

Book Review: West with Giraffes
By Lynda Rutledge

There's a communication theory called the Narrative Paradigm. It suggests that human beings are natural storytellers, and that a good story is more convincing than a good argument.

In "West with Giraffes" author Lynda Rutledge demonstrates that she is both a natural and convincing storyteller.

"West with Giraffes" is historical fiction done right. By definition, historical fiction is a story that takes readers to a real time and setting in the past. The story is often a blend of actual events from that time period and the author's imagination. The characters may be based on real people, or fictitious.

In "West with Giraffes" Rutledge has taken an actual series of events and fleshed out the story surrounding them.

For example, in September 1938, one of the deadliest and most destructive hurricanes in recorded history struck the east coast. Somehow, two young giraffes – one male and one female – and the cargo ship they were on survived the storm and docked in New York's almost totally incapacitated harbor. The giraffes were placed on a specially constructed pickup truck, and spent the next 12 days crossing the U.S. where they were delivered to the San Diego Zoo, becoming the first giraffes in Southern California.

Those events are recorded history. Rutledge's acumen as a storyteller gives life to the 12-day journey in the personas of three main characters: 17-year-old Woodrow Wilson Nickel, who drives the pickup truck; Riley Jones, the zookeeper in charge of the giraffes; and Augusta "Red" Lowe, a wannabe Life magazine photographer and journalist,

who sees her documentation of the trip as her breakthrough moment. Strangers at the start, their respective relationships evolve as they navigate through rugged mountain ranges, blown tires, and the ghosts of their pasts. Rutledge's vivid narrative pulls you in and makes it difficult to put the book down.

The story is written first person, told through Nickel's voice as he comes of age and learns the importance of trust, hope, resilience and love. But Nickel doesn't tell the story as a naive 17-year old. We learn early on that what we're reading is his memory, his reflections that he's documenting as a 103-year-old resident of a nursing home. It's a story he has never told, and in his waning days he's obsessed with making certain 'she' learns the whole story. Who is 'she'? You have to read the book to find out.

Meanwhile, let's not forget the giraffes. As Nickel reflects decades after the historic journey, "Few true friends have I known, and two were giraffes ..." Nickel comes to learn something Riley Jones already knows, that love and devotion to animals is a treasured commodity. As more and more species become endangered, it's up to humans to ensure their survival.

As I noted earlier, "West with Giraffes" is historical fiction done right. Too often, in my opinion, authors make the mistake of taking an event or historical timeframe, adding a character or two, and simply writing, 'and then this happened, and then that happened.' The story comes across as nothing more than a timeline and the characters mere shadows.

That's not the case here. Rutledge's characters come to life, and she enables the reader to care for and about them. When you combine that with a well-told story, you almost hate when you reach the last page.

I highly recommend “West with Giraffes,” and give it a 5 out of 5 stars. You will not be disappointed, and I welcome hearing your thoughts if you check it out.