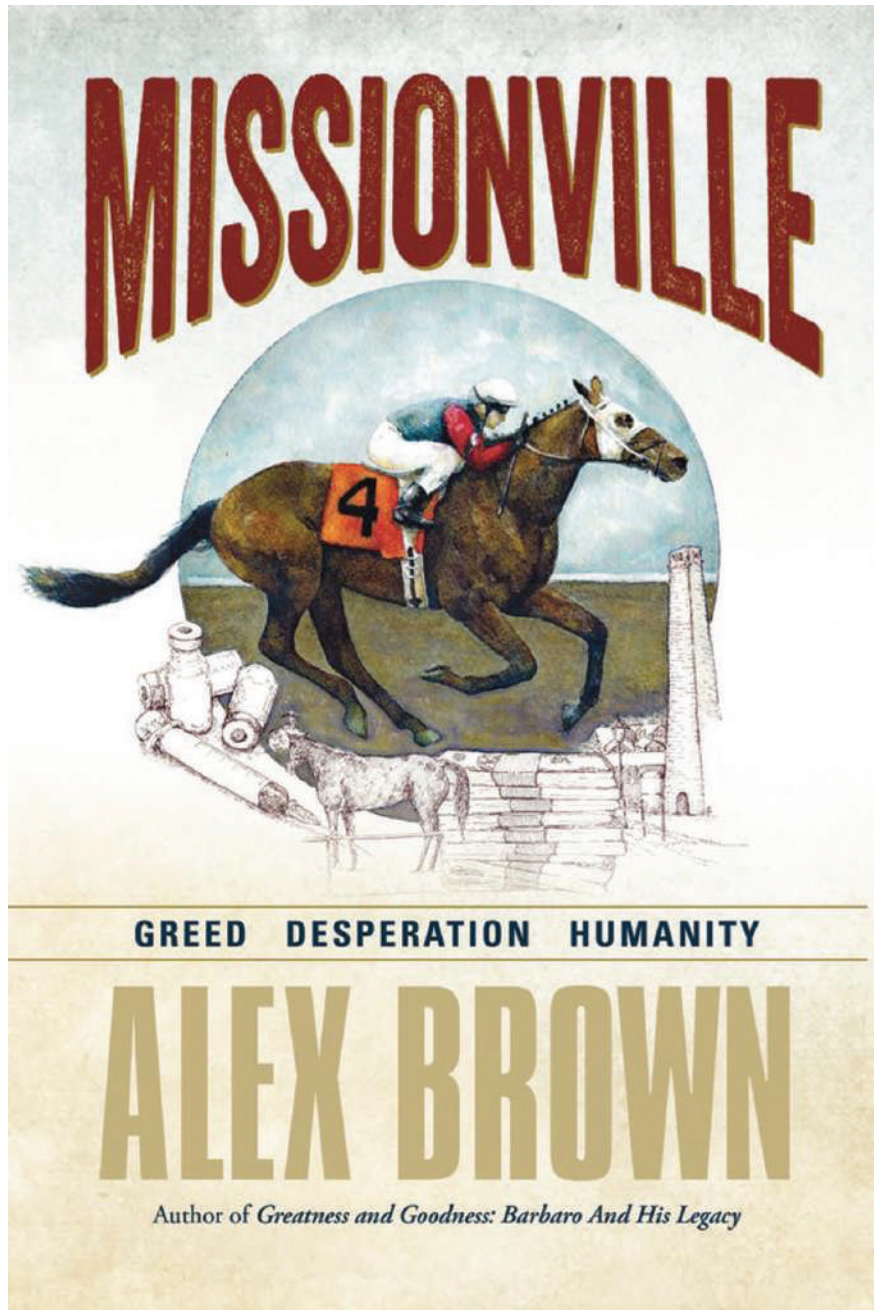


# Book Review: Missionville By Alex Brown



The first long-form piece of fiction from Alex Brown is Missionville and the author doesn't drift too far from his core in this one. For a few decades, Brown has supported his writing career by working at various tracks as an exercise rider while, at the same time, being a passionate crusader for horse rescue efforts.

In Missionville, the central character, Pete Wright, is a struggling trainer at a fictional hard scrabble racetrack somewhere in Pennsylvania. He works his own horses and, at the beginning at least, is much more ambivalent than the author is about the ultimate dismal fate to which many of the low claiming horses at Missionville are veering.

There are more than a few clues that the Missionville racetrack has some unpleasant issues. The owner of the track has assured that security leaves his horses alone. A vet seems to be injecting some animals with an undetectable substance. There's a jockey that everyone knows is using a buzzer to win races. A groom is enhancing his free lance career by funnelling slow horses to auction where they will be sold for meat. A veteran trainer takes his own life. Even the clockers appear to be on the take, registering slow times for horses to enhance their odds in the evening. The protagonist, Pete, is doing so poorly with his modest stable of three or four horses that, out of sheer desperation, he accepts \$500 to drive a truck full of horses across the border into Quebec, where the slaughter of thoroughbreds is permissible.

This is a turning point for Pete. He's filled with self loathing at what he's done.

*"I watched horses being unloaded at the slaughterhouse. All healthy looking, all relieved to get out of that ridiculously cramped trailer, expecting something better. All. Now. Dead. But I got my five freaking hundred."*

Not too coincidentally, Pete has recently met Amanda, who spends all her spare time saving horses from slaughter and finding permanent homes for horses that can no longer

race. Amanda, needless to say, is beautiful and not only does she want to save horses, she wants to save Pete. Amanda takes a lot of hot showers and, fortunately for our central character, really enjoys sex.

Between the two them, and with help from others, they set out to:

- 1) Find out what drug is being injected into horses (spoiler alert – it's *frog juice!*)
- 2) Have the track owner punished for his unethical and illegal behaviour
- 3) Prevent a horse named Spicy Lemon from getting on a slaughter bound trailer
- 4) Rid the track of the buzzer-using jockey and a cheating trainer

Because Missionville is a work of fiction, this all comes together neatly (too neatly?). Brown creates a great pace with the action. His writing is unfettered with excessive description, electing simply to take us from scene to scene like a morning workout in which the colt goes pole to pole with athletic efficiency.

It's a very good read, though I admit for at least the last half of the book, I was expecting something else. Some violent conflict perhaps.

My horse racing literature of choice was always Dick Francis. In a Dick Francis story, the good guy, while investigating the illicit activity of the creeps and sleazeballs, inevitably finds himself in mortal danger. I thought Pete might end up tied to the back of a dark stall on the receiving end of some brass knuckles. Or knocked out, or put on a panicking runaway horse, feet and ankles bound tightly to the stirrups.

But Alex Brown isn't as interested in crafting a nail biting 'whodunit' as he is in giving us a well described primer on the way horse slaughter works. In this regard, he's done a brilliant job. His past experience has allowed him to paint an accurate picture of how the backstretch works and how horses plummet down the claiming ranks and become worth more dead than alive.

Woodbine fans will find a lot to identify in Missionville. This track, like Woodbine, has slots. There's a top jockey named Emma Sparks, who is clearly modelled after Emma-Jayne Wilson.

*"A good honest horsewoman. That's what Emma is, and a pleasure to work with."*

The backstretch chaplain at Woodbine is Shawn Kennedy. The backstretch chaplain at Missionville is named...Shawn. Brown says he modeled the Amanda character after local horse rescuer Ellie Ross (Ross points out their relationship was strictly platonic). And poignantly, Brown describes the heroic work of the one of the outriders.

*"I see a riderless horse. It is galloping the wrong way on the inside fence moving down the backside. I watch Darren start to bear down on the loose horse. They are going at a flat out gallop. Darren leans closer and closer to the runaway, then snags it by the bridle. As soon as he does this, he starts to ease his pony back. In less than a minute, he has the loose horse walking alongside the pony. It's a remarkable piece of horsemanship."*

I asked Alex about that paragraph and he told me,

*"The last edit I made in the book was to name the outrider, Darren. Prior to that, the outrider was unnamed. He is named after Darren Fortune, and I did this shortly after he passed."*

At 336 pages, Missionville is hardly a short story. But Brown keeps things moving quickly and, since he's working in his area of expertise, it all comes off with authenticity.

"Missionville is definitely not Woodbine," Brown told me. "But it is like many lower level tracks in the United States." (Brown also free-lanced on horses at Penn National).

Alex Brown is also the author of 'Greatness and Goodness: Barbaro and His Legacy' and on his website, [Alexbrownracing.com](http://Alexbrownracing.com), updates his list of dozens of kill buyers in the United States.

Missionville is clearly Brown's effort to identify how horses get in terrible circumstances. Horse lovers will cringe at the reality he portrays. This work of fiction may, in fact, be the first novel that explicitly exposes the horse slaughter process, while at the same time, showing how individuals can prevent horses from an unacceptable fate.

In that sense, *Mission* accomplished. And if you find some of the plotline or nefarious activities a little hard to swallow, Brown warns you on the very first page:

***This is a work of fiction. The truth would be unbelievable.***