

★ Shoot the Horses First: Histories

Leah Angstman

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In the sixteen sumptuous historical stories of Leah Angstman's *Shoot the Horses First*, outsiders and pioneers face disabilities and prejudice with poise.

An orphan shipped from Brooklyn to Illinois hopes to meet the right adoptive family; a Civil War veteran recalls the joy of a snowball fight during a harsh winter. Playing at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, Frederick Douglass's grandson dreams of being the first Black violinist to undertake a transcontinental tour. Women long to escape domesticity or prostitution to pursue careers.

The flash entries crystallize moments of realization, often about health: a man and a girl fail to outrun an outbreak of yellow fever; a doctor attempts a blood transfusion from a dog to a man. Such threads and reversals connect disparate narratives: in one, a boy is scorned for doing laundry and sewing; in another, a maid is mistaken for a boy when she sweeps a chimney.

Vintage horse motifs appear between the entries, whose dedication to period accuracy leads to keen cultural details. In the standout story "A Lifetime of Fishes," a white woman injured in a boating accident is taken in by Native Americans; she begins to learn their language and customs. A glossary defines the Wampanoag terms included.

The book's longer pieces shine; their out-of-the-ordinary romances are given space to develop. In the novella *Casting Grand Titans*, a botany professor in 1850s Iowa learns that her salary is 6% of a male colleague's. She strives for intellectual freedom, reporting a new-to-science species of moss, while working towards literal liberation for runaway slaves. In the tender "The Light Ages," a medical student determines to validate a part-paralyzed girl by recording her compositions on a phonograph for all to hear.

Set in the past among lives complicated by ill health and discrimination, the stories of *Shoot the Horses First* feature epiphanies and triumphs.

REBECCA FOSTER (January / February 2023)

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