Smoky the Cow Horse Short Guide

Smoky the Cow Horse by Will James (Joseph-Ernest-Nephati Dufault)

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Smoky the Cow Horse was one of the earliest winners of the Newbery Medal.

It garnered the high praise of the National Education Association, the New York Times Book Review, and the New York Herald Tribune, and it has long been a popular book among both adults and younger readers.

The novel tells an absorbing and sometimes gently humorous story about a believable horse who lives an exciting life in cowboy country. James captures the flavor of cowboy speech patterns as he relates Smoky's exciting adventures.

The novel's emotional appeal derives from Smoky's special relationship with the cowboy Clint, the only person Smoky allows to ride him.

About the Author

Will James was born Joseph-ErnestNephati Dufault in St. Nazaire de Acton, Quebec, on June 6, 1892, to a French-Canadian family. Soon after James was born, his family moved to Montreal. From an early age, James showed both a talent for drawing and a fascination with reading about cowboy life. As a child, he told his father that his dream was to be a cowboy, and he seems never to have wavered from that youthful ambition. In 1907, at the age of fifteen, he left home to go to the American West and become a cowboy.

James gives quite a different account of his first fifteen years in his autobiography, Lone Cowboy: My Life Story. He asserts that he was born in a tent in Montana while his parents were moving from one cowboy job to the next. He says that his mother died in his first year and that his father was gored to death by a steer when James was four. He then claims to have been adopted by his father's close friend, Jean Beaupre, a French-speaking fur trapper, prospector, and cowboy.

James's true life story was not widely known until 1967, when Anthony Amaral published Will James: The Gilt Edged Cowboy, the first book-length biography of the author. Amaral originally intended to write a glowing biography of his childhood hero, whom he considered to have been shamefully neglected for some years. While researching his biography, Amaral uncovered James's true story. The biographical works on James written before this date—and, unfortunately, at least one written after it—draw on the falsehoods of Lone Cowboy as if they were facts.

James's account of his life from his early twenties onward seems to be more or less accurate. But even here he is sketchy on names and dates, supposedly to avoid being tracked down for earlier infractions of the law.

James always considered his visual art to be more important than his writing.

He began writing to help sell his art. He sold some of his sketches to the West Coast magazine Sunset, but these small sales were not enough for him to make a living. In an attempt to break into the better-paying eastern magazines, he dashed off a series of sketches and an article about horses and the men who rode them, and submitted it to Scribner's. As he sent it out, he commented to his wife, Alice, whom he had married in 1920, that it was too easy to be any good. Despite James's doubts, "Bucking Horses and Bucking Horse Riders" and the drawings were published in the March 1923 issue of Scribner's.

For the first few years of his writing career, James continued to write and illustrate short pieces about various aspects of cowboy life, most of which were published in Scribner's. Many of these pieces were then collected in book form. The first of these collections, Cowboys North and South, came out in 1924, and the second, The Drifting Cowboy, was published in 1925.

In early 1926 Smoky the Cow Horse was published serially in Scribner's.

James then expanded Smoky to book length. The book was an immediate success, and James went on to write many more well-received books and articles about his favorite subjects: horses and the American West. Unfortunately, James soon began a long, initially sporadic decline into alcoholism, which periodically incapacitated him and eventually destroyed his marriage and ruined his health. He died from complications of alcoholism on September 3, 1942, in Hollywood, California.

Setting

Smoky the Cow Horse is set in a romanticized version of the American West. James never gives an exact location, but he seems to draw on his experiences as a cowboy in eastern Nevada and near Billings, Montana. Based on evidence in the novel and a statement that James makes in Lone Cowboy about the real-life basis for Smoky, the author intended the action to take place from about 1905 to 1921. But some of the details James includes are more appropriate for a mid- or late-nineteenthcentury setting. For example, he makes repeated references to the longhorn steer, which had all but vanished from the American West by the early twentieth century.

Social Sensitivity

Probably the most troublesome part of this book is James's portrayal of the villain, whom he describes as "a halfbreed of Mexican and other blood that's darker." He repeatedly refers to the villain as "the breed." Teachers may want to point out that this book was written in a time before sensitivity to racial issues was widespread and use this as a starting point for a discussion of how sensitive or insensitive American society is to such word choices now.

The rodeo scenes in Smoky may also pose problems for some readers. James never depicts outright maltreatment in any of these scenes; instead he portrays the rodeo as a basically fair contest between man and beast. But one could argue that it is inherently cruel to ride a horse who is not trained to be ridden and who will desperately try to buck a rider off.

Literary Qualities

Smoky falls into the literary tradition of the western novel. Characteristic of its genre are the book's subject matter, cowboys and horses; its strong, silent protagonist; and its easily distinguishable "good guys" and "bad guys."

In addition, the novel functions within the tradition of the modern animal story.

Smoky owes a great deal to the progenitor of that genre, Black Beauty.

Smoky even has the same circular structure as Black Beauty, in which the main character ends up in the same place or set of circumstances in which he begins.

In each novel, the protagonist starts out in pleasant, country surroundings and with kind and knowledgeable handlers.

Both Smoky and Black Beauty later fall into less fortunate circumstances. In the end, both horses are restored to the care of a loving handler in a country setting.

Smoky is written from a third-person omniscient narrator's point of view. The narrator presents events from the perspectives of both horse and human, focusing on Smoky and Clint. The narrative is written in the ungrammatical language of its subjects, employing the vernacular (everyday speech). Although the authenticity of the vernacular in which James wrote has been questioned by some, most critics consider it to be genuine.

Smoky makes use of foreshadowing. In the section about Smoky's training, the narrator talks about circumstances that turn horses into outlaws. This discussion foreshadows Smoky's eventual transformation into The Cougar, the meanest bucking horse on the rodeo circuit. Similarly, Clint's recurring worries that Smoky might somehow be taken from him foreshadow Smoky's being stolen.

Themes and Characters

The importance of handling horses properly is a recurring theme in Smoky.

Horses that are treated with respect and compassion turn out well; those who are abused, intentionally or unintentionally, turn out poorly. This theme is introduced when the narrator contests the popular belief that in "breaking" horses "the cowboy breaks the horses' spirit."

The narrator goes on to assert that "breaking a horse the way he's broke on the range is about the same on the animal as schooling is to the human youngster."

Smoky starts out as a wild horse whose personality traits will be determined by the training he receives. He is carefully trained to be a top-notch cow horse, but he becomes both a killer and the meanest bucking horse on the rodeo circuit after a horse thief abuses him.

Friendship is another theme in Smoky the Cow Horse. Smoky and Clint, the "bronc twister" for the Rocking R outfit who breaks him, become best friends.

Clint has been breaking horses since "long before he quit growing," and he has suffered innumerable injuries over the years. But his patience and deep affection for horses keep him going. With Smoky he develops a special bond that he compares to marriage. The value and intensity of Smoky and Clint's friendship are vividly illustrated when Smoky brings the injured Clint home and when Clint undertakes a painstaking search for the missing Smoky, eventually rescuing and rehabilitating him.

Topics for Discussion

1. In his New York Times Book Review commentary on Smoky, Stanley Walker says, "The story, luckily, is not told in the first person, and therefore James does not find himself forced to attribute any uncanny knowledge to the animal."

What are some examples of the kinds of information that it would have been difficult to present from Smoky's point of view?

2. The narrator of Smoky infuses the story with gentle humor. For example, he states that "when Clint . . . held [the rope] under the pony's nose for him to see what it was the little horse near showed signs of shame for getting scared." What are some of the other humorous passages in the book? How do they affect the narrative's tone and your attitude about the characters?

3. One of the themes of Smoky concerns how a horse's handling affects the sort of horse that he becomes. What ideas about a horse's handling are put forth in this book? Describe or point out some passages in which these ideas are put forth explicitly. What parts of the novel implicitly support these ideas?

4. The people in Smoky who mistreat horses generally do so for one of three reasons: outright malice, indifference, or ignorance. Point out examples of people in each category.

5. James portrays the rodeo as essentially a fair contest between people and horses. Some people would argue that rodeos are unfair because the people participate by choice while the horses do not. Which point of view do you agree with?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Watch one of the movie versions of Smoky and compare it to the book. What has been changed in the film version?

Why?

2. In his purported autobiography, Lone Cowboy, James writes about a horse who he says is the real-life version of Smoky. Write an essay comparing the depiction of the horse in Lone Cowboy to the portrayal of Smoky in the novel.

3. Critic Stanley Walker says of Smoky, "Will James, the cowboy-artist-writer, has done the Black Beauty of the cow country." Write an essay comparing Smoky to Anna Sewell's Black Beauty.

Possible points of comparison include the major plot lines, settings, narrative techniques, and the writers' ideas about the treatment of horses.

4. At least one of James's biographers has pointed out that the cowboy way of life that he describes in many of his books, including Smoky, resembles that of the late nineteenth century rather than that of the 1910s and 1920s, which according to James is the setting for many of his books. Research how cowboy life changed from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, and write a report about which time period's conditions Smoky most closely reflects. Be sure to give specific examples from the novel.

5. Ross Santee derived the title of his New York Herald Tribune review of Smoky, "Will James Knows His Riggin'," from a remark he overheard in a cow camp in Arizona. A cow puncher looking at some of James's pictures declared, "Here's a fellow who knows his riggin'."

Write an essay reporting on the accuracy of James's drawings and descriptions of cowboy equipment or work in Smoky.

Possible subjects include saddles, hackamores, corrals, horse traps, roping, branding, and roundups.

6. Smoky was published serially in Scribner's magazine before it was published as a book. Write an essay comparing the serial and book versions of the story. Does the extra material inserted in the book version slow down the story, or does it enhance the narrative?

For Further Reference

Ainsworth, Ed. "Will James, the Lone Cowboy." In The Cowboy in Art. New York: World, 1968. The chapter on Will James presents an interesting, though not scholarly, view of his life and work.

Amaral, Anthony. Will James: The Gilt Edged Cowboy. Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1967. Amaral was the first of James's biographers to discover that the author had fictionalized much of his autobiography. Nonetheless, this is a sympathetic work, based in part on interviews with people who were part of James's life. Amaral published a revised version of this work as Will James: The Last Cowboy Legend (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1980).

Bell, William Gardner. Will James: The Life and Works of a Lone Cowboy.

Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Press, 1987.

Written by a professional historian, this is an interesting, sympathetic, and well-documented biography. It contains good reproductions of James's illustrations.

Neil, J. M., ed. Will James: The Spirit of the Cowboy. Casper, WY: Nicolaysen Art Museum, 1985. Distributed by the University of Nebraska Press, this is a catalog to a 1985-1986 exhibition of James's artwork. It includes three essays that provide biographical information on James and a critical introduction to his writing and illustrations.

Santee, Ross. "Will James Knows His Riggin'." New York Herald Tribune (October 3, 1926): 3. This is a favorable review of Smoky the Cow Horse.

Walker, Stanley. "Out Where the Mustang Kicks His Heels." New York Times Book Review (October 10, 1926): 7.

This is a glowing review of what Walker fondly calls "the Black Beauty of the cow country." It provides one of the most insightful literary analyses of Smoky.

Related Titles/Adaptations

In 1929 Scribner's published an edition of Smoky to which James added several oil paintings. Although James was not as talented as a painter as he was as an illustrator, the paintings in this edition are a colorful addition to the illustrations in the original. Smoky makes appearances in two of James's other books. In his largely fictional autobiography, Lone Cowboy, James reveals how Smoky dies; in Horses I've Known, James drops some hints about where the real-life Smoky was born.

Three film versions of Smoky the Cow Horse have been made; all are titled Smoky. The first version, filmed in 1933, was directed by Eugene Ford. Will James himself was taken on as consultant and narrator for the film. Unfortunately, his drinking troubles got in the way of his work, and he ended up contributing little to the film. Victor Jory played the part of Clint, and a black horse named Rex played Smoky. At first, James was opposed to using this horse to play Smoky, because Rex was black, not mouse colored as Smoky is in the book. But after James saw Rex put through his paces, he agreed with the choice. Unfortunately, this version has been lost in a studio fire.

In 1945 Twentieth Century-Fox made the best surviving film version, directed by Louis King and starring Fred MacMurray as Clint. In 1966 Twentieth Century-Fox filmed the novel again in a production directed by George Sherman and starring Fess Parker as Clint.

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