

Horses They Rode

Sid Gustafson

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hardcover.

Reviewed by O. Alan Weltzien

With *Horses They Rode*, his second novel, horse veterinarian Sid Gustafson further establishes himself as a strong new voice among Montana novelists. Gustafson, who grew up on a ranch near Cut Bank, sets the majority of his novel in his home country, the Blackfeet Reservation, and his consistently lyrical evocation of place constitutes his greatest achievement. For readers who have never set foot in Glacier County, Gustafson easily takes us there, splendidly painting details of drainages and canyons (e.g. the Two Medicine), of foothills and wide prospects where the grasses feed some of the best horses in the world—or so Gustafson persuades us. Protagonist Wendel Ingraham grew up riding in this country, at home with the Blackfeet and as knowledgeable as they in the vegetative rhythms of spring and summer and in the lore and science of horseflesh. *Horses They Rode* shows Ingraham returning to his roots and persuasively *grounding* himself in his home place. Gustafson's lifelong familiarity with the Blackfeet enables him to persuasively present many minor characters as well as Bubbles Ground Owl, sage and friend of Wendel's. Though the plot omits this northern reach of the Rocky Mountain front in winter, it does not slight some bleak tribal realities, such as Bubbles's drunkenness and final decline and fall.

Horses They Rode could be called a restoration narrative, as its plot arcs from Wendel's shattered family life and drunkenness to his returned health and stabilized identity as expert horse trainer, ranchhand, and father. The latter proves the most important. Most of the way through the novel, Gustafson reminds us through Ingraham's lover, Nancy/Nan, that "St. Wendel" was "the patron saint of wanderers and wolves" (191). The plot begins with Ingraham in Spokane, that life wrecked, and follows him home past Whitefish and over Marias Pass. The following spring he returns briefly to Spokane, ostensibly to buy bulls for Rip Ripley, owner of the Walking Box Ranch north of Browning. The Spokane interlude shows Ingraham at the Playfair Racetrack, those scenes establishing his expertise as a trainer and providing the story of Dharma Bum, the Montana-born thoroughbred who's proven the winningest horse in Playfair history. Gustafson thus playfully nods to Jack Kerouac's novel as he does to several other recent American titles (e.g. James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*) in his narrative. Ingraham re-returns to Glacier County, this time with his young daughter, Trish, and his lover, Nancy, a Whitefish skier and former flame, in tow. Wolves wander but live as part of a pack, their identities acutely social.

Gustafson has already surprised Ingraham and ourselves with the arrival at the ranch of Paddy, his newly discovered son, product of a liaison a decade earlier with Gretchen Ripley, the high-strung, half-native daughter of the owners. Trish's mother, Ingraham's ex-, is a Spokane Indian, so both his son and daughter are part native. The novel traces his increasing confidence as young father, fashioning his family in the soil that nurtured him. Wendel tries to make up for the ten lost years between himself and Paddy, just as

he roots Trish in the camp and horse life he knows intimately. For the most part, Gustafson succeeds in creating this contemporary family. Wendel comes into his own as a father even as he finally learns the reason for the sudden death of his own father, rather than his gradual disappearance. I find the character of Paddy, a ten-year-old who appears a rider well beyond his years, not always convincing. This lost son seems too quickly at ease and too calm in his quick love of his father. He enters and exits the plot abruptly. Trish, on the other hand, always acts believably as a five-year-old daughter who adores her father and who soaks up the minutiae of his Reservation country like a thirsty flower.

In the character of Ripley, Gustafson has created an unsurprising ranch owner, one well past his physical prime but still the patriarch, worrying his aches and pains just as he worries the future of the Walking Box. Ripley knows the current cost of land and orders his hands, white and Blackfeet, around while trying to suppress the memory of Wendel's father saving his life. He lures Wendel back to the ranch through a bet and a horserace ("a horse for a ranch" called, aptly, "Summerhome"), the novel's climax, and Wendel is left working cattle and horses as he has been earlier in the novel. The novel ends with Wendel on the ranch, his son the likely inheritor of it all. More important is the firm sense that Wendel knows the ranch and its rhythms of work, if anything, better than the ostensible owner. He *belongs* to its ridges and bottoms and coulees, perhaps more than Rip.

Gustafson opens with the door slamming in the face of Wendel's failed marriage: "And that was that for the family life he'd always dreamed" (8). Its final eight chapters show that family life blossoming like hardy perennials, more radiantly than ever,

particularly in the Palookaville—love that name—summer idyll. In the brief Epilogue, following the death and burial of Bubbles, "the horse dream" illustrates Bubbles bequeathing his "*horse medicine bundle*" to Paddy, another native son and inheritor (285–86). In Bubbles, Gustafson has created the tribal storyteller, repository of collective wisdom, most at home training horses and repeating the needed stories.

Clearly, Gustafson knows his way around horsetracks, and the retrospective story of Dharma Bum at the Playfair Track foreshadows the native horserace that climaxes the novel. The great horse, Wendel's creation and Trish's inheritance, will travel east to run at Saratoga for big bucks, but Wendel remains behind, awaiting Trish's seasonal return. If Paddy's appearance as jockey on Rip's horse stretches credibility, the father-against-son competition, in the third and final race, resonates symbolically, as does Bubbles' drunken interference (which ironically throws the victory to Paddy). Wendel loses the race to save his son, just as his father sacrificed his life to save the owner's. More importantly, Gustafson paints all the details of the landscape scene—the level terrain of the course, the Blackfeet crowds, the private, quiet post-race interval with father and son—with complete assurance.

Gustafson has titled each of his twenty-eight chapters with a word based upon –man or –men as suffix, and most of these display facets of the protagonist, like a brightly lit jewel slowly rotating in a display window. Wendel begins as "Brakeman," a freight train transient; the Epilogue, titled "Man," gathers these Ingraham facets together and glances at his successor, keeper of the horse medicine bundle. *Horses They Rode* represents Riverbend Publishing's first original novel, and gracing the dustjacket's

cover is an attractive painting, *The Blue Horse*, by Marietta King, a Blackfeet artist. Gustafson is to be commended for his solid novel, his lyrical cadences celebrating the union of an individual, his family and acquaintances, and a tribe, with a particular place. For the most part, his sometimes run-on syntax serves his purposes, and his best sentences and paragraphs resemble poetry. He brings to life the topographies of Glacier County just as he does a cast of characters white and red. Gustafson has clearly contributed to Montana's rich literature of place and has joined writers like James Welch and Deirdre McNamer in establishing the Highline, particularly its western reaches near "the Backbone of the World," as a lush literary region.