

A story, not the story of the Depression years

Seabiscuit, written and directed by Gary Ross

By David Walsh
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Seabiscuit, written and directed by Gary Ross, based on the book by Laura Hillenbrand

Seabiscuit was a race-horse who aroused great popular interest in the US in the late 1930s. Something of an underdog, undersized and with a poor previous track record, he electrified crowds with his speed and fighting spirit. The human beings around him—his owner Charles S. Howard, trainer Tom Smith and jockey Johnny ‘Red’ Pollard—were also unusual and colorful figures. Laura Hillenbrand wrote a best-selling account of the circumstances (*Seabiscuit: An American Legend*) and Gary Ross has now filmed a version.

Seabiscuit follows the traumas undergone by the three central figures and their subsequent resurrection. Howard (Jeff Bridges), a successful car dealership owner in San Francisco, loses a son in a heart-breaking accident and a wife to divorce. Horseman Smith (Chris Cooper) finds himself at loose ends after the Western frontier comes to an end and the age of the automobile dawns. As an adolescent, Pollard (Tobey Maguire) is cut off from his family in Canada and forced to make his way as a journeyman jockey and boxer.

Seabiscuit unites them and ultimately offers a means by which they overcome their past failures and realize their dreams. He becomes a national sensation in 1937, defeats the country’s most celebrated race-horse War Admiral in a head-to-head competition in November 1938 (without Pollard) and ultimately wins the most lucrative purse of the day in the Santa Anita Handicap in March 1940 (after enduring a career-threatening injury and with a seriously damaged Pollard on his back).

Any work of history, any illumination or distortion of the past serves purposes in the present.

Hillenbrand’s book makes pleasant enough reading, although it hardly creates a dent as serious cultural or social history. Her analysis of the Great Depression, the crucial historical background for her work, fits into six paragraphs. In that passage Hillenbrand argues that by February 1937 the Depression’s “sweeping devastation was giving rise to powerful new social forces.” The author names two—“a burgeoning industry of escapism” and “technological innovations,” radio in particular. She continues: “The modern age of celebrity was dawning. The new machine of fame stood waiting. All it needed was the subject himself. At that singular hour, Seabiscuit, the Cinderella horse, flew over the line in the Santa Anita Handicap.”

Hillenbrand is attuned to certain issues and writes adequately about them. Much of the social universe, however, escapes her attention. In another day, when memories were fresher and the social climate more favorable, an historian—even of thorough-bred racing—would probably have found it challenging to refer to “February 1937” and avoid mention of the high-point of the wave of sit-down strikes reached that

month at General Motors in Flint, Michigan. Indeed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that volatile year some 400,000 American workers engaged in sit-down strikes—potentially a significant challenge to capitalist private property.

The absence of any reference to one of the most dramatic and explosive events of February 1937 is all the more startling when one considers that the life of one of Hillenbrand’s principal protagonists, Howard, was bound up with the automobile industry and specifically General Motors and, furthermore, that, as she writes, the “scattered lives” of her three leading characters had come “to an intersection” at a Detroit race-track in the summer of 1936.

There is no reason to believe that the omission was a conscious one. To many members of the educated or quasi-educated middle class in America at present the life-and-death social struggles of another era have little or no resonance. For Hillenbrand, who suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome and remains more or less restricted to her home, the Seabiscuit story seems primarily to signify the principle of *personal* perseverance in the face of physical and other kinds of suffering.

Filmmaker Gary Ross (writer of *Big* and *Dave*, director of *Pleasantville*) adopts a somewhat more politically-conscious approach than Hillenbrand to the events, but given the nature of his outlook, the overall result is shallow and largely delusive. A former speech writer for Bill Clinton and delegate to a Democratic National Convention, Ross wants his film to inspire those in his audience bitter or demoralized by *social hardship* with this fable about steadfastness in the face of adversity.

In the film’s production notes, the director explains, “Red lost his family, Howard lost a son and Smith lost his way of life. How do you transcend that kind of pain, overcome the grief? What I discovered in the story was three characters all broken that could have quit. Instead they reached out to each other and formed a unique nuclear family.”

Beyond that, Ross means the story as a metaphor for a “broken” America in the 1930s and presumably at any time of economic and social difficulty. The filmmaker has included a narration by historian David McCullough that refers in glowing terms to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration. About the “New Deal” McCullough intones, “It had a lot of names ... but it really meant one thing. For the first time in a long time, someone cared.” Clinton too, it must be remembered, felt one’s “pain.”

Ross’s uplifting message is repeated at regular intervals throughout the film. It makes its way into virtually every scene. One character or another is bound to recite, “Sometimes when the little guy doesn’t know he’s the little guy, he can do big things,” or “You don’t throw a whole life away just ‘cause it’s banged up a little” or “Sometimes all somebody needs is a second chance” and, finally, “We didn’t fix

this horse. He fixed us—and we fixed each other.”

Verbal, visual and dramatic clichés are piled upon one another until the closing credits. From the first sequences no spectator will be in doubt as to the fate of the three men and their race-horse. Obstacles and setbacks are merely occasions for the film to redouble its commitment to the characters’ ultimate triumph. Each scene—rather, each camera angle, lighting arrangement, vocal mannerism, body gesture and note on the soundtrack is organized and directed toward that end. The film is being pulled along at every instant by the gravitational force of its inevitable heartwarming and cathartic conclusion.

Ross’s *Seabiscuit* has been described as “Capra-esque,” but, frankly, even Frank Capra’s films were never as simple-minded or linear as this. The relationship between filmmakers, audiences and social reality in the 1930s was different and would not have permitted it. Social polarization in America and a world of \$100-million-or-more films have helped create a genuinely unhealthy situation.

The tale is intended as a populist celebration of the “little guy,” the “underdog” who overcomes enormous odds. The production notes breathlessly depict the race between War Admiral and Seabiscuit as “a contest between two worlds: the East Coast establishment of bankers and their beautiful horses versus a nation of downtrodden but spirited have-nots who championed a ragtag team of three displaced men and their unlikely challenger.” (A *Washington Post* critic correctly remarks about Ross’s thoroughbred, “He’s a salvation machine ... a kind of surrogate for FDR.” Absurdly, the faces of desperate men and women cheering the Seabiscuit team seem intended to bring to mind Walker Evans photographs.)

In stuffing the story of Seabiscuit into this framework, however, Ross has inevitably sacrificed a portion of the truth. Hillenbrand’s work is limited, but it presents facts that contradict the film’s oversimplified and mythologized version of events.

Only in a country where right-wing billionaire Ross Perot was able to posture as the defender of the “little man” could Charles Howard be described as a “displaced” man who represented “a nation of spirited have-nots.” Following an agreement with General Motors chief Will Durant in 1909, Howard, Hillenbrand notes, “was soon the world’s largest distributor in the fastest-growing industry in history.” A millionaire many times over, Howard purchased in the 1920s a 17,000-acre ranch in California’s redwood country north of San Francisco. (Ross’s screenplay also clearly implies that Howard lost his only son to the fatal accident, when, in fact, the auto magnate had several children.)

Trainer Tom Smith had certainly suffered financial and psychological difficulties in the Depression, along with countless others, but the film’s implication that he somehow drifted directly from lassoing mustangs on the open plain to directing Seabiscuit’s rise to racing success is misleading. Smith had been working with racehorses for more than a decade, including a stint for “the winningest trainer in the nation.” He had operated in relative obscurity, but when banker George Giannini introduced Smith to Charles Howard, he told the latter, “Now you can have the best trainer in the country.”

Pollard had known more than his share of ups and downs, including genuinely painful experiences as a teenager attempting to survive in the harsh world of bargain basement horse-racing, but he was hardly an unknown quantity in 1936 as *Seabiscuit* suggests. Hillenbrand explains that in 1928 Pollard along with his friend George Woolf had

taken “the racing world by storm. ... Pollard earned assignments on nearly three hundred mounts and guided them to more than \$20,000 in total purse earnings. His fifty-three winners placed him in a tie for twentieth in winning percentage among fully employed riders in North America.”

And Seabiscuit himself, although small in stature and having had his talents go unrecognized and skills misused, hardly came from nowhere. He was a descendant of Man o’War, perhaps the most celebrated racehorse of all time, through his sire, “the brilliantly fast, exceptionally handsome Hard Tack.” (War Admiral was the son of Man o’ War.)

That Ross was obliged to “change details and ... fictionalize parts”—to use his phrase—in this significant manner is not accidental. Treated objectively and soberly the story of Seabiscuit, a fascinating enough account of one courageous animal and a team of remarkable racing professionals, simply could not have been made to conform to the director’s schema.

There is a relationship between the *depth* of a drama, on the one hand, and social-historical truth, on the other. In his imagination—and his scenario—Ross can manhandle the conflict between Howard’s entourage and the group around War Admiral into representing any process he likes. On screen it can be made to stand for the struggles of the “underdogs” during the Depression and their eventual “salvation” under Roosevelt’s New Deal. However, there are artistic consequences. If an artist does not penetrate (directly or indirectly) to the fundamental social-historical conflicts of a given period, if, for example, he falsely elevates an entertaining but somewhat accidental episode into *the* story or *one of the* stories of its time, he will be forced to resort to trickery and juggling with the facts and, consequently, the work will seem unreal and overblown. It can never have a profound impact.

After all, contrary to the claims or beliefs of many today, drama springs from life. It is not arbitrarily or merely subjectively derived. The emotional and moral impact of a story is related in part to the truth of its reflection of life. To make *Seabiscuit* into a parable about a nation’s recovery and survival in hard times only deceives people about American society and history. In the end, such an effort is meant, rather flimsily, to “keep hope alive,” at a time when serious doubts about the viability of the present set-up are forming in many minds.

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