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## Book Review: Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art.* By Raphael James Cristy. Foreword by B. Byron Price. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. xx + 347 pp. Photographs, illustrations, color plates, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

In 1882, two years after arriving in Montana and eighteen after his birth in St. Louis, Charles M. Russell got his first ranch job, as a horse wrangler with the Horace Brewster cow outfit. Russell claimed to be no great shakes as a cowhand, an assessment supported by the men he worked with. One of them, Belknap "Ballie" Buck, said that Russell "couldn't ride a horse that bucked very hard," and Russell himself told his apprentice, Joe DeYong, "It takes me sore when they spring a lot of my talk that I never said. They tell what a bronk wister and roper I am and men that know me think I been filling them up." Russell may not have had superior skills as a cowboy, but he did have excellent skills of observation and a deep desire to tell the cowboy's story.

What many admirers of his paintings, which themselves are strongly narrative in their content, don't know is that Russell also told that story in prose. While much critical attention has been paid to his pictorial art, *Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art* is the first book-length study of his prose. Raphael Cristy's well-documented survey (some fifty pages of text and eighteen of bibliography) and critical evaluation of Russell's tales places them in the context of his paintings and his biography. The result is a thorough, readable, and useful work, especially for scholars, although the many photographs and anecdotes of Russell's life will interest the general reader as well.

As with his painting and sculpture, Russell ascribes his success as a writer to his wife Nancy. She is the one who promoted his art and encouraged his proclivity to give away his paintings

to friends. She also encouraged him to channel into print his gifts as a raconteur, one who would hold visitors to his studio enthralled with his stories of incidents on the range. He began with submissions to the Montana Newspaper Association, which distributed them to papers around the state, then published a collection in 1921 under the title *Rawhide Rawlins Stories*. (Rawhide Rawlins was the persona who often narrated in the tales.) This was followed in 1925 by *More Rawhides*. His best stories are found in *Trails Plowed Under*, published in 1927, a year after his death. Continuously in print, it is currently available in a 1996 paperback edition from the University of Nebraska Press.

The book is arranged thematically, with sections (among others) on Indians of the Northern Plains, on nature and wildlife, on cowboys and open range ranching, and on twentieth-century ranching. I was particularly interested in and impressed by Cristy's final two chapters, which place Russell's writing in the critical context of Western American literature. I have always liked the tales in *Trails Plowed Under*, but this book makes me realize that my viewpoint was narrowed by my own ranch upbringing. Being able to make the stories of a particular folk group accessible to a general audience takes a degree of skill and sophistication that Russell possessed, although he might not have owned up to it.

Of the many and varied tales in *Trails Plowed Under*, my favorite is an episode about a rough-string rider and a green colt. The bronc twister on a Montana ranch often got twice the wages of an ordinary cowboy, but paid for it with bumps, bruises, and broken bones. It took a special kind of hand to ride tough horses, and self-preservation wasn't always high on the list of necessary attributes. In this particular instance the bronc twister was riding out with the rest of the crew in rough country.

He rolled a cigarette and, without thinking, struck a match on the concha of his chaps. The scratch and hiss of the match spooked the colt, who ducked his head and began bucking wildly toward the rim of a thirty-foot cliff, the bronc rider spurring and quirting as horse and rider disappeared over the edge. As the cowboys rode up and peered over, expecting the worst, they saw the colt wedged among the top branches of a cottonwood tree, rider still firmly in the saddle. "‘Anybody got a match?’ the bronc rider called up to them. ‘The one I struck blowed out.’"

Unbelievable as it sounds, this actually happened to a man named Charlie Brewster. Russell, like all good storytellers, had the innate ability to relate such an incident with essential accuracy, yet pick and exaggerate just the right details to add humor, anticipation, and excitement. *Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art*, by shedding light on Russell's ability to create narrative in writing, has the added advantage of contributing critical insight into his painting as well.

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