

## 'Armstrong,' a New Comic Novel

Wanted to tell you about one of the funniest books I've read in a while. It's a novel called "Armstrong," and it imagines that Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer survived the Battle of the Little Bighorn.  
By David Limbaugh  
Hits: 965

Written as a letter to Custer's wife, Libbie, it is a page-turning adventure that's genuinely clever and engrossing. There is also a real history to the story, and conservatives will recognize a certain cultural and patriotic conservatism, including a strong affirmation of marriage and America's military heritage. The book is set at the tail end of Reconstruction and offers, in its own comic way, an ideal of reconciliation that some might find instructive for our times.

The book's wholesome and redeeming message does not detract from its hilarity. It is anything but preachy and is entertaining throughout as the nonstop action drives the story forward -- rapidly. The only thing that slowed me down was my involuntarily pausing every other paragraph while silently laughing at the witty dialogue. There are politically incorrect utterances, but they add an authenticity to the historical setting.

It's rare to find a book that a dad can enjoy (SET ITAL) and (END ITAL) pass on to his teenage children. Sure, there will be some jokes and historical and political references they won't get, but the story will keep them entertained. They'll laugh at Custer's outrageous exploits, and they'll probably learn something, too. It may even spark in them an interest in the history of this period.

The book has been praised not only by novelists Winston Groom ("Forrest Gump") and Stephen Coonts ("Flight of the Intruder") and screenwriter Rob Long ("Cheers") but by historian Bradley Birzer at Hillsdale College. Birzer wrote in *The American Conservative* that he "thoroughly enjoyed" this "satirical alternative history," and he praised the author, H.W. Crocker III, saying that "Crocker knows his history, so his anti-history is knock-down, pain in the stomach, hilarious." If you like learning history while laughing, you'll like this book.

Full disclosure: H.W. (Harry) Crocker is a friend of mine. But I also know him from his history books and novels. I reviewed his first novel, "The Old Limey," many years ago and noted that it's "a great book, an absolute gut-buster." This book is just as good, if not better, because as wild as the story seems and as quixotically fearless as Custer is here depicted, many of the experiences and characteristics Crocker attributes to him are founded in fact.

Custer really was a daring and highly successful cavalry officer. He was indeed the "Boy General" of the Union Army at the age of 23. He attended the wedding of a Confederate officer (a friend from West Point) during the Civil War. He liked the Southerners he fought against, and he was fond of his Indian scouts. Though a handsome man and a flirt, he was famously devoted to his wife, Libbie (which Crocker demonstrates throughout the letter). And I understand that Custer truly did have a remarkable affection for and rapport with dogs, horses and other animals -- even if not quite to the exaggerated degree shown in the book.

The Custer character in "Armstrong" is bigger than life -- brave, bold and buoyant no matter the

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circumstances, and the other main characters are equally colorful, including a multilingual Native American scout (and Christian convert), an eccentric Southern cardsharp who wears an eye patch decorated with the Confederate battle flag, and a large cast of beautiful women.  
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Custer's life is saved by one -- Rachel, a white woman held captive by the Sioux, who spirits him off the battlefield. Custer is inducted into their tribe in a hysterical scene -- one that explains the eye-catching art of the book's cover, which has Custer, muscular arms folded, highlighting a tattooed image of his wife, an image put there by the Indians.

Rachel and Custer escape from the Sioux, and through a series of rollicking escapades, he ends up posing as a marshal, Marshal Armstrong, who forms a ragamuffin army of his own to liberate a town from a villain who has enslaved it. But Rachel has designs of her own.

I won't reveal any more about the plot, but if you grew up watching Westerns on television -- or if you missed out on that experience -- you will love "Armstrong," which is pitched as the first in a series of "Custer of the West" novels. I am looking forward to the next one. Humor is hard to pull off for an entire novel, especially one grounded in history, but my friend Harry really delivers in this marvelous satire. One of my favorite books in college was "Don Quixote," and at least in terms of its endlessly droll dialogue, "Armstrong" is reminiscent of it. I am happy to recommend it to you.