

# The Black Stallion

By Keith Phipps

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Children's movies are better than ever, but the live-action film grappling with bonds between human and animals has disappeared. "The Black Stallion" is a reminder of how powerful such stories can be and that its director, Carroll Ballard, is the undisputed master of the form.

An adaptation of Walter Farley's beloved 1941 novel—which spawned 16 sequels—"The Black Stallion" is the film Ballard was destined to make, even if it came to him by accident. "I grew up in a frontier, pretty much wilderness area," Ballard tells critic Scott Foundas. "As a kid it was experiencing the world in a very direct way. And to me that was one of the most important, formative aspects of my life." Ballard became interested in filmmaking after enlisting in the army, thanks to a cinephile sergeant who screened films by Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray and others. After his service, he enlisted in UCLA, where he befriended Francis Ford Coppola.

Coppola brought "The Black Stallion," part of a planned series of adaptations of classic children's literature, to Ballard in the 1970s, by which point he was deep into an unusual, and not always profitable, career that had made him uniquely qualified for the job. For the U.S. Information Agency, Ballard shot the farming documentaries "Beyond This Winter's Wheat" and "Harvest," the latter nominated for a Best Documentary Feature Oscar in 1967. Three later shorts collected on the Blu-ray display his affinity for depicting the lives of animals. The wordless educational short 1965 "Pigs!" captures a day in the life of pigs on a farm while 1969's "The Perils of Priscilla," financed by the Pasadena Humane Society looks at the world from the perspective of a runaway cat. "Rodeo," created for Marlboro by Ballard, also in 1969, best presages "The Black Stallion." An artful look at one night at the rodeo focusing on a single bull ride—which Ballard faked by asking several riders to wear the same red shirt—it's a brutal depiction of the theme Ballard would make "The Black Stallion"'s centerpiece: the delicate, danger-



*Alec Ramsay (Kelly Reno) bonds with The Black when the pair are stranded on an island following a shipwreck. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

ous, and often uneasy balance between humanity and nature.

Animal movies weren't uncommon when "The Black Stallion" premiered in 1979, but none were as artful as Ballard's film, nor as sensitive to animal life. (That "The Black Stallion" hit theaters alongside "C.H.O.M.P.S.," a comedy about a robot dog starring Valerie Bertinelli, suggests how much it stood out at the time.) Ballard's film immediately sets itself apart by refusing to condescend to the subject or its audience. "The Black Stallion" opens on a boat off the coast of North Africa in 1946, where the young Alec Ramsay (Kelly Reno, a first-time child actor chosen for his experience with horses) is accompanying his father, who spends his evenings gambling and filling Alec's head with stories of Alexander The Great's horse Bucephalus, a black stallion only the conqueror could ride. For Bucephalus' modern equivalent, Alec needs to look no further than a horse known only as The Black, who fights the men trying to tame him but warily accepts the sugar cubes Alec brings him. Then the ship sinks, stranding Alec and The Black on an island where they're forced to depend on each other to survive.

Ballard doesn't skimp on the beauty or terror of the film's early scenes. The Black is depicted as a danger to those around him and the shipwreck sequence plays like a child's worst nightmare, a horrific collision of fire, water, creaking metal, and disappearing parents given force by Caleb Deschanel's superb cinematography and the sound design of David Lynch veteran Alan Splet. From there it shifts to the sun-dappled shores of a Mediterranean island where Alec slowly wins over The Black, who at first wants nothing to do with him then becomes his in-

separable companion. Some of the shots in this sequence of boy and horse in harmony on an Edenic beach are nothing short of miraculous.

How did he achieve them? "Patience," he tells Foundas. "You have to be a good fisherman. You have to sit there and watch the fish come up to the bait and not take it. Go away. Sit there another hour. Hope that maybe it will come back." The film shows how the patience pays off. In one shot Alec and The Black face each other in profile as Alec attempts to lure the wary horse with some seaweed. The glistening water captures the light of the setting sun as the silhouettes of each meet and, in the moment, come to an understanding that bonds them together. The film could end here and it would be a masterpiece, a movie that channels the special fascination animals hold for children, and the potential for that fascination to become an understanding of the larger world, into cinematic poetry.

It doesn't, yet the spirit of its first half bleeds into its more conventional second hour, which finds Alec returned to his mother (Teri Garr) in America with The Black in tow. After the horse runs off, still too wild to be contained in a small backyard, Alec finds him on the farm of Henry Dailey (Mickey Rooney, in a role that earned him an Oscar nomination), a former jockey who reluctantly teaches Alec how to race. It all builds to a rousing finale whose outcome is never really in doubt but whose presentation sets it apart. In brief flashes, as the race nears its end, the film returns to the island and to those idyllic scenes of boy and horse, the meaning clear: What Alec and The Black have accomplished would be impossible without the deep, hard-won bond between the two, the result of a long negotiation that led Alec to understand that nature is to be respected, not to be bent to humanity's will.

Ballard would return to this theme throughout his career. Released in 1983, his next film, "Never Cry Wolf," adapted Farley Mowat's autobiographical account of studying the animals of the Canadian Arctic. Thirteen years later, Ballard's "Fly Away Home" wove the touching depiction of a father and daughter's difficult reunion into the story of their attempt to help a group of orphaned Canadian geese fly south for the winter. Ballard's most recent film, 2005's "Duma," is a lovely, if lesser, reprise of "Fly Away Home," recounting the true-life tale of a South African boy traveling across the wilderness in an attempt to return to the wild the cheetah he's raised from a kitten.

It's also a theme as relevant now as ever. In Ballard's films, civilization tends to be a disrupting force throwing nature out of balance, uprooting animal populations and turning humanity into corrupters of the natural world. "The Black Stallion" is less explicit about this than later efforts, but the image of The Black kicking against those attempting to contain him is emblematic of that concern. Carelessness when it comes to those who share the planet risks inviting consequences beyond our control. And though nonfiction films like the DisneyNature series have done much to introduce young viewers to the natural world, narrative films create a different, deeper kind of understanding, particularly those as artful, intelligent, and respectful of young viewers as Ballard's. With no projects on the horizon, his voice is much-missed; his influence not felt as widely as it ought to be.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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