

# COWBOYS NEVER CRY

TINA WELLING

This Conversation Guide is intended to enrich the individual reading experience, as well as encourage us to explore these topics together—because books, and life, are meant for sharing.

## A CONVERSATION WITH TINA WELLING

*Q. What inspired you to write *Cowboys Never Cry*?*

A. While talking with you (my editor, Ellen Edwards), we both realized that people who don't live in the West often hold somewhat unreal images of the cowboy culture. And even those of us who do live in the West glamorize the lifestyle. We may not have ridden a horse for years, but we sure have a snazzy pair of cowboy boots in our closet.

The lifestyle comes from an industry that is more than a hundred years old. Yet nothing other than the fashion designs—Levi's, snap-front shirts, cowboy boots, Stetsons, silver and turquoise jewelry—is the same today. There are serious conflicts between the traditions of land use in the past, when running cattle in wilderness areas was the norm, and the needs of land conservation in the present. We have finally learned the interconnectedness of life-forms on our planet, so we know that however we treat the water, air or land in one

## CONVERSATION GUIDE

place affects every other place. I wanted to explore the conflict between past ranching traditions and present realities and write about how we could keep the good parts while healing the practices that wound the land and its wildlife. Flowing beneath all that were the energies of my two characters—Robbin and Cassie—that began to embody in my dream world the opposition of the older value system of ranching and the newer realities of the shrinking wilderness. I saw these two people as strongly attracted to each other, yet carrying opposing views on this matter of the cowboy mystique. One rode the wave of that universal lure all the way to the peak of glamour; the other moved quietly in the opposite direction, toward finding solace in the wilderness. Along the way I knew that writing about the two of them would reach me things I wanted to know about fame and grief, because those two experiences epitomize the high and low of our culture's value system—people often long for one and fear the other.

*Q. In the novel you explore different kinds of cowboys. You also live in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, both the novel's setting and where lots of real and "pretend" cowboys live. Explain what led you to write about cowboys and what personal experience you drew on.*

A. Sorry, no juicy story of a personal romance with a cowboy—unless you count my husband, who looks darn good in a pair of Levi's. Though there is certainly a romance on my part for the whole cowboy culture. When I first moved from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Cheyenne, Wyoming, I was enthralled with the drama of the lifestyle. I was a big rodeo fan, my first friend

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

was a born-and-bred cowgirl, and in no time at all my wardrobe included cowboy boots and a classy Stetson. A few years after that I moved to Jackson Hole, home of Grand Teton National Park, and I began to hike and ski. I fell in love with the outdoors.

Following that I became alerted to what it means to take care of the land, how all our actions affect the wildlife, and how very precious our wilderness is to each of us. From there I realized that those ranchers who cling to certain traditions often jeopardize the wild places and wildlife that belong to us all. In Jackson Hole today the ranchers comply with the land conservation practices that honor the migration paths, and protect the wetlands, the streambeds and the predators. Yet in areas of Wyoming and other western states traditional views still reign. I knew a rancher who was proud of having shot and buried the last bear in the county on his ranch. He was carrying on the tradition of his grandfather, who had homesteaded the ranch and had worked hard to protect his livestock from predators, which were abundant then.

*Q. I was certainly surprised to learn that long-standing ranching practices are often destructive to the environment. As in the novel, are the ranchers you encountered during your research learning new ways that might help sustain their way of life?*

A. Sometimes I was shocked that my perceptions were so far off the mark. One thing that comes to mind: it is astounding how much damage cows can create on stream banks. They tend to gather around water, so destroy the plant life by trampling

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

the banks, which causes erosion, which muddies the water, which in turn kills further plant and animal life. But, yes, things are definitely improving.

Still, there are plenty of holdouts around the West at this point. Ranching is a hardscrabble life, so anything that might cut into profit is resisted. As always, it is a matter of education. For example, ranchers all over Wyoming are still randomly shooting coyotes and teaching their children to do so as well. Recently a young boy told me he does it to help ranchers.

Oddly, many ranchers who want to reduce the coyote population are also strongly against the coyote's natural predator—the wolf. In the 1940s ranchers were mainly responsible for killing off the wolves in Wyoming, killing the very last one ever spotted for the next fifty years. In the 1990s the wolves were reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park, and since then the number of coyotes has been reduced in the greater ecosystem. I used to hear them every night before falling asleep; now I rarely do. Yet I now have the pleasure of listening to wolves howl around the valley. Balance is everything in the natural world.

*Q. Although the novel opens three years after Cassie's husband died, she's still finding her way toward a new life. Explain how you see her healing process.*

A. I see Cassie as embracing her grief rather than numbing or distracting herself from it. She held the pain lovingly and stayed present with it, and this allowed her to be supported

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

by the liveliness around her, most especially by the natural world, which can be very healing. For many of us a period of grief is almost a time-out, a stretch of life in which we do little other than survive, but I wanted to examine the possibility of coming through that period having gained useful life skills and a deepened sensitivity to oneself and others.

*Q. Robbin is a man searching for new ways to create a meaningful life. Through him, do you hope to convey some general ideas about where meaning lies?*

A. Yes, I do. Our culture has it backward: it is not the outer appearance but rather the inner experience that offers our quality of aliveness. Many of our media messages suggest that if we look good, that's all that matters. But these images of success do not take into consideration our inner well-being. Many people suffer from a lack of self-esteem or a sense of not measuring up while trying to form themselves into acceptable versions of the culture's idea of success and happiness.

When I speak to writing students, I notice they put very little emphasis on the value of creative writing for the deep personal pleasure it brings to the writer. Rather, the emphasis is put on the outer event of publishing. I see success as a sense of satisfaction, a calm happiness in experiencing the moment.

Exchange with others is often a component of our satisfaction; so is being acknowledged and recognized for one's authentic self. This can happen on a very small scale and still offer all the real benefits that world fame offers. Some people

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

can manage world fame without it also stealing their life force, but it's a skill to be learned and not many people look at it like that. Most people just go racing after it, expecting that it will fulfill all their inner needs of self-acceptance. In the novel Robbin gets to the peak of the fame and wealth that many people dream about acquiring and discovers it's just flashing lights and applause that does little for his inner experience of fulfillment.

*Q. Tell us more about Cissy Patterson and Cal Carrington—how their story first came to your attention and why you felt drawn to include it in the novel.*

A. I adore the story of Cissy and Cal for its drama and romance and conflicts.

When I first moved to Jackson Hole twenty-some years ago, Felicia, Cissy's daughter fathered by Count Gizycki, occasionally visited the valley and published stories about her girlhood here with her mother and Cal Carrington on the Bar BC Ranch and Flat Creek Ranch. To me it seemed Cissy and Cal epitomized the contrast in the cultures of the East and the West in the 1920s. Cissy lived for society and the accumulation of status; Cal lived for a sense of oneness with the land and wildlife. She couldn't be alone and quiet; he loved solitude and stillness. The two of them were full of opposite qualities and yet the legend is that they fell in love. Felicia says no, they were only friends. But the two of them were in the prime of life, both very physical in their own way, and the places within themselves where they did meet were powerful

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

and magnetic. Aside from their summers together in Jackson Hole, Cissy often invited Cal to her home in Dupont Circle to meet her society friends and on several occasions the two of them traveled together around Europe. They took turns introducing each other to their respective lifestyles and in the process they widened their lives and became lifelong companions.

*Q. Your descriptions of Jackson Hole make it sound like a place of stunning natural beauty, out-of-sight prices, and an odd combination of cowboys and actors! What first drew you to the area and what keeps you there?*

A. I was first drawn by the beauty. Unlike most mountains that have foothills in front of them, the Grand Teton Mountains rise dramatically from flat meadows. The immediate sensation is one of sheer, towering spires against the sky. One day my husband, John, and I were hiking while on a visit to the valley. I said, "People should live in the place they think is the most beautiful." He said, "Okay." And we moved here. It was that abrupt. I felt kind of embarrassed at first telling anyone; we had children and responsibilities. But here in Jackson Hole that story isn't one bit unusual. Many people arrived here the same way we did—they fell in love, moved in.

What keeps me here is the community. It is the most awake gathering of people I have ever encountered. The people care about what happens regarding everything from town regulations to Bear Number 349. Because we host so many visitors, we have a lot of culture for a small town. And the valley is



## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

home to many creative people—artists, writers, entrepreneurs. In some ways it's not an easy place to live. We can have very harsh weather, it is extremely expensive, and I have to drive a hundred miles to the nearest place to buy underwear!

*Q. You wrote this novel in about a year—much faster than your previous two novels. How did you manage it?*

A. I managed it with the love and support of my family. I began the novel while visiting my sister Gayle and my brother-in-law Bob Caston in Florida. When I arrived, they had set up a desk for me on their deck beneath a palm tree and overlooking the river. I watched herons wade while I wrote. Suddenly I'd hear wild splashing in the water and look up in time to see a tarpon strike. I reveled in the glorious pandemonium of these huge fish feeding. It was an exciting contrast to the serene dipping of palm fronds and soft breezes. I ended the novel by coming back down to Florida at the end of the year and leasing a condo for a month to spend more time with Gayle, Bob, my brother Tom and my sister-in-law Debbie Welling. In between, my husband was on call for supplying just the right word when I'd holler for help and cooking just the right meals to keep me going in tight times.

*Q. A loving relationship between a man and a woman lies at the center of each of your three novels. Is that by accident or design?*

A. That's by design. The intimate relationship between a man and a woman intrigues me. It is certainly the center of my

## C O N V E R S A T I O N   G U I D E

own life. I have been married to the same man for decades. I find long-term loving partnerships—whether of the same sex or opposite sex—to be full of mystery, misery and elation. Love between two lifetime partners has so many layers to it. It holds heartache, disappointment, joy, comfort, companionship, surprise, romance, history and hope. Many important life skills are demanded in such a relationship. It's a real trick to stick with it, to keep alive the core of love and respect under constantly changing circumstances and challenges. I wouldn't be surprised if my next book carries deep love and commitment as one of its themes as well.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Cowboys Never Cry* is, at its heart, a love story. What do and don't you like about Cassie and Robbin and their developing relationship?
2. Discuss the other couples in the novel—how do those relationships add to the main romance?
3. Are cowboys your weakness? What attracts you to them? Do you distinguish between real and pretend cowboys?
4. Discuss Cassie's way of life. What about it appeals or doesn't appeal to you? What changes would you have to make in your own life to live like that? Or do you, like the guy in the bar, need the security of insurance?
5. Do you find Robbin's crisis of meaning, and his effort to create a new life for himself, believable? Have you, or some-

## CONVERSATION GUIDE

one you know, ever suffered a similar crisis? What did you do about it?

6. The author suggests that women have come so easily to Robbin, he doesn't even know how to ask one out on a regular date. In what ways is Robbin secure and sophisticated when it comes to women and in what ways is he backward? Have you ever felt inexperienced for your age when it came to romance—maybe as a “late bloomer” in your youth or as someone starting to date again after a long marriage? Did you call upon a friend for help, as Robbin calls on Cody?

7. How do you feel about Cassie's efforts to make Robbin, Boone, Cody and Fee more conscious of the environmental impact their decisions have on the ranch? Do you think it's important to preserve ranching as a way of life?

8. Were you surprised to learn that cattle ranching comprises only one percent of Wyoming's income, or that legislators in the western states are often ranchers because the two jobs neatly dovetail? Discuss the implications.

9. Several of the older characters in the book develop unique romantic relationships—Cissy Patterson and Cal Carrington, Boone and Elene, Fee and Laraine. What do you think of the accommodations they make in order to have a relationship? What makes their situations different from Cassie and Robbin's?

10. Cassie finds solace and renewal in the natural world. Do you?