

Riding Zebras (a parenting parable)



In the land of Parentia there is an unusual horse race.

Contestants (and most natives compete at some point in their lives) must cross the land from west to east by a variety of

routes. The people take this race very seriously despite the vague nature of the rules and the fact that the finish line is unclear, ill-defined and frequently moved. The land is full of hazards including potholes, chasms, mountains, swamps, quicksand and jungles. Jockeys do not necessarily ride their mounts but can also lead them, walk alongside them, entice them onward with tasty tit-bits, or herd them with a riding crop (although riding crops are nowadays frowned upon).

As the route taken varies so much, what may be an easy ride for some can be treacherous and difficult for others. Some riders have helpers and supporters; others must face the challenges alone. So complicated is the whole affair that a clear winner is seldom agreed upon and just completing the course is generally acknowledged to be the most important thing. “Experts” do not even agree on what is the most important goal: is it speed, distance covered, endurance, style or even having a happy horse?

These experts write hundreds of contradictory guide-books while the riders constantly complain about the lack of a manual.

Although an obstacle that kills or maims a horse will be acknowledged as being bad luck, hazards such as hills, swamps and deep valleys are not accepted as excuses for poor performance and a rider who complains about these, or asks for help, is seen as lacking in skill. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the whole thing is that what is

called a “horse” varies tremendously. Some riders are given well-behaved mares or stallions while others have plodding cart-horses and others bucking-brancos. Still others find themselves allocated by chance a stubborn mule or even a virtually unrideable zebra. Despite the diversity of mounts it is an important part of Parentia mythology that all steeds start equal and that only the skill of the rider is significant.

Obviously it takes tremendous skill to ride a zebra or a bucking bronco and such riders may develop the most skill but gain no recognition. If they do well they complete the course long after others have finished, battered and bruised from having been thrown many times. Many show heroic persistence and determination. It seems unfair and cruel that the jockeys of mules, broncos and zebras are generally held **entirely** accountable for any problems by those who rode horses. Strangely enough, the riders themselves often accept all the blame. The obvious contribution of the nature of the beast, the terrain, supports, luck and even the weather are all disregarded when prizes are being given out. This belief in the all-important, all-powerful jockey is clearly a form of magical thinking. The natives often declare “all animals are equal”, though a few have been heard to add under their breath, “though some are a lot more equal than others.”

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