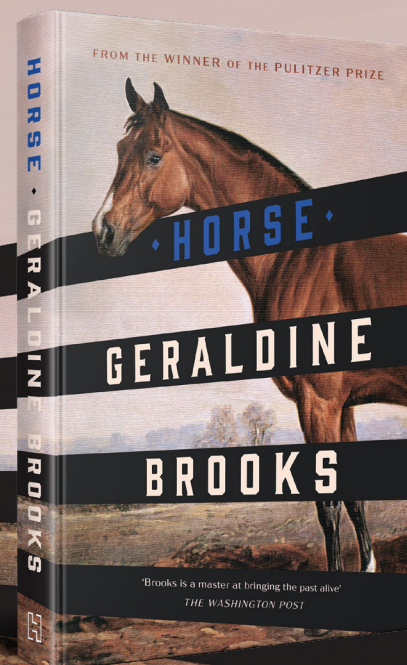# AN INTRODUCTION TO *HORSE*
BY GERALDINE BROOKS

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 art and science, love and obsession, the human-animal bond, the legacy of enslavement and the ongoing quest for racial justice.

Horse is set in three time periods. The historical spine of the book is based on the true story of the remarkable racehorse, Lexington, whose blistering speed drew crowds of more than twenty thousand to the track and riveted the attention of the United States even as the country was sliding towards Civil War. Like most of the great horses of the period, Lexington's success relied on the skills of Black horsemen, many of whom were enslaved. Brooks vividly captures the growing risks faced by these men and the horses they cared for as war sweeps through the South.

Lexington was painted many times during his long career. One portrait wound up in a 1980s bequest to the Smithsonian from a radical art dealer named Martha Jackson, a champion of edgy contemporary painters such as Jackson Pollock. That painting and its mysterious provenance brings the novel to bohemian New York in the 1950s and an art world roiled by exciting new means of expression.

Meanwhile, in contemporary Washington DC, Jess, an Australian scientist working at the Smithsonian rediscovers the significance of a skeleton specimen simply labelled 'Horse', while Theo, a Nigerian-American art historian, tries to learn more about the Black horsemen so vividly portrayed with their charges in nineteenth century American equestrian art. Even as they puzzle over these mysteries, the legacy of that past unexpectedly ensnares them.

GERALDINE BROOKS is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *March* and the international bestsellers *The Secret Chord*, *Caleb's Crossing*, *People of the Book*, and *Year of Wonders*. She has also written the acclaimed nonfiction works *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*. Born and raised in Australia, Brooks lives in Massachusetts.

FROM THE WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

HORSE · GERALDINE BROOKS

· HORSE ·

GERALDINE BROOKS

'Brooks is a master at bringing the past alive'
THE WASHINGTON POST

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. On page 28 (Theo, Georgetown, Washington, DC, 2019), Theo reflects that depictions of horses are among the oldest art humans created. The book's epigraphs reflect on the significance of Lexington in American horseracing—in his day, an even bigger celebrity than the legendary racehorse Seabiscuit or Australia's Phar Lap. Discuss the enduring human fascination with horses—do they move you more than other animals, and if so, why?

2. Theo and Jess are both obsessed with their rarefied fields of expertise. Does the author manage to convey why these unusual careers can be so compelling? If so, how?

3. Jarret's connection with horses is presented as stronger than his bonds with people. How does his love for and dedication to Lexington help or hamper his coming of age and his transformation over the course of the novel?

4. Horseracing in the mid-nineteenth century was very different to its modern iteration. What surprised you? Do you think horseracing today takes adequate care for the wellbeing of equines?

5. On p. 71 (Thomas J. Scott, The Meadows, Lexington, Kentucky, 1852), Scott writes, '[We] who think we are above enslaving our fellow man are corrupted. Only show us absolute agency over the apt and the willing, and suddenly we find the planters' obduracy that much less odious. I must guard against the rank seductions of this place.' How does the author draw out the similarities and differences between Northern and Southern attitudes in this era (leading up to and including the American Civil War, and its aftermath) through Thomas J. Scott, a practised observer who moves between the regions?

6. Several historical figures appear in the novel, among them the emancipationist newspaper publisher Cassius Clay and his daughter, the suffragist Mary Barr Clay. What are Cassius Clay's arguments for emancipation to the Warfield family? Do you see the roots of what would become Mary Barr Clay's passion for the women's suffrage movement in the way she is portrayed in her youth? What are their respective strengths and limitations? How do novels make historical figures come alive for us beyond what we might find in a work of nonfiction?

7. Martha Jackson was a real American gallery owner and art collector. Discuss her portrayal in *Horse* and what her relationship to the painting of Lexington conveys about her character. What does her storyline contribute to the novel's themes? What did her chapters reveal to you about America in that era, and did you notice any similarities between the art world of the mid-twentieth century and the horseracing economy of a century prior?

8. Referring to the Civil War on p. 87 (Jess, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, 2019), Jess says, 'Not my war […] Unless you call Australia the *very* Deep South.' Theo is also not American-born. Nevertheless, they're both forced to reckon with the legacy of enslavement—particularly Theo, who encounters racism in his daily life. How does this affect their relationship? What does the novel reveal about the way history shapes our present moment?

9. Discuss Theo and Jess's relationship. What do you think attracts them to one another despite their differences? What do they learn from each other?

10. Examine Jess's conversation with Daniel in the aftermath of what happens to Theo at the end of the novel. What did you make of Daniel's assessment of the situation? Do you share his point of view?