

A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

✦ **BOLETO** ✦

*A Novel*

ALYSON HAGY





*Alyson Hagy is available to chat with your book club via phone and Skype. Email us at [wolves@graywolfpress.org](mailto:wolves@graywolfpress.org) to make a request or for further details.*

## Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the book, Will remembers his mother asking him as a child: “Who are you today, Will Testerman? What will you be today?” What do you think these questions end up meaning for Will? As a reader, do you think they speak to the actions we commit in our everyday lives and the people we are in general?
2. How do you feel the three-part structure enhances the novel? Do you think each section could stand alone as a kind of novella or do you think the three are inseparable? What do you think Hagy’s structural decision says about the state of the contemporary novel?
3. Early on in the story, Chad says to Will, “You are your own muddy river. . . . You are your own kind of crazy flood. Don’t forget it” (page 60). How did you interpret this description of Will? Does it simply mean that Will let his morals muddy up his business decisions, or does the description run deeper?
4. In a lot of ways, *Boleto* de-romanticizes the mythology of the cowboy. Do you view Will as a contemporary cowboy? In what ways does he fit the trope and in what ways does he not?
5. Hagy formats her dialogue without quotation marks. How does this stylistic decision add to the relationship between Will and the filly?

6. Will Testerman always seems to be running from the death of something: his career aspirations, the horse trade, his mother's cancer, Caliban's death, Gustavo's disappearance, his relationships with women. How has the constant presence of death in Will's life shaped him by the novel's end?

7. How does *Boleto* marry the old West and the new West? In what ways do you think his book fits into the Western genre? Does it celebrate a new kind of West or mourn the death of the old one?

8. After all he has been through, how have Will's values changed? Do his actions at the polo ranch reflect this? Do you think the novel ends on an optimistic or pessimistic note for Will's character?

## On the Origins of *Boleto*

Alyson Hagy

I met a man somewhat like Will Testerman in the corrals of a Wyoming ranch probably seven years ago. He was quiet, very steady, certain of himself despite his youth. He exuded a pleasant confidence that drew all kinds of people to him, though he was shy and modest in most ways, not interested in tooting his own horn. And he owned this beautiful bay filly. He had been around hundreds of horses, but you could tell that this filly—he had found her far off the beaten path—was something special to him despite his emotional reserve. I've seen a lot of horses, too, but that filly was flat-out beautiful. I couldn't stop looking at her. She had an aura about her. This man told me he wanted to do something different with the filly, something he hadn't tried before, something no one he knew had tried. He had met people who told him he ought to think about finding horses that could be made into polo ponies. There was more money in polo than in the piecemeal rodeo roping and horse-training he had been doing. So he planned to head to California when the summer was over. The idea of trying California put a gleam in his eye. He knew he was taking a risk. And he was sure he was ready for that.

Later, I sometimes wondered what had happened to the young man and his horse. But I didn't think to myself, "Hey, there's a novel in that." My wondering, the questions I had about that man, just didn't seem large enough to fill a book at the time.

Then, about two years ago, I was 150 pages into a project about

rock climbers when the plot of *Boleto* came to me during a lecture given by a pair of archaeologists. I'll never know why things like that happen to me, but they do, and I was glad I had my notebook with me. Will Testerman was a minor character in the rock climber project (which also features Annie Atwood), and suddenly his story came to me in a swoop when I was supposed to be listening to the archaeologists. Young man. Trying to train the right horse in the right way. Trying to take what he does well into the wider, less accepting world. I also began to hear—immediately—some of the stories Will Testerman would tell the filly and that he would tell to himself.

I had been reading John Steinbeck, some of the shorter books I'd never read, when the lightning bolt struck. There might be echoes of Steinbeck in my novel—the visceral love we so often feel for animals, the awkward humor of male friendships, the way farm/ranch people form fragile communities based on generosity. And I'm sure the book is haunted by Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* and Per Petterson's *Out Stealing Horses*, terrific novels that feature young people with strong personal codes of behavior who are sorely tested by the wider world. But I was trying to do something a little different. Will Testerman is trying to figure out who he is. He's like the protagonist of most novels in that way. But he is also deeply aware of stories and storytelling, of the legacies of his family, his profession, his Western culture. He uses the stories he tells the filly as a kind of teaching tool even though she can't really understand what he's saying—not the words, anyway. Westerners speak more easily of their animals than they speak of themselves, or that's been my experience, at least. And when people out here talk about their dogs and horses and mules and resident varmints, I think it pays to listen to them. We bind ourselves to certain stories, and we bind ourselves together *with* other stories. I wanted to try to capture the humor and richness and energy of that habit. I love

how people entertain one another with small tales and tall tales and everything in between. I'm constantly collecting the stories I hear. I wanted to see what would happen if I tried to make Will into a kind of habitual, private storyteller . . . how readers might react to a litany of short tales embedded in a bigger story.

## ***Book Notes: A Playlist for Boletto***

Alyson Hagy

It's impossible to live in Wyoming and not spend serious time on the road, whether you're pulling a horse trailer or just getting to the county courthouse. I'm an indiscriminate music listener. I dial up all kinds of tunes—jazz, blues, alt-country, classic rock. Sometimes, I like melodies that work with the huge landscapes out here, and sometimes, I prefer harmonies that work against those landscapes. When I think of a playlist for *Boletto*, I think of Will Testerman, the protagonist, and what he'd like to hear coming from the speakers of his extended cab Dodge Ram pickup. Will is a modest, young horse trainer. He's a product of his isolated, rural, Wyoming upbringing. So is his taste in music. There's a predictable kind of focus to the songs listed below. But they mean a lot to him.

What do I think of when I think of this novel and how I wrote it? I think of Ry Cooder. Songs like "Bus Ride" and "Feelin' Bad Blues." As usual, Will and I agree on some things, and not on others.

### **"Wayfaring Stranger," Trace Adkins**

A song Will might allow into his head as he drives north from the family ranch to take a look at the young filly he's heard about on the telephone. He'd think of it as a good song for a journey, and he'd like how its mood reflects the glowering spring skies over the Absaroka Mountains. He wouldn't sense the potential foreboding in the song. He's not that kind of guy.



### **“Honky Tonk Heroes,” Waylon Jennings**

One of his father’s songs, the kind of thing that would play on a cassette in the print shop in Lost Cabin, Wyoming. Will’s not getting along so well with his father, but this song would come to mind as he flees Texas after the beating from Mr. Passante. Will “feels something slide off him” when he leaves Texas. Great music helps that.

### **“Essence,” Lucinda Williams**

This is the kind of song Will’s older neighbor Annie Atwood would introduce him to in an attempt to broaden his horizons. Will’s a little in love with Annie before she disappears, but he doesn’t like this song.

### **“When You Say Nothing at All,” Alison Krauss & Union Station**

Will’s not crazy about this song, either, but it’s exactly the sort of tune his high school girlfriend, Lacey, loves. It would be in their minds, like the chorus of a last dance, the final time they see each other before Will leaves town.

### **“Feeling Good,” Nina Simone**

Will’s mother’s song, one of several I imagine she plays over and over again (at low volume) on an old hi-fi while resting in her bedroom after a chemo treatment. She’s dying. She’s all right with that. She knows the dark angel will let her pass through. Will is likely to remember this song as he leaves Wyoming for California at the wheel of the 1986 Cadillac he’s gotten from Kenny Braithwaite, hoping his mother’s cancer is in remission.

### **“Horsepower,” Chris LeDoux**

LeDoux was a Wyoming boy. Will knows all of his songs, and he’s imagined living quite a few of them. “Amarillo by Morning.”

“Hooked on an 8 Second Ride.” It’s all gospel for Will. If he needs to stay awake while he drives from Lost Cabin, Wyoming, to Anaheim, California, where he hopes to learn how to train polo ponies, he’ll sprinkle in some David Allan Coe.

### “Oh Girl,” La Mafia

The grooms at Estancia Flora will have Spanish-language radio playing in the barns when the manager, Thomas Edwards, allows it. And Will hears some good tejano music coming from the houses that border the estancia, including Estella’s, when he sleeps outside at night. But the grooms—especially Gustavo—will think a song like “Oh Girl” is mawkish and hilarious, and they’ll lip-synch it with pop star flair just to see if they can make Will laugh.

### “The Man Comes Around,” Johnny Cash

When it all unravels at Estancia Flora in Anaheim, Will is going to feel the deep judgment of this song, even if its Christian vibe is not his own. The Man in Black. Prophesying. The ending for all endings.

*This playlist originally appeared at [largeheartedboy.com](http://largeheartedboy.com). Reprinted with permission.*

## *Lucky Ticket: Alyson Hagy*

Judith Rosen

“This was not the planned book,” Alyson Hagy says of her third novel and seventh book, *Boleto*. “I was working on another novel and sitting in a lecture and this book just came to me,” she says, about remembering an encounter she once had with a ranch hand.

The book that would become *Boleto* began there. The protagonist, Will Testerman, is a twenty-three-year-old horse whisperer who tries to change his life, and luck, by buying a young filly and taking her from his family’s farm in Wyoming to the polo fields of California. Will’s father calls him “the dreamer” (translation: screwup), and Will hopes that this beautiful horse that he names Boleto (Spanish for ticket) will be his ticket out. As a counterpoint to the story of the filly is the question repeatedly asked by Will’s mother, who is dying of breast cancer: “Who are you today, Will Testerman? What will you be today?”

As in other recent works, like her fourth story collection, *Ghosts of Wyoming* (Graywolf, 2010), Hagy, an English professor at the University of Wyoming at Laramie, writes about the 99 percenters of the West, not just modern-day cowboys like Will, who are being crowded out by wealthy landowners and oil and gas companies. Hagy views Will as a skilled craftsman, whose trade is horses; he’s just trying to get by. His father does the same, working a full-time printing job to hold on to the family farm; his mother is a teacher.

Hagy, fifty-one, first met her prototype for Will at a ranch nearly a decade ago. “I watched this young guy. He had a beautiful filly,

and he said, 'I trained a lot of roping horses, and I want to do something different.' He said he wanted to try to train polo horses," Hagy explains. "I don't know what happened to him. The book came to me in 2009. It was a long incubation period."

Hagy grew up on a farm in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, where her parents still live. She met her first mentor, Richard Ford, at Williams College, where he was her thesis adviser. She had planned to study medicine. "I never thought of writers as being live people," she says. But that changed at Williams when she was introduced to Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Ann Porter, and Eudora Welty, and their voices got stuck in her head. "For Richard Ford, writing was deadly serious. You were either in or you were out. If you get an idea for a novel, you should try to talk yourself out of it, he advised. Writing was hard work. He called it a 'curse.' If you really need to write, it will let you know, was his theory." Aware that she was "cursed," Hagy went on to get an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan in 1985, then taught creative writing in Charlottesville, Virginia. She returned to Michigan to teach writing and then, in 1996, headed west to her current job at the University of Wyoming.

Each of the places where Hagy has lived appear in her stories and novels. "Search Bay," selected for the 1997 *Best American Short Stories*, is set in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and other stories take place in North Carolina's Outer Banks. But the West is more than just another locale for Hagy; it has come to define her. "The landscape of the West speaks to me in a different way than the Blue Ridge. My style is more austere living in the West," she says. "I don't think I'm done with Wyoming yet. It's brought more clarity to my sentences. My husband would say, 'It's so damned cold; it freezes the excess.'"

Yet her stripped-down prose is also lyrical, as in this passage from *Boleto*: "The things that never changed for him were the de-

tails of home. The furl of light on the tin roof of the barn. The contours of the two-track that ran along the edge of the meadow, all the way to the property line. . . . These were the truths that were fixed inside him. They hung like well-used tools on a workshop wall.”

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