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*The Hearts of Horses* (review)

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Syrian/Greek camel-handler moves—with camels—from Turkey to Arizona and Sonora. American agricultural researchers travel from Arizona into the oases of Egypt. Together, these stories add another significant new cultural dimension to the multicultural (and borderland) West. This concept will appeal to readers of *WAL* who will want to consult the book for their own education and for possible use in the classroom. The second unifying strand of *Arab/American* is a yearning, even a nostalgia, for rootedness, conceived of here in the context of displacement, migration, exile, and transience—and complicated, of course, by the current state of tension between the Arab and the American worlds. Nabhan tells us that one in three people on the planet have been recently uprooted from their homelands—a proportion that is even higher if we include those whose families moved less recently, whether by force or choice. His on-the-ground tracking of his own clan's history is part of this strand, as are essays about the recent violent conflicts and knowledge of a place that comes only with very long experience. This complex of issues will especially interest those of us who take seriously the role of place—and the world that we humans have made in tandem with nature.

As I often find when I read one of Gary Nabhan's books, what I most enjoyed about *Arab/American* was the experience of being inside the mind—and heart—of a really interesting, active, and original thinker who also writes with engaging clarity. It is a bonus for me, as it will be for others, that Nabhan's literal and intellectual territory overlaps with ours in such provocative ways.

***The Hearts of Horses.***

**By Molly Gloss.**

New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007. 289 pages, \$24.00.

**Reviewed by Jerry D. Mathes II**

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Molly Gloss's *The Hearts of Horses* begins with a shy, awkward teenaged woman who wants only to earn her living as a bronc buster. In 1917, Martha Lessen arrives at the ranch of George and Louise Bliss in Elwha County, Oregon, after the Great War "had swept all the young men from the ranches, [and] there were girls who came through the country breaking horses" (1). She is searching for the romantic West of Buffalo Bill Cody. Her big cowboy hat and batwing chaps, which everyone looks at amusingly, reflect her yearning for a past she feels still exists somewhere. She believes that if she earns enough money, she can ride off and discover it.

Bliss hires her to break his horses but learns that instead of a traditional ride'em-or-kill'em bronc buster, she is a horse gentler, a practice she acquired from an old cowboy who developed the technique due to age and injuries. Martha is soon offered the opportunity to ride a "circle" around the county. To ride a "circle tour," a bronc buster rides from ranch to ranch, leaving one horse and taking another to the next ranch to expose horses to different environmental conditions. All members of the circle board another member's horse until their horse completes the circuit and returns home.

In this job, she meets a wide range of people in Elwha: two old spinsters, the Woodruff sisters, who refused to marry so they could work their father's ranch, and their hired hand, Henry Frazer; a college-educated chicken farmer who is dying of cancer and wants Martha to break a horse as a gift to his son; a drunk who bought a horse he couldn't break and, in the guise of not having enough time, hires her to break it to save face with his wife; an ostracized German family; a rich man from the East who was conned into buying a horse by his hired man, Logerwell, whom Martha has fired after she discovers on her circle ride that he is beating horses; and others who make up the varied landscape of ranchers and farmers.

Although Martha Lessen plans on leaving come spring, she becomes intertwined in the community, attending church, going to dances and social events. The tie that finally binds her to this place is Frazer, for whom she even sheds some of her tomboy ways "to behave like the other girls" (191).

Gloss creates a lyrical study in contrasts of people's attitudes, cultures, and eras. Martha straddles a time her granddaughters will consider amazing, but her story is subsumed by the stories unfolding around her. The novel is finally about Elwha. What drives the narrative are historic forces that clash within that isolated community, although some of the more interesting ones are reported rather than dramatized, like Louise dealing with patriotic bigots and the personal tragedies and triumphs of Elwha's residents, which are presented through beautifully wrought scenes. It is a story of flux between the old and new West, about what is ugly and beautiful in each. And Gloss shows us that no matter how we try to construct a future, it will shape itself in its own way and no amount of nostalgia will create a romanticized past in the present.

