Ten of the Best Horse and Pony Books

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Ten of the Best

Byline: Jane Badger chooses her top ten.

?It?s easy to dismiss horse and pony books as full of what John Birks called ?little self-conscious misses in jodhpurs?*, says Jane Badger. ?The genre has always been prone to repetitive wish fulfilment, and publishers have not always resisted the desire to put out books whose only merit is that they contain a pony. And if the reader doesn?t like ponies, of course even that merit is denied them. Putting aside the more formulaic examples which still appear (which nowadays might just as easily include a unicorn or a pony with magic powers as the earthy sort that kicks), there are still excellent horse and pony books being published.? Jane Badger chooses her top ten horse and pony books.

**Sugaring**

Jessie Haas, ill. Jos A. Smith, William Morrow, 24pp, 0688142001, £10.99 hbk

Jessie Haas has the gift of being able to write for all ages and her picture books are particularly strong. Set on a Vermont farm in spring, Nora and her grandfather are collecting sap from maple trees to make maple syrup. They are helped by the horses, Bonnie and Stella, who pull the sap tank around the trees. The lack of mechanisation gives a slow, measured pace to the whole which makes it ideal for a quiet, shared read. Sugaring is beautifully illustrated and Haas? text paints in family relationships with a sure touch. I wish the book had been around when I was attempting (unsuccessfully) to persuade my daughter to appreciate horse. (5-8)

**Nobody?s Horse**

Jane Smiley, Faber, 272pp, 0571253547, £6.99 pbk

Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley?s Nobody?s Horse is a triumph. Abby is a distant child, an outsider at school. Her soul is elsewhere; partly with her devout Christian family, and partly with horses. Abby does not rage at her lot, but she does make small and determined moves to assert herself. The pace of the writing is calm and unhurried; the tone unjudgemental. There a lot of technical horse content, but the characters are strong enough to intrigue even the non-devotee. (Originally published as The Georges and the Jewels.) (8+)
The horse world can be over-serious at times. It is a rare equine writer who manages to combine humour with pony fiction, but Janet Rising has managed it with her ?The Pony Whisperer? series. After she finds a tiny statue of the goddess Epona, heroine of the series Pia is able to hear ponies talking to each other. The ponies have a robust view of their humans: there?s no twinkly sentiment here. The humans are equally well done. Janet Rising has a sympathetic but wry view of the modern teenager. (9+)

**For Love of a Horse**

Patricia Leitch?s ?Jinny of Finmory? series, of which *For Love of a Horse* is the first, was originally published in the 1970s. The ?Jinny? books are an at times lyrical exploration of the nature of possession and belief. Jinny has a wild Arab mare, Shantih, but the series is not a triumphant trot through success in the show ring: Jinny is a thoroughly believable teenager: stubborn, listening only to herself and at times plain wrong. (9+)

**For Sale or Swap**

Alyssa Brugman is known for her writing for teenagers (Being Bindy et al) but she has also written a fine series of horse stories, ?Shelby and Blue?. *For Sale or Swap*, the first in this five part series, captures the stresses and strains of being a teenager keeping a pony on a shoestring. Money is tight; Shelby?s pony is not the one she dreams of, and so she swaps him in a deal which seems too good to be true. Too late, Shelby discovers she is the victim of a scam, and she ends up with no pony. Alyssa Brugman observes Shelby?s world beautifully. (10+)

**Fly-by-Night**

Fidra Books? list includes some fine classic pony fiction from doyennes of the genre like Ruby Ferguson and Josephine Pullein-Thompson but their stand-out titles are the first two books in K M Peyton?s ?Mayfield? series. *Fly-by-Night* and *The Team* tell the story of working class Ruth who is obsessed by horses but lives in a council house and with no helpful horsey background at all. Ruth acquires a pony, and it is there that her problems start. Fly is untrained and Ruth clueless so their progress is anything but smooth. (10+)

**War Horse**

Michael Morpurgo, Egmont, 192pp, 1405226668, £6.99 pbk
**War Horse** is the horse book *du jour*. Albert loves the horse Joey, but war breaks out in 1914, and Joey is sold to the Army. Joey is the narrator, a brave choice for Michael Morpurgo. A horse telling its own story is a difficult narrative voice to get right, as the glut of *I remember the day I was born? books written by teenage girls in the 1940s and 1950s testify. The ending is sentimental, but the strongest part of the book is the unsentimental picture of the horse?s lot in war. Through using Joey (and his remarkable linguistic abilities) as the narrator, Michael Morpurgo is able to portray the horror of war, and the humanity shown by both sides. (10+)

**Firehorse**

Diane Lee Wilson, Margaret K. McElderry Books, 320pp, 1442403314, £5.75 pbk

Set in 1872, the date of the Great Fire of Boston, Diane Lee Wilson?s heroine Rachel moves from rural Illinois to Boston. She cannot take her horse and life in Boston is cloistered, smelly and hopeless until Rachel meets the firehorse of the title, terribly burned, and with a fearsome temper. The horse is gradually nursed back to health. Rachel?s consequent desire to become a vet is vehemently opposed by her father and society, and her struggle to fulfil her dream is even harder than that to cure her horse. (12+)

**The Damage Done**

Linda Newbery, Kindle, B005LDV8A2, £2.30. (Pbk edition can be found second-hand.)

Horses feature in several of Linda Newbery?s books. Kirsty, heroine of *The Damage Done* is surrounded by people who want to palm off their responsibilities: she is the handy sponge who picks them up. Kirsty?s brother has left for America, leaving her to run the livery stable he?s started and cope with her agoraphobia. Horses are being attacked locally and Kirsty cannot decide whether Dally, who is living rough nearby, is responsible. *The Damage Done* is compelling and beautifully written. (14+)

**The Bride?s Farewell**

Meg Rosoff, Puffin, 208pp, 014132340X, £6.99 pbk

Shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal 2011, *The Bride?s Farewell* is set in the 19th century. Its heroine, Pell, finds horses give her freedom of a sort, in a world where what girls may and may not do is strictly laid down. She wakes up on the morning of her wedding, not agog with excitement, but determined to escape. She takes her horse, Jack; her younger brother, Bean, and loses them both. Pell?s struggle is at times desperate. She has much to learn about possession, and about the stories we tell ourselves to make our lives easier. Not for one second did I disbelieve any of it. (14+)

**Jane Badger** runs Jane Badger Books, the first and largest website specialising in English language horse and pony fiction. [www.janebadgerbooks.co.uk](http://www.janebadgerbooks.co.uk) [3]

* John Birks was a contributor to the periodical *Junior Bookshelf*, and the quotation comes from a piece he did for them in 1946 about horse books.