

# A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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AN AMERICAN TALE



TOM VANDYKE

Praise for *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*

“It’s good and it moves! Tom Van Dyke tells a rousing tale of a young man learning how to cowboy and finding the girl of his dreams. I’ve written a good 40 western stories but learned a lot from Tom’s book.”

—ELMORE LEONARD  
Novelist

“INSPIRING. *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale* reveals the true American West but goes even further. A man and woman who refuse to let a soaring relationship disappear is a sign of life on earth at its best.”

—MICHAEL BLAKE  
Author of *Dances With Wolves*

“A GREAT RIDE!”

—BOB BOZE BELL  
*True West* magazine

“*A Cowboy Christmas* is a heartfelt tale of a cowboy’s roam. A magical story and delightful read for all seasons.”

—THOMAS COBB  
Author of *Crazy Heart*

“I’m a narrative painter, so as I read this book, the words drew pictures in my mind. These images are vivid and the story feels real. *A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*, is a welcome addition to my library.”

—HOWARD TERPNING  
Western Artist

“The stuff of novels – A masterpiece. A compelling unforgettable journey. Insightful. Uplifting. Heartfelt. A creative narrative with joyful language captivating my imagination.”

– RUSS GIBB  
Concert Promoter/Educator

“*A Cowboy Christmas* is a warm, well-written tale of a young man discovering himself and the new world during an engaging adventure in the American West. The book took me back in time and sparked memories of when I was working on Western films with my friend John Wayne.”

– DON COLLIER  
Western Film and TV Actor

“*A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale* is a beautiful story for all ages. Not since the work of James Dickey have I read such poetry in a novel. A wonderful remembrance for what the Old West once was. Don’t wait for the film—buy the book now.”

– KEN ROTCOP  
Studio Creative Head of: Embassy  
Pictures, Hanna-Barbera Productions

“Tom Van Dyke has crafted an inspired story of the Old West, Arizona and New Mexico Territories—1873. A well-researched tale of an adventuresome young man carving out a life that most men can only dream about. Hold on tight. It’s a fast ride. This magical tale fits like a vintage Stetson and good pair of boots.”

– MARSHALL TRIMBLE  
Official Arizona State Historian

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# A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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AN AMERICAN TALE



A Novel

TOM VAN DYKE

PAGE BRANCH PUBLISHING  
PHOENIX, ARIZONA

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*A Cowboy Christmas An American Tale*  
is a work of historical fiction. Names, characters and events are products of the author's imagination. All characters, events, and any resemblance to persons, living or dead are coincidental.

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For

Mary, who has inspired and shared every trail  
of a creative life

And

Adam, Mark, Grant, Jocelyn, and Walker  
who made it a joy

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## P R E F A C E

I have a long trail of praise for the American cowboy.

Leafing through tattered pages of hand-written journals and dust-covered books, and wandering museums admiring masterworks of western artists, I looked beyond the golden frames as windows into America's past, and imagined what the restless spirit of the West was like one hundred fifty years ago for cowboys on the American frontier.

Inspired, I felt challenged to create a magical story that crisscrosses the expansion of the far West and collides with destiny—a story about cowboys who burned themselves like candles for experiences worth living and values that created strength and revealed character—a story as enduring as the romance of the West.

Embracing a cowboy's flavorful soup of words and expressions, WB tells his story with cowboy wit and humor. His tale begins in 1873. Not yet sixteen, with hope and dreams, he crosses the Mississippi, and without fear, leaves the far shore of civilization behind. With empty pockets, a spark for life, and a wild sense of freedom, he follows his heart searching for adventure and fortune and discovers the romance.



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“Columbus discovered America in 1492  
Horses arrived in 1519  
Cattle arrived in 1521  
Then there were C o w b o y s”

—tom van dyke

Some pages are omitted from this book preview.

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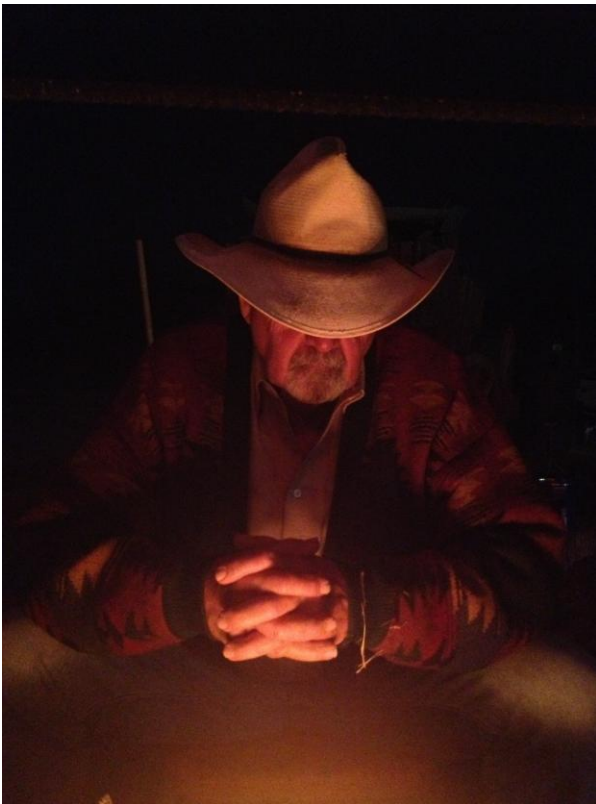
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# A COWBOY CHRISTMAS

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AN AMERICAN TALE



A Cowboy's Story

## BLOWING IN THE WIND

*“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BLOWING IN THE WIND, I wasn't much more than a hayseed, fifteen years old, when I stowed away on a wooden ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean from the old country. I was on the trail for adventure, discovery, and fortune in the new world. It was the year I gave up my gold and silver—1873. With the gold sovereign from my parents, I bought an Indian pony and a high-horned Mexican saddle from a trader. I traded the silver pocket watch my father had given me for an American rifle and I was off. I was looking to ripen in the far West. . . .

Chasing the rainbow, I started my roam. I crossed the Mississippi and left the muddy bank of civilization as I knew it. Rumors of free land with vast riches, and the discovery of California gold lying on the ground no deeper than a carrot, had set off a stampede of white-hooded wagons migrating in pandemonium for the land of the setting sun.

The further I plowed from civilization the more of it I found. Furniture and other items of good intention too heavy for mule or ox to haul another day were left, picked over, and strewn along the trails.

And then with certain predictability, miles up ahead, I'd find graves marked with headboards, and the bleached bones of an ox or horse that travelers were forced to slaughter for lack of food and planning. This was common sight.

Trail-weary mules would haul to a stand-off, refusing to budge. Negotiations began with a crack of the whip, followed by a barrage of verbal encouragements, blistering the ears of the mules and not fit for the lessons of Sunday school.

Another household item would sail from the prairie schooner.

Having rested for two hours and satisfied their terms had been addressed, the victors, with another crack of a whip, would launch a momentary charge up the trail. The dust would flood over the top of the wagon wheels and through the spaces between the loops of the canvas ties into the wagon.

This combined folly of tongue, temper, whip, and grunt created a sight that made the covered wagons appear to float like ships sailing forth on billowing waves in clouds of dust.

Between the torrid sun and the relentless dust, faces burned and noses bled from the dry, cutting dust which covered every man, woman, and child—inside and out.

Not everyone's wagon made it across the vast prairie. At a point of no turning back, I passed a

family downloading a heavy rosewood sideboard from their wagon to lighten the load. I stopped to help them. Admiring the beautiful family heirloom, mother ran her hand over the dusty top revealing the craftsmanship and fine, polished finish. She smiled with a distant gaze releasing memories and a time past. With a deep breath and as if she had suddenly remembered a forgotten chore, she turned quickly and returned to the wagon.

I watched as she stretched her boot to climb the wooden spokes. Pulling herself up hand-over-hand, she pushed off the hub to the top of the wheel and crossed over to take her place on the wooden seat of the wagon. Gripping the reins, her hands were cracked and calloused. Her beauty once bright and obvious, now of fewer years than thirty was fading with hardship and toil. Her lips were blistered and her fair skin parched, scrubbed by the wind, sun, and alkaline water.

Her striking eyes, the color of the ocean, were hardened with resolve in a steely gaze that left me with no doubt that with all the six-gun bravado and strength of the sombreros, the settlement of this hostile frontier would be carved out by the steadfast determination and courage of the sunbonnets.

Having endured the endless solitude, monotony, and arid expanse of the Great Plains, I slowly approached the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

Overcome by thirst, I was losing my song and enthusiasm for the lore of the West.

The trail was cluttered with believers and sorry settlers, Yankee neighbors, Rebel brothers, white

marauders, men with all the earmarks of bad company—and *me*.

Rising up in the foothills before me, stood a majestic woodland forest of pine spears guarding the blue horizon of paradise. Mountain streams swarming with trout cut through the dense thicket of ponderosa pines. Thundering waterfalls glistened, cascading down the rock face.

I was looking for a trail of worn passage I could follow westward. The startling hoop-and-holler, which I first thought were Indians, set me on a gallop of escape and safety.

I threw a quick glance back over my shoulder. They were three bandits, looking for loot—my horse, saddle, rifle, anything in my pockets worth a cent. With rebel yells and caps popping, they were gaining on me. Their bullets buzzed by my ears like flies.

If the likes of me was worth their charge, they had to be desperate.

The sound of their yells and the whiz-bangs of their bullets startled my pony. And with the speed of an arrow, he wheeled sharply, almost running out from under me—a talent he had kept hidden from me till then. We blazed for cover in the tall pines.

The marauders were closing and their rounds splintered and shattered the bark of the dense maze of trees we were fast approaching. There was no room to fit or enter.

The stream with its roaring rapids was just ahead. If we tried to cross, we'd be sitting ducks. At the stream's edge, a narrow path used by elk, deer, and the Indian for passage over the mountain

twisted up and followed the bank of the river. We slipped into the fortress of shaded cover. The low hanging pine boughs whipped past us, stinging both our hides.

Our climb slowed to a fast walk, weaving about the switchbacks up the slope, drifting through patches of light streaming through the high branches of the cathedral pines. Rushing up behind us, I could hear the blundering bandits' grumbling the worth and effort of their campaign.

A rifle cracked lead—a branch snapped down smacking me loose from the saddle. My startled pony slipped, dislodging rocks and black soil that fell splashing into the river. As he stumbled to catch his footing, I desperately clung on, looking over the sheer edge of the rocky gorge at the fierce deafening rapids of the river below.

The dense trail unraveled. Up ahead was a small clearing that glowed green. Surprised, my pony jerked with a sudden stop, wide-eyed and snorting. Two bear cubs scampered across the trail—they were not alone! The ROAR startled every living thing and shook birds from their roosts. Mother was ANGRY! We had just entered her home—uninvited.

I was trapped!

The awesome force of Nature lay in my path and the blazing gunfire and crime of bandits squeezed me from the rear.

Rising up to her full height of seven feet, with a reach to ten, she made a massive impression with snarling teeth. She was prepared to defend her cubs.



With glaring yellow eyes, the silver-tipped hairs on her neck and humpback shoulders were up. Moaning, swinging her head, the extended claws of her paws were ready to thrash.

Nervous and snorting, my pony pitched and danced around. I turned, hearing the voices of the bandits rustling up the trail from below. I saw the flash of a rifle. The shot echoed, booming and bouncing off the surrounding cliffs and high peaks.

Momma moaned and glanced around looking to see the whereabouts of her two cubs.

The trap was sprung—the moment was now!

My pony reared up to challenge her size and bolted straight at the grizzly. I lunged forward with all I was worth and let out the ‘rebel yell’ I had just become acquainted with.

The grizzly was struck by the surprise of our charge and momentarily faltered as we pushed past her. With snapping teeth and a whirling swat, momma flicked me up high off the saddle—a returning volley of pine boughs flung me back down—I was headed for the rocks.

Grasping for the saddle horn with my bloody throbbing arm, I dangled over the high-cut cliff of the raging river below. Righting myself, we bolted up the trail with momma bounding on our heels.

With leaping strides, the nine hundred pound grizzly raced, covering ground—thirty yards, twenty, ten—closing faster than my heart beat. In five she’d be pulling us down. With my pony’s last burst of strength, in a leap of faith, we dashed up and over the high-cut bank and vaulted thirty feet down into the deep waters of the river below.

The echoing roar of the grizzly standing on the high bank of the river's edge greeted us as we surfaced the water. My Indian pony was already swimming to the far edge. Red rivulets of blood streamed from the claw marks of my wound. The cold, clear water relieved the pain.

The grizzly swaggered along the steep bank, looking up and down for access. Rising up to her full magnificent height, she let out a shrilling ROAR! . . .

My trail-wise pony made his way up the other side of the steep-winding slope of a pristine mountain wilderness, yet undefiled by the presence of man.

The scent of pine, juniper and wildflowers of every color—columbine, forget-me-not, and brittle-bush filled my head. As we climbed higher, the air thinned and became cooler. Above the high shadows of late afternoon, the tips of the tall pines glistened in the warm rays of the sun.

I slowly approached the crest of the mountain at twilight. I sat there spellbound—gazing at the luminous light glazing the distant western landscape as if it were the *dawn of creation* itself.

The wild and free beauty before me rekindled my enthusiasm and spirit. Raw, heavy vapors rose in harmony from the fertile valley floor up into the glowing atmosphere of boiling red clouds. I watched the shimmering afterglow mesmerized as the theater of light slowly faded into a starlight encore that twinkled and glowed with brilliant constellations and blazing shooting stars.

## A THIN LINE

THE NEXT MORNING I awoke to a new dawn rising. Glorious! . . . A new day in a new world.

I discovered a mountain man's log cabin pitched high on the western slope with inspiring views of lakes, canyons, and pine-clad cliffs.

The shelter was primitive and crudely built of logs by a trapper who must have had a hide as thick as bark to withstand the blowing winds and heavy snows of the freezing mountain-top winters.

Inside was low down and close quarters, just big enough for a three-legged aspen chair, a tree stump table, and a bed made with posted rails strung with rawhide rope and covered with hides. There was a grease light—a dish of tallow with a rag in it used as a candle.

Dusty yet orderly, it contained basic food stores for his return: cornmeal, flour, salt and pepper. A cast-iron skillet rested on the stump. I lifted the cover and found a round tin. I opened the tin and inside was a spool of line and a fish hook.

Fanning their fins in the clear, cool water, the native trout would dart out of sight under cover of the banks at the first sight of an intruder. I had learned at an early age to fish the brooks and lakes with my father and grandfather. Avid anglers, I think my grandfather could talk to the fish—he certainly thought like them: “Laddie, your every motion should mirror nature in approaching their world.

“They are wise, skittish creatures. Your close attention to the smallest detail is required. The soft and boggy banks shivers the water with vibrations from harsh, clumsy movements and pounding footsteps warning the fish of your presence.”

Out of sight, back off from the banks, I carefully placed the worm on the sharp hook so the ends would wiggle lively in front of the trout’s nose.

With a wiggle on the hook and the line tied to a long, thin aspen whip, I crouched down low and with light steps slowly approached the bank of the stream—careful not to disturb the brush. I took a silent position hidden behind the cover of a bush at the water’s edge.

I watched the fast water hugging the bank on the far side of the stream. Reaching over the bank with my long fishing pole, I cast the line upstream and let the worm float naturally with the force of the

current over the cold gravel bottom. The thin line glistened and stretched out. The worm whirled down the riffle sinking into the underwater pool where trout are most likely to be found.

As it swirled around the eddy, the tip of the aspen pole twitched. The line went taut with a series of sharp tugs. The whip bowed. I lowered the tip so the trout would not feel the pull of the pole on the line and become aware of my play. Then, I lifted the tip again, slowly drawing the slack out of the line and when I felt the fish solid—I struck quick with a jerk, setting the hook and connecting me with the trout.

The trout surged with a full pull of the hook rising, splashing—bursting the surface of the water. The spring and action of the aspen whip I had selected made for an engaging contest. A battle of twists and flips, I worked and played to tire and land the trout without breaking the line. . . .

With an upward swing of my whip, a good breakfast sailed through the air landing on the green moss of the bank.

I enjoyed the sport of life's thrilling challenge connected *by* a thin line.

I acquired a liking for the high life and the taste of fresh mountain trout as I nursed my arm and regained my strength. My wounds were nearly healed. I wore the scar of the four claw marks as a badge of courage.

On the lakeshore, my breakfast trout filled the skillet and sizzled over the hot coals of a small fire when I noticed the flash of approaching lightning. A summer thunderstorm with gusty winds rolled in

howling across the mountain's canopy of high pine.

In a wild rush, I climbed to the very top of a swaying, bending pine in order to experience the full fury of the storm. Whistling and wailing, with crashing torrents of freezing rain, I was whipped and shaken and flipped about *by* the thrilling hand of Nature. I enjoyed the sport of blowing in the wind. I felt mighty. I felt strong and that my life was unfolding before my eyes raising the question—was life streaming into me or out of me.

On the rough face of that mountain, I *had* come alive.

Tossing and twisting in my sleep, I woke to a full moon and decided to leave the mountain fortress that very night fearing I may not want to leave the pure air and inspired way of this virgin retreat in the light of day.

I saddled up my Indian pony, “You’re the reason I’m still alive, partner. You saved my life . . . apparently you know where you’re going.” I climbed aboard, “Arrow, take me there.” We wandered slowly down out of the enchantment of the moonlit shadows of the towering pines—

INTO A MIRAGE

—INTO A MIRAGE of blazing hot light, a vast Sonoran landscape of thorny plants with showy flowers and giant saguaro cactus lay before me.

There was no water. There was no shade. . . .

Beads of sweat rolled off my forehead. I gazed across a harsh desert flatland populated with proud colorful lizards wearing scaly armor, sunning themselves on the hot rocks and asked myself: How could anyone—anything—survive out there? . . .

With a prayer asking for our safe passage, we started. “Come on Partner . . . Arrow, let’s go” . . . He didn’t move. I kicked him with my heels, “Git-up!” Nothing. “Arrow!” He shook his head, backed, turned, and wandered over into the shade of a scrub mesquite tree and planted himself. . . .

“Good idea, we’ll wait for the sun to set.”

We traveled at night by the light of the moon when the desert cooled and bloomed with eerie beauty. The desert came alive with life: bobcats, jackrabbits, bats, fox, mountain lions, snakes, and beetles, all ready to eat—or be eaten. Owls hunted with silent wings. Coyotes howled—two sounded like seven. They ate anything they could chew.

Arrow had a slow steady pace and a nose always in search of water. We hadn't seen a trail or person for days—weeks.

The moon rose full, illuminating the desert as if it were the light of day. As I rode along, something most unusual appeared—something I never saw before and never again. I wondered if it was my imagination. I watched as an orange-red light slowly washed over the face of the moon until the moon was totally covered in a beautiful red glow. It was an amazing sight to behold. . . .

As the rising sun burned off the blue shadows of morning, I became aware of a faint, far-off squeaking sound. Miles ahead, I approached three covered wagons traveling west with a squeaky wheel.

For safety and good company, I thought it best to attach myself to the wagon train. I was loping by when I noticed her brushing her hair in the back of the wagon. *Oh my!*—she was made of sugar.

I slowed Arrow to a walk and her wagon passed me by. Keeping up alongside with the rolling wagon, I removed my hat and said, "Hello. Allow me to introduce myself."

"Hello," she smiled.

In a breath she stole my heart.



I loved her at first sight. Ginny had long flowing golden hair, divine eyes sparkling with life, sculpted features, and cherry lips—I wanted to kiss.

We talked and laughed. Smart and witty, she was raised on books and in time we discovered each other. . . .

I worked for my supper. I gathered up wood for our cook fires and Arrow found water.

Over time the squeaking became more annoying. Ginny's father appeared instantly, the moment I rigged a rawhide pouch that dripped a thick mixture of soap and bacon grease on the hub, silencing the squeaking wheel grinding on the axle of their wagon. And with a nod Virgil said, "Pretty clever, boy."

Stargazing and cuddling by campfires with Ginny, we studied the heavens and watched the shooting stars leave trails in the sky. "There's the Big Dipper," pointed Ginny.

"Right beside Polaris, the North Star," I said.

"And together they are the timekeepers for the heavens," said Ginny. "The Big Dipper rotates counter-clockwise around the North Star every twenty-four hours." Holding her hand above her head, she clinched her fist, pointing her forefinger straight up as if the panhandle of the Dipper. "It's ten o'clock now and the Dipper is here." Moving her hand, "At midnight it will be here, at two a.m. it will be here."

Reaching over, I cupped my hands into a pail of water. "This is for you, Ginny." I held my hands out to her.

"What's for me?"

“Look.” Ginny leaned in and peered at the moon’s reflection in the water cupped in my hands.

“Oh! . . . Is this a promise?”

Gazing at Ginny in the glow of the full moon, she looked like a porcelain doll.

“Promise?” I asked. It was the first time a girl had ever gazed upon me with such loveliness, opening feelings of passion to me and my emotions.

“Are you promising me the Moon?”

I delighted in her gaze. Our back-and-forth volley in that tender moment was my awakening. Her glow gave my heart flight. So pure she was, I fumbled for words rising to her poetry. . . .

“I promise you the Moon, and under all the stars in heaven, I will love only you all the days of my life.”

She captured me with her smile. We held each other close for a long time when Ginny whispered, “My heart belongs to you.”

We were inseparable. And, in the tall grass, we stole away. It was the happiest time of my life.

And Ginny wasn’t far behind. She told her mother, “He loves me Mama and I love him.”

“No you don’t, Ginny!—How do you know?—How can you tell?”

“His eyes tell me. The way they lay on me. He’s strong and smart too.” Ginny was passionate, “I have feelings for him Mama, his lips, his—”

“Hush child, you froth too much,” putting her hands to her ears.

Ginny had a natural innocence that required vigilance and for her folks to be on constant watch for coyotes.

Her father took one look at WB and knew: tall, lean, and good-looking, he's on the loose.

We were rumbling around in the back of the covered wagon out of view. Ginny's mama was driving the team. Ginny was giggling and laughing when Mama yelled back, "Virginia, what's goin' on back there?"

". . . Nothin', Mama."

Well, Mama let out a whistle that could cut glass. "Virgil," she squalled, "Ginny's bundling up again."

We scampered, getting ourselves together knowing the chaperone was on his way, a big man with an Arkansas toothpick.

Lickety-split, I climbed out of the work end of the covered wagon, untied my pony that was trailing along and jumped on. By the time Pa busts up, I was a choirboy with my harmonica, serenading my prairie rose.

He flashed around the big knife, gesturing he's going to shave me real close.

"Oh, Pa, W's just playing me a melody."

If looks could kill, I had just been wounded.

Squinting hard and drawing the toothpick under his eyes, "Walker Brady, I'm eyein' you, boy." Slowly, Pa put the big knife back into its sheath and rode back up ahead . . . out of sight, Virgil grinned to himself and winked at Ma.

Ginny smiled and I trotted along with my serenade.

"I don't think your pa likes my music."

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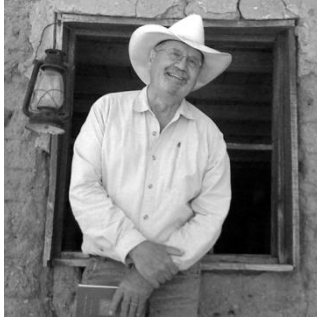
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Pages 33 – 162 are not included in this book preview.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TOM VAN DYKE lives with his wife, MARY on their ranch in the foothills of Tonto National Forest, Cave Creek, Arizona. Tom is a nationally recognized film producer/director and award-winning screenwriter. One of his motion pictures was considered for nomination of an Academy Award®.

Tom created and wrote the American Bicentennial television public service announcements, *Stand Up and Be Counted*, featuring John Denver, the most widely viewed national and international PSAs in the history of television.

His creative expression of writing and film production is shared with his creation of fine art. Tom's sculptures, paintings and photography have been exhibited or are in the permanent collections of the NY Museum of Modern Art, the Carnegie Art Institute, the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Henry Ford Museum, the Cranbrook Academy of Art, and the Butler Institute of American Art.

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