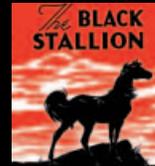


## THE BLACK STALLION LEGACY:

# The Story of Walter Farley's Mythic Masterpiece— from Paper to Silver Screen

By Evie Tubbs



It is 1931. With twelve million people unemployed in America, the Great Depression's ferocity is finally sinking in. City people are moving in with relatives on family farms. Those who have no place to go build shacks out of old boxes and boards on public land, often near garbage dumps where they can scrounge for food. These areas form communities called "Hoovervilles," named after the president who seems strangely oblivious to the situation while being served seven-course dinners in formal attire each evening. And with World War II on the brink of its first attack, "The American Dream" seems merely a ghost of the past.

Just five miles from the New York Stock Exchange where the catastrophic collapse of the U.S. economy birthed the doom of the Great Depression, a high school horse lover in Brooklyn is desperately seeking hope. He searches libraries for horse stories to fulfill that need, but comes up disappointed. Swirling visions take shape in 16-year-old Walter Farley's mind of a courageous young boy developing an unspoken bond with a wild black Arabian stallion. As he begins to pen the timeless story of hope, courage, adventure and the ability to overcome, Farley does not yet realize that he is creating the most famous fictional horse of all time.

# THE BOOKS

“Young Alec Ramsey first saw the Black Stallion when his ship docked at a small Arabian port on the Red Sea. The Black was a giant of a horse—all muscle, all power, all beauty. His mane was swept in the wind like black flame. A white cloth was tied around his savage head, covering his eyes so that he could not see. He reared high in the air, and his front legs struck out viciously at the men who were trying to get him aboard the ship... Little did he dream that this mighty black horse was destined to play an important part in his young life; that between them would grow a strange understanding that would lead them through untold dangers in their long journey to adventure in America. Nor would his wildest imagination tell him that he and this desert-bred stallion would electrify and captivate an entire nation!”

—Excerpt from *The Black Stallion*

Walter Farley was two things: athletic and creative. Tall and lanky, his build was perfect for tennis and track (even racing against Jesse Owens). But his passion for horses began at an early age as he frequently visited his uncle’s training farm in upstate New York.

As typical in the mind of any young person, dreams are a way to live out personal aspiration. So when Farley’s search for a story combining his world of horses with heroism and adventure never came to fruition, the story in his mind of a black stallion and a boy came to life. While an

undergraduate student at Columbia University, he finished *The Black Stallion*.

“He walked into Random House Publishing and put the manuscript on the desk,” recalls son Tim Farley. “They actually read it... and then they actually printed it.”

Though the book was considered successful, times were tough. A war was on. There was a paper shortage. People were living in fear and dread. Farley moved West. Then South. Then back to New York where he was drafted

into the U.S. Army in 1941 for five years, eventually taking a journalistic assignment for *Yank Magazine*. In 1945, he married Rosemary Lutz, a successful model who supported the struggling artist during the first years of their marriage.

Farley never forgot his black stallion though. He had, in fact, a strict, strategic expansion plan for more adventure stories of *The Black*, little to anyone else’s knowledge. In recent years, the Farley family found a list of 12 book titles Farley had brainstormed in the early 1950s, including *The Black Stallion’s Filly* and *The Black Stallion’s Blood Bay Colt*. In a rigorous eight-hour workday schedule, he finished a new book every year during that time.

Farley went on to write 21 books in *The Black Stallion* series, a timeless collection of classic children’s literature, ending with the last book *The Young Black Stallion* that he wrote with his son Steve that was published shortly after his death in 1989 and made into a Disney IMAX® movie in 2004.

The *Black Stallion* books made Farley an

icon around the world, but especially in the horse community. He used it to his educational advantage, visiting horse farms and trainers wherever he’d go, from the circus world to the show world to the race track.

In the early 1940s, his travels and research led him to Ruth “Bazy” Tankersly and family, founders of the legendary Al-Marah Arabians in Maryland and Arizona. A lifelong friendship immediately began as Tankersly introduced him to her own love affair with Arabians. Perhaps out of a mutual understanding, Farley felt at home at Al-Marah and frequently visited the farm. Tankersly and her family gave Farley a real place of

belonging in his imaginary world of Arabian horses.

“The whole idea of *the Black Stallion* being something that any Arabian horse owner could embrace was a phenomenal feat,” says Mark Miller, Tankersly’s son, “and still is to this day.”

Children have been flocking to the book series

now for five generations. Because he began writing *The Black Stallion* when he was in high school, he used vocabulary and expressed feelings that children could understand. But the primary attraction, as it has been from the first book, is an innate mythological intrigue of horses within people. That passion in the competent hands of a gifted writer created magic never before or since matched.

“Pick up that book, and you belong to the *Black Stallion* from Page One,” says Miller. “That is the essence of its timeless tradition.”

One-hundred million copies of the books have been sold in over 20 countries around the world. And the demand isn’t yet depleted. Next year, Random House has announced that all 21 books will be in print and actively sold again.



Walter Farley with beloved Arabian mare Al-Marah Athena, who is the main character in his book *The Horse That Swam Away*.



Walter Farley and Chaille Groom at the 1972 U.S. Nationals show in Oklahoma City.

## How Many Walter Farley Novels Have You Read?

- The Black Stallion*
- The Black Stallion Returns*
- Son of the Black Stallion*
- The Island Stallion*
- The Black Stallion and Satan*
- The Black Stallion’s Blood Bay Colt*
- The Island Stallion’s Fury*
- The Black Stallion’s Filly*
- The Black Stallion Revolts*
- The Black Stallion’s Sulky Colt*
- The Island Stallion Races*
- The Black Stallion’s Courage*
- The Black Stallion Mystery*
- The Horse-Tamer*
- The Black Stallion and Flame*
- Man O’ War*
- The Black Stallion Challenged*
- The Great Dane Thor*
- The Black Stallion’s Ghost*
- The Black Stallion and the Girl*
- The Black Stallion Legend*
- The Young Black Stallion*  
(with Steven Farley)

# THE MOVIE

Family films of the 1960s and 1970s were dominated by Walt Disney Pictures setting in motion a certain genre and expectation. Not until *Star Wars* rattled box offices in 1977 did the Disney dazzle on family films get shook up. At the same time, *Apocalypse*

*Now* was being produced by Francis Ford Coppola at the record-breaking cost of \$150 million. Coppola noticed the buzz appeal that *Star Wars* had made and decided to take his movie production in a new direction: Family Films. His first step was identifying the most popular children's story of the day. Based on the number of books sold, *The Black Stallion* was one of the all-time highest. Hollywood and book agents came together on an agreement, and *The Black Stallion* movie was born and

enjoyed the same director as the mega-movie hit *The Godfather*—Francis Ford Coppola.

Casting began immediately for major roles. Mickey Rooney was cast as “Henry,” the ex-racehorse trainer. Teri Garr played the role of Alec Ramsey’s mother, while country-music singer Hoyt Axton was Alec’s short-lived father in the movie. But casting Alec Ramsey, the primary actor, proved hard to fill. Finding the combination of a young boy who could ride, act and look the part weeded out prospects quickly. Thankfully, producer Fred Roos had a knack for spotting talent quickly. When 12-year-old Kelly Reno, a cowboy from a ranch in Pueblo, Colo., auditioned for the part, producers compromised on filling the role with an older boy described in the original story and gave Reno the part. It was a good move. He was the right size, had the right quality about him, and was confident on a horse.

Tim Farley helped movie producers look for horses to cast in the movie, scanning continents for the horse that would represent the charisma, beauty and majesty of “the most famous fictional horse of the century.” Eventually they found their star in San Antonio, Texas, a 1969 black Arabian stallion named Cass Ole (Al-Marah Cassanova++ x La Bahia++), one of the most beloved Arabian show horses of the day. “Cass” was pretty on camera, though

not a big horse; but Kelly Reno was a fairly diminutive boy, so the pairing worked. Three other horses were brought in as stunt doubles, but Cass remained the equine star.

“Movie making is such a roll of the dice,” says Tim, who worked with production crews on each of the three *Black Stallion* movies. “The script, the crew, the actors... there are so many variables. But then also times when there is magic.”

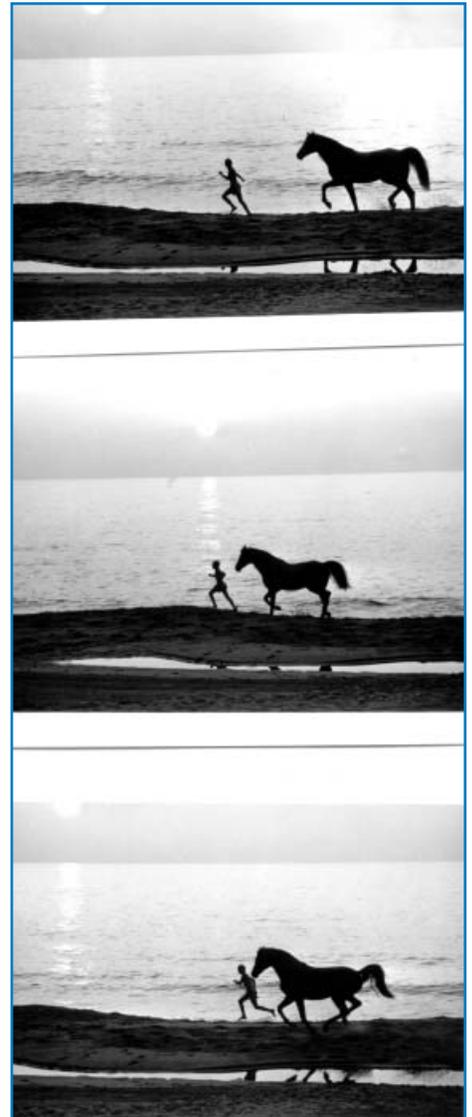
Magic did happen on set of *The Black Stallion*. One particular scene (called the “Tag Scene” by producers) depicting the relationship between boy and horse was an unplanned, unscripted shoot caught at sunset where Alec and The Black played tag amidst the breaking waves.

“It was like we were shooting a documentary,” Tim recalls. “They were really having this moment. And we just happened to be a crew with nice 35 mm cameras shooting a lot of film.”

Fifteen minutes of Alec and The Black playing on the beach with a double rainbow as their backdrop became one of the films many magical moments. The footage was so good that producers added the uncut tag scene at the end while the credits rolled. Needless to say, most people who watch the movie stay glued to the screen through the entire credits.



Walter Farley poses with Kelly Reno, the boy who played Farley's boyhood portrayal of “Alec Ramsey.”



The “Tag Scene.”



The magnificent “Rainbow Scene” shown while movie credits roll at the end. Tim Farley described it as “magic.”



Purebred Arabian stallion Cass Ole plays the most famous fictional horse of the century, The Black, in the movie *The Black Stallion*. Shown here preparing for his match race with Kelly Reno ("Alec Ramsey") up.

Animals, like people, have moods as well. Renowned trainer Corky Randall was head trainer for each *Black Stallion* movie, and many times liaison between horse actors and movie producers. One evening at sunset, the producers asked for a tenth take working with Cass Ole at liberty. While seeing Cass grow increasingly impatient, Randall advised that they resume in the morning.

"It is important to note that by this point, Cass had been a star horse for about three years," recalled Tim, "and took on the attitude of a movie star who knew he was pretty important."

Though Cass preferred to end his day, producers called for yet another take... then, to their surprise and detriment, they watched their star run into the dark night disappearing within 500,000 square miles of desert dunes, tail in the air, contentedly galloping off the set. When he didn't return right away, uneasiness turned to panic as cast and crew realized that a black

horse in the night desert is not a likely scenario for easy finding. The crew jumped in jeeps and began a frantic search that lasted into morning.

Around dawn, on the ridge of a distant sand dune about five miles from the set, they made out a little black silhouette against the sunrise. The crew called, and Cass ran as hard as he could toward them, as glad to be found as they were to find him. The movie star was ready to be back in his cushy trailer with food and water and company around him. A typical Hollywood compromise was struck after this occasion: He never ran off again. And the producers called it quits on Cass's lead.

In the end, the movie exceeded expectations of all involved. Walter Farley saw a dream realized with a movie that played out his boyhood visions. Francis Ford Coppola (along with co-director Carroll Ballard) is credited to producing "the greatest children's movie ever made" (Pauline Kael, *New Yorker Film Magazine* movie critic). Mickey Rooney was nominated for best supporting actor. And the movie won a 1979 Academy Award® for sound editing effects. A visual feast from start to finish, the timeless tale of *The Black Stallion* plays out on almost mythic terms.

The movie premiered at the New York Film Festival in 1979. The most challenging horse movie ever made was not only successful, but retained the thrill and magic that Farley had so ingeniously crafted in his book. The movie was followed with a successful sequel, *The Black Stallion Returns* in 1983 and a recent Disney IMAX® film *Young Black Stallion* in 2004.

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## 2006 U.S. NATIONALS Welcomes THE BLACK STALLION

Fittingly the sentiment of the last U.S. Nationals held in Louisville proudly welcomes Walter Farley's Black Stallion to Freedom Hall. Arabian Nights Dinner Theatre (Kissimmee, FL), courtesy of the Black Stallion Literacy Project, brings a fairy tale to life on horseback in an evening performance culminating with Walter Farley's Black Stallion.

Friday, October 20 • 7:00 p.m.  
Kentucky Fair & Expo Center  
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In conjunction with the 2006 U.S. National Arabian & Half-Arabian Championship Horse Show.

For more information, visit:  
[www.ArabianHorses.org/USNationals](http://www.ArabianHorses.org/USNationals)

Tickets are available through  
[www.Ticketmaster.com](http://www.Ticketmaster.com) June 1st.

\$10 for adults  
\$7.50 for Seniors & Children (17 & under)  
Children 5 & under are FREE.

"It seems like children's genres go through trends with some type of edge, then burn out," Tim surmises. "Human stories are what is timeless. And about every 10 years, I see it cycle back to something as simple and human as a boy and his horse. There's something very attractive about that."

Though The Black's spirit stirs the heart of every Arabian horse enthusiast, it also bonds the soul of every horse enthusiast. Even greater, he continues to touch an inner core of humanity, young and old, in a place where many are never touched.

But for Walter Farley, it was much simpler. "It's not what I've achieved; it's what I've enjoyed that is important," he said.

Tim continues about his dad. "I have to believe that in his mind he was Alec Ramsey. It didn't matter if he was 16 years old or 26 or 66, he's still 'Alec.' He is still riding that horse on the beach. And that horse carried him all around the world." 🐾

*Evie Tubbs is AHA Marketing Manager and a frequent contributor to AHM.*

*Photos Courtesy of Tim Farley.*



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**Entertainment and Literacy—**  
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Official Black Stallion website & Fan Club.  
 Best value for purchasing books, movies and memorabilia.

[www.Arabian-Nights.com](http://www.Arabian-Nights.com)

Arabian Nights Dinner Theatre,  
 home of Walter Farley's Black Stallion

[www.BSLP.org](http://www.BSLP.org)

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