

Book Review

“Chantilly Dawns” by Lissa Oliver

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I've never been entirely sure about racing fiction. Over the years, I may have read the odd Dick Francis novel, and perhaps two or three of John Francome's books, but I have never been entirely bowled over by the genre. Perhaps, having been able to see behind the scenes at MJR, I have looked in vain for a novel whose characters seem to speak with authentic voices, voices which chime with my own experiences in the racing world. And, of course, the two highly successful novelists whom I've already mentioned competed at the highest level in the world of National Hunt racing, with its subtle (and not so subtle) differences from the Flat.

Readers may recall, however, that I enjoyed Charlie Brooks' foray into the field with his book 'Citizen', and, of course, Michael Tanner's 'The Tinman's Farewell', based on the life and death of the legendary Fred Archer, was an excellent read. However, 'Chantilly Dawns' by Lissa Oliver is a book I thoroughly enjoyed and would recommend to anyone interested in racing fiction and particularly to aficionados of the Flat.

A look at the author's credentials for writing such a book helps to explain why I enjoyed it so much. A freelance horseracing journalist by profession, Lissa Oliver is the European Correspondent for Australia's *Racetrack* magazine. She has also written regularly for *The Irish Field*, *European Bloodstock News*, *European Trainer* and *International Thoroughbred*, as well as contributing from time to time to the *Racing Post* and *Pacemaker Owner/Breeder*. Her knowledge of racing is highly impressive, and, as a result, those 'voices' I mentioned hit the right note with me.

The book's hero is Marcel Dessaint, a French champion jockey who has lost his licence to ride after a succession of his fancied rides failed to match up to expectations. Filled with self-doubt, he is eventually persuaded to fight to clear his name and to discover the truth behind the horses' defeats. One of the book's main strengths lies in its accuracy over racing details – the statue of Gladiateur at Longchamp, the details of Newmarket and the author's understanding of the timing and relative importance of the two-year-old races in the Pattern. Particularly impressive is the passage which deals with an important owner's daughter's reaction to a trainer's plan to run a two-year-old of high potential in the Prix de Conde, selling the plan as a prep race for the Criterium de Saint-Cloud. "Well, it's a poor choice," she comments. "And a dangerous one. His value will hardly soar with a Group Three win, but it will halve his purchase tag if he loses." Such hard-headed commercialism is a necessary part of a top owner's make-up in this day and age, and the book is all the better for its appreciation of that reality.

Dessaint is a sympathetic character, and I found myself eagerly turning the pages as the story reached its denouement to discover his fate. So far as I am aware, this is the author's first venture into the world of racing fiction. I, for one, will await her return eagerly.

John Scanlon