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Edited by Rebecca Cassidy
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REBECCA CASSIDY

Introduction

Pathos and Poetry

The first episode of *Luck*, a television series created by David Milch (*NYPD Blue*, *Deadwood*), directed by Michael Mann (*Manhunter*, *Heat*) and filmed at Santa Anita Park in California, aired on Home Box Office in December 2011. It was immediately taken into a second season and broadcast in Britain in early 2012. In the conservative world of television writing, David Milch is regarded as a maverick genius, known for his uncompromising take on American life. *Luck* is no *Seabiscuit*. The first episode weaves together a number of stories: the release from prison of Chester ‘Ace’ Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman), a racehorse owner with links to organised crime; a pick-six attempt by four inveterate gamblers or ‘railbirds’; and a hard boot trainer (Nick Nolte) with a dark horse. It also includes the humane destruction of a horse on the track, its head cradled in the arms of a tearful bug boy. *Luck* is a complex, unflinching portrayal of violence and corruption at the track. Dialogue- and character-driven, it invites reflection and understanding rather than judgement. Milch, a lifelong race fan and winner of two Breeders Cups, describes his series as ‘a love letter’, albeit an unsentimental one: ‘To me, the track is what the river was to Mark Twain. Where you see the most life and interesting people, go there. That’s what I’ve done.’¹ In March 2012, halfway through filming the second episode of the second season, production of *Luck* was permanently suspended by HBO, when a third horse had to be euthanized as a result of an accident on the set.²

As the brief lifespan of *Luck* indicates, representing racing is a fraught and complex endeavour. Death stalks the racecourse, along with joy and rapture – something that *Luck* confronted head on. When, in the first episode, the bug asks a ruined old jockey how to cope with the death of a horse, the jock, played with convincing bitterness by Hall of Famer Gary Stevens, replies, ‘You’ll get over it. That’s why they make Jim Beam.’ This was not a series that ignored or glorified the deaths of animals on the track,

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but one which encouraged us to confront the costs of our entanglements with animals in a thoughtful and progressive way. To cancel it because of the death of a horse, which died when she reared up, fell and banged her head while being led back to a barn, is to foreclose a potentially productive discussion about welfare. It allows people to return, chomping on cheap burgers, to a comfortable world in which the exploitation of animals can continue as long as it happens off screen.

The reactions of racing enthusiasts to the series, collected in the pages of the *Daily Racing Form*, were mixed.³ Some complained that *Luck* was not an accurate representation of the track. Others lamented that this representation would not attract the new fans the sport craves. Although the jury is still out on *Luck*, part of the purpose of this book is to explore how the morally opaque, troubling image of racing that it presents coexists with alternative historical and contemporary representations which stress its elitist and conservative credentials.

Until recently, a division of labour existed between historians of racing and fiction writers exploring the same subject. As Jane Smiley shows in Chapter 3 of this volume, racing fiction includes murder, conspiracy, cross-class indiscretion and failure. Great authors including Anthony Trollope, George Moore and Ernest Hemingway have used racing as a backdrop to muse on inequality of opportunity, the small tragedies of ordinary lives blighted by bad decisions and the blindness of fate. Many horses and jockeys have died in tragic circumstances on the fictional tracks created by racing's greatest writers. Historians, until recently, stuck to lists of winners, descriptions of famous races, horses, owners and breeders. Artists fell into both categories. As Douglas Fordham describes in Chapter 2 of the present volume, many painted order and hierarchy, in the image of the establishment they served. Some, like William Powell Frith in *Derby Day*, turned their backs on the horses and depicted crowds that included thimble riggers, mistresses and infamous murderers. *Derby Day* is the Victorian equivalent of an episode of *Luck*, and when the National Gallery first exhibited it in 1858, it had to erect a barrier to protect it from the large crowds it drew. The Queen loved it too.

New writing about racing is beginning to look beyond descriptions of regal influence and equine heroism to more nuanced, inclusive representations. In North America, Edward Hotaling has described the contribution made by black jockeys to the sport and Steven Riess has exposed the relationship between racing administration and organised crime in New York between 1865 and 1913. In the United Kingdom, Mike Huggins has meticulously documented the often overlooked participation of the middle classes and women in the sport and Donna Landry has unravelled the connections

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between the Middle East and Europe that framed the creation of the thoroughbred. In Australia, John Maynard has written about Aboriginal jockeys and Wayne Peake has told the story of Sydney's pony racecourses, the one-time competitor to thoroughbred racing. These and other works urge us to rethink conventional descriptions of racing as an invention of the English aristocracy, which has been exported, unchanged, to the New World. Part of the purpose of this volume is to understand why ideas such as these have endured in place of cosmopolitan alternatives.⁴

A National Sport?

According to Thomas Egerton, the second Earl of Wilton, writing in 1868, horseracing was a reflection of the essential character of the Englishman in the same way as the theatre represented the French and the bullfight the Spanish. This vision included fair play, muscular athleticism, determination and beauty, indeed: 'Sportsmanship is the ideal of racing. It is its foundation.'⁵ In practice, twenty-four years after the Running Rein Derby, when the winner was found to be an ineligible horse named Maccabeus, English racing was still far from pristine. However, the idea of racing as a quintessentially English sporting tradition, nurtured through administration by a private club for 250 years, was remarkably resilient. This idea retarded changes to the sport and underplayed the cosmopolitan and cross-class exchanges that characterised the development of the thoroughbred and racing in England and beyond.⁶

At the start of the twentieth century, a row broke out about the status of the thoroughbred racehorse. In some ways it was clearly an English horse, racing in England, bred on English studs, patronised by kings and queens. But in another, it was the offspring of imported stallions, described as Barbs, Turks and Arabian, and mares of indeterminate origin. In what sense could it be claimed as 'English' at all? One of the primary characters in this battle was the Arabian horse enthusiast Lady Wentworth, who, in 1945, published a vast volume, the purpose of which was to prove that the thoroughbred was descended entirely from Arab horses and was indeed an Arabian horse itself (of a kind inferior to those bred in the desert). She called this topic 'historical dynamite', and said that in raising it she risked 'receiving a bomb by post the day after publication'.⁷ Richard Nash's chapter, which opens this volume, provides a new perspective on this incendiary argument. He shows how ideas of 'Englishness', continuity and descent battled with environmental determinism in the succession of kings as well as stallions. In Nash's chapter, racing is a form of politics: race meetings serve as rallies for Jacobite rebellions, and gifts of horses communicate diplomatic messages between

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international allies. According to Nash, ‘the “sport of kings” is born from the same cultural ferment that marked the end of absolute monarchy’.

The thoroughbred was the product of international exchanges of horses, people and ideas which had taken place since at least 1576 when Elizabeth I commissioned the Neapolitan Prospero d’Osma to report on the state of the royal studs.⁸ Once the breed was established, through the crossing of Arab and other horses, English racing and the thoroughbred became more insular, exporting a template and horses to the colonies and seeking to preserve a breed and practice that had always been hybrid, according to a new ideal of purity. The Jersey Act of 1913, which restricted entry to the *General Stud Book* (GSB) to horses who could trace their ancestry without flaw to those already registered, epitomised this insularity and was repealed in 1949. The Jersey Act proved that the Jockey Club was out of touch. Horses had travelled for stud purposes for several centuries. Horses bred overseas had also successfully competed in the European blue-ribbon events for more than thirty years: the American horse Iroquois won the Epsom Derby in 1881. Post-Second World War, French horses won nineteen classics between 1947 and 1959. The repeal of the Jersey Act was partly motivated by the ridiculousness of having French and then American Epsom Derby winners in 1947 and 1948, neither of which were eligible for entry in the GSB.⁹

Soon after the repeal of the Jersey Act, the movement of horses by air became routine, and racing entered a new era of internationalism, reflected in the international flat race pattern created by Lord Porchester and agreed by the French, Irish and English authorities in 1970.¹⁰ Various races and series, with ‘World Championship’ pretensions including the Breeders Cup (first run in 1984) and the Dubai World Cup (first run in 1996), have since emerged. The internationalism of these competitions has been moderated by the continuing importance of local conditions ranging from epidemiology and breeding incentives to track conditions and race tactics. Chapters in this volume by Wayne Peake (Chapter 9) and Chris McConville (Chapter 14) show that the New World has produced influential horses, techniques and personnel, as well as vital technology including the starting stalls and pari-mutuel. Racing is not simply exported and replicated wholesale in new jurisdictions, colonial or otherwise.

The increased availability of air transport since the 1960s also profoundly affected the bloodstock industry. Northern Dancer (1961–1990) the most influential sire of the twentieth century, was a Canadian-bred Kentucky Derby winner who stood only in North America, but nevertheless produced North American, Japanese, European and Australian champions. Among his many grandson stallions, High Chaparral (b. 1999) is typically well travelled. He was bred in Ireland, bought by Coolmore at Tattersalls in Newmarket,

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returned to Ireland to be trained by Aiden O'Brien, raced in England, Ireland and the United States and has stood as a stallion in New Zealand, Australia and Ireland. Ease of transport has not, however, created a single type of 'international' thoroughbred, valued equally in all jurisdictions. The preference for dirt sprinters in North America and stayers in Europe still produces different kinds of horses, with recognisable pedigrees and phenotypes. As McConville argues in his chapter, the majority of horses and races continue to be produced for regional markets that serve geographically proximate national racing cultures. The animated discussions regarding the relative merits of horses in England and the United States that took place when Diomed won the Epsom Derby in 1881 are just as lively today, although they take place online rather than in the pages of the racing press.¹¹

Making Racing

The fusion of betting – an anarchic means of distributing wealth which has no minimum price – with the expensive business of producing and maintaining fragile thoroughbred horses generates many of the paradoxes that enliven racing. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, racing historians distinguished sharply between these activities. Egerton's vision of racing as epitomising the English character, for example, explicitly excludes betting, which he sees as an unfortunate side effect of the sport, reluctantly acknowledging that 'turf gambling has arisen from horseracing ... and to a very alarming extent; but it does not belong to racing as a sport'.¹² Fifteen years earlier, in the *Sporting Review* of 1853, Craven (John Carleton) had complained that 'Epsom's "pride, pomp and circumstance" are on the wane, no longer as of yore may it be said – "there all is gentle and aristocratic."' Systematic bookmaking or 'betting in the round' was emerging at the time, replacing matched bets between known individuals. Craven described this new system as having 'elbowed a way to place and power wholly unbecoming'. He concluded by reinforcing the distinction made by Egerton: 'The turf is not intended for the trade of tout or tapster. ... As already aforesaid, betting has nothing to do with racing.'¹³

At times, this distinction has been politically expedient and even necessary for racing to survive. In post-Revolutionary New York, for example, 'Knickerbockers' – racing supporters drawn from the Long Island gentry – formed the Society for the Promotion of the Useful Arts and exhibited racehorses at agricultural fairs. They were rewarded in 1821 by a bill which permitted two racing seasons in Queens County.¹⁴ In the United Kingdom, the distinction between racing and betting endured in divisions between regulatory bodies including the Jockey Club, the National Bookmakers

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Protection Association (formed in 1932) and the Horserace Betting Levy Board (formed in 1961 to raise and distribute a levy from bookmakers on behalf of racing). In 1975, Phil Bull, the founder of Timeform and one of the great racing minds, told journalist Hugh McIlvanney that ‘what is so sad and alarming regarding the future of racing is the refusal to admit the obvious, that the vital audience for the sport is no longer on the course but in the betting shops.... This is, above all, an entertainment industry and it is the audience that matters.’¹⁵ The Jockey Club relinquished its control over English racing in 2006, but the administrative and regulatory structure of racing continued to reproduce the divisions between racing and betting that concerned Bull in the 1970s. In 2011, the government minister responsible for managing negotiations between racing and the betting industry likened his role to finding peace in the Middle East. The consequences of these structural divisions are discussed in more detail in Mark Davies’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 13).

It has been conventional to present betting and breeding and testing horses against one another for the purposes of their improvement as mutually exclusive and even antagonistic. However, these different activities do not produce an exclusive set of binary oppositions between, for example, lower-class gamblers and upper-class owners. On the contrary, these categories are blurred and overlapping. Eclipse (1764–1789) – who appears in the pedigrees of more than 90 per cent of thoroughbreds racing today – was owned by a meat salesman and a madam at various points in his career. Eclipse’s most famous owner was the son of an Irish smallholder whose first job was carrying the front half of a sedan chair. Dennis O’Kelly was mocked by the English establishment for his Irish accent, but, unlike ruined eighteenth-century aristocrats such as John Damer, eldest son of Lord Milton, who committed suicide after building up gambling debts of £60,000, O’Kelly left his heirs a fortune based on Eclipse’s stud fees. More recently, Londoner Michael Tabor sold his betting shop chain for a reported £27 million in 2003 and has since won two Epsom Derbies (with Galileo and High Chaparral) and a Kentucky Derby (with Thunder Gulch). Irishman J.P. McManus, currently the most powerful owner in British jumps racing, became a bookmaker at a greyhound track at the age of twenty.

Wealth creators and the international super rich have had at least as much influence over the development of the thoroughbred as have royalty and the local establishment. The Rothschild family, their vast fortune based on Nathan Mayer von Rothschild’s role in organising the financing of the Napoleonic Wars, were hugely successful owners-breeders in England and France throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶ Nineteen-time leading owner and seventeen-time leading breeder Marcel Boussac

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dominated French racing in the twentieth century and made his fortune in textiles and newspapers. Colonel Hall-Walker (later Lord Wavertree), whose wealth came from the brewing industry in Liverpool, is known among the racing fraternity for using astrology to guide his breeding plans. He was also responsible for introducing the third Aga Khan to racing on a visit to his stud in Tully, initiating a successful and ongoing involvement in racing by the Imams of the Shia Ismaili Muslims. In 2011, the extent of the involvement of the royal families of Saudi Arabia and Dubai (and particularly Sheikh Mohammed, Prince Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum and Khalid Abdullah) led Newmarket trainer Jon Scargill to describe British racing as ‘three funerals away from a holocaust’.¹⁷

In the United States, influential owners and breeders have been drawn from a mix of established wealth, including Guggenheims, Mellons, Hunts and Hancocks, and self-made men. John Mabee, tireless promoter of California racing and breeding, moved from Iowa in the 1950s because of ill health and made his fortune from a chain of grocery stores. Breeder and racetrack owner Frank Stronach dominated Canadian racing, having emigrated from Austria in 1954 to make a fortune from manufacturing automotive parts in Montreal. In the past twenty years, Internet millionaire Satish Sanan has spent an estimated \$150 million on bloodstock in North America, having discovered racing as a student in the betting shops of England. In 2011, the top five buyers at the Keeneland September Sale included two members of the Dubai ruling family, Florida health care executive Ben Leon, telemarketing billionaires Gary and Mary West and Irishman John Magnier’s breeding and racing operation, Coolmore.¹⁸ In Australia, the Melbourne Cup has been won four times (in 1974, 1975, 1996 and 2008) by Malaysian entrepreneur Dato Tan Chin Nam, whose first venture was selling chickens on the side of the road after leaving school at age sixteen. This cosmopolitan mix of new and more established wealth is *de rigueur* on racecourses and at bloodstock auctions all over the world.

Old Histories, New Histories

Despite good claims to having been a national sport at one time or another in England, Australia and the United States, to many people today racing is a complete mystery, couched in an arcane and mysterious language of ‘odds’, ‘distaff lines’, ‘blinkers’, ‘fetlocks’ and ‘Furosemide’. For some enthusiasts it appears to encapsulate the whole challenging business of life, but racing is a relatively small village. The population is boosted annually by events such as the Grand National in England or the Melbourne Cup, ‘the race that stops a nation’, in Australia. The sport has not lost

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the elegant simplicity that attracted a crowd of seventy thousand people to see Seabiscuit win the Santa Anita in 1940: 106,322 came to a Tokyo racecourse in 2010 to watch Rose Kingdom win the Japan Cup in the stewards' room, and in the United Kingdom annual racecourse attendance figures reached record levels in 2011.¹⁹ Interest in racing has recently been boosted by two wonder horses – Frankel in Europe and Black Caviar in Australia. Black Caviar's incredible unbeaten run has drawn vast crowds, and this mare is truly modern – she Tweets and has her own Facebook page. Despite these lifts, the size of the racing village is dwindling, and new investors and audiences must be found, perhaps in new markets, including China, considered in Mark Godfrey's chapter of this volume (Chapter 12), or through appealing to new kinds of fans. Racing faces stiff competition from sports which are more accessible to amateur participation and simpler to understand, as well as from increasingly diverse and accessible gambling products.

The United Kingdom recently modernised its gambling laws, enabling bookmakers to advertise, but also opening up the market to competition from other sports and online competition.²⁰ Neither racecourses nor High Street shops hold monopolies on off-course betting any longer: this generation can bet on the majority of sports at home, online, or through their telephones or televisions. Those who have remained in the shops to bet in cash are able to choose between machines, virtual racing and sports with much higher public profiles, better returns and simpler rules than racing. As Davies describes in his chapter, changes in technology and regulation have affected racing all over the world. In the United States, 'handle' (the total amount wagered) is down 37 per cent and attendance by 30 per cent over the past decade. Racing in the United States faces competition from casinos, which grew by 34 per cent between 2001 and 2010 and now outnumber racetracks by a ratio of 6 to 1.²¹ Even in Hong Kong, where a phenomenal average of HK\$150 million is bet on every race (fifty times the average at U.S. tracks in 2010), Winfried Engelbrecht-Bresges, the Jockey Club's CEO, estimates that the annual revenue lost to illegal online gambling is between one-third and 100 per cent of the Jockey Club's receipts. Worldwide, having once dominated the field, racing now competes with other betting media, legal and illegal, for air time, customers and investors.

Racing administrators are aware that in order to widen the appeal of horseracing to a new generation of potential investors, the product must both be 'clean' and also be perceived as such. This problem is particularly acute in the United States where federal bodies lack authority and the use of race-day medication is an established local practice. In 2012, the

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Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association's American Graded Stakes Committee announced that a ban on race-day medication for two-year-olds in graded stakes races would not be enforced because of 'the nature of the various entities involved in implementation of rules governing racing'.²² In the United Kingdom, where race-day medication has not been permitted since 1904, new whip rules show that administrators have begun to engage with arguments about horse welfare.²³ The popularity of the play and film *War Horse* shows that people are fascinated by animals and their relationships with people, and that, under certain circumstances, sacrifices made by animals can be viewed as heroic. The extreme demands placed on racehorses are more likely to be understood and accepted by a wider audience if the horse is seen as a willing participant. Race-day medication, surgical procedures and whips alienate people, including the vast numbers who own pets or ride horses, because they militate against the idea that racing is the natural expression of instinctive competition.

If racing is to reach out to new audiences, it also needs to be mindful of the heuristic effects of the ways in which it presents itself. In the introduction to a book of short stories published in the United States in 1986, the editor describes racing as

an integral part of British history, a vivid and colourful pageant of people, courses and, above all, great horses, stretching back over three hundred years to the reign of that great sporting monarch, Charles II. He it was who first instituted races across the glorious heath at Newmarket which has rightly come to be known as the 'Horse Racing Capital of the World'. In Britain too, we created the thoroughbred racehorse.²⁴

This description makes racing sound irrelevant and parochial: a white, Anglophile, upper-class sport. It was written twenty-five years ago, but similar ideas are still recycled on racecourse Web sites and in sundry media. The alternatives presented in this collection (and in *Luck*) are so much more interesting. Isn't it time to ditch old histories in favour of more exciting, accurate and inclusive alternatives?

This book examines thoroughbred racing as it developed in Britain and was adopted and adapted elsewhere. Each chapter allows an expert in his or her field to unpick the diverse interests and priorities of racing's participants, undermining common misapprehensions and opening up new topics for academic and popular debate. The chapters may be read in any order, and no attempt has been made to standardise opinions because, as Mark Twain said, 'it is difference of opinion that make horse-races'.²⁵ Nevertheless, certain common themes emerge, including: cosmopolitanism

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and cross-class contributions to racing; internationalism, regionalism and localism; racing and politics; the commercialisation of racing and breeding; the funding of racing by betting; and the depiction of racing in popular culture. Several chapters illustrate how these shared themes are instantiated differently ‘on the ground’ at different times and in various racing jurisdictions.

Why bother to scrutinise racing in this way? Won’t claims of Englishness, stories about great victories and the intrinsic beauty and power of individual thoroughbreds be sufficient to ensure a future for the sport? The response presented in this collection is that more critical, dynamic and inclusive writing about racing is not only more accurate but also more likely to interest new audiences. From this perspective, *Luck* is not an exposé of the underbelly of track life, as some have suggested, but an invitation to hang out with the crooks and rogues, horses, heroes and ordinary people who between them create the racing spectacle.

NOTES

- 1 L. Pugmire, ‘Q&A: David Milch on horse racing and iconic TV series’, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 December 2011. Available at: www.articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/25/sports/la-sp-pugmire-qa-20111226. Accessed 6 February 2012.
- 2 BBC News, ‘HBO cancels Dustin Hoffman drama *Luck* after horse death’, 15 March 2012. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-17364029. Accessed 19 March 2012.
- 3 For mixed reactions to *Luck* in the pages of the *Daily Racing Form*, see, for example: www.drform.com/blogs/luck-episode-3-recap-ace-bernstein-takes-reins. For reactions on a UK-hosted racing forum, see: www.theracingforum.co.uk/horse-racing-forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=89554&start=0. Both accessed 27 February 2012.
- 4 E. Hotaling, *The Great Black Jockeys: The Lives and Times of the Men Who Dominated America’s First National Sport* (New York: Prima, 1999); S. Reiss, *The Sport of Kings and the Kings of Crime: Horse Racing, Politics and Organised Crime in New York 1865–1913* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011); M. Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society 1790–1914* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); M. Huggins, *Horseracing and the British, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); D. Landry, *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); J. Maynard, *Aboriginal Stars of the Turf* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007); W. Peake, *Sydney’s Pony Racecourses: An Alternative Racing History* (Sydney, N.S.W.: Walla Walla Press, 2006).
- 5 T. Egerton, *On the Sports and Pursuits of the English, as Bearing upon Their National Character* (Unknown binding, 1868), p. 1.
- 6 For the invention of the thoroughbred, see D. Landry, *Noble Brutes*. For a description of the cross-class development of horseracing in England, see M. Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society* and *Horseracing and the British*.