



**Riders, Readers, Romance:
A Short History of the Pony Story**

—Jenny Kendrick

Dorsey, Angela. *A Horse Called Freedom*. Markham, ON: Scholastic, 2004. 144 pp. \$6.99 pb. ISBN 0-439-96775-9. Print.

Koops, Sheena. *Voice of the Valley*. Victoria: Orca, 2006. 208 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-514-4. Print.

Siamon, Sharon. *Free Horse. Mustang Mountain*. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2004. 160 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-608-9. Print.

Siamon, Sharon. *Dark Horse. Mustang Mountain*. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2005. 160 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-720-4. Print.

Siamon, Sharon. *Gallop to the Sea. Saddle Island*. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2006. 160 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-713-1. Print.

White, Julie. *The Secret Pony*. Winlaw: Sono Nis, 2004. 160 pp. \$7.95 pb. ISBN 1-55039-148-8. Print.

I wasn't a fan of pony stories growing up and so it wasn't until I had a horsey daughter that I became entangled with the genre. With a My Little Pony clasped in each hand, her bedtime stories took us through series such as Pony Tails and Saddle Club by Bonnie Bryant and the Jinny stories by Patricia Leitch, and (as perhaps befits someone who grew up to qualify as a riding instructor) her questions were far less

literary than technical. In proposing a link between the marketing of equine collectables such as My Little Pony and "the pony fixation so widespread in popular fiction for girls," Bob Dixon, in *Playing them False: A Study of Children's Toys, Games and Puzzles*, observes that it is "easy to see how this concept draws upon the caring, 'mother' role," but he also expresses doubts about the suitability of toys that, in his view, are "heavily

overlaid with the sex object role" (30). My Little Pony, Dixon concludes, is one of many "toy concepts" that "leave very little to the imagination," and there is little, he argues, that a child can do with such a toy other than "get another" (267). Perhaps this argument can be applied by extension to pony-series fiction: is there little a reader can do imaginatively with series fiction other than "get another"?

In "On the Tail of the Seductive Horse," Elaine Moss promotes an alternative view of the value of pony fiction, arguing that many "a young reader has climbed up the tail of a horse (the run-of-the-mill Pony Club story perhaps) to sit comfortably in the saddle of literature thereafter" (27). Moss concludes that this is partly because, despite being despised by "trendy journalists and social engineers as middle-class, static, irrelevant to today's social pattern," horse and pony stories are not confined to series or popular fiction but may cross genres, appearing in such forms as social realism, poetry, humour, fantasy, myth, satire, romance, and coming-of-age stories.

It is, perhaps, the quantity of pony-series fiction, and its lack of range, particularly in the years following the Second World War, that has to some extent obscured the wider-ranging material Moss describes. This essay takes a retrospective look at the origins of the pony story in post-Great-War Britain, and explores its causes, contexts, and critical reception as a background to evaluating the style and impulses of six

examples of the modern Canadian pony story, four by series writers Sharon Siamon and Angela Dorsey, and first novels by Julie White and Sheena Koops.

The horse and pony story has a persuasive and meaningful history, and the range of texts is not limited to series or popular fiction. Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the equine world, is not only a crusade against the maltreatment of working horses, but also an acknowledgement of the societal forces that pressure humans into such behaviour. As the most famous of several equine "autobiographies," *Black Beauty* sets, if not a literary standard, a humane standard that has tended to be emulated by its descendants, amongst which Canadian readers will count the classic dog story, *Beautiful Joe*, by Margaret Marshall Saunders.

Perhaps the best known of these successors in Britain is *Moorland Mousie* by Golden Gorse (Muriel Wace), published in 1929 by Country Life. According to John Birks in "Horses in Books," it is *Moorland Mousie* that started a "spate of pony stories" in the 1920s and 1930s (171). Whilst Birks does not explore the reasons for this explosion of interest, he points out that, like *Black Beauty*, *Moorland Mousie* offers readers "a good deal of information on handling and caring for ponies" and therefore provides "genuine value" (172). Indeed, Golden Gorse was one of a number of writers, including Eleanor Helme and Allen Seaby, who seem to have been motivated in the post-war years by a



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realization that horse knowledge, common in their own pre-war youth, was rapidly being lost as a result of mechanization.

These early pony stories tend to focus very much on the ponies themselves, and to reflect concerns such as the promotion of the native pony and its moorland settings, the correct breaking and training of the child's pony, and the preservation of the art and skills of riding and horse care. By the 1930s, a number of publishers were printing books in this genre, and in subsequent decades, as Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig remark in a rather severe evaluation of the pony story, "the odd tendency of certain young girls to identify strongly with horses has provided a profitable fictional theme" (403).

"Odd," perhaps, if it is indeed, as Bob Dixon suggests, a "fixation" (30), but the earlier the material, the more likely it is to have been written and illustrated by horsemen and women for the young riders of the day, many of whom, both in life and in fiction, were boys. Richard Ball is one of many writers brought up before the war, when riding for boys was necessary and commonplace, before men took over machines and the horses were left to the girls, and Roger, the boy protagonist of *Broncho*—a book which has many of the features of the girls' pony story whilst also relating Broncho's and Roger's experiences of war—is not afraid to be attached to his horse. G. D. Armour, the illustrator, is also representative of a predominantly male group of horse-loving, sporting artists brought up before the Great War, many of whom (including Armour himself, Lionel Edwards, and Thomas Ivester Lloyd) had the opportunity to observe the combat experiences of their equine companions at close quarters whilst serving as remount officers during the war years. This close observation, embodied in fine sporting illustrations, both at war and elsewhere (for example, on the hunting field), is one of the most delightful features of the horse and pony

books of the interwar period (Crouch 73).

Not all writers of the time were working from this rather reflective and evocative perspective, however. Novelists such as Enid Bagnold and Joanna Cannan seem to have used the experiences of their pony-owning children to inform their fiction. In their joint autobiography, well-known post-war British pony-story writers Josephine, Christine, and Diana Pullein-Thompson credit their mother, Joanna Cannan, with establishing the genre as we know it, where the focal character is the pony-mad girl rather than the pony (147).

In the rags-to-riches tradition, this “rescue, rehabilitation and recognition” form of pony story turned many a fictional pony from the error of its ways by means of the exceptional horsemanship of its youthful owner (Kendrick). In the earliest stories, recognition usually came in the form of being allowed to go hunting, perhaps for the first time, or occasionally engaging in activities such as point-to-point, show jumping, or showing. According to his daughter Gwen Aldin, writing for the August 1936 issue of *Riding*, Cecil Aldin organized the very first all-children’s pony event in the UK in 1926. Undoubtedly, the establishment of the Pony Club in 1929 lent a realistic background to the fictional attempts of protagonists to prepare their ponies for the gymkhanas and jumping events that are the highlight of so many later, and perhaps increasingly rather formulaic, pony stories.

To these two forms, the “anthropomorphic” or “autobiographical” horse story, and the “realistic, domestic” pony story, Alison Haymonds adds two more categories: the “adventure story which includes ponies” and the “wild horse story,” which she considers to be mainly American. In contrast to the more usual girl-focused series fiction, Haymonds points out that texts featuring wild horses tend to be set against a Wild-West backdrop and employ male protagonists who tame their horses, as, for example, in Will James’s *Smoky the Cowhorse*, which she describes as the “first great classic American horse book” (“Pony Books” 360).

Haymonds contends that the ponies of early British texts are “pets rather than workmates” when compared to the “mustangs” and “working horses” of *Smoky*, and there are indeed marked differences in class and setting, and the harshness of both human and equine protagonists’ environments and existence in North America, weighed against the comparatively “rural, domestic” locations even of Britain’s wild places (“Rides of Passage” 57). These differences are arguably superficial, however, since the essence of *Smoky* is the same as contemporaneous British horse fiction: correct and humane breaking is thoroughly explained and horse and human develop a partnership; in time, the horse descends through the working scale before eventually being rescued to live to a happy old age.

Frank Eyre credits Arthur Ransome, who produced “something completely new” in *Swallows and*

Amazons in 1931, with an “incalculable” impact on twentieth-century children’s fiction, from a more natural and realistic approach to characterization and dialogue to the instigation of the holiday story and the beginning of “the fashion for books with plenty of country lore in them” (89, 94). Perhaps this new realism and ruralism were part of the zeitgeist of the interwar years. Many pony-story writers of the interwar period shared their readers’ passion for horses and were committed to the promotion of their craft, and observation of wildlife and the understanding of country ways were realistically represented against such rural settings as Exmoor, Dartmoor, and the New Forest. The Ransome effect was certainly evident in *The Far Distant Oxus* and sequels, pony adventures echoing Ransome’s style by two schoolgirls, Katherine Hull and Pamela Whitlock.

The popularity of early equine fiction, largely published for a middle-class, pony-owning readership, led to the expansion of the genre, and, as it entered the mass and then paperback markets after World War II, Birks’s “spate of pony stories” (171) became a torrent. Whilst the middle-class protagonists of the early books were empowered not only by their sport but by wealth and the confidence of class, in “the post-war years,” Alison Haymonds explains, “the female heroes of pony books created new social and psychological patterns for girls,” whose “life with ponies was a trial run for the sort of life post-war women had to learn to cope

with, juggling relationships, responsibilities, work, and family” (“Rides of Passage” 52–53).

Small wonder, then, that Haymonds complains that “feminist critics seem to have ignored the pony book while embracing other forms of popular fiction for girls, like the school story” (“Rides of Passage” 53). This failure to engage with enterprising protagonists who may develop careers, undertake hard manual labour, and compete in dangerous sports alongside men, is curious—and ironic, given the attention paid to the arguably even more restricted world of girls’ school stories. It is also ironic that pony stories are equated with class, or as Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig rather spitefully put it, stories that identify “one kind of dumb thoroughbred with the behaviour and mannerisms of another,” since, surely, the protagonists of pony stories are no better bred and no more moneyed than the pupils of private schools (403).

Defending the variety and period charm of the pre-war pony book does not mean that enthusiastic critics fail to note its post-war decline. For example, Clarissa Cridland dismisses the “undistinguished books published in the 50s and early 60s” that follow the pattern of Joanna Cannan’s *A Pony for Jean* in focusing on the perspective of the child rider (38), and Alison Haymonds comments on authors such as Pat Smythe, the Olympic show-jumper, who prove that “good riders do not necessarily make good writers” (“Rides of Passage” 59).

In *Fair Girls and Grey Horses*, Josephine, Christine, and Diana Pullein-Thompson describe a more positive response to the impact of the active, knowledgeable heroines they feel they portrayed in their books:

We became convinced that skill, courage and determination could triumph over almost anything and we tried to pass this on in our books. . . . Certainly our heroines were always equal and sometimes superior to the boys; they might suffer from doubts and indecision but by the last page their courage, patience and talent were rewarded. (329–30)

In subsequent years, horse and pony stories have perhaps become less likely to carry the authority that infuses books written by such experienced and independent horsewomen, and are much more likely to conform to the conventions of formula fiction than their predecessors. There are too many writers and too many series to name individually, but Ruby Ferguson's *Jill* series, "manifestly wish-fulfilment" yet "subtly subversive" (Thiel 112), is fondly remembered by many readers, and remained in print until recently, whilst horse stories such as the Australian *Silver Brumby* series by Elyne Mitchell and America's *Black Stallion* series by Walter Farley have been deservedly popular.

Haymonds argues that the pony-story genre "seems to have passed its peak" ("Rides of Passage" 69),

although, whilst the quality may not be what it was, the market seems fairly robust, as a cursory visit to the Canadian, UK, and US Amazon websites demonstrates. Currently, there are pony series for all ages of children, from easy readers, often employing fantasy elements such as magic and unicorns, through the more typical pony-focused adventures for preteens, to series such as *Saddle Club*, which, as Haymonds points out, "combines instruction with teenage romance—a kind of 'Sweet Valley High' with horses" ("Rides of Passage" 58).

Despite the popularity of pony stories, critical response to the genre has been largely either negative or suggestive of some deep and rather suspect psychological motivation. John Birks derides the fictional "little self-conscious misses in jodhpurs" and their "pampered darlings" (166), whilst the forthright Cadogan and Craig condemn the breed altogether, although the reason why ponies, rather than any other hobby or interest, arouse such ire is unclear: "It is difficult for the uncommitted reader to dissociate any pony book from the absurd, exasperating connotations which the genre has acquired" (404).

Psychoanalytical evaluations of the pony story, usually only applied to girls, are varied and perhaps contradictory, typically focusing on constructions of the child as caregiver; or the horse as focal character, surrogate child-self, and locus of fantasy; or the dominating child-rider; although these constructions



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rarely appear in isolation from each other. Arguably, the more pragmatic and knowledgeable a text, the more likely it is that riders/readers will read to further their knowledge of and pleasure in their sport or hobby, as compared to the wish-fulfillment of the dream-come-true pony romance.

Pony stories may well appeal to the maternal, as both Bob Dixon and Marjorie Fisher point out, and, certainly, real-life equines require a large amount of very consistent care, whilst fictional ponies are all too frequently in need of rescue and nurture. Similarly, Bruno Bettelheim argues that both boys and girls may use play with animals to “vicariously satisfy a desire for giving birth to and caring for a baby,” and further that children may substitute animal care for the Oedipal desire to “have a baby with mother or father” (56). The pony story may indeed allow the exploration of such unconscious desires, but in allowing the child to identify with both giver and receiver of care, it may also fulfil a need for more satisfactory parenting than the child receives, in addition to transmitting positive, if pedagogic or didactic, attitudes toward caring for animals and, by extension, potential children in adult life.

Marjorie Fisher’s idea that “horses make a direct appeal to the feminine need to be dominated and at the same time to be maternal (for pony books are written chiefly for girls)” (183) also locates the child reader in the roles of both pony and rider, allowing the reader to swap roles at will between the care-giving human protagonist and the equine character he or she is training. This reading, however, presupposes a female readership attuned to the indicators of romantic fiction, whereas I would argue that young readers are more likely to identify with pony protagonists for attributes such as their speed, strength, and apparent freedom, rather than for their willingness to be

tamed. Bob Dixon's contention that in identifying with the pony the young reader is positioned as sex object is perhaps clearer in relation to *My Little Pony*, which is conceivably more fashion doll than horse. In any case, as Alison Haymonds points out, the opposite may also be thought to be true, since "it has become a cliché that the horse or pony replaces the male in books as sex object" ("Rides of Passage" 65).

In contrast, psychoanalytic responses to pony stories can also focus on adolescent sexuality and its control. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim proposes riding for girls as a means of "controlling the male, or the sexually animalistic, within herself" (56), although how non-riders are expected to gain such control is unclear. Whilst agreeing that horses are "objects of desire for young teenagers who can channel turbulent and often difficult emotions safely into their passion for ponies," Alison Haymonds refutes Bettelheim's claim, arguing that "rather than suppressing the male animal within herself she is learning to assert herself as the equal of males" ("Rides of Passage" 64, 66). Apart from Haymonds, it is a rare critic who presents an alternative view to the connotation that the affection the horse lover expends on his or her equine companion, or the attachment the young reader shows to reading about this relationship, is unhealthy. The negative and discouraging reaction of Cadogan and Craig, for example, fails to take account of the enterprising young protagonists who run riding

schools, rescue neglected horses, put in hard work to prepare for shows, and are empowered by riding, the only sport in which men and women compete on equal terms.

In turning to the six modern Canadian books that are the focus of this essay, it seems important to determine whether any elements of the interwar novels that started the genre—with their emphasis on horse knowledge, the natural world, and self-development—remain, or whether these contemporary novels merely conform to the markers of formulaic fiction and adolescent romance that Haymonds describes. Given the rural settings of the novels and the rugged terrain over which the stories are often played out, there is undoubtedly the potential for these characteristics to emerge. It would be heartening to find that these novels offer the kind of encouragement to independence for girls that Josephine Pullett-Thompson claims for the work of herself and her sisters, and it would certainly be interesting for scholars to discover deep psychological needs being represented—and perhaps fulfilled through reading—in the way that Bettelheim suggests.

The reality is perhaps less exciting, although *The Secret Pony* by Julie White, one of three books under discussion here that have protagonists aged twelve or thirteen, is firmly based in the demands of horse care and the need to gain skills, despite its simultaneous accordance with Haymonds's analysis of formulaic

pony fiction (“Pony Books” 361).

The twelve-year-old protagonist of *The Secret Pony*, Kirsty Hagen, has recently moved from Vancouver to fulfill her mother’s dream of rural life. Naturally, Kirsty’s dream is to own a pony. White parallels the gap between the mother’s vision and the actuality of “a sagging, tin-roofed farmhouse on a rough, sloping half-acre” in Armstrong, North Okanagan (9) with Kirsty’s growing discovery, having secretly bought a skinny and unkempt pinto pony for a hundred dollars, that the dream and the reality are poles apart.

Kirsty’s attempts to keep Lancelot seem doomed to failure, since the reality of a pony is so much “larger” than the fantasy (12), but hope comes in the form of Lucy, an archetypal “wise woman” and high priestess of the art of riding, who offers instruction in exchange for chores. Even this would not be enough, due to Kirsty’s deceit in masquerading as her mother on the telephone to buy Lancelot, but for the intervention of her father’s new wife, Janice, who also used to ride and whose gift of a saddle and bridle puts her firmly in the fairy-godmother category. In pony books written by pony people, however, the worst sin is not deceit, but lack of “horse sense”¹ and the punishment must fit the crime. In this case, Kirsty hurts her arm in a fall as a result of overconfidence in her fledgling riding ability.

The Secret Pony is the only one of the novels under discussion here that is firmly based in reality, due, no doubt, to the author’s experience as owner of a stud

and as an instructor and examiner working with young riders and horse owners in Pony Club. Inevitably, this close involvement with horse and rider education implies the risk of pedagogy, but White largely avoids didacticism and is careful to mediate the pedagogical, without using an instructional voice, through the skills and behaviours of a parallel and paradigmatic child character. In passing, White challenges the accepted view of education as being school-based and proposes an alternative view of vocational education for young people whose lives will be lived out in a rural environment and who cannot obtain the necessary practical skills within the regular curriculum. There is no sense of fantasy or wish fulfillment in the entirely pragmatic view of Lucy’s granddaughter, Faye, a child brought up to the work of breaking in ponies on a pony farm, who says, “I’m going to be a professional rider. School’s a waste of time for me” (58–59). More than this, White disputes the book itself, when Lucy points out the gap between an academic source of information and practical expertise: “Reading’s good. Just remember you can’t learn it [horse care] all from books” (57).

Kirsty, whose horse knowledge has been gained from camp and books, and whose impulsive self-belief is challenged by the range of responsibilities horse-ownership brings, is paralleled with the quieter Faye, whose entire life has been spent on a pony farm and whose knowledge and experience are a

paradigm of what needs to be known in order to ride and care for a horse. More than this, whilst Faye is clearly a developed rider for her age, she is presented as continuing to learn, as her grandmother taught her to ride, and she in turn trains young horses for sale. Nicholas Tucker's contention that the "animals within these stories are sometimes seen as sharing the problems and social disadvantages common to childhood" (161) is further acted out in the text in the comparison between the pony Lancelot, whose owner has become ill and is unable to care for him, and Kirsty, who needs to renegotiate her place in a refashioned family, following her parents' divorce and her father's remarriage.

For young aficionados, *The Secret Pony* offers much in the way of riding knowledge and observation of horse behaviour. The romantically renamed Lancelot (Spot to his former owners!) is still far from the perfect pony at the end of the novel, but the stage is set for Kirsty and Lancelot to develop a partnership, and for the hitherto fractured family to come together to support her.

Like *The Secret Pony*, Angela Dorsey's *A Horse Called Freedom* features a pinto pony and a twelve-year-old girl who is forced to leave the city and move to the country to fulfill a parental dream, but the similarities end there. Dorsey's novel is a ghost story that features a haunted barn and the tormented ghost of Freedom, a wild horse. In order to set the phantom

horse free from her past, Jani (the protagonist), her pony Keeta, and her new friend Penny need to discover Freedom's history and confront the issues that are holding her down.

Whilst wild horses may be fairly familiar in equine literature, the inset story of human obsession in *A Horse Called Freedom* is perhaps less usual for fiction of this type and for this age of reader. When Jani and Penny confront Mr. Hansen, a previous owner of Jani's new home, about the ghost horse, they encounter a man whose fixation has led him to prefer the death of the loved creature to its freedom. Whilst many young readers might be unaware of it, adult readers are likely to find Mr. Hansen's obsessive account of the capture, maltreatment, and death of Freedom, the filly who "turned [his] head" (61), and with whom he "fell in love—and then hate" (65), uncomfortably close to the experience of women who suffer domestic violence: "'I named her Freedom,' he sneered, 'Freedom, 'cause it was the only thing she ever wanted and the only thing I would never let her have'" (66).

Jani's attempts to solve the mystery of the poltergeist-like horse in the barn entail unearthing Freedom's skeleton (literally as well as metaphorically) and eventually lead to a fire in which the barn burns down, at last attracting Jani's parents' attention. The reasons the girls work through for the trapping of Freedom's spirit in the barn fail to release her, and it is not until Freedom learns to trust Jani that she gains her



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freedom (114).

Unfortunately, in promoting a rather didactic message about trust and love, Dorsey fails to follow through on the pro-wildness argument, and, in order to be free, Freedom cannot retain her independence but must submit to being tamed—at least to some extent—by Jani. This is reinforced at the end of the story by the birth of Keeta's foal, "the living spirit of Freedom." The new Freedom is born into captivity, and is eagerly compliant compared to her wild predecessor (136).

The third novel for this age group, *Gallop to the Sea*, is the first in a new series by Sharon Siamon, the author of the Mustang Mountain series. Set on the Nova Scotia coastline, *Gallop to the Sea* has as its cultural underpinning Lord Selkirk's resettling of dispossessed Scottish crofters in the very early days of the nineteenth century. The main protagonist is a feisty, red-haired thirteen-year-old called Kelsie MacKay, and the past is present in family history, in nostalgic hooked rugs, and in Kelsie, who loves horses as her horse-breeding pioneer ancestors did (26). Two years after the death of her mother, Kelsie and her younger brother Andy move in with their great-aunt Maggie. Kelsie and Andy have grown up in presumably remote mining communities, so there is not the same degree of urban/rural conflict that is present in many of the other novels, but moving to live by the sea provides the added level of risk and otherness that seems *de rigueur* for Siamon.

Siamon's series books are set in the Rockies (Mustang Mountain) or in Nova Scotia (Saddle Island), each series title making the horse link clear. Whilst Mustang Mountain caters to the slightly older girl, the protagonists being aged about fifteen, the protagonists of the Saddle Island series are younger, aged twelve and thirteen. This makes some difference to the romantic impulse of the novels, but romance

is a barely disguised subtext of all three of Siamon's novels under review. Having read the books in order of date of publication, I came to *Gallop to the Sea* last and was somewhat surprised to find both girl and boy protagonists almost as aware of the opposite sex as their elders in the Mustang Mountain series. Siamon depicts thirteen-year-old Kelsie's growing awareness of Gabriel to the point where she becomes enthralled by the new and "raw" feelings which his "name and the image of his laughing face" conjure up (126).

Each of the texts in this age group have featured a protagonist moving house, and typical concerns include the new school and making friends. Although boy/girl relationships are a feature of *Gallop to the Sea*, it is again the making of a friendship with a similarly horsey girl that is important. It is the perennial escapee, Caspar, who first brings Kelsie and Jen together, and the threat that Caspar will be sent to auction and end up as fertilizer inspires a plan to save him and swim him out to Saddle Island. From this point, the novel descends into an assortment of stock elements: the villainous and melodramatic riding-school owner, Mr. Harefield; the island, with its promise of buried treasure (presumably to be uncovered in a later book in the series); a family curse; and grandparents lost at sea; not to mention the map and "stories about pirates, shipwrecks and smugglers" (26). Perhaps Siamon's young readers will not question the likelihood, or even the risk, of swimming a horse from island to island

across dangerous currents, but the idea that Kelsie, who had "never ridden without a saddle" and couldn't control Caspar at the beginning of the novel (35), can swim him to the island four weeks later rather stretches credulity (105).

Each of the three novels with twelve- or thirteen-year-old protagonists starts from a position of great change in the lives of the protagonists: loss, death, and divorce feature in the back stories, and horses provide solid, larger-than-life comfort, somewhere between the friends who take part in the adventure and the family the protagonists cannot confide in. Ponies are pervasive in all three texts, but only *The Secret Pony* is securely realistic in human and equine terms, exploring both the difficulties of adjusting to life post-divorce and the realities of owning a pony. In comparison, Dorsey's ghost story and Siamon's adventure are pacy and exciting, but seem somewhat less insightful.

In *Free Horse*, number seven in the Mustang Mountain series, Siamon again goes for pace and incident, whilst at the same time engaging not only with themes such as wild horses and romance, but also with issues such as racism, gender stereotyping, and a child's need for mothering. At the end of her two-week summer holiday at Mustang Mountain Ranch in a remote area of the Rockies, fifteen-year-old Meg O'Donnell is being driven to the Calgary airport by eighteen-year-old Thomas Horne when they encounter Ruby Tucker, a local ranch owner who needs to get to

a hospital and needs someone to look after the ranch and her difficult ten-year-old stepson Tyler. Over the next four days, Meg and Thomas run the ranch, civilize Tyler, save the life of Brett, Tyler's racist and sexist older brother, and, with the help of Skeets, an old rodeo rider, brave a terrible storm to rescue wild horses that have been caught for sale to the dog-meat factory.

The strands of this heavily didactic narrative follow the situations of each of the main characters. Meg needs to learn that she is not yet ready for a relationship or for the responsibilities of mothering, either in catering to trail riders at the ranch or in caring for Tyler. Racism is explored through the antagonism between Thomas, who has learned "horse lore from his Blackfoot grandfather" (14), and Brett, whose lack of respect for Thomas's girl cousin has created the antipathy. Afraid of horses and loyal to Brett, Tyler begins to lose his racist and sexist attitudes when he learns to love wild horses and transfers his allegiance from the almost gothically wicked Brett to the heroic Thomas. Unlike Dorsey in *A Horse Called Freedom*, Siamon partly accepts that some wild horses will be domesticated and make "first-rate trail horses," as Skeets says, although Skeets disapproves in general of "catching wildies" (105–6).

Unfortunately, these issues tend to be treated weakly, the action contradicting the overly didactic perspectives. Although Siamon promotes an anti-sexist viewpoint, for example through Tyler's learning that

it is not unmanly for Thomas to wash "Meg's cooking dishes" (49), at the same time, it is Meg who cooks, cleans, and cares for Tyler, and through it she develops not only an understanding of children (165), but also of the "power of pie," the way to the men's hearts (105). Equally, whilst racism is overtly rejected, with Meg forbidding Tyler to make "stupid racist comments" (82) and realizing that her own drawings of Thomas look like a "stereotype from the past" (121), Siamon's portrayal of Thomas, with his "shiny black braid down his back" (12), his "proud and stern" profile (92), and his skills as a horse whisperer (159) hardly amounts to a well-rounded character.

Rather than issues—or even horses—it is romance that drives *Free Horse*. Again, however, the romantic impulse is counterbalanced by a didacticism that has Siamon stop short even of a kiss in this story (the one kiss having taken place before the novel opens) and conclude with Meg's decision to leave Mustang Mountain and Thomas because she still has "a lot to learn" about relationships and responsibility (185). Although Meg believes that it is Thomas and the Appaloosa, Palouse, who are "true partners, never separated" (39), *Free Horse* is by no means on the level of texts such as *The Horses of Follyfoot* by Monica Dickens, which Nicholas Tucker cites as having "unmistakeable sexual overtones" (163).

Siamon's *Dark Horse*, ninth in the Mustang Mountain series, focuses on Meg's best friend, fifteen-



Whilst issues such as
racism, pioneering,
and ecology form the
backdrop of the novel,
it is romance (or should
I say *luurve*) that is
pervasive.



year-old Becky Sanderson, who lives at the Mustang Mountain Ranch with her parents. As in *Free Horse*, friendship features only briefly, and the novel focuses on the relationship Becky would like to have with sixteen-year-old Rob Kelly and her jealousy of another teenage girl. Becky and Tara's rivalry extends not only to Rob, but also to the Windflower 50, a fifty-mile endurance race. *Dark Horse* is acceptably pedagogic about endurance racing, and readers will find they learn much about the sport and its organization. On the other hand, Siamon's didacticism tends to weigh down each narrative strand, so that jealousy, which Siamon informs her readers on at least nine occasions is a "green dragon" (19), is unacceptable in the making of relationships, whilst "helping one another" is essential to being in the spirit of the race (16). Even worse, the one affects the other, so that, as Laurie, Becky's mother, rather forcibly points out, "If you're jealous and angry, Windy will feel it and it will slow her down" (30).

In entering a competition, contestants need to prepare appropriately and abide by the regulations, and a great deal is made of Becky's determination to try to finish the race according to the rules and the spirit of the race, as compared to Tara's disregard of both. Tara's lack of knowledge about endurance racing, which threatens the health of Hawk, her Arabian horse, is contrasted with Becky and her mother's preparation and care for "mixed-breed" Windy (46). Young readers who respond to this may well feel pleased that Becky wins the ribbon for "the spirit" of endurance racing, despite failing to complete due to helping Tara, but Tara's fate is less satisfying: rather than being punished, she wins the novice event ribbon and the sponsorship to the United Arab Emirates (160).

Once again, it is romance that is the underlying impulse of the novel, from Becky's initial hope that Rob will "take her in his arms

and kiss her" (20) to the "dizzy" moment when he "drew her close and kissed her lips" (146). So remote is Mustang Mountain Ranch that it looks as if Becky will have to "finish school by correspondence" (27), but at the last moment, as she jumps into Rob's arms, Becky decides she can bear to stay with her "snobby, pig-headed cousin Alison" (68) and attend the same school as Rob: "she wasn't going to be so lonely this year, after all" (166).

Simon's romances are tame stuff, however, compared to *Voice of the Valley* by Sheena Koops. Whilst issues such as racism, pioneering, and ecology form the backdrop of the novel, it is romance (or should I say *luurve*) that is pervasive. Unaware of the threat from a damming operation, almost-fifteen-year-old Onja Claibourn, out riding her half-Arab chestnut mare Ginger, meets Etthen Mercredi, who takes her to an archaeological dig and opens her eyes not only to the danger to the valley but to relationships. That this process takes over two hundred pages is unfortunate, since there is insufficient incident to flesh out what might have been an interesting story, and instead Koops fills space with a mixture of romantic fantasizing and thinly disguised pedagogy. I feel I know what Koops's students have been learning, from Harriet Tubman and slavery (51), through desertification (60), to units of measurement (76).

At the beginning of the novel, Onja is remarkably disengaged from the history of her area, but the process

of assisting with gathering reminiscences as part of the dig links her to her own family's past through Great-Uncle West Claibourn, who has sold his land to the developers, and further back through her great-great-grandparents, who were among the first homesteaders (62). "I feel so stupid not knowing anything about this," Onja writes to her friend Stacy. "There are archaeologists running all over, talking about First People or First Nations or Aboriginals. (I've always just said Indian, but I get the feeling that's a bad word or something)" (69).

Fortunately, through Etthen and Celine, members of the Dene nation (111), Onja is able to learn more appropriate attitudes toward First Nations people and their presence in the history of the region. Whether Koops is entirely successful in her attempt to promote inclusion and combat racism, however, is debatable, since the continual consciousness of race, from the surprise that an anthropologist at the dig is black (42) to Onja's Métis teacher (66), tends to operate against the general acceptance of Etthen and Celine, and Onja's rejoinder that Etthen "is the real thing" seems weak compared to Stacy's remark: "'You didn't tell me he was Native,' Stacy scolded. 'If you put that boy in buckskin, he'd look like the real thing.'" (183)

As with Mustang Mountain, there is an uneasy balance in *Voice of the Valley* between didacticism and the daydream "if only" quality of the romance: it seems that Koops's disparagement of Harlequin romances (2)



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does not prevent her from writing one. “[P]layful conflict” with Etthen, Koops writes with a teacherly simile, keeps Onja “attuned to his body, like a negative magnet beside a positive” (16). Onja imagines him with “hair flowing like a coal bed, his shoulders broad like the high branches of an oak tree, legs strong as fieldstone” (87). The first kiss, “like sugar powder on an éclair” (153), inspires Onja to new flights of fancy: “Red, like rose hips on his tongue. Orange like the taste of his lips. Yellow like candlelight in his eyes” and so on through the rainbow to “Indigo like his beating heart” (154).

A feature of the novels under review is their settings in remote rural areas, and when not writing about love, Koops’s observation of country life can be very appealing: “There was nothing better on a hot summer evening in the field—with the grain dust floating in the air and the sun setting—than eating corn on the cob and watermelon, drinking brewed ice tea and swinging her legs off the tailgate of the truck, Onja thought” (124). When she uses urban, perhaps even beauty-parlour, similes, however, like the sun “like a heat lamp high in the sky” (49), the wind a “blow-dryer” (63), and flower heads which are batting “like false eyelashes” (105), the effect borders on the absurd.

In these six novels, the notion of a “pony fixation” that is “widespread in popular fiction for girls” (Dixon 30), seems to work only in books for younger readers, and even then, it is only Julie White’s *The Secret Pony* that really involves a pony-mad girl and her longing for the pony she cannot afford (Haymonds, “Pony Books” 361). In *Gallop to the Sea* and *A Horse Called Freedom*, genre is the driving force; adventure in the one and ghost story in the other, with friendship a secondary impulse and the ponies third. Whilst the settings of *Voice of the Valley* and *Mustang Mountain* include horses, romance is the overriding impulse.

In each of the novels for younger readers, there is a sense of loss, created by moving house at the least, but also, in *Gallop to the Sea* and *The Secret Pony*, linked to some aspect of orphaning. It may be, as Marjorie Fisher proposes, that ponies fulfill the need for the child protagonist, and thus the reader, to act out maternal instinct (183). The acquiring of an unwanted pony, however, implies a parallel between child and pony protagonists in which they share, as Nicholas Tucker suggests, the “social disadvantages common to childhood” (161). This may allow a child reader to be consoled by the pony’s rescue if not the protagonist’s. On this model, one might predict that the overwhelming romantic focus of the three novels for older readers might be mirrored by constructions of the horse or pony as desired object, in a “physical relationship” in which “horses can play roles that vary between faithful servant to ideal companion or even something in the nature of a demon lover” (Tucker 163), but this parallel works for none of the texts, and the horses tend to be part of the background and setting rather than protagonists in their own right.

Horse riding is a physically challenging sport with a demanding level of care attached to it, but the writers of these novels are not all successful in delivering the conviction that Josephine Pulein-Thompson writes of, that girl protagonists and readers “could succeed” and be “equal and sometimes superior to the boys” (330). The three novels for

younger readers all portray self-motivated and strong-minded girls, although the protagonists of *A Horse Called Freedom* and *Gallop to the Sea* both employ a fantasy competence rather than realistic character traits in achieving their goals. In contrast, Kirsty in *The Secret Pony* is initially presented as over-confident and under-skilled, but the motivation and persistence with which she pursues horse knowledge demonstrate a potential for success that readers could emulate rather than fantasize about.

The protagonists of the Mustang Mountain series may have great skills, but the impulse of the novels is toward domestication. In *Free Horse*, Meg is reputed to be a talented rider and instructor, and she is certainly a hard worker, but throughout the novel she is constructed as engaging in traditionally female adult tasks such as child care and cooking, and ultimately finds herself to be too young to be successful. In *Dark Horse*, whilst Becky is capable, motivated, and independent and tries hard to succeed in the endurance race, she is riding in place of her mother and it is her mother’s feminized ethic—“endurance racing is all about helping one another” (51)—that Becky is being conditioned into. In *Voice of the Valley*, Onja seems to have no particular skills, and is without any interest in her locale or the issues that should concern her, until she meets Etthen. Through Etthen, she learns about the valley’s past and the threat to it, and to Etthen she hands over control even of her horse,

like the Harlequin characters Koops derides.

Nicholas Tucker suggests that pony stories, with their capable heroines ready to get their hands dirty, represent, in fantasy at least, a “chance to revolt” against the “passive femininity” girls may feel they are expected to arrive at (162), and, from this small sample, it seems that this model works well for pre-teen protagonists, who are accorded a creditable level of freedom, capability, and independence. Haymonds’s rather different view positions pony stories as representing the complex lives of “post-war women” for whom “juggling relationships, responsibilities, work, and family” will be the norm (“Rides of Passage” 53), and it could be argued that it is a balance of

these potentially conflicting adult responsibilities that can be seen in the two Mustang Mountain titles. In writing for older girls, however, and despite setting their fifteen-year-old characters against challenging backgrounds, neither Siamon nor Koops resist the urge to romanticize and, as a result, not only feminize and domesticate their heroines, but also depict them as caught in an endless fantasy of longing for the heroic and controlling male:

“The red mare is stone blind. See how she stays with the stallion, right at his flank?”

Meg reached for Thomas’s hand. “So they’re true partners.” (Siamon, *Free Horse* 187)

Notes

¹ “Horse sense,” frequently referred to in interwar pony fiction, was promoted, for example in *Horse-Sense and Horsemanship of Today* (1924), a manual by Geoffrey Brooke, and parodied in *Horse*

Nonsense (1933) by R. J. Yeatman and W. C. Sellar, more famously known as the authors of *1066 And All That* (1930).

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