

Horses Book Talk

By Liz Barker

The Horse: the Epic History of Our Noble Companion / Wendy Williams 2015

This is about the evolution of the horse. It is written by a horse loving journalist and follows the somewhat formulaic technique of jaunting around the world asking various specialists appropriate questions and recording their answers. Sites of interest are also visited. There's a moderate amount of "I" involved and a tinge of assuming that "I" will put things together as some new, revealing theory.

Actually the book is very interesting though not what I was anticipating. I assumed that it would be a history of horses in relation to man. The first couple of chapters relate the author's visits to various wild horse herds with an appropriately qualified guide. The purpose is to observe the horse as a wild animal - not in relation to man. It's a different perspective. These are feral horses, domesticated species which have established "wild" populations. Probably the only truly wild horse living is the Przewalski in Mongolia, Other horse relatives are donkeys, zebras, wild asses, and onagers.

The wild horse visits are a way to examine herd behavior which is a big factor in domestication and general horse training. There is definitely a pecking order and training requires the human to establish him or herself as the leader. Horses bite and kick more among themselves than as defense. They benefit from companionship which is important for the one horse owner to recognize. Some race horses have another animal as a substitute.

The evolutionary history of the horse begins in North America with the eohippos, a small five toed animal which evolved millions of years ago and then disappeared. Climate change seems to be the major factor. Beringia at that time was a thousand mile land strip allowing access to Asia. The proto-horse spread across Asia into Europe and continued to evolve. It's an herbaceous herd animal, prey to carnivores. The horse's main defense is the speed provided by its leg structure. What we think of as the ankle is located half way up the horse's leg and its hoof is a one toed remnant of a foot. Other distinctive features include the placement of its eyes, strong teeth and a very simple, rapid digestive system concentrated in the duodenum. The horse returned to North America with the Spanish explorers in the 16th century.

Early domestication may have been primarily for a meat source. Herding swift horses almost necessitates becoming a rider. The development of the bit, stirrups, and saddle made a big difference in man's ability maintain herds and to make use of the horse as a mount and a work animal.

Farewell to the Horse: a Cultural History by Ulrich Raulff (2015) is a broad ranging look at the horse's place in the history of man. The emphasis is more on depictions in art and the use of the horse in conflict. Horses enabled men to travel more rapidly and over greater distances. Prime examples of the

effect of this on human society are the conquests of Alexander the Great who expanded his empire into Asia and Genghis Khan and the Mongolians who reversed the direction. Armor and weapons first enhanced and then diminished the advantages of cavalry.

Cave drawings document early association with horses. The popular equestrian statue demonstrates a continuing appeal. There are literary references, a section on Hans the mathematical genius among other miscellany, and numerous photographs of paintings, etc. Horse riding cowboys and Indians are a persistent American image. And horse keeping remains alive and well on the race track and in personal ownership.

Horse Power by Juliet Clutton-Brock (1992)

Surprisingly enough this "history of the horse and the donkey in human societies" published by Harvard University Press provided a well-illustrated, concise story of horses and their evolution, domestication, and relation to humans. There is ample discussion of the horse as a draft animal in farming and transportation which seemed to be lacking in the previous books. There is even mention of Mathematical Hans the horse reputed to arithmetic but found to be following cues his trainer unknowingly conveyed.

Horsekeeping on a Small Acreage by Cherry Hill (1990) is a very detailed description of facilities and management needed by the horse owner. It would be a good reality check for anyone who is even toying with the idea of keeping a horse or two. It might also serve as a useful check list for specific aspects such as purchasing appropriate property, providing housing, growing one's own feed, etc. In a way it is rather dry and there is a curious lack of visible evidence of horses within the book but the topic coverage is comprehensive.

Driving Horses: How to Harness, Align, and Hitch Your Horse for Work or Play by Steve Bowers and Marlen Steward (2006)

This is another comprehensive coverage example with multiple photographs illustrating the processes involved - and lots of horses. It's very much a how to book and not very conducive to discussion. It was interesting enough to actually read in relation to getting some idea of the intricacies of harnessing and hitching horses - and the importance. An unexpected sidelight was a section on testifying at trials involving runaways and other accidents. Improper hitching would be negligence and a cause. There was a strong emphasis on safety, but an encouraging tone. Think of how different it would be to hitch up the horses to till the garden or to get to town for a visit or supplies.

The New Horse-Powered Farm / Stephen Leslie 2013.

This 321 page book on both horse and driver training, equipment, and procedures is a detailed and amply illustrated discussion of using horses for the small scale sustainable market grower. The author and his wife have a small dairy herd, raise produce, and accomplish this with the use of live horse power. Personal experience and research are augmented by numerous short (2-4 pages) comments on

specific aspects by similarly experienced individuals.

There's a wealth of information, advice, and anecdotal experience on keeping and driving horses, equipment designed or modified for use with horses, and small market farm management. There are lots of specifics especially in regard to equipment, exploring all the different kinds of cultivators, their purposes and how they are hitched and used. All the individual sidebars demonstrate an interest in the connection with horses and the part they play in an integrated, sustainable, low carbon use farm.

A section on farm economics compares using animals with using a tractor. A horse's feed can be raised on the farm, it can reproduce itself and provide soil fertility but also needs daily attention including the need to work - and probably a bit of affection. A tractor requires outside inputs but just sits there unless needed. It's biggest non-horse utility was the bucket loader.

The main horse breeds discussed are Belgians, Suffolks, Fjords and Hafliners with some space for other options such as oxen, mules, and miniatures. Starting out with a trained team and a mentor is recommended though not everybody did that. The author's own experiences and practices provide the basic background. The overall content is as integrated as the featured farms. Soil fertility, crop layout and succession and cultivation techniques are as fully covered as the care and housing of the horses.

Horse, Follow Closely: Native American Horsemanship by Gawani Pony Boy (1998)

Some history of Native Americans and their relationship to animals provides background for their approach to training horses. Getting to know the horse and establishing the human as the leader are essential factors for establishing an almost telepathic control. Several lesson exercises are detailed. Folktales, anecdotes and photographs add to both the training techniques and the general approach. The method may seem a bit questionable but establishing such a bond between horse and rider is worth considering.

A Year at the Races by Jane Smiley (2004)

This is a description of a very different kind of relationship. Long time horse rider, and Pulitzer prize winning author of the novel Horse Heaven, describes some of her experiences breeding and racing horses. She has a close relationship with some, including her riding horses. Others are boarded and trained at a distant track. A lot of money is involved. There is a horse astrologist who receives messages from the horses and a horse healer who may or may not produce results but the horses seem to like her company.