

FICTION

A girl and her horse anchor a story of defiance

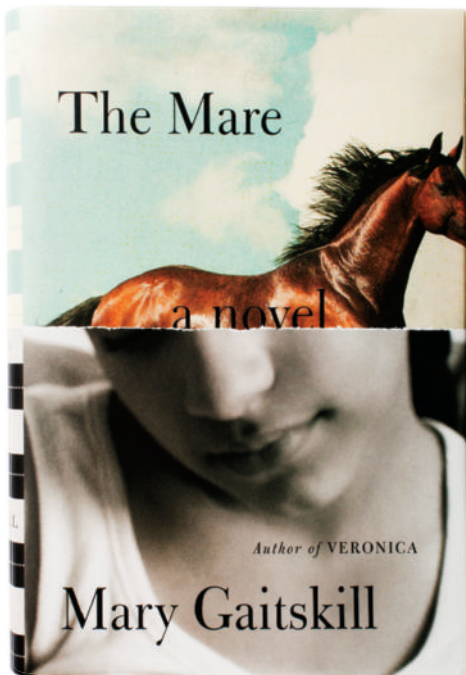
MARY GAITSKILL MAY BE THE LAST AUTHOR ONE WOULD expect to write a story of a girl and her horse. The reigning classic in the equine genre, Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet*, tells the sweet story of Velvet, a teenage girl who learns to ride the steeplechase on her beloved piebald. By contrast, Gaitskill's short stories and novels have, until now, regarded life less as a journey toward triumph than as a series of humiliations to be (barely) endured. The author's best-known story was adapted into the BDSM film *Secretary*; her 2005 novel *Veronica*, a bitter masterpiece, granted its narrator a glimpse of fame and achievement before plunging her into poor health and degradation.

And yet Gaitskill has, with her new novel *The Mare*, learned a different gait. This novel's protagonist, also named Velvet, is tough and taciturn, but she opens up on a Fresh Air Fund trip to upstate New York after meeting an ill-tempered horse with whom she has an intimate, almost supernatural connection. Velvet's life in New York City, where she lives with a stern, illiterate Dominican mother who cannot speak English and rents out Velvet's bedroom to survive, comes to feel like a shadow version of the life she experiences while riding.

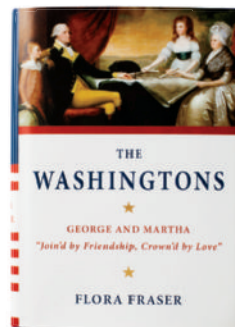
There's moral complexity to *The Mare*. Velvet's host Ginger, a recovering alcoholic coming to terms with the death of her sister, is motivated by a potent mix of altruism, a sublimated desire for a daughter and the wish to live her own life again, but better. (Her husband Paul, less so.) And Velvet's mother, who'd be easy for a novelist to render as an obstacle to be overcome, is animated by a complicated but no less real love.

We see the story through all these perspectives in alternating first-person narrations that give a real sense of each character's passions and flaws. *The Mare* is far from childlike, but it is a novel of late childhood: that state of being in which one is constantly aware of but unable to reach an independent life beyond the present.

By the time the barriers of geography, mind-set and circumstance erode to bring all the characters together, we've seen exactly how judgment has held each of them back. It's only through outright defiance of what's expected of her that Velvet is able to experience a moment of grace. It's an overtly sentimental moment on its face, and one that gains new resonance for the reader, who knows that it's not only Velvet who's breaking free. —DANIEL D'ADDARIO



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HISTORY

Marriage tips from the first First Couple

IT'S A SELF-EVIDENT TRUTH that George Washington set precedents. In her new book *The Washingtons*, a biography of America's founding marriage, Flora Fraser makes the less evident point that Martha Washington set some too and that together they paved the way for First Couples to follow.

The Washingtons can be a model for the rest of us too. George and Martha had a full partnership and a functional blended family, in which George fully embraced his stepchildren as his own. Privately and publicly, according to Fraser's account, they weren't stingy with affection. Martha, predating Joni Mitchell by about 200 years, called George her "Old Man"; his comrade-in-arms Henry Lee III once noted that George, in turn, was "exemplarily tender" to Martha.

They also knew that marriage takes work. It's pointless to "look for perfect felicity before you consent to wed," George would write to a granddaughter in 1794—but whether or not he sought it, he and Martha are proof that you can get pretty close.

—LILY ROTHMAN