

A CONVERSATION WITH MOLLY GLOSS

What made you decide to write this book? How long did it take to complete?

I've had this book in mind for about fifteen years—since first hearing about girls and young women who were breaking horses in the early decades of the twentieth century—but the idea was just a few sentences in a notebook until I happened to read a description of a “circle ride,” which some old-time horse breakers used to finish their horses. The circle is such a perfect narrative device, and I saw right away how it would knit Martha's story to the stories of the farmers and ranchers for whom she breaks horses. From that point, the writing itself took around four years.

What kind of research did you do to anchor the book accurately in its historical era?

Several years ago, I had done quite a bit of reading and writing about the twentieth-century homesteading movement and its impact on the western landscape, so it was mostly a matter of refreshing what I knew. My first real research for the book involved reading novels written around 1917 and memoirs about the ranching West during the First World War. I find that novels especially are a good source of period details—and since they're also written in the syntax and vernacular of the times, they help along my narrative voice. And of course I also did a great deal of research about horse-breaking methods of the times; about World War I and especially its impact on horses; about social conditions in the small towns and on the ranches of the West during the war; and about cancer treatments in the 1910s.

I also spent a couple of weeks on a large working cattle ranch in Idaho, the Harris family ranch, where I got reacquainted with horses after a twenty-year hiatus, and was able to soak up a lot of information and stories about ranching and horse breaking, some of which made it into the novel. Then I went to a couple of BLM (Bureau of Land Management) mustang adoptions and watched Lesley Neuman give demonstrations of how to “start” a wild horse (see “First Touch”). Within an hour Lesley can bring a horse that is as wild as a deer—literally climbing the corral rails—to accept a first touch, and then can halter it, lead it, even get it to lift up its feet, the whole thing accomplished through body language. Later, with Lesley coaching me from the corral rails, I was able to have this amazing experience myself, which I wanted not only for research purposes but for pure personal satisfaction.

Did you have any particular goals in mind when you began writing *The Hearts of Horses*?

My husband died around the time my last novel, *Wild Life*, was published, and for the next three years I really wasn't able to write at all. When I began *The Hearts of Horses* I deliberately set out to write a book that would honor him, sometimes in ways that are visible to anyone who knows me or knew Ed, and sometimes in ways that no one else would guess or know. More than that, I wanted to write a story that I knew he would love. It was that goal that got me through the first difficult months of writing, while I was still struggling to climb back in the saddle, so to speak.

Was it difficult to achieve the balance between evoking a bygone era and sentimentalizing it?

Like Martha in my novel—and like people everywhere in the world, as a matter of fact—I'm a sucker for the cowboy myth and its romantic images—riding across unfenced prairies, camping under the Milky Way, waking up to find deer grazing with your horses, and so forth. And I grew up reading Zane Grey and the rest of that crowd, novels about lonely heroes trying to give up their guns but in the final scenes always turning to violence as the only way to save the town from the bad guys. Much of my life has been spent exploring that mythology and the way it has shaped and influenced American culture, thinking hard about the paradoxes and ambivalences in the western movement and looking at the dark underside of the myth. In all my work I'm always striving to retell that story, to find a central place in it for women, to retell it as a narrative of community, and to shape it around the realities of the historical West, realities that are sometimes darker but always more complicated and therefore more interesting—and more human—than the stories we usually hear. I don't know if I always succeed, but I'm always conscious of trying.

Black Beauty touches Martha Lessen deeply. What books have had that sort of impact on you?

As a girl, the book I read and reread obsessively was *Shane*. Shane comes out of the heart of the wilderness, where his strength of character and his skills of fighting and shooting have been honed, and he saves us from the forces of evil; and when he's finished with the necessary killing, he sacrifices himself to loneliness and heads back into the wilderness. He's our classic American hero, and as a girl I was always deeply moved by that story. But I wasn't thinking too hard, then, about the dark side of the cowboy myth. I still love to reread *Shane*, and I'm still moved by it, but what I see in it now is all the sorrow that underlies the violence. As an adult, the books that have deeply affected me, and I suppose have shaped my writing, have had other sorts of heroes: Willa Cather's western novels, for instance, especially *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. And Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, which I've read at least half a dozen times. When I squint hard, I can see Silko's book as a retelling of *Shane*, but in this retelling Tayo turns away from killing, and he doesn't ride off into the mountains at the end. He heads toward the embrace of his people.

Did you make a decision at the outset to include issues with contemporary echoes and implications in *The Hearts of Horses*, or did those issues become part of the story organically?

When I write about the West, I'm always trying to find a central place for women—women who own their own lives and their own livelihoods—and at the same time, and surely not at odds, I'm always returning again and again to the question of loneliness, of what it is to be loved, or unloved, or to feel so, and the questions of marriage and children, their place and meaning in a woman's life. These questions seem to me to arise naturally whenever you're writing about women, whether it's women today or a hundred years ago. And just from a practical writerly standpoint, if your hero is a woman, and your novel is set in 1917, you've got to make decisions about whether she lives alone and prefers it, whether she's married, whether she has children, and crucially you have to figure out how those things may complicate her heroic role in the novel. And yes, I'm aware right from the get-go that I'm grappling with questions every woman still grapples with. There are no right or wrong answers—that's the only thing that remains certain to me after years of turning these questions over and over in my mind and in my writing.

The war was something I hadn't realized would resonate so strongly as a current issue. I set the novel in 1917 because I knew that women had taken up a lot of the ranch jobs when the young men went off to fight in Europe; it was largely just a practical consideration. And I expected it would make an interesting backdrop to what was happening on the ranches. But I was stunned, when I dug into the research, to find so many specific contemporary echoes: people calling sauerkraut "liberty cabbage," for instance, and eyeing suspiciously anybody who spoke German or had a German surname; accusing antiwar protesters of being unpatriotic; and the espionage laws that eroded civil rights during those years. I can't say I'm happy about all the parallels, but it does give the novel a layer of relevance I hadn't expected.

What would you say is the central theme of *The Hearts of Horses*?

That's a hard one. Can I refer you back to something I said earlier, about the darker, more complicated, more interesting, more human story of western settlement? That was one thing I tried to keep in mind while I was writing this novel, and it might have to stand as the central theme.

Do you tackle the writing process differently depending on the genre in which you're working?

Really no, not at all. There's always research to be done before and during the writing. There's always a great deal of effort to bring life to the page. And to my way of thinking, there's a continuous line between historical fiction and science fiction. We are every bit as distanced from the past as we are from the future. We have as much trouble believing the past was real, that its people walked the earth and felt the same things we feel, as believing there will be a future world and people will go on living their complicated lives after we are dead and forgotten. So bringing those worlds to life, whether past or future, involves the same rigorous evocation of detail and the same attention to the old human questions, which in my case, and even in my science fiction, are questions that circle around the western experience.

What is the most important piece of advice you can give to aspiring writers?

Keep writing. Write every day. There is no real way to teach someone how to write well, but you can learn it, and you learn it mostly by the practice of writing every day. There are so many things that can keep us from writing—family responsibilities, financial considerations, all the daily distractions. And when you begin trying to publish, there's almost always discouragement, rejection, which can go on for a long time. So you have to find a way to fit writing into your life, and then find the diligence, the heart, the will to keep at it. Many of the most promising writers I've met in workshops are not the ones who've had some later success. It's the ones who've kept writing.

When readers finish *The Hearts of Horses*, what do you hope they will be feeling?

I hope they'll read the last lines and wonder what Martha meant by those words—and that they'll go on thinking about them after they close the book. I hope they'll feel glad to have met these people, to have come to know them and even to love them, and saddened now to leave them behind. But of course that's one of the pleasures of a novel, isn't it? You can always open to the first page again and find those people right there waiting for you.