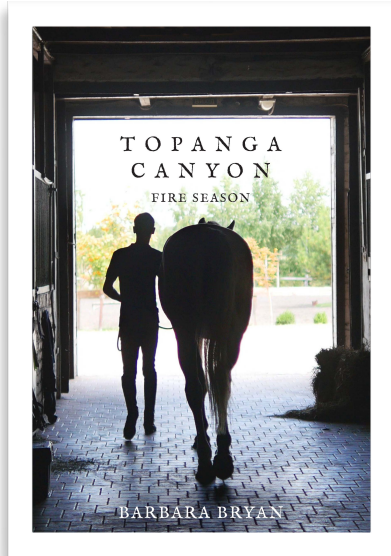




# INDEPENDENT BOOK REVIEW

A CELEBRATION OF SMALL PRESS AND SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS



## *Topanga Canyon: Fire Season*

by Barbara Bryan

Genre: General Fiction / Coming of Age

Reviewed by Audrey Davis

### **A wholehearted journey of discovery and courage**

Barbara Bryan's *Topanga Canyon: Fire Season* tells a lively story that confronts real-life issues that are much deserving of a spotlight.

Matt Barrett, an extremely apprehensive 14-year-old boy from Chicago, is dropped off at the horse ranch of his grandfather, Silas Phillips, to help and learn the unfamiliar lifestyle and the family business.

Southern California is an entirely different environment than what he is used to. As Matt takes time to adjust, he meets new people and learns a great deal about relationships, trust, and standing up for yourself.

This story really keeps the pages turning! The novel's pacing does not slow down, even for a second. The author skillfully weaves comedic scenes throughout serious moments while not losing sight of the focal point: drawing attention to the harsh practice of soring Tennessee walking horses.

Even though Matt's story may be a fictional one, soring horses is not, and in some places, it is still used today. There are a few different types of devices and training styles, and Bryan does a great job highlighting the worst parts and why they are cruel. A prevailing mentality in these training circles seems to be that horses cannot or do not feel pain like humans do, and this is simply untrue. I liked that the author chose to include additional information about the practice and how to help by taking action against it.

Despite this terrible practice, the novel comparatively demonstrates the positive and lighthearted side of horse-rearing, enjoyed by many for many years, without the needless hostility.

***“Not all surprises at the ranch are necessarily bad.”***

Barbara Bryan also does a wonderful job of characterization. There is a diverse cast of characters, and the indigenous culture and practices add greatly to the exploration of the novel’s people.

Matt, as a lonely teenager in a coming-of-age story, searches for friendship and belonging, and the author captures his teenage feelings of anxiety, confusion, and embarrassment well. I particularly liked his enthusiasm for learning new things. As much as his grandfather tries to deny it, under his supervision, Matt flourishes and begins to remind Silas of his younger self. I might have liked a little more from the somewhat abrupt ending however.

***“This tale truly has the Phillips touch to it.”***

Overall, I would happily recommend this book to horse-lovers and realistic fiction-lovers alike. Bryan paints us an intriguing story with a few plot twists and leaves us with the feeling that we must find it in ourselves to speak up with the words we want to hear spoken. Courage may be found when sought, but while healthy rivalry can be beneficial, violence, especially for the sake of winning a competition, should never be an option.