**Paperback Rider***January 9, 1972*

***James Fox* talks to Dick Francis who is as popular with the Queen Mother – and thousands of other fans – for his yearly thrillers about the esoteric world of racing as he used to be for his regular victories on the turf.**

Each year another Dick Francis thriller comes into the lists, the jacket a little more glossy and multi-chrome, the sex and violence stepped up a fraction, the source material from the world of steeple-chasing as solid as one would expect from an ex-champion jockey who writes thrillers about his trade and a steeple-chasing column in the *Sunday Express*. Usually it lies second or third behind Alistair Maclean in the evening papers’ polls and at a guess it sells from 15,000 to 20,000 copies. Often the day before publication Dick Francis takes or sends a copy round to Clarence House for the Queen Mother, who is said to be partial to a good racing thriller.  
 He rode for the Queen Mother in the days when he was champion, finishing up on Devon Loch who collapsed in sight of clear victory in the 1956 Grand National, a tragedy that has clung to Dick Francis’s name ever since. When Francis took *Bonecrack*, his recent thriller, round to the Queen Mother, she was returning to Scotland the same hour at the end of Emperor Horohito’s visit. “I went in, “ said Dick, who is careful not to abuse his friendship with Her Majesty by telling anecdotes, and who only did so after I had pressed him hard for just a crumb, “and handed it to Sir Martin Gilliatt. He said, ‘Gosh, this couldn’t have arrived at a better time,’ and rushed off to give it to her for the journey. Apparently she was very pleased with it. She always says how much she likes the books. ‘More sordid than ever,’ she always says.”  
 The Francis thrillers have more than a coterie following. He is one of Michael Joseph’s biggest and steadiest selling authors. All of the 10 books he has written have remained in print, including his autobiography, *Sport of Queens*, which he began writing when he was still riding professionally. “Rather elementary, isn’t it?” he says. On another level there’s a certain snobbishness about discovering the charm of Dick Francis’s books. They are widely read by the people in the members’ enclosure. Like primitive paintings their style is treated as beyond reproach and I couldn’t find a single adverse review in a stack of cuttings stretching over several years, except a rather shrill denunciation from the *Racing Specialist* whose reviewer seemed to have detected heresy against the Establishment. In *Enquiry*, published in 1969, Dick Francis portrayed a sexually perverted Steward of the Jockey Club who had been black-mailed into framing evidence against a jockey. “If Francis has a fault,” wrote the reviewer, “it is his tendency to put authority – this time the Stewards of the Jockey Club – in a farcical light. As a result his message on the evils of racing’s current inquiry system is less likely to be taken seriously.” Francis says, “None of the Establishment has objected to my books.”  
 In fact there’s nothing in the Dick Francis thrillers that anyone could object to, particularly in the racing world.  
 When the Queen Mother said, “More sordid than ever,” it was a dig in the ribs of the most genteel kind. “The characters are not so repulsive as so many characters these days,” said Anthea Joseph, widow of Michael Joseph who has always published Dick’s books. “They are books people like to have about the house. The depth of character is not great. You don’t have to worry about anything or concern yourself with complicated things.” Reviewers speak of Dick Francis’s spare and economic style, the cracking pace of the narrative, the heartbeats of excitement, the authenticity of detail. The characters are always betraying Dick Francis’s sympathies. “I liked him: he was imaginative and had a sense of humour to leaven the formidable big-business-executive power of his speech and manner. A tough man, I thought appreciatively. Tough in mind, muscular in body, unswerving in purpose: A man of the kind to have earned an earldom if he hadn’t inherited it.” One is led to imagine a House of Lords full of ‘he-men’.  
 The language is designed to be tough and pitiless. You will shudder as the liquor bites. When you stop ringing the doorbell you give it a rest. “Send a St. Bernard to a dying mountaineer and he’s unlikely to ask for the dog licence.” The writing often struggles to fight clear of cliché but the real fascination to be picked from the Francis thrillers is the way they put over, sometimes unconsciously, the closed-in, hierarchical world of racing. Conservative to his boots, as the racing world no doubt expects of him, Dick Francis writes in homage to this military attitude to rank and position that you find on the turf. Dick rode for Michael Joseph, too. “It’s a snobbish world,” said Anthea Joseph. “In racing you’ve got to be what’s expected of you.”  
 Dick and Mary Francis have a house called Penny Chase, under the Berkshire Downs: a bungalow, very neat and bright, with a sun patio. They designed it themselves. In the kitchen, hidden in a Weetabix packet that you could never find, are the treasures of a lifetime: a silver cigarette box from the Queen Mother and two letters from Her Majesty to Dick. They own a few acres of grass outside the house, all enclosed with spruce wooden fencing. They have three aeroplanes. Two are on lease to the Oxford Flying Club and the other they let out for charter. Dick has a Rover three-litre. Mary Francis runs a dress shop nearby and has a Triumph sports runabout. Dick rides out for exercise occasionally with Frank Cundell’s stables nearby.  
 Mary Francis plays a significant part in the creation of the Dick Francis thrillers. After the fall of Devon Loch when Dick Francis was leading the jockeys’ league table, he was approached to write his autobiography. “Mary said, ‘Go on, you have a go at it. You’re always writing long letters to people describing races, and writing the odd article.’ She talked me into it and said she could put me right with any other English because Mary has a university education, which I haven’t.”

He got a job as racing correspondent for the *Sunday Express* – which he still has – but the money was not as good as it had been. “I had two boys to educate and had to do something, and Mary and I loved going to see thrillers on the stage and on films and reading whodunits. Alistair Maclean – we loved all those sort of books. We were always discussing whether I could write a better whodunit than that.”  
 Dick and Mary travel the world in search of authentic detail for the books, although the description of the Australian scenery in *For Kicks* was a description of the colour photographs in a brochure they found about the Snowy Mountains:  
 “…the big blue green lagoon to the left, with the snow-capped mountains rising steeply in rocky beauty along the far side of it. Puffs of cloud like plumes crowned the peaks…”  
 For the latest book, *Smokescreen* (to be published on October 16 by Michael Joseph), they went to South Africa, and greatly enjoyed the trip and the friends they made. “It’s not as bad as people who have never been there say it is,” said Mary Francis. “You know, the phrase ‘Black is Beautiful’ was invented by the Whites in South Africa to raise the morale of the black people.”  
 What about publishers’ demands for more sex and violence to keep in tune with the times – does he mind? “Yes and no. I haven’t had the experience I portrayed in the books about that. It’s something that everyone enjoys, although we don’t do it here – I’m an old married man now. But just imagine someone like yourself having a girl on the mat in front of the fire. The publisher said sex and sadism sells. They didn’t tell me to do it but they lapped it up. I don’t like filth in anything. I try to do it as nicely as I possibly can.”  
 “I’ll tell you one thing,” said Mary Francis, “right at the beginning when the boys were still at school you wouldn’t write anything that they would be ashamed of reading at school. It would lay them open to too much ribbing.”  
 The erotic passages, such as they are, are well within the bounds of decency. In *Bonecrack*, the hero’s mistress says to him, “Archimedes said that if he could find somewhere to stand he could shift the world.” “Huh?” says the hero. “With a lever, you uneducated goose,” she replies. Further down she seduces him. “Just how much of a lever do you suppose I am?” she says. “I threw *The Observer* to the floor. ‘I’ll show you if you like.’ ‘Please do,’ she said; and switched off the light.”  
 We discuss the special world of racing in which the Francis family moves (their eldest son, Merrick, is assistant trainer to Josh Gifford). “To the outsider it’s class-conscious,” says Dick, “but when you’re right inside racing it isn’t. For instance the Queen Mother, and the Queen of England too. She will go racing. She will talk to the lads. The Queen Mother gives a party every year for her racing friends who go and talk to her and to the Queen just as I’m talking to you. There’s no class distinction there.

“Racing is a social gathering. It is, shall we say, a country gentleman’s sport, isn’t it? But the country gentleman nowadays can’t afford to go there. It’s the greengrocer and the fish merchant who go racing now.”  
 Most of the Francis heroes are rich and cultured. (“Kate and I leaned against the bar and discussed sherries with the innkeeper.”) Dick himself has struggled as a jockey, breaking bones in every part of his body, riding again before they are properly mended, riding as many races a week as he was physically able to, working hard as a writer and racing journalist. “That’s what I expect anyone I write about, who is a success, to be like. Because life isn’t easy. I’ve had to struggle and I’m still struggling.”  
 But he’s never resented the inherited wealth he has seen around him in racing. “Those people are very amiable.”  
 “Really the ones who aren’t amiable in life,” said Mary Francis, “are the people who haven’t got, not the ones who have. There’s an awful lot of jealousy. People only resent wealth because they haven’t got it. Why should on resent what other people have?”  
 After all the words he’s written over 10 years, the writing does not come any easier than when he first began, he says. “Always after five chapters, he wants to tear it up,” says Mary Francis. “He thinks every time this one is going to fail.”  
 “I’m surprised they are so successful,” says Dick. “If I was riding a race I wouldn’t be surprised that I’d won, because I felt: ‘You devils, you can’t do me, I’ll do you.’ I was better than them. But with the books I’m surprised at their reception. I feel at times that they might be becoming a little boring, but it’s nice of you to say that they’re not”.