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 people right there waiting for you.

Author Bio: Molly Gloss

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2009.

Born November 20, 1944, in Portland, OR; Gloss is the daughter of Charles David (a railroad switchman) and Eleanor Marie (a hospital housekeeper) Lovelace. She married Edward G. Gloss (a truck driver), on June 11, 1966, and has a son named Ben. Gloss received her B.A. and secondary teaching certificate in 1966 from Portland State College (now University). She enjoys reading, sailing, cross-country skiing, hiking, and camping. Before taking up writing full-time, Gloss taught. elementary school in Portland and was a correspondence clerk for Consolidated Freightways. Gloss has written western-based novels, science fiction, and fantasy. She has received several awards, including a 1996 Whiting Writer's Award for emerging fiction writers, and she was a PEN/Faulkner Award nominee for her novel The Jump-off Creek, her second novel after the young adult novel Outside the Gates. In The Jump-off Creek, Gloss tells the story of Lydia Bennett Sanderson, a widow trying to make it on an Oregon homestead in 1895. The author follows Sanderson in her daily struggles as she faces not only loneliness but a life of hard work in the Oregon wilderness. The author visits the early twentieth century with her most recent book The Hearts of Horses, which tells the story of a young woman who has a knack for breaking horses. Noting that the author has "written what at first seems a very quiet observation of a single life in a remote ranching section," a Bookslut Web site contributor observed that the novel evolves until, "in the most subtle way possible, readers will discover a deeply heartfelt novel about a group of people who connect and intersect with Martha Lessen and her deep love for horses." Writing for the Kitsap Sun, Susan Salter Reynolds noted that "Gloss' intimacy with the landscape and ranch life is conveyed beautifully in particulars and small observations." Reynolds added: "She also has the skilled novelist's ability to show entire lives intertwined, however loosely, in a community."

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

Hearts of Horses

Molly Gloss. Mariner Books, $13.95 (304p) ISBN 978-0547085753

Gloss's austere latest (after Wild Life) features a wandering taciturn tomboy who finds her place in rural Oregon while the men are away at war. After she leaves home in 1917, 19-year-old Martha Lessen plans to travel from farm to farm in Elwha County, Oregon, breaking horses left behind by owners away fighting. She winds up in small town Shelby, where farmers George and Louise Bliss convince her to stay the winter with them after she domesticates their broncos with soft words and songs instead of lariats and hobbles. While breaking the town's horses, Martha meets a slovenly drunk, a clan of Western European immigrants and two unmarried sisters running a ranch with the help of an awkward, secretive teenager. When Martha's not making the rounds or riding through the Clarks Range, Louise tries her hand at socializing (or, perhaps, breaking) her, but Martha chafes at town dances, social outings and Louise's hand-me-down church dresses. Gloss's narrative is sometimes as slow as Martha's progress with the more recalcitrant beasts, but following stubborn, uncompromising Martha as she goes about her work provides its own unique pleasures.

"One of the best books you'll ever read." (Jane Kirkpatrick, author of the Kindship and Courage series)

"Gloss has made herself a permanent place on the shelf of American Literature which features tough, smart, independent women." (Ken Haruf)

"Brings the period during World War I vibrantly alive with a tale of a female horse whisperer." (Seattle Post-Intelligencer)

"Gloss's intimacy with the landscape and ranch life is conveyed beautifully in particulars and small observations." (Los Angeles Times)

Suggested Readalikes

Salthill, Judith Barnes.
The Horses of Proud Spirit, by Melanie Sue Bowles.
The Soul of a Horse: Life Lessons from the Herd, by Joe Camp.
In the Presence of Horses, by Barbara Dimmick.
Spirit Horses, by Alan Evans.
The Horse Whisperer, by Nicholas Evans.
Riding Lessons, by Sara Gruen.
Broken: A Love Story: Horses, Humans and Redemption on the Wind River Indian Reservation, by Lisa Jones.
The God of Animals, by Aryn Kyle.
Hope Rising: Stories from the Ranch of Rescued Dreams and Bridge Called Hope, by Kim Meeder.
Chosen by a Horse: A Memoir, by Susan Richards.
The Man Who Listens to Horses and Shy Boy: The Horse that Came in from the Wild by Monty Roberts.

Web Resources

Author website: www.mollygloss.com/hearts.html
Official website of Monty Roberts, "The Horse Whisperer": www.montyroberts.com
Stanford Addision Ranch—Native American Horse Training: www.stanfordaddisonranch.com
Horse World—News, Care, Training: www.myhorse.com

The Hearts of Horses
By Molly Gloss

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. "Martha had set out from Pendleton meaning to live a footloose cowboy life and see the places she'd read about in Western romances-she hadn't come down to Elwha County intending to stay" (p. 50). What does a "footloose cowboy life" mean to Martha? Does she find it?

2. What are Martha's methods for breaking horses? How do they differ from most other people? What challenges does Martha face as a female broncobuster and how does she overcome them?
3. Why do so many characters take notice of Martha's outfit, dressing "like she's headed off to a rodeo" (p. 39)?

4. Many of the characters in the novel come across as very lonely. For example, "Dorothy had been starving for female company, for any company really, so long as it wasn't a child, but she didn't say so" (p. 69). What makes Elwha County such a lonely place? When Martha attends the Christmas dance at Bingham Odd Fellows Hall, she "stood at the edge of their crowd in an agony of loneliness" (p. 105). How is Martha's loneliness different from Dorothy's?

5. Kent Haruf said of Molly Gloss and The Hearts of Horses: "She's given us...a great deal of lore about the gentling of horses-a gentling that suggests both a practical fact and an enduring metaphor."

Explore the gentling of horses as a metaphor. What's the secret to Martha's horse whispering? How does Martha's gift with horses reflect her character?

6. Explore how the circle ride, too, might be symbolic of something greater. Who is on the ride and how do the horses and their owners become a part of Martha's life?

7. The novel takes place during the winter of 1917-1918, just after the U.S. entered World War I. In what different ways does the war affect characters' lives? How has it changed the way the land is used?

8. Because of the war, many of the German families in Elwha County are mistreated, there are grand displays of patriotism, and many sacrifices are made for the greater good. How are these consequences of war similar to or different from those which occurred during wars the U.S. has fought in since WWI? Do you see reflections of the current war in Iraq?

9. Martha judges people by how they treat their horses. The Thiedes notice that she had "evidently made up her mind that people who treated horses decently must be decent people" (p. 108). How do you form your opinion of people? What is your moral compass?

10. While riding with Henry Frazer, Martha tells him what she's heard of the harsh treatment of horses in the war. When Henry makes a comment about Will Wright enlisting, Martha "thought he might be making a point about the men, whose suffering ought to be more important to her than the horses. She wondered if Henry even believed her, that horses had their horse friends and that they might become homesick and lonesome among strangers" (p. 167-168).
Why does Martha think about the horses first and humans second? In times of war, do you think it's justified to sacrifice the comfort and safety of animals? To what extent?

11. Martha is responsible for getting Al Logerwell fired for beating horses. What are the repercussions
of Martha's actions? Later, she repeats a comment she heard from the Woodruff sisters when she says, "Well, there are plenty of men who will beat a horse. But they'd just better not do it in front of me is all" (p. 202). What is the significance of this statement?

12. Why does Louise Bliss avoid all news of the war? Why does the library she attempts to open through the Elwha Valley Literary Society become such a sensitive issue?

13. Martha and Henry's marriage feels inevitable long before Martha realizes the path she's on. What does Martha tell Henry she wants out of a marriage and how is he able to give these things to her? What makes Henry different from most men Martha has known?

14. Shortly after her marriage to Henry, Martha realizes that "loving someone meant living every moment with the knowledge he might die-die in a horrible way-and leave you alone" (p. 284). What events in the novel led her to this conclusion? How else did these events change her? Have you ever had a similar realization in your own life?

15. How is this book about the "hearts of horses"? Which horses are characters and what are their roles? What else might the title be referring to?

16. In the last paragraph of the book, Martha tells her granddaughter, "I guess we brought about the end of our cowboy dreams ourselves" (p. 289). What does she mean by this? Do you agree with her?

(Questions provided by the publisher.)

Girls Head For The Arena

Cowgirls played a major role in the winning of the Old West. Cowgirls roped cattle, busted broncs, appeared in Wild West shows and were featured performers in early rodeos. They became icons of the American West through a variety of advertising illustrations and were featured stars in the early Western silent movies.

Will Rogers dubbed Lucille Mulhall of Oklahoma, America's first cowgirl. A plucky young horsewoman, Mulhall debuted at a St. Louis County Fair in 1899. She was the first of many female stars to sail through the arena into the limelight, charming audiences across the world with skill and finesse.

Most of these young women grew up on Family ranches at the turn of the century, then, drawn to adventure, followed the rodeo road. In the arena, they challenged men in roping and bucking contests. By 1920, during a Golden Age for the cowgirl, audiences thrilled to see women clad in colorful costumes and widebrimmed hats roping steer, riding bucking broncs, competing in relay races and roman riding, and performing death-defying tricks on horseback.

Cowgirls, like cowboys, learned to ride and rope growing up on a ranch. Like Mulhall, many young girls were expected to pull their own weight alongside their fathers and brothers. Mulhall's father said she could have as many cattle as she could rope and brand. When she proved herself proficient at this task, he asked her to stop or else he wouldn't have any of his own cattle left.

Alice and Margie Greenough, also Montana ranch girls, learned to ride and work alongside brothers. "Rodeo was born in us. We learned to ride horses before we could walk. Dad would give us a bucking horse and expect us to make a good horse out of him. If we bucked off, we better find him and bring him back home," Margie said.

There were a few exceptions to this ranchgirl rule. Famous rider Tillie Baldwin was a former hairdresser from Norway who moved west to try cowgirling. Vera McGinnis grew up in Missouri, then her family moved to a ranch in New Mexico. Her father worked as the county doctor, and her mom ran the cattle business. Since they didn't have a babysitter, they tied young Vera onto the back of a donkey where she spent many hours. When she learned to ride without ties, she grew to enjoy riding.

Because of the difficulty of ranch work and rodeo riding, cowgirls were the first to discard the sidesaddle and ride astride, or what some called clothespin style. At first, this style wasn't considered proper for a lady. One pioneer Montana lady said about another lady riding astride, "a very bright woman but very advanced in our day [the mid-1880s]. She scandalized our [cow] boys who were rather old fashioned, by borrowing their horses and riding astride; when the rest of us, if we did have to ride a man's saddle, would simply crook a knee over the saddle horn."

Equipped with their saddles and typical cowboy gear such as boots, hats, bridles, chaps, and spurs, cowgirls, like cowboys, headed for the arena in search of adventure and a paycheck. One year after Mulhall made her stunning debut at the St. Louis County Fair in 1899 riding astride in her father's Wild West show, she was seen by a special observer. Theodore Roosevelt watched Col. Zach Mulhall's show in Oklahoma on the Fourth of July and was so impressed with Lucille's performance, he urged the colonel to take his daughter on the road and show America her talents. Col. Mulhall took heed of Roosevelt's advice, and Lucille was on her way to becoming The Champion Lady Steer Roper of the World.

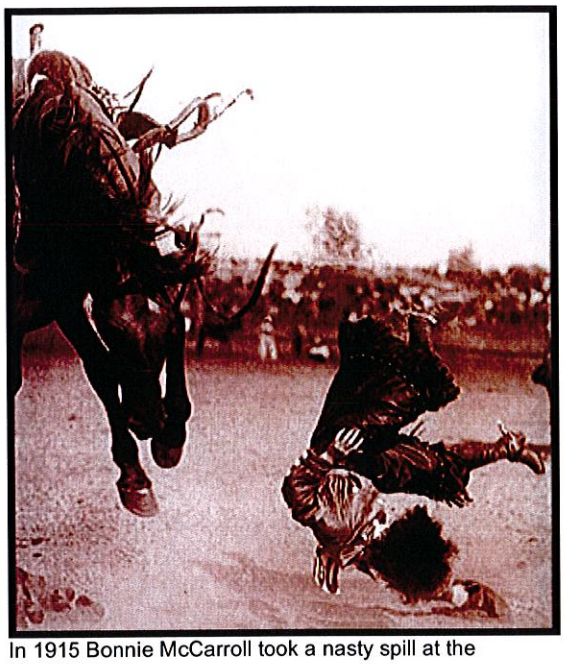
Other young western women followed her lead. To earn more money, women traveled with circuses, rodeos, and Wild West shows. In the latter two, audiences took it for granted that they would ride alongside the cowboy. Her daring exploits won America's heart. Bertha Blancett was one of the first cowgirls to ride slick. This meant that she didn't tie or hobble her stirrups when she rode a bucking bronc (stirrups were tied together under the horse in order to limit movement). Hobbles were banned, however, because they were considered extremely dangerous.

Bonnie Gray, another twenties cowgirl, accepted a $100 dare to ride a horse off a diving board into a

pool 35-feet below. She also attracted attention by being one of the first to master rotating around and under the belly of a galloping horse and back into the saddle. Fans loved watching her jump her horse, King Tut, over automobiles.

Tillie Baldwin, the former Swedish hairdresser, was the first cowgirl to compete at the Pendleton Round-up in 1911. During this prestigious show, she impressed audiences with her bulldogging skill. Mabel Strickland, nicknamed the Lovely Lady of the Rodeo, and Crown Princess of the Rodeo, was also a famous bulldogger. Her well-known victory pose-standing on one leg with her arms in the airshowed off her finesse. Other cowgirls felt this euphoria. After committing to the life of a relay racer, Vera McGinnis, the girl who was believed to have "rode the fastest and dared the most," said, "This is the life I've been looking for, the continual challenge! I love it."

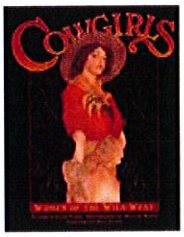
While the old-time cowgirl was respected for her talent and courage, she was also admired for her dress. As they used to say, she was "all westerned up in her colorful rags." Since there was nothing suitable through mail order, most women made their own costumes.


In 1915 Bonnie McCarroll took a nasty spill at the Pendleton Round-Up.

Initially, cowgirls wore split skirts. Most of these were made of leather and often heavily fringed. Embroidered shirts or fringed jackets and vests completed the ensemble. One gal wore a fancy unborn calf split skirt. A few girls purchased bicycle suits with skirts. Following the lead of Vera McGinnis, however, cowgirls started sewing elastic into the skirt hems, creating bloomers, which were safer and more practical. Trick riders often wore sneakers or rubber-soled tennis shoes instead of boots. Almost all the cowgirls wore silk scarves around their necks, silk and fringed sashes, wide-brimmed hats, beaded gauntlets, and fancy, stitched boots. By this time all the major spur makers made the most popular spur designs in both men's and women's sizes. Prairie Rose Henderson was famous for her flamboyant beaded outfits as was Lulu Belle Parr, an 1890 bronc rider in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

The Golden Age of the rodeo cowgirl started to decline when Bonnie McCarroll took a fatal fall at the Pendleton Round-up in 1929. Hit with bad publicity, the Pendleton Round-up eliminated women's bronc riding. Other rodeos did the same. The Rodeo Association of America didn't step in to help women and ignored their pleas to be included. Instead, the association created more regulations, making it more difficult for women to find competitions. Throughout the 30s and 40s, rodeos offered women more contract acts (acts which women were paid for) than competitions.

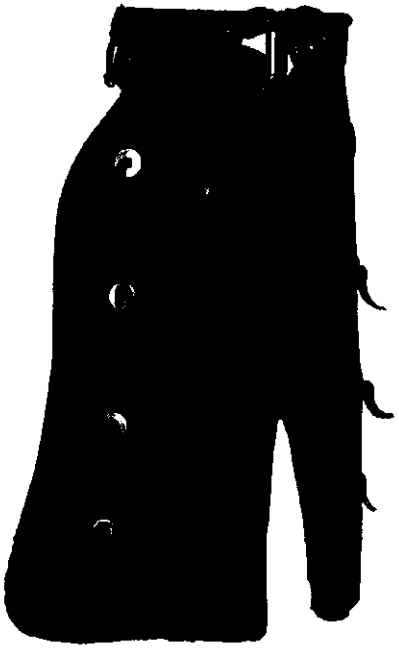
Elizabeth Clair Flood & William Manns. *Cowgirls Of The Old West*. 2006 Calendar.



Cowgirls: Women of the Wild West

The cowgirl appeared on the American frontier in the mid-1800s. She worked with stock alongside the cowboy and was a determined and spirited pioneer. Rancher Lorraine Plass, at age 87, epitomizes the cowgirl spirit: As long as the colt stays under me Ill do all right. I will get the job done.

Batwing Chaps



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