

The Broncos of Madison County

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The Horse Whisperer

By Nicholas Evans

Delacorte, \$23.95

Horses, with their bumperlike noses and their lovely wine-jelly eyes, aren't built for decisive action. They're hysterical, they're gullible, you can catch one with a single oat. It's a safe bet that Seabiscuit and Man O'War were every bit as sensitive as Grimm's insomniac princesses.

Nobody, however, said they were smart. Horses' intelligence, such as it is, directs them toward feats such as gulping down lethal quantities of food (they like fermented apples) that make them dangerously ill, or bolting in terror from airborne leaves and candy wrappers. But given the right conditions, even the big hairy ones make the down on a thistle look clumsy. Whenever horses have decided to leaven their mountainous bodies with their almost unthinkable grace, they have made people from Shakespeare to Nathan Detroit wonder and believe.

Nicholas Evans isn't the first novelist to create a horse (in this case, a teenage girl's spunky young pet) that acts as the animal embodiment of fear, pride, and lust. We have to hope, however, that he stands alone in his determination to lade a poor beast's wagon with nearly immovable literary freight. This stolid book, a first novel, was deemed worthy of a multi-million-dollar advance long before Evans finished writing it. He also sold the movie rights to Robert Redford before the ink was dry. Publicists have been crowing that The Horse Whisperer is The Bridges of Madison County with a plot, and they're not lying: Tom Booker, the magic-fingered horse trainer, is a dead ringer for Clint Eastwood. Casting Annie, the teenage horse-lover's mom—a wayward, sneering British literary magazine editor who climbs into the cowboy's bed despite the husband she left at home—is a bit more problematic. We'd all be pretty naive, however, if we assume Tina Brown can't act. Robert James Waller's story, especially in movie form, suffered grievously from lack of direction. Evans makes no such mistake. What he seems to have angled for is Bridges with riveting images: i.e., blood. If Pilgrim, the equine protagonist, can pull this mess together, the Wood Memorial Stakes ought to be a cinch.

The little snorter doesn't have a chance. As far as we can guess, Evans has imagined every scene for the camera, and thus telegraphs disaster long before it hits—a technique that quickly makes readers numb. Of course, the trusting steed and his mistress have to get creamed by an 18-wheeler in order for the adults to have anything to rescue. But the intensity of that accident—and it is horrifying—is met nowhere else in the story. That Pilgrim would survive only to change from sweet pet to slaving monster is less than plausible. We are told much about his blood and his gnashing teeth, but physically, he's not there. Similarly, the girl who loves him, also sorely wounded in the crash, functions mostly as a catalyst for her mother's guilt. Stuck-up, selfish Mom is very much in evidence, though. Evans makes sporadic efforts to humanize her, and trots out one of the worst metaphors for feminine masturbation to ever see ink.

What a thoroughly unpleasant enterprise this is, and how elaborately presented. The writer's voice has an overarching feel of having been thoroughly combed, clipped, and curried, by not just one but many hands. Whether this is a feature of production or a vagary of Evans's style is impossible to tell, but this is not the kind of uncertainty that adds mystery to the story, and the title suggests that we might expect at least a little. Instead, there are ample opportunities to join the girl in her indignation at her nice-guy dad's disgrace, and wonder if every sophisticated bodice-ripper from now on is going to hinge on a tryst that lasts exactly four days.

Why this came to be is all too clear. Industry demands its heroes, and Evans is groomed to ascend. The Edwardian actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell was noted for having said that she didn't care what people did as long as they didn't frighten the horses. Here's to that. Besides the book's inflated passion, the notion of being entertained by a movie version—including, perhaps, a careening truck fated to maim a girl and her flighty pal—is repulsive. But not nearly so much so as the very present possibility of being bored by it.