



Title: *The Toughest Cowboy (or How the West was Tamed)*
written by John Frank, illustrated by Zachary Pullen

Bibliographic Info: Frank, J. (2004). *The toughest cowboy*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

The Toughest Cowboy earned a Bccb Blue Ribbon Picture Book award.

Synopsis: John Frank's *The Toughest Cowboy* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) is a funny story about a tough cowboy, Grizz, who decide to get a dog to help herd cattle. However, Grizz comes back from town with, of all things, a miniature poodle named Foofy, much to the amusement of his fellow cowboys. Grizz points out to them that Foofy needs special care—she likes French cooking (Chuck Wagon's assignment), needs to have her hair brushed regularly (Bald Mountain's job), and then needs to have pink ribbons tied behind her ears (Lariat's job). At first the men balk at their assigned tasks, but when they accidentally discover that Foofy loves fetching a tin plate that is tossed to her, and that they enjoy tossing the plate to each other as well, they find that taking care of Foofy is something they like to do. In fact, they discover they have hidden talents that lead them to give up cattle herding. The move to town, where Chuck Wagon opens a gourmet restaurant, Bald Mountain opens a hair salon, Lariat opens a gift shop where he sells rope holders for hanging plants, and Grizz starts a business manufacturing flying plates, known as “Grizz-Bs.” Zachary Pullen's oil paintings are a riot, especially the faces of his cowboys with their oversized faces with exaggerated features.

Themes: Wild West, Cowboys, Dogs Tall Tales

Author Information:

Author and poet John Frank lives in Kirkland, Washington. He has also written two additional children's books: *The Tomb of the Boy King*, which is an enchanting epic poem, and *A Chill in the Air*.

New York based illustrator Zachary Pullen is best known for his work in publications such as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. He uses a traditional oil technique and caricature style.

Activities:

Standard 1, Reading: Benchmark 2: Fluency – This is a great book to use to practice reading with expression and fluency. After initial read aloud, teacher can model and have students repeat. Readers' Theater/Choral Reading – Students can be divided into parts to act out the characters.

Benchmark 4: Comprehension of variety of texts – various comprehension activities can target elements of fiction, cause/effect, prediction, main idea/details, etc. For example,

students can make a cause and effect diagram depicting the causes and effects in the story (Grizz wanted a companion, so he wanted to get a dog; the saloon owner was moving, so he gave away his dog; Foofy needed special attention, so the cowboys each took a certain job; Grizz was disgusted with Foofy, so he threw the tin plate, which led to Foofy catching it, which led to their having lots of fun, which led to their liking Foofy; the cowboys liked the way they lived when they took care of Foofy, so they moved to town and changed their lives).

Standard 2, Literature: Benchmark 1: Literary Concepts – besides the above activities, students can learn about the tall tale genre and practice using play on words such as the ones Frank used in the book and in naming the characters.

Social Studies Integration

This book can be used to explore the Old West – the significance of cowboys and cattle drives and life during that period. They can also make a map or a timeline.

Discussion questions:

Background Questions:

- What were cowboys like? Did they stay in one place?
- How might your life change after getting a pet or a new member of the family? What would you do to care for them?

During /After Questions:

- How might your life change after getting a pet or a new member of the family? What would you do to care for them?
----How did the characters change after getting Foofy?
- Why didn't the cowboys like Foofy at first? Why did they change their minds?
- Could Lariat really lasso fire? Was Bald Mountain really as big as a house? Why does the author say things like this?
- Were the cowboys happier before or after they got Foofy?