Seabiscuit: an American Legend Study Guide

Seabiscuit: an American Legend by Laura Hillenbrand

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Seabiscuit: An American Legend is the first book-length work published by Laura Hillenbrand. While suffering from a debilitating illness, Hillenbrand wrote short pieces and feature articles for a variety of equestrian magazines before becoming captivated by the tale of Seabiscuit and the men who believed in him. She found that his story was a triumph over adversity that mimicked her personal predicament in many ways. Though nonfiction, the book pushes the reader forward using narrative elements more commonly found in fiction novels, as lives and situations intersect and diverge. The plethora of detail is a testament to Hillenbrand's thorough research.

The book takes place between 1929 and 1940, a period during which the world changed dramatically. In the United States, a stock market crash heralded the decade-long Great Depression that mired the country in despair and hopelessness. During those dark days, average citizens clung to even the smallest diversion that afforded hope or escape from their daily lives. An unlikely hero—a short, squat, and seemingly unfit racehorse—offered one such distraction, becoming a media darling and capturing the national imagination. In fact, in 1938, as the word teetered on the brink of World War II, the majority of news coverage was devoted not to politicians or warmongers but to one knobby-kneed horse nearly past his prime. Seabiscuit became a cultural icon, according to Hillenbrand, and offered hope to a generation of disadvantaged people: if he could overcome adversity and become a winner, so could they. From his initial outings in the dust of Tijuana to his grudge match with Triple Crown winner War Admiral, Seabiscuit epitomized the rags-to-riches American dream for millions of impoverished citizens who wondered whether the dream was still possible.

Although the horse became the focus of public attention, it was the convergence of the unique men contributing to Seabiscuit's success that piqued the interest of the media reports of the day, just as it is for Hillenbrand's book. The unlikely matching of a self-made business tycoon, a taciturn cowboy horse trainer, and a gangly, half-blind jockey rounded out the quartet that captured the hearts of an eager public, as well as the imagination of Hillenbrand.

Author Biography

Laura Hillenbrand was born in 1967 in Fairfax, Virginia. Her parents separated when she was a child, leaving her mother, a psychologist, to raise four children. A bright and athletic young woman, Hillenbrand was attending Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, getting good grades and planning to spend her junior year at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, when she became suddenly and inexplicably ill. Thinking it was merely a case of food poisoning, she ignored the symptoms and waited for the illness to go away. Instead, the illness worsened, and other symptoms arose. These eventually became so debilitating that Hillenbrand was bedridden; ultimately, she dropped out of school and returned to her family in Fairfax.

She visited many doctors, who variously diagnosed her as suffering from the Epstein-Barr virus, bulimia, and nothing at all. Finally, at Johns Hopkins, Hillenbrand was told she was suffering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome—a disease often referred to as the "yuppie flu" for its prevalence among upwardly mobile overachievers. Even though she had a diagnosis, there was no known cure; as the symptoms worsened, she was essentially bedridden from August 1991 until the summer of 1994.

In an effort to find something to fill her days, Hillenbrand parlayed her interest in horses and horseracing into short magazine articles, which were published in periodicals such as *Equus* and *Turf Flash*. During her research, Hillenbrand stumbled across a name from her childhood: Seabiscuit. Her favorite book as a child was *Come on Seabiscuit!* by Ralph Moody (1963), about an underdog horse who made it big. Intrigued, she collected everything she could find on the horse and its jockey to construct an article for *American Heritage*. She soon realized she had entirely too much information for a short article and decided to write a book instead.

Seabiscuit: An American Legend was published by Random House in 2001. Almost from the outset, the book took the nation by storm, topping the bestseller lists and staying there for weeks. Among other accolades, the work was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, winner of the 2001 William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award, and received "best of the year" honors from such notable publications as *New York* magazine, the *Economist*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. Because of the success of the book and the sentimental nature of the subject matter, the bid for film rights came quickly. The film was produced under Hillenbrand's close supervision, even though her illness kept her far from Hollywood. The film, adapted for the screen and directed by Gary Ross, was released in 2003.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: the Day of the Horse Is Past

In 1903, Charles Howard leaves his home and family in New York and travels west to seek his livelihood. Arriving in San Francisco with twenty-one cents in his pocket, he uses his charm to borrow enough money to open a small bicycle repair shop. Soon, locals who had been foolish enough to purchase a new contraption—the horseless carriage, or automobile—appear at Howard's door, seeking his advice on repairing the machines. A visionary, Howard notes the advantages the steel beasts have over the current mode of transport, the horse. He travels to Detroit to convince Will Durant, the chief of Buick and future founder of General Motors, to give him the company's automobile sales franchise for San Francisco.

On April 18, 1906, the San Francisco earthquake, registering 7.8 on the Richter scale, alters the course of Howard's life. The earthquake causes hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries, fractured streets and roads, and major fires. Horses and people flee. Snatching opportunity in the midst of adversity, Howard offers his previously useless Buicks as ambulances and transport, proving the worth of the automobile and eventually creating enormous wealth for himself.

Chapter 2: the Lone Plainsman

Tom Smith is an archetypal cowboy, an original against which all others are compared. He is a man of the open plains who drifts from job to job and is more comfortable in the company of horses than he is with humans. While working for the garrulous and gargantuan Charlie Irwin, owner of the largest racing stable in the country, Smith learns that the horse with the fastest breakout from the starting gate is usually the winner. Irwin notes Smith's way with animals and makes him a trainer. After Irwin's untimely death in an automobile accident, Smith drifts from job to job until he is introduced to Charles Howard.

Chapter 3: Mean, Restive and Ragged

Howard wants to increase his thoroughbred holdings, but he is more intrigued by spirit than by breeding. In 1936, he sends Smith east to scout for horses. After attending several auctions and discounting numerous possibilities, on June 29, Smith is standing by a paddock when the perfect horse finds him. An unlikely descendant of champion lines, the horse surveys the trainer with haughty indifference, and Smith knows he has found his winner. The horse has attitude.

The horse's current trainer, James Fitzsimmons, is, according to Hillenbrand, "the only man whom Smith ever regarded with awe." Fitzsimmons had trained Hard Tack, a Triple Crown winner and the son of the legendary Man o' War. Consequently, he had inherited

Hard Tack's sons, Grog and Seabiscuit, both of which had little resemblance to their sire. Fitzsimmons notes the two things Seabiscuit did best were sleep and eat; his assessment of the animal's ability is that he is lazy. But Smith, and later Howard, see potential. The sale is finalized and they begin searching for a jockey.

Chapter 4: the Cougar and the Iceman

The candidate for jockey is almost as unlikely as the steed. Johnny Pollard, dubbed Red for his carrot-colored hair, is an oversized intellectual who, Hillenbrand remarks, "is one of the worst riders anywhere." After a rocky start, Pollard signs on as an apprentice jockey or "bug boy," so named for the asterisk beside a novice's listings in the race program that looks like a bug. During this time, most bug boys are young runaways or orphans who are overworked, barely paid, and bulimic in order to maintain weight requirements. They are frequently traded, sold, or lost in card games without their consent. As Pollard's skill with difficult mounts becomes obvious, his lack of skill as a rider is overlooked and he is viewed as a specialist who could ride any steed offered to him. In addition to a growing reputation, Pollard gains his first real friend, veteran jockey George Woolf, nicknamed the Iceman for his unflappable style.

Chapter 5: a Boot on One Foot, a Toe Tag on the Other

The life of a jockey in these early days of racing is not an ideal one. Their lives are chained to making a successful impost, the weight each horse is permitted to carry in a particular contest. From purgatives to laxatives to starvation, the young men fight to stay thin while they are often housed in the corner of the horse stall. These conditions produce not only malnutrition and dehydration but also lead to weakened immune systems and a tendency to be accident-prone. In addition to their physical condition, the riders live in constant fear of being thrown from or pinned under their huge mounts. Yet, through it all, they maintain an illusion of invincibility.

Chapter 6: Light and Shadow

In 1928, Pollard and Woolf parlay their friendship into racetrack legend. With Pollard as the tamer of wild beasts and Woolf as the charismatic media darling, they become racetrack celebrities in Mexico. As their reputation in the Tijuana circuit grows, however, so do their personal problems. For Woolf, a diagnosis of Type I diabetes produces bouts of sleepiness and a tendency to gain weight; for Pollard, a small rock or clump of dirt launched into his eye by a passing horse results in permanent blindness on his right side. Keeping their conditions secret, the jockeys continue to ride.

The racing culture in Tijuana crumbles in 1934 when Mexico bans gambling. By then, however, California has reinstituted pari-mutuel betting, which offers the state a percentage of the take, and has sanctioned the opening of Santa Anita Park. After returning to the United States, the friends part ways; Woolf 's career grows, resulting in better and faster mounts, while Pollard backslides into oblivion. Two years later, Pollard,

destitute and broken, wanders into Detroit, begging for jobs. Trainers laugh him away as he wanders from stall to stall until Tom Smith extends his hand and introduces the jockey to Seabiscuit.

Chapter 7: Learn Your Horse

When horses are as skittish and temperamental as Seabiscuit, one trick of the trade is to give them a companion. The first stall mate Smith tries is a nanny goat, which Seabiscuit launches over the stall door. The second is a lead horse called Pumpkin that becomes the thoroughbred's constant companion. Smith determines that most of the horse's reactionary behavior is due to previous ill treatment, and decides he can produce results by getting the steed to trust him and the jockey.

Seabiscuit is limited by not only his physicality and his temperament but also by his age. Because the Triple Crown—the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness Stakes, and the Belmont Stakes—is limited to entries three years or younger, the four-year-old thoroughbred does not qualify. However, the horse proves himself at smaller venues from east to west, and even earns a private sleeping car on the train that transports him.

Chapter 8: Fifteen Strides

In 1936, Smith and Howard decide it is time to unleash their well-kept secret; they enter Seabiscuit in the Bay Bridge Handicap at Bay Meadows. The horse quickly reduces the field, shocking spectators and reporters alike. By December, Howard and Smith know the horse is ready for the hundred-thousand-dollar Santa Anita match. There he must face the formidable Rosemont, the thoroughbred considered the best horse in the world by most racing enthusiasts on the West Coast. Unfortunately, at a decisive moment in the contest, both Pollard and Seabiscuit lose momentum, producing a photo finish between the two horses. The final decision goes to Rosemont.

Chapter 9: Gravity

In 1937, the United States is in the throes of economic and social upheaval. Unemployment and poverty are rampant and citizens seek any means of escape from the reality of their dreary lives. The combination of legalized track betting and the availability of affordable radios offer that escape. Radio reporters prowl the tracks, seeking to scoop their peers, and Smith, always circumspect, makes a game out of eluding them by exercising Seabiscuit at different venues or times. When he is aware newsmen are around, he substitutes Grog, the horse's twin brother, to foil the persistent reporters.

Chapter 10: War Admiral

Owned by racing aficionado Samuel Riddle, who also owned his sire Man o' War, War Admiral is the pride of East Coast racing. A Triple Crown winner, War Admiral is considered the fleetest mount on the circuit. Temperamental and eager as the others in his line, the horse is allowed to start outside the starting gates because his jockey, Charley Kurtsinger, cannot keep him from crashing through the boards. Consequently, War Admiral is the horse to beat.

To secure Seabiscuit's national reputation, Howard enters him in the Brooklyn Handicap, where he finally demolishes Rosemont. From there the team moves on to Massachusetts, where Seabiscuit sweeps the field; he is followed closely by a young filly named Fair Knightess. Howard is so impressed by her energy that he purchases the filly—not only to race but to breed with Seabiscuit after his retirement.

Racing fans, urged on by the press, clamor for a match between Seabiscuit and War Admiral. Both horses are entered in the Washington Handicap, but the track is wet; Seabiscuit is scratched, or removed from competition, to prevent injury from racing on the muddy track. The supporters of War Admiral chide that Howard is afraid to pit Seabiscuit against the champion, pushing the man harder to arrange a one-on-one match. Despite a lucrative offer, Riddle refuses to match the horses.

Chapter 11: No Pollard, No Seabiscuit

In December 1937, Pollard, riding the colt Exhibit, accidentally brushes another horse, and the horse's rider complains to officials. Although Pollard was not at fault, the stewards, the track racing commission, suspend him from the venue and recommend he be suspended from all California tracks for the rest of the year. The news is particularly shocking since Seabiscuit is scheduled to meet War Admiral in March, only three months away. To add insult to injury, sportswriters select War Admiral as Horse of the Year. The state racing board upholds Pollard's suspension, and Howard reacts by pulling his entries in all state races until the jockey is reinstated.

By February, Pollard is back in the saddle and Seabiscuit is entered in the San Carlos Handicap; once again, the track conditions are muddy and the horse is scratched. Pollard opts to ride Fair Knightess, which proves to be a fatal error. Mid-track, the filly loses her footing and goes down with another horse directly behind her. The other horse plows into Fair Knightess, flipping her massive frame on top of Pollard. The left side of Pollard's chest is crushed, and he is told he cannot ride for at least a year.

The Santa Anita, also known as "the hundred grander," is just around the corner, and although Howard wants to pull the horse from the race, Pollard will not hear of it. He recommends that Howard hire his old friend, George Woolf, for the mount.

Chapter 12: All I Need Is Luck

Adding to Pollard's bad luck, Smith becomes ill and there are rumors of a kidnapping plot against George Woolf. Despite it all, Seabiscuit appears at Santa Anita to compete once again for the title of greatest money winner of all time. During the race, however, the horse Count Atlas pulls alongside, pushing Seabiscuit toward the wall. The act is an obvious foul, but the horses are out of view of the reviewing stand, so the foul goes undocumented. As Woolf pulls away, his first reaction is to whack the other jockey with his whip. It works, and regaining his competitive spirit, Seabiscuit dives down the track, neck and neck with another contender, Stagehand. The horses hit the finish line at exactly the same time; once again, Seabiscuit is denied the photo finish.

Chapter 13: Hardball

After the race, a group of reporters petition to have the race video reviewed to establish the foul committed against Seabiscuit. Although the tape reveals the foul, it also reveals Woolf striking the other jockey. Woolf is suspended.

While turmoil swirls around the Seabiscuit camp, negotiations with Riddle continue. The bout between Seabiscuit and War Admiral is finally set for Memorial Day, with a $100,000 purse. Only one condition remains. Howard wants Pollard to ride; if the jockey is not physically up to task, the event will be canceled.

Chapter 14: the Wise We Boys

Since War Admiral starts outside the gate, Smith has to train Seabiscuit to do the same. Using the classical conditioning of Pavlov, who trained dogs to salivate whenever they heard a bell in anticipation of food, Smith teaches Seabiscuit to react to the starting alarm. Once again, the trainer plays hide-and-seek with the eager press to keep his training tactics secret. Then, the unforeseeable strikes: Seabiscuit develops soreness in his knee. Smith cables Howard to come immediately. Once again, the race is called off. In June, Riddle and War Admiral head for Suffolk Downs in Massachusetts, and Howard and Smith follow.

Chapter 15: Fortune's Fool

Shortly before the Massachusetts match, Pollard runs into an old friend from his Tijuana days, Bert Blume, who is in a bind because his exercise rider has failed to show up. As a favor, Pollard offers to take his friend's horse for a workout.

Things go smoothly until something spooks the horse, who crashes through the rail and gallops off toward the barn with Pollard still astride. With momentum carrying him, the horse skids and slams into the side of the barn. By the time horse and rider come to a stop, Pollard has damaged most of his right leg below the knee.

Hospitalized and told he will never ride again, Pollard buries his pain and disappointment in alcohol. Woolf is summoned to ride Seabiscuit. Just as it appears that the thoroughbred will at last meet War Admiral, Seabiscuit develops pain in his leg and has to be scratched once again.

Chapter 16: I Know My Horse

Back in California, Smith nurtures Seabiscuit and readies him for Hollywood Park. Track officials want to send veterinarians to examine the horse for soundness. Smith refuses, stating he knows the horse, and he alone will make that decision. Seabiscuit races, and takes home he gold trophy.

Chapter 17: the Dingbustingest Contest You Ever Clapped an Eye on

The eldest Howard son, Lin, creates a racing partnership with singer and actor Bing Crosby, part owner of the new Del Mar racetrack near San Diego. To promote the track, the younger Howard pits his best racer, Ligaroti, against Seabiscuit. During the match, Ligaroti lags behind until his jockey pulls alongside Seabiscuit and grabs the blanket under the horse's saddle. Woolf and his mount literally drag the other horse and rider along. At the finish line, Woolf knows he needs to act; he reaches for Ligaroti's bridle, raising the horse's head so that Seabiscuit goes under the wire first. There is an inquiry, and Woolf is again in danger of suspension.

Chapter 18: Deal

As Woolf faces suspension, the injured Pollard falls in love with his nurse, Agnes Condon. At the same time, Alfred Vanderbilt, a friend of Howard's and owner of the Pimlico racetrack, attempts to renegotiate with Riddle for a two-horse match between War Admiral and Seabiscuit. Riddle finally agrees, but only if both owners put up a $5,000 forfeit fee in case the match is called off again.

The race is the talk of the country, lauded as East versus West, and is scheduled to take place at Pimlico in Maryland. It rains for days before the event. Knowing that this is the last chance for Seabiscuit to race War Admiral, Woolf memorizes the track and discovers a hard-packed path that would be perfect for Seabiscuit's footing.

Chapter 19: the Second Civil War

On November 1, 1938, before a sold-out crowd, Seabiscuit and War Admiral face off. When the dust clears, Seabiscuit is declared the winner, finishing three lengths in front of War Admiral. In addition to winning, the horse breaks a Pimlico track record that was set shortly after the Civil War. With such a decisive victory, Seabiscuit is voted Horse of

the Year. War Admiral runs only two more races before retirement. Everyone asks Howard if the same will happen to Seabiscuit, but Howard wants to try again to win the Santa Anita.

Chapter 20: All Four of His Legs Are Broken

When Pollard is released from the hospital—bankrupt, homeless, and unemployable—Howard invites him to move into his home. In the meantime, Woolf rides in the Santa Anita; during the match, Seabiscuit stumbles, rupturing a suspensory ligament. However, the Howard stable does finally win the coveted prize at Santa Anita, but with a new purchase, Kayak II, instead of Seabiscuit.

Chapter 21: a Long, Hard Pull

Once he is settled on the ranch, Pollard sends for Agnes and they are married. Seabiscuit comes home to recuperate and is placed in Pollard's care as Smith travels east with Kayak II. Over time, both Pollard and the thoroughbred begin to heal. They both make remarkable recoveries, and in the fall of 1939, the Howard team once again leaves for Santa Anita.

Chapter 22: Four Good Legs Between Us

With three months to prepare for the race, Seabiscuit once again becomes the focus of an inquisitive media and the talk of the nation. Merchandising stands spring up, and the horse's likeness is everywhere. Pollard rigs a brace for his still-injured leg; he is allowed to exercise the horse, but he wants more. If Seabiscuit is ready to win the race that has long eluded him, Pollard wants to be on his back in the winner's circle. Howard is less enthusiastic; the doctors have already emphasized that another break will cripple Pollard for life.

Chapter 23: One Hundred Grand

Still indecisive about who will ride, Howard consults Woolf. The jockey thinks it would be better to break a man's legs than his heart. On the day of the race, Pollard is astride Seabiscuit in front of the second-largest crowd ever to attend a horse race. Not only does the stallion finally win the elusive prize, he sets a new track record for speed and a new world record for monies won.

Epilogue

In 1940, Seabiscuit retires from the track and sires a foal named First Biscuit. Away from competition, Seabiscuit becomes restless; Howard decides to harness the energy

by teaching the horse to herd cattle. In 1947, Seabiscuit passes away and is buried in a secret place on the Howard ranch.

As for the others, Woolf garners a reputation as the best rider in the country. Soon after, his health deteriorates, and he suffers a fatal accident while racing at Santa Anita. After having to leave his post with Howard while recovering from back surgery, Smith leaves the west to train horses for cosmetics mogul Elizabeth Arden Graham; he dies in 1957. Pollard, ravaged with illness and alcoholism, leaves racing, only to return years later with less and less success. He passes away in 1981; his wife, Agnes, succumbs to cancer only two weeks later.

Characters

James Fitzsimmons

James Fitzsimmons grows up in Brooklyn and spends a great deal of time at the Coney Island Jockey Club. By age ten, he is working odd jobs at the track and trying his hand at being a jockey. Deciding that aspect of the sport is not for him, Sunny Jim, as he is called at the track, carves his place in the industry as the best conditioner of thoroughbreds in the country. Fitzsimmons trains Hard Tack, the roguish-tempered father, of Seabiscuit until it becomes evident that Hard Tack is literally untrainable. His owner, Gladys Phipps, offers him at stud, but when no one accepts her free offer, she mates the horse with one of her own mares. The result is Seabiscuit and Grog, neither of which have their father's temperament or their champion grandfather's zeal.

By virtue of his work with the lineage, Fitzsimmons is entrusted with the training of the offspring. After determining that Seabiscuit has speed but is lazy, Fitzsimmons suspends his no-whip rule, literally lashing the horse into submission. The method succeeds and Seabiscuit is raced constantly, tripling a normal workload.

Charles Howard

The ultimate owner of Seabiscuit, Charles Howard is handsome and well-mannered with a charismatic energy that draws people to him. Over six feet tall, he is trained as a military horseman and tries to serve in the Spanish American War, but he contracts dysentery and has to remain in camp. Howard's father was a scandalous playboy who abandoned his family, so Howard is raised by his mother in a structured, upper-class environment. According to Hillenbrand, Howard "made himself into his father's antithesis,".

Stifled by life on the East Coast, at age twenty-six, Howard leaves his wife, Fannie May, and two young sons in New York while he journeys to San Francisco to seek his fortune. Arriving with only a few pennies in his pocket, he wheedles enough money to open a bicycle repair shop. Since the automobile is a novel invention and no auto mechanics are available, owners of automobiles begin bringing them to Howard for repair; it is not long before automobiles are part of his vision for the future. Thusly inspired, he goes to Detroit to visit Will Durant, the founder of Buick and General Motors (GM), and convinces the man to give him the San Francisco dealership for his automobiles. After Howard uses the vehicles as emergency transport following the San Francisco earthquake, public opinion of the "horseless carriage" begins to shift favorably.

To make himself more publicly and promotionally visible, Howard begins racing cars. This increases his sales and, in 1909, he is awarded sole GM distributorship for all of the western states. As his fortune grows, he engages in philanthropic endeavors and purchases a ranch, Ridgewood, for his wife and four sons. The turning point in Howard's

life is the death of his fifteen-year-old son, Frankie, in a car accident. After Frankie dies, his somewhat unstable marriage deteriorates and he begins frequenting Tijuana, Mexico, where a growing market caters to U.S. citizens escaping the Prohibition of the 1920s. In 1929, Howard meets Marcela Zabala, the sister of his daughter-in-law, and despite their age difference, the two are married. Marcela is a veteran horsewoman, and with her encouragement, Howard begins purchasing racehorses. That year also marks the crash of the stock market, which may have contributed to the re-legalization of horse racing in California.

Throughout the book, Howard's encounters with others are marked by his empathy, kindness, and almost resigned acceptance of fortune's ebb and flow. He has a strong sense of public image and engages in philanthropic causes, including providing a home for Pollard, his wounded jockey. In a sense, Pollard becomes a surrogate son to Howard, replacing the son he lost. Howard is vocal and craves media attention, but under the braggadocio, he is a kind and genteel man.

Lin Howard

Charles Howard's oldest son Lin partners with Bing Crosby to create a stable of thoroughbreds and challenge his father's dominance of the circuit. His wife is Marcela Zabala's sister, and it is Lin and his wife who introduce Marcela and Charles.

Marcela Zabala Howard

Marcela, Charles Howard's second wife, is his daughter-in-law's sister. A striking brunette, the young actress and former Salinas, California, Lettuce Queen is full of grace and charm. Marcela is half Howard's age; however, they are well-matched. They share an effervescent empathy, a love of horses and the spotlight, and a zest for life.

Agnes Pollard

Agnes Pollard is Red Pollard's nurse during his convalescence after a near-fatal riding injury. Eventually, despite the vast differences in their social classes and educational levels, she becomes his wife. They have two children, Norah and John. In addition to being his long-suffering nursemaid and soul mate, Agnes understands her husband's need to pursue his profession, despite his physical catastrophes. She dies of cancer only two weeks after Red's death in 1981.

Johnny Pollard

See Red Pollard

Red Pollard

Seabiscuit's primary jockey, Johnny "Red" Pollard is an elegant and muscularly honed intellectual with bright orange hair. Born in 1910 in Edmonton, Canada, as one of six children, Pollard grows up in a wealthy home until a flood wipes out his father's brick factory and the family fortune. Although he is a bright child with a love of literature, Pollard is much too restless and adventurous to become an academic. Instead, he develops an early appreciation for the two sports that would define his life: riding horses and prizefighting. One of his brothers is a champion boxer, but Red's role in the ring is too often as a punching bag for better-equipped fighters. At fifteen, he immigrates to the United States and begins his career in the bush leagues, a no-holds-barred, unregulated, and sometimes illegal form of horse racing. Although he learns quickly, he fails to win races and is forced to use his only other athletic skill, prizefighting, to earn enough money to fend off starvation.

Rising from relative obscurity as a gangly, unlikely jockey, Red earns a reputation for working well with difficult mounts, and drifts into the lives of Howard, Smith, and Seabiscuit. It is a perfect match between man and horse until a series of freak accidents forces Pollard into convalescence, where he is told he will never ride again, and into subsequent battles with alcohol and drug addiction. However, Pollard, like the horse he rode, refuses to surrender. He creates a brace for his impaired leg and returns to the sport in spite of his disability, winning the Santa Anita Handicap riding Seabiscuit.

Samuel Riddle

Samuel Riddle is the owner of Man o'War and War Admiral, Seabiscuit's main rivals. Riddle embodies the elderly, stern, and wealthy East Coast racing establishment. Although the book has no outright villain, Riddle is depicted as an obstinate businessman and hardnosed negotiator. He is the mirrored opposite of Howard, and the two clash repeatedly throughout the book. Riddle's horse, War Admiral, is seen as Seabiscuit's primary rival by most enthusiasts of the sport.

Seabiscuit

Seabiscuit, the unlikely hero of the book, is a three-year-old mud-colored colt that brings the principal characters in the story together. Though it is not initially evident from his scruffy appearance, Seabiscuit descends from champion lines; he is the grandson of award-winning Man o'War, and the son of Hard Tack. Unlike his storied ancestors, the colt is squat, rectangular, and low to the ground with a short tail, square knees, and stubby legs. He looks nothing like a winner. In fact, his favorite pastimes are eating and taking long naps—very un-thoroughbred-like behavior. When he gallops, he moves from side to side rather than straight ahead, and he habitually trips over his own hooves.

Prior to his encounter with trainer Smith, Seabiscuit, literally whipped into shape by prior trainers and riders, is at the point of burnout from a grueling schedule. Underneath his

sad and shaggy façade, however, the horse has attitude—the quality Smith and Howard are seeking. After liberal doses of kindness and care from both Smith and Pollard, the horse learns to trust people. Despite injuries and setbacks, he prances directly into the national spotlight, breaking records for both speed and monies earned, and charming the hearts of the American racing fans.

Tom Smith

Tom Smith wanders on the periphery of two worlds, with his heart in the cowboy days of the old west and his body in a rapidly industrializing world. The grizzled wrangler spends the majority of his life with animals, taming mustangs for the British cavalry and job-hopping through ranch foreman positions and Wild West shows. Taciturn and withdrawn, he rarely speaks to people and lives outdoors or in barn stalls where he develops a way of communicating with horses.

By the 1930s, Smith looks older than his late fifties and projects an air of virtual invisibility. He is a forgettable man with gray hair, perpetually clad in a gray felt fedora. Even as a child, Smith preferred the company of animals to men; he devoted his growing years to hunting deer, tracking mountain lions, and driving cattle across the plains. As the Wild West grows tame, Smith wanders from the vanishing frontier onto the Unaweep Cattle Range in Colorado where he works for twenty years as ranch foreman. The ranch is sold in 1924 and the cowboy, aging and unemployed, joins the sideshow antics of Charlie Irwin's Wild West Show, where his talent as a trainer is noted and blossoms. By the time he encounters Howard and faces Seabiscuit, Smith is considered a miracle worker with difficult mounts.

Sunny Jim

See James Fitzsimmons

War Admiral

The son of Man o'War—who also sired Seabiscuit's father—War Admiral is the best racehorse in the eastern United States, and becomes Seabiscuit's archrival. Jet-black and regal, the horse topples the Triple Crown, smashing his sire's track record and setting an American record for speed. With those records to his credit, he is the horse to beat in the mid-1920s and 1930s.

Alfred Vanderbilt

Alfred Vanderbilt is the youthful owner of the Pimlico racetrack in Maryland, home of the Preakness Stakes. He succeeds in arranging a one-on-one match between Seabiscuit, representing the new breed of western racing, and War Admiral, the pride of the eastern

establishment. Vanderbilt serves as mediator between Howard and Riddle, setting the purse and convincing Riddle of the worthiness of the match.

George Woolf

Seabiscuit's backup jockey, Woolf is the epitome of a professional cowboy. Outfitted in cartoonish western regalia, Woolf, nicknamed the Iceman, offers a commanding presence, unperturbed by the opinions of others, and unrattled by the dips of an unstable lifestyle. A consummate perfectionist, Woolf surrenders his ambition to become a Canadian Mountie and uses his talents instead in the racing arena. He studies the sport, the competition, and the tracks and becomes one of the best jockeys in the country. Woolf and Pollard are friends, bonded by their intellect and sense of humor. When Pollard is physically incapable of riding, he recommends Woolf to Howard as his replacement; it is Woolf who rides Seabiscuit when the stallion finally faces off against War Admiral and wins.

Themes

Catharsis

Seabiscuit's meteoric rise in the national consciousness represented a type of catharsis, or cleansing of emotion, of all that was negative in an era marked by economic downturn, mass unemployment, and hardship. According to Hillenbrand, "America was desperate to lose itself in anything that offered affirmation." People of that time identified with Seabiscuit, an unlikely hero that was a victim of situations beyond his control. With his determined success, they were afforded a vicarious victory for themselves, and a temporary release from their own troubles. Release was more than psychological, however, for horseracing provided an inexpensive form of entertainment, as well as the lure of quick riches through potentially winning bets.

The American Dream

Seabiscuit personified the American dream, the belief that the underdog—human or beast—can overcome adversity and through persistence, intelligence, and hard work, rise to the top. The American dream is a concept with its roots in early European settlers who immigrated to America, seeking not only religious and political freedom but also the riches they were certain the land contained. The concept became ingrained in world consciousness, enticing countless immigrants to seek out their fortunes in the New World. Popularized by the writer Horatio Alger, Jr., the idealization of the American dream and its entrenchment into popular culture has long served as a literary theme. Seabiscuit was the embodiment of persistence and pluck, the criteria often cited as fundamental to achieving the American dream; thus, he served as a role model of sorts. The horse became "a cultural icon that transcended sport."

In addition to Seabiscuit's impact on the American psyche, Charles Howard also epitomized the potential of the rags-to-riches myth. Howard parlayed twenty-one cents into millions of dollars through intelligent investing, self-marketing, and entrepreneurial thinking. Though often overshadowed by his prize horse, Howard embodied the American dream as well.

Popular Culture

Although popular culture is a fairly recent avenue of study, its origins sprang from the advent of radio, which was more immediate than print media and allowed for the instantaneous transmission of news. During those early years of mass media, families gathered around radios to hear the latest on world events, serialized programs based on fictional characters, and live coverage of sports. For the first time, it allowed spectator sports to be followed in real time without having to actually attend the event. Further, Hillenbrand writes of Seabiscuit that in 1938, "no individual had known fame and popularity that was as intense and far-reaching." As further proof of the horse's

effect on popular culture, the author notes, when the number of newspaper column inches was tallied at the end of 1938, Seabiscuit "had drawn more newspaper coverage … than Roosevelt … Hitler … Mussolini … or any other newsmaker."

In addition to the impact of radio, the decade heralded the advancement of trends like merchandising, marketing, and celebrity endorsements. Seabiscuit's likeness graced everything from ashtrays, parlor games, cards, hats, and wallets to the front of a military bomber. There were even Seabiscuit Limited trains to transport fans to the track. At the extreme end of the merchandising phenomenon was a request to use the horse as an exhibit during the San Francisco World's Fair, and gargantuan-sized billboards of the racer's likeness draped on Manhattan skyscrapers.

The Sporting Life

Sport has long been an obsession for many Americans, as the abundance of published works on a variety of athletic contests will attest. Obviously, in a work that revolves around horseracing, the sporting life is a central theme. From the high life enjoyed by the ones who could afford to own competitive thoroughbreds to the lowly existence of stable boys and the grueling pace of unseasoned jockeys, Hillenbrand depicts a rounded and vivid picture of the sport of kings. The life of jockeys is displayed in detail, as is the adrenaline-filled excitement of the races.

Seabiscuit shows the sacrifices that athletes are willing to make for the love of the sport. According to Hillenbrand, "A jockey's life was nothing short of appalling." The controlling factor in a jockey's life was the scale; he and his mount were allowed only so much weight in order to compete. Riders literally starved themselves and used purgatives in order to lose weight. Hillenbrand writes, "Most walked around in a state of critical dehydration and malnutrition and as a result were irritable, volatile, light-headed, bleary, nauseated, gaunt, and crampy."

The Wounded Hero

The theme of the wounded hero is one in which the hero overcomes great adversity—physical, mental, or emotional—in order to fulfill his or her destiny. Each of the protagonists in *Seabiscuit* deals with individual demons as well as some type of physical or psychological injury. Howard suffers through the death of his son and the subsequent guilt he feels at supplying the means of that death, the automobile. Smith surrenders his isolation and resistance to social involvement to deal with the press and the fans. Seabiscuit and Pollard both overcome mistreatment and extensive physical injuries to triumph in the end.

Style

Biography

Traditionally, a biography represents the life or a portion of the life of a single person, usually someone of import or historical significance. Although there are fictional predecessors, such as the classic children's book *Black Beauty* (1877) by Anna Sewell, *Seabiscuit* is unique as the biography of a real horse. Hillenbrand broadens the definition, however, to include biography of the three principal humans who played important parts in Seabiscuit's life—Charles Howard, Tom Smith, and Red Pollard.

Historic Nonfiction

Seabiscuit is a work of nonfiction, reporting on the lives of real people and setting those lives in the historical context of real events. Although nothing is fictionalized, Hillenbrand's style moves with the pace of a fiction novel. Her book uses some of the traditional elements of a fictional novel, such as characters, scenes, narrative arc, and climax. The story is driven by the characters and events, with few exceptions, as the lives of the men and the animals intersect and overlap.

Seabiscuit is filled with social history and socioeconomic characterizations. The stratifications of class structures both before and after the Depression era are present in the main characters, as well as the vast numbers of others who cheer the horses to victory. Hillenbrand's passages about the time period offer readers familiarity not only with the life of the racetrack circuit but also the popular culture, styles, and values of the 1930s.

Hillenbrand researched Seabiscuit's story by watching old newsreel footage, interviewing dozens of persons who were involved in racing during the decade, and piecing together newspaper clippings. She employs an omniscient third-person narrator, one who stands outside the story but can wander in and out of the thoughts of her characters. Although some of the actual dialogue was recreated and some of the thought processes derived, she endeavors to be true to the historic context as well as to the character makeup of the persons about whom she is writing.

Sense of Place

Since the book covers over forty years, the timeline shifts with each chapter—from the rough-and-tumble old west to the beginning of World War II. Encompassing most of the continental United States as well as Tijuana, Mexico, the primary setting of the work is the racing circuit, and the major scenes are played out in horse barns or on racetracks. Hillenbrand creates a sense of place so vivid that the reader can almost experience the aroma of the track and the barn. In essence, the setting the author creates serves as another character in the work, rather than merely as a backdrop for the action.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to things that are not human, a device Hillenbrand employs throughout the work. She illustrates Seabiscuit's moods in purely human terms, discussing his pride, shame, and boredom among other qualities. She notes at various points that Seabiscuit had a "gleam in his eye" or that he "seemed … amused." The other horses in the book—notably Pumpkin, Fair Knightess, and War Admiral—are also anthropomorphized. By giving the horses human characteristics, Hillenbrand creates characters that readers can identify with and root for.

Imagery

Imagery is the effect of using words to paint a vivid picture in the mind of the reader. Hillenbrand creates imagery masterfully in her description of locale, such as when she describes the racetrack in Tijuana: "The colorful racing world that had spun itself around Tijuana withered and blew off into the sagebrush deserts." She also uses vivid language in her depiction of people like Smith, who "had a colorless translucence about him that made him seem as if he were in the earliest stages of progressive invisibility." She also notes that he "had the ethereal quality of hoof prints in windblown snow." Many of the images she creates, of course, relate to horseracing and to the men perched on top of the mounts. Hillenbrand writes that "to pilot a racehorse is to ride a half-ton catapult," and that "jockeys squat on the pitching backs of their mounts, a task much like perching on the grille of a car while it speeds down a twisting, potholed freeway in traffic." The use of images, metaphors, and similes aids readers in deeply experiencing the story.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

In 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed, and practically overnight, persons of wealth were turned into paupers. Millions of Americans lost their fortunes, their jobs, their homes, and their hope in the years that followed. Although the stock market plummet may not have precipitated the Depression, it certainly contributed to the economic misery of the period. The primary factors leading to the Depression, however, were an uneven distribution of wealth (a small group of people controlling a disproportionate amount of money and power), accumulated war debts from World War I, and the expansion of credit and installment purchasing. Although some relief was offered under the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, particularly in the form of Social Security, welfare, and employment, the Depression lasted until shortly before World War II.

By 1937, the year of Seabiscuit's acclaim, the United States was in the throes of serious economic despair, few regions of the nation spared. Factories were closed in the cities, many as the result of the more than four thousand mass labor strikes during the year. Farmers and ranchers in the Midwest suffered through waves of replanting and relocation as the decade-long Dust Bowl wiped out crops and dislocated families. The Revenue Act increased taxes for small businesses, while offering tax breaks to larger ones, which affected many small towns. Unemployment statistics reached a staggering 20 percent, and hunger marches on state and federal capitols became commonplace. As the economic situation worsened, World War II loomed on the horizon and the Dies Committee (later named the House Un-American Activities Committee) was created, triggering pervasive paranoia among people about the possibility of Communists infiltrating groups, particularly labor unions.

Prohibition

Beginning in 1919 and ending in 1933, the selling or consumption of any alcoholic beverage was illegal in the United States. Because the social climate favored moral reform, bans were also instituted for gambling and cabaret dancing.

The Prohibition helped facilitate the rise of organized crime, as trafficking illegal substances became a quick way to make money. Alcohol was thus readily available if one knew where to go and had the cash to cover the purchase. Racetrack gambling, on the other hand, was somewhat more difficult to conceal; thus, thoroughbreds, their owners, and their fans began visiting wide-open Mexican border towns like Tijuana, where both gambling and alcohol were legal. When California politicians realized that much-needed revenue was leaking out of the state, they reinstituted betting at the state's racetracks, with the government keeping a cut of all profits.

Horseracing and Betting

Horseracing is one of the oldest competitive sports, dating to the domestication of the animal in prehistoric times. By the time of written records, the sport was organized in all major civilizations and was included in the first Olympic games in ancient Greece.

Part of the appeal of the sport is betting on the outcome of the races, which led to the growth of the industry in the United States. In the early years of the twentieth century, however, antigambling sentiment caused many racetracks to lose revenue and close their doors. This created a subsequent wave of horseracing enthusiasts that crossed into Mexican border towns, particularly Tijuana. In the post-Depression recovery period, states not only condoned but encouraged a resurgence of racetrack betting as long as the betting was pari-mutuel, which afforded the state coffers a share of the profits.

During the Depression, affordable diversions and hobbies were few. The chasm between rich and poor broadened, with the middle class largely swallowed up by the economic downturn. Those who were hit the hardest sought any means of diversion offered to them. Bargain seating at sporting events provided one form, and the sudden affordability of radio provided another. The most economical sporting events to attend were baseball and horse racing. Spectator numbers for both sports increased dramatically during this era.

Critical Overview

Seabiscuit: An American Legend has sold more than three million copies and topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for forty-two weeks. In addition, the book won a variety of awards, and was a finalist for the coveted National Book Critics Circle award. The book was also named one of the best of 2001 by National Public Radio, the *Washington Post, Time* magazine, and Amazon.com, among others.

Critical appraisal could find little wrong with Hillenbrand's first book-length effort. Patsy Gray, writing in *Library Journal*, writes, "This story of trust, optimism, and perseverance in overcoming obstacles will appeal to many readers." Todd McCarthy of *Variety* contends that part of the work's allure is due to the horse being "a commoner among racing's royalty, which ultimately became the source of his mass appeal." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* called the work a "captivating account of one of the sport's legends" rendered in "simple, elegant prose." Dennis Dodge, writing for *Booklist*, proclaimed the work "a remarkable testament to what four years of meticulous research and a writer's gift for storytelling can accomplish." Others noted Hillenbrand's craft, imagery, and poetic word choice. Even *Business Week*, not known for flowery praise, included a glowing review that complimented the author as "a deft storyteller whose descriptions of such races are especially good, filled with images of pounding hooves and splattering mud."

A significant number of reviewers noted the parallels between Hillenbrand's own condition (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) and the perils illustrated in the work. One of the more thorough analyses, penned by Tim Morris in *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, noted the success of Hillenbrand's work as unlikely as the success of its protagonist, and compared the reading public's encouragement of Seabiscuit to overcome the odds against him to Hillenbrand's need to defeat her disease. Morris explored fans' online postings to Hillenbrand and discovered a significant "crossing over" of the fan base from those who enjoyed the work to those who were aware of her condition. The essayist pointed out, "The book evokes a culture that has vanished for good, where noble animals and noble men and women commanded the nation's attention by competing in a pure and elemental sport."

Rarely does any work garner such positive reinforcement from both the reading public and professional critics alike. *Seabiscuit* filled a nostalgic void much needed in the modern world, and reinforced a nation's belief in persistence as the route to ultimate success.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Dr. Joyce Duncan is the Managing Editor of the Sport Literature Association, the editor of Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature, *and a faculty member at East Tennessee State University. In this essay, Duncan analyzes Hillenbrand's book as it reflects the history of a horse and an era, as well as the sentiment, innocence, pathos, and stock characters presented in the work*.

Seabiscuit: An American Legend is unique in many ways from the books that tend to top the bestseller lists. In an age consumed with self-help genres, reality television, and video games, *Seabiscuit* stands out as a work of refreshing naiveté. There is an almost childlike innocence to the narrative as Hillenbrand evokes a world where it becomes evident that the nice guy will finish first, that goodness will triumph over adversity, and that comeuppance will be served to those who deserve it. Even for those who are unaware of the true historic ending of the tale, Hillenbrand creates an aura of predictability wherein the reader, though able to guess the outcome, continues reading not to find out what happens next but to achieve a satisfying closure.

Echoing her quality of innocence, there is a strong sense of sentiment, and one wonders how much of Hillenbrand's own autobiography ripples through the pages. There is a sticky sweetness attached to her characterization of the principals in the story and Hillenbrand appears to identify not only with Seabiscuit, but also with his jockey, Red Pollard. The young man is constantly pitted against physical ailments and psychological despair, but rises time and again to face the odds and become a winner. It is obvious that the author has empathy toward Pollard, even excusing such weaknesses in him as his addiction to alcohol. Despite his failings, Pollard is illustrated as a man of honor with a sympathetic heart. Through her renderings of Pollard and Seabiscuit and their numerous improbable comebacks, the author arouses pathos, feelings of pity and sympathy, accompanied by ultimate jubilation in her readers. Reading nonfiction so well-crafted that it flows like the best of page-turning fiction, propels the reader forward, figuratively running his or her own race to the end of the work.

Although the book is definitely penned with polished, if somewhat reserved, language, it is reminiscent of two children's books that preceded it. The first is the somewhat obscure *Come on Seabiscuit*! by Ralph Moody, originally published in 1963. Hillenbrand has in fact mentioned the Moody book as a childhood favorite, and it clearly serves as at least one source of inspiration for her more sophisticated rendering of the story. An additional tale that frequently goes unmentioned, by both Hillenbrand and her reviewers, is *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, written over a six-year period in the mid-1800s and depicting another biography of a horse, albeit a fictional one. There is something reminiscent of Sewell's sympathetic approach to the treatment of horses present in *Seabiscuit*; however, the comparison is not restricted to the subject matter or the writing styles of the two authors. Ironically, perhaps, the commonality spills over into their lives as well. Sewell, like Hillenbrand, wrote *Black Beauty*, her only published major work, while she was bedridden with illness. For both women, success came quickly and book sales were phenomenal.

The 1930s was not a period of calm and good feeling in the United States. However, the book, while maintaining historical accuracy, creates a portrait of a simpler time when heroes and villains were easily discerned, when camaraderie was abundant, and when families gathered round their radio together for an evening's entertainment. Hillenbrand deftly leaves her readers nostalgic for the past. Strangely, while she writes about an earlier population seeking escape from their dreary lives, she creates a need for escapism into the past for the modern reader who covets a more pastoral moment.

Recreating history can be an arduous task, particularly if information is obtained primarily through the oral recounting of events from those who lived through the period. Oral history, and particularly retrospective oral history, must always be somewhat suspect due to the passage of time and the age of those reporting. Witnesses and participants often embellish the banality of their actual experience. On the other hand, their anecdotes add a measure of local color and a sense of immediacy that help the reader almost feel the movement of the horse, the pounding of the hooves, the cheers and boos of the fans, and the aroma of the stalls.

If the people had not really existed and if the book were fiction, it would be a simple task to critique the author for dealing in stereotypes and for creating flat characters that represent certain attributes or characteristics. Although the cast was not created as such, Hillenbrand imbues each with a humanity and moral quality that raises the principals in the story from the dust of history. Yet, each is representative of something bigger than a single individual. Among other stock characters in the work, there is the outsider, living on the periphery of civilization (Smith); the waif, surviving by his wits (Pollard); the self-made millionaire, personification of the American dream (Howard); and the underdog, who conquers all the odds against him and succeeds due to sheer pluck and perseverance (Seabiscuit).

It was a time when men were men, an era when people could live off the land, outside the confines of cities and materialistic trappings. The trainer Smith, although precipitously balanced between two eras, is the archetypal cowboy, the strong and silent Gary Cooper type, as well as the original "horse whisperer." Balancing his gruff and taciturn demeanor around other people, his tender coaxing of animals reveals his thinly veiled gentle nature and warm heart. From Hillenbrand's depiction, Smith could be the prototype for every cowpoke who ever stumbled into Dodge City. Pollard, as a virtual orphan and a young man of literary acumen, is cast upon an uncaring world to make his own way. A graduate of the school of hard knocks, he is categorized as the quintessential underdog, arousing pathos and empathy and becoming an easy character to cheer to victory. Even Howard, the owner of Seabiscuit and one of the nation's wealthiest men at the time, is depicted as one who struggled to make his way, a self-made man created through grit and ingenuity, the cornerstones of the American dream. They are rough-and-tumble men whose lives collide in a rough-and-tumble world, thus illuminating the survivor theme present in all great western motifs. In addition, the hero of the piece, an irascible thoroughbred built, Hillenbrand says, like "a cinder block" and enamored of eating and sleeping, rises from obscurity to become a national treasure. It is the stuff from which fairy tales and Hollywood are made.

More than a happy little book about perseverance, though, Hillenbrand has created a portrait of an era—a time in which the media began to infiltrate lives and living rooms to create a nation of spectators. Much of modern popular culture, from twenty-four-hour sports channels to the merchandising of athletes, can trace its origins to the period about which she writes. In addition, the work reveals the breadth of the chasm among classes through clearly delineated verbal portraits of each of the primary characters.

Hillenbrand also delves into the darker side of the sport as she explores in graphic detail the life behind the track. Jockeys, treated much like slaves, were frequently little more than commodities and often suffered illness or disability due to the self-imposed abuse required to meet weight requirements. It is ironic that while the horses were being pampered and catered to, the humans who guided them across finish lines were encouraged to starve themselves, forced to sleep in barn stalls, and used as currency in games of cards between stable owners.

Although a book about the sport of horse races and expertise is typically aligned with sport literature, and a book that features an animal as its central figure is typically aligned with children's literature, *Seabiscuit* is much more than either category would suggest. *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* transcends the pigeonholed genres created by critics and English professors; it is a story of creating possibility from impossibility, a lauding of persistence and a celebration of life. If it were not based in fact, the entire tale might be embraced as imagination of the highest caliber.

Source: Joyce Duncan, Critical Essay on *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Morris draws parallels between author Hillenbrand, a sufferer of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and the against-all-odds champion she chronicled.

The best-selling American sports book of the year 2001—and one of the year's bestsellers in any genre—is *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* by Laura Hillenbrand. The success of the book is as unlikely as the success of Seabiscuit himself. How does a book about a half-century-dead racehorse become a publishing sensation? Sales of the book don't depend much on nostalgia, since most Americans are too young to have seen Seabiscuit race. Nor is Thoroughbred racing the cynosure of media attention that it was when Seabiscuit briefly dominated the sport in the 1930s. One can barely imagine selling such a book to a publisher in 2001, let alone to hundreds of thousands of readers.

But the Biscuit always beat the odds. Overmatched at ages two and three, Seabiscuit never entered a Triple Crown race. Yet he had great success at age four, and was Horse of the Year at five (in 1938). Even then, some of his most famous races were hard-fought losses. He had a knack for coming in second in the prestigious Santa Anita Handicap; he didn't win the race till his final outing in 1940. His story is one of continual comeback against adversity.

The author of *Seabiscuit*, Laura Hillenbrand, has also fought adversity. As one visitor to Hillenbrand's on-line guestbook at www.seabiscuitonline.com says, "YOU are the Seabiscuit of us invalids!" Afflicted with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Hillenbrand became America's most famous sufferer of the illness, especially after an interview on NPR's Diane Rehm Show in April 2001. Before April 2001, entries in her guestbook center on the inspirational qualities of the horse. After April, the entries follow two main threads—one about Seabiscuit, the other about the inspiring quality of Hillenbrand's life. The threads become entwined, even confused. While rooting for the horse to come back and win in the text, people root for the author to overcome disease in real life.

The author, lovely, frail, spirited, is embraced by hundreds of readers and nonreaders who imagine themselves the cure to her problems—perhaps none so invitingly as one "fellow CFSer" who signs himself "Tom Smith" and prescribes that Hillenbrand "curl up in the hay and get the rest you need."

Laura Hillenbrand hardly set out to invoke such readerly concern and affection. Yet the way her readers feel about her is analogous to the way she feels toward the horses and people she writes about. As her readers summon up images of the author curling up in her bedding, or think aloud about ministering to the hair behind her ears, they more or less consciously echo passages in *Seabiscuit* where Hillenbrand conveys an immediate, visceral sense of the sufferings of her heroes.

Time and again in the story, Seabiscuit and jockey Red Pollard achieve great things, only to be brought to earth again by the fragility of their bodies. In 1938, Pollard,

immobilized by an injury, must watch George Woolf ride Seabiscuit in the match race against War Admiral: "He was sure he would be able to ride again. A glance at his emaciated body, jutting out a harsh angles from under the sheets, testified to the contrary." Later, in 1939, it is Seabiscuit who is incapacitated as another Santa Anita Handicap approaches:

The veterinarian took radiographs, which would take a while to develop. All they could do now was wait. The Howards spent their time sorting through myriad sympathy notes from fans, some of whom enclosed bottles of remedies for the horse.

You can't send bottles of Tahitian Noni Juice through cyberspace, but in most other respects the parallel between Seabiscuit laid up in 1939 and Hillenbrand laid up in 2001 is remarkable—not least because of the outpouring of public sympathy and love.

The love that the readers of *Seabiscuit* bear its author has precedents in literary history and sport history, if not perhaps in the genre of sport literature: one thinks of Willa Cather's devoted circle of reader-critics, of the loving crowds worldwide that attended Muhammad Ali, of the deep connection cancer survivors feel to Lance Armstrong. Such love suggests that one reason for the success of the book is the fluid relationship among author, text, heroes, and reader that allows Hillenbrand's audience to imagine their way into inspiring, validating, and romantic situations. "I was so taken by your story today, and would like to give you my services for free," says one reader; "I would like to illustrate, paint, draw, scribble, or attend to your yard work for you."

Such readers claim to center their experience of literature, and possibly of life, around Hillenbrand and *Seabiscuit*. Even allowing for the hyperbole of fan-letter discourse, these readers feel something special. One goes so far as to reverse the coat-tails of the book's spring publication, claiming that Hillenbrand has done more for the Triple Crown races than the Triple Crown has done for *Seabiscuit:* "With your emotion packed words I am sure you and you alone are responsible for the increase in interest re the Derby (up 40%) and the Preakness (up 56%)."

Just as significant in establishing a sense of the "horizon of expectations" that characterizes *Seabiscuit's* readership are remarks that connect *Seabiscuit* to other reading experiences. Jim Lewandowski says that *Seabiscuit* is "the best since I read "Undaunted Courage' by Stephen Ambrose," a prodigiously unironic bestseller from 1996. Andrew Abruzzese, a restaurateur, admits that "I have finished reading two books in my life. To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee and yours." By such central measures of canonicity as this—the sense that a book is the best, or even the only, exemplar of literary quality—*Seabiscuit* is poised to become canonical in a way so deep as to evade the notice of academic discourse.

Not all readers go as far as Sandy Mendez, who tells Hillenbrand that "I have requested your book accompany my burial." But among all the tears and sighs, real or virtual, that season readers' responses to *Seabiscuit* on-line, is the sense that this book has given them something irreplaceable: an inspiration, a reason to go on living, to follow a dream.

This might be the moment for a scholarly puncturing of illusions, for some demonstration of the false consciousness of Hillenbrand's farflung readership. But it may be better just to note a recurrent dynamic that drives interest in sport literature: the need for an unadulterated hero. This need—documented in founding studies in the academic field of sport literature like Michael Oriard's *Dreaming of Heroes* and Robert J. Higgs's *Laurel & Thorn*—continues to be felt in the 21st century. Possibly the only heroes left without feet of clay are those with shoes of iron.

In tracing the appeal of *Seabiscuit* to its construction of an unironic hero, and to the apparently unorchestrated coupling of authorial image with that of the hero, questions of literary value seem beside the point, as they so often become in academic criticism. But *Seabiscuit* is clearly more than an exploitation of an available niche in American cultural discourse. It's a nonfiction masterpiece. Such a straightforward statement seems ingenious. But without good writing, the other factors that align to produce the *Seabiscuit* phenomenon would not be enough. The very ingenuousness of such a bald assertion of critical value will trigger, for many academic readers, a hermeneutics of suspicion: what is wrong with this picture? Everyone is having far too good a time.

But occasionally, the books that are revered by "naïve" readers can also be those that stand critical scrutiny from the most jaded readers. Honestly, I couldn't put *Seabiscuit* down, either. While it is unlikely to make the Oprah Winfrey list (it is non-fiction, and its author will probably be unable to appear on the Oprah TV show, two strikes against it), Hillenbrand's book is akin to the tales of survival and redemption preferred by Winfrey and her staff. And just as there is literary merit aplenty on the Oprah list—in the work of Edwidge Danticat, Toni Morrison, and others—so there is exemplary imaginative writing in the work of Laura Hillenbrand. Even if one's preferred mode is irony, there's something to be said for the occasional splash of earnestness.

Source: Tim Morris, "*Seabiscuit?* Come On …," in *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Fall 2001, pp. 79-90.

Critical Essay #3

In the following interview with Publishers Weekly, author Hillenbrand discusses the appeal of Seabiscuit and the people who helped the horse become a part of history.

Source: Lynn Andriani, "PW Talks with Laura Hillenbrand," in *Publisher's Weekly*, Vol. 248, January 1, 2001, pp. 3-15.

PW: Your book *Seabiscuit* is about a legendary racehorse. What makes Seabiscuit's story so special?

LH: He's unique because of the time he was in. It was the Depression, and people were trying to find ways to escape, and this "rags to riches" horse answered their yearning for something like that. Seabiscuit was the single biggest news-maker of 1938, and that was a really momentous year. During that time, even people who didn't give a damn about horse racing were following him.

PW: Why had, no one yet written this book?

LH: In the 1930s, journalism was a lot less personal; journalists tended not to say very much about the people involved. But when I started looking into the life of Seabiscuit and the lives of those around him, I found fascinating people living a story that was improbable, breathtaking and ultimately more satisfying than any story I'd ever come across. I had to tell it.

PW: A lot of people haven't heard of Seabiscuit. Given that, was it difficult to sell the book?

LH: I originally sold a story to *American Heritage* magazine, and that started everything rolling. People started saying, "You really ought to make a book out of this."

PW: *Seabiscuit* is largely a story of three men (an owner, a trainer and a jockey) with distinctly different personalities and temperaments coming together to produce a winning racehorse. How did these disparate characters affect your research?

LH: One of the things I love is just how improbable it is that these three people would get together. It's just amazing. But they all got along really well. There were times when I found conflicting stories from other people and in the press. But one of the beautiful things about horse racing is that there are extremely thorough records about races. And there were witnesses. Most of them are in their 80s and 90s, but I got a lot of first-hand accounts and I found a lot of film and photographs that could settle disputes.

PW: The culture of horse racing was very different in the 1930s and '40s than it is today. Other than the Triple Crown, many races today have only an elite following, nothing like the mass audiences of the past. Will that decrease in popularity affect the book's readership?

LH: The racing audience certainly has shrunk. Back then, everyone in America followed Seabiscuit. But I've tried to write this book for a general audience and I think its biggest appeal is not the sports angle; it's the human angle. I think these people are absolutely fascinating—and would have been even if I didn't care about horse racing.

Adaptations

- *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* was adapted into a film by writer-director Gary Ross in 2003 and was released by Universal. The film stars Jeff Bridges, Chris Cooper, and Tobey Maguire. The film is available on DVD through MCA Home Video. The film is spliced with actual footage from the 1930s, which adds to the authenticity of the historical narrative.
- *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* was released in an abridged version on audiocassette and compact disc by Random House Audio in 2003. The book is read by Campbell Scott and is widely available.

Topics for Further Study

- How has the experience of receiving news changed for people since the time of Seabiscuit? Compose a two-page paper discussing the attributes of radio in the early part of the twentieth century and the attributes of television today, and how each has affected society in different ways.
- No one thought Seabiscuit was a worthy horse until he met Tom Smith, Charles Howard, and Red Pollard. Think of a time when you overcame adversity or accomplished something that no one thought you could do. What was the situation, and how did you overcome it? Was there someone who believed in you and encouraged you? How did your accomplishment feel? Write a two-page essay about your accomplishment, and be sure to include details.
- Research the history of the automobile. In a small group, discuss how the automobile changed the world. Consider what it did for mobility, for the structures and stability of families, for business prosperity, for city structures, and for the convenience of all. Create a list of pros and cons about automobiles and horse-drawn carriages. In your group design two advertisements: one advocating the advantages of the automobile, and the other recommending rather the advantages of the horse-drawn carriage.
- Research three famous thoroughbred American racehorses. Some good examples would be horses that have won the Triple Crown (the Preakness Stakes, the Kentucky Derby, and the Belmont Stakes). Select one of the three and write your own one-page biography of the animal. Include any humans—trainers, jockeys, owners—that have been a part of the horse's success.

What Do I Read Next?

- *The Horse Whisperer* (1995), by Nicholas Evans, is a fictional tale of a man, much like Smith, who uses his soothing voice and kind words to communicate with horses.
- *Seabiscuit vs. War Admiral* (2003), by Kat Shehata, is a book for young readers. The work presents a lively, illustrated, and factual account of the famous match between the two thoroughbreds.
- *Come on Seabiscuit*! (1963), by Ralph Moody, was republished in 2003 by Bison Books after the success of Hillenbrand's book. This work is designed for young readers and served as an inspiration for Hillenbrand and countless other readers.
- *The Seabiscuit Story: From the Pages of the Nation's Most Promising Racing Magazine* (2003) was edited by John McEvoy. The book would have importance for anyone interested in the news coverage of the horse's career as it was actually taking place.
- Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) is about the adventurous and often difficult life of an English horse. It is considered a classic work of children's fiction and was the first popular book to use an animal as its narrator. The book also paints a vivid picture of all aspects of society, both good and bad, in Victorian England.
- *The Black Stallion* (1941), by Walter Farley, is another of the most popular books ever written about a horse. In this tale, a boy and a horse are shipwrecked on an island together, where they form a long-lasting bond that culminates in a showdown not unlike the "Seabiscuit/War Admiral" showdown that took place just a few years before the book was published.
- *Man O'War* (1962), another title by Walter Farley, is written in the tradition of Sewell's *Black Beauty*. Farley tells the story of Seabiscuit's legendary grandfather in this fictional biography.

Further Study

Hillenbrand, Laura, "A Sudden Illness—How My Life Changed," in the *New Yorker*, Vol. 79, No. 18, July 7, 2003, p. 56.

This article recites the origin and progression of Hillenbrand's Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and notes how writing both changed and saved her life.

Bowen, Edward, *At the Wire: Horse Racing's Greatest Moments*, Eclipse Press, 2001.

Bowen's work chronicles many of the most famous contests in the sport, including those featuring Man o' War, Seabiscuit's randfather.

Terkel, Studs, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, W. W. Norton, 2000.

Terkel offers verbal biographies collected from dozens of persons who illustrate firsthand accounts of their lives among the turbulent socioeconomic conditions of the 1930s.

Morgan, Bert, *Horse Racing: The Golden Age of the Track*, Chronicle Books, 2001.

Morgan offers a visual compilation through his photographs that depict Triple Crown events from the 1930s through the 1960s, including Hard Tack, Seabiscuit's father.

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Morris, Tim, "Seabiscuit? Come On …," in *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall 2001, pp. 79-91.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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