



Deanne Stillman

With Robert Wilder

Deanne Stillman is the author of *Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West* and the critically acclaimed bestseller *Twentynine Palms: A True Story of Murder, Marines, and the Mojave*. *Mustang*, now out in a softcover edition, was named by the *Los Angeles Times* as a “Best Book 2008” and won a California Book Award silver medal for nonfiction. It also was widely hailed in many publications, including *The Atlantic*, *Orion*, *The Economist*, *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and *Missoulian*. The late Tony Hillerman called it “remarkable.” Stillman’s writing has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere, and she also writes for the stage and big and small screens. She attended New York University and the University of New Mexico. She is a member of the core faculty at the University of California at Riverside Palm Desert Low Residency Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts.

Why are we, a cowboy nation, waging war on our greatest partner?

Why have we betrayed the mustang, the horse we rode in on?

Wilder: How does a girl from Ohio fall so deeply in love with horses?

Stillman: I grew up in Cleveland and had this curious “riches to rags” upbringing. After my parents divorced, we moved literally to the wrong side of the tracks, and my mother’s most immediately marketable skill was her horseback riding. She got a job at Thistledown Race Track as an exercise boy. She was one of the first women to ride professionally on the track. My sister and I spent a lot of time around the track, and I always loved being around horses. Their power, nobility, and their service astonished me. Here were these horses day after day, racing, crossing the finish line, winning or losing, but just enduring—no matter what. Even at a young age, I certainly knew that horses helped people and had been a partner to humans in so many ways. I always admired their will and was aware of the effect horses had on people because I saw the effect they had on me.

Wilder: How did you connect your love for horses with your other passion, writing?



Deanne Stillman with Bugz, a survivor of the 1998 Christmas massacre of thirty-four wild horses outside Reno. After her rescue, Bugz lived at Wild Horse Spirit in Carson City, Nevada, where she died on June 2, 2009. Photograph by Betty Lee Kelly.

Stillman: I wanted to be a writer and I read a lot as a kid, developing an early love of the West. My favorite books had to do with frontier characters—Calamity Jane, Jesse James, Crazy Horse, and Sitting Bull. My father was a big fan of the classics and used to read Edgar Allen Poe to me and, in particular, he loved to recite the poem “Eldorado.” That poem really fueled my fantasies. Because of all this turmoil in my family, I would get lost reading about the West. Plus, being around horses made all these rivers converge in me. Years later when I started writing, I knew I wanted to someday write a book about horses. After all, horses saved my family’s life, so somehow I wanted to do something for them. Then, in 1998, I heard about the massacre of thirty-four horses outside Reno at Christmas time, and two of the accused were marines, and one was stationed at the combat center in Twentynine Palms, California. I was finishing up my book *Twentynine Palms* at the time and knew about various grisly crimes coming out of that base. I started looking into that incident. Why would someone on Christmas day say, “Hey, let’s go up and kill some horses”? The story then took over my life as I was finishing up *Twentynine Palms*. I knew that given all the circumstances of my life, the time had come to write something about horses and this was it. I started down the wild horse trail. And here I am.

Wilder: One of the surprising things about the book is that you mention that horses evolved on the North American continent, rather than the theory that the Spanish brought the horse here.

Stillman: That was my first gigantic surprise in my research and remains my biggest surprise, that the horse is America’s gift to the world. It evolved on this continent fifty-five million years ago; at the time it was as big as a fox terrier. That was the “dawn horse,” or *eohippus*. It went extinct, but other lines evolved that got bigger and faster, and traveled across the Bering Land Bridge, populating the rest of the world. It then went extinct here during the Ice Age, but others from the same lines returned years later with Hernán Cortés. The first chapter of my book is about Cortés and the first sixteen horses that launched the *entrada*. It truly is an astonishing story that the horse is native, reintroduced wildlife, as scientists call it. Ice Age horses are linked to Spanish horses by mitochondrial DNA.

Wilder: What are some of the major questions about the saga of the wild horse that you try to address in *Mustang*?

Stillman: Why are we, a cowboy nation, waging war on our greatest partner? Why have we betrayed the mustang, the horse we rode in on? The horse is our great silent witness—that’s a phrase I got reading about Comanche, the horse that survived the battle of Little Bighorn, and I tell his story in my book, as well as the story of that battle by way of equine service, based on both cavalry and Native American accounts. Comanche was retired with full honors after that battle, after he was found wounded, bleeding with eight or nine or ten bullet wounds. There was talk of putting him down, but someone intervened since he seemed to have a great will to live. Some say a soldier poured some booze into his hat and offered that to this bleeding horse in the middle of a battlefield surrounded by carnage. From then on the horse evidently developed a taste for Hennessy. Anyway, he was saved, and in the army’s citation they described him as our great silent witness—he had seen the battle at the Little Bighorn unfold, and he was the only living thing standing when the army got there a few days after the battle was over.

Wilder: Can you say more about this idea of the horse as a silent witness?

Stillman: One of the horses in the 1998 massacre was mutilated. Some of the people who committed the crime sprayed fire extinguisher in the horse’s eyes. I was quite struck by the heinousness of the whole crime, but the fact that they chose to mutilate the horse’s eye seems meaningful. It’s like the famous

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British play *Equus*, based on a series of true incidents that happened in the English countryside in the 1970s, I believe, that involved a teenager who went into a barn one day and couldn't take the horses' gaze so he stabbed six of them in the eye with a spike. The horse has that big all-seeing satellite eye, and that's why people call the horse the great silent witness. The horse has carried us through thick and thin, battles and atrocities, and, in a lot of ways, he's us. He's our mirror and our conscience.

Wilder: Besides being a thorough history of the wild horse, *Mustang* is filled with memorable characters. Do you have a favorite?

Stillman: Wild Horse Annie, this amazing Nevada character who, one day in 1950 on her way to work after seeing blood spill out of a truck, followed it to a slaughterhouse and saw injured and dying mustangs being off-loaded. She decided then and there to put a stop to it. She battled for this cause for the next twenty years, at great personal risk, to protect the wild horses of the West. As a result, President Nixon signed the 1971 Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act that protected wild horses from being captured, branded, harassed, or killed on public lands. Annie started her crusade at her home near Virginia City, and ironically her herd was the one that was massacred in 1998. Her herd was under siege then; they're under siege now. Everything has come full circle with that herd.

Wilder: In your book, you state that at the end of the nineteenth century there were two million wild horses in the West. Now there are roughly 25,000. What happened?

Stillman: At the beginning of the twentieth century, the range was closed, the cattle drive era was over, the Indian had been cleared from the frontier, the buffalo was gone, and the horse by then was flourishing. But it had become obsolete; its job was done, and people started looking to it as a cash crop. For the next twenty-five or thirty years there was an era known as the "great removal." Hundreds of thousands of horses were rounded up and sent to slaughterhouses, ferried off to foreign wars. One slaughterhouse in Chicago was so busy that cowboys referred to it jokingly as the "corned beef and cabbage."

Wilder: What's the climate now around the wild horse?

Stillman: Since that 1971 law went into effect, people have

been trying to take it down. Thousands of horses have disappeared into the government roundup pipeline and were reportedly sold off into slaughter. A lot of other things have happened: big sell-offs of public lands where horses live, more pressure on the range through development, and oil and gas drilling. All these factors led to increasing roundups. A few years ago there was a rollback in the federal law protecting them, and it said that any horse over ten years old or who hadn't been adopted after the third try through the government's adopt-a-horse program would be eligible for sale to the lowest bidder, which meant to the slaughterhouse. As soon as that went into effect, some wild horses were immediately sold to slaughter. There was such a public outcry the country's three equine-killing plants were shut down. But horses are still being shipped across our borders to Canada and Mexico for slaughter.

Wilder: Is there any hope for the wild horse?

Stillman: I have tremendous hope but also know that citizens must remain vigilant. A new bill that would widen protections for the wild horse and put some teeth back into the '71 law has been introduced this year, and I'm proud to say that my book has been part of the campaign for these new protections. This bill—the ROAM Act—passed the House by a wide margin and has been introduced in the Senate. By the time this interview appears, I hope it already has cleared the Senate. If the ROAM Act fails in 2009, free-roaming wild horses and burros are, in my opinion, on their way out. There are a lot of people coalescing now around this whole situation. I've heard from truckers who drive livestock to slaughterhouses who now say, "I won't drive mustangs anymore. I won't do it." I hear from a wide range of people who do not want our heritage stripped away. I wrote about this in *Slate* magazine years ago and I got mail from marines in Baghdad, and one of them said that the favorite movie for him and his buddies was *Hidalgo*. They loved the scene at the end where the Viggo Mortensen character frees the horses. There they are in Iraq, they're in the cavalry with the horse insignia on their uniforms watching *Hidalgo* wondering what's going on over here. Why are we turning on the mustang, our great icon? The story of Wild Horse Annie shows that one person can make a huge difference. If she hadn't stopped in her tracks on that morning in 1950 and decided to do something about what she saw at the slaughterhouse, there would be no wild horses today. None.

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I'm calling for a moratorium on all roundups until government studies are brought up to date. The way they determine how many horses are in each herd area—range studies—in a lot of these places, the range studies are out of date. We have nearly four million cattle on public lands. The range can't handle twenty-some thousand horses? Montana has about 100 horses left, one very historic herd who are direct descendants of conquistador horses. They're talking about further reducing this herd. A state like Montana can't handle 100 horses?

Wilder: Finally, I know you've professed your love for the desert and the Southwest by the slogan "I brake for sand." Are there any places in New Mexico that you hold dear?

Stillman: Any red rock mesa really rings my chimes. It was in New Mexico that I first became imprinted with the desert: petroglyphs, monsoons, the smell of the desert just before it rains, the flowers, the sunsets. I love Chaco Canyon and Bandelier. Coronado State Monument is one of my all-time faves. I came to New Mexico to go to college, and as soon as I got off the plane, a tumbleweed the size of a Volkswagen rolled across the tarmac. After growing up and reading all these great frontier stories and imagining being here, I thought, "I *am* here." Then I was on a dig in an Anasazi site outside Abiquiu and the group I was with started exploring the state and going to different cliff dwellings and monuments. I haven't stopped and since then have explored many a desert trail on foot and horseback. I feel as though I have this deep ancestral connection with the horse coming into this continent and up into the Southwest. I feel very spiritually connected to these places. I think it's because I'm the descendant of a desert tribe, and my path in life, since I was a little girl, has been that of a scribe. Also, as I learned while working on my book, Jews have a deep connection with the West and horse; there were crypto-Jews fleeing the Inquisition, and they went on to become some of the first cowboys in the Southwest—a story I tell in my book. Follow the horse and you'll find out the most amazing things . . . and understand that without it, America would not be here. ■

Robert Wilder's essays have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Details*, *Salon*, and *Creative Nonfiction*. His column "Daddy Needs a Drink" appears monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*, and he is the author of two books, *Daddy Needs a Drink* and *Tales from the Teachers' Lounge*. Wilder, who teaches elementary and high school grades in Santa Fe, is a recent recipient of the National Book Foundation's Prize for Innovations in Reading.