



RIGHT
Jean Abernethy hugs her Half-Arabian mare, Willow.

OPPOSITE
“Springtime” for Fergus the Horse.

Cassandra Koch

Jean Abernethy

the woman behind Fergus the Horse

By Janet de Acevedo Macdonald

Idyllic may best describe Canadian Jean Abernethy’s childhood. She grew up on a farm in Lindsay, Ontario, Canada, about a two hours’ drive north of Toronto.

“My mom read aloud to us from a very early age, right up into our teens. We had no television. She read scores of library books. I don’t recall a favorite, but invariably the books were nature and animal stories. For example, Thornton W. Burgess’ ‘The Adventures of’ [Reddy Fox, Grandfather Frog, Peter Cottontail, etc.] series when we were little and ‘Call of the Wild’ by Jack London when we were older.

“Mom had a series of about 12 books of short stories she acquired somewhere that were categorized by subject. The science fiction one in the series never got touched. The animal stories book got so worn it needed duct tape. Mom read to us regularly for hours.”

Following along with her mother’s storytelling, one of four children, young Jean was fascinated with how the pictures matched the words. This is something she strives for today — to associate artwork with stories. That and she wants to

get a laugh. Always a doodler, Jean clearly remembers the day she showed a picture she’d drawn to her grandfather and had him respond with a hearty laugh. His reaction stoked her creative fires to recreate that feeling of accomplishment.

“Music has also been a part of my life. Together with my two sisters and brother, we

were a band for a while, until us kids grew up and left home. Mandolin is my main instrument. I have written a few songs, too.”

After high school, Jean headed to Toronto and took classes in Equestrian Studies at Humber College; then studied commercial artwork with specialization in Illustration



from the Ontario College of Art and Design University, graduating in 1987.

Not long after graduation, Jean married, and the couple emigrated to Georgia. A Canadian without a work visa, unable to work and now a mother of two, Jean used her talents to draw portraits of neighborhood children for extra money.

Artistic Influencers

As a youngster, Jean worked diligently to emulate American author and illustrator C.W. Anderson. Imitation being the sincerest form of flattery, she tried to figure out how he drew so beautifully by tracing his illustrations. Anderson wrote and illustrated more than 35 horse books, including the popular 11-book series “Billy and Blaze” — one of Jean’s

RIGHT
One of Jean’s many horse and rider illustrations.

BELOW
Jean Abernethy did illustrations for the Monty Roberts 2002 book, “From My Hands To Yours.”

OPPOSITE
Jean and Willow have completed hundreds of trail miles together.



favorites. Billy, a little boy who “loved horses more than anything else in the world,” received Blaze the horse as a birthday gift.

As her own talents developed, Jean focused on many artists for their story-telling skills and artistic techniques. Among them she tributes the Dutch artist Rein Poortvliet, known for his paintings about hunting, farm life and animals in all shapes and sizes. There was British painter and teacher Lucy Elizabeth Kemp-Welch, best known for the paintings of

horses in World War I military service and her illustrations in Anna Sewell’s timeless best-seller “Black Beauty.” Sir Alfred Munnings was counted as one of the world’s greatest equestrian artists, and Pennsylvania-born equine artist, author, teacher and illustrator of more than 130 books, Sam Savitt was the official illustrator of the United States Equestrian Team and founding member of the American Academy of Equine Art.

‘Luck’ is When Opportunity Meets Preparation

Jean’s best-known character,

Fergus the Horse, evolved over 15 years of drawing generic horses. Their first job together was for famed horse whisperer Monty Roberts. Living stateside at the time, Jean attended one of Roberts’ Join-Up® clinics in Georgia and introduced herself to him as a horse illustrator. Roberts asked Jean to illustrate his book, “From My Hands to Yours.” That project kindled a working relationship which

led to creating Fergus drawings for his quarterly magazine, Join-Up® Journal.

Monty Roberts Remembers:

“Jean Abernethy contributed greatly to our organization for a sustained period of time. Jean consistently surprised me in two entirely separate areas. When she meant to, she was very methodical, correct, and knowledgeable about the ‘real

life’ of working with horses. At the other end of the spectrum, when Jean wanted to create humor, she did it with enough reality to get one’s attention and a load of humor far to the lighter side of her artwork. Jean is a true genius in the area of equine art.”

Fergus & Friends

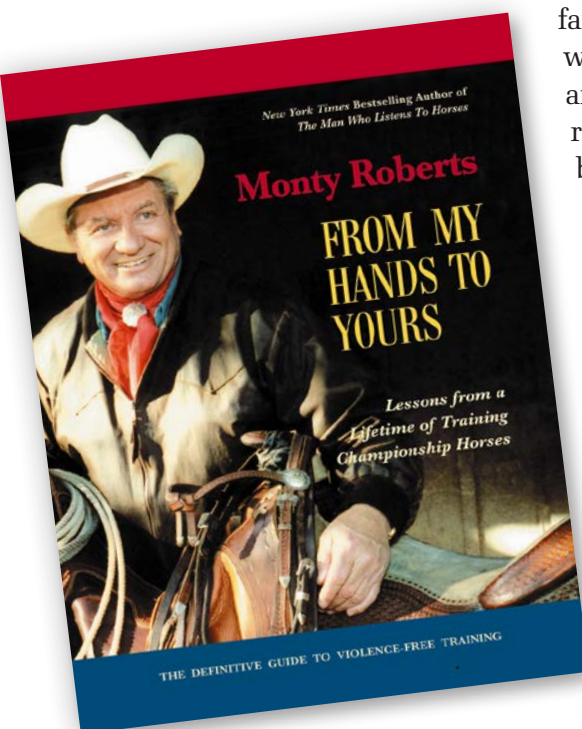
Fergus’s pedigree is somewhat generic, so he fits into almost every equine conversation. Jean refers to him as a “FLHWBGE (Funny Little Horse With Big Googly Eyes)” from the little known, but much-needed species, *Equus hilarious*. A gelding, to date Fergus has about 14 cartoon friends.

“Eleven on the Christmas Hitch (‘Fergus and The Night Before Christmas,’ 2018), then a few more. I sometimes invent characters as needed to craft the joke. ‘Socks’ is a good example of that. Then there’s the people, the dogs, the goat...’68,’ the sassy cow...the talking pasture rock...” Jean explains. “The mule is super intelligent; the Clydesdale is aloof; the Appy mare worries a lot; the cow-horse is obsessed with cows. Then those personality traits play against each other.”

For all things Fergus, Jean is both illustrator and copywriter, and depending on the story, it takes her two to three hours to create a new comic strip. She still uses conventional artist materials occasionally, e.g.,



Tammy Donaldson





LEFT & BELOW
Jean's saddle work in progress.
Her latest finished saddle.

watercolor and charcoal/graphite on paper, but most of her work is digital now.

"I save a lot by not buying art supplies!"

Admittedly, Jean doesn't write down her flashes of ideas regularly enough, but she does keep a note pad by her bed for when something good comes to her in the wee hours. Sketchbooks lie throughout the house filled with ideas.

Willow, Jean's Half-Arabian Buckskin

Vanguards Pistolena, aka "Willow," is Jean's 12-year-old Half-Arabian buckskin mare. Sired by 2004 AQHA Perlino stallion, Lees Last Steady Gun, out of Crabbet-bred Mi Royal Flag, Willow stands 14.1 hands.

"She's been incredibly challenging and consequently taught me a lot. I've put hundreds of hours and hundreds of miles on her since I got her at the age of five. That has paid off in developing her into a good worker, although she can still be quite the live wire. I've worked her six summers as a trail guiding horse, so that has made us close."

Sadly, the COVID-19 lockdown in Canada has kept the two apart for health safety reasons.

Rider, Saddlemaker & Copyright Watchdog

Jean's Facebook friends and followers may remember that she took on a saddle-making project last year.

"With each one, I've learned a little more about ordering the tree, crafting the leather and creating a balanced seat. I might build another someday. I'm not letting go of my tools any time soon."

Fergus joined social media in 2012, and it's been fun. Jean is amazed and grateful to the Fergus followers who share the comics, and the laughs, with their friends. They are a loyal following, often writing to ask her directly about the authenticity of Fergus images they see online.

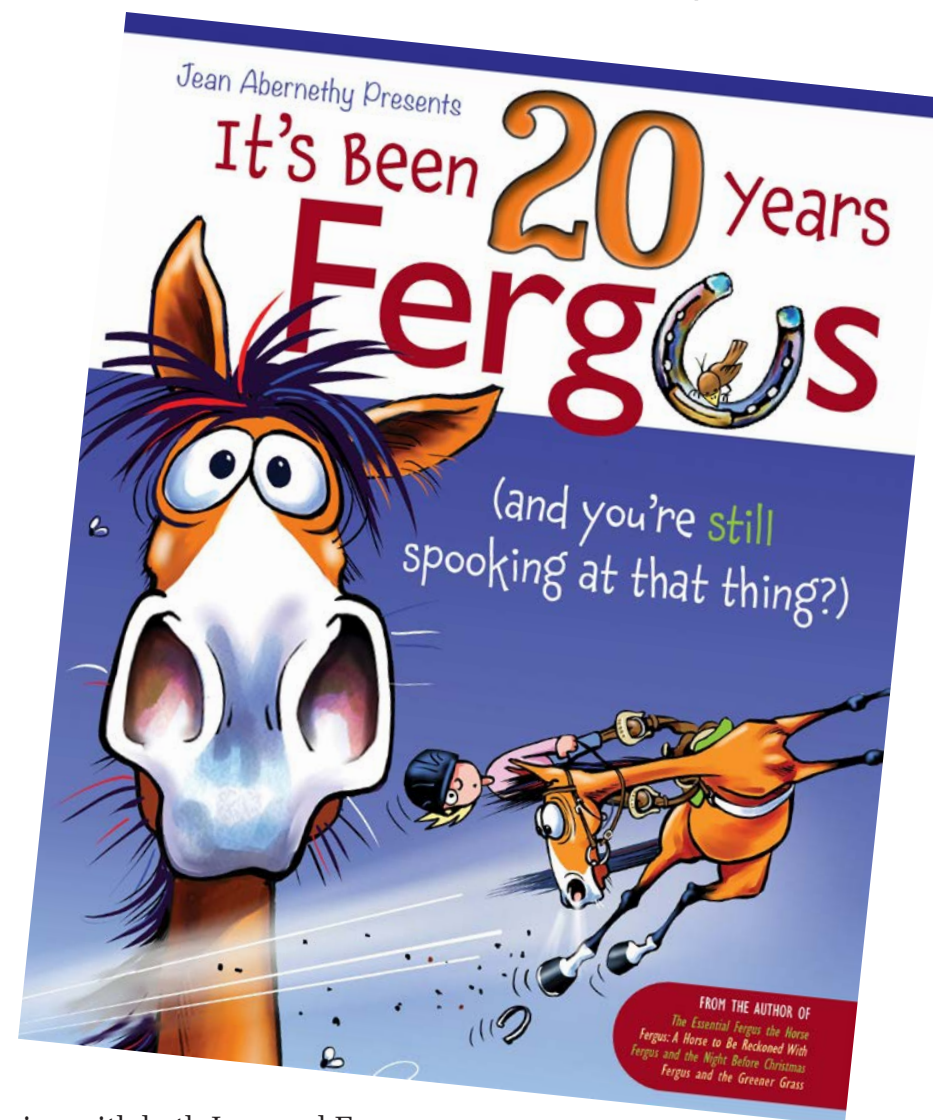
"I can't thank Fergus's friends enough," says Jean.

2020 is 20 Years of Fergus

While there are no Fergus animated movies on the horizon, his devotees will have book number five this September. Readers of all ages, from five to 95, will be delighted by his wit, honesty and profoundly funny observations on horses, humans and the life they strive to live together.

"It's Been 20 Years Fergus (and You're Still Spooking at That Thing?)" is a rollicking comic treasury starring the world's most famous cartoon horse. He has hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook and a surging presence on Instagram.

Rebecca Didier, managing editor at Trafalgar Square Books (www.HorseandRiderBooks.com), the publishing house for Fergus books, sums up work-



BELOW
Fergus's fifth book, "It's Been 20 Years Fergus," is out in September 2020.

ing with both Jean and Fergus quite nicely.

"At Trafalgar Square Books, we have had the absolute pleasure of calling Jean Abernethy and her wise, wonderful and wacky character Fergus the Horse our friends since 2014. That was the year before we published Jean's first collection of comics, 'The Essential Fergus the Horse,' which was followed by three delightfully illustrated story books. Jean's creative energy astounds. She is never without a new idea for sharing her unique blend of sage equine

advice and utter ridiculousness. If ever there was someone who actually has a 'twinkle in her eye,' it is Jean. She and Fergus have made us all slightly sillier and definitely happier horse people by being a part of our lives." 🐾

Janet de Acevedo Macdonald is a freelance travel writer who blogs at arabianhorsetravel.com. She has proudly written articles for "Arabian Horse Life" and its predecessor "Modern Arabian Horse" since 2012.