

A Father and Son Speak about the Painting *A Desperate Stand* by Charles M. Russell

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This happens the day after Thanksgiving. After their small Thanksgiving dinner (just the son, his mother, and his father) the son and his mother find the 1950s version of *Peter Pan* with the original Broadway cast on a streaming service. And when the Indians appear, she has to try to explain them and the problematic caricature they present. She finds their depiction difficult to explain in the way having too much context can make simple things hard to explain to someone new to the subject.

That next morning, after braving Black Friday to accompany his father to the hardware store, the son says he wants to get rainbow pancakes for breakfast. “Just us,” he adds. When asked whether he didn’t want to go home for his mother because he didn’t want her along or just didn’t want to take the time, he refuses his father’s framing (to his father’s delight). The son had turned four only a few weeks earlier. The son says he thinks she would enjoy sleeping in.

And after they put in their orders (the son knows what he wants and orders with confidence—“I would like rainbow pancakes, applesauce, and milk, please”), the son notices the painting hanging above their booth and asks across the table, “Are those Indians?” The father had noticed the painting on previous outings and

hoped that perhaps they wouldn't have to talk about it today. He'd thought as they were being seated that maybe he should ask for another booth. He didn't. So he says, "Yes."

The painting's frame has a little brass plaque centered along the bottom that reads "*A Desperate Stand* by Charles M. Russell." Depicted in the center of the painting is a tight knot of men and horses—eight men alive and one on his back dying or dead, a rifle lying close by as if fallen from his hand, and eight horses but only five standing in the center of the composition. These men have taken a defensive position, firing rifles from the middle of their horse barricade. In the background is a line of Indigenous men, Indians, on horseback riding from right to left in a slight arc, giving the sense of a greater circle. There is muzzle flash and smoke from the centered mens' rifles. The men in the background are painted in such a way as to communicate speed. They are riding at a gallop around the non-Native men in the center.

"Which ones are the Indians again?" asks the son.

"The ones in the background," says the father.

"Who is that at the bottom of the frame?" asks the son, pointing to a supine Native man in the foreground of the painting. He lies dying within feet in the circled-up men and horses.

The father says, "An Indian who has been wounded."

"Why?" the son asks. And the father begins to talk about the land and Native peoples and settlers from Europe and what a home is and those European settlers, now Americans, pushing their way across this continent when the son interrupts and asks, "Why are they not in the center?" The son is asking about the Indians.

The father tells him that there could be a painting in which the Indians are in the center and tries to imagine it for himself and his son.

The father points out to the son the perspective of the painting and that the white horse of one of the white men in the center of the painting with its flank to the viewer draws the eye because of contrast, and then the father notices the man who's behind the horse's hindquarters is aiming his rifle over the horse's rump right out of the painting at the viewer. And he thinks he and his son, who are viewing the painting, are in the arc with the Indians, closing it to complete a desperate circle.

And that's when the rainbow pancakes arrive, and the son says, "If we were in the picture, I would punch the bad guy and put him in jail."

