



Longshot

Dick Francis

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"Fast-paced, meticulously plotted...Nobody sets up a mystery better than Dick Francis."

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Travel writer John Kendall didn't think he was doing anything too out of the ordinary when he tramped off to rural England for an interview with a successful race horse trainer. Soon enough, however, Kendall realizes that completing the book will be tricky at best. In fact, the perils described in his survival manuals pale next to the dangers in rural England....

Selected by the Literary Guild, the Mystery Guild, and Doubleday Book Club

Longshot Details

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Sara says

It's fair to say that Dick Francis is the most reliable author of horse-related mysteries in the English Language. While that may be a fairly narrow niche, it's also a niche that allows Francis to expand his knowledge base into areas readers would never expect.

In Longshot, Francis offers us a main character who is not only a writer, but a survival expert, ala "Survivorman" Les Stroud. This character is hired to write a biography for a famous racehorse trainer. What ensues is the result of a previously-vanished amateur jockey, several characters with poorly balanced mental status, and WAAAAAYYYY too much money being thrown around by people with too few scruples. As usual, the first-person narrator is a multi-talented man of few words who is not only disciplined, but much tougher on the inside than he is on the outside.

Overall, this narrative hangs together a bit better than some of the other DF titles. The standard plot devices (a male, single narrator who is physically fit, a hideous injury, the nick-of-time rescue) don't feel so standard, as they are all twists on the usual fare. The backup characters are more rounded, and the descriptive elements don't feel tacked on. When you reach the climax of the story, Francis plays with your expectations, making the bad guy's consequences something you'd never expect.

Henry Ozogula says

I have not read too many Dick Francis' novels, but this one made a big impression on me since it involved the world of writing, literature, literary agents...John Kendall is a struggling writer – I have identified with this for years! – and his attempts to survive in this sphere sparked empathy from me. His (early) interactions with his agent piqued me – even if he would learn that his agent even before talking to him, had accepted a position on his behalf before deigning to brief him! Indeed there is a lot of human warmth, great intelligence, fecund interactions amongst people in Francis' novel.

But always terrifying is the sinister, cruel proclivities of certain individuals ('villains') in his works. People one would not necessarily associate sheer, palpable evil with, often turning out to be incredibly malevolent. And so it turns out here too. Late in this work, we flinch with horror as our hero has an arrow embedded in him, with the concomitant excruciating pain that goes with this. Yet the tormentor is still bent on tormenting him further, by trying to pull the goddamn arrow out! Excuse me. Even now I shudder trying to imagine the throes of pain. The mystery in this work, as usual, is exceedingly brilliant, complicated yet simple in the end... Yes, Kendall is a struggling writer who has nevertheless managed to publish some "books". His encounter with an established, formidable, revered female writer late on in this work, for me, was worth the price of this book alone !

David says

Dick Francis is my favorite writer...no one quite like him. Incredible details, character development and I

love the way he uses sentence structure to set a scene and convey emotion. Dick Francis was a master at that. I've read his entire collection, and this is among my top-five favorites. I'm a newspaper writer, so it was fun to relate to the anguish of writing that is expressed in this novel. I've read the entire Dick Francis collection, and am now going back through the classics on my shelf — it's like reading them for the first time. My heart was racing and I couldn't flip the pages fast enough. Great stuff.

Jay says

An enjoyable Francis staple – a worthy hero, plenty of horses and racing. Most of the Francis books tie the mystery plot to something Francis has obviously researched. I've read and learned about glass blowing, (ancient) computer viruses, and gold mining from some Francis plots, and I've come to expect these non-horse bits as much as the upstanding hero. And many books contain a couple of these side research plot points beyond the well known and expected horse racing touches. For “Longshot” I feel Francis may have been on a tight schedule. The unique skill described is survival, and you get the feeling he picked up a book at the shop on surviving in the British wilderness and wrote bits of that into this story. Quite a few bits. There's always another one coming. The other “inner workings” parts of the story involved selling a book to a publisher and the workings of a horse training farm, neither of which I suspect required any additional research for this author. I felt a bit disappointed after being entertained in a more “exotic” manner in earlier books.

But that didn't really hurt this story – it's a good one. As I said at the beginning of this review, this is a typical Francis plot, and I enjoyed it. And since I bought 5 more at the library sale, all thick paper hardbacks, I will keep reading him.

This is the 20th Francis book I've read, and the first in paper (the previous ones either audio or ebooks). I believe I still prefer audio for these kinds of mysteries, since they tend to keep driving and I feel I would have completed this quicker and with as much retention and enjoyment as reading the paper novel. I can't say the same for every author or genre of book. In my most-read author chart on Goodreads, Francis is coming strong in third behind Ross Macdonald and James Lee Burke, leaving Philip Roth and John LeCarre behind and Ian Fleming hoping to find more books to publish. The serious fiction plodders are behind and struggling to keep up.

Christine says

I read this book yesterday. I mean, I read the whole thing yesterday, if that gives you an idea of how much it grabs you. Francis was the master of that last sentence that makes you have to start the next chapter whether you want to or not.

Nate D says

Dick Francis only writes horse racing-related noir, as far as I can tell. I think my parents must have been reading him for a while, because this rather unmemorable example ended up in my hands when I was a teen.

Arwen56 says

Romanzo di genere "giallo", che può vantare alcune caratteristiche positive. Ad esempio, i delitti avvengono coinvolgendo una cerchia di persone piuttosto ristretta, persone che, man mano che il libro precede, si imparano a conoscere abbastanza bene; diciamo che, in questo senso, "l'impianto" generale assomiglia al tipo di ambientazioni create dalla Christie: poche persone, che hanno risentimenti verso qualcuno oppure motivi validi per difendere "a spada tratta" qualcun altro. Personalmente, è l'organizzazione che preferisco nei "polizieschi". Detesto quando saltano fuori personaggi "nuovi" ogni tre per due oppure quando si scopre che l'assassino è uno che non si era mai sentito nominare prima.

I personaggi, sia pur con tutti i limiti del caso, sono abbastanza definiti, hanno una loro particolare psicologia e non sono solo marionette gettate in scena per creare superflui colpi di scena o per riuscire a tirare sino alla fine.

Infine, il mondo che fa sfondo alla vicenda, cioè quello delle corse dei cavalli, sembra ben descritto e ricostruito. Non per nulla, l'autore stesso è stato un fantino piuttosto affermato negli anni tra il 1953 ed il 1954, il che lo fa evidentemente parlare con cognizione di causa. Per contro, vi sono un paio di particolari non del tutto convincenti nel finale, particolari che ovviamente ometto di citare per non svelare nulla a chi dovesse eventualmente leggere il romanzo. E, aggiungerei anche che il lettore tende a sospettare sin da subito dell'assassino o, almeno, per me è andata così.

Comunque, in linea generale, il mio giudizio è sostanzialmente positivo.

An Odd1 says

"Longshot" by top-notch Dick Francis is an arrow that just misses the heart. Narrator John Kendal meticulously details directions for constructing such, bows, traps, diagram of arteries guarding life blood, in six glossy white hardcover survival guides "Return Safe from the Wilderness" (Jungle, Desert, Sea, Ice, or Safari). Generous large racehorse trainer Tremayne Vickers invites John to leave starving in an frigid garret for a month live-in biography commission.

Daughter-in-law Mackie skids their jeep into a deep water-filled ditch, where our hero saves her, the head lad Bob Watson, client Fiona Goodhaven, and respective spouses quiet Ingrid and happy Harry, from "ice-cubery" p47. We get drawn into the family circle with sons friendly Gareth 15 (pal appropriately nicknamed Coconut 14), and otherworldly woodworker Perkin. Fiona's cousin violent jockey Nolan, arrested for strangling a party girl there the previous April, publicly attacks and threatens John.

Interspersed are third-person accounts of Berkshire-lilting local Inspector Doone finding the bones of missing strangled sleeparound stable girl Angela Brickell. Her murderer keeps on trying, inspired by the guides. John needs a strong will to save his own skin.

I'd forgotten the title, but I've enjoyed this at least thrice now. I knew the perpetrator and fate at first meeting, but I wallow in expressions like still mornings "as rare as honest beggars" p 64, that bring eccentric character voices to life, my new friends. I still fear huge horses, even after moving to the country and learning to ride Western along with new neighbors. But I read everything I can find by Francis, edge of the seat suspense. Surprise endings twist our perception of justice.

At the end, John is the loner cowboy riding off in the sunset, but the people have been more finely delineated than in modern book series that drag on too long. I mourn the author, not alive to write more; his son has not yet achieved the same pinnacle of talent.

Mary Pagones says

The most important draw for me as a reader when reading a mystery is a compelling narrative voice and Dick Francis does not disappoint. I admit as a writer I felt especially drawn to the character of John Kendall. Kendall is the successful author of a series of how-to guides about wilderness survival. Despite his glamorous occupation, he's completely skint at the beginning of book, having frittered away almost his entire advance. He doesn't have enough money to put coins in the heater of his cheap rented flat. So he's desperate enough to accept a position ghost-writing the memoir of a successful horse racing trainer. Of course, he stumbles into a mystery--one of the stable hands, a beautiful young girl is found murdered.

The book is well-plotted and delightfully funny. One of my favorite sequences involves Kendall attempting to teach a group of teenage boys how to forage for food in the wilderness although they'd really just rather be eating pizza indoors.

My only quibble is that the other characters could have been a bit more differentiated and there wasn't quite as much horse-related action as I'd hoped for but still a fun and expertly-written read.

Ruth Jalfon says

OK, I'm officially going through the equivalent of mind-numbing TV; enjoyable, quick and instantly forgettable plot-driven books. My mind lately has been like fizz and all I want is to read something easy and diverting so I'm raiding the children's library I run eg reading through a box set of Dick Francis that my mother also likes and gave me - I've probably read them already a few years ago, but as I said they're not memorable (and now the technology described is **really** out of date!). I'm also reading my husband's crime/mystery type books - you know, fun, fast paced, all action, describing the minutiae of the protagonist's life ie that they got up and had a shower and exactly what they ate for breakfast and that they turned the key in the ignition to start up their XXX car etc etc. So apologies if I'm dumbing down the literary level here but hey I'm still reading! (...just not the medical journals I'm supposed to be reading).

Linda levenson says

I'm a real fan of Dick Francis.

Kaethe says

28-Jul-98

Longshot - Dick Francis It's funny that I've read this at least twice before and never wrote anything about it. I can't love the mystery because there's a whole lot of slut-shaming and blaming the victim(s). But, the stuff

about the great trainer wanting his story told, and the writer who's sold his first novel and is trying to write his second and live on his tiny advance...that has the feeling of real truth. And despite the heinous indifference of the community to the death of a young sexually-active woman, the Ladies (titled or not there are clearly some women who are better than others, at least in part because they are safely married) are all treated with respect and admiration.

Yeah, despite the bad, I still love the book, because who doesn't want to be offered the chance to ride a good horse and then be asked to turn jockey? Even at my age I still like to daydream about previously undiscovered talents being discovered. Probably very few people actually could stand modeling as a career, say, but who wouldn't love to be asked?

Personal copy

Alexis Neal says

One of Dick Francis' better books. Not a lot of action, and because of the nature of the villains' tactics, what action there is tends to play out more as man vs. circumstances more than man vs. man. Still, John Kendall is one of my favorite Francis characters (unassuming and capable, as Francis leads tend to be), and I enjoy the slow build of tension over the course of the book.

Like Koontz and others, Francis often falls into the cliché of the insanely evil villain--atrocious acts committed by individuals who are clearly deranged. I tend to see this as a pretty lazy choice and prefer everyday villains. We all of us have the capacity for evil, and the more sympathetic and complex villains remind us of that. The maniacal villain seldom makes for a compelling story, and Francis is at his best when he resists the impulse to sidestep a more legitimate motive in favor of "because he/she is crazy."

That being said (and I hope this does not constitute a spoiler), this book avoids the clichéd psycho killer pitfall. Which is probably a large part of why it ranks among my favorite Dick Francis novels.

Harry says

What is there to say about Dick Francis? As I think about all of his books (yes, this review covers all of his books, and yes I've read them all) I think about a moral ethical hero, steeped in intelligence and goodness embroiled in evil machinations within British horse racing society - either directly or indirectly. The heroes aren't always horse jockies, they can be film producers, or involve heroes engaged in peripheral professions that somehow always touch the horse racing world.

But more than that, Francis's heroes are rational human beings. The choices made are rational choices directed by a firm objective philosophy that belies all of Francis's novels. The dialogue is clear and touched with humor no matter the intensity of evil that the hero faces. The hero's thoughts reveal a vulnerability that is touching, while his actions are always based on doing the right thing to achieve justice.

Causing the reader to deeply care about the characters in a novel is a difficult thing to do. No such worries in a Francis novel. The point of view is first person, you are the main character as you read the story (usually the character of Mr. Douglas). The hero is personable, like able, non-violent but delivering swift justice with

his mind rather than through physical means. This is not to say that violence is a stranger to our hero. Some of it staggering and often delivered by what we would think of normal persons living in British society.

You will come to love the world of Steeple Chase racing, you will grow a fondness for horses, stables, trainers and the people who live in that world. You will read the books, devouring one after the other and trust me Dick Francis has a lot of novels (over 40 by my last count).

There are several series woven into the fabric of Francis's work: notably the Sid Halley and Kit Fielding series.

Assessment: Dick Francis is one of my favorite writers. I read his books with a fierce hunger that remains insatiable and I mourn his death.

Lynn Pribus says

Francis is so reliable a read. You know the ethical and loyal hero will triumph, there are plenty of red herrings and horses (of various colors) and action. Still, the writing is not flabby or plain. He writes with verve, good depictions of people and horses and places.

Never a disappointment.
