

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Summer 1984

Review of *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* By Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence

John W. Bennett
Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Bennett, John W., "Review of *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* By Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence" (1984). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1771.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1771>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame. By Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982. Illustrations, photographs, references, index. 288 pp. \$19.50.

Anthropologists have been slow to take up intensive fieldwork in American life, partly because their professional training has emphasized that "the exotic" is something found only in remote tribal societies, not in urbanized North America. But with the transformation of tribal cultures into developing nations, anthropologists have begun to turn to their own culture and have found it possible to see it as exotic. This book is an example of that new genre. The author has unusual equipment for the task: she was trained as a veterinarian and also as an anthropologist, and her study of rodeo grew out of a wider interest in the relationship between humans and animals. The present work emphasizes the significance rodeo symbolism and attitudes may have for conceptions of the "wild," and animals generally, in North American culture.

Culture is the keyword. The author is a true *cultural* anthropologist: one who is concerned exclusively with the patterns of symbol, values, and aesthetics that presumably define the meaning of human experience and the world. This means that some aspects of rodeo are not dealt with at all: for example, the dozens of small, local rodeos all over the West and Middle West. The author's rodeos are the big ones and are, of course, a part of the entertainment media in both rural and urban North America. If one studies rodeo as a symbolic ritual, as she does, one looks for the most complete and pure versions, and these are the big ones. The symbolic focus also means that the social and economic aspects of rodeo are omitted from this study. The chapter that comes closest to a more social-reality-oriented approach is "Inheritor of Cowboy Tradition." The contents include some information on rodeo's roots in the range-cattle industry, where rodeo performers come from ("performers," not "participants"), the nomadic character of the performers and promoters, the anti-urban attitudes of many rodeo people, and rodeo's associations with country-western music. This chapter, however, is mostly about machismo themes, physical risks, male dominance and bondedness, some curious alliances with fundamentalist Christianity, and the cowboy image.

The animal theme occupies more space than other topics. Horses and cattle each get a chapter: the horse is not only an element of the "chivalric code" but what the author calls "animality," or a "merging" of human identity with the animal. Horses also have to be subdued and inducted into the human world—the man's world—and therefore the horse constitutes a "symbolic bridge between nature and culture" (p. 132). Thus, horses are both wild and tame and apparently symbolize the dual aspirations of the westerner, who wants both to ride the open range and to drive his Cadillac. The bronc is also the symbol of the outlaw, the resistor to organized society. The author considers the man-horse relationship as "sacramental," and also "sacrificial," since the horse takes a beating, first in the breaking, and later in the contests.

It is also in the horse chapter that the reader finds samples of the harder-to-take assertions about symbolic meaning. The author describes a Wyoming saddle bronc rider breaking a yellow mare, beating her over the head to stop her from rearing up: "The blood flowed everywhere. . . . she ended up covered with red blood." The author notes that the "red and gold imagery (*i.e.*, the yellow mare and the red blood) is suggestive of the crucified Christ." This is a bit difficult to swallow since the reader is rarely told, in passages of this kind, where the symbolic meanings come from: the author's own literary imagination or the people she studied. One is tempted to wonder what the Wyoming bronc rider would say when he discovers he is symbolically rehearsing the death of Christ.

The reviewer has also studied ranching and horses and cowboys; among other things, he was struck with the evident cruelty and excessive man-centeredness of the whole tradition, and also its exceedingly conservative conceptions of the social order. The author seems to know about these things, but they have not become part of her intellectual consciousness, strongly identified, as it is, with rodeos. This is an interesting but very specialized book about the rodeo, and one that is bound to be controversial. It is definitely worth reading, but one must read it with care.

JOHN W. BENNETT
Department of Anthropology
Washington University