

# Chronicling times good, bad on the ranch

By KELLY ANDERSSON  
For the Missoulian

Russell Rowland is by no means a Montana rancher. Still, he's more than capable of writing about Montana ranchers.

In his novel, *The Watershed Years*, Rowland allows readers an intimate look into the lives of ranchers on the plains of Montana. Three generations of family and their friends intertwine in sometimes marvelous and sometimes awful connections.

A few good years of good weather and good crops and good prices on a ranch cannot undo the Depression's years of hardships and heartaches. And for the Arbuckle family, those few good years of prosperity are fraught with greed, deceit, and tragedy. And, it turns out, bad weather is the least of their troubles.



As Blake Arbuckle's sister-in-law Helen plots behind his back, his wife Rita tries to show him the impending doom. Blake does his best, though, to hang onto the ranch, his family, and his optimism:

*I knew that Helen was capable of anything. But I really believed that Rita and I had built a shield against whatever schemes she might cook up. That we would somehow be immune to that evil by our simple devotion to doing the right thing.*

That optimism, bordering on stubborn blindness, usually sees Blake through – as it's seen generations of Westerners through tough times. It's almost a theme, cropping up intermittently through the book.

"Blake Arbuckle is very loosely based on my grandfather," says Rowland, "but as the story unfolded, he ended up being a lot more like me in terms of personality."

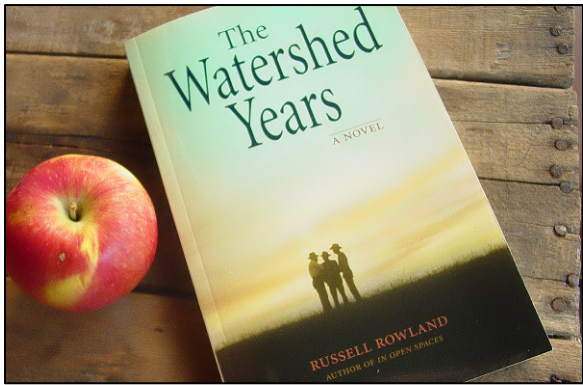
Rowland, a native Montanan most recently of Billings, says another theme accidentally emerged, a similarity between his first novel, *In Open Spaces*, and this one.

"Because the first book covers a thirty-year span, during the Depression and during both world wars, there was a lot of struggling to survive," explains Rowland. "And the second book takes place during one of the more prosperous times in Montana's history. But in both cases, the hardship or the prosperity brought out either the best or worst in the characters, depending on their values and their goals in life."

Rowland writes with precision about the fabric of people's lives – fabric that sometimes flutters smoothly, but that sometimes is tattered by family conflicts. Thus this passage from the Christmas dinner argument:

*I heard his footsteps stomping toward the back door, and a slam followed. When I joined the family moments later, I could practically see blood leaking from the corners of their mouths from biting their tongues.*

Any author who uses similes as often as Rowland does risks the attention of the reader – too many of them and you get to noticing. But Rowland nails them. While Blake's wife was in labor, he drank coffee until he "shook like an engine out of tune." While they're up all night waiting for news of a brother-in-law lost in a blizzard, they avoid each other "like strangers waiting for a train."



It's his close observation of life that allows Rowland to portray it concisely.

"I guess I've been a careful observer since childhood," he says. "I'm more of a watcher than a doer, which is probably true of most writers."

As a child, Rowland closely watched anything that was different from everyday life. "I loved being around new people, or visiting new places. I can remember every trip we took when I was a child like it was yesterday."

And he's obviously a master at observing people:

*Dad could not get used to this. His distrust of success was too well ingrained – too much a part of him. He shook his head each time we bought something remotely extravagant.*

*"That old separator was perfectly fine."*

*"Yeah, it worked all right. But it's twenty-five years old, and this new one will save Rita a lot of time. With the baby coming, we need to think about these things." Rita was due in six weeks.*

*"Your mother had babies up to her ears, and she got by with the old one."*

*Sometimes there was just no point in arguing.*

In just that short passage, he manages to capture in his hand, and show us, a portrait of a generation permanently scarred by the Depression.

In his storytelling he portrays the catty spats and veiled accusations of family members on the edge. But Rowland never quite tells you the truth on most of it. He walks you to the edge of the truth behind those accusations, then slaps you back to two ranchers in a hay field talking about the weather – just like life in Montana. Indeed, that's perhaps the essence of Rowland's writing. It's just like life.

===== Meet, greet, read and sign =====

Russell Rowland will read from and sign copies of *The Watershed Years* at Chapter One Bookstore in Hamilton on Thursday, November 1. The good folks at Chapter One have also invited him to a lunch date - a friendlier and more intimate setting - where people can meet him and share lunch at Maggie's restaurant, just across the street from the bookstore. The "author luncheon" price of \$24 includes both the meal and a copy of Rowland's latest book. He'll also be at Fact & Fiction in Missoula on Friday, November 2.

Half of Rowland's royalties from *The Watershed Years* will support the Brittany Harbuck Memorial Scholarship, founded to help aspiring writers. Rowland's stepdaughter, Brittany Harbuck, was killed in a motorcycle accident in 2005. He says she was "a very special girl, only nineteen and a very promising writer."