A Funny Name for a Horse

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Each and every object in the world has its own history, it goes without saying, which is a result of some other history, and so on; forever continuing. It can be triggered, Ellen was told, by a name. And the unexpected can appear in small and large lumps.

[Murray Bail, Eucalyptus 1998: 109]

In 2003 a five year old mare won the Melbourne Cup, the premier Australian horse-racing event. That was unusual – the race is usually won by males. Her name was even less expected: Makybe Diva. “A funny name for a horse,” people said, “How do you pronounce it?” She was owned by Tony Santic. Her name was a collage of the first two letters of the names Maureen, Kylie, Belinda, Diane, and Vanessa – the five women who worked in Tony Santic’s offices. This is not common practice in assigning names to race horses. It is more usual that the name is an assertion of the aspirations of the owner, as in ‘Breeze Past,’ ‘Great Blaze,’ and ‘Our Excess.’ Or, often, the name is cleverly derived from that of the parents as in ‘Haphazard’ out of the dam ‘Random Chance’ by the sire ‘Distorted Humour,’ and ‘Intriguing’ out of ‘Curious Affair’ by ‘Carry a Smile.’

Makybe Diva was not named in the way that most race horses are named. Rather, she was named in the way that many fishing boats are named: Subron for Susan and Bronwyn, daughters to the owner; Rosma H for Ross, Matt, and Harry, sons to the owner; or Morrie D for Morrie and Dallas, father and son to the owner of the boat.

The day after Makybe Diva’s win a newspaper headline made the connection: “Tuna King lands the catch of the day” was the page two story in The Australian. Tony Santic is a fisherman, harvesting live, young tuna south of Port Lincoln, in South Australia, and farming them in pens for the lucrative Japanese market.

Owning race horses started as a hobby and became a passion. At the time of her win, Makybe Diva was one horse in a stable of a hundred and fifty. Tony’s experiences as a fisherman, his sense of the proper way to name a fishing boat, had been transplanted to his stable of horses. In naming a horse that became a winner he had memorialized relationships with others with whom he had a close connection.

Makybe Diva was, indeed, a champion. She has entered the record books as the only horse to win three successive Melbourne Cups. To one newspaper reporter, she conjured visions of Hercules who became a God after completing twelve challenging tasks or of the humble hobbit Frodo who resisted evil powers to save Middle Earth. After her third win she was retired from racing – it was time to rest and to carry a foal – but both her name and her imagined qualities lived on. Her kid brother sold for two and a half million dollars and her first foal, born in August 2007, was initially valued at around six million. A child in the town of Mount Gambier was named after the horse and a lifesized, bronzed statue of the champion now adorns the foreshore at Port Lincoln. At the same fishing port a new purse seiner Markane, part-owned by Tony Santic, launched in 2005 and named for Marcia and Kane, wife and son to another of the three owners, was described as having the “lines and performance of a thoroughbred,” she was “expected to have a winning edge in ‘brining home the goods’ for her owners.”

Names, and the memories associated with those names, may circulate long after the person, place, or object that first carried the name has gone. In 1852, the two-masted, square-rigged merchant vessel Miranda – named, we suspect, for a now forgotten wife or daughter to the builder or owner – sheltered from a south easterly gale behind Rabbit Island, off the coast from Wilsons Promontory, in southern Victoria. Her anchor cable parted and she was blown ashore, and wrecked, in the bay that now bears her name. Many years later, in 1983, Snowy Manifold, who lived and fished near the promontory, built a seventeen meter, steel fishing boat that he named Miranda Bay. Or, again, the small, fishing boat Doughboy was named for a sand island that has disappeared beneath the waters of the Gippsland Lakes and is now remembered by few people. And the names of the Lakes Entrance fishing boats Nephelle and Blanca – names that, when these Allied Fisheries
boats first arrived in this country town, were disparaged as strange and exotic, as the sorts of names doctors or lawyers would give to their children— are now both shared by the daughters of fishermen.

And so it is with Makybe Diva. No longer seen in the flesh, but often heard about. A statue at Port Lincoln; another at Flemington Race Course where she raced to fame. The mother of three foals, all news-worthy. Inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2006 and, more recently, in 2010, officially recognized as a legend by the Australian Racing Hall of Fame. The symbols and the signs memorialize a horse; a horse that, nowadays, few people would recognize. Now, it seems, the name itself has more significance than the animal that once carried that name. As it is with fishing boats that sank, or burnt, or simply rusted and faded away, it is the name that is remembered, and it is the name that conjures up stories of remarkable times and events.

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