

WINTER READING

Return to the thrilling days of yesteryear by losing yourself in a novel. By DARRELL SMITH

If your desk work and a gloomy winter landscape are starting to get to you, maybe it's time to take a trip without leaving home by losing yourself in a good novel.

Two recent book releases—"Marshal of Medicine Lodge" by Stan Lynde and "Afoot" by George Brandsberg—typify the pleasure to be derived from the uniquely American form of story-telling, the Western.

As these books demonstrate, Westerns have come along way since the days when they were mostly action-action-action. They still contain enough action to keep you thoroughly entertained, but most also feature plausible plots and fully developed and believable characters. The settings of today's Westerns often are so well researched that when reading one you feel as though you are peering through a window into your great-grandfather's time.

Montana marshal. "Marshal of Medicine Lodge" follows youthful lawman Merlin Fanshaw as he tries to keep a lid on simmering tensions created by white settlers encroaching on Montana's Crow Indian Reservation. The multi-talented Lynde—who wrote the syndicated cartoon strips Rick O'Shay and Latigo—is admirably

equipped to bring the people and the era to vivid life because he grew up on a ranch on the Crow Indian Reservation. (For more information on Lynde, go to www.oldmontana.com.)

Lynde's story flows along with humor and suspense and realistic touches, such as water wagons settling the dust of frontier streets and billows of white smoke that belch forth when black-powder firearms are shot. Realistic-sounding cowboy phrases, such as "crowbar hotel" for jail and "bean master" for ranch cook, are sprinkled through the dialog. The plight of Indians in late-19th Century America is accurately depicted.

There is some violence and sex, but the book is tamer than network television shows. The book is appropriate for mature teens and adults.

George Brandsberg, a retired farm writer and Kansas State University information manager, whose articles have appeared in FARM JOURNAL, offers a fast-moving, well-researched adventure yarn in "Afoot—A Tale of the Great Dakota Turkey Drive." It follows 13-year-old Joshua Greene as he crosses frontier Dakota Territory, working as a cook and trail hand on a crew driving turkeys.

Git along, little turkeys! That's right, turkeys. The flock's owner hopes to cash in on pent-up demand for poultry meat in the Deadwood mining camp. (Frontier farmers did, in fact, occasionally drive flocks



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of turkeys to market, as Brandsberg explains.)

Like Lynde, Brandsberg peoples his yarn with multi-faceted characters that you'll believe in and care about. He leavens it with descriptions of geography, firearms and history that all ring true. It's a fast, fun

read that can be enjoyed by teenagers or adults.

"Afoot" was enjoyable enough to make this reviewer wish for a sequel.

"Marshal of Medicine Lodge" is fourth in a series. It is sold at Amazon (www.amazon.com), Barnes & Noble (www.barnesandnoble.com) and

www.iuniverse.com for \$14.95 plus shipping and handling.

"Afoot" can be purchased from www.cedartip.com for \$22.80 for hardback and \$11.85 for paperback, plus shipping and handling.

Why Read a Western?

Western novels have provided an escape for Americans for more than 150 years. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower read them to relax from the pressure of leading Allied forces during World War II. Closer to home, retired FARM JOURNAL field editor Dick Seim of Ames, Iowa, is a lifelong reader of Westerns.

Westerns transport Seim to a way of life he didn't experience but identifies with. "I feel a kinship with Westerners," he says. "I don't ride horses, but I admire horses and horsemen and women. Anyone with a farm background has worked, sweated and sometimes frozen under the same big sky, contesting with nature through the seasons.

"In earlier days, I carried water to the house," Seim continues. "I've hunted small game for the table. I've tramped over fields in both daylight and starlight just for the pure pleasure of breathing earth-scented air and

feeling like a part of nature. I've camped out, cooked steak over a fire and potatoes under it. Have you ever smelled bacon fried over a cob fire at dawn? You don't forget it.

"When I read a Western, I find interests beyond the story line. Camping, cooking, hunting, livestock—I mentally nod in appreciation of the writer's technique and detail. In a small way, I've shared some of those experiences.

Perhaps most significant, Seim concludes: "In almost all Westerns, the hero is a self-reliant good guy. He doesn't use dope or misuse women. He usually wins out, and in these tales, the bad guys get what they deserve. Sadly, that's not always true in today's real world. Westerns provide a respite from the realities of modern life. Escapism? Sure is. And I ride off with the good guys whenever I can."