

Change the way you watch old Hollywood westerns

Read 'Falling from Horses' by Portland author Molly Gloss

You might not love horses. You may not know a cowboy. That doesn't matter. "Falling from Horses," Portland writer Molly Gloss's most recent novel, will make you care for horses at least enough to see if the terrible things they once did to them in the movies might actually have happened. They did. Gloss has done some meticulous research.

It's 1938. Bud Frazer, nursing a small calf-roping purse from the Chilcoquin Roundup and a small wad from the sale of his saddle, buys a Greyhound bus ticket for Hollywood aiming to ride in the movies. In Eastern Oregon he leaves behind his good folks, who earn a hard living working others' ranches. The cherished memories of his younger sister, though, Mary Claudine, killed a couple years back in a ranch accident, accompany him.

As the high desert rolls by at a pre-interstate pace, Bud makes friends with another adventurer, Lily Shaw, "fearless and too smart by half," says Bud. Lily is leaving the women's pages of the Seattle Times and heading to Hollywood, too, determined to become a screenwriter. They enjoy an unusual friendship as each navigates the deceptive and sometimes-dangerous culture they're determined, for their own reasons, each to tackle.

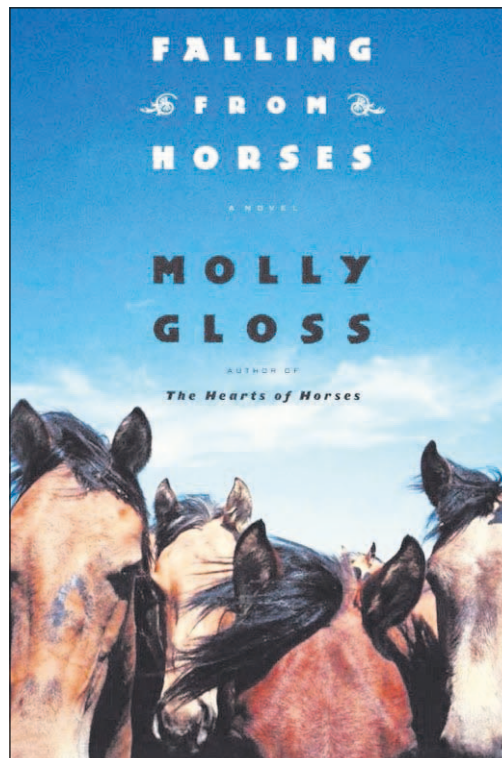
Except for a couple of villains, Gloss's characters are mostly good people, accustomed to hardship, who keep their emotional

cards close to their chests. Bud narrates a lot of the story looking back from across the years. He's thoughtful, observant and friendly in the easy, sometimes laconic way of a lot of ranch hands. Sometimes, as when he describes northern California — "suddenly there was Shasta, as big as you please, a white

ice cream cone of a mountain, like the ones kids draw even if they've never seen such a thing" — he reminds a reader a little of Huck Finn.

Gloss interrupts Bud's tale with narrative describing the hard circumstances of his family's work on marginal small ranches in Eastern Oregon. Equipment breaks down, lightning kills horses, an accident hobbles Bud's father, his mother soldiers on. Bud and his precocious sister Mary

Claudine, under their parents' progressive guidance, enjoy the broadest of educations. Then, on a gather, Mary



Claudine disappears.

Bud, resuming his story, encounters a variety of curious Hollywood wranglers, gradually finding some success riding stunts in the movies. The terrible horse wrecks he experiences, though, ultimately catch up with him. Sort of like he had hoped.

When, near the story's end, his dad asks if Hollywood wasn't pretty hard on horses, Bud, before replying, remembers how horses were treated well on ranches.

Then to himself he thinks, "In the movies, though, you couldn't watch a

cowboy picture without seeing horses used in terrible ways, whipped and spurred by stage drivers, by posses and outlaw bands, ridden hard up and down steep ravines, through flooding rivers, into deserts or snowstorms without food or shelter. They were always being jumped through plate-glass windows or trapped in burning barns, caught in the middle of gunfights, and shot at, wounded, killed, by just about everybody in the picture — good guys, bad guys, cavalry, Indians. Ridden hell-for-leather until they staggered and dropped dead on the ground."

Then Bud simply says to his dad, "Yeah, they're hell on horses."

Rooted in place, in time, in community, Molly Gloss's characters are genuine. A reader cares about them. She describes a fistfight like she's been in one or two herself and 1930s Los Angeles like she lived there. Her research into the trip wires and tilt chutes that sent horses falling, her description of stunts and the tricks riders use to survive them mostly, will change the way you watch old Hollywood westerns.

the arts

VISUAL ARTS • LITERATURE • THEATER • MUSIC & MORE

Story by JON BRODERICK