

Sam: A Pastoral

Susan Larson

Savvy Press (Oct 1, 2012)

Softcover \$12.95 (220pp)

978-0-9826069-9-5

A look, a whinny, a flinch: such small things, from an animal, speak volumes. The lessons we learn from the creatures we love can transform us for life. In the young adult novel *Sam (a pastoral)* a young girl discovers how to survive a tumultuous world through the help of a horse. But the lessons she learns aren't the prosaic ones one might expect from this subject; instead, they are deep and often gritty.

Sam takes teen readers on a journey into a place (rural upstate New York) and time (the 1950s) that, at first glance, could be idyllic. But the story ventures into the shadows, poverty, abuse, bullying, and family dysfunction. And it explores how to handle the unfair, painful things life hands us—and even how to deal with those who seriously mistreat us.

The story follows young teen Ruthie Rossley, who has only one desire: a pony. But her domineering and abusive father forbids it. That is, until he buys a run-down shack of a farm and is convinced to purchase a not-so beautiful, but powerful and devoted, horse named Sam. Ruthie's life remains far from perfect and its dark side will soon destroy her spirit. A few caring people help, but it's through her time with Sam that she learns the impact of the various ways she can respond to what's happening around her, and how to find healing. And she must hear what he says quickly, because she's about to fall apart from the pain.

Author Susan Larson weaves the lessons in seamlessly. She artfully shows rather than tells issues, which is particularly effective when hinting at abuse and its impact on a family. In that regard she truly respects her audience. Her writing proves strong and her voice warm and relatable. And rather than idealizing the past, Larson shows how young people then faced very similar problems to what kids face today.

The story does, however, sometimes feels a bit slow-paced, particularly in the beginning. And at times it's hard to know exactly who the audience is—curse words and adult themes such as molestation are included, implying a mature teen audience, yet the story is about a girl's love for her horse, which may seem a bit juvenile to young adults. It's an interesting blend of the innocent and the painful. And it's an intriguing story of how the unconditional love and patience of an animal can transform a life.

DIANE GARDNER (September 14, 2012)

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