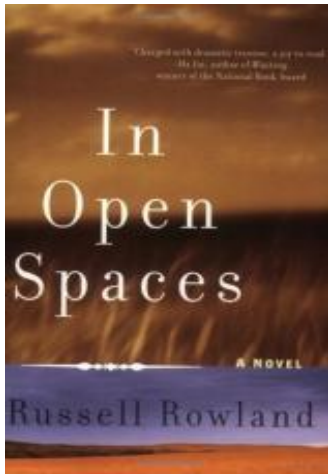


In Open Spaces

by Russell Rowland



About the Book

When the rising baseball star George Arbuckle is found drowned in a river, the devastation radiates through the family and the farm that they own and run. Set in the prairie of eastern Montana and written in the voice of George's brother, the shrewdly observant Blake Arbuckle, the story constellates around the choices that Blake is forced to make between home and independence and between loyalty and betrayal.

The escalating dramatic tension between family members becomes pronounced when the outsider rebel brother, Jack, abandons the family for a separate life only to return later to reclaim the family farm estate when he needs the money. A deserter gone AWOL during the World War, Jack proves himself as the dark focus of the family's arousing suspicions that he may have had a hand in his own brother's death. Rowland weaves a fascinating tale of the psychological wars within and the possible fratricide that bring a family apart and the redemption that brings them ultimately together again.

Discussion Guide

1. What role does the landscape play in this story?
2. What is the significance of the title of this novel, as well as the titles of the three sections, Fire, Dust, and Water? How are these sections representative of the different phases in Blake's life?
3. One of Blake's recurring questions during this story is "What was he/she like?". Do you see the answer to this question changing over the course of this story?
4. What do you think motivates Jack to disappear from, and then come back to, the ranch?

5. How do Blake and Jack's approaches to life/work differ, and how do these differences play out in this story?
6. This story takes place during a time when women supposedly played a secondary role. How do the women in this story assert their power?
7. What do you think motivates Rita to stay on the ranch after Jack disappears?
8. How does the lack of communication (i.e. telephone, easy access to your neighbors) affect the lives of these people? Why doesn't their isolation make them more talkative when they are around other people?
9. How is Blake's relationship with Sophie different from the one with Rita, aside from their sexual involvement?
10. There are several strong themes in this book. What would you say they are, and which of them was most significant to you?

Author Bio

Russell Rowland was born in Bozeman, Montana, in 1957. His first novel, *In Open Spaces*, made the *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller list and was named among the "Best of the West 2002" by the *Salt Lake City Tribune*. It received a starred review in *Publisher's Weekly*.

Rowland's second novel, *The Watershed Years*, has garnered rave reviews. The *Missoulian* said, "Rowland writes with precision about the fabric of people's lives - fabric that sometimes flutters smoothly, but that sometimes is tattered by family conflicts."

Rowland lives in his home town of Billings, where he teaches at the Gotham Writers' Workshops. He has taught at Boston University and was a writer in residence at St. Mary's College. Russell holds a BA from Pacific Lutheran University and an MA in Creative Writing from Boston University. He also offers private consulting for fellow writers, and is available for public readings and speaking engagements. He has been a frequent guest speaker for business organizations throughout Montana.

Rowland was a MacDowell fellow in 2005, and his work has appeared in numerous publications.

Critical Praise

"A family epic that has a muted elegance. A gracefully understated novel."

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