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# Book review: Chestnut Mare, Beware

By Kate O'Hare

Mystery writer Jody Jaffe made her debut last year with *Horse of a Different Killer.* Set on the southern show circuit, the book earned Jaffe an Agatha Award nomination and was one of the most successful novels on the Ballantine crime-fiction list.

It introduced the character of Natalie Gold, an expatriate northerner working as a newspaper reporter in Charlotte, NC. With her unruly red hair and forthright manner, the Jewish Nattie doesn't quite fit in with southern society; but she has found success on the hunter circuit with her beloved mare, Brenda Starr. As hinted at in *Horse of a Different Killer,* she also might just find romance with fellow reporter Henry Goode, a divorced, devoted father of two rambunctious boys.

Nattie also has a little something special, a bit of a psychic sense that is sometimes useful, at other times irritating.

Now Nattie is back in Jaffe's second effort, *Chestnut Mare, Beware,* currently available in hardcover from one of Ballantine's imprints, Fawcett Columbine. Even though hers and Henry's investigation in *Horse of a Different Killer* earned a front-page byline, Nattie is still toiling away as the fashion correspondent, hoping for another chance to break out of covering the rag trade.

The chance comes when Henry gets wind of threats being made against an A-Z list of bigwigs in the Carolinas and Virginia. Nattie recognizes some of the names from the horse-show circuit, including Santee Mundell, an industrialist who spends scads of money keeping his beautiful daughter, Topping, supplied with top-of-the-line show horses. Unfortunately, his money can't buy her talent in the saddle.

But it's Henry's story; and Nattie has to figure out what to put in her fashion column, along with preparing for a riding clinic in Virginia with the famed trainer George Morris (who makes a memorable cameo appearance). In the course of a story about an organization for parents who have lost children, Nattie runs into Reenie, the grieving mother of Josane Ashmore, a former Miss Connecticut whom Nattie interviewed during her days as a reporter in upstate New York.

Nattie stops by Reenie Ashmore's house on Christmas Day (on the way to visit her own mother in Greensboro, NC) and learns that Josane died several years before in Middleburg, VA, in what was supposed to have been a riding accident on her willful chestnut mare, Rita. But Reenie suspects murder.

Meanwhile, Henry announces he's headed to northern Virginia to drop his boys off with their mother for a visit and to check some of the names on his list. Nattie realizes that she has to head to Virginia anyway for her clinic with Morris (and she's dying for a break from fashion), so why not tag along with Henry and ask a few questions about Josane (who, fortunately, is from one of the towns serviced by Nattie's paper).

Before long, Nattie finds herself hip deep in intrigue involving the moneyed horsey set of northern Virginia, the tobacco industry, and good old-fashioned motives for crimes like hate, revenge, and jealousy. As a bonus, her relationship with Henry takes some surprising turns—but not before hitting a bump in the road named Topping Mundell.

Jaffe proves the value of the old adage about writing what you know. For the last 25 years, Jaffe has been riding and showing hunters. She also spent ten years as a feature writer for the *Charlotte* (NC) *Observer.* Her view of the show-horse world is clear-eyed and unflinching. It's a world she obviously loves but about which she has few illusions.

*Chestnut Mare, Beware* offers Jaffe the opportunity, through Nattie, to make barbed comments about the recent horse-killing scandal and some of its

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