

Peter Pan

The Forgotten Story

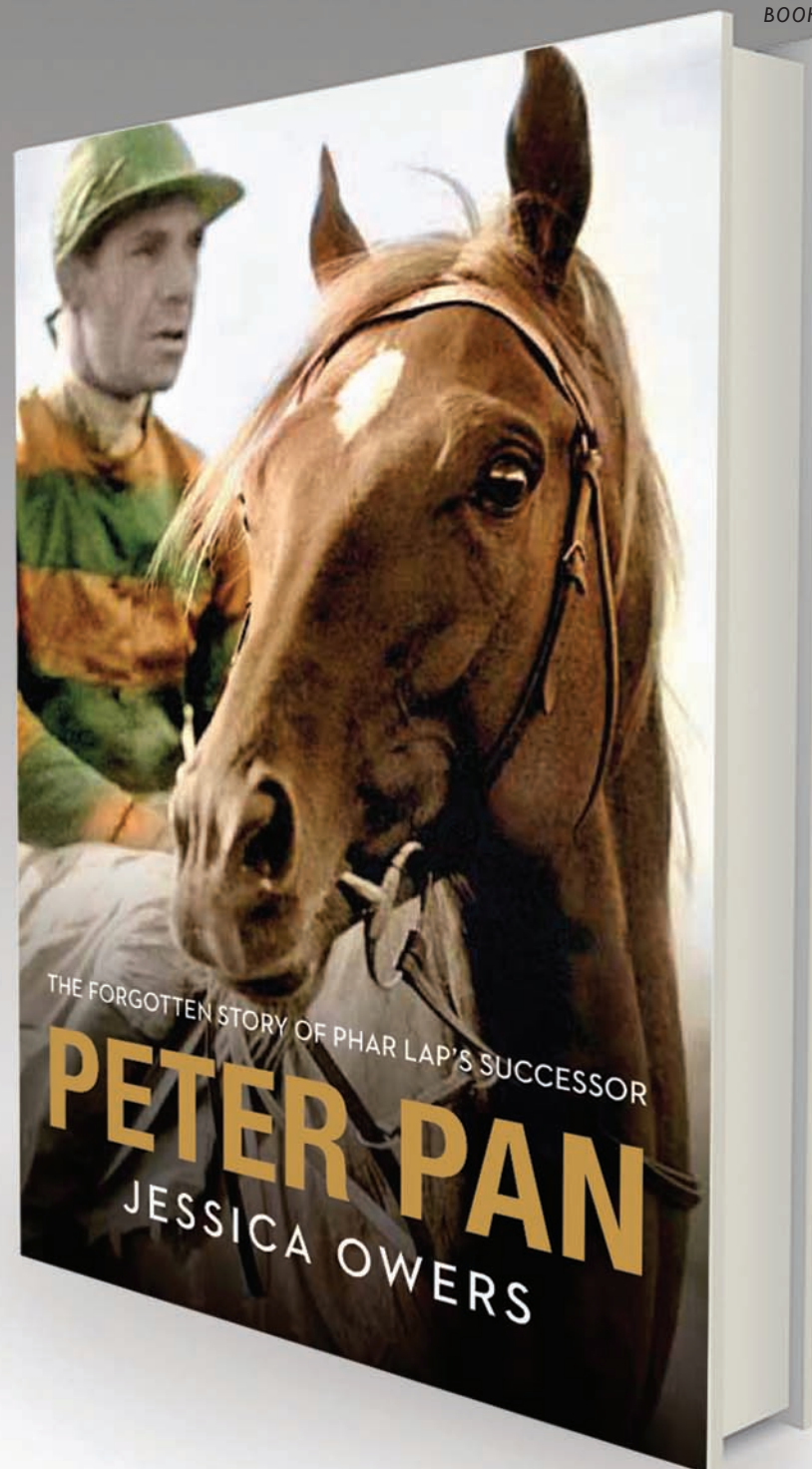
A new biography by author **JESSICA OWERS** brings to life the story of a (long) overlooked champion of the Australian turf.

FOR THE MOST part, we've read every conceivable racing tale. We've read the underdog story, and the cheap-champion story. We've read the one where the bad horse comes good. But what about the one where two champions appear in the same era, right after each other, and legend has space only for one of them? Step forward *Peter Pan: The Forgotten Story of Phar Lap's Successor*.

Debut author Jessica Owers has emerged with a richly detailed and engaging new biography on Peter Pan, the dazzling blond chestnut of the 1930s who stepped onto Australian racetracks in May 1932, just six weeks after the death of Phar Lap. Before his retirement in 1936, Peter Pan won two Melbourne Cups, broke the Australasian mile

record, and became a racing idol in the post-Phar Lap days. At just under 500 closely packed pages, this book is a serious anthology on the life of a truly amazing horse.

The story follows Peter Pan's racing career chronologically, from his barnstorming three-year-old season to his unheralded second Cup win and scintillating 1935 run when, as Owers tells us, Peter Pan became "something of a miracle in the history of horse racing". The book features the wealthy owner Rodney Dangar, the Doncaster Avenue trainer Frank McGrath, and a procession of Hall of Fame jockeys, from Jim Pike to the 'Demon Darb' Munro. Sprinkled throughout, in fascinating, scene-setting appearances, are the other characters that touched Peter Pan's life – Lanny Leighninger from the Agua Caliente Jockey Club, for example, who tried to lure Peter Pan to Mexico, and the fast-talking American boxing manager Al Lippe who wanted to buy him. In fact, this book overflows with long-forgotten details, >>



weaving them together to recreate an extraordinary thoroughbred life during the Great Depression.

Via careful reconstruction of the times, we are reminded throughout of the relentless legend of Phar Lap. Time and again, Peter Pan was compared and deposed in favour of the Red Terror, even in the wake of extraordinary track deeds. We learn of his owner's frustration at this, and newspaper snippets reveal interesting public sentiments. At the end of the book, the author takes the legend of Phar Lap to account in an engaging comparison of the two horses' records: that alone is worth the price of admission!

If **Peter Pan** reads like a

good novel, it is because it was written like one. Jessica Owers has employed narrative non-fiction to knit this story together, so we are brought back to moments in Peter Pan's life, not merely educated about them: There was the smell of cut grass from the straight six, and the odour of paddock roses that traveled on the breeze.

We also learn a great deal about Peter Pan himself, from his irascible nature to his colossal dimensions (over 17.1hh) and his striking beauty ("clapping eyes on him was like suddenly spotting a magnificent woman").

I'm tipping anyone who reads this cover to cover will end

up smitten ... and a whole lot wiser about a horse that was much better than history has given him credit for.

Available in bookstores from October 31 (the day before the Melbourne Cup), **Peter Pan** is something new for racing in this country: raising the bar significantly for thoroughbred biographies. Beautifully written, and with a truly astounding level of research, it will appeal even to non-racing audiences. But for the thoroughbred enthusiast, it's a galloping reminder of an equine hero that needs to be given his full due.

Peter Pan: The Forgotten Story of Phar Lap's Successor does just that! ■

ENCORE, ENCORE

JESSICA OWERS WRITES like she's been around for a lot longer than her publicity blurb – and certainly her photo – would suggest.

According to the spiel, Jessica was born in the year Kingston Town won his first Cox Plate (1980 to save you looking it up) but this is a VERY good effort for a debutante.

She's really nailed the essence of what is a great Aussie story: a tale about a time that our grandfathers and great grandfathers often reminisced (or in the case of crusty old jourmos, our fathers!).

Bitten by the racing bug since she read about Phar Lap as

a nipper, Jessica completed a degree in environmental science and journalism at Stirling University in Scotland and has since penned a number of features for leading trade publications.

And she doesn't mind making a 'call' either: "That Phar Lap was a great horse there is no denying ... but his greatness was emphasised by the poor class of opposition he encountered" is likely to put some knots into knickers at the Phar Lap Society.

A top read – five years in the making – Peter Pan is out on the 31st of October and definitely one of those Christmas presents you can get out of the way early.

