



A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck

Jane Smiley

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“Every horse story is a love story,” writes Jane Smiley, who has loved horses for most of her life and owned and bred them for a good part of it. To love something is to observe it with more than usual attention, and that is precisely what Smiley does in this irresistibly smart, witty, and engaging chronicle of her obsession.

In particular she follows a sexy filly named Waterwheel and a grey named Wowie (he “tells” a horse communicator that he wants it changed from Hornblower) as they begin careers at the racetrack. Filled with humor and suspense, and with discourses on equine intelligence, affection, and character, **A Year at the Races** is a winner.

A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck Details

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Author : Jane Smiley

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From Reader Review A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck for online ebook

R Fontaine says

Uneven for a marginally knowledgeable horse person. While instructive, more often too esoteric, at times unbelievable, but always about the love of horses.

Helen says

I enjoyed this book very much. Reading it was like having conversations with an educated and respected friend. I particularly liked the references to other readings that added to my understanding now only of how the equine mind works but also my own mind. Included in the bibliography and referred to often are "Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences" by Howard Gardner and "A General Theory of Love" by Thomas Lewis, MD, Fari Amini, MD & Richard Lannon, MD. There are other excellent books in the bibliography, some I have read and others I hope to read.

Quotes that I recognized from my own truths:

"Someday we would have boyfriends, husbands, children, careers - that's what the horses are a substitute for, according to adult theorists. But what truly horsey girls discover in the end is that boyfriends, husbands, children and careers are the substitute - for horses."

also this one:

"Fascination with horses predated every other single thing I knew. Before I was a mother, before I was a writer, before I knew the facts of life, before I was a schoolgirl, before I learned to read, I wanted a horse."

Gronk says

I was expecting this book to be more about the racetrack and less about horses in general - not sure why I expected that but I was surprised that this was much more general, touching on other equestrian sports too. I expect had I not been very familiar with horses I would have found this book much less enjoyable. I wish she had spent more time discussing her motivations to get into horse breeding and race horse ownership. I wish she had spent more time discussing the costs. (She does mention some costs, but I think it would have been extremely interesting to see a much more detailed breakdown of costs and purses.)

I'm glad I read it - it was enjoyable. But I wouldn't recommend it to anyone that isn't a horse person.

Lucinda says

This is a book that touches on the 'sport of kings' with all the compelling action and drama off and on the racetrack and about those sunning & athletic athletes of the horse world; the Thoroughbred. It was such an insightful & informative read that one can only experience through a very experienced and knowledgeable

person who has worked within the specific industry for some time and it was certainly apparent that Jane Smiley knew what she was talking about & discussing down to the very small detail. Any fan of sport will understand completely the ups & downs and hardgraft that goes into any sport or athlete, and the Thoroughbred horse is a prime example of the athlete in the horse world as it is a breed that is specially designed for running at speed (with a larger ribcage & lungs and a larger heart). They are unpredictable, flighty and utterly fascinating horses that are truly a delight to work with and it is so nice to be able to read a book that explores from a person's personal point of view what they are like to be around and to gain an honest viewpoint. It was such a captivating read that was funny & witty and full of spirit and bravery; just like her horses, it truly was a rollercoaster of an adventure. The stunning images and photographs within this little book add a personal & heartfelt touch that makes each chapter come to life which transports you into the centre of all the action that is momentarily taking place. Jane Smiley has had such an interesting and fascinating life and it is a real privilege to be able to take a look at get to experience what she did through her re-telling of her pacey racing adventures. It is such a charming account that is ever so slightly outrageous; a candid exploration of the bond between the horse and human that is told with panache, intelligence and a lot of humor. Working with horses is just so rewarding alongside all the hard work and relentless commitment (that is true with all horses), and it is a real privilege and honour when it comes to Thoroughbreds and being able to ride/ train them. As a huge horse racing fan, a lover of this particular horse breed and as someone who also supports an ex-racehorse charity I knew that I was going to love and treasure this book, but when I read it it did exceed all my expectations and I learned so much. Anyone can read this regardless of whether you are 'into' horses or not, as it touches upon all human emotions and common encounters within life as well as being really easy to read. A very enjoyable book that will make you smile and laugh out loud as well as it being a book that is brimmed full of extensive horse related knowledge & a truly matter-of-fact insight into the world of horse racing.

Mmars says

At times this book had me on the seat of my pants and at others I needed toothpicks to keep my eyes open as a glazed over rehashed info. And now that I've finished, I still don't know what to make of it.

It can easily be said that there are two sets of readers - those familiar and those unfamiliar with horses. Count me on the unfamiliar side. I remember childhood neighbors I played with as a child who had a horse. They were responsible for its care. I soooo wanted to ride it, but was never able to. Now I understand why! I also remember two girls in my grade (I know at least one of them had a horse) who loved horses in a way I could not relate to. I also get that now. But, this animal communication thing - Smiley consults with a woman who can hold silent conversations with the horses. Only a skilled writer could include this in a nonfiction book and make it halfway believable. Or, at least, allow it to seem possible. She acknowledges the skepticism and holds a degree of it herself.

I was also impressed with the respect, caring and empathy Smiley held toward her horses. She comes off as a very smart owner, albeit low-budget, who obtains trainers who approach the horses knowledgeably and always observant of the horses personalities and needs. She clearly educates the reader on the world of thoroughbred horses. What happens behind the scenes? What is a gelding? What is a maiden? How important is it to pay attention to a racing horse's feet? How much of the race is up to the jockey or to the horse? What is the difference between various race tracks and circuits? I loved all this information. I learned so much.

And her telling of the races, and these were real, was spellbinding. I picked up her novel "Horse Heaven" at

the same time as this book and will hopefully read it soon. I thought this might provide a bit of info to set me up. She didn't let me down in that area.

My criticism is that the book read more like essays written separately and put together without a careful editing eye. The first two or three chapters had some glaring editorial errors (consecutive repetition of words???? How bad is that?) I only dock stars for poor editing and when it impinges on the quality of the book, as it does here. I'm going from 4 to 3 stars. Sorry, Jane.

Erin says

I really like Jane Smiley so I had a good feeling about this book when I found it on the paperback shelf at the library. And I was not disappointed. It's a book about a year in her life with her Thoroughbred horses. I like her frankness as she reveals her own ignorance about her learning curve, her excitement at the races, and her love for her individual horses. But what really appealed to me was her discussion about the psychology of the animals, referring extensively to many books I've read in my own studies of psychology. The only reason I don't give this book a higher mark is I don't have any connection to horses. So while I found the book fascinating, I wasn't able to draw on any of my own experiences. Perhaps I'll reread it when I buy my own racehorse.

David says

Interesting but a bit strange. Chapters alternate between author's experience as a thoroughbred owner (the parts that interested me most) and her reflections on the nature of horses, communication, and the problems of learning to get the most out of them.

Steven says

Picked this one up at the library after being impressed with a review I had read somewhere. This book is a memoir about a year in the life of the author with her thoroughbred horses. It was interesting and did a great job chronicling the whole psychology of thoroughbred horses. Interesting thoughts and ideas about the training of the breed, what makes them champions, the frequency or infrequency of injury, their physical peculiarities, etc. I find all those subjects to be pretty interesting, as I find horse racing in general to be a fascinating sport. Ever since I watched an ESPN piece about the champion, Secretariat, I have been intrigued about the whole idea of horseracing and the psychology of the animals that participate in the sport.

Like other horse books I've read (and I have surprisingly read one or two) this is very much a love story about the animal and all of their greatness. I was expecting something a little different, though, and actually hoped for a chronicle of a year at a racetrack and the unique characters that inhabit it, and this book is not that by any stretch. (I have a bit of experience with that aspect through my job and I think that subject would make for an interesting read.) Despite that, I always like to read good non-fiction where an author is passionate about a subject and by that measure, this book certainly did not disappoint.

Bernadette says

Jane Smiley reveals her personal side in this almost-a-memoir book on everything she knows and has learned about horses. She says it is a love story - her love for her horses, which began as a child but became nearly a full-time commitment when she acquired her first horse in 1993 and entered the rarefied world of horse breeding and racing. Smiley is one of my favorite authors, but I prefer her fiction over this book. She always does her research and in this one she offered more about the history, training, personality and physical attributes of the horse than I wanted to know. Granted she tied this information brilliantly into her personal experiences with her horses but I still skipped over the multiple pages of intense information and looked for the anecdotes about Wowie, Waterwheel, Persey and assorted other members of her horse family. One of the more interesting topics, however, was the explanations of the race track - how the betting, race criteria, etc. are handled in this country and abroad.

Even though Smiley did not make a horse lover of me with this book, I do admire her for showing her passion, disappointment, humility, and wonderment regarding her love for her horses. She even admits she gets a bigger charge out of one of her horses coming in third place at Santa Anita than she does winning a literary prize. That's quite a statement from a Pulitzer Prize author.

Myriah says

An entertaining tale of Jane Smiley's love of horses, re-discovered when she was in her forties. She talks about the return to horses and her rapid embracing of the horse world - acquiring horses, trainers, gear and eventually race horses. The book is at its most interesting when she's talking about her experiences with her horses and at the racetrack. Smiley also attempts to riff on horse psychology, jumping off others' work and throwing her own suppositions out there, which ends up being a distraction for the story as a whole.

Brian says

I first started reading this book last fall, but since it is often difficult for me to read books of essays straight through, I did not finish it. Then in late July Robin and I went on a road trip and we ended up reading the entire thing out loud in the car.

Smiley is a wonderful writer, and I think even non horse people might enjoy this book, but due to its subject, I did not give it a higher rating. What makes this book great for horse people is that it is not a book on training, or breeding, or thoroughbreds, or horse/human relationships, but it does contain all of those elements. And Smiley has a wonderful way of writing that shows the certainty that comes with someone who has worked with horses for many, many years but also portrays the wisdom of someone who knows they have not spent nearly enough years working with horses.

Susan says

Interesting insights into the racing world from a small player, and interesting examinations of the personality and intelligence of horses.

Jessie says

I wish more of this had been about racing and less of it about poorly-researched and anecdotal "horse philosophy." Also, real bummer that Jane Smiley apparently believes in astrology, numerology, and horse psychics (!).

Bonnie says

I haven't read any of Smiley's fiction books but after this one I'm not running out to get one. "A Year at the Races" is somewhat misleading. Although we do follow a few of Smiley's homebred losers at the track, that's only a small part of the book. In between, I was subjected to endless philosophical and psychological drivel about horses. It's not that I believe it's hogwash but it wasn't what I wanted to read from a book called "A Year at the Races". Okay, some of it I rolled my eyes at: her "horse communicator" Hali who not only claimed to speak to horses (and they speak to her)...I can buy that...but communicates with Smiley's horse via ESP. Please. I mean, halfway through the book even Smiley comments, "yes I realize I wrote a whole section about talking to the horses...but I'm not counting on the reader...to accept that section". Later she says, "I had a wandery way of talking and writing, too, never mind an interesting digression." And that is precisely my trouble with this book. It never focused on any one topic, much less the title topic. Too disjointed and very often clinically dull.

Natalie says

Much of what happened during Jane Smiley's A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck remains hidden from the reader.

What's missing? Smiley describes betting on her own horses in small amounts a couple of times. Did she really spend a year at the races and never bet another horse? Did she really never lose a bet? Wish she would have told us!

She describes herself as the mother of children, but we don't hear what happened to their father(s) or of their opinions of her involvement with the horses. Most middle-aged mothers' real life horse stories are fraught with arguments over horses and money. The difficulty of making time for horses when there is a household to care for, and children to rear is the story of every horsewoman's life who has ever raised a child, yet that story remains untold here. The story of the arguments, the decisions about time and money are absent here, leaving a hole at the middle of Smiley's account.

We are privy to Smiley's reflections on various methods of horse training and her own horses' responses to the trainers Smiley's hired. She describes the short careers of two of her horses that were sent to the track, their trainer, and her relationship with that trainer. Her own involvement appears to be that of an owner who would drop in for her horses' races and an occasional morning work, but her insights are sincere and her concern for the horses rings equally true.

She responds to (& appreciates) the routine and order of the backside of the track, but not to the cast of characters that populate it. The reader gets the impression that she didn't get to know these people well enough to make their stories part of her own story or her personal experience of horse racing, maybe she feels she's already written their story in *Horse Heaven*?

Which is a shame, because the insightfully drawn characters and relationships between them that she creates for her fiction are so much more fully drawn than the horses and race people she presented here in *A Year at the Races: Reflections on Horses, Humans, Love, Money, and Luck*.
