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(see page 38)**



PAINT HORSE FOAL

**GALLOP DOWN  
MEMORY LANE AS  
WE CELEBRATE THE  
BLACK STALLION'S  
60<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY**



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*The Black Stallion's wild, free spirit has been entrancing youngsters for decades. Here and inset, opposite page, the Black is portrayed by an equine member of the Orlando, Florida-based Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction. (The horse image on succeeding pages is the original cover art from the first book, published in 1941.)*



# FADE TO BLACK

*Do you remember the books that set you dreaming about horses?  
On his 60th anniversary, the Black Stallion is still sparking  
passion in the hearts of horse-crazy youngsters.*

A GIRL OF 10 LIES SPRAWLED ACROSS HER bed, devouring the book before her. It's *The Black Stallion*, an unlikely adventure story about a boy who tames a wild horse, and then rides it to victory in a great race. Sounds of children playing drift in the open window, but the girl doesn't notice. She's totally absorbed, even though she's read the novel—and the more than a dozen others in the series as of the early 1960s—countless times already.

Fast forward almost 40 years. A journalist cracks open a new copy of an old book, one she hasn't seen in decades. She pages through it, reliving the shipwreck that brings Alec and the Black together, the taming of the savage horse on a desert island, and the long quest to match the stallion's astonishing speed against the leading racehorses of the day. At the pivotal moment, when the Black finally makes his move—despite an injured leg and a bungled start that leaves him 100 yards behind the others—she's transfixed once again...and surprised to find herself weeping with emotion.

*With a sudden spurt he bore down on Sun Raider. For a moment he hesitated as he came alongside. The crowd gasped as the Black's ears went back and he bared his teeth. There was a movement on his back; his jockey's hand rose and fell on the*



*stallion's side for the first time in the race. Into the lead the Black swept, past the cheering thousands—a step, a length, two lengths ahead—then the mighty giant plunged under the wire.*

Oh, yes, she thinks. The magic is still there. Yes, indeed.

In October of this year, the world of children's literature will celebrate the 60th anniversary of the publication of Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion*, the book that begat a

series that set a generation of youngsters dreaming about horses. Sales of the 21 books in *The Black Stallion/Island Stallion* series have now topped 100 million worldwide. The novels have been published in nearly a dozen languages. The 1979 film, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, won an Academy Award, and has reached the platinum level on the *Billboard* chart of all-time best-selling videocassettes. The film's sequel, *The Black Stallion Returns*, has passed the gold level of video sales; other films are in the works.

What makes the tale of *The Black Stallion* so enduringly popular? Come with us as we examine the phenomenon—past and present—of the equine the *New York Times* has called “the most famous fictional horse of the [20th] century.”

*continued on next page*

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER FORSBERG MEYER



## 'INCREDIBLE UNION'

Today's natural horsemanship clinicians stress the importance of a bond that enables horse and rider to be as one. The late Walter Farley was bringing that concept to life 60 years ago. "If there's an attraction with horses that you can't do with a cat or a dog, it's that you can sit on a horse and become one," the author said in a 1987 article in *The Chronicle of the Horse*. "All the great riders have that feeling."

Including Alec Ramsay, the Black's teenage owner. He first rides the wild stallion bareback and bridleless, guiding him with only his legs, hands, seat, and voice. Even after the horse is trained to accept girth and bit, it's the bond of love between him and Alec that makes it possible for the boy to control, and eventually turn the horse into a champion.

This almost transcendental relationship between horse and human is at the heart of every Walter Farley book, including those about Flame, the island stallion. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, it excited the imagination of young horse lovers and left a lasting impression on them, many of whom grew up to pursue a life with horses.

"Walter Farley changed many more lives than he could have imagined, and it was always for the better," says Sheila Varian, the Arabian Horse Trust's Arabian Breeder of the Year in 1991, 1992, 1994, and 1998. "At 8, I'd lie on my Morgan/Percheron mare's big, flat back as she grazed, and read the stories Walter Farley created for us kids. Because of those books, I was hooked forever to the Arabian horse."

Not all *Black Stallion* lovers became Arabian aficionados, however. In fact, the Black himself wasn't a purebred; Farley describes him as "a giant of a horse, glistening black—too big to be pure Arabian."

"The breed of horse wasn't important," says Teresa Larson of Peyton, Colorado, a lifelong Quarter Horse enthusiast who read most of the Farley books multiple times when she was a 4th and 5th grader in the '60s. "It was that incredible union between horse

and human. I remember thinking that the unique communication between Alec and the Black must be the *ultimate* form of training and riding."

For the truly devoted, the books became almost like an addiction. "My mom said I wound up having to wear glasses because of sneak-reading *Black Stallion* books with a flashlight under the covers at night," says Larson, whose grandfather took her to the library every Saturday to replenish her supply of reading material. "But I couldn't help myself. I *lived* through those books."

Larson says the books influenced her own children, as well. Son Jordan won the limited open reining futurity championship at last July's Rocky Mountain Summer Slide on a filly he trained. "Jordan's told me, 'When I'm just kind to this mare and reassure her that I like her, everything's okay,'" says Larson with a laugh. "I tell him, 'That's exactly right!' And that's what Walter Farley was so good at—communicating the importance of that bond of trust."

## EQUINE CONNOISSEUR

All his life, Farley was an equal-opportunity horse lover. "He was interested in every kind of horsemanship and every kind of horse," says his widow, Rosemary Farley, who spent an early date with her husband-to-be horseback riding in New York's Central Park. "He especially enjoyed Thoroughbreds, Arabians, and harness horses, but he was also fascinated by Paso Finos, the bullfighting Andalusians of Spain, dressage horses, and three-day eventers. He himself played polo in the Armory in New York City, and he even went out West and rode Western on a ranch."

Though his earliest books—including *The Black Stallion*, *The Island Stallion*, *The Black Stallion's Blood Bay Colt*, and *The Black Stallion's Filly*—were pure adventure stories, later novels began to carry strong moral themes. "I can express myself through my horse books," Farley said in an interview with *The Chronicle of the Horse's* John Strassburger in 1987. "I can write about love, about nuclear war, about sexism." In *The Black Stallion Legend*, one of the last books before Farley's death in 1989, Alec ponders the plight of Native Americans and "a world in which...conflict threatened not only between nations but between people of the world, red, yellow, white, black and brown."

Throughout all the books, early and late, runs an unwavering conviction that horses should be treated with respect. In the introduction to his only nonfiction book, *How To Stay Out of Trouble with Your Horse*, Farley wrote, "It is possible—in fact, necessary—to regard your horse not as a working machine whose only true love is the feed you give him, but as a close friend.... It has been proven countless times on the racetrack and in the show-ring and barnyard. Call it what you like—love, friendship, compatibility—there is a union between horse and rider that is understood by each." (For examples of Farley's horse-handling wisdom, see "The Wisdom of Walter Farley" on page 81.)

## PASSING THE TORCH

*The Young Black Stallion* was Walter Farley's last book, but it wasn't the last book in the series. Steven Farley, who co-authored the book with his father, has produced two additional sequels, *Black Stallion's Shadow* and *Black Stallion's Steeplechaser*.

In addition, the 43-year-old author, who holds a degree in journalism from New York University, has spun off his own *Young Black Stallion* paperback series. The new books feature contemporary stories set in the horse-racing country of Ocala, Florida. The heroine of the series, Danielle Connors, meets 18-year-old Alec Ramsey when he arrives from upstate New York to train horses at her father's farm. Titles in the series to date include *The Promise*, *A Horse Called Raven*, *The Homecoming*, *Wild Spirit*, *Yearling*, and *Hard Lessons*.

"I have another novel on the horizon," reveals Steven, "but I'd prefer not saying what it's about yet. We're also talking with people about film and television projects, and our Web site is up and running. Updates on all *Black Stallion* happenings are posted there regularly." For more information, log onto [www.theblackstallion.com](http://www.theblackstallion.com).





## FROM THE HEART

The gee-whiz wonder of a youngster with his first, idolized horse is a large part of the Farley books' charm. Farley's dead-on rendering of this emotion is perhaps due to the fact that he was barely more than a boy himself when he wrote the first book.

"He started out writing on the kitchen table with a borrowed typewriter when he was in high school," relates son Tim Farley. "He was horse crazy and couldn't find a lot of horse books for children, so he decided to write his own."

That was in the early 1930s, when young Walter and his family lived in Brooklyn, New York. Walter's father was the manager of the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City, and though the boy never owned a horse of his own in his childhood, he gained first-hand experience of them through his uncle, a professional horseman.

"He wasn't the most successful trainer of racehorses," Farley once said of his uncle, "and in a way I profited by it. He switched from runners to jumpers to show horses to trotters and pacers. Consequently, I received a good background in diverse kinds of horse training and the people associated with each." His uncle became the model for the character of Henry Dailey, the racehorse trainer who comes out of retirement to help Alec prepare the Black to race.

Farley was still working on his first book when he graduated high school and entered Columbia University as an English major. There, a professor in one of his writing classes shared some book chapters with a friend—who happened to be an editor at Random House, then a small publishing firm. Impressed, the editor approached the student about publishing the book, which became a top seller. That was in 1941, when Farley was 26 years old. Letters from children began pouring in, begging for a sequel, but the outbreak of World War II intervened. Farley joined the army, where he trained in the Fourth Armored Division and served in the Aleutians. He was assigned to *Yank*, the army's weekly magazine. In his odd spare moments, he also worked on *The Black Stallion Returns*, a sequel to his first book.

It was at a *Yank*-sponsored party at Gramercy Hotel in New York City that he met his wife-to-be, Rosemary Lutz, a fashion model. The two were married in 1945, a year before Farley finished his 5-year army stint. Their first child, Pam, was born in 1948; by 1959, Alice, Steve, and Tim had followed.

Tim says that in 1950, after his father had already written six books in the series, he took a piece of paper and wrote 12 more titles on it—then proceeded to produce the books they represented, one a year, over the next dozen years. His regimen was disciplined. He'd rise at 4 A.M. and head to his office, which was outside the house and didn't have a telephone. Then he'd work straight through to midafternoon, stopping only for breakfast and lunch or to stretch his legs with a walk around the pond.

Like most writers, he had a love-hate relationship with his work. "He'd come in for breakfast grouching, 'This is the hardest job in the world—terrible! Awful!'" recalls Rosemary. And, despite his ongoing

## THE WISDOM OF WALTER FARLEY

Though he insisted he was but a "professional observer" of horses, Walter Farley acquired the savvy of a horseman over his lifetime. In response to requests from readers, in 1981 he produced his one and only work of nonfiction, a basic safety guide for horse owners. Titled *How To Stay Out Of Trouble With Your Horse*, the slender volume contains a wealth of common-sense guidelines covering the basics—safe catching, leading, grooming, tacking up, mounting, riding, and trailering.

Here are some of his general tips—indicating that the creator of *The Black Stallion* genuinely knew his stuff.

### ON ACQUIRING A HORSE:

- Spend your money on qualified, competent instruction before buying a horse for yourself or your child.
- When you do buy, have an experienced horse person assist you in making your selection.
- Don't "overhorse" yourself. Buy a horse that suits your ability at this time, not one you hope to be able to control and ride at a later date.

### ON RIDING:

- Remember, to ride a horse is to train him. Every cue calls for a response, and responses form habits.
- Always push your horse together with your legs, rather than pulling him together with the reins. Work from back to front, never from front to back.
- Strive for unity between you and your horse. Try to be a part of him, to have him listen to your mind through your hands, seat, and legs.

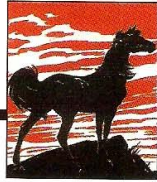
success, "he was always afraid of not getting published again," says Tim. But in fact he was published throughout his life—34 books in all—including, in addition to *The Black Stallion/Island Stallion* series, several picture books and beginning readers for young children, a novel about a Great Dane, and a fictionalized account of the life of the immortal racehorse Man O'War.

*continued on next page*



Walter Farley wrote 34 books in all, most about horses, but one inspired by his pet Great Dane.





## FRUITS OF HIS LABORS

Financial success enabled him to indulge his love of travel. Over the years, often accompanied by Rosemary and the children, he spent time in Mexico, Hawaii, the South Seas, many South American countries, the Caribbean islands, and Europe. He also owned a number of horses, including several from legendary breeder Bazy Tankersley's

### A LEG UP ON READING

Walter Farley believed in the power of imagination, and he felt children should be encouraged to make better use of their imaginative powers. Toward that end, he wrote several beginning-level readers and picture books intended to inspire younger children—including his own—to read. He also made frequent appearances at schools, libraries, and book fairs to promote reading.

Today this legacy is kept alive through the Black Stallion Literacy Project, a national initiative to teach youngsters to read using *Black Stallion* books and real-life experiences with horses. The pilot program has already involved 6,000 youngsters in the Fort Worth, Texas, and Reno, Nevada, areas.

"You just can't believe the hold these books have on kids—and how the thought of seeing a horse excites their imagination," says Mark Miller of Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction. Miller's Orlando, Florida, dinner theatre is co-sponsoring the project along with the Farley Family.

The concept of using horses to teach reading is supported by research showing that contact with animals and animal-themed educational activities improves children's capacity to learn. "One hypothesis suggests that the human brain is, in part, designed by evolutionary pressure to pay attention to animals and natural settings," says Aaron Katcher, MD, Associate Professor Emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania. "So contact with animals and learning about animals are favored forms of mental activities."

Here's how the literacy project works. First-grade classrooms in targeted schools receive posters and stand-up art depicting the Black Stallion—this whets the children's appetites. Then a horse is brought right to the school for the children to see. (The project relies mainly on local "Friend of the Black Stallion" farms to supply safe, gentle animals for this purpose.) Each child is then given a copy of *Little Black, A Pony*, Farley's first beginning-reader book. They understand that once they've read the book, they'll have their own one-on-one encounter with a horse.

After children complete the book, their hands-on experience occurs at one of the local participating horse farms. On completion of the farm visit, each child receives a certificate for a free copy of *Little Black Goes to the Circus* and other gifts.

"It's a win-win-win arrangement," notes Miller. "Children learn to read, schools receive help with one of their most important assignments, and breeders have the satisfaction of knowing they're helping to inspire another generation to love horses."

The project's goal is to teach one million children to read over the next 5 years. The pilot program is now complete; nationwide implementation during the 2000-2001 school year will reach about 40,000 children in 10 states. "After that," says Miller, "we hope to expand the project into all states."

In large cities and other areas with limited access to horse farms, the project is drawing on local mounted police, carriage horse operators, posse groups, and other equine units to provide children with hands-on experiences.

For more information on the Black Stallion Literacy Project, call (800) 553-6116 or log onto [www.blackstallionliteracyproject.com](http://www.blackstallionliteracyproject.com).

Al-Marah Arabians. (See "The Mighty Mrs. T," *Close Up*, October '00.)

"I don't think Walter ever owned an Arabian that wasn't an Al-Marah horse," says Mark Miller, Tankersley's son and owner of the equine-oriented Arabian Nights Dinner Attraction in Orlando, Florida. Miller grew up with the Farley children and himself was so entranced by the magic of the Black Stallion that he wanted to create a live representation of him. Thus was born the idea for Arabian Nights, which features, in addition to various other breeds and types, a Black Stallion look-alike. (Miller is also a sponsor of the Black Stallion Literacy Project"; see "A Leg Up on Reading," at left.)

While the Farley children were growing up, the family divided its time between a farm in Pennsylvania Dutch country and a beach house in Florida. In 1968, Pam Farley was killed in an automobile accident in Europe at the age of 20. Farley memorialized her free spirit and love of horses in *The Black Stallion and the Girl*, published in 1971.

In 1979, Francis Ford Coppola (who directed *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*) brought the story of the Black to the screen in a film that received both critical and popular acclaim. "It may be the greatest children's movie ever made," raved *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael. A sequel, based on *The Black Stallion Returns*, wasn't as successful at the box office but has enjoyed a long life in rentals and sales.

In 1987, at the age of 72, Farley suffered a stroke that kept him from returning to his beloved typewriter. His last book, *The Young Black Stallion*, a prequel about the Black as a colt targeted by thieves in Arabia, was written with his son Steven. (Today, Steven is carrying on the Farley tradition by continuing the original series and creating a new one. See "Passing the Torch" on page 80. For an interview with Steven, see *Horsepeople*, January '01.)

After the senior Farley's death in 1989, many of his papers were donated to his alma mater, Columbia University. All his fan mail, however—which he treasured—is still tucked away in a tack room at his Pennsylvania residence. In his standard reply to those letters, Farley said he'd never forget the many letters he himself wrote as a young, horse-crazy youngster. The notes were sent "to anyone who had anything to do with horses," in the hope they might lead "to having my own horse someday."

It's the kind of longing that can bring forth a legend—and keep it alive forever. ♦

Jennifer Forsberg Meyer, H&R's consulting editor was a genuine "Black Stallion junkie" in her youth. Today, her 6-year-old daughter, Sophie, is learning to read with the help of *Little Black, A Pony*.



The author with his wife, Rosemary.

Did the *Black Stallion* series inspire last year's winning Kentucky Derby jockey? Find out by logging onto [equisearch.com](http://equisearch.com).