

WOMEN, TOO, CAN BE CHAMPION JOCKEYS AND WIN BIG RACES

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In fact, they can win the greatest race of all. Today, under “Recommended Readings,” see: [0009. (BBC 10.4.2021) Rachael Blackmore wins Grand National on Minella Times]. Terminology: Grand National is a horse race. Minella Times is the name of a horse. Rachael Blackmore is the name of a jockey. The jockey. Not a he but a she. The first woman rider since 1839, i.e. in more than 180 years, to have won the single most difficult, the most famous, and the most lucrative steeplechase in the world.

Now though I like sports in general, and maybe end up watching too many for my own good, I can't say that I'm a great fan of horse racing. It is distant, aristocratic, a glamorous pastime and a snobbish social setting for the super-rich. A striking symbol, whichever way you look at it, of the immense inequalities of this world. Just think of what it costs to acquire and maintain an entire stable. Or of champagne and caviar at Ascot. And put that side by side with the slums of Manila or Mumbai. Or Africa or Brazil. Or of what is today happening in Myanmar. It's a bit too much for me. And neither do I enjoy any form of betting or gambling. I'm very straight and square in that way. Everything I do or earn has to be the fruit of my own work.

Of course I do appreciate the incredibly beautiful combination of strength and elegance that is a horse at full gallop. And I can understand why Edgar Degas went to Longchamp near Paris to paint horses. But there is also a darker side. Cruelties that are reminiscent of gladiator fights. Race horses are trained and driven by humans for the satisfaction of humans. Hence they are bred for speed and lightness. So while they are incredibly fast, their bones are also extremely fragile. They break all too easily. And when a horse breaks a leg or ankle when going at 40 mph (or 65 kph), because it will not heal there is no option other than euthanizing it — “putting it down” or “putting it to sleep” right then and there, in front of everyone, wherever it may have fallen in the middle of the track. Meanwhile thousands will be cheering the winner and his mount.

Did I say “his”? Yes, but this, at least, has been changing, and changing rather quickly, too, over the last few decades. Indeed, horse riding (binicilik) in all its forms, whether it is flat racing, steeplechasing, show jumping, dressage, or eventing (which is a combination of the last three), is one major sport where women can and do compete together with men because their physical differences do not matter — since it is the horse that is doing most of the work, Hence it becomes a matter of experience and sensitivity to the horse under you, and when it comes to sensitivity you might even

say that women have the advantage. Still, it is a probabilistic game, a matter of percentages. There have been far more men than women in the saddle, and hence the winner's circle has also been occupied by men most of the time.

Steeplechasing, that is to say riding horses around a flat race course but also over a number of hurdles or jumps, is characteristically English and Irish because it has grown out of the Medieval nobility's habit of fox-hunting in hills and forests, where you had to clear natural obstacles all the time. The Grand National is held annually at Aintree Racecourse in Liverpool. It is brutally long and brutally hard: horses have to run 6.907 km and jump 30 fences, which are higher than any other steeplechase races. Hence it is regarded as "the ultimate test of horse and rider." Woman jockeys have been allowed to compete since 1977, though even that step was opposed by male conservatives. Yet they have been getting closer and closer. Kate Walsh finished third in 2012. And now, in the person of Rachael Blackmore, they have won for the first time.

This upheaval also includes romance. They need something, somebody, to hold on to. They have such small lives and harmless desires that it seems absurd for them to be treated like villains. All they want is to have a home to live in, to not worry about tomorrow, to be able to make plans for just one week — and to be able to love someone without the fear of being inconstant due to camps or imprisonment, to be able to come home and find their loved ones safe and sound, to be able to think of having a baby, of having ordinary family nights filled with small talk, laughter and champagne. Instead, in Flotsam Ruth and Kern come to a point where they have to rent a room at a brothel just to sleep safely. They are in their bed next to each other, homesick and downcast, but the couple in the next room are loudly making love. It is a striking contrast.

Or consider this conversation, in *Arch of Triumph*, between Ravic and Joan, where Joan is attempting to leave and Ravic begs for togetherness out of a very sweet and innocent urge: one more night to shoulder her sleeping head:

Ravic put his glass down. “You know you would leave me again — tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, sometime —” he said. Joan lowered her head. “Yes.” “And if you returned — you know you would always go again —” “Yes.” She raised her face. It was flooded with tears. “What is it, Ravic? What is it?” “I don’t know either.” He smiled. “Sometimes love is not very gay, is it?” “No.” She looked at him. “Why is it this way with us, Ravic?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know that either, Joan. Maybe because we have nothing left to hold onto. Before, one had many things — security, background, faith, aims — all of them friendly railings to which we could hold when love shook us. Nowadays we don’t have anything — at best a little despair, a little courage, and otherwise strangeness within and without. Then if love is in, it is like a torch on dry straw. One doesn’t have anything but love — that makes it different — wilder, more important, and more destructive.”

Also significant in this regard is how men behave with regard to their beloveds. This is yet another common point, which may come from Eric Maria Remarque’s own personality. They are gentle and protective but not superior. Both Ravic and Kern are loyal to their loved ones even when they are in brothels or similar places from time to time. In fact we never witness promiscuous masculinity or physical pleasure, even though it might serve as a great defence mechanism for men in times of trouble. It is important for men to feel potent and in control, and to seek a relationship in which they can dominate women who they perceive to be weaker; hence they tend to fall into the trap of becoming less humane, less empathetic and more narcissistic. I will turn again to the brothel scene, which was really remarkable to me because while we get a sense of “only and only flesh” kind of uncleanness from the sounds of love-making next door, we don’t see it affecting Kern in any way. Instead of being led into his own sexual fantasies, he simply hugs Ruth and dreams of a better tomorrow. Also when Ravic understands that Joan is leaving, all he wants is “one more night” to see her sleeping on his shoulder. No feeling of oppressive anger at a woman because she is leaving; no dominating sexual desires, no rigid feelings, no unhealthy defense mechanisms. It is almost feminine.

And yet, there is a difference. Arch of Triumph becomes different through Ravic. He takes his revenge against a Gestapo agent, and even though Haake has tortured Ravic himself and caused his beloved Sibylla to commit suicide, Ravic is filled with dark and heavy feelings for having killed this murderer. This kind of violence and vengeance leads me into pessimism about human life, and also colors my entire feelings for Ravic. On the other hand, with Kern I feel rather hopeful and at ease. Compared with Ravic, Kern does not even interfere violently in the fist fight that erupts around Ruth and the Jewish identity problem. He just wants to save her and leave the scene of the accident. He and Ruth are obviously facing great problems which they may never overcome, but are nevertheless likely to find a way to live for tomorrow.

Good work. This is what close reading and participation should be like.

