Clarion Review

General

The Dead Cattle Ranch Mystery
Madeleine Carroll
Xlibris
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Francis Steinway's life has just gone from bad to worse. His beloved father has been deployed overseas, and his mother has uprooted the family from their comfortable city life to go live on Grandpa's cattle ranch out West—a ranch where this technologically gifted boy doesn't even have Internet access. Can Francis adjust to his new life and find out what's killing the herd—and the ranch's profits—before everything goes belly-up?

The Dead Cattle Ranch Mystery is an exciting debut from middle-school teacher Madeleine Carroll that will rope in boys of ages nine to fourteen who crave whodunits with fast-paced plots. Carroll uses her expertise to skillfully combine coming-of-age issues with nonstop action. Readers will easily relate to Francis, or Frank, as he soon becomes known. Frank's reluctance to change his name and anxiety over moving to a new place mirror changes kids often face. Carroll deftly showcases the challenges youngsters navigate while they seek acceptance from both their families and peers. In a culture that disdains nerdiness, Frank embraces his geeky side, along with what he learns at the ranch, to solve the cattle mystery. Kudos to Carroll for her portrayal of a brave, geeky boy.

Frank and his friend Jackson notice all the clues to the cattle mystery, while the adults remain skeptical and disbelieving. The adults' reactions make sense, however, given the townsfolk's propensity toward insularity and their general lack of computer use, all of which Carroll takes great pains to establish. Frank's mom explains his grandfather's aversion to technology by saying that "he comes from a different era."

The suspense increases when the boys investigate adults who hold power and authority. The boys' vulnerability will keep readers on edge and turning the pages to see how, if, and when the children will be discovered. While Grandpa and Mom fail in their powers of observation, they are loving and supportive. Frank's absent father has a role to play too, as Frank reflects on

what his dad would do in a given situation.

A cliff-hanger ends every chapter and is often accompanied by a key rhetorical question to keep readers turning the pages—for example: “Frank began to think about the people he’d met that morning. Could one of them be killing Grandpa’s cattle?” and “Was [Harry] admitting he wanted Grandpa’s land?” Carroll offers the right number of twists to sustain the suspense without confusing young readers. *The Dead Cattle Ranch Mystery* could be the start of a modern Hardy Boys series for tween boys. One hopes Carroll pens more fiction, because she certainly has the power to lasso a following.

Jill Allen