



Bullet Work

Steve O'Brien

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Poetic ruminations about randomness punctuate the action in this mystery set on the “backside” of Fairfax Park’s racetrack: “Who would be wealthy, who would be poor? Who would have fame, who obscurity?...Into each life the second would come, without warning, without hint...Life became the response to the second.” These philosophical, foreboding passages transcend the novel’s specificity—its insular, transient community of racetrack devotees who endure long hours and low pay to be near the creatures they adore—to become an insightful analysis of character and motivation.

The track in season provides an irresistible draw for Dan, a divorced attorney who owns Aly Dancer, a filly who shows real potential. Unlike his betting companions, Magic Milt, who squanders his income at the track, and Lennie, a brilliant mathematician who supports himself on racetrack winnings, Dan relishes life on the backside. He is fascinated by the activity behind the track as well as by the personalities who populate it.

When an extortionist requires a “safety fee,” and murders two horses to make his point, Dan delays payment, opting instead for a round-the-clock human presence near Aly Dancer’s stall. In the meantime, he takes AJ, a young, taciturn hot walker with an uncanny ability to communicate with horses, under his wing after witnessing how the boy is bullied by other walkers and trainers. Dan faults himself for not intervening when three toughs harass the boy in a restaurant and vows to become as the boy’s protector. However, he underestimates the rancor that AJ’s talent inspires: “People attacked what they feared...The possibility that an event was beyond the realm of the cogent or the logical was not to be tolerated....That’s why gifts from the obscure were callously rejected and distrusted.”

Dan is at home when AJ is assaulted and “tied to a post with a blanket over his head” on top of a large pile of horse manure. When Dan finds him, he is half-dead, and the reader intuits that AJ may be too innocent and unique to function in the rough-and-tumble of the backside.

The novel’s conclusion takes Dan into danger in a deserted spot, and even though it ties up loose ends, O’Brien refuses readers the pat, satisfying wrap-up mystery readers may anticipate. Instead, as mourners come together for a funeral that leaves too many questions unanswered, readers are left to wonder about those who seek haven in the pockets and corners of a society that lacks both interest and empathy. Steve O’Brien’s first novel, *Elijah’s Coin*, won multiple awards in both young adult and men’s fiction.

ELIZABETH BREAU (April 1, 2011)

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