



Book Club Set

Horse

By Geraldine Brooks

About the Author



Australian-born Geraldine Brooks is an author and journalist who grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney, attending Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney. She worked as a reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald for three years as a feature writer with a special interest in environmental issues.

In 1982 she won the Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship to the journalism master's program at Columbia University in New York City. Later she worked for The Wall Street Journal, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans. In 1990, with her husband Tony Horwitz, she won the Overseas Press Club Award for best coverage of the Gulf War. The following year they received a citation for excellence for their series, "War and Peace." In 2006 she was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University. She returned to Harvard as a Visiting Lecturer in 2021.

She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 2006 for her novel *March*. Her novels *People of the Book*, *Caleb's Crossing* and *The Secret Chord* all were New York Times Best Sellers. Her first novel, *Year of Wonders* is an international bestseller, translated into more than 25 languages and currently optioned for a limited series by Olivia Coleman's production company. She is also the author of the nonfiction works *Nine Parts of Desire*, *Foreign Correspondence* and *The Idea of Home*.

Brooks married fellow journalist and author Tony Horwitz in Tourette-sur-Loup France in 1984 and were together until his sudden death in 2019. They have two sons, Nathaniel and Bizu. She now lives with a dog named Bear and a mare named Valentine by an old mill pond on Martha's Vineyard and spends as much time as she can in Australia. In 2016, she was named an Officer in the Order of Australia.

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About the Book



A discarded painting in a junk pile, a skeleton in an attic, and the greatest racehorse in American history: from these strands, a Pulitzer Prize winner braids a sweeping story of spirit, obsession, and injustice across American history.

KENTUCKY, 1850

An enslaved groom named Jarret and a bay foal forge a bond of understanding that will carry the horse to record-setting victories across the South. When the nation erupts in civil war, an itinerant young artist who has made his name on paintings of the racehorse takes up arms for the Union.

On a perilous night, he reunites with the stallion and his groom, very far from the glamor of any racetrack.

NEW YORK CITY, 1954

Martha Jackson, a gallery owner celebrated for taking risks on edgy contemporary painters, becomes obsessed with a nineteenth-century equestrian oil painting of mysterious provenance.

WASHINGTON, DC, 2019

Jess, a Smithsonian scientist from Australia, and Theo, a Nigerian-American art historian, find themselves unexpectedly connected through their shared interest in the horse—one studying the stallion's bones for clues to his power and endurance, the other uncovering the lost history of the unsung Black horsemen who were critical to his racing success. Based on the remarkable true story of the record-breaking thoroughbred, Lexington, who became America's greatest stud sire, *Horse* is a gripping, multi-layered reckoning with the legacy of enslavement and racism in America.

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Discussion Questions



1. Did you see similarities and differences to how the horses and the slaves were viewed by the owners? What does this say about their value to those who owned them?
2. What do you think the impact is to a person when their lineage, their family history, is erased?
3. Many characters have different reasons to be angry in this book. How do they use their anger? Who has the right to show it and who feels they need to suppress it?
4. What do you think about the relationship between Jess and Theo? Do you think it would have worked out long term?
5. Did you know much about horse racing before reading this novel? Did you learn anything that surprised you?
6. What do you think about what happened to Theo at the end? What does it say about being Black in the U.S. or in other countries?
7. How has racism and our notion of race in the U.S. changed from Jarret's time to Theo's time?
8. How does art weave into the stories in the book? How does it reflect the times, attitudes, and heritage at the different stages of the novel?
9. What do you think about Jarret and Lexington's relationship? What do you think Jarret's life would have been like without Lexington?
10. Which character did you most connect to? Why?

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Author Interview



HORSE is based on a real-life racehorse named Lexington, one of the most famous thoroughbreds in American history. How did you learn about him?

I had just published my novel, *Caleb's Crossing*, which was partially researched at Plimoth Plantation, and the curators there had invited me to a lunch, at which they suggested I might want to write a novel based on a young woman from the early Plymouth settlement. It was clear to me that this would be too close to the character I'd already created in *Caleb's Crossing* but from across the table I began to catch snatches of a different conversation. An executive from the Smithsonian was describing how he had just overseen delivery of Lexington's skeleton from Washington DC to the International Museum of the Horse in Kentucky, where it would be the centerpiece on the history of thoroughbred racing in the US. As he related the horse's extraordinary life story, I became fascinated, and by the time he got to the horse's fate in the Civil War, I knew that my next book wouldn't be about a settler in Plimoth, but about this horse.

Why the title?

When Lexington died, the horse was so beloved he was given a ceremonial burial, complete with a horse-sized coffin. Later, it was suggested that his skeleton be disinterred and gifted to the Smithsonian. It stood in pride of place there for many years. But as the horse's fame waned and the museum's emphasis switched from displaying curiosities to advancing scientific knowledge, Lexington's individual story became less important, until the skeleton stood in the Hall of Osteology along with those of other species, simply an example of "equus caballus", or "Horse." Eventually it was relegated to the attic of the natural History Museum and all but forgotten. It's clear in the novel how central horseracing was in the 1850s, a passion as much in the North as the South, among Black Americans as White Americans. Why do you think it was so popular?

Before the Civil War and the Jim Crow era that followed Reconstruction, the racetrack was an integrated space, where all classes and colors mingled. Horse Racing was the popular pastime of the 1800s, with crowds of twenty thousand or more packing racetracks to watch famous rivals such as Eclipse and Fashion, Grey Eagle and Wagner, and thousands of fans following the outcome in the lively turf press of the day.

Of New York's three main newspapers of the era, two were devoted entirely to horseracing. America was an agrarian culture; even most townsfolk were only a generation removed from the land. Races happened everywhere. Andrew Jackson raced his horse in the streets of Washington DC; many towns hosted quarter mile sprints on their Main Streets, and farmers of modest means dreamed of breeding the next champion. Meanwhile, the wealthy built racetracks on their plantations and saw in their thoroughbreds a reflection of their own prestige.

What is known about the enslaved people whose skills the racing business was built on? What sources did you have, and how much was left to the imagination?

Horse Racing relied on the plundered labor of highly skilled Black trainers, jockeys and grooms. Their centrality is evident in the surviving correspondence of elite White horse breeders, who counted on the expertise of these men. These letters, as well as reporting in the turf press, reveal deference to the knowledge and skill of trainers such as Hark, Ansel Williamson and Charles Stewart and jockeys such as Abe Hawkins and Cato. These were great professionals who, within a brutal system, wrested a degree of personal agency not available to most enslaved people, including acquiring property and traveling widely throughout the country. Unfortunately, most of what we know of them is distorted through a White lens: Charles Stewart, for example, related his life story to a White woman and while the account is rich in detail, it is likely that he self-censored aspects that reflected badly on her forebears.

The central story involves Jarrett, an enslaved boy, and Lexington, the racehorse he raises and trains. What inspired his character and his story?

There are detailed accounts of a lost painting by the artist Thomas J. Scott (who is also an important character in the novel) depicted Lexington “being led by black Jarret, his groom” while the horse was at Woodburn Stud, which was perhaps the preeminent livestock breeding operation in America at the time. I was unable to find any biographical detail on Jarret, so I created his character based on records I could find about two highly accomplished Black horsemen who, though enslaved, were in charge of Woodburn’s thoroughbred operations: the trainer Ansel Williamson and the jockey and trainer Edward D. Brown.

The novel features a nearly contemporary storyline, set right before the pandemic, and an interracial relationship at the heart of it. As a historical novelist, why did you choose to write in the present day?

Just as my novel *People of the Book* has a contemporary thread in dialogue with its historical core, I wanted this novel to take us into the modern laboratories at the Smithsonian where bones are studied and artworks are evaluated. As I researched the historical spine of the novel it became clear to me that the story I’d thought would be about a racehorse was also a story about race, and as White supremacists rioted in Charlottesville and George Floyd died under the knee of a White police officer, I knew I could not deal with racism in the past and not address its loud and tragic echoes in the present.

You made another discovery related to the horse while you were researching at the Smithsonian, but this one was about art, not science.

Yes. One of the best surviving portraits of Lexington, painted by Thomas Scott, was given to the Smithsonian in a bequest from the pioneering gallerist, Martha Jackson. She was a friend of Pollock and DeKooning and a champion of avant garde art in 1950s New York City. It’s the only traditional, representational painting in her bequest—very different from the art she loved and collected. The mystery of why that painting might

have mattered to Martha brings the novel into the turbulent, bohemian, post-war art world at the birth of abstract expressionism.

Who are the famous horses who descend from Lexington?

Ulysses S. Grant's favorite horse, Cincinnati; the horse Preakness after whom the stakes race is named and two other Preakness winners; nine of the first fifteen Travers Stakes winners; Asteroid, who was undefeated; Kentucky, who is in the US Racing Hall of Fame. Lexington sired 236 winners at a time when racing was disrupted by the Civil War and many thoroughbreds were requisitioned as warhorses. He appears in the bloodlines of many of the greatest racehorses even today.

You dedicate the novel to your late husband, the writer Tony Horwitz, and write in your Afterword that you traveled together to Kentucky, where your research often intersected in intriguing ways. Would you describe some of those intersections?

Tony was researching the travels of Frederick Law Olmsted just before the Civil War. Olmsted was interested in the views of the emancipationist Cassius Clay, who also happened to be the son-in-law of Lexington's breeder, so we traveled together to Clay's estate, White Hall. Tony also knew his way around the rich archival sources in Kentucky and was able to help me unearth a Civil War journal by the chaplain of Thomas Scott's unit, which contained a detailed memoir of the two men's relationship, forged in field hospitals caring for the wounded.

You ride horses and thank your horse Valentine and her companion who "were daily inspirations." When did you begin riding?

Late! I was in my 50s when I took my first riding lesson, a time when knitting lessons might perhaps have been a more prudent choice. I'm still not a very good rider, but there's so much more to horses. They're exquisitely sensitive animals who can teach us a lot about ourselves, about group dynamics, and about leadership. Valentine and I

have volunteered in a therapeutic riding program for children with autism and sometimes the relationship between child and horse verges on the miraculous. That's why it's tragic that so many racehorses are used up and destroyed before they're five. My horse is twenty-six and she still has so much to give.

Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: