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The Orange Slipknot

Jan Young
Pat Lehmkuhl, illustrator
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“Hoofs pounding, the runaways veered to miss a pickup coming down the driveway,” the author writes. This near disaster is caused by twelve-year-old Ben Lucas’s “Great Idea”—to lasso a ground squirrel with an orange slipknot. The calamity is avoided, but there will be other trouble caused by Ben’s orange slipknot, and he will need to take responsibility and “mend his fences” if he wants to realize his dream of becoming a “true buckaroo” on this modern Nevada cattle ranch.

This is an exciting story of cattle ranching in the Great Basin of western United States. Here, modern ranching techniques and practices mix with old Spanish vaquero tradition as Ben tries to earn the respect of his father, who is “top hand” on a sprawling ranch. As he attempts to undo the disaster he created, he learns some old-time cowboy skills from the “true buckaroos of the bunk house,” who deliver good-natured teasing to “Bad-news Ben.”

As Ben attempts to undo the Big Trouble, he is suddenly put into a role of responsibility as they save cattle from an approaching snow storm. Here a wild cougar and stranded horses will come into play as Ben attempts to save the life of Fred—an old flinty cow boss who, for some inexplicable reason, despises everything that Ben does. Ironically the orange slipknot will play a key role in the story’s climax, as Ben rushes to save the life of Fred and bring home the horses.

Jan Young has published articles of fiction and nonfiction for children and adults; this is her first novel. She uses her experience and knowledge gained by living with her husband and sons on a working cattle ranch in Nevada, where they help people train their horses through clinics and lessons. Young tells a story that shows “cowboying” is not a dead term in history books, but a still active way of life for many on the western plains.

Young fills her story with details of ranching life: details that appeal to young readers—four-wheelers, horses, rifles, and wildlife. The author also adeptly weaves in the details of hard work on a cattle ranch where open range, public lands, haying, and ground gophers are an important part of everyday life.

This book is for “two groups of kids—town kids and country kids,” as the author writes in her introduction. With a fourteen page glossary of “Ranching Terms & Cowboy Slang” and a comprehensive study guide, the book could be a useful tool for classroom instruction.
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