

Lissa OLIVER

The new Dick Francis?

Irish-based horseracing journalist, Lissa Oliver, is known locally for her literary contributions to *Racetrack* magazine, the GavelHouse website and, more recently, *Track To Track*. In Europe, her features appear in *International Thoroughbred*, *European Trainer*, *The Irish Field* and the daily *European Bloodstock News*. And, as a serving member of the Kildare Committee of the Irish Thoroughbred Breeders' Association, she writes many of their educational booklets. In both 2008 and 2009 Lissa was nominated for the UK's prestigious Clive Graham Horserace Journalist of the Year at the annual Derby Awards in London and, was award a special commendation for having again been nominated in 2010.

But Lissa is also a published novelist with a rapidly growing popularity in Europe that is poised to go global with books such as *Gala Day*, *Nero: The Last Caesar* and the recently released *Chantilly Dawns*.

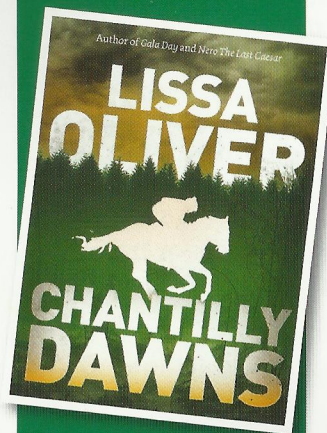
Why horse racing, Lissa? Was your father a trainer/jockey? Were you raised in the country, a la National Velvet?

"I was brought up on a London council estate," Lissa explains, "so there was no family involvement with horses. My passion was for books ... even before I started school. One day I picked up a book called *The Brigadier* by John Hislop: the story of champion racehorse Brigadier Gerard and I was hooked.

"That was the turning point. Hislop not only told Brigadier Gerard's story, which gave me such an immediate understanding of racing, but he introduced me to the past and the fascination of pedigrees ... an instant enrolment in all things racing. My next book was *Fred Archer's biography* and I cried my eyes out at the ending. ➤



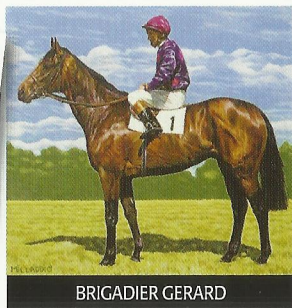
“ IF YOU HAVE A PASSION FOR SOMETHING, ALWAYS STAY FOCUSED, ALWAYS WORK TOWARDS IT, AND EVENTUALLY IT WILL HAPPEN FOR YOU. YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT HAPPEN. ”



What I loved about Archer was his passion for racing. He killed himself because he could no longer ride. I couldn't ride, I had no involvement with racing, yet I shared that passion and understood the driving force behind his sacrifice ... the sacrifice that all jockeys make. If there's no such word as Jockeyphile then they should invent it just for me! They are my heroes."

Turning theory into practice?

"I was 14 and obsessive!" Lissa laughs. "I wrote to the TV pundits and Brough Scott invited me to a racemeeting. He made me feel so welcome and I was introduced to Joe Mercer, Brigadier Gerard's jockey and my hero at that time. After that, I went racing as often as I could. My parents knew it was a safe environment and it was still free entry as I was underage."



BRIGADIER GERARD

And your interest in Australia?

"I used to buy The Sporting Life every day with my school lunch money (probably why I'm quite thin!) and I started to notice the name of

Kingston Town cropping up in the international results at unheard of regularity! The top European horses tend to run every four to six weeks and at their specialised distance, while here was a horse running every other day, it seemed, winning sprints as easily as Cup races! He was a phenomenon. So I started to subscribe to Turf Monthly. I must have written quite impassioned letters, because Turf Monthly published them! They introduced me to some Australian racing pen pals, including my best mate to this day, Maggie Creighton. Maggie taught me so much about your racing and the heroes of the past."

So writing letters turned into ...?

"I never realised writing could ever be anything but a hobby. I left school and I could no longer afford to go racing. I tried to work in the stud industry, but that was the early 1980s when girls were just not given the opportunities. Following a stud management course I switched tack completely and worked in the theatre for a year, but racing was my first love and I began working for Ladbrokes, the betting office chain. It was the closest I ever thought I'd get to racing. I spent my lunch breaks in the back office, writing a racing novel."

Yet, you ended up in Ireland?

"I married in 1986 and we sold up and moved to Kildare in Ireland (not far from the Curragh racecourse).

We swapped a small terrace house for a bungalow on 10 acres! We lived frugally, but had time to pursue the things we enjoyed. For me, that was writing and horses.

"I became focused on writing as an author, rather than as a hobby. The move to Ireland couldn't have been better for us. I even have my own ex-racehorse out in the garden! Every dream came true, but it wasn't overnight. If you have a passion for something, always stay focused, always work towards it, and eventually it will happen for you. You have to make it happen."



FRED ARCHER

How did you make it 'happen'?

"I self-published two novels, one a racing thriller (Gala Day), the other a fictionalised biography of the Roman Emperor Nero. That was nominated for several top awards and was commissioned as a film script, which I wrote, although the film never went

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into production. That gave me confidence as a writer. Recognition is very important, because writing is such a solitary pursuit. That's why I involve myself so much in the teaching and encouragement of new and would-be writers."

OK, now that you have a full time gig writing, which do you prefer ... magazines or books?

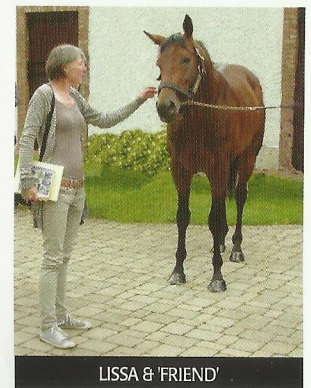
"I couldn't choose between the two. Working as a racing journalist is just unbelievable, a dream come true. I have a press pass to go racing, without which I could never afford to go. I pinch myself every time I set off to interview someone. I get to interview people I hero-worship. I visit studs and racing yards. That's not work! And every good article leads to new magazines and more work, so I'm truly blessed.

"But writing novels is a wonderful form of escapism, no different to reading novels. I get just as swept up in the characters and plot as a reader would. My novels are all character-driven, so I never really know what's going to happen next. The plot is my idea, but the characters don't think like me and usually have their own agenda! My latest novel, Chantilly Dawns, published by Book Republic, was just such a sheer pleasure to write. I loved the main

character, a disgraced French Flat race jockey, and he gelled so perfectly with the other characters in the story, they all more or less wrote it for me – I just guided them.

"The book has been described as a gripping thriller and has already been nominated for the Golden Dagger Award for crime fiction, but I never saw it as such and still don't. For me, it was just the story of Marcel, a jockey, forced to make sacrifices and hold on to his life. That encapsulates my passion – for writing, for racing, for those iconic jockeys I love so much!"

Chantilly Dawns is available from www.bookrepublic.ie or as a Kindle e-book from www.amazon.co.uk or, **to win a free copy, check out our subscription offer on page 63**



LISSA & 'FRIEND'