

Cowboy on the Wrong Train: Mouse with a Clue

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In the eventful Christian thriller Cowboy on the Wrong Train, a cattle rancher encounters danger and arrives at a new sense of faith.

In Jeanne Ann Off's novel *Cowboy on the Wrong Train*, a small-town farmer faces off with an animal rights group that commits nefarious deeds.

Cattle rancher Ty and his real estate agent girlfriend Patti witness a murder at a diner. The perpetrators escape, but Ty recognizes them in town over the following few days. He learns that one of them, Skeet, is purchasing cattle and horses for an unknown reason.

Later, when Ty steps onto an idling train out of curiosity, he overhears a conversation about Skeet and a mysterious group, The Secret Organization, that aims to discontinue the human use of animals. Ty is kidnapped and held on the train for several days; once rescued, he returns to his farm and family. His discussions with family members and friends lead him toward religion.

In the end, the narrative covers too much ground. It has elements of a thriller; it delivers information about day-to-day life as a cattle farmer; and it has an evangelical element. When it comes to an abrupt end, it leaves these plot threads unsolved, with the exception of a sudden declaration of belief. Several pages of Bible verses are included in lieu of a tidy conclusion, suggesting that the book's true purpose was its religious angle. However, this, too, is undone by the fact that the exchanges concerning Jesus and Christianity occur at odd times, as when Ty and other kidnapped individuals are blindfolded on the train. These and other conversations are contrived and repetitive. Characters discuss their surroundings, the particulars of investing and ranching, and the appearances of others; their tones, and their tendency toward exposition, is unnatural, detracting from, rather than fleshing out, the story. The absence of dialogue tags muddies such conversations further.

With its excessive focus on mundane actions, as with Ty and Patti looking at a restaurant menu and Ty's cat stalking a mouse, this is a plodding tale that's slowed further by its passive, inconsistent narration. Its hero, Ty, is a static character who shows little emotion in the course of coming to faith. He is reactive rather than proactive, and is swept along by events rather than participating in them: Skeet and others control his story. Only sweet, intelligent Patti has a distinctive personality among the non-treacherous cast.

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AIMEE JODOIN (November 17, 2021)

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