



Dark Horses

Cecily von Ziegesar

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From the internationally bestselling author of *Gossip Girl* comes a dark, psychologically complex update of *Black Beauty* replete with jealousy, romance, mystery, and redemption.

Merritt Wenner has been self-destructing ever since the tragic deaths of her grandmother and her horse, and after an epic all-night bender she walks out of the SAT and disappears. Her parents, looking for a quick fix, ship her off to a residential equine therapy program.

At Good Fences, Merritt meets Red—a failed racehorse and a terror in the barn. Red has never bonded with anyone, but Merritt is not afraid of him, which makes all the difference. Soon they're sneaking rides after curfew, which catches the attention of Red's owner. Recognizing their potential, he funds their launch into the competitive hunter/jumper circuit.

Against the cutthroat backdrop of competitive riding, Merritt and their groom, Beatrice, develop an attraction. Merritt also finds herself drawn to Carvin, a rival rider. But in Red's mind, Merritt belongs to him alone. Anyone else poses a threat. And Merritt can't foresee what he'll do to keep her to himself.

Dark Horses Details

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From Reader Review Dark Horses for online ebook

rachel says

[Merritt was probably bisexual but she said she was "confused" (hide spoiler)]

Chelsea says

The horse girl in me absolutely adored this book. The bookworm in me cringed a bit. This was a love/hate story for me.

Going in to this book I am going to be honest, I had low expectations. This is mainly because as a person who has grown up in horse barns and has been riding since I was really young horse stories, while enjoyable, are so inaccurate. I can't tell you how many times I've read the "damaged girl meets the damaged horse and they bond and she is the only person who can magically ride him and they ride off into the sunset together" story. So hearing the synopsis of this story I was a bit apprehensive. I couldn't have been more pleasantly surprised by this.

First off, von Ziegesar is clearly an equestrian and it shows. This is the first horse book I've ever read that is true to what working with horses is actually like. As soon as SmartPak, Charles Owen and Hermes were mentioned I realized this was written by an actual horse person and I grinned like an idiot. To people who aren't actively in the horse community, I'm sorry but this may be a bit dull to you, but I relished in all the descriptions of the courses and the show circuit that I used to be a part of. Devon showgrounds is where I spent a good part of my childhood and could not be more pleased to see it mentioned in a YA book. Ok, moving on from the horse fingerling...

This book is aptly named. We all have dark horses in our personal stories and some deal better than others. While this may have the cliché trope of broken girl meets broken horse, this approaches it realistically and doesn't have the fairytale feel to it at all. As an owner of a somewhat broken off track Thoroughbred, reading from Red's perspective is pretty spot on for how baby green racehorses think about things. Although I can't quite relate to Merritt's alcoholism, I have worked in hippotherapy barns before and the healing power of horses is a very real thing. While Good Fences may be a fictional place in this story, places like that exist and are beneficial to not only the people but the horses as well. Everything in this story calls to me and I loved every second of it.

Time to go hug my horse now.

Nicole says

a Wild Ride

Christina (A Reader of Fictions) says

DNFed on paragraph 3

The prologue is in the horse's point of view, and he thinks, I shit you not, "The earth is a just-baked pie left out to cool." Then, in paragraph three, he thinks: "More like, Bye-bye my American pie."

WHY IS A HORSE SO OBSESSED WITH PIE AND OLDIES????

Kellie says

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3.25/5

In the beginning, I was not sure how I would feel about this book. Of course I was excited to read this book because I really enjoyed the Gossip Girl novels. However, I was a bit iffy on the horse topic. The subject ended up growing on me. At first, I was a bit uncomfortable reading from the point of view of a horse but I pretty much enjoyed Red, the horse's, point of view. I really loved the bond between Merritt and Red. Although, I was not the biggest fan of Merritt's character. I also didn't really like any of the characters in general. They were a bit flat and unreal for me. Overall, I enjoyed this story despite some problems.

Jen Ryland says

[jealous, murderous (hide spoiler)]

Stephanie Bain says

I adored this book though! It was beautiful, sad and thrilling. I loved the characters even when i didnt. I loved that the love that took over the book was conventional!

I read this as i was listening to a classical music playlist on spotify and oh i highly recommend you try!

*i received this book for free through booktube tours in exchange for an honest review!**

Bexnbookx says

Want to see me talk about books? Check out my Youtube Channel: Bexnbookx

Dark Horses is a strange story about toxic infatuation, however overall an underwhelming reading experience.

Dark Horses surrounds Merritt Wenner who has been self-destructing ever since the death of her grandmother and grandmothers horse. After an all-night bender, she walks out of the SAT's and disappears. Her parents, send her off to a residential equine therapy program *Good Fences*, and Merritt meets Red.

Red is a failed racehorse and a terror within Good Fences, he has never bonded with any human, but Merritt is not afraid. Soon their sneaking rides, and after catching the attention of Red's owner, he sees the opportunity to make money from their bond and launches their competitive hunter/jump circuit. However, Merritt finds some of her problems following her, and one of them might be her favourite horse.

I went in hopeful for Dark Horses, I had heard some great things but unfortunately this book was a let down. Dark Horses as a title is pretty accurate, however I didn't really grasp how accurate it was before going into it. I also want to start out by saying readers with a background with horses may have a different experience as I did, the novel definitely detailed horse care and maintenance well. However, as someone who has never been around horses, I didn't care for it or connect to it.

The writing style was straight forward and told from two points of view: Merritt and Red. It was easy to read however it felt like it was written very young and both the characters (especially Red) were written in a juvenile manner.

The plot within Dark Horses was easy to read and fast paced, however that's where my enjoyment stopped. The plot seemed to be at unrealistic on many occasions, and you had to suspend your disbelief throughout sections of the story. Then once we came to the conclusion everything was left unresolved and left me feeling frustrated at wasting my time for the sub-par outcome.

I was excited to read about the characters within this story, who doesn't want a story based on damaged and broken characters coming together to work through their issues, but it wasn't this at all. The characters had no development throughout the story and their plot lines finished almost exactly the way they started. Then there was the little matter of the horses perspective... I think Red as a character is an unnecessary edition to the story, his perspective was completely unbelievable and both main characters were honestly unlikable.

Overall, Dark Horses was a twisted take on a contemporary story that tried to be more than it actually was. With a psychopathic horse and characters that were one dimensional. It's unfortunately a no from me.

Rating: 2/5

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Jay G says

Want to see more bookish things from me? Check out my YouTube Channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfer...>

I received this book as part of Booktube Tours in exchange for my honest review

VIDEO REVIEW TO COME SEPT 30th:

Dark Horses is told from two perspectives, Merritt a self destructive teenaged girl and an ex race horse named Red. After the death of her grandmother and horse, Merritt walks out in the middle of her SAT test after a night of drinking. Her parents opt to send her to Good Fences, an equestrian based rehab facility, where she meets Red. Red belongs to the owner's daughter Beatrice who also attends Good Fences. Red has been unable to bond with anyone and hasn't allowed anyone to ride him for years, until he meets Merritt. Their bond quickly catches the attention of Beatrice's owner, a very wealthy business man who decides to fund Merritt and Red to compete in horse races around the United States. Merritt develops a friendship with Beatrice and also a possible love interest in her competition, a rider named Carvin. Red does not take lightly to Merritt's new found friendships, anyone who comes between himself and Merritt poses a threat and he will stop at nothing to keep the two of them together forever.

The book was extremely easy to read, fast paced and fun to read. I really enjoyed the changing POV between Merritt and Red. I loved Red's point of view, he was such a jerk and I was laughing at most of the things he thought about. I still don't know how I feel about Merritt... at times I found her very bland and boring but other times I really liked her as a character. The insta-love between Carvin and Merritt was a bit of a bummer to me, although it took awhile for their relationship to actually develop, the initial onset came way to quickly in my opinion. You could really tell that the author has an extensive knowledge about horses and equestrian lifestyle based off of the vocabulary she uses and her writing in general on the topic. The writing did occasionally go off on tangents that I didn't find relevant to the plot development, it was still an enjoyable read! I did feel like the plot was a bit too far-fetched and convenient at times though. I also found the ending to be unresolved, I really want to know what happens next with Merritt and Carvin! Overall, I enjoyed the story!

Molly says

Let me be clear: not only did I want to love this book, I EXPECTED to love it. But I think it's my most-loathed book of the year.

And let me count the ways.

- Red is so horribly-written. He's written with a human voice. I expected a peek into the mind of the great beast. Instead he's written like a teenage boy who's also probably a rapist. He quotes song lyrics nonstop (and references myriad other things no horse would have knowledge of), he knows what the Merritt Parkway is offhand for some reason, and worst of all, his thought processes and voice are human (he mentions texting and says things like "What a freak.") An unbalanced human, but he's just written as a person. The idea of

alternating human and equine POVs was pure genius - but what good is that if the horse is written like a bitchy, spoiled emo teen in a horse's body?

- Merritt's story is the ultimate Mary Sue horse story. Not only do we get the typical "such an amazing rider she immediately starts showing A-rateds" crap, AND the "only one teen girl can gain the love of one angsty horse" plot, both painful cliches in the subgenre, we ALSO GET THE POV OF THE HORSE GOING ON AND ON ABOUT HOW SHE'S THE ONLY ONE HE LOVES AND SHE UNDERSTANDS HIM AND SHE'S PERFECT. It seriously reads like it was written by a preteen who wanted to one-up Joanna Campbell.

- The "attraction" between Merritt is nothing but queer-baiting. As soon as it's vaguely acknowledged, Beatrice is killed off so that Merritt can begin a real proper heterosexual romance that's an actual plotline with (attempted) emotional value.

It's just badly-written and it sucks because it's an amazing concept that in the hands of a competent writer could have been brilliant. What a waste - and man am I pissed that while I usually stick with library books, I purchased this one. If only you could return books for being terrible. I usually give books away when I'm done, but I'm just going to throw this one out. Because it's garbage.

Nemo (The Moonlight Library) says

SUMMARY

When Merritt walks out of her SATs and goes on a bender, her parents send her to an equine rehabilitation camp called Good Fences where she meets Big Red, a former racing Thoroughbred recovering from injury and with a Big Bad Attitude to match. Red takes a liking to Merritt and claims her as his own, and when the two impress their sponsor and join the professional show circuit, Red won't let anyone or anything come between him and his human.

PLOT

I really liked the idea of reading alternative points of view from both Merritt, a damaged teen girl, and Big Red, and equally damaged and somewhat unhinged beautiful chestnut Thoroughbred. Merritt had no idea Red was so malicious though, although she loved him, she still only thought of him as a horse whose responsibility she could pass over to someone else. Red and Merritt don't even start off liking each other and that's the best kind of relationship I like reading about. Red very soon decided that if he 'belongs' to Merritt then he's going to behave and do his best for her, and that's when they get pulled into the professional show circuits because let's face it, someone who walks out of their SAT isn't exactly going to go to university. Merritt's parents are largely absent and although she seems to bond with fellow competitor Carvin, he quickly cools off. Instead, the sponsor's reckless, out of control daughter Beatrice, working as Red's groom, revolves into Merritt's life and VERY briefly makes the audience question if there's going to be a bisexual romance before Big Red takes matters into his own... um... hooves.

It's Red's jealousy that I'm torn up over how I should feel. Because 1) I mean come on, he's a loyal herd animal and he clearly has chosen Merritt as his 'person', much the way one of my three cats has chosen me as her 'person' and is practically my little shadow and that is seriously one of the best feelings you can get from an animal you love. 2) I know Red knows he does the wrong thing on occasion but he does try to be

good for Merritt.

CHARACTERS

I loved Red's narrative voice. Because playing a radio soothed him, he knew a lot of lyrical references and forever threw them into his own narrative. Even though he doesn't speak, he sure gave off a lot of feeling and despite his nasty streak I really empathised with him. He was such a great character that even though he does bad things, I'm finding it hard to judge him harshly. He's smart and loyal and loves Merritt.

Merritt Wenner (whose name I like to think of more like 'Merit Winner') doesn't handle abandonment issues very well, so when people in her life leave her or she just can't cope, she likes to drink and take random drugs to deal with it, which is what landed her at Good Fences. She's abrasive and rebellious and the only thing good in her life is basically Red. I didn't really feel like she had as much of a character arc as the horse did because at the end of the novel she's in the same place she was at the beginning, and I was really disappointed when she half-heartedly entered a plot to steal Red only to quickly abandon him. Like she almost couldn't decide whether she loved him or not.

WRITING

The writing was contemporary, not exactly graceful, but fun with Red's lyrical inputs. I didn't really have an issue with it, it wasn't over the top purple or lyrical and it wasn't gritty and urban it just kind of was the middle of the road. Definitely the best thing about the writing was Red's narrative voice. I really felt like I was looking out of the eyes of a slightly deranged horse. Although it was kind of weird how smart he was... like he knew how much he weighed, for example. I thought that was weird.

PACING

The pace of this book was like that of a Thoroughbred – almost to the point of reckless. It felt rushed, like how quickly Bea's feelings for Merritt grew and then BAM that's all over. We completely missed Merritt's winter training in Florida and went straight to the professional circuit. It seemed like the author was just so keen on getting everything down and telling this somewhat thrilling story that the whole thing seemed rushed and could have done with some padding out. For example, the girls at the Good Fences all jumbled into one, even when one of them was plucked out and promoted to supporting character rather than bit player.

OVERALL

I really enjoyed *Dark Horses*. Because of the plural in the title I kept expecting another horse to be dark like Red but nope, it was just him. From the first moment I loved the idea of a horse over its rider and this book really delivered pretty much what I expected and what I wanted. I would really recommend it to YA readers who like a bit of a thrill or those readers who enjoy troubled teen stories.

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. This does not affect my opinion of the book or the content of my review.

Ally says

If it hadn't have been for the last 20%, this book would have been a 4-star read for me.

Told from the dual perspectives of Merritt and her horse Red, *Dark Horses* is a really beautiful story of friendship and growth. Until about 80% through the book when it brings in some apparently obligatory YA tropes that I thought I had escaped. Instalove? Check. Damaged girl who continues to relapse? Check. Absent parents? Check. Though this last one was present throughout the entire book.

Needless to say, I went from elated - I couldn't seriously imagine enjoying a book co-narrated by a horse - to angry and disappointed. After a certain incident (view spoiler), it seemed that the author decided to just continue on with the traditional YA story line. There was a lot of opportunity to do something different here. Rather than explore sexuality, the author gets rid of a character that might have made out main character unique and add some much needed diversity to the story. Similarly, characters suddenly became one-dimensional and suddenly we're back to guy meets girl, falls for girl, something tragic happens, exchange of "I love you's", etc.

I want to rate this at 2-stars just because of all of that, but I enjoyed the first 80% so much that I couldn't do it. Consider this a warning: read at your own risk - you may not hate the ending as much as I did and it's definitely worth it to be inside Red's head (that is, for the first 80% of the novel).

Natalie Monroe says

Introducing a brand new game show! Who Said It: Teenage Girl or Horse?

"I thought this girl wanted to make friends, but she'd already changed her mind and started talking trash about me. She was no different than Beatrice. At least I knew her name now: Merritt, like the highway."

"No sleep in Brooklyn!"

The boom-boom-clash beat of the classic Beastie Boys' song reverberated through my head."

"I imagined there was gossip about me. I could picture the discussion on a radio call-in show."

"What a freak."

"Couldn't she just text her?"

"It was one of the blondes. Amora or Nadia. I couldn't keep them straight."

If you guessed teenage girl for every single one, then you're **dead wrong**. All of them were pulled from a horse's POV. Thanks for playing!

Seriously though, what horse knows about texting? What horse can't identify people by smell and instead focuses on their blonde hair like a pre-feminist awakening tween? **Red's (the horse) thoughts are no different than a human's**. What's the point of the dual POV then? He calls a bridle and reins by its official names rather than identifying it as something cold and hard and tugged consistently at his mouth—descriptions I would expect animals to give.

Other things bugged me too, like Merritt mentally insisting Carvin is gay as a reason not to ask him out. That is so offensive on so many levels. It's like a boy eyeing up a hot girl in a bar, then tells his buddies that she "probably swings for the other team anyway" when they urge him to talk to her because he knows he doesn't have a shot.

The ending is neater than a Christmas bow and made me wonder if my copy had five chapters cut out. All loose threads are tied up, all problems are resolved. Which is great except the majority of the plot is focused on Red and Merritt's relationship instead of steadily advancing towards solving those problems.

I liked the premise. I still do, just not the execution.

ARC provided by Edelweiss. Quotes taken from an uncorrected galley proof and may be subject to change.

Tez says

[The horse dies :-((hide spoiler)]

Sammi says

[image error]
