



# **Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West**

*Deanne Stillman*

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## **Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West** Deanne Stillman

An epic story that restores the horse to its rightful place in the history of the American West

Mustang is the sweeping story of the wild horse in the culture, history, and popular imagination of the American West. It follows the wild horse from its evolutionary origins on this continent to its return with the conquistadors to its bloody battles on the old frontier to its present plight as it fights for survival on the vanishing range.

Along the way, you meet some of the great characters -- equine and human alike -- in American history, including Comanche, the gallant horse that survived the Battle of the Little Bighorn; Charlie Joe, the intrepid cast member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show; Fritz, the mustang that became America's first equine movie star; and Bugz, the survivor of the 1998 wild horse massacre outside Reno, Nevada. There's also Wild Horse Annie, who lobbied for the first federal protections for mustangs and, after a twenty-year fight, saw them signed into law in 1971.

In the tradition of Barry Lopez and Peter Matthiessen, Mustang follows the horse tracks across American history and shows that despite ever-encroaching civilization and dwindling protections, the horses still run wild, with spirit unbroken -- a living tableau of our heritage. But for how much longer, no one can say.

## **Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West Details**

Date : Published June 9th 2008 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

ISBN : 9780618454457

Author : Deanne Stillman

Format : Hardcover 368 pages

Genre : History, Animals, Horses, Nonfiction

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## **From Reader Review Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West for online ebook**

### **Amanda says**

I know a fair bit about mustangs and about equestrian history, and I went into this book hoping it would be a summary of mustangs in the American imagination as well as a thorough overview of the current mustang debate. I didn't really find either.

In general, this was a well-written and thoughtful book. It was an enjoyable read that moved right along, and the last few chapters did give a good snapshot of some of the challenges that mustangs face in the American west today (without going into too much depth, alas). Stillman was best when handling contemporary issues, and telling stories of people that she'd met or interacted with. Her background in journalism served her well.

However, the overall framing and narrative of the book had some major flaws. First and foremost was that Stillman made no attempt to define mustang. She did not give any boundaries to what she would be discussing, and did not attempt to parse out the nuances between range-bred cavalry horses, range-bred ranch horses, semi-managed herds, or truly feral herds. There is a world of difference between a horse that is part of a semi-managed group that belongs to the US Cavalry or a particular ranch and a horse that exists completely untouched within the larger ecosystem out west. Not every horse that lived in the American west was a mustang; not even every horse roaming loose in the west was a mustang, in a time when loose herd management was more typical. (Did they intermingle? Probably. I'm not aware of any good research that looks more closely at those boundaries, though.)

This problem leads into the second major flaw, which is that Stillman's book then becomes a history not of the mustang but of the horse in the American west. She considers US Cavalry remounts such as Comanche, Spanish conquistador's horses, cow ponies on cattle drives, Native American herds, Wild Bill Hickock's show horses, and others to be part and parcel of the mustang story. Some of them may be - but most of them are not. Many times, the story became more about the people involved than the horses. Granted, it's difficult to truly write the history of a horse - who after all don't communicate or write down their own history - but the overall book felt more like a chronicling of the things humans did in the American west, and oh by the way they usually involved horses.

The good news is that this was not a bad book, and does add to the literature about mustangs, so it's not a loss. It's simply a missed opportunity.

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### **cati says**

Was looking for a horse book after seeing War Horse. Found this by accident. Not the greatest writing, but the history was very interesting, although brutal! So much violence was done to (and still is) to our horses in this country and abroad. I had a hard time getting through some parts. I haven't actually finished because it got to be a bit too much. But, glad to have it in my library!

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## **Joshua says**

This book just plain pissed me off. It clings to a claim of a history of the mustang and an account of their current plight by the barest of margins. The writing is sloppy and the author maunders on through endless speculation and pointless rabbit trails. Her chapter on Custer and the Little Bighorn is a morass. She even includes reenactors' takes on what they think really happened. I gave up there.

Stillman's weird fixation on Hernando Alonso is a case in point. She even goes so far as to imagine him muttering Hebrew prayers while shoeing horses. And again, just the sheer volume of unnecessary detail - do we really need a full account of Cortes' invasion of the New World? So much dross. It's like she had no real idea what she was trying to say and so she padded the whole thing with tangential things in order to mask her aimlessness.

Take this passage from Chapter 1: The Horses Return: "They must have known they were coming home for nothing else can explain their survival, and perhaps only that knowledge deep in their cells sustained them." I should have put the book down then and there but I gave Stillman the benefit of the doubt and pressed on. Bad call. It's ridiculous.

I came to the literature looking for hard facts regarding wild horses after encountering them in the wild and being struck by their beauty and their ability to survive in the harshest of climates. I've spoken to BLM agents, I've tracked horses in the desert and I want to sponge up all the knowledge I can about them. I wish I hadn't wasted my time trying to get through this one.

I would recommend David Philipps' Wild Horse Country if you are seeking a good introduction to the history and present situation of the mustang. His reporting is thoroughly researched and is a solid read all the way through.

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## **Nan Williams says**

To me the author not only did not prove her avowed premise of the government's approval of the wanton destruction of a valued American asset, but she actually proved the opposite.

A great deal of the book was taken up with how many "mustangs" (and she never clearly defined that term) were simply murdered - for sport or for financial gain or because they were nuisances. If I had added up all of her numbers, I would have come out to more than a million horses or ponies (and she used these terms interchangeably as well) that were killed.

Where I'm very confused is that I've always considered a horse to be a very valued asset - transportation and or a beast of burden or financially advantageous to breed. From reading her book, it would seem that the Spaniards and the Indians as well as various

Americans and the US Government consider them useless and nuisances.

The current population started with the remains of horses brought to Mexico along with soldiers led by Cortez. Some of the horses escaped and were captured by Indians who rode them and who used them in

chasing and killing buffalo. That was in the early 1500's.

She bounced back and forth in the history of the West so that it was difficult to have a clear picture of just how things developed chronologically. She talked about the cavalries in the War between the States, but I would assume most of those horses were bred and trained in the East. She said that we donated mustangs to the European nations

fighting WWI and that 200,000 of our horses perished in that war. In 1899 she says that we sent 230,000 "wild horses" to South Africa to aid in the Boer War.

In another place we learn that 45,000 horses were killed on the Crow reservation; that Custer ordered the killing of 875 horses and then 1400 ponies. According to her one mustanger killed over 20,000 horses, himself, in the 1920s. Following WWII over 100,000 horses were taken from Nevada, alone, and sold for pet food.

In 1925 Montana signed a death warrant for abandoned horses running at large and about 400,000 were "removed." And on and on and on about how many horses have been killed or murdered or given to other nations throughout the past 400 years.

She raised many more questions than she answered. How many times can a single mare foal? Horses, according to her numbers, have got to be the most prolific animal on earth! Another question I have is how were the wild horses captured and tamed and trained and then transported to Europe and Africa for use in the wars? How long does it

take to tame and train a wild horse for military use? She told how Buffalo Bill took his entire retinue to England to put on shows and half his horses died on the voyage. So how did the government ship 1/2 million?

The final count that she gave was that in Nevada at the time of the writing she said there were 30,000 mustangs in government corrals and long term pastures and another 25,000 on public lands. And that's in addition to horses that are still in the wild in other western states.

Well quite frankly, I just don't understand her premise that we're wantonly destroying a national heritage. Otherwise, I thought the history of the West in the book was interesting although I felt that it often detracted from the subject of horses. And I thought way too much was included (ie. casual "conversations" among historical characters) and asides that had nothing to do with anything.

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## **Linda says**

The title of this book could have been *The History of the Horse Since the Beginning of Time*. Impressive research makes this a comprehensive and compelling saga of the wild horse in the American West. The conquering Spanish in the 1500's brought the horse with them and changed the west forever. Columbus casually threw horses overboard when he needed to lighten his load. Two hundred thousand mustangs were killed in WWI. The callousness throughout our history described in detail towards animals that have served mankind so well is appalling. It continues today. The Bureau of Land Management rounds what is left of the wild herds in America into holding pens. Groups like "Life Savers" attempt to rescue the horses from the slaughter house, but they can't afford to save them all. The sterilization program in place now is more humane, but it ensures that there will be no more wild herds in the coming decades. This situation exists mainly because the horses compete with cattle for food. Cows are much harder on the public lands they are allowed to graze upon, but cows provides a profit for cattle ranchers who hire lobbyists to keep congress voting in their favor. I was not aware of this plight until I attended a fundraiser for the wild mustangs in America. Like the buffalo nearly killed to extinction, the wild horses will go the same way if people don't become involved in rescuing them from harsh government policies. Ms. Stillman presents the wild

mustang's case eloquently. The Cowgirl Jumped Over the Moon

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### **Diane C. says**

A thorough, interesting and compassionate book. Although I knew wild horses were hunted and treated badly through history, I had NO idea how badly. Shouldn't our first rule of animal treatment, if not coddling them, be don't torture them?

I could not finish this book, the descriptions of the treatment of these horses like so much garbage to be taken out and burned was too awful. And I will definitely get involved with a group that advocates for them.

Harrowing.

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### **Kim says**

This was an amazing book but also one that was hard for me to get through. It was extremely well written but some parts were so sad and literally made me cry....we haven't treated the mustang well at all, and sadly we still don't. It was just sad that such a beautiful symbol of freedom has been abused so badly. But it definitely opened my eyes that more needs to be done to protect these amazing beautiful creatures.

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### **Kyle Magin says**

Oof. This book is far from uplifting. The plight of wild horses in the West mirrors pretty much every other natural resource out here: It's been abused and vilified and people who defend horses are likewise abused and vilified. There's a terrific history of the Spanish conquest and northern Mexico, Texas, Nevada and Hollywood in here. A definite must-read for my fellow Silver Staters.

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### **Iris says**

Finally gave up on this one with only a few chapters to go. Not that it was bad, but it has been done before, and better. James Frank Dobie's "The Mustangs" was the original work and had a lot more fact and a lot less opinion in it.

Deanne Stillman seemed to copy his work about the mustangs, and add in a lot of history of the west. So much so that it should have just been called "The Saga Of The American West". Mustangs actually seemed fairly irrelevant in the book.

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### **Pete says**

**Mustang: The saga of the Wild Horse in the American West** is a book by Deanne Stillman which I felt

described the history reasonably accurately.

I re-read this book prior to a trip to Alberta CN where I had a second opportunity to mingle with the herds. My first encounter was in Nevada. I am not certain of the accuracy of the author's numbers, but it was a considerate reflection of the issues these wonderful creatures are encountering. Her historical references through cattle drives and Native American interaction seemed accurate though.

If not mistreated or targeted by cattle ranchers, they are easy to work with and if the BLM doesn't destroy them all as predicted, alternative solutions should be sought out.

This book was an uncomfortable but realistic read on the wild Mustangs.

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### **Anne Clermont says**

Having grown up in Canada, there was a lot of early American history I never knew about - save what I learned in novels and movies. This non-fiction book gave a fantastic historical look at the part the horse played in American's culture. I learned many fascinating details! Really well written and researched, though I do agree with a review below that the numbers of mustangs in modern history were confusing. I'm betting that that's because no one really knows how many are left in the wild. The point is clear: they are disappearing and should be protected. I highly recommend this book!

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### **David says**

A look at the history of the mustangs that helped build the American west and now are threatened by government and commerce which are trying to eliminate wild mustangs.

The narrative was best when it concentrated on the horse's story; sometimes reading the descriptions of the people involved with the horses was a bit tedious.

All in all a good look at the plight of wild mustangs today.

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### **Caroline says**

This is a wonderfully written and often incredibly moving elegaic tribute to the American mustang, the animal that more than anything else played a part in creating the myths and legends of the American West. It traces the horse's history on the continent, right from the ancient progenitors of the modern horse, through the Spanish horses of the conquistadors, right on through the highpoint of the West, with the Indian tribes, the cavalry, the cattle drives, up to the modern day, when the very existence of the mustang is threatened by government, big business and cattle ranchers. Stillman clearly has a very deep love for these horses and it really shows in this book. I found myself in tears near the end where she talks about the slow death of the mustang, of the round-ups and the meaningless murder of entire herds. For a creature that more than any other has truly represents the spirit of America, it seems a heartbreaking and senseless end.

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## **Gabrielle says**

Really quite bad. She exhibits absolutely no control of her language or her structure; whole chapters pass without any indication of when, where, or why the events happened, nor why they were included where they were in the book. She allows purple prose to pass for style, and worst of all in a nonfiction book, allows opinion, biased reference selection, and prejudicial language to substitute for research. And I'm a sucker for the subject matter. Sad.

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## **D says**

I started this book with the first week before school, and I'm finishing it the week the semester ends. I read slowly because there was so much reading for school. All excuses aside, I dug it. When Deanne Stillman lets her love shine through and sway her prose, it gets beautiful and all I could dream about was riding a horse through canyon lands. Or just seeing a wild herd of mustangs. I don't know, but this book really made me want to ride. I haven't since I was a kid, but now I'm begging my dad to take a trip with me to Canyon de Chelley where we ride horses through.

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