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Flicka and Friends: Stories of Horses and of Boys Who Loved Them

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Abstract

For Henry Larom, Rutherford Montgomery, and Mary O'Hara, in constructing stories about boys coming-of-age with significant horse companions in the American West in the 1940s and 1950s they turned to the Western as their structural model. To some degree, all three utilized Western conventions, but as the writers move further from this model, most specifically eschewing gun violence as an indicator of heroism, the cowboy's "other" standard appurtenance, the horse, becomes progressively more significant. The horse, ultimately, is a bridge between the Western and the coming-of-age tale, helping to create a new form of children's fiction from the two genres in which the books participate.

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When Henry Larom, Ruthertford Montgomery, and Mary O'Hara wrote series fiction for young people in the 1940s and 1950s that featured the exploits of male protagonists and their beloved horses in the American West, they were at one level participating in an expanding national interest in horses and horse racing that was not confined to children's literature, but to which children's literature was not immune. Early children's classics such as *Black Beauty* (1877) and *National Velvet* (1935)—both set in England—had been followed by honored American stories such as Marguerite Henry's *Justin Morgan Had a Horse*, *Misty of Chincoteague* (Newbery Honor Books in 1946 and 1948, respectively), and *King of the Wind*, the Newbery winner in 1949. Less honored by literary critics but just as much or more so by readers, the novels of Larom, Montgomery, and O'Hara took their young heroes in a direction different from that of the general "horse story" and even from perhaps the most famous horse series of the time, Walter Farley's globe-trotting *Black Stallion* adventures.¹ For despite the extent to which the exploits of real horses like Seabiscuit and Citation no doubt contributed to the popularity of Farley's magnificent Black—a racing stallion²—Larom, Montgomery, and O'Hara were not especially interested in thoroughbred racing. Only Mary O'Hara's series, beginning with *My Friend Flicka*, makes direct reference to Seabiscuit, when a character wonders whether a new foal might become a racer like Seabiscuit and alleviate the family's financial worries. Mostly, however, O'Hara's books are about raising horses and families in the harsh but beautiful landscape of Wyoming, where she lived for many years. Henry Larom's *Mountain Pony* books are also set in Wyoming, and Ruthertford Montgomery's *Golden Stallion* series takes place in northern Colorado; thoroughbred racing, when it is mentioned at all in these books, is minimized or even disdained as antithetical to western ideals. For rather than being invested in the growing popularity of horse racing in America, or of

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