

Cottonwoods Is a Suspenseful Story in an Authentic Historical Setting

By Darrell W. Smith
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Up front, I should state that I'm a friend of George Brandsberg. I'm also an avid reader, and when it comes to historical fiction, I'm pretty demanding. And I try to be honest. That made it risky to agree to review George's new book; but, fortunately, I liked it—liked it a lot, in fact (as I did one of his earlier efforts, *AFOOT*).

What will interest readers most is the plot. After two young Norwegian immigrants are invited to partner with two ranchers in a cattle company, bad things begin to happen. At first, the four write off the odd happenings as coincidences, but gradually, as the attacks become more violent and bloody, they realize something sinister is at work. George tells the story well--as I neared the conclusion, I wound up reading until the wee hours to find out how things turned out (and it was not entirely as I expected).

Beyond the plot, what I liked very much was the ring of historical authenticity. George sets his tale in 1907-1908, around Belle Fourche, SD. He knows the area because he grew up there, on a ranch, later in the century. Many of the incidents in the novel (as he explains on his Web site, www.cedartip.com) are drawn from stories told by his ancestors and long-time residents or discovered in period newspapers. A few of the characters, such as a county sheriff, were real people.

Without slowing the pace of his narrative, George tells us a bit about ranching in the post-open range era. For example, the ranches around Belle Fourche didn't just raise cattle; they also grew crops, and most of their owners were enthusiastic supporters of a large government-sponsored irrigation project. The ranching economy was influenced by investors based in eastern or Midwestern cities (in this case,

Milwaukee). George reminds us that the area's population included many recent immigrants, from various countries. His prose reflects more than a passing acquaintance with horses, tack, farm equipment, early automobiles and period firearms. Because George also understands people, almost all of the novel's major characters have intriguing backstories, which are gradually revealed. They come across as real human beings, with flaws and weaknesses (some of the villains are seriously flawed), as well as strengths. Except for the really evil ones, all the characters are simply doing the best they can in a world that was complex even in 1907. The authentic period details and well-rounded characters left me feeling that, hey, this story could have happened, and the book taught me a bit about a distant time and place—the two things I want from a historical novel.

As often happens with a self-published work, there are a few minor typos, but nothing that will distract a reader—and actually fewer than I've seen in some books from major publishing houses. If you like solidly-grounded historical fiction that transports you into another era, while sweeping you along with a suspenseful storyline, you probably will enjoy Cottonwoods.

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