



# Winter Range

*Claire Davis*

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**Winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Best First Novel and the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award for Best Novel**

In *Winter Range*, the intimate details of ranching and small-town life are woven into the suspenseful story of three people struggling to survive, to belong, and to love in the chillingly bleak landscape of eastern Montana. Ike Parsons is a small-town sheriff whose life is stable and content; his wife Pattiann is a rancher's daughter with a secret past. But when Ike tries to help a hard-luck cattleman named Chas Stubblefield, he triggers Chas's resentment and finds his home and his wife targeted by a plot for revenge.

## Winter Range Details

Date : Published October 5th 2001 by Picador (first published 2000)

ISBN : 9780312284251

Author : Claire Davis

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Fiction, Westerns, Mystery

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# From Reader Review Winter Range for online ebook

## Felicity says

*I don't give star ratings to books by faculty members of my MFA program.*

Claire Davis's first novel builds from the small to the epic, an engaging read that moves along quickly. It's a story told from several different perspectives, one of them increasingly twisted, written in Claire's full-throated and inimitable style.

It's particularly notable for the sense of place. I enjoyed the artistry in the way two places were depicted; rural Montana, throughout, and softer Midwestern farmland through Ike's point of view. The latter place emerges partly through definition, partly by contrast with the main setting; an interesting technique. Moreover, the lasting impression of the uncaring Montana wilds isn't personified. Claire Davis manages to paint the landscape in all its fury while leaving it empty.

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## Jennifer says

I picked this up on the recommendation of a co-worker. I am so happy I actually read it. It was gritty and compelling. The landscape of this novel in Montana in the winter - and I think the novel itself kind of captures the image that just saying those words *Montana in the winter* brings to mind.

It's been over 2 years since I read this book and I still think about it. Maybe I feel a kinship to the landscape as I sit at my computer and the wind outside my window is -40 degrees. Maybe the image of starving livestock was described so well it boiled into my brain. I don't know what it was - but this novel haunts me.

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## Ron Charles says

My copy of "Paradise Lost" is lost, but through the Internet, it's been regained. A Web site managed by Dartmouth College presents most of Milton's poetry, neatly annotated: [www.dartmouth.edu/~milton](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton).

Claire Davis's wonderful debut novel, "Winter Range," describes the Montana plains in all their stunning, edenic beauty, but my thoughts kept drifting back to that earlier paradise.

Through the Dartmouth site, I found what I was looking for. There's a particularly creepy moment in which Satan, recently evicted from heaven, spots Adam and Eve for the first time: "O Hell!" he groans, "what do mine eyes with grief behold." Spying from atop the Tree of Life, he's filled with awe and knows he could have loved this beautiful pair under different circumstances. But, as he bitterly notes, having lost everything, what's he got left to do but raise a little hell.

The villain in Davis's novel isn't so wicked, of course, but in the simple setting of a Montana range, the author raises the same disturbing questions about the nature of hatred and the way it's fueled by an incendiary mixture of pride, jealousy, and boredom.

Chas Stubblefield is in over his head. His brutish father always said he couldn't manage the ranch, but when the old man died before he could sell it, Chas grabbed the chance to prove himself. Now that dream is freezing to death in the fields. The feed store won't extend him any more credit. The bankers who encouraged him to borrow too much money want their payment.

When the new sheriff, Ike Parsons, gets wind of this trouble, he drives out to see for himself. After seven years of drought, debt has caught other farmers by the neck, but he has never seen anything this bad. Hundreds of Chas's cattle have already fallen dead in the snow. The rest are frozen monuments of starvation.

Chas would be hungry himself, if he weren't eating the beef as it dies. "Out of money. Out of credit. Out of luck. All I got left is patience," he says bitterly. Ike gives him the obvious advice: Sell what's left to the rendering company and get out.

"No," Chas answers stubbornly. "These animals are going to die."

Ike feels wedged between Chas's pride and the town's unshakable respect for a man's private property. But the law is the law, and starving one's own herd is a crime. Ike reluctantly enlists the testimony of the local vet, secures a court order, and plans to take the remaining herd out.

"What it came down to for Ike was respect," the narrator notes. "We were human, with the ability to construct order, to make choices, and a conscience that demanded we bear the consequences of our actions. It raised us above the animals."

Or is he motivated by something lower - like resentment over the relationship Chas had with his wife when they were wild teenagers? Their marriage is drawn perfectly, so true to the currents of affection and the eddies of resentment Ike and his wife must ferry to get over that uncomfortable past. He's determined to make the application of law impersonal, but in a small town where those subject to the law are friends and lovers - and voters - that's not easy.

Davis captures the complexity of this tragedy in all its personal and social dimensions. "This was a community that knew each other's families and histories and shared the same jokes, and one person's grief became another's," the narrator writes. "All of them were stung by Chas's shameful act, the cruelty of it, because that worked at the fabric of their lives ... all of it dependent on a basic respect for what was given in your hands."

Abandoning his self-respect and stripped of his property, Chas has nothing left to do but starve his horse and fantasize about revenge.

Yet even in the scariest moments as he creeps into neighbors' homes and eyes their bounty with envy, there's something heartwrenching about the conspiracy of circumstance and vanity that blinds him. What, after all, is more dangerous than a hopeless man? Raised by a fundamentalist mother who eventually hanged herself, Chas has a strong sense of the cruel God he's defying. He even quotes "Paradise Lost" in one rueful moment. The sympathy Ike feels only complicates his task.

A heartening new addition to the field of Western fiction, Davis brands these characters with rich psychological clarity. Ominous throughout, her story finally races toward a gripping, ice-bound tragedy that tests the limits of Ike's faith in himself and the law. "Winter Range" looks like a simple story, but it's deceptively large - like this land and the challenges it poses.

## **Christine says**

Since the last few books I've read have been duds, it's not difficult for this book to be better. The writer shows skill at her craft and can actually formulate sentences that do not make us think she failed standardized exams.

The plot made me think it was a parable of the American economy and how the housing market has a lot of depressed citizens. The bankers loaned money and the people who did not have financial literacy (like the antagonist of this story) did not know how to manage their assets (in this case, his ranch and his cows).

I would recommend this book to people who want to go armchair travelling to Montana, but cannot tolerate living in Montana where there are not fancy hotels or cushy places to eat. It gives a vivid picture of the ranching communities in Montana, in the way John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* portrays farming California.

The first chapter where the main characters are introduced reminded me of a literary version of a Norman Rockwell picture.

I don't understand: a) what exactly drove the antagonist's mother to suicide b) did the Horse live or die? I wanted the horse to survive. And to give the antagonist a kick in the pants (front or back, doesn't matter) for being so silly about a lot of things. Maybe I'm the one who's shallow for thinking this way since I am not a wizened and weather-beaten descendant of multi-generational ranching families, but if people are so tough and survivors, why can't they just cut their losses and cut their ties to the land? MOVE ON: the cows even know how to do that.

I think I would cast Robert Redford as Purvis-the-old-vet, which is very likely sacrilegious since I'm sure lot of readers could argue he's too poncey to play someone in this story. Since the vet has to run in a scene in the book, I think Redford could handle running at his age.

It was ok. It was certainly better than the other books this person recommended to me. Not as good as *East of Eden*, but not as epic obviously, and not as profound, but I don't think the author intended it to be anyways.

It's a quick read.

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## **K says**

read some time ago, but remember it as a biting story of uncommon detail of incredible hard knocks, competing against the elements and just plain hard luck, in love and life. oh, and the writing of this author was vivid and wonderful.

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## **Paul says**

Pretty good. Really cinematic, I could see this being adopted. Has a sort of *Fargo* vibe, but only because it's

always snowing and there's a sheriff with a gun and it's small-town. Davis does a good job of creating a complex "villain," which I put in quotes because he is but isn't really a villain or just isn't only a villain. The sheriff is less interesting in this way and his undying love for his wife borders on unbelievable, or else just boring. Still, this didn't disappoint after having read one of Davis's stories, which was great. I'll read her other novel in a bit. Cool structure, despite its traditional movie feel. The book seems to reach a number of climaxes, then dawdle for a bit, not boringly, then pick up again. In fact I'm not sure I've ever read a novel structured like this—at least not this successfully. Lots of landscape, too, naturally.

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### **Rrshively says**

My husband would give this book 4 or 5 stars, so don't let my rating discourage you. I did think this book was O.K. The author was wonderful at using language in a fresh new way. Harsh as Montana winters are many parts of the story. Chas has gotten in over his head in buying land and cattle, and his cattle are starving, but he has a strange way of dealing with that out of a revengeful heart. Ike is the sheriff who followed the lovely Pattiann from Milwaukee to her home turf of Montana ranch country. He is devoted to the law and feels he must lawfully deal with the starving cattle belonging to Chas. But Chas and Pattiann have a wild past. Will it intrude on the present? What horrors can a revengeful heart devise? And then there is the teen Joe that is troubled. Is the vet, Purvis, wrong in seeing something there to salvage? There is a lot of strong language to match the landscape.

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### **Carole says**

This is a taut novel belonging to the genre I would call northern plains bleak, along the likes of Annie Proulx and Ivan Doig. The dialog is spare and chill, like the landscape. The characters are tough as rawhide and face an environment that is barely forgiving. The central issue, starving cattle on a failing ranch, brings out strongly held principles by the locals, especially rugged individualism, minding one's own business, and the sanctity of private property. The novel builds to a dramatic, and icy, climax that is suitable and effective. A strong three rating.

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### **Susanne says**

Although this book described some harsh scenes of a Montana rancher whose cattle were starving and a local sheriff's attempt to help the young man and his horse and cattle, the plot was riveting, the characters well-developed, and the setting beautifully described. The novel did not have the happily-ever-after ending I could have hoped for, it was realistic and so well-written that I could hardly put it down.

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### **Lori says**

This book reminded me of parts of Jasmine. The harsh winter, starkly beautiful land, people struggling to make a living growing our food, bankruptcy, an alien in a small community and, a spiral of violence.

In this case, the outsider grew up on a Wisconsin dairy farm. Not a ranch. Not Montana. And, not this

particular ranching community.

I keep thinking about All Over Creation, maybe it's the weather. Alienation and isolation stand out. Stubblefield's family lived and ranched in the community for generations. But, he almost completely isolated and alienated from it. It seems as inevitable as the next domino in a cascade.

The cows covered in a carapace of ice aren't the most chilling image.

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### **PRINCESS says**

"We're two of a kind, you and me, two sides of the same coin, your daddy trained you for what you can't have, and mine left me what he didn't prepare me for."

The year of big snow.

Ike is a cop in his forties when he marries Pattiann and move to a new community and becomes Sheriff Parsons.

Sheriff Parsons has a practical and empathic vision of law enforcement. Mrs. Parsons once was in relation with Chas Stubblefield, the loner in the town who is apparently different than Ike; anger and unfriendliness view towards government, banks, and outsiders, a weird guy who kills dogs in the town with rat poison, puts the bank on a fire and other crazy stuff. The town goes under a pile of snow; people eventually end up asking helps from each other and their view of point's changes about the law, love and ethics in their community but very late. Winter is over and dead animals are all over. Strange relationship we notice between the ranchers and their animals. We see Chas keeps his cattle to starve in the field because he is too poor to feed his cattle and he is so stubborn to accept the help from others. We see as well how the author given such a unique but strange behavior to her characters.

A dark and clearly written melodramatic yet psychological thriller to keep you amused.

3.5\*

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### **Samantha says**

Depressing!!!! Also very slow at times I would say the last 20 pages are the best. The author did paint an awesome picture of the landscape and lonlieness so for that I give it 3 stars

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### **Ktbird says**

A haunting novel revealing the harsh life on the range. Life and death - at the end of it all, we are all just meat. I don't like to think about animals suffering, and there was too much of that in this book. That said, this book seems to capture painfully realistically the difficulties of survival involved with cattle ranching, and the blended histories of the humans trying to make a go of it.

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**Jo says**

The story definitely belongs to the northern plains bleak genre, but, for me, it lacks the pull that wrenches at your gut and makes you feel nature and mankind in all its visceral glory.

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**Liz says**

I liked this book a lot. It won a prize for the "best first novel". The story takes place in the badlands (? I don't really know what the badlands are, I am just guessing) of Montana - during the winter. Doesn't make me want to move out there. In this story, the sheriff, who has moved from the midwest out of love for the Montanan woman he wanted to marry, has to adjust to small town Montana, plus his wife's past mistakes. You get a good sense of what the life is like there, and develop respect for ranchers and their "stick-to-it-ness". There main themes are love and loss. Seems like I have said that about most of the books I have been reading.

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