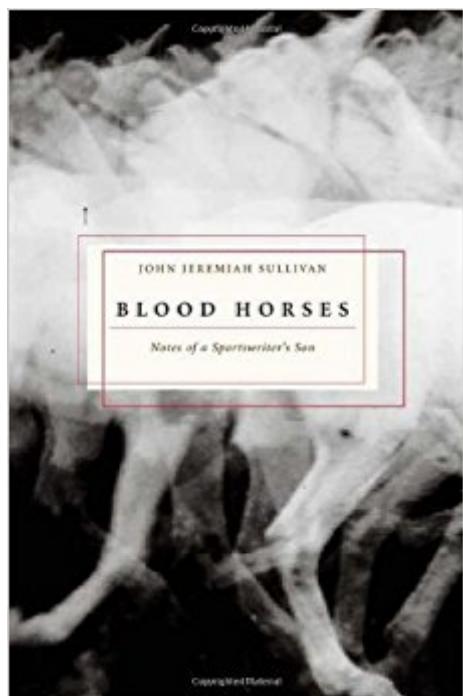


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Blood Horses: Notes Of A Sportswriter's Son



Synopsis

One evening late in his life, veteran sportswriter Mike Sullivan was asked by his son what he remembered best from his three decades in the press box. The answer came as a surprise. "I was at Secretariat's Derby, in '73. That was . . . just beauty, you know?" Sullivan didn't know, not really: the track had always been a place his father disappeared to once a year on business, a source of souvenir glasses and inscrutable passions in his Kentucky relatives. But in 2000, Sullivan, an editor and essayist for Harper's, decided to educate himself. He spent two years following the horse--both across the country, as he watched one season's juvenile crop prepare for the Triple Crown, and through time, as he tracked the animal's constant evolution in literature and art, from the ponies that appeared on the walls of European caves 30,000 years ago, to the mounts that carried the Indo-European language to the edges of the Old World, to the finely tuned but fragile yearlings that are auctioned off for millions of dollars apiece every spring and fall. The result is a witty, encyclopedic, and in the end profound meditation on what Edwin Muir called our "long-lost archaic companionship" with the horse. Incorporating elements of memoir and reportage, the Wunderkammer and the picture gallery, *Blood Horses* lets us see--as we have never seen before--the animal that, more than any other, made us who we are.

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Customer Reviews

Horse racing does not lend itself easily to the drama and characters of most sports, because, as the author puts it, "when your Sammy Sosa has four legs, cannot speak, and has, to all appearances,

no idea what people are so worked up about, you have to work harder to generate narrative." In his own quest to trace racing's history and capture its urgency, Sullivan, a former Harper's editor, has indeed worked hard but made it look effortless. He has found narrative not in a particular horse but in The Horse—the cultural, literary and biological phenomenon. It would be easy to expect, in this post-Seabiscuit age, a tale of the triumphant underdog, but Sullivan has more reflective pleasures on his mind. He alternates a history of the South, particularly of Lexington, Ky., where he spent time as a child and where much of the American horse-racing industry is concentrated, with a larger cultural and historical examination. His riffs are also unexpectedly hilarious, especially when he takes a gonzo-ish trip to the Kentucky Derby. Running throughout is the story of Sullivan's late father, a longtime sportswriter and dreamer whom the author lovingly, but largely unsentimentally, worships, and whose presence provides a kind of magnetic pull without overwhelming the book. Sullivan, who won a National Magazine Award for the piece on which this book was based, has a fairly liberal approach to structure and pace, but no matter: he has written a history as sweeping as it is personal and whose coherence is made more impressive by its lack of central drama—a book that is, in short, as remarkable as the finest horses it documents. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Sullivan has written a strange amalgam of a book: part personal reminiscence; part bittersweet elegy for his father, sportswriter Mike Sullivan; and part wide-ranging investigation into the history and culture of the horse, particularly the Thoroughbred racehorse. Spurred by his father's recollection of Secretariat's Kentucky Derby victory in 1973, the author devoted two years of intensive reading and travel to understanding the various aspects and allure of Thoroughbred racing. Although he remains in some respects an amateur, communicating what he has learned with an amateur's zeal and certainty, he has learned a great deal. In describing the roles horses have played throughout human history in war and peace and the way Thoroughbreds are bred, sold, trained, and raced today, Sullivan provides vivid detail and, occasionally, penetrating insight. His account of War Emblem's 2002 bid for racing's Triple Crown makes for especially compelling reading. Dennis DodgeCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

"Blood Horses: Notes of a Sportswriter's Son", the first book from writer John Jeremiah Sullivan, is an exploration of the horse as literary motif, a son's love poem for his dead father, and a masterful writer's first attempt to wrestle his talents into a full-length book. To understand Sullivan, and his second book of essays, *Pulphead: Essays*, whether sports fan or not, this raw and vulnerable look

into JJS's family life is a must. "What a farce, and a gaucherie, even to try to tell the story of a life," argues John Jeremiah Sullivan, as he- with humility, talent, and perhaps a touch of irony- tries to do exactly this. In chapters, such as "Icon", a "section concerning the physical evolution of the horse and the history of its meaning in human culture--", Sullivan's initial objective for the book, which "grew out of a conversation with Guy Davenport about the long history of the talking horse as literary motif..." is clear. Although, it is in the chapters about his father, Mike Sullivan, that John Jeremiah's writing finds its highest emotional pitch- one that possesses the blue, melancholic beauty of a Kirchner street scene. After reading the chapter about Mike Sullivan's last days, I was literally distraught for hours. The language was so real, so honest that I almost felt like I knew Mike Sullivan, or that somehow I was reading about the last days of someone who I loved. But I suppose because of JJS's writing, his dad had become, over the course of this book, close to me. Mike Sullivan spent a career as a sportswriter and newspaper reporter in Louisville, Kentucky and after that Ohio. His chief passion was baseball. But it was the 1973 Kentucky Derby, when Secretariat triumphed in the first leg of his magical Triple Crown run, that Mike credited as the most special sports moment in his life. Mike Sullivan, the one that emerges on the pages of this book, is a loving, flawed, sometimes distant, chain-smoking, literary, and humorous man. Of his father, JJS writes, "my father's ambition had been to Write (poetry, no less)." Every year Mike Sullivan would wear a white suit to the Derby in homage to one of his literary heroes, Mark Twain. In his college days, Mike Sullivan was a Ginsberg aficionado and hippie, who filled his course of studies with reading the works of literary giants. He left college with grand literary ambitions- ones that his son has more closely achieved than he. Mike Sullivan's career never reached the heights that perhaps he dreamed for himself in his most personal moments. Mike settled instead for the income and security of a job as a sports reporter. JJS writes nostalgically of afternoons in the booth with his father, from where Mike covered minor league baseball games in Louisville. Mike had a reputation among his colleagues as humorous and gregarious man. Through sports, and the language around it, father and son found a way to communicate, to express their love. The "Notes" in this book's title is appropriate. The style is a collage. I have read many, many books about the history of horseracing. But somehow JJS's hodgepodge, quilted style, the way he patches together immense amounts of information, which he colors with his own opinions, achieves an effect that is unique. JJS philosophizes like Bill Barich at his greatest heights in *Laughing in the Hills*, while not sacrificing the rigorous research one expects of a David McCullough book. This book is a young writer's book. A Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust* (Vintage International), and not the taut perfection of a later work like *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text*. There is beauty in this rawness, in a young writer's attempt to unleash his

talents, in not letting convention stand in the way, in seeing if the pasta will stick to the wall. This beauty is achieved partly because of the presence, rather than the absence, of the writer's psyche on the page. JJS's psyche is an empathic one. He attempts something I have never encountered before in a horse book, and something that I believe says a lot about Sullivan as a writer- he tries to empathize with a yearling, to wonder what those first days of domestication is like in the mind of a young horse, "...the time the bit is slipped into its mouth and it first tastes the whip, it will have come to see reality as a succession of such indignities, but perhaps not so awful, with excellent food that appears magically every morning and night, and a little herd of bipeds..." Whether a yearling, or his father, Sullivan is able to do what only the great writers are able to: imagine what it is like to be in the mind of his subject. That empathy and ability to see the world through the eyes of his subjects, whether they are horse or human, is what sets the works of JJS apart.

J. J. Sullivan is about to become an important American writer and essayist. Read "Blood Horses" and indulge your interest in horse racing, where it started, who does it appeal to, its history, its thrilling modern times productions, and just about anything else. And all of it written with authority and panache. An outstanding work.

If Sullivan were any better a writer he'd be illegal. Every sentence in this book is a tiny gem, every tale told a revelation. I learned more about racing, Kentucky, and the strange bonds of family then I had any right to expect for the cover price. And whatever Sullivan writes in the future, I'll be happy to have it in my library.

Good read, not finished yet

I can't help but add my voice to the chorus of accolades. This book is a gem. Sullivan tells his tale in an original voice and finding this voice is a delightful discovery. At times this book made me laugh out loud, and at times I couldn't read the words because my eyes brimmed with tears. There are some passages that are flat-out hard to read, but to read them, in the end, is to be reminded of what it is to be human. Sullivan harnesses horses as a powerful metaphor. I will certainly read this book again.

Great writing style. It flowed nicely from topic to topic and from current time to past events as the author recalled his father. Good wit.

THIS WAS A GREAT READ.I LEARNED A LOT ABOUT HORSE RACING FROM A behind the scenes perspective, but the study of mans relationship through history with the horse was what really grabbed me. This is the second book I've read by John Sullivan [Pulpwood Essays] and he makes every topic totally compelling.

Good paper quality, easy to read. in general like new condition. Boring book tho. Its a good book to read if you want to passout.

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