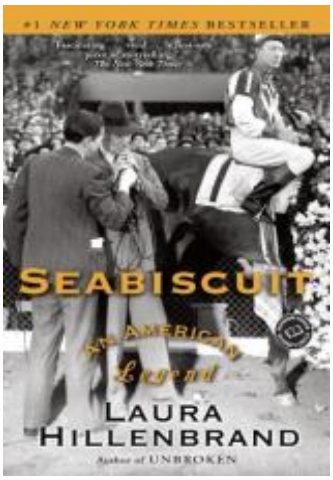
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Seabiscuit: An American Legend

by Laura Hillenbrand



About the Book

Seabiscuit was an unlikely champion. For two years he floundered at the lowest level of racing, before his dormant talent was discovered by three men. One was Tom Smith, an arthritic old mustang breaker. The second was Red Pollard, a half-blind jockey. The third was Charles Howard, a former bicycle repairman who made a fortune by introducing the automobile to the American West. Bought for a bargain-basement price by Howard and rehabilitated by Smith and Pollard, Seabiscuit overcame a phenomenal run of bad fortune to become one of the most spectacular, charismatic performers in the history of sports.

Discussion Guide

1. Seabiscuit grew so popular as a cultural icon that in 1938, he commanded more space in American newspapers than any other public figure. Considering the temper of the times as well as the horse's early career on the racetrack, what were the sources of The Biscuit's enormous popularity during that benchmark period of U.S. history? Would he be as popular if he raced today? What did the public need that it found in this horse?

2. The Great Match Race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral in 1938 evoked heated partisan passions. These passions spilled over on radio and into the daily prints, with each colt leading a raucous legion of followers to the barrier at Pimlico Race Course that autumn day. What were the differences separating these two horses, and what did each competitor represent in the American experience that set one apart from the other?

3. All jockeys in the 1930s endured terrible hardships and hazards, starving themselves to make weight, then competing in an exceptionally dangerous sport. For George Woolf and Red Pollard, there were additional factors that compounded the difficulties and dangers of their jobs--diabetes for the former and half-blindness for the latter. Why, in spite of this, did they go on with their careers? What were the allures of race riding that led them to subject themselves to such risk and torment?

4. What was the role of the press and radio in the Seabiscuit phenomenon? How did Howard use the media to his advantage? How did the media help Seabiscuit's career, and how was it a hindrance?

5. Seabiscuit possessed all the qualities for which the Thoroughbred has been prized since the English imported the breed's three foundation sires from the Middle East three hundred years ago. What were those qualities? What made this horse a winner?

6. Horses of Seabiscuit's stature, from Man o' War in the 1920s to Cigar in the 1990s, have always generated a powerful gravitational field of their own, attracting crowds of people into their immediate orbit, shaping relationships among them, and even affecting the personalities of those nearest them. How did Seabiscuit shape and influence the lives of those around him?

7. Red Pollard, Tom Smith, and Charles Howard formed an unlikely partnership. In what ways were these men different? How did their differences serve as an asset to them?

8. What critical attribute did Howard, Smith, and Pollard share? How did this shared attribute serve as a key to their success?

9. In what ways was each man in the Seabiscuit partnership similar, in his own way, to Seabiscuit himself? How did these similarities help them cultivate the horse's talents and cure his ailments and neuroses?

10. What lessons can be drawn from the successes of the Seabiscuit team? What does their story say about the role of character in life?

Author Bio

Laura Hillenbrand is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller SEABISCUIT: An American Legend, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, won the Book Sense Nonfiction Book of the Year award and the William Hill Sports Book of the Year award, landed on more than fifteen best-of-the-year lists, and inspired the film *Seabiscuit*, which was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Hillenbrand?s *New Yorker* article, ?A Sudden Illness,? won the 2004 National Magazine Award, and she is a two-time winner of the Eclipse Award, the highest journalistic honor in thoroughbred racing. She and actor Gary Sinise are the co-founders of Operation International Children (www.operationinternationalchildren.org), a charity that provides school supplies to children through American troops. She lives in Washington, D.C.

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Critical Praise

"Fascinating . . . Vivid . . . A first-rate piece of storytelling, leaving us not only with a vivid portrait of a horse but a fascinating slice of American history as well."

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