

THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER: A book review

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"Publishing a volume of verse," wrote Don Marquis "is like dropping a rose-petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo." But Michelle Guillot, author of "The Official 2060 Superprix! Fan Guide: The definitive guide to mid-21st century dressage" will hear echoes loud and clear. She will hear howls of protest from those who have failed to notice there is 'something-rotten-in-the-woodshed' of today's dressage and paeans of praise from those who have. She will also hear the sound of laughter.

The author is to be congratulated and thanked for having produced a book that is destined to become a classic in its field. It is required reading for Federation Equestre Nationale (FEI) and national federation dressage committee members and the perfect Christmas present for all equestrians. The book is classified by the publisher under 'Humor' but don't let this mislead you

(<http://www.lulu.com/content/paperback-book/superprix/7431987>).

Yes, it is a (wickedly) funny book but it is also a tragic book. The text is more than comic and the illustrations more than cartoons. Appropriately, the author/ illustrator calls it a fantasy but it is no more a fairy tale than 'Gulliver's Travels.' Read it slowly and thoughtfully. There is a barb in every sentence and a story in every picture.

The book is a satire on current trends in dressage and a plea for reform. Observing what has happened to dressage in the last few years, the author imagines what dressage could be like in 2060 if these trends continue. Sadly, the accuracy of her predictions have been confirmed by several changes for the worse that have already received FEI approval. It is as though the FEI had seen an advance copy of her book and, failing to recognize that she was being satirical, had sanctioned many of her predictions.

Michelle Guillot writes and draws with a perceptive knowledge of dressage. In her afterword, she sums up what appears to be the intention in present-day dressage ... to "maximize results in the show ring while minimizing the time and effort it takes to educate the horse and rider."

Her book pokes fun at the short cuts being taken in tack and training. She wittily disapproves of the FEI's approval of mechanical restraints such as flash, crank and drop nosebands, ST bridles, bits, chains and hyperflexion training methods. But, as she points out, the most chilling development is the effect these have on the mental and

physical welfare of the horses themselves. Readers are reminded of the retrograde step taken by the FEI in 2007 when they eliminated the training pyramid requirement for 'Relaxation'.

The author deserves the thanks of every horse lover for writing this book. I hope it will get widely circulated and its message acted on. She succeeds in combining intelligence, imagination, and irreverence with a deep insight into human nature.

Would it not be wonderful if the launch of this book helped to persuade the Dressage Committee of the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) to recommend acceptance of a rule change proposal they are currently considering, to approve the crossunder bitless bridle for dressage. With a stroke of the pen, the USEF could reverse the trend of the last few years and approve an option that will dramatically enhance the welfare and safety of both horse and rider. The USEF have the opportunity to give a much-needed lead to the FEI and set an example for all other national federations.

The USEF Dressage Committee members have received a copy of the petition from 'Academia Liberti' in support of this proposal, with 2,250 signatures and many compelling comments from all over the world ...

(<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/allow-bitless-bridles-in-usef-rated-competitions>).

In order that the committee should avoid a semantic stumbling block created by that misleading phrase 'On the Bit' they will also have received a copy of an article that explains the mistake in translation that has enabled this phrase to bedevil dressage for nearly a hundred years

(http://www.bitlessbridle.com/on_the_bit.pdf)

In addition, they have received a twelve-page bibliography on the crossunder bridle (www.bitlessbridle.com/articles) and a copy of an article published recently in the Equine Veterinary Journal which describes a scientific experiment carried out last year to compare a jointed snaffle bridle with a crossunder bitless bridle ...

(<http://caliban.ingentaselect.co.uk/fstemp/75d40bf169716c2276a9a19e4ed7159f.pdf>)

The experiment showed that, even in the first four minutes, performances improved by an average of 75% when the bit was removed. A video of the experiment is available free of charge at

<http://www.bitlessbridle.com/cat/Video.html>

As chairman of the company that has marketed the crossunder bitless bridle for the last 10 years, I cheerfully declare a conflict of interest. As a veterinary researcher for the last 57 years, I recognize the harm a bit does to a horse's mind, the diseases it causes and the accidents it provokes.

The scientific evidence in favor of an amendment to the current mandatory use of one or more bits and a chain for dressage is convincing but perhaps a purely rational argument is insufficient to win the day. Guillot's book will help by employing the power of laughter.