

# EQUESTRIAN LITERATURE

## A LIFE IN HORSE BOOKS

By Jessie Haas



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“ANY CREDIBLE HORSE BOOK MUST ENCOMPASS THE FACT THAT HORSES ARE LARGE, INDEPENDENT-MINDED CREATURES WHOSE OPINIONS SOMETIMES DIVERGE FROM THOSE OF THEIR RIDERS,” SAID REVIEWER ANITA L. BURKHAM IN HER ARTICLE, ‘WHAT MAKES A GOOD HORSE BOOK.’ (THE HORN BOOK, JANUARY 2014) SHE WENT ON TO SAY, ‘JESSIE HAAS HAS PERFECTED THE KNACK OF BALANCING THE HORSE’S PERSPECTIVE WITH THE HUMAN’S WITHIN THE SAME NARRATIVE...’ I WAS GRATIFIED TO READ THESE WORDS, BECAUSE THAT BALANCE BETWEEN THE HORSE’S PERSPECTIVE AND THE HUMAN’S IS WHAT I’VE BEEN TRYING TO WORK OUT SINCE CHILDHOOD, IN THE STORIES I WRITE AND WITH THE HORSES I RIDE.



Growing up in rural Vermont, I read only horse books. The Black Stallion was my favorite. **But why were the horses I knew so different from the horses in stories?** How come Alec Ramsay, alone on a desert island, could ride The Black without even a bridle, **while my real pony Scamper defeated me at every turn?** Scraping me off on tree limbs, balking, bucking, biting, running away, rolling in something whenever I especially wanted his white coat to be clean, he taught me that horses have their own points of view, and that I should never take victory for granted.

Still yearning for that mystic union I'd read about, I persuaded my parents to let me buy a weanling filly when I was a young teen. I'd never trained anything in my life, but I'd read a lot of books. Josey had not read those books. We didn't kill each other. Eventually we came to understand each other, but until the end of her life at age **34**, I could never give her paste dewormer without help.

Growing up, most of my friends had horses, in the way Vermont kids did in the **1960s** and **70s**; animals of no special pedigree or training, on whom we were more or less turned loose to roam the

woods and fields together. Our parents usually had no idea where we were, and it didn't matter. The horses knew the way home. In college, having read every horse book I could find many times over, it dawned on me that somebody needed to write some more, and that somebody could be me. But I wouldn't just rewrite the books I loved. I would tell it like it is.

In my first book, Keeping Barney (**Open Road Media e-book**), Sarah loved the same horse books I did, and took on the care of a horse exactly like Scamper while his owner was at college. Selling just before I graduated, Keeping Barney hit home with many readers; I met one on Facebook recently, a mom who has goats and Morgan horses because of reading that book while she was growing up.

Keeping Barney was published forty years ago. Since then I've written forty more books, most involving that struggle/diplomacy between humans and horses. *"Bramble didn't think she should always do what Maggie wanted. Neither of them should be boss all the time. There should be some give and take."* (**Bramble and Maggie; Give and Take, Candlewick 2013**). I've also have trained



two more horses. It's hard to say that I've gotten better at either, because each book, each horse, presents unique challenges. My training skills have certainly improved since I learned about clicker training, which lets me say 'Yes, that's what I mean' to my horses by means of a delicious treat. I've incorporated positive training into many books now, including in my easy reader series, the Bramble and Maggie books. Even my books for American Girl, the doll and book company, involved clicker training, and Saige, Girl of the Year 2013, came with her own pink clicker. Clicker training seems to bring out the sense of humor in my horses—or maybe in me. All I know is that I go more slowly, and laugh more.

My other major interest is history. I've written about it in The Horselover's Encyclopedia 2nd Edition (**Storey, 2017**) and in Hoofprints: Horse Poems (**Open Road e-book 2004**). Horses changed the human story. Our modern world would not exist without their influence, yet most people have no contact with them, and no idea how they shaped our lives..

These days I own two Morgan mares, and ride

them on the farm where I grew up. They are descended from the heroes of two favorite books from childhood, Justin Morgan Had A Horse, and King of the Wind, both by the late Marguerite Henry. I still remember the thrill of realizing that she and I were colleagues.

In recent years I've begun writing stories from the horse's point of view as well as the human's. Bramble, a persnickety lesson horse, goes on strike, and her owner tries to sell her. Maggie has always longed for a horse, and falls in love at first sight, but Bramble is determined to be picky. *"Maggie seemed like a pleasant girl. But maybe there was something wrong with her."* (**Bramble and Maggie, Horse Meets Girl, Candlewick 2012**). Through four books, a horse who has her little ways and a girl who takes every question to her big horse book learn to trust each other. The Hungry Place (**Astra 2020**) follows Princess, a champion Connemara pony who lives a privileged but lonely life until she's abandoned to starve, and a girl named Rae with a different kind of hunger in her heart.

Writing from a horse's point of view feels tricky.



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**How do I know what a horse would be feeling? But how does any writer know what someone else would be feeling?**

We live in a time when identity is important for authors and readers. *I've written stories from a male point of view;* today I'd hesitate to explicitly speak for someone from another culture. But horses aren't going to be writing books of their own any time soon. If anyone is going to speak for them, it must be a human. I approach the horse point of view with humility and respect, informed by the exciting new science about equine senses and the equine mind.

That new awareness makes writing about horses, and even a gentle ride in the hay field, seem even more daring and fantastic. Horses see and hear and smell the world so differently than we do that they might as well be aliens. Yet they're not. They are our cousins, and sophisticated loving communication is possible. The more I learn

the more astonishing that seems, and the more interesting the challenges; riding horses, and writing about them. 🏠

*Jessie Haas lives in Westminster, Vermont, USA, in an off-grid cabin in the woods with her husband and two cats. She's the author of 40+ award-winning books, and an environmental journalist. Learn more at*

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