

Interview with John Royce, author of *Eclipsed by Shadow*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview John Royce, who is here to talk about his new novel, “Eclipsed by Shadow.”

John Royce is a writer and horseman from Texas who now lives in Boston, Massachusetts. Twenty years of training and competitive riding sparked his spell binding ode to horsemanship, “Eclipsed by Shadow.” Living in Boston also fueled his interest in history, as reflected in his novel, “Eclipsed by Shadow.”

Tyler: Welcome, John. I’m glad you could join me today. Will you begin by telling us a little bit about the plot of “Eclipsed by Shadow”?

John: Thanks, Tyler. This book is the first volume of a trilogy entitled, “The Legend of the Great Horse.” The story concerns a young horse-lover named Meagan and her horse Promise, but it is not—*not*—what would be considered a typical horse story. It is the story of civilization told from horseback.

In the story, Meagan’s family is not wealthy and must make sacrifices to keep horses as a part of their lives. It is a surprise when an eccentric and wealthy elderly woman reveals to Meagan that her newborn filly, Promise, is one of the “Great Horses” of history. Meagan is given the warning to never ride Promise lest the horse “wing its rider into the dark.”

Of course this revelation is met with disbelief, and of course the revelation is (partly) true. Meagan does mount Promise and is brought into the darkness of humanity’s past. The story follows Meagan as she finds herself tracing the hoof steps of history.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about the Legend of the Great Horse? What are its origins per Ms. Bridgestone in the novel?

John: Mrs. Bridgestone is a wealthy widow who has become obsessed with a mysterious legend of a “Great Horse.” The Legend is written:

In the Beginning, Man so angered the Lord he was cast from the Garden. In the midst of the Lord’s wrath an Angel came onto Him. The Angel asked permission to lead Mankind back again to Paradise, and wished to be given a shape to best serve Man in his exile.

This love stayed the Lord’s wrath. The Four Winds swirled into a shape of beauty that moved to thunder...the Angel took form and became the first Horse. Since that time, the Angel has lived an unbroken line of lives, inspiring and teaching, even as the Angel’s children have carried Mankind to mastery of the earth. Upon each death the Angel takes another form and again a Great Horse is born.

Tyler: Where did you get the idea to create a legend about a great horse?

John: I did not so much create the legend as reinterpret it. Mythology and the world’s religions speak of the horse as a gift from the Creator and tell various stories of how the horse came to be a partner of man.

Tyler: In creating the legend, were you influenced by any real horses or just mythological ones?

John: I would say the equestrian influences in the book come from working with real horses and coaching riders. However it was my interest in history that illustrated for me the phenomenal depth of our ancient partnership.

Tyler: I was struck by one of your reviewers' comments on the back cover, namely that "this is the equestrian version of the Harry Potter series." Do you think that's a fair comparison? How is "Eclipsed by Shadow" more than just history but also adventure and magic?

John: I've had a few reviewers make the comparison to "*Harry Potter*," which is flattering and nice to hear. However, while I include the device of time travel so that we may explore the world's history, there is no other "magic" in my story. It is simply history as a modern rider might encounter it.

One parallel I think the reviewers are making is between Meagan and Harry, who are both just average teenagers who stumble into some amazing adventures. In the case of Meagan, she is a typical horse-crazy youth who is dedicated and serious about her riding, but is not especially gifted or unique in any way. Her ability to survive in ancient times is due to her knowledge of modern horsemanship, which allows her to out-perform her contemporaries of each new historical period. Horsemanship has been a millennia-long process of progress, and any well-instructed rider today has knowledge superior to our predecessors.

The other parallel of "*Eclipsed by Shadow*" with the "*Harry Potter*" series is a sense of traveling to new and colorful worlds inhabited by intriguing characters met along the way. The history presented does take on the atmosphere of traveling through other worlds...though of course it is our own.

Tyler: The farthest back in history the novel takes us is to 20,000 B.C. in North America. What is significant about that time in horse history?

John: I wanted to show the arc of man's relationship with the horse, and the first relationship was that of predator (man) and prey (horse). 20,000 BC was also the time of cave paintings which illustrate the imaginative preoccupation that primitive man had with horses.

Tyler: Among the other historical periods in "*Eclipsed by Shadow*" was there one you especially enjoyed writing about?

John: The periods most enjoyable to write were the ones that came more naturally, the times closer to the modern day in the later two books. The historical periods covered in "*Eclipsed by Shadow*" are darkly fascinating, but the extreme research required and the language gap made this first volume challenging for me. "*Eclipsed by Shadow*" covers man's pre-historic era, antiquity and the Middle Ages—all of which are rather alien to modern sensibilities. These were not the cartoonish periods popular entertainment often portrays, but I understand why these times are treated that way. It's hard for modern audiences to "get" the connection. Fortunately horses are the common element to make that connection here.

Tyler: Briefly, will you tell us a few of the uses of horses throughout history?

John: Briefly? This is a trilogy—remember? Okay, horses have been hunted for food and used as pack animals. Horses have provided transportation throughout history in ways too numerous to recount; usually mounted, but in harness, horses have driven chariots, wagons, coaches, barges, buggies, and fire-trucks. They have been inspirational religious symbols and myth, and status symbols of prestige for nobility. Horses have a long, varied military legacy (nomadic warriors, chariots, cavalry, knights, conquistadors, couriers) such that today's military traditions are heavily derived from horsemanship in its pageantry and discipline. Horses are historically known as teachers of character and leadership, and horsemanship is one of the ancient subjects of a classical education. Horses are invaluable for mounted hunting and still necessary for working cattle. Chariot racing was the first mass spectator sport, and since that time horses have been our partners in sports such as polo, jousting, racing, steeplechasing, dressage, and more recently, eventing, reining and jumping. Horses are good therapy for handicapped riders and those with emotional trauma. People like to gamble on them. There is an artistic and fashion element associated with horses (trousers and coats are derived from horseback riding). Horses support or contribute to the industries of farming, breeding, saddlery, recreational and sport riding, and veterinary medicine among others. They are also fun on trail rides. There's more, but you said briefly...

Tyler: Will you tell us about the mechanics of the time travel? What motivates the journeys from one timeframe to the next in the novel?

John: The mechanics are simple: The Great Horse, Promise, can travel to any of the lives lived by the Great Horse throughout history. Wherever Promise takes Meagan is a place she, Promise, has been before. Horses embody motion and travel: Promise just takes that one dimension further...however the *motivation* for the journey is something the reader will find out at the end.

Tyler: Will you tell us more about Meagan? Do her experiences change her through the book?

John: Absolutely, Meagan is changed by her journey. The young Meagan you meet at the beginning of the book is a very stereotypical 12-year-old girl, and the reader comes to know her character as the story progresses to her young adulthood. I will tell you the cause of the biggest change that Meagan makes, and I did not see this coming when I started to write: there is an incredible amount of war in human history. Just an amazing, amazing amount. It literally does seem that the only time people do NOT want some kind of war, historically speaking, is in its immediate aftermath. And the experience of researching this unhappy fact changed me as well.

Tyler: John, have you always been interested in horses, and have you been involved with them in training or riding or any other ways?

John: Well, I have to say I'm a second-hand horse-lover, in that I had no natural interest in the animal as a child. It was my mother and sister who instinctively loved horses, and it was through their association that my interest was sparked. My early equestrian days were spent trying to build strong fencing to keep our first horse out of the neighbors' yards and taking brief kamikaze rides that ended in varying discomfort. Later I rode in some Western riding events, but jumping caught my eye. I ended up competing in eventing and junior jumpers, and later had my own hunter/jumper stables in Houston.

Tyler: Who do you view as your reading audience? What age group?

John: This book is intended for teenagers and up—everybody. I specifically wrote this book for a mainstream audience that had no affiliation or knowledge of horses, for the reason that the horse is our common legacy. We have all benefited from the partnership with horses. The story of horses is the story of civilization.

Tyler: That's interesting, John. We tend to think of ourselves as more closely associated with cats or dogs, but in terms of civilizing humanity, horses have been a bigger influence I'm sure. Did you intend for "Eclipsed by Shadow" to be educational, or in doing research, did you just find a lot of interesting information you wanted to include in the book?

John: I was fascinated by the intersection of horses and history, and wanted to share what I found. I made some discoveries along the way and I tried to share those as well—so yes, the purpose of this book is educational. Entertainingly educational, but serious nonetheless.

Tyler: Would you share with us a few of the interesting discoveries or historical facts about horses you mentioned in the book?

John: Well, one main theme is the fact that horsemanship has mirrored mankind's advancement. The highest level of horsemanship in antiquity was obtained by the ancient Greeks, and as Europe fell into the barbarity of the Middle Ages horsemanship became brutal and primitive as well. Classical humane horsemanship was one of the major arts re-discovered during the Renaissance.

Another interesting fact is that horses are not domesticated like dogs, ferrets, or chickens. The reason for this is that horses are a much older species than man, and have not essentially changed in the millennia of our partnership. A horse retains natural instincts and will instantly "revert" to the wild.

Tyler: John, what besides horses influenced you in writing this book? I was struck by many of the quotes you use from famous writers like Mark Twain and Charles Dickens and several references to T.H. White's "The Sword in the Stone." Would you say you have literary or other influences?

John: I've had tons of writing influences, Tyler; in a way, probably everything I've read. Twain is one of my favorite writers of modern age, also Dickens and T.H. White. Communicating truths about our world through stories and the written word is something each of these writers illustrates.

However as far as direct influences on the book, I took a different path. What I did was to spend a few months reading popular works and authors of each historical period before I started writing. For example, the "first" historian, *Herodotus*, was the influence behind the Scythian chapter. Reading works of monks and other public figures of the medieval period helped color that era. For Rome, I studied translations of Roman writers such as the

historian *Tacitus* and the satirist *Juvenal*, and even world's first novel, the "*Satyricon*." Writing is imbued with the attitudes and outlook of the culture that produces it, so in this way I hope to present a truly valuable reading experience, and perhaps to have readers see parts of history in a new and more genuine way than before.

Tyler: What do you hope readers will come away with after reading these books? For example, Anna Sewell wrote "Black Beauty" to speak out against cruelty to horses. Do you feel you have a similar purpose in writing "Eclipsed by Shadow"?

John: Yes, that we should remember our horsemanship. Honor our past, honor our horses. Also I hope to show some reasons for the seemingly irrational obsession and commitment we have for the animal.

Tyler: John, I understand "Eclipsed by Shadow" is book one in a series called "The Legend of the Great Horse." Will you tell us more about the series—how many books there will be and without giving away the plots of the future books, what your overall goal is in writing the series?

John: The work is a trilogy, and the three volumes will be published each summer beginning in 2008. My overall goal is to take the reader on a road-trip through history to the present day, showing the development of horsemanship as it parallels the development of civilization.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, John. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they may find there about "Eclipsed by Shadow"?

John: Thanks for having me, Tyler. Information on the book series can be found at www.TheGreatHorse.com, which hosts a discussion "blog" section with news, reviews, updates and other details about the book. Happy Trails!

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