

Making Her Dream a Reality: Award-Winning Author *Ellen Feld*



Many young girls grow up dreaming of horses; drawing, painting, writing about their favorite four-legged animals. For some, this passion weaves its way into adulthood, some have it as a hobby, while for others, if they're lucky, actually becomes a vocation. Such as the case with writer Ellen Feld, who has taken her love for horses, Morgans in particular, to a new level, becoming an award-winning author in the meantime.

By Christina Koliander

Ellen grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts, just two towns from Northampton and the Three County Fairgrounds, which plays host to the New England Morgan Horse Show each July. "I guess I was destined to discover Morgans as so many people in Amherst had Morgans," Ellen said recently. "Unfortunately, we didn't have room for a horse, so I had to resign myself to writing stories about them." Ellen's first horse experience was when her

father took her to a local riding academy for a trail ride. "I was known to ride my bike to a nearby pasture and visit with a very old, gentle horse," she remembered. "I'd spend hours picking grass along the fence line and feeding him. He'd keep me company, even though he had plenty of grass of his own to eat."

In seventh grade, Ellen took an Industrial Arts class. For every assignment, she would design a horse barn, despite the efforts of her teacher to design different types of buildings. "Realizing that my interest in horses was intense, he told me that his uncle had just bought a horse and knowing I lived just down the road from his uncle's farm, he suggested I introduce myself to him," she said. Ellen quickly fell in love with the yearling filly at the farm, Soliloque Robin. "The farmer, Charlie Jacque, was delighted that someone was interested in his new horse," she said. "His sons, all



Ellen has used artist Jeanne Mellin as her series' illustrator. Here are examples of her works from the various books.

in their 20s at the time, were not interested in horses. He invited me to take care of the filly and later to train her. I didn't have a clue how to train a horse, but somehow she put up with all my mistakes and we spent many years on the trails together."

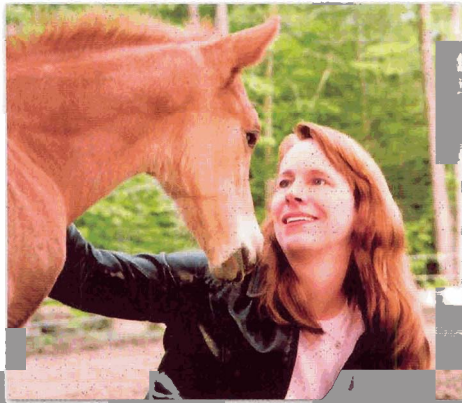
Ellen received a B.A. from the University of Massachusetts with a double major of Russian and Soviet and Eastern European Studies. She continued her studies with graduate work at Georgetown University, where she focused on Russian Studies. After a brief stint working in the foreign policy office of a U.S. Senator in Washington, D.C., she realized she missed Massachusetts and returned home. Between working full-time at the Physics Department at Amherst College, freelancing for equine publications (including *The Morgan Horse*), and raising a family (daughter, Holly, and son, Nicholas, with husband, Mike), Ellen took up her childhood hobby of writing horse stories.

"My first book, *Blackjack*, was originally planned as a short story," Ellen said. "I was between magazine assignments and felt the urge to write, so I thought it would be fun to see if I could write a short story. The first chapter of *Blackjack* is a dream sequence and it was a lot of fun to write. When it was done, I showed it to a couple of friends who thought it was really good. They suggested I try and write a whole book. I wasn't sure I could, but I liked the challenge and before long, I had written the whole story!"

Since that time, Ellen has written four books for young adults (*Blackjack: Dreaming of A Morgan Horse*, *Frosty: The Adventures of a Morgan Horse*, *Rusty: The High-Flying Morgan Horse*, and *Robin: The Lovable Morgan Horse*) plus her newest, *Shadow: The Curious Morgan Horse* for younger readers. The main character in her books, Heather Richardson, is based on Ellen's teen years, but from there she developed the character into the teen she would have wanted to be. "However, wanting to keep her real, I didn't

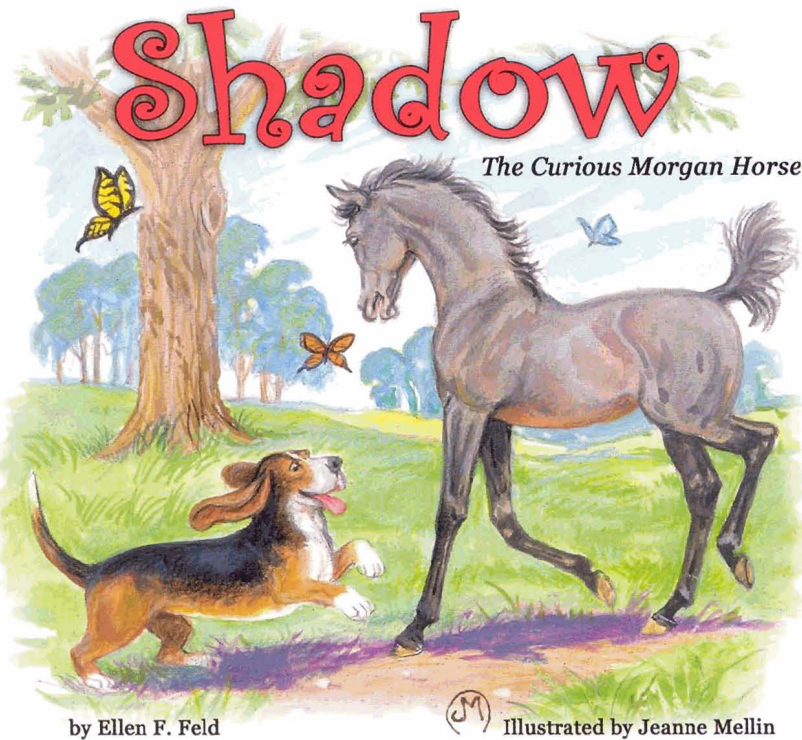
want a perfect character" she explained. "Therefore, I also inserted some of the mistakes and bad decisions I think most teens make into her character." Through her series, other horse-crazy kids including Nicholas Bunker, Karen Greene, and Laura Campbell have joined Heather.

Ellen said she has used the names of some friends as characters, but beyond that there is no resemblance. "The only exception is Chauncy," she said, the kindly bus driver who introduces Heather to Morgans. "He is heavily based on Chauncy Simmons, the breeder who sold Soliloque Robin to Charlie Jacque," she said. "Chauncy was my bus driver in junior high school and he invited me to come meet his Morgans. He was a wonderful man, incredibly generous with his time and horses, and full of Yankee humor. He taught me so much and always had a chuckle to share. I wanted



my teen characters to have that same sort of relationship with an older mentor."

Although the stories Ellen writes are fiction and the characters aren't based on real people, the horse characters are based heavily on Ellen's own horses. "Number one on my list is my 27-year-old gelding 'Rusty' [Don Lee Rusty]," Ellen said. "Rusty was born on Charlie Jacque's dairy farm and I'd just missed his birth by minutes. When he finally figured out how to stand up, he kept coming to me instead of his dam. I bought him that day and we've been inseparable ever since. He's probably the only horse that has a book dedicated to him! [Ellen's new book *Shadow* is dedicated to Rusty.] Next is 'Blackjack,' Rum Brook Immortal Star, now 12. I bought him as a weanling from Meg Preston. The only difference between the real *Blackjack* and the fictional character is the real *Blackjack* is a gelding. He's my retired show horse who is now enjoying being my daughter, Holly's, trail buddy. We also have 'Frosty' (Silvershoe Sun Frost), a gray Morgan mare, her filly, 'Annie,' and 'Lola' (Victory's Lolita). Rounding out the herd is



Spot, an Appaloosa, and Rerun, a spunky Miniature Horse. Spot and Rerun, although not Morgans, are in the books too. I keep telling my husband, Mike, that I'm running out of horses to base my books on and need to buy some more! He's been very good natured about the whole experience."

Ellen said her horses' likes, dislikes, quirks, and personalities are all in her stories. "I believe it helps to make the stories believable and brings the horses to life," she said. "For example, at feeding time Rusty has a habit of raising one front leg, pawing in the air, and contorting his neck and face. It's pretty funny and I've written that into the book. I also try to use real life experiences in the books. Heather and Frosty get stuck in a swamp and yes, I had that happen when I was a teen. When I want to incorporate something into the story that I have no experience with, I check around and can usually find a friend who had that happen. In *Frosty*, Frosty gets bitten on the nose by a snake. Fortunately, I never had that happen to one of my horses, but I had a friend who had experienced it so she was able to describe to me exactly what happened to the horse. I want to keep my stories believable, so I feel it's important to use real-life experiences."

Reviewers also have noted that while Ellen's plots are entertaining for middle-school readers, she also cleverly educates them about horse health and care, riding safety, and general horsemanship. "Many of the health issues that have been discussed in my books are things that are very common," she explained. "Most horse people will have to address these health

problems at some point. I feel very strongly that kids who have a love for horses and are reading my books shouldn't just be reading about having fun with horses. They should be aware there is a lot of responsibility that comes with owning a horse, and keeping them healthy plays a big part." Every book is reviewed by a veterinarian to ensure accuracy, and a medical doctor reviews each section that deals with human health. "I always felt that books that had kids up and running around the day after a major injury were rather silly, so even the time to heal is accurately portrayed in my books," she said.

From start to finish, Ellen says the entire process of writing a book takes a year, from the start of writing to the published book. The first draft takes about five months, then goes through several rewrites, then on to her editor, illustrator, layout/graphic designer, and finally the printer. Ellen has used artist Jeanne Mellin as her books' illustrator. "She has been a fantastic artist for my books," Ellen said. "She has good-naturedly tackled even the strangest of pictures, including skunk attacks, horses sinking in mud, lost dogs, drawing maps, and a horse getting stung by a bumble bee." Linda Mahoney and Tami Johnson, avid Morgan owners, have added their talents to the graphic needs of the books.

Ellen took the route of self-publishing when she discovered she had no other options after trying to sell her first book. "Even with more than ten years of writing for numerous book publications, book publishers still considered me 'untried.' I queried about 40 different publishers trying to sell my first book. For my



Shadow loved to run and play in the field where she and her mother lived. She would jump towards the sky, kick her back feet up high, and chase the butterflies who flew into her pasture. Shadow would run, and run, and run until she came within a few inches of the wooden fence that surrounded her home. Then she would stop and stare at the mysterious woods beyond the fence. How she wanted to travel into the woods to see what lived among its tall trees!

One day, the rooster who lived in the barn wandered into Shadow's field and told the young horse about his amazing adventures in the woods beyond the fence.

"You really went into the woods?" asked Shadow in disbelief.

"Yes, many times," answered the rooster as he puffed out his chest. "In fact, the last time I hunkered into the woods was yesterday. I was gone for several hours and met lots of wild animals."

"Did you see a bear?" asked the curious horse.

"Yes!" exclaimed the rooster. "Did he scare you?" asked Shadow.

"He roared at me, but I wasn't afraid. I cock-a-doodle-dooed and he ran away," bragged the rooster as he puffed his chest out even further. "Then I met a deer who showed me a magical pond. The water sparkled and the deer told me that anybody who drank from the pond could fly!"

"Wow!" exclaimed Shadow. "Did you drink the water?"

"No," said the rooster. "It was getting dark and I had to go home." The rooster scratched the ground with his bright yellow feet and then turned and walked away.

As Shadow watched the rooster return to the barn, she decided that she wanted to go into the woods to find the amazing pond.



efforts, I received a lot of form letters saying, 'thanks, but no thanks.' I'm not one to give up, so I decided to self-publish. After the success of my first book, I wasn't interested in finding a publisher; I was having too much fun and enjoying having full editorial control over my book. I didn't want to relinquish that control to a publisher in a big city far away.

"Mechanically, self-publishing is actually pretty simple," Ellen explains. "Having said that, the average self-published book sells from 60-100 copies. Most people who decide to self-publish fail to consider their marketing strategies before publishing their book. For example, many people think that once their book is listed on Amazon.com, orders will flood in. But there are more than two million books on Amazon. How many people are going to find your book? Why should they buy your book from an unknown author, over a better known, better-advertised author? These questions have to be

answered before you publish. To date, I have sold more than 20,000 copies of my Morgan Horse series, but it has been done with a lot of hard work and a lot of time.

The next day, the sky was filled with storm clouds. The wind began to blow and soon the rain was falling. There was lightning and thunder crashing all around the horses.

Shadow clung to her mother's side, waiting for the storm to pass. Suddenly, Shadow heard such a loud crashing sound that she jumped. "Mommy," she said softly, "I'm scared."

"It's okay," replied Frosty. "It was only a tree falling to the ground. The storm will be over soon." But Shadow, still very frightened, closed her eyes and pushed closer to her mother.

Finally, the rain stopped and the roar of thunder drifted far away. The storm was over. Shadow opened her eyes and looked at her mother. Frosty smiled, nuzzled her baby, and began to eat grass.

most, if not all, of the promotion of your books," she said. "I had a slight advantage over other self-publishers just starting out because I had been writing articles for numerous horse magazines for about 15 years before I started my Morgan Horse series. I had established good working relationships with those magazines and they were eager to support me in any way they could. In addition, I send review copies out to major, national pre-publication review journals that review books from all genres. These journals concentrate on the library and bookstore markets. I also send review copies to many additional review journals as well as Internet sites that regularly review books. Reviews are by far the best



I've really enjoyed it, but there is a lot of effort involved."

A lot of effort translates to lots of leg-work on Ellen's part. "Whether you are self-published or carried by a mainstream publisher, you, as the author, must do

way to get the word out so I concentrate heavily on that when each book first comes out.

"Word has also spread around my region about my availability to give talks to schools," she continued. "This is a fun way to meet my audience and spread the word about my books. During the fall I attend book signings almost every weekend. It is a tough schedule, but it sells a lot of books. I do some signings in bookstores, but I've found my best audience at state fairs and craft shows. I have also worked really hard at getting the books carried by several national organizations, some horse-related, others school-related. It takes more than one phone call or one sample book. For example, my books are carried by the U.S. Pony Clubs Inc. This is a huge honor

"The pond? The magic pond? Can I come?" asked Shadow. But the two deer had jumped off the path and behind the trees so quickly that Shadow didn't have a chance to go along. "I guess I'll have to try and follow their trail," she told herself.

Shadow slowly made her way through the thick underbrush. There were fallen branches, rocks, and overgrown bushes everywhere. It made traveling very hard. After what seemed like a long time, Shadow stumbled back onto a path. Was it the one she was on before? She didn't know.

Was she lost?



Seeing a small black animal with a big white stripe down its back, Shadow asked the creature, "Do you know how to get to the magic pond?"

"Magic pond? Magic pond? I've never heard of a magic pond," grumbled the little animal. "And I don't like being bothered!" he complained as he lifted his tail and squirted an obnoxious smelling liquid towards Shadow.

"Ew! Ew! Ew!" shouted the surprised horse. "That smells terrible," she moaned as she raised her head towards the sky and curled her lip. "Gross! Gross! Gross!"

"Don't you know you should never bother a skunk?" asked the fluffy skunk as he waddled off.

"Oh, this isn't fun at all!" mumbled Shadow as the horrible smell filled the air.





The title character from Ellen's first book, *Blackjack*, has been made into a Breyer model and will be available to the public in January. (Photo courtesy Reeves International)

as they are very particular about what books they will carry. Each book must pass through a stringent review process. It took several persistent phone calls and lots of follow up to ensure that my books wouldn't be lost in the piles of submissions and in the end it paid off. On average, I'd say I do two or three things each day to promote my books. It is definitely time-consuming and you can't be shy. But in the end, all the hard work has paid off!"

Ellen's efforts have certainly paid off. To date, her books have won three national awards. *Blackjack* and *Frosty* won the "Children's Choices" Award, co-sponsored by the International Reading Association and the Children's Book Council. For this award, 10,000 children from five different areas of the country review and vote on their favorite. "This award is a huge honor, especially since my books were competing against titles from many of the large, traditional publishers!" Ellen said. *Robin* won the Adding Wisdom Award given by Parent-to-Parent, a group dedicated to honoring excellence in children's products. And one of Ellen's biggest coups was reached just last month. *Blackjack* will be made into a Breyer Model Horse to be available to the public in January! Previous book/model combinations include *The Black Stallion* and *Justin Morgan*, so *Blackjack* is in good company!

Ellen's advice to young, aspiring writers is simple: "Keep on writing! Write about things that are important to you, such as your horses. Write an adventure story with your favorite horse as the lead character. As you write, you can imagine yourself participating in the story and then your imagination will take off!"

Ellen herself is continuing to write. "Heather is coming back!" she said. "I'm about halfway through my sixth book,

Annie: The Mysterious Morgan Horse, the next book in the series. After that, I plan on putting the series on hold for a year while I work on my first historical novel, involving famous Morgans, of course. I may also do another short story, continuing the adventures of *Shadow*, the filly in my newest book, due out this fall. I had so many requests from parents looking for a book for younger readers that I wrote *Shadow*. It's a hardcover, 32-page short story with more than 20 full-color illustrations by Jeanne Mellin, of course."

Meanwhile, her children are continuing their active interests in Morgans. Holly, 14, has been heavily involved in showing for years, taking a reserve Grand National title, but has taken a couple of years off while the family has put their energies in their new farm. "But she was at New England this year, watching the classes, and has caught the bug again," her proud mom exclaimed. "She's taking lessons and hopes to be showing next year." Nicholas, 12, has started taking lessons and both are hoping to be in the ring next year.

Ellen admits the series that has seen such success originally began with a different goal. "Originally I had planned each book to focus on a different breed of horse," she concluded. "But when I approached a couple of other breed registries about my series to see if there was any interest, I was turned away. AMHA has been so supportive with my first book that I decided to focus on the breed I know and love the most, the Morgan."

Editor's Note: To order any of Ellen Feld's books you can go to www.willowbendpublishing.com or AMHA's website, www.morganhorse.com. ■