

# BookTalk

## RACING SPIRITS

By Ann Zinsmeister

*Seabiscuit: An American Legend*

By Laura Hillenbrand

Ballantine Books, 399 pages, \$15



In the last issue of *TAE* (LIVE), university president John Silber cites his favorite definition of an intellectual: “a person who has a commanding

knowledge of a field that’s really none of his business as a professional.” One might extend that to say that the mark of a great non-fiction writer is someone who uses “commanding knowledge” to rivet laymen to a subject they know (and think they care) nothing about. Judged on those grounds, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, an artfully crafted story about a legendary thoroughbred racehorse of the 1930s, is a masterpiece. Laura Hillenbrand has enticed millions of Americans into territory they hadn’t dreamed could interest them. I myself picked up the book as someone who didn’t know a furlong from a furlong, yet was drawn in to the point where I now breathlessly anticipate my first trip to Saratoga to watch the ponies.

Most fitting for an installment of *TAE* devoted to “American Originals,” this

book profiles a wondrously fresh and authentic series of individuals. Not only the horse, but also Seabiscuit’s owner, trainer, and jockey captured the hearts of Americans during a particularly harsh moment in our country’s history—the final years of the Great Depression. In 1938 there were actually more newspaper column inches devoted to a crooked-legged horse named Seabiscuit than to Hitler, Roosevelt, or Mussolini. Hillenbrand’s absorbing account of the colt’s rise to fame will take you on an unforgettable journey through America’s golden age of horse racing, and introduce you to the remarkable collection of men who brought it to life.

In 1903, just as the era of the horseless carriage was dawning, Charles Howard’s restless spirit and intense ambition carried him from New York to San Francisco. Applying his entrepreneurial zest and skills as a bicycle mechanic, Howard set up a Bay Area shop working on those cranky, newfangled automobiles, then became a mechanic and driver at the first primitive auto races. Soon, Howard met Buick Automobiles mastermind Will Durant, and talked his way into running one of the first Buick dealerships on the West Coast. When Durant went bankrupt, Howard had become wealthy enough to bail him out. Durant repaid him with General Motors stock and a percentage of the company’s gross sales, for life.

With his mushrooming wealth, Howard purchased a ranch and a stable of thoroughbred racehorses. He eventually wound up with a ragged, low-built

colt called Seabiscuit, who led him on the ultimate ride. Howard escorted his prize from coast to coast, triumph to triumph, and eventually back home, where he ended his days attending to the smallest needs of his beloved animal.

Howard could never have achieved this success without trainer Tom Smith—a man as quiet and unassuming as Howard was flashy. Smith was on the prowl for an animal whose talents had escaped the Eastern racing establishment. After much searching, he found a creature with fast, obstreperous bloodlines that was stuck with a trainer too busy to untangle its puzzling peculiarities.

Smith—who spent his early years alone on America’s empty Plains—was more at home with horses than with men. He had tamed mustangs for the British in the Boer War, and earlier toiled as a deer hunter, mountain lion tracker, and cattle and sheep driver. He took one look at Seabiscuit and knew there was something great lying dormant within the buck-kneed horse. Smith began to painstakingly build a world around his find, among other things recruiting just the right rider.

Jockies are a breed unto themselves. Living daily with danger and fear, they suffer to keep their low weight—fasting and sweating themselves down continuously. Even after near-death “spills,” they often return to the track before full recovery. Red Pollard was such a rider, and he came to understand Seabiscuit like no other rider. A former boxer of Irish descent, and a devourer of great lit-

erature, Pollard had a gift for working with troublesome horses. Like Smith, Pollard had a natural empathy for animals, and specialized in steering racers that no one else would go near. Seabiscuit and his rider developed a mutual understanding. "So long as you treat him like a gentleman, he'll run his heart out for you," said Pollard, who unearthed in his charge what trainer Smith described as a "more natural inclination to run than any horse I have ever seen."

As Seabiscuit was ferried from East to West and track to track, he captured the imagination of Americans across the country. People attended his races in record numbers and even sought him out at train stations on his cross-country journeys. At an otherwise low period in American history, people were lifted out of their slumps by their zeal for this hearty horse and his remarkable human handlers.

Contemporary Americans trying to forget their stock portfolios might want to settle into a comfy armchair and read *Seabiscuit*. It will transport you to a different era filled with heroic characters. You'll feel like you're right there at the races, having just placed your bet, waiting for the bell to ring.

And they're off.

Ann Zinsmeister is a TAE proofreader.

## WHAT'S RIGHT?

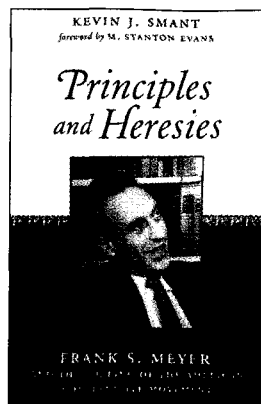
By Gerald Russello

*Principles and Heresies: Frank S. Meyer and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement*

By Kevin Smant

ISI Books, 381 pages, \$29.95

The life of Frank Meyer (1909-1972) encapsulates most of the great political and intellectual struggles of the last century. Born into an affluent New Jersey family, Meyer spent over a decade serving the Communist Party, first as a student at the London School of Economics, later in



Chicago, before making his way to conservatism and William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *National Review*, for which he served as an editor and writer. Over

the next three decades, Meyer became a central figure on the American Right, both politically and intellectually. In *Principles and Heresies*, Indiana University history professor Kevin Smant provides the first book-length study of Meyer. It's an important contribution to American conservatism, and to postwar American political and intellectual life in general.

Although Meyer left the Communist Party in 1945 (at some personal risk), his experiences as a high-ranking radical remained with him lifelong. Having seen its dangers up close, Meyer made the struggle against communism a focal point of his work. In painting the communist demimonde of the 1930s and 1940s, Smant further confirms the historical record—now acknowledged by all except for the most recalcitrant leftists—that American communists were then working actively to overthrow our nation's Constitutional system. There were calculated, long-term conspiracies to destroy the United States long before Osama bin Laden arrived on the scene, this book reminds us, and it is the example of people like Meyer that shows us such attempts can be resisted.

Meyer's abandonment of communism was influenced by two books: Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, and Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*. They introduced Meyer to freedom, especially economic freedom, and the free intellectual tradition of the West. Uniting freedom and tradition—what became known as "fusionism"—became the hallmark of Meyer's work. In his

groundbreaking 1962 book *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo*, Meyer tried to "fuse" the conservative desiderata of order and freedom through their common roots in the "nature of man."

Slavish traditionalism, Meyer argued, leaves no room for moral choice, and thus ultimately offers no opposition to tyrannical collectivism. Yet pure personal liberation is just as undesirable, forgetting as it does that freedom has individual virtue as its ultimate goal. "Truth withers where freedom dies, however righteous the authority that kills it; and individualism uninformed by moral value rots at the core and soon surrenders to tyranny," Meyer concluded.

Meyer had a great capacity for friendship as well as for vigorous disagreement, sometimes with the same people. His isolated Woodstock farm was a place of pilgrimage for new and established conservatives. His marathon phone calls with friends were legendary, as were the vitriolic attacks in his columns on those whom Meyer thought heretical. Meyer was also a player in Republican politics and conservative activism. He organized the New York Conservative Party (which elected James Buckley to the Senate in 1970) and the American Conservative Union, and helped marginalize the John Birch Society when it threatened to discolor legitimate anti-communism. He emerges from this account as an astute political strategist, as well as a crucial voice in the editorial councils of *National Review* in debates over Nixon, Goldwater, Reagan, Vietnam, civil rights, and a host of other issues.

While communists have now largely vanished, the libertines and authoritarians who also worried Meyer remain, on both sides of the ideological divide. In a time in which the nation is once again debating the relative merits of individual freedom versus social order and protection, Meyer's careful defense of both is well worth revisiting.

Gerald J. Russello, a lawyer in New York City, is writing a study of Russell Kirk.