

Waltzing Montana

Mary Clearman Blew

Amy Brakeman Livezey
After Annie, 12" x 12"
mixed media on panel

Waltzing Montana

The following is an excerpt from Mary Clearman Blew's unpublished novel and the third book in her High Plains trilogy. The first installments, Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin was released in September 2018 by University of Nebraska Press, and a linked novel, Sweep Out the Ashes, is expected to appear in 2020.

Central Montana, November 1925.

Starving cattle had picked the range as clean as though by geese, but a little rain had fallen a few weeks back, and the grass perked up enough to provide some ground cover before turning brown again with the first hard frost. Weather moved in and clouds rumbled and lightning danced on the horizon and struck the high prairie in two spots, and when the plumes of smoke rose where no smoke should rise, every man in the Plum Creek country ran for shovels and gunny sacks and buckets, and every woman started boiling water for coffee and slicing bread for sandwiches.

Knowing they had Plum Creek between them and the road up to the high prairie, Renny brought in the Belgians and hitched them to the wagon. He tied Pink and Smokey to the back of the wagon and threw their saddles in back with the shovels and buckets and sacks. Mildred came running with her black bag, of course, and climbed up on the wagon seat beside him as he whipped up the Belgians as fast as he thought they could travel and still have wind enough to reach the smoke.

Neighbors closer to the flames than Renny and Mildred already were setting backfires. Just enough contrary wind to keep the backfires shifting, and the men had to beat out their fires with shovels and gunny sacks and reset them. Still, they were getting a pretty good fire break burned off, Renny saw. Better luck than the crew on the other fire, a half-mile away to the north. He could see men running in front of the flames and beating them with sacks, while the natural draughts created by the two fires pulled their flames toward each other and around the unlucky bastard's sheds and corrals and homestead shack that lay between them.

Renny's idea was to leave Mildred well behind the fire break with the heaving Belgians and the wagon, where she could set up her aid station. He'd just untied Pink from the wagon, thinking to saddle her—old bitch, even after that run behind the wagon she wasn't out of breath—and take a shovel and sacks and try to ride around the fire to help the short-handed crew to the north, when something apparently happened, because everybody started jumping and shouting.

Somebody yelled in his ear. "Let me have your horse, Renny!"

"Jesus, Pat! I ain't even saddled her yet—"

But Pink's reins were jerked out of his hand.

"Pat, she'll bite the hell out of you! She's tried enough times with me —"

Pat had torn off his shirt and was tying it around Pink's head as a blindfold, and Pink was letting him do it. A handful of mane and one quick swing, and Pat was astride Pink, bareback, and Pat and Pink were outa there in a thunder of Pink's hoofs.

Renny saw what was causing all the excitement. At the door of the shack, a hundred yards away, stood a woman holding a baby. The flames from the burning grass were low, but not low enough for a man to run through or dare to drive a truck with tires and gas tank through.

Pink, the fast old mare, still the fastest horse in Murray County. The mean old mare, letting Pat Adams ride her bareback through hoof-deep burning grass and flaming weeds.

"Who's the crazy son of a bitch with no shirt on?"

“Patrick Adams.”

“Jesus. Look at him go.”

They all watched. What else could they do? Pat and Pink had run ahead of the flames now, Pink who devoured the hundred yards with her great slashing Hambletonian strides and Pat who rode as though he was part of her. They saw him rein in Pink at the door of the shack, not quite to a halt, more of a four-hoofed dance in place as the young woman handed up her baby to Pat, and Pat tucked the baby in the crook of his arm and with his other hand reached the young woman's hand and swung her up and behind him on the dancing Pink, and Renny thought his heart would stop. Pink, who'd never carried double in her life, Pink with the white blindfold tied over her eyes. Well, nobody ever said Pat Adams didn't know how to handle a horse. But jesuschrist, Pat, you crazy son of a bitch.

They saw Pat wheel Pink around. Shirtless. Bundle of baby in one arm. Pink's reins in his free hand. The woman's arms clasped around him. Pat paused, deciding his best angle, and then he leaned forward and gave Pink her head, and she leaped and came down in her slashing strides toward the flames that burned toward her, and again she was racing hoof-deep through fire.

“Godalmighty, look! The bastard's laughing!”

How long had he watched? Afterward Renny tried to figure. All his life? Less than a minute? The horse and the rider with the baby in the crook of his arm and the young woman with her arms wrapped around the rider's waist and hanging on for dear life. Low flames, rising black smoke. Renny knew he'd never forget the sight. Nobody on the high prairie that afternoon would ever forget the sight.

Almost before the watchers could draw their next breaths, Pink had slashed across the flames and over the backfire line to blackened ground, and Pat had reined her down to a rear and a dance. White teeth flashing in Pat's smoke-blackened face, and Pat still laughing, the crazy bastard, from whatever exhilaration was coursing through his blood.

Collective letting out of breath.

“Guess this means his leg musta healed,” said a farmer.

“Yup. Guess what we can use around here every once in a while is a cowboy.”

Pat let the young woman slide to the ground, and Renny yelled at her to get away from Pink, but all she wanted was her baby, and Pat handed down the howling baby and she snatched it from him and began to howl, herself, and Mildred somehow was beside her, and Mildred wrapped a wagon blanket around the woman and baby and led them away.

Pat slid off Pink. He untied her blindfold and took it off and handed her reins to Renny.

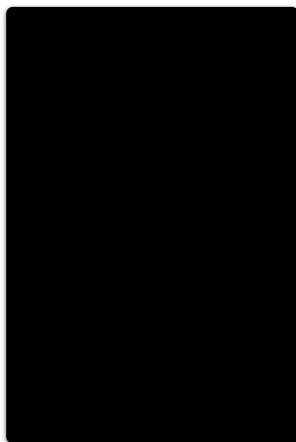
“Helluva horse,” Pat said. He slapped Pink on the flank. “You might use some of Mil's ointment on her hocks, Renny.”

A helluva horse she was. Renny took Pink's reins to lead her back, and she bared her teeth and tried to bite him.

They never stood a chance with the sheds and corral and the shack, and all were lost, but the men fought and fought on and encircled the fire, and then they leaned on their shovels and watched it burn out. Then a cheer went up as a woman drove up with a team of horses and a wagon with urns of coffee and packets of sandwiches, and the men fell on the food and coffee, and everybody was laughing and slapping each other's backs, and more women came with food and coffee, and a woman who knew her took the young woman and the baby away in the wagon. She and her husband were squatters, somebody said, with nowhere to live but that abandoned homestead shack. Nobody knew where her husband might be.

Or where Pat had gone, for that matter. The last Renny had seen, Pat's friend Albert had been tearing off his own coat and wrapping it around Pat.

Renny tied Pink to the back of his wagon and judged that the Belgians had got their wind back for a slow pace home. Mildred had applied ointment to burns and bandaged several scrapes and one deep cut from a shovel swung in the wrong direction, and it looked like she was ready to go home. Her face was as still as though it had been sculpted, and she spoke not a single word all the way home. Or for some days after, not that Renny heard.



Mary Clearman Blew has written or edited fifteen books of fiction and nonfiction. Her short fiction collection, *Runaway*, won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, as did her memoir *All but the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family*. A novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, won the Western Heritage Award. Her most recent nonfiction book is *This Is Not the Ivy League: a Memoir*, which depicts her educational path, beginning with enrollment in a country school in Montana and culminating with her professorship in creative writing at the University of Idaho. Her novel *Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin* was released in September 2018, and a linked novel, *Sweep Out the Ashes*, is expected to appear in 2020 as the second volume in a High Plains trilogy. The current excerpt is taken from *Waltzing Montana*, which will be the third novel of this trilogy.

