*Cold Country*, by Russel Rowland rev. by Seth Rodriguez

Dzanc Books

*Cold Country* is a novel written by Russel Rowland which portrays the lives of the average, rural Montanan. His life growing up on Montanan ranches allows him to display the hardships and formulate the characteristics of the characters in the novel. In Montana of 1968, a small town is flipped upside down when one of the members is found dead, murdered by fellow townsfolk. An outsider family is quickly outed as the potential perpetrators and the town soon begin to turn on each other. The overarching theme of the novel is the stubbornness that defined the rural population, stubbornness amongst the characters that made it difficult to trust and work with each other and perhaps led to a murder.

The characters in the novel are developed to each be unique and be able to stand on their own with characters ranging from pessimistic to extroverted. Rowland develops these characters all with unique characteristics that leads back to the theme of stubbornness whether that be stubbornness convincing one character, Gordon, that beating their son does no harm or another character, Carl, moving to rural Montana with the belief of carving a new life out of nothing. However, with the varying timeline changes and number of characters, it can be difficult to keep track of who is who at times as each character has something to say, it was common for the story to be building up a relationship and getting into the plot of the story when the next chapter transitioned into a few weeks or a year into the past.

The story is told from a third person perspective and varies in timeline to help build structure around certain characters and to help the reader learn more about said character, perhaps to also convince the reader that they are potentially the murderer. One example shows Tom inheriting a piece of land from the owner, Kenwood, which another character Lester, wanted. Their relationship with each other diminished from this act and leads the reader to asking questions of who the murderer was. The timeline change was also done well as some of the characters are not developed much and can build the reader an image of who they are with events 2 weeks to 9 months earlier. This allows Rowland to develop the characters freely without needing to interrupt the current event. However, this approach was done excessively throughout the novel and leaves the reader wondering whether the side tracking was necessary as some did not introduce a new perspective of the conflict. One such example was when the two main characters, Carl and Roger, are out in a snow storm helping a calf and that is it. It would be nice to have less of the diversions and only keep the ones that add to the story.

The tensions build up and leave the reader wondering what lies in the next chapters for Carl and his family. With rumors quickly spreading and fingers begin to point toward them, this further alienates them from school and work. In chapter nine, after news spread about potentially who the murderer was, Carl’s 10-year-old son, Roger, takes off on his horse into the mountains to hide as he can no longer stand the alienation. This section of the book was interesting as it opened a new plot with the family trying to find their son who now is surviving on his own, which further strikes the towns’ suspicion on the family who are already on the hot seat. This conflict however was quickly solved with Roger being found and the family keeping it a secret which I felt was a missed opportunity to develop a secondary plot to the story and expand upon the town believing the family are hiding something since there was little reason for the town to suspect the family are hiding something in the rest of the novel.

The author does an exceptional job at driving home the idea of similes and diction. This allows Rowland to add more imagery and impact to the story that keeps the reader invested. “Roger crept toward a stand of evergreens, the knife poised, his heart beating his ribs like a wooden spoon” (Rowland 83). Another example “the sun sat alone on the cloudless side, tossing a casual, dry banket of heat over the browning fields” (Rowland 181). Rowland does a great job at driving the imagination of the reader as they read.

Overall, *Cold Country* does a great job with its imagery and building up on the characters. The novel demonstrates the alienation of those different from you as well as the stubbornness of each character who eventually turn against each other. Rowland does a great job leading the reader to dead ends and assumptions toward particular characters who could be the murderer.