

## NOSTALGIA

Joan Gilbert

### Rita Mae Brown on Saddlebreds

Saddlebred people often complain that our fancy should have more fictional representation. Aren't we and our horses wonderful enough to deserve it, our history and traditions worthy of being immortalized? "Where's our Rita Mae Brown?" ask those who have read her many best-selling mysteries set in the hunt world.

Actually, Rita Mae was ours for one volume, *Puss 'n Cahoots*, which was published last year by Bantam. In this novel, people and animals who star in her "Mrs. Murphy" series, visited the Shelbyville show. They experienced that event fully, every detail perfectly accurate. Obviously, Brown knows Saddlebreds and their shows and their people, very well. Here's how that came about:

"When I was five or six years old," Brown says, "My mother and I were at a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania show which was at the time for all breeds and all disciplines." And she pauses to express regret that such shows are now so hard to find. "A most wonderful looking horse came into the ring," she says, "My mother stood up in respect and she said to me, 'Never forget that you saw this horse. His name is Wing Commander.'"

*Judi Lovell*  
*Switch Company*

Long Flowing Switches  
Feathers and Manes  
Jack Russell Puppies

**judi-lovell.com**

**(423) 479-7857**  
243 Jessie Lane  
Charleston, TN 37310

Since then, Brown says, she has made it her business to see the most noted American Saddlebred horses and their most noted riders. She is usually at Louisville. "I've rubbed elbows with many Saddlebred people," she says and mentions some important breed history she witnessed as it was made. For instance, she saw the meeting of Imperator and Sky Watch in Kansas City.

Though she thrills to the beauty and spirit of Saddlebreds in the show ring, Brown also has known and worked with many of them in less dramatic roles. She knows how versatile they are and the many ways in which they enhance human lives. This is demonstrated in *Puss 'n Cahoots*, when three-gaited Shortro, whose owner doesn't need him as a show contender, gives him away. He is quite valuable, being well trained and sweetly dispositioned and having done well in his classes. But his highly responsible owner is reluctant to let the promising youngster out of her hands. To prevent the chance of his being treated harshly by a buyer, or shifted hand-to-hand for a lifetime, she gives him to a trusted friend, "Harry" Haristeen, to be trained for the hunt field.

When Shortro learns from companions who witnessed the transaction, that he will not be going home with his beloved owner, he is very anxious. He asks the other horses about his new life. "What will I have to do?" Told that he will be a hunter, he says "I don't want to kill anything." They explain what the role will mean with Harry: he will merely be chasing foxes. And he will have good, affectionate care from an owner who never discards a horse. He then says, gratefully, "I will do anything." In those few touching words we recognize the universal equine manifesto and contract with humankind.

Brown, knowing Saddlebreds well in their many human-complementing roles, says that they do, indeed, make very good hunters. "They certainly can jump," she says, "and their size and stamina are ideal. They have good mouths. They are a very intelligent, brave and level-headed breed, if not conditioned to be otherwise. Their steady temperaments make them nice companions."

Reminded of the breed's "tap dancer" designation by some critics, she says those words fit only individuals who have been trained to move that way. Saddlebreds are as capable as any other breed of reaching forward strongly.

So given all this, can we expect to see more of Brown's mysteries devoted to Saddlebreds? Many readers suggested

that to her, after seeing *Puss 'n Cahoots*. Dare we hope for a series centered on the breed? Brown says she has no such plan, but Saddlebreds will figure more in her mysteries from now on. After all, we have to see how Shortro's retraining turns out, don't we?

To familiarize readers with Brown's books: she began with some that were mainly feminist in slant, some that are satire and/or humor, even a book on the craft of writing. And she did a very well received historical novel about Dolley Madison.

But Brown is best known for the two series to which she now devotes full time, 3.3 million of them being in print. One of her own cats, Sneaky Pie Brown, claims authorship for the "Mrs. Murphy" series which stars a tiger-striped cat whose shelter experience did not destroy her sassiness and astounding cleverness. She leads a little support group that includes a dutiful Corgi named Tucker and a fussy, plump and lazy grey cat named Pewter. These three help Harry to solve assorted mysteries in the genre called "cozy."

In the series named for Jane Arnold, a master of hounds who is in her early 70s, pets take smaller roles and horses much larger ones. Through Jane we are exposed to the traditions and history of the hunt, but also to several aging people who stay fit and vital through working with horses. When asked who the model for Jane Arnold is, Brown says she is a composite of several women she has known who continued hunting through their 70s and beyond. "It seems to me that a great many women grow stronger as they grow older," she says.

We find, in Brown's books, refreshing and comforting dips into a place where main actors have enough of everything, live in beautiful natural surroundings, and enjoy friendships that are deep and dependable. In that mainly happy place, animals are treated with suitable consideration and appreciation.

Questions are raised in many readers' minds by the fact that Brown's animals' intercommunication is set forth freely, though they can speak directly to humans only so far as their body language and facial expressions are understood. Some readers are at first put off by this, but the animals' wit and honesty soon wins us over. They are right about us in so many ways: we cannot smell or hear much, our vision is pitifully limited and we are in general quite helpless at receiving their communications. We are redeemed in their eyes, however, by the provision and protection

## Show Stopper Tack, Inc.

### A Saddleseat Only Tack and Apparel Shop

Cut-back, Lane Fox Saddles, Weymouth and TWH Bridles, Saddle Seat Apparel, Fine Harness, Buggies and Carts, Training Harness and Equipment, Action Devices, Tail Sets, Horse and Pony Blankets, Bits, Stable Equipment and Supplies and a wide range of products to meet your needs in performance and budget both in the show ring and at home.

[www.showstoppertack.com](http://www.showstoppertack.com)

(800) 285-0645

we give them.

A second question Rita Mae's books inspire: do they always include some real people? Some of us were unaware that she does this until we found Joan Hamilton and Larry Hodge and Joan's late parents in *Puss 'n Cahoots*. We may not be enough acquainted with people in the hunt world to have recognized them in other books. "Yes," she says, "real people sometimes take roles." The arrangement is that they have an opportunity to read their part if it involves more than passing mention.

And now to fill in — in a random manner — basic data about the writer, herself:

Rita Mae Brown comes honestly by her love of equines and her ability with them. "My mother," she tells us on her website, "had the best eye for horses of anyone I've ever known." One of the ways she utilized this talent was at the track, betting not for fun, but for money the family needed, despite a hard working husband and father.

Rita Mae's resume includes several honorary degrees and one PhD she earned through a scholarship to the University of New York. Her horse experience includes playing polo (she started the first women-only polo club in America) and hunting to hounds. In the latter, she has attained expertise enough to be Master Of Fox Hounds and she also is a huntsman, which means that she can, when necessary, "carry the horn" that controls hounds in the field. Brown gave up polo because she feels she cannot afford to keep the necessary ponies in addition to all the other animals she supports, an unknown number of mouths, most belonging to rescues. She does continue to ride to hounds.

Though while working in Hollywood, Rita Mae received Emmy nominations, there is nothing afoot for a long film or a

TV series set among her casts of characters. Readers have told her they would welcome this, but she greatly doubts the possibility. We all realize that few advertisers could be convinced that more than a few Americans want to watch something besides technology, concrete, metal and gore. She does not believe there is much chance in this country for anything similar to the avidly followed British television series that feature people living quietly among the beauties of nature, usually with appreciative attention to horses and other animals.

Rita Mae's latest book is *A Purrfect*

*Murder*, released in late January of this year, and her project underway is a new Jane mystery scheduled for release in Fall '08. Rita Mae has had a total of 39 books in print, and has won many awards for her work. She consistently makes *The NY Times* best sellers list. But she says this on her website autobiography:

"What I have done that I care most about is that I have cherished life. I've rescued by now hundreds of cats, dogs, foxes and hounds, and found homes for them. When asked, at the end of her interview for *Saddle & Bridle*, what she would most like to say to readers, it came quickly:

"Support your local animal shelter, by whatever means you can, donations of money or work or in any other way. A donation of just ten dollars can feed a cat for a month." She urges us to adopt from shelters, rather than to buy pets, reminding that if we are dead-set on a purebred, every variety winds up among the rejects. She says that in the past few decades she has bought only one dog. All her other pets, she says "found me".

Given this passion on her part, and the frequent mention in her books of people who work for needy animals, can we expect a mystery with such a setting? "I'm not planning one at this time," she says, "but Sneaky Pie may be."

## Saddlebreds UK News

The European Championship and Open Breed Show was a great success with a number of top horses in attendance. The crowd of spectators grows with each year and many stayed to the very end, which was great news.

The inclusion of open breed classes, and catering to both Paso Finos and Iberians, meant we had very colorful support from both groups. Even Worse, owned by Lynn Herd, was crowned the Saddlebred Performance Champion with Comanche Deuce, owned by David Whittard, reserve.

Everyone that won a ribbon at this show — regardless of the place — is eligible to take part in a photo competition to win \$2,500. What a great opportunity for our photogenic Saddlebreds — get clicking with those cameras.

The venue has already been booked for next year's event — May 10, 2009 — and please note this is a

week later than it was this year. Mark the date in your diary now, as this is



Even Worse.

photo courtesy of Bollins Photography

the show of the year to attend for Saddlebred enthusiasts and owners. As with any specialist show, sponsorship is desperately needed, so please use the coming 12 months to try to raise some sponsorship to support your national championship show.

— Lynn Jarvis