



Thunder Peak

Trae Stratton

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Injecting fantasy elements into an Old West setting, the young adult novel Thunder Peak follows a strong young woman as she meets her destiny.

In Trae Stratton's young adult novel *Thunder Peak*, a girl comes into her own as she learns about a fantastical conflict involving unicorns and a chieftain.

The novel is set in the 1880s in Storm Town, an Arizona outpost in the shadow of Thunder Peak. In the Territory of Arizona, there are frontier outlaws and cattle rustlers to deal with. There, fourteen-year-old Casey lives on a ranch with her uncle; she was told that he adopted her after her parents died. But when Casey spies a herd of unicorns invisible to others, and when she rescues one that was injured by Nightblade, a treacherous chieftain who wants to regain his physical form, she realizes that there's more going on in her world than she knows.

In brisk form, Casey is made privy to revelations about Leutia, a magical faerie realm with implications for her identity and future. And she and her uncle hope to reunite the unicorn with its kind; they undertake thrilling adventures in which their knife-throwing and marksmanship skills are a benefit. Casey's uncle, a Civil War veteran and a feared sniper, also works with the sheriff, all while keeping secrets from Casey.

Unpredictable challenges test the cast's mettle; most result in their personal growth. And Casey is a brave heroine, in part because of her upbringing on the ranch, but also because of her heredity. Her story is intriguing: she's both hardy and capable of tenderness toward the rescued animal, and her relationship with her uncle is warm and deep.

The story's tension owes itself most to the book's fantasy elements, including a guarded portal between Leutia and Earth, and creatures like lizard beings and a turtle guardian. Disruptions around the portal have serious consequences, foreshadowing events to come. Still, the world's complexities are under explained, as with *frein*, which involves eldritch energy and spell casting, but is only explained in an appendix, instead of in the text proper.

Revelations come in steady intervals, allowing Casey to advance in a measured, suspenseful manner. Daily work on the ranch is still required, even if Casey has a sense of urgency about the rescued creature. But there's a late, jarring shift in the book that covers what Nightblade and Casey's guardian are thinking; magical warring and questions about creatures' loyalties are introduced, and future coverage of destiny, magical vengeance, and power struggles is implied.

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KAREN RIGBY (November 28, 2021)

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