

Racetracker: Life With Grifters and Gamblers...

John Perrotta

Jen Ferguson, Illustrator

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For a behind-the-scenes view of the eccentric and unpredictable world of horse racing, Racetracker is a sure bet.

A single glance at the dodgy-looking figures populating the cover of John Perrotta's collection of tales about his six decades in horse racing is all it takes to impart the essence of *Racetracker: Life with Grifters and Gamblers...* Jen Ferguson's illustrations perfectly encapsulate the intense devotion, edginess and high-strung nature of the horses and people that hug the rails with their nervous eyes and death grips on their Daily Racing Forms. Ferguson plays Ralph Steadman to Perrotta's Hunter S. Thompson in this romp through the complicated world of horse racing. This "alternate universe" is deliciously full of a slew of unique individuals, from dollar bettors with arcane, superstition-laden handicapping strategies, to mega-millionaire owners flying their posses in helicopters from stable to track.

Perrotta was infected with the racing bug early in life by his father and grandfather, and in his variegated career he held almost every kind of horse-racing job from hot-walker to jockey agent to racetrack executive. He tried equine-less alternatives, but premed college studies, a stint as a sports journalist, and owning a health food store never matched the excitement of being a self-described "gambling degenerate," and he was always jonesing to get back to the ponies.

One doesn't need to be a fellow track junkie to appreciate this book; Perrotta is careful to explain different aspects about the sport to novices. Racing veterans will have plenty of other nuggets of insider information to savor; such as how people become horse investors and owners, or how some trainers purposefully instruct jockeys to keep young horses away from the lead at some races so they don't go "speed crazy" and burn out in longer races with bigger purses. These asides are nice counterpoints to his adrenaline-fueled tales about racing's heyday as a huge and glamorous spectator sport in the mid-twentieth century.

Racetracker is peppered with zesty language, humor, and brio to match its crowd of colorful personalities. The tales are a little less zesty in the later chapters when he chronicles his later years working with Due Process Stables owner Bob Brennan and working in the film, radio, and television industry on horse-racing projects. The infamous former owner of First Jersey Securities, Brennan was imprisoned for bankruptcy fraud, and the author appears uncharacteristically careful not to dish any dirt in these vignettes. These later stories lack the sizzle of earlier ones. Still, for a behind-the-scenes view of the eccentric and unpredictable world of horse racing, *Racetracker* is a sure bet.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (October 15, 2015)

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