

Cattle Kate

Jana Bommersbach

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By narrating the tale in the first person, an evocative and powerful writing choice, Bommersbach brings her real-life subject to life.

An ambitious young woman who defied the limitations of the time in which she lived and paid the ultimate sacrifice is the heroine of *Cattle Kate*, a historical-fiction novel based on a true story.

It's the story of Ella Watson, a proud, hard-working Canadian woman who immigrated to the Kansas prairie with her large Scots-Irish family in 1877. Early chapters detail her family history and childhood; later ones describe her solo move west to the Wyoming Territory in the mid-1880s to homestead her own land.

Jana Bommersbach, a well-known writer of the American West, stumbled upon the story and wanted to set the record straight 125 years after Ella's death by lynching, for supposedly rustling cattle. Citing many references, including materials provided by Ella's great-nephew, the author writes of the ensuing events through her protagonist's eyes.

Readers learn of Ella's fate in the very first chapter—and that of her husband, Jim Averell—at the hands of some of her drunken cattlemen neighbors. The story then moves on to her own life, eventually circling back to the events that unfolded in chapter 1. Bommersbach writes as Ella in the first person in the first two hundred pages, and the remaining pages are a factual unfolding of the lynching and aftermath. An extensive section of endnotes and references follows. Readers will picture a hard-working young woman who learns to stand up for herself and believed that neighbors were there to support one another during trying times. It's a jolt, then, to have that positive voice suddenly quieted, as an omniscient narrator relates the matters of fact of the rest of the story. It's as if Ella truly was gone, and it's an evocative and powerful writing strategy.

Interspersed throughout with the social, political, and cultural history of the time, the story is also populated with names that ring familiar: Buffalo Bill Cody, Geronimo, General Crook, and Belle Starr. The author weaves these bits of history within the larger story.

This book will appeal to those who enjoy reading about the struggles of our nation's westward movement and who are also captivated by the backstory of those significant events.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (Winter 2015)

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