rich with emotion. I always enjoy her fiction because of the non-judgmental approach she takes to human foibles; the heady brew of dry humor plus pathos by which she makes us know that often the bad guy wins and the nice people lose. In this one, almost every character, human or horse, gets what he or she wants

in one way or another, deserved or not.

It is a long book, cleverly plotted with intertwining destinies, and I never wanted it to be over. I will probably not ride a horse again in my life and, unless someone invited me along, I would not attend a race, even though the Santa Anita track is just down the freeway. But I don't think I will ever forget the animals or the humans, so well did she bring them to life. Now I understand completely how people can love horses so much.

KateNZ says

This is my favourite Jane Smiley so far. It takes place over two years, and follows several American flat racing Thoroughbreds, their trainers, owners, jockeys and associated hangers-on. There are dirty training tactics, personal trials and tribulations, affairs, distressing animal abuse, big money deals and scams, betting ... and of course the thrill and beauty of the actual races and the horses that run them.

It is typical of her other books that I've read in that it has a large cast of characters, and the narrative and POV keeps switching between them (including the horses and a rather unlikeable dog). The characters are all memorable enough that the reader doesn't get confused, though (unlike *Moo*, where I occasionally had to remind myself who was who), and I didn't find the short episodic nature of the narrative at all annoying. There are amusing moments. Mostly, though, it is a meticulously observed story of two years in the lives of those involved in the racing scene - deeply complex, but with a fresh, forthright and deceptively simple storytelling style.

Denise says

A rambling book with many evocative characters, human and equine, that will stick with me. I haven't cried over a book in a while but one particular scene was so wrenching that it had me sobbing as I read.

Jack says

Fine novel by Jane Smiley, a favorite author. She gets inside the minds of the horses in a surprisingly believable way. Really enjoyed it.

Sarah says

an epic poem in prose . . . about horse racing.

Lisa says

I love the Dicken-esque structure of this novel. This is the first novel I have read by Smiley. I read her small

bio of Dickens and thought it was a wonderful distillation of the man and his work; she had the fine sense to recognize *Our Mutual Friend* as perhaps his best work. With *Horse Heaven* she goes back her forebearers, Dickens, Fielding and Thackeray and creates a novel that is worthy homage.

One of the things I loved best about her book is the sly humor. There is one episode of quiet sly humor which involves Pete Rose and an airline attendant and a woman who believes she can grant wishes. I won't attempt re-tell it. Its a small bit, but so perfect.

Now all that said, it took me about 100 pages to really get thoroughly hooked. But once it did hook me, it had me fast. Even now I find myself thinking about things in it or laughing over bits.

You don't have to love horses to love this book; but you may afterwards.
