

The Watershed Years

Russell Rowland

*Riverbend Publishing, Helena, MT, 2007. 253 pages.
\$12.95 softcover.**Reviewed by Jodi Schmitz*

When writing a book about the West as it was in the days of sprawling ranches and endless miles of swaying prairie grass, it can be difficult to straddle the line between just the right amount of description and downright rambling. *The Watershed Years* by Russell Rowland is a prime example of an effective mix of dialogue and description. The reader is drawn in by the portrait Rowland paints of ranch life, with all its triumphs and hardships, while still feeling attached to the characters in the story. Rowland, also the author of the novel *In Open Spaces*, is obviously familiar with ranching in eastern Montana, and this book successfully chronicles the struggles that a ranching family can have even in times of arguably good fortune. For this family, the Arbuckles, sometimes not even an end to a long drought and an unexpected series of better-than-usual harvests can bring peace to their lives.

The passages of description in this novel are powerful and effective, nearly always conveying the intended emotions. In one passage about the damage

caused to the wheat crop by a hail storm, the narrator, Blake, says,

From the minute we were close enough to see, I knew my hope had been futile. Between every row, a casserole of icy pellets and grain littered the ground. The stalks that weren't broken stood naked, with only an occasional stubborn grain clinging by a slender fiber. Many stalks were broken, bowing in apology.

The word choice is beautiful, compelling the reader to feel the intense sorrow of the situation almost as acutely as Blake does himself.

On the other hand, a snag in this novel is the amount of space devoted to character development. Simply stated, there isn't quite enough. One particularly fascinating story line is the account of Blake's brother Jack. During the Depression, Jack disappeared from the ranch, leaving his wife and son behind, and didn't turn up again until years later. Unfortunately, the reader isn't given enough insight into Jack's character, aside from the obvious dislike that Blake has for him, to understand the motives behind Jack's mysterious departure. Jack is depicted solely as an exceedingly selfish and greedy man by Blake and his wife Rita (who is also Jack's ex-wife), and the reader is forced to believe this version of him simply because there is no other

explanation available.

There also isn't enough of a conclusion to wrap up some of the questions about Jack that Rowland brings up over the course of the novel. Allusions are made to his possible participation in the drowning death of his brother George, but nothing is definitively cleared up by the end. He seems to be a bad guy, but no evidence is given to prove this.

Another minor character weakness is the way Blake and Rita's relationship is portrayed. It seems that the happy couple is bordering on just a little bit too happy to be completely realistic. Granted, they are newly married, but given the stresses inherent in the first year of marriage, the difficulties of being a ranching family, and the tension mounting in the rest of the family, one would think that Blake and Rita would have moments when their love wasn't quite so perfect and all-encompassing. In fact, when Rita finds out that Blake has lied to her about a promise he made that could leave their family without the home they've always had, she is only mildly angry for a very short time. Any other woman would have had a lot more to say on the subject.

Aside from these small difficulties in the flow of the novel, *The Watershed Years* is superbly written and Rowland's talent for storytelling is evident from

the very first page. One of the ways he creates such interest is by turning a seemingly commonplace subject into something much more. According to Guy Vanderhaeghe, author of *The Last Crossing*, "Russell Rowland's compelling Montanans show us the extraordinary that lurks in ordinary lives." Indeed, this book tells us a story about regular Montana people who we never would have guessed had so many secrets if we saw them just from the outside. The Arbuckles are easily recognizable characters; they could be the ranching family down the road from any one of us. However, Rowland weaves this family's situation into a story that's fascinating and powerful. He gives us a peek inside the lives of people dealing with pressures well beyond the norm, and makes it feel intensely real.

Even the title is surprisingly indicative of how the story will unfold. In the very first pages of the book, the word "watershed" is defined as either "a ridge of high land dividing two areas that are drained by different river systems," or "a critical point that marks a division or a change of course; a turning point." By the end of the book, the reader realizes that the events that have taken place are indeed a turning point for the Arbuckle family, and we're left wondering what will happen next to this captivating Montana family.