

# Four Horses for Tishtry Short Guide

## Four Horses for Tishtry by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

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## Overview

Four Horses for Tishtry is the story of a bright and determined girl who must work hard, risk danger, and leave her home and family to attain her ambitions. The fact that it takes place in a faraway time and place, and that her dreams involve performing in the arena with her team of trained horses, adds a twist of the exotic to this universal theme.

## About the Author

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro has said much more in print about her writing than about her life. Her writing output is substantial, with more than thirty novels published since 1976. She has written many short stories, a play, three books about an entity called Michael that were published as nonfiction, and many articles and book reviews. She is also a serious composer, with a number of musical compositions to her credit. Perhaps the best-known of Yarbro's works are the Saint-Germain novels, based on rumors about an actual nobleman in eighteenth-century France. In these novels, she has recreated the count as a vampire and has taken him through the centuries to settings that range from ancient Rome to modern times. In fact Yarbro's SaintGermain series, along with the very different vampire novels by Anne Rice, can fairly be said to have started the contemporary "revisionist vampire" subgenre.

Yarbro's vampire novels are notable for the way they explore the predicament of a tragic figure who must stay immortal in a world of mortals. They are also examples of drawing a historical setting in fine detail, so that the reader gets a feel for what it was like to live in that era. This quality is evident in *Four Horses for Tishtry* as well.

Nevertheless the author says that she writes primarily to entertain and views words as tools to be used for this purpose. She has written straight historical novels, historical fantasies, mysteries, horror tales, and other fiction which is difficult to classify. She continues to explore new corners of the imagination in each new book.

Yarbro was born in Berkeley, California, where she still lives. Like many writers, she wanted to write since early childhood, but after attending San Francisco State College she spent the years from 1963 to 1970 working as a cartographer for C. E. Erickson and Associates, a family business in which her father was involved. When it closed in 1970, she tried her hand at writing, first selling short stories and then in 1976 her first book, *Time of the Fourth Horseman*, a suspense novel. She has also worked as a counselor for mentally disturbed children, a tarot reader, and a voice teacher.

## Setting

Four Horses for Tishtry takes place in the eastern part of the Roman Empire during the reign of Nero. The story follows Tishtry and her trained horses as they travel from her home in faraway Cappadocia (eastern Turkey) into richer and more sophisticated provinces. She goes first to Apollonia, (presumably Sozopol in modern Bulgaria; there were several cities named for Apollo in this era), sails past Byzantium and down the Turkish coast to compete in Troas (the site of ancient Troy). Her second voyage takes her up the eastern shore of the Adriatic to Salonae (modern Solin, near Split), where major games were held.

Most of the novel's events occur in Photo of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro by S. Robb the great amphitheaters, their nearby stables and training grounds, and the simple quarters of the slaves who perform there. But there are also glimpses of other parts of city life. Tishtry has errands at busy quays and marketplaces. As her fortunes improve, she visits the famous Roman-style baths where soaking in the pools relieves her tension and strained muscles.

During one voyage, the ship is caught in a mighty storm. Tishtry and a deck hand work together to keep the horses safe. In this exciting episode, we also see how large animals were transported by sea, a seldom-described practice which was important in the era's economy.

Unlike many books set in imperial Roman times, the novel does not deal with famous men and events. Tishtry and all the other characters, even the wealthy Roman who buys her, are obscure people. Leading their own lives outside the notice of history, they nevertheless enjoy the blessings of a rich and far-flung empire. And their emotions and goals are not very different from our own.



# Social Sensitivity

The Roman Empire was regarded as the pinnacle of civilization not only by its inhabitants, but by people living in later centuries as well. Many of our own institutions are derived from Roman thought and governmental structure. Yet the Romans' society took for granted two customs that strike us as immoral: slavery and bloody contests in the arena.

Slavery is an integral part of Tishtry's story. The more deadly gladiatorial games are never shown in the book, but their close proximity is obvious: Each amphitheater has two sets of gates, the Gates of Life and the Gates of Death. Some parents or teachers may wish to supplement the relatively benign picture which the novel presents with a discussion of the darker sides of slavery and the arena.

Slavery was universal in the ancient world. Roman slaves worked at almost the whole range of jobs. Some lived and worked under brutal conditions as galley slaves or quarry workers. Many were agricultural workers or domestic servants. And a considerable number of slaves worked in occupations that are professional and highly regarded in our own society: as physicians, tutors, estate managers, and similarly responsible professions. Education or skills in a slave were highly prized; there were no laws against teaching a slave to read and write as there were in the pre-Civil War South. The Romans believed people were slaves because of the vagaries of fate, not because they belonged to a supposedly "inferior" race. Some slave rights were protected under law. As indicated in the novel, most slaves were entitled to keep part of any cash they earned and to buy their freedom if they could. Masters were also obligated to provide security for their slaves in case of illness or old age.

All this is not to put a benign face on slavery. At best, slaves had little dignity or freedom, and many lived under terrible conditions. The Romans knew this and greatly feared slave revolts, punishing rebellious slaves in ways designed to intimidate others, such as public crucifixion. But it may put into perspective the fact that some slaves, like Tishtry and her family, were able to live reasonably full lives.

The best that can be said for the gladiatorial games is that many educated Romans deplored them. At the same time, civic leaders and ambitious politicians felt it necessary to sponsor spectacular games to please and entertain the local citizens. As Tishtry's story shows, along with the fights, the Romans often watched a variety of less lethal contests in the arenas. There were also many other amusements available: dramas, parades and religious ceremonies, street-side entertainers, and banquets.

Four Horses for Tishtry is unusual in having a female protagonist. Very few other novels set in Roman times have a woman or a girl as the central character. Of those that do, most are either romances or books based on biblical themes. Yarbro deserves much credit for writing a different sort of story here.

## Literary Qualities

Tishtry's story is told from her point of view throughout the novel. This has the dual advantage of helping readers to identify with her, and of building suspense as treachery unfolds, only to be recognized by Tishtry and the reader at the last moment. Both dialogue and narrative have a smooth, colloquial style.

The author uses Latin forms for place names and features of the games, even when an English equivalent exists. (For example, tunica for tunic; Roma for Rome.) The Latin plural forms, in particular, sometimes create a jarring effect. Specialized terms from the games and other Roman customs are defined in a glossary. However, there is no map. A map showing Tishtry's travels or just the eastern Roman empire would have been a useful addition.

Although there are many novels set in the Ancient Roman world, few use a similar setting or protagonist. The adult novels *Ben Hur* by Lew Wallace (1880) and *Spartacus* by Howard Fast (1951) show dramatic scenes at the public games: the famous chariot race in the former, and gladiatorial combat in the latter. Both of these episodes deal with a different and much darker side of the public games than that presented *Four Horses for Tishtry*.

*Four Horses for Tishtry* also bears some resemblance to coming-of-age novels. Its young protagonist learns about the dangers and deceptions of the wider world when she leaves her provincial home. Tishtry's bittersweet triumph at the book's end marks a turning point in her life, but the reader may suspect it is just the first of many more tests and adventures that await her on the road to Rome.



## Themes and Characters

The novel follows Tishtry's adventures during a crucial year or so of her life. As the book opens she is just turning thirteen. Although she and her family are slaves, their situation is unusual. The family has trained show horses for several generations. They are owned by a kindly if indecisive Cappadocian horse breeder named Chimbue Barantosz, who has encouraged Tishtry to become the best trick rider she can possibly be. Most of her time is spent practicing and training her horses and working out new tricks.

Although Tishtry might seem relatively fortunate, she has the burden of responsibility for other people's hopes.

Her owner depends on the army's unpredictable purchases of his horses for most of his income; he has invested in Tishtry's training in the expectation that she will earn his money back, and more. Her father is hoping she will be so successful that she can buy the whole family's freedom with the five percent of her winnings she is allowed to keep. Her brother, also a trick rider, was killed in the arena several years ago. And Tishtry owns her own horses; it is primarily up to her to keep them in prime condition. All these claims create the book's first theme, that one's responsibilities to others, whether sought or not, must be carried out. The contrast between good and bad slave owners in the book reinforces this theme.

But Tishtry herself desires success in the arena. She works long hours with her horses every day. As her dream of performing in larger cities and finer shows becomes reality, she invents and practices new, more daring tricks for her presentations. At the same time she never forgets her father's warnings that her brother's recklessness was responsible for his death. This results in another theme, somewhat unusual in a tale of quest and adventure: that determination, practice, and caution will ultimately win one's heart's desire. It works for Tishtry all the way through the book. By proceeding cautiously she avoids serious injury in an innately dangerous setting. In the book's climactic race, she is able to prevent her chariot's collapse from becoming a total disaster because she dances across her horses' backs in a trick learned through long practice, and cuts their harness lines.

As she moves into the larger world she discovers that determination and caution are also necessary outside the arena. She is sold more than once to other hopeful investors. Each time, she at first speaks up boldly about what type of support she expects from grooms and owners, then has to adopt a more cautious tone as she finds that other masters are less indulgent than Chimbue towards an outspoken slave.

A counterpoint to her caution is represented by her next-to-last master, Calpurnius, who recklessly bets the last of his money against her just before selling her, counting on Tishtry's obedience to throw the race. Calpurnius's gamble ruins his reputation as well as his finances.





The other theme woven through the book is loneliness. In this motif other, supporting characters play important roles. Tishtry has to leave her family and familiar surroundings to compete in the wider world. Her sister, Macon, who makes the horses' harness tack, accompanies her to Apollonia. They share each other's joys and worries there even more than at home. But when Atadillius, the Master of the Bestiarii, decides not only to purchase and free Macon, but to marry her, both young women know Macon's good fortune means they must part. Tishtry becomes fond of Holik, the kindly young man who helps her with the horses during the storm, but then they must go their separate ways. Holik reflects her own gloom when he says that permanent friendships are not for slaves. At the end of the book she has to say goodbye to Himic, a retired charioteer and trainer she has come to trust. Only the promise that Himic's old friend Lykos will be working with her saves her from feeling desolate, even when she has earned enough to free her family. She knows that in aiming to perform at the Circus Maximus in Rome, she has consigned herself to more loneliness along with rigorous training.

It is not clear in the book how much Tishtry's slave status accounts for her loneliness or how much of it would be her lot anyway, in view of her ambitions and the travel they require. Perhaps it shows the essential loneliness of human life as well, a theme which is present in the author's Saint Germain novels for adults.

Strangely, the most memorable character in the book aside from Tishtry is her first master, the dithering Chimbue Barantosz. He means well, but he is easily spooked, like Tishtry's horses.

He is a man of his word, and he is able to arrange things so Tishtry can carry out her ambitions even when he no longer owns her. His character is a welcome change from the cruel centurions and corrupt businessmen who populate so many novels of Roman life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Tishtry has always been told she has to be an excellent trick rider, so she can earn the money to buy her family's freedom. Do you think this responsibility helped her to be a better performer?

Was it unfair to expect so much from a girl of thirteen? How much should parents push a talented son or daughter?

2. Although the ancient world had no telephones or motorized vehicles, it did have fairly reliable transportation by land and sea. Do you think Tishtry's sadness each time she had to leave someone she liked was because she might never see them again? Or did she have other reasons, such as knowing she had not dared to get too close even before they parted? Will Tishtry ever be able to make lasting friendships, and even to settle down and marry? What would it take to make this happen? What would it take to make her happy if it happened?

3. Does *Four Horses for Tishtry* give too pleasant a picture of slavery in Roman times? Should it have shown more about the dangers Tishtry was faced with, both in her performances and in trying to please her masters?

Give reasons for your answers.

4. Like the Romans, we watch a great deal of violence and killing in our entertainment. Unlike the Romans' shows, the violence in our television shows and movies is not real; people do not actually get killed. How important is this difference? Do you think it is natural for people to enjoy this type of entertainment?

5. Tishtry spends long hours practicing with her horses. At the end of a workout or journey, she tends to their needs before she does anything for herself. In what ways does this much care and responsibility help her?

## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read some more about the contests and shows held in the Roman amphitheaters. Write an episode describing another kind of act as it might be performed there. Be sure to show what the participants are feeling as well as what they are doing.
2. Copy or draw a map and trace Tishtry's travels on it. Indicate approximately where the various events in the book took place, such as the storm at sea and the race at Solinae.
3. Read about Roman slaves' lives in some history or reference books. List at least fifteen different types of work that slaves often did. Explain why so many more jobs were open to slaves in the ancient world than in the American Old South.
4. Tishtry's horses perform in the arena, but horses were used in many other ways as well in her time. Report some of these other uses. Tishtry's home province was close to the steppes whose inhabitants made many innovations in horsemanship, such as the stirrup. How might this have influenced her family's, and Chimbue Barantosz's, way of life?
5. Draw a map of an amphitheater and the surrounding area where the performers and animals trained and lived. Or draw a sketch of a street in a Roman city, or of a quay where ships unload their cargoes from all over the Roman Empire. Label the various objects and features.
6. Read another book about a young man or woman in the Roman world of the first century A.D. Some titles are Yarbro's *Locadio's Apprentice* (1984); Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1961) and *Frontier Wolf* (1980); Henry Winterfeld's *Mystery of the Roman Ransom* (1971); and Barbara Wood's *Soul Flame* (1987). Write a report comparing the two books. What do their main characters have in common? Is this because they belong to the same culture? How do the main characters and their problems differ? How much difference is because they are individual people with different interests and talents? How much is because they are in different situations?

## For Further Reference

Liversidge, Joan. *Everyday Life in the Roman Empire*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976. This excellent survey contains information on practically every aspect of life in the era: trades, travel, technology and material culture, religion, and town life in various regions. A section on theaters and amphitheaters explains the history of the games, as well as describing many other entertainments of the time. A map, a chronology of the Roman emperors, a location-list of Roman provinces, and an extensive bibliography add to its usefulness.

Pauli, David N. Review. *Library Journal* (May 1985): 106. Short and favorable review which points out the coming-of-age aspects of Tishtry's story.

Smith, Gary E. *Guide to the Roman Amphitheaters*. Azusa, CA: Gary E. Smith, 1984. Probably too specialized to be useful to most young readers, this book is nevertheless an essential source for anyone studying the amphitheaters of the ancient world.

Several hundred sites are listed and briefly described, along with locations, and photographs of some of the ruins.

"Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series*.

Vol. 25. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 499-502. This bio-bibliographical article focuses on Yarbro's work. All her writings in various genres up to its date of compilation are cited; these include an extensive list of novels of historical fantasy, mystery, and horror, as well as many short stories and some books published as nonfiction. In a long quotation, the author talks about her approach to writing, and distances herself from the grim outlook which characterizes some of her novels.

## Related Titles

Yarbro has written another young adult novel set in the Roman Empire.

Locadio's Apprentice is the story of a young man of Pompeii and his efforts to become a physician. There are no adaptations in other media.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996