

Buck

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue

Horse trainer Buck Brannaman is the sweet-souled star of *Buck*. Cindy Meehl's documentary begins as the portrait of a remarkable professional and turns unexpectedly into a Dickensian tale about the consequences of a turbulent childhood.

Brannaman's moment in the spotlight came when Robert Redford signed him on as adviser for his 1998 film *The Horse Whisperer* and wound up using him as the model for his character. But for horse owners all over the country Buck has long been a legend, and his insistence on treating horses with fairness and compassion—a legacy from the man who taught him, Roy Hunt—has been an inspiration.

You might call Buck's approach humanistic pragmatism. At the outset of the clinics he gives (he's on the road nine months of the year), he reminds his audience in his deadpan style that they ask a horse not only to accept a rider who assumes the position that a lion would take to attack and kill him, but also to place the hides of other dead animals on his back. So it seems miraculous that a horse will be compliant, yet he will if he trusts his rider. Everything relies on that implicit bond of trust.

Buck argues that an unruly horse is the result of human error. When working with the owners of troubled horses, he blurs the line between trainer and therapist. In one amazing scene, he pinpoints the character flaws of a woman whose blind love for a stallion she rescued and spoon-fed has been a factor in turning him into a predator. Brannaman's judgment is harsh, but the owner takes it without flinching: she recognizes not only the accuracy of his assessment but also the purity of his intentions. Buck presents himself with such transparency that the people to whom he offers his experience and counsel—like almost all the horses he works with—are gentled into simple acceptance.

The film's dramatic turning point comes when we learn about his early years. As children, Buck and his brother were celebrity trick ropers trained by their abusive

alcoholic father, whose tyranny over them reached its peak after their mother died. Eventually the boys are rescued and placed with kind, patient foster parents, Forrest and Betsy Shirley. (We see glimpses of the beautifully understated relationship between Buck and the now widowed Betsy.) Buck talks about the horses as if they were children like himself, fearing cruelty and responding to a loving touch and a just and consistent owner.

We also see how Buck himself blossomed into the family man who has trained his youngest daughter, Reata. Their connection is the antithesis of the one he suffered with his own father. Buck speaks openly about his recognition as a young man that he had the choice to refuse to turn into his father; he had alternate models.

In the classic movie *The Night of the Hunter*, Lillian Gish—as a fairy godmother figure who saves abandoned and mistreated youngsters—declares that her heart is humbled by the endurance of her charges. The story of Buck Brannaman humbles our hearts.