

A Fine Ride

By James McKinley

Book Review:

A Fine Place to Daydream: Racehorses, Romance, and the Irish, by Bill Barich. Knopf, 2006.

Full disclosure first: my maternal grandparents raised horses and bet on them, and my father played the ponies and sent the boy-me to the corner drugstore bookie with his bets. I grew up, therefore, with a predilection toward the Sport of Kings to the point where I later wrote a book about pari-mutuel wagering. Any wonder then that I've read Bill Barich's earlier musings about horse racing, notably *Laughing In the Hills*, with more than casual interest and envy?

So, we come to his book about horse racing in Ireland, and a fine ride it is, although sometimes the track is muddy. What Barich has wrought is a mostly contemporary history of Irish racing, with a dollop of English race-tracking lore stirred in for international flavor. You must add personal history because significant parts of this book deal with Barich's new love (after his 10 divorced years), for Imelda, an Irish woman with a remarkable devotion both to Barich and his obsession with betting parlors and trips to racing meets. Then there is the landscape of those trips, the hotels and drinks (you can't not drink and bet in Ireland, it seems) and romantic meals, all the peat-smoke ambience of horse-loving Ireland. Nobody does landscape better than Barich, and here in his new home—he's a well-traveled American of Californian influence—he's the odds-on favorite, in his portraits of people, pubs, animals, tracks.

The book's center is the Cheltenham Festival, a horse-racing meet in England's Cotswolds, where Irish horse-owners, breeders, trainers, jockeys, their charges, the horses, go across the Irish Sea

to show the Brits who are the best chasers and flat-racers, and then drink and brag about it, win or lose, often the latter. Barich is nothing if not chauvinistic about his adopted land.

Racing information is needed here: American horses race usually on flat, dirt tracks. We sometimes have turf races, meaning the horses run on grass. In almost all cases, American horses seldom run more than a mile and a half (for instance, The Belmont Stakes), and often only a quarter of a mile (the famous quarter-horse race at Ruidoso in New Mexico). While the Irish and British also run "flat races," Barich's favorite horses are "chasers," a generic term meaning horses that run what we call steeplechases, races in which horses jump "hurdles" (low embankments) or "fences" (higher, flexible obstacles), all the time navigating water and other terrain nuisances, over as much as four miles. Their jockeys, local heroes in Irish and English racing papers, are called "jump jockeys." They get hurt a lot when horses fall, as they frequently do; the horses often are destroyed; the jockeys usually live on with their broken bones and injured organs to race again and tell tales to Barich.

It's Barich's affectionate depictions of these tales and those of what are in the United States called "race-trackers"—breeders, owners, trainers, touts, bookmakers, bettors and the jockeys—that run well through the book. Two of Barich's horses, favored by him in the Cheltenham, carry the names "Best Mate" and "Moscow Flyer" (there's another named "Beef or Salmon" that deserves his losses). Barich writes: "In reversal of boxing protocol, Best Mate entered the paddock first, preceding the challengers. He looked splendid, elegant like a lion. . . . Henrietta Knight soon joined her horse, as did Terry Biddlecombe and Jim Lewis' gang. They had a studied nonchalance, that McManus-like talent for concealing their emotions. . . ." Nice stuff, especially if you read the book wanting to know a large cast of folk and histories, attested to by the Acknowledgements and Bibliography.

But me, I wanted the track less muddied and dusted more with Barich's patented race descriptions, even more of rainy race

meets and hot whiskeys and Guinnesses and the betting rooms and sweet dinners with Imelda. I wanted more of the stuff of humans obsessed not solely with the business of racing, but with, yes, its chancy romance. More of Barich's other passions, because I like a memoir better than a sports report. I know that's a cheap criticism—commenting on a book that the author didn't write.

That said, *A Fine Place to Daydream* is a fine place to while away an afternoon, and dreams are what horse racing is all about. The long-shot who comes first with your money on him. The after-shock of realizing you really are blessed with all of it, the thrill, the money, the drinks, your love of the sport and the woman who lets you indulge it, and more. Or the feelings I had as a boy when I came back from the corner bookie. I couldn't wait to tell my father he'd won for a change. The losing I left to him to ponder, just as Barich and all bettors must. So in the end, following the "bang-tails," as my father called them, has many rewards. Not always winnings, but the kind of book Barich has written is pay-off enough.