

A tale of horses, hurt and healing

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Marjorie Simmins at Caberfeidh Stables in Dundee, Cape Breton, in 2013, rides Winnie, a palomino quarter-horse, in her first time back in the saddle after a debilitating accident.

Year of the Horse is the book Marjorie Simmins wanted to write all her life.

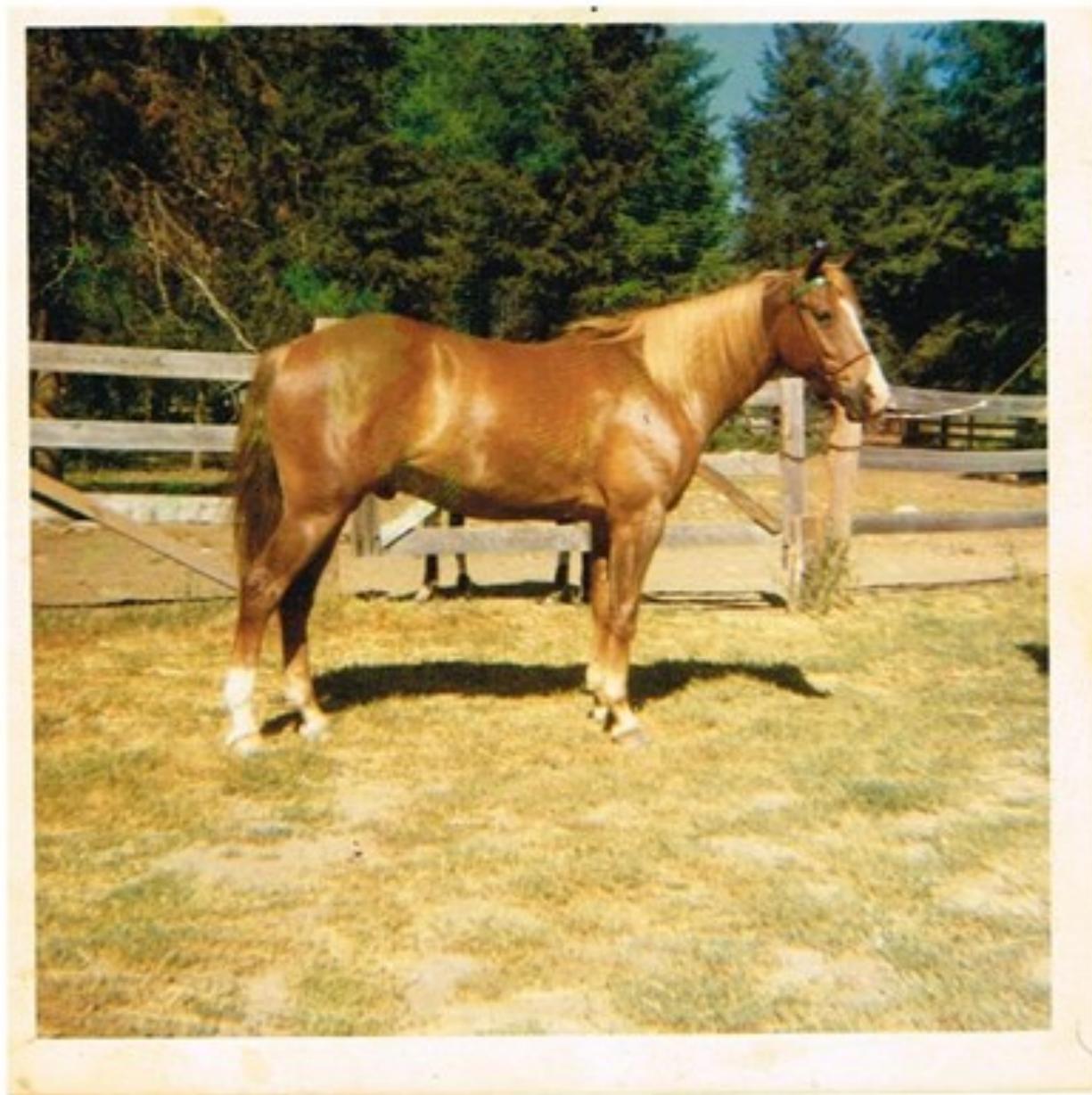
As a horse-mad 13-year-old living in Vancouver, she became owner of Nizzeyn's Coqeyn, a half-Arabian, half-Welsh pony, "who was astonishingly gifted and forgiving, and I loved him beyond beyond."

Horses continued to be as vital to her existence as the air she breathed as she embarked on a career as a commercial fishing and sportfishing writer, an essayist and teacher, and fell in love and moved to Cape Breton with her husband, Silver Donald Cameron.

"Riding horses was never just something I did. *It's who I am.* I love the whole world of horses, want it in my life now, and as I get older. I want it for my body, and for my mind and spirit," Simmins writes in

[Year of The Horse](#) (Pottersfield Press).

She had never written about "all her sweethearts," horses with names like Kaber, Boo, Ryan, Cliquot, Fritz and Madonna. And most loved of all, Coqeyn, pronounced like the drug.



Nizzeyn's Coqeyn, 1971, at Southlands, in Vancouver, was Marjorie Simmins' first horse.

A debilitating riding accident in 2011 left her with soft tissue and nerve damage so severe she couldn't get out of bed for many long months, and years of numbness in her back followed.

Though in pain, she was determined to get back in the saddle. When she realized 2014 was the year of the horse in the Chinese zodiac, she decided 2014 was to be her year of the horse. "If ever there was a title for a book, that was it," she muses.

Sitting in a Halifax coffee shop in the midst of a book tour that will take her from Nova Scotia back to her native B.C., where she will spend the winter before returning to Cape Breton in May, Simmins says Year of the Horse, "is a story about horses, healing and improbable dreams."

It is not her first book. In 2014, she released [Coastal Lives](#), also from Pottersfield Press, of 22 previously published essays about living on the West and East coasts.

"It was a culture shock coming from Vancouver to the Maritimes in a rural village of 250 people with my eyes wide," she says, noting proudly the book took off like a bullet and was selected a "must-read" by Atlantic Books Today.

[Simmins](#) has also contributed to anthologies Nova Scotia Love Stories (Pottersfield Press) and Untying the Apron: Daughters Remember Mothers of the 1950s (Guernica Editions), among others.

"But the Year of the Horse was like coming home," she says, noting there was a comfort factor in writing about the ups and downs and drama of horses and horse-crazy people.



Marjorie Simmins, author of Year of the Horse, and Simon, a chestnut quarter-horse, at One More Time Stables, in Brooklyn.

She describes Year of the Horse as primarily a well-researched non-fiction book and

secondarily a memoir. She drew on a lifetime of memories recorded in her journals and 25 years of professional writing, researching and interviewing to make sure every detail of the various breeds, tack and riding technique was meticulously recorded, along with vivid horse recollections like this passage from her book:

"I just had to check that Coqeyn was real — that a source for such mountainous joy could reliably exist in the world for a thirteen-year-old girl who only six months ago was earthbound ordinary, didn't even

imagine that she could call to a horse and have one appear from the silky summer darkness, as her own."

Sipping her coffee, Simmins says her goal is "to keep the reader close, to entertain, make a pleasurable read."

"If it was just a story of a poor little girl who hurts her back and gets back on the horse, it would be dreadfully dull. I want Year of the Horse to sing, gallop, to sweep you up," she says enthusiastically.

"As my coaches would say, 'eyes up, heels down,' and get ready to go on a very fast-paced ride."

Simmins had modest goals when she first got back on a horse in June 2013 at Caberfeidh Stables in Dundee, Cape Breton, near her home in d'Escousse on Isle Madame. She cried at the beauty of her first mount, Winnie, a palomino quarter-horse she dubbed a fairy-tale horse and a dream to ride.

But her coach Adrienne Smith insisted that she not only participate in her first show in 42 years but that she would win. Originally an English rider, she also put in place an ambitious plan for earning her Level 1 and 2 Western Rider certifications.

Winnie and Marjorie Simmins win a showmanship class at the Roseway Stables Summer Show in 2015.

"I had thought, 'Can I get back in the saddle?' and anything after that would be a miracle.

"In my wildest dreams, it couldn't have turned out more rewarding."

Intellectually curious, she was thrilled to be writing the book while she was experiencing it.

"I was fascinated by the process of healing and moving forward."

And she was dying to talk about "all my sweet boys and girls," the horses of her past.

When she was in bed recuperating, in pain and trying to sleep, she would replay in her mind her favourite stories and memories of her equine friends.

"The opportunity to revisit these beloved animals was not to be missed, and not just visit, but to share all my sweethearts."

While Simmins poetically captures the bond between rider and horse, she stresses Year of The Horse is not just for riders.

"I am a perfectly average woman who had an extraordinary few years. I'm not especially blessed, but I count my blessings. When you forget to dream, you forget about magic and forget that it's available to all. Your dream might not be mine, but don't forget the dream is there to craft into reality.



"You can live a dream, but it is up to you to craft that dream, to believe in it, to love it, to live it. This book is for anyone who has been brought to their knees and stood up again."

Year of the Horse by Marjorie Simmins
(POTTERSFIELD PRESS)

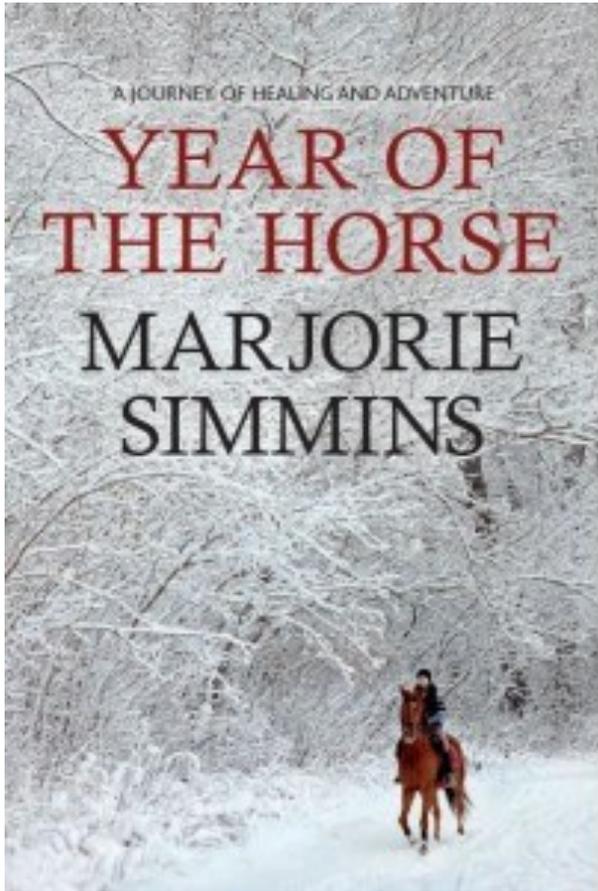
Simmins holds a book launch at the People's Place library in Antigonish at 3 p.m. Wednesday, with a reading at 4 p.m.

She'll also be signing books at Coles in Antigonish from 12 to 1:30 p.m.

And at 7 p.m., Cameron will screen his film *Green Rights: The Human Right to a Healthy World* at the Schwartz Auditorium at St. Francis Xavier University.

The couple, married 18 years, are terribly proud of each other's work and laugh a lot, Simmins reports.

They will travel in a motorhome with their two Shelties, MacTavish and Franki, on what they have dubbed the Cameron-Simmins Family Transcontinental Reading and Screening tour. Click [here](#) to follow the tour, which winds up in B.C. in December.



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Gaye Kapkin

What a great story. Thanks for sharing your experiences Marjorie. Gallop on!

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