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BOOKS

A dream about horses

Judith Barrington's new collection challenges human exploitation

BY MEG DALY

In the title poem of Judith Barrington's long-awaited third collection of poetry, *Horses and the Human Soul* (Story Line Press, \$14 softcover), a thoroughbred mare dozes in a midnight field, an unsuspecting target of impending violence.

Earlier in the book, a young girl presents her "uptumed, hopeful face" to her mother, from whom she must naturally separate as she matures.

In another poem, a lesbian comes to terms with her place in the natural order of things, at first feeling alienated and then realizing: "The trouble is not nature, she thinks/but the people who say I'm not part of it."

Barrington's stunning new collection takes on the elemental themes of the natural world vs. the human, life passages and losses of innocence, violence and inhumanity, survival and return to nature. Anchoring her exploration of these themes is the horse and its spirit.

The Portlander, who will celebrate her 60th birthday this month, was born and raised in England and essentially grew up on horseback. She palled around with other girls who were, like her, she says, "in love with horses." They reveled in caring for their animals and tack, riding and competing, and all things equine-related.

Barrington says riding horses was her "chosen world." Growing up in the 1950s, it was a world that allowed girls her age to avoid being boxed into demure, feminine roles. Instead, she and her friends were active and independent. The experience was, she explains, "very formative. It had a major influence on who I turned out to be."

Horses also had an important influence on her imagination. One poem pays homage to psychologist Carl Jung, who said that if you dream about horses you are dreaming about your own spirit.

Another, the elegiac "Living Without Horses," muses:

To live without horses is to carry them with you always:

*the one who lifted you over the tiger trap,
the one who kicked you when you deserved it,
and the dappled grey one who lay down under you*

*and died as you ran away
unable to stay with him on that path
beside the golf course, breathing in
what you would search and search for in the years to come.*

Many of Barrington's latest poems are infused with this kind of longing and remembrance, as if they are river rocks the poet turned over and over in her hand for years, to remember the essences of water and stone. So, too, are the poems lovingly rendered; they are acute, lyrical, sprinkled with humor, deeply compassionate, meant to be read again and again.

Barrington says the process of writing a poem is not about executing an intended message. Rather, "something is pulled out of you that you didn't know you knew."

In her prologue, "The Poem," Barrington writes that "the poem...has lodged in my heart like a stone in the shoe." She beautifully, playfully captures the undeniable, mysterious and sometimes tormenting urge to create. "The Poem" serves as a Rosetta

stone for the collection, the answer to the why of grappling with painful or difficult material: "There is no avoiding it...no stillness that can ease the bruise/except the stillness of a motionless heart."

Arranged in two parts, *Horses and the Human Soul* travels an arc from a childhood spent in nature and with horses to adult wranglings with oppression and materialism and then back to the natural world with the wizened eyes of experience.

The author writes bravely and with nuance about human injustices, particularly homophobia, sexism and war. Her incorporation of human violence toward animals marks a new point in her own political evolution.

"As I get older, I care more about the treatment of animals," she says. "Exploitation is exploitation...it's all connected because it's an attitude of superiority, whether it's men over women...or human over all the other species."

Barrington's work, while often politically incisive and unflinching, also includes humor and delight. There is a slyly unmistakable English wit, as well as an all-out poking fun. "Why Young Girls Like to Ride Bareback," for instance, expertly and delicately turns a crass joke into a warm, empowering embrace of pre-teen female (and queer) sexuality:

Now you hold her, warm and alive, between your thighs.

In summer, wearing shorts, you feel the dander of her coat, glossy and dusty at the same time, greasing up the insides of your calves, and as she walks, each of your knees in turn feels the muscle bulge out behind her shoulder.

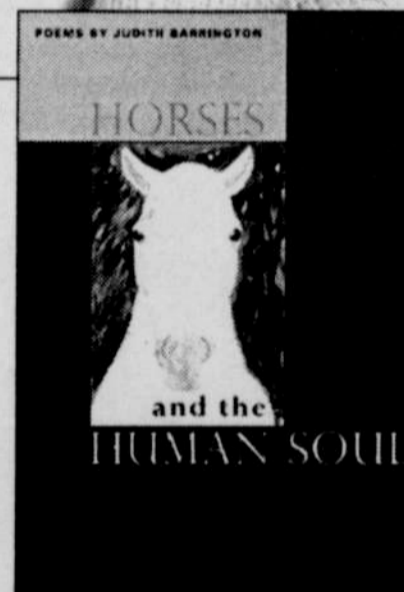
Barrington's core readership in the United States has been in lesbian and feminist circles. While she is glad to have readers who appreciate her content, she is also pleased to be highly regarded for her poetry itself, which is especially true in her native country. Her poem "The Dyke with No Name Thinks About Landscape" won the 1996 Dulwich Festival Poetry Contest, judged by famed Iranian-British poet and stage actress Mimi Khalvati.

"There's something about the syntax and rhythms of the language that have remained English," says Barrington, who has lived in the States for 30 years.



PHOTO BY BARBARA GUNDEL

Judith Barrington sees poetry as something "pulled out of you that you didn't know you knew"



Barrington is also the author of a memoir, *Lifesaving*—about the death of her parents in a cruise ship fire and coming of age as a lesbian—which won the 2000 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Autobiography and was a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award and an Oregon Book Award.

Barrington is now at work on a book-length poem, written in the terza rima form (think Dante's "Inferno"), about her relationship to World War II. She was born during an air raid, which she writes about in one of the poems in *Horses*, and her partner, Ruth Gundel, lost many family members in the Holocaust.

Barrington will also likely spend time this summer at Soapstone Creek on the Oregon coast, where she and Gundel run the Soapstone Writing Retreat for Women. One imagines Soapstone is not unlike "the swift, sleepless river" in Barrington's poem "Kinds of Sleep": "[A] river which dreams/and dreams for the women who hold each other/on its bank, not yet dreaming for themselves." ■

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