

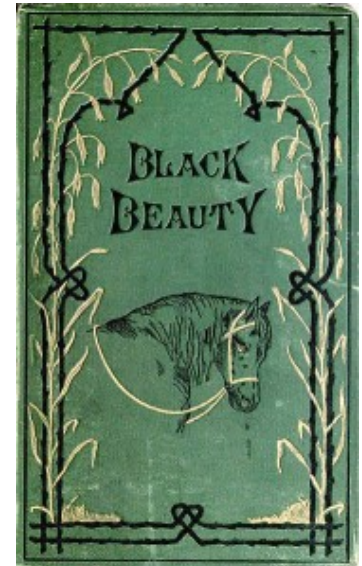
How *Black Beauty* Gave Animals a Voice

by Kristin Berkery

Most horse-loving kids read [Black Beauty](#) at some point, and even though it's a well-loved story, most adults view it as children's fiction. But that wasn't what author Anna Sewell intended.

Sewell was permanently disabled after a childhood accident and never married or had children. Of English Quaker origins, she subscribed to the belief that all humans and animals should be treated fairly. Sewell spent the last few years of her life writing *Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse*, bedridden by poor health and cared for by her mother. She never got to appreciate its immense success – Sewell died just five months after the book was published in late 1877.

Black Beauty was ground-breaking. It was the first novel to tell a story from the perspective of an animal, giving readers a realistic glimpse into the hard lives of horses in Victorian England. Because horses were necessary for transportation and farm work, they were often mistreated and considered no better than inanimate objects. Sewell had empathy for all animals, but especially horses, and she wrote *Black Beauty* in the hope that it might inspire people to



One of the first American editions of *Black Beauty*, published by F.M. Lupton Publishing Company, New York, in 1885.

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treat horses with more kindness.



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Meanwhile in the United States, George Thorndike Angell formed the [Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals](#) in 1868, the second humane organization in the country. He was prompted to start the MSPCA after hearing about two horses dying during a brutal 40-mile race. Just three years later, 24 cities across the U.S. had established similar animal protection organizations.

Angell spent years searching for a book that would inspire people to treat animals humanely, much the way [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#) helped advance the abolitionist movement that eventually led to the ban on human slavery.

In 1890, someone brought *Black Beauty* to Angell's attention and he knew it was the right book to further his cause. By the time he died in 1909, Angell had distributed around two million copies of the book to schoolchildren.

Shortly after Angell's discovery, *Black Beauty* inspired a writing contest to find its equivalent for dogs. The winner was Margaret Marshall Saunders' [Beautiful Joe](#).



An early edition of *Beautiful Joe* by Margaret Marshall Saunders.

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Written from the perspective of a horse in Victorian England, *Black Beauty* tells the story of a colt who grows up and experiences happiness, mistreatment, and great sadness as he is passed from owner to owner. He suffers damaged knees, the use of a fashionable bearing rein that holds his head high at the risk of hurting his back, the loss of his equine friends, and overwork in the hands of cruel or ignorant owners. Eventually he finds a home where he can retire and be happy, but his story reveals that he is one of the luckier horses of his era.



The equine actor Docs Keepin Time playing Black Beauty in the 1994 film. [Buy the DVD at bn.com](#)

Anna Sewell was one of many in the U.S. and Great Britain who were independently thinking about the plight of animals in the mid-1800s, but it took a story like *Black Beauty* to bring them together and to reach a younger generation. It was hard to ignore how important, and yet how disregarded, horses were in society at that time. Once people began to advocate for horses, it was a small step for them to start recognizing other animals' well-being.

The humane movement picked up steam in the 20th century, but there was still plenty of work to do to ensure that animals were treated with dignity.

Next up... the [anti-cruelty movement goes to Hollywood](#).

Below is the trailer for the [1994 film version of *Black Beauty*](#).