

### Sunset saddles

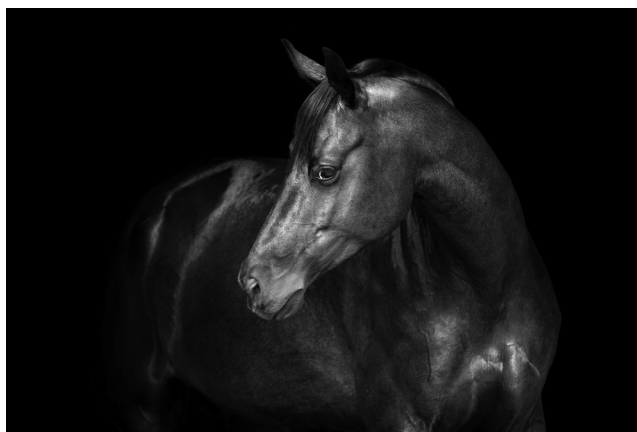
*Farewell to the Horse: The Final Century of Our Relationship*

by Ulrich Raulff

Allen Lane, 464pp

adapted from a review by **Kate Kellaway**

- 1 As you pick up the reins of *Farewell to the Horse* – trying to get a sense of what sort of a ride it is to be – it becomes evident within three paragraphs that you have never read a book like it. Its author, Ulrich Raulff, is a one-off. He has an extraordinarily connective mind and it is seldom possible to predict where he is going with it. Just as you are telling yourself



- this is a book of calm erudition, you will run into a deadpan joke. Or you will come across a moment of barely concealed emotion. At the end of the first chapter, he explains his book is for everyone and no one and then relents: "I have written it for my mother, who loved horses and understood them. Whether she would have liked it I will never know. Ten years have passed since I could have asked her."
- 2 Without having known Raulff's mother, I confidently suppose that she would have loved this book, as any reader interested in horses, history, art, literature or language will. She would have been stunned by its scope and stylish intellect. This is about the end of a relationship between man and horse that Raulff likens to the 27 an idiosyncratic workers' union, and what is thrilling is that the horse becomes a subtext – a new way of considering history via the stable door. It is not altogether a farewell.
  - 3 He declares that horses are now in "semi-retirement" with a "part-time job as a recreational item, a mode of therapy, a status symbol, and a source of pastoral support for female puberty". Professional competition riders might get huffy about this dismissive summation. However, compared with the past he describes, the "semi-retirement" is true enough. He gives a vivid sense of horse-filled cities, helped by statistics (there were on the streets of New York 1,100 tons of manure and 270,000 litres of urine daily). Horses were doomed to slum dwellings and short lives – it was malodorous chaos. Nor were they ever an ideal form of urban transport, for although a horse's strength is equal to seven men, horses as motors were "costly, sensitive and unreliable".

- 4 The farewell was 30; it took a century and a half for man and beast to part and the horse remained a hospitable vehicle for ideas in painting and literature, as Raulff reveals in his marvellous way. Tolstoy calculated he had spent seven years in the saddle and the book includes a splendid photograph of him riding through woods with such naturalness that one feels sure this was no exaggeration. In a fascinating chapter devoted to country doctors, there is a shrewd analysis of Flaubert's Charles Bovary, whose doomed inelegance as a rider is set against Emma's lover, a nifty horseman. We then move on, at a lick, to another country doctor, John Boyd Dunlop, vet, friend of Queen Victoria and inventor of the first successful pneumatic tyre.
- 5 Raulff's ability to corral scattered equestrians in art, letters and life makes stimulating reading and his writerly pace is exhilarating — especially when he takes flight from his own starting gates. Writing about the 19th-century photographer Eadweard Muybridge, famous for photographs of horses in motion, he considers the way time is broken into component parts and then, without warning, makes a dazzling comparison with the historian's need to acknowledge "a certain invisibility within periods of longer duration".
- 6 Riding West, a chapter on cowboys and Indians, opens with a quote from John Wayne: "I don't get on a horse unless they pay me." But it was the horse, Raulff maintains, that "made possible both the conquest of the West and the invention of the western". This same chapter reveals that Native Americans came to riding late and — little-known fact — that Jewish cowboys were "the first cowboys in America". The chapter on war horses is 31 but horrifying. In the First World War, of an estimated 16 million horses involved, 8 million were killed.
- 7 A horse is perhaps safest within a frame and Raulff is in his element writing about art. He describes Stubbs as "the Ingres of the stable", identifies the ominous stillness of Degas' painting *The Fallen Jockey* and gives an inspired analysis of Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*, with its spectral horse, and RB Kitaj's homage *The Jewish Rider*.
- 8 The book is beautifully illustrated. The frontispiece is especially arresting — a black-and-white photograph in which a woman holds up a framed mirror. A grey horse looks solemnly into the glass. It seems to ask what a horse knows about itself, something even the revelatory Raulff — who respects the mystery of his subject — does not attempt to answer.

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