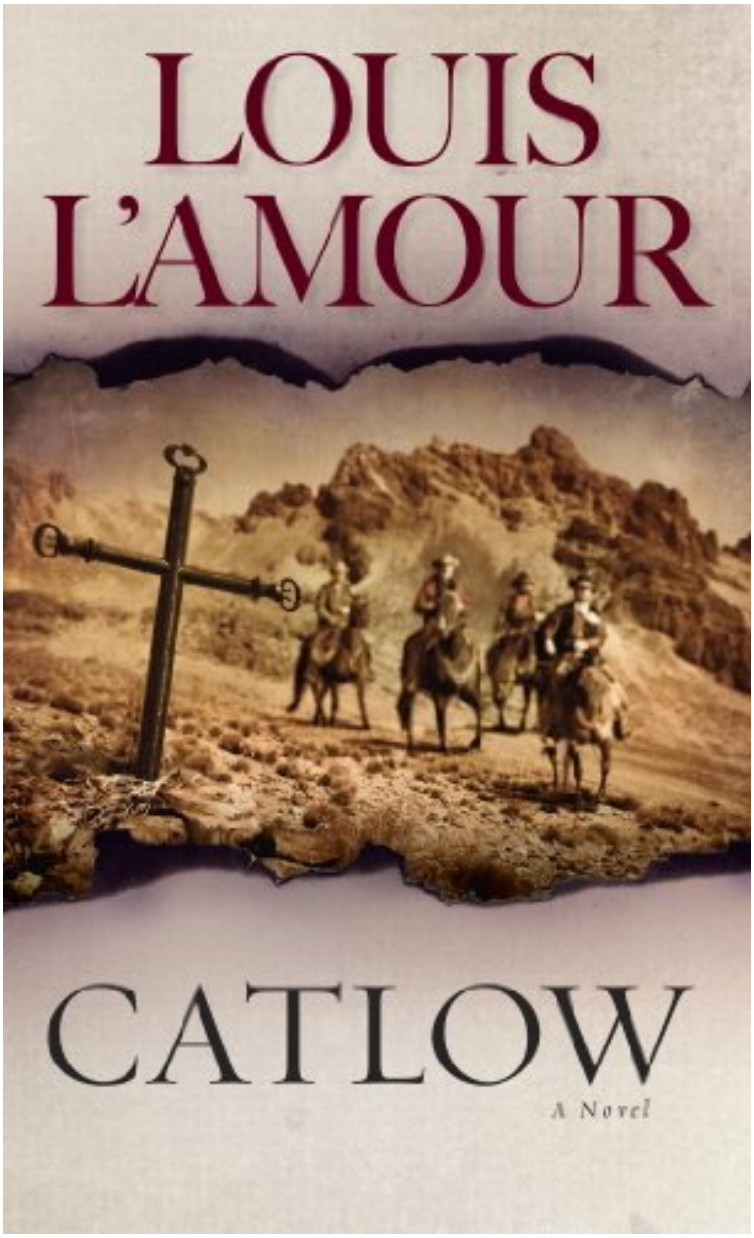
Catlow: A Novel



Par Louis L'Amour
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[Read free ebook] Catlow: A Novel

Par Louis L'Amour : Catlow: A Novel before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Catlow: A Novel:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBen Cowan and Bijah Catlow had been bound as friends since childhood. By the time they grew to manhood, Catlow had become a top cowhand with a wild streak. It took just one disastrous confrontation with a band of greedy ranchers to make him an outlaw. And when he crossed that line, it was up to U.S. Marshal Ben Cowan to bring him in alive--if only Catlow would give him the chance....From the Paperback edition.ExtraitWherever buffalo grazed, cattle were rounded up, or mustangs tossed their tails in flight, men talked of Bijah Catlow.He was a brush-buster from the brazada country down along the Nueces,

and he could ride anything that wore hair. He made his brag that he could outfight, outride, outtalk, and outlove any man in the world; and he was prepared to accept challenges, any time or place.Around chuck-wagon fires or line camps from the Brazos to the Musselshell, men talked of Bijah Catlow. They talked of his riding, his shooting, or the wild brawls in which, no matter how angry others became, Bijah never lost his temper--or the fight.Abijah was his name, shortened in the manner of the frontier to Bijah. He was a broad-shouldered, deep-chested, hell-for-leather Irishman who emerged from the War Between the States with three decorations for bravery, three courts-martial, and a reputation for being a man to have on your side in any kind of a shindig, brannigan, or plain old alley fight.A shock-headed man with a disposition as open as a Panhandle prairie, he was as ready to fight as an Irishman at a Dutchman's picnic; and where the wishes of Bijah Catlow were crossed he recognized the laws of neither God nor man. But the law had occasion to recognize Bijah Catlow; and the law knew him best in the person of Marshal Ben Cowan.By the time Bijah and Ben were fifteen years old, each had saved the other's life no less than three times; and Bijah had whipped Ben four times and had himself been whipped four times. Ben was tough, good-humored, and serious; Bijah was tough, good-humored, and wild as any unbroken mustang.At nineteen, Ben Cowan was a deputy sheriff, and at twenty-three a Deputy United States Marshal. By the time Bijah had reached the age of twenty-three he was a known cattle rustler, and an outlaw with three killings behind him.But it was no criminal instinct, inherited or acquired, that turned Bijah from the paths of righteousness to the shadowy trails of crime. It was a simple matter of frontier economics.Bijah Catlow was a top-hand in any man's outfit, so when he signed on with the Tumbling SS's it was no reflection on his riding. He hired out at the going wage of thirty dollars per month and found, but the sudden demand for beef at the Kansas railheads turned Texas longhorns from unwanted, unsought wild creatures into a means to wealth and affluence.From occasional drives to Missouri, Louisiana, or even Illinois, or the casual slaughter of cattle for their hides, the demand for beef in the eastern cities lifted the price per head to ten or more times its former value.Immediately the big ranchers offered a bonus of two dollars per head for every maverick branded, and Bijah Catlow, who worked with all the whole-hearted enthusiasm with which he played, plunged into the business of branding cattle to get rich.He was a brush-popper and a good one, and he knew where the wild cattle lurked. He was a good hand with a rope and he owned some fast horses that knew cattle as well as he did, and nobody knew them better. The first month after the bonus was initiated, Bijah Catlow roped and slapped an iron on eighty-seven head of wild cattle.During the months that followed, Bijah was busier than a man with a dollar watch and the seven-year itch (when he isn't winding, he's scratching) and he averaged two hundred to two hundred fifty dollars a month. In those days nobody made that kind of money on the range, or much of anywhere else. And then the bottom dropped out.The owners of the big brands got together and agreed that the bonus was foolish and unnecessary, for it was the hands' job to brand cattle anyhow. So the bonus came to an end.From comparative affluence, Bijah Catlow once again became a thirty-a-month cowhand, and he led the contingent that quit abruptly.His argument was a good one. Why brand cattle for the ranchers? Why not for themselves? Why not make up their own herd and drive through to Kansas?After all, most of the mavericks running loose on the plains of Texas came from Lord knew where, for cattle had been breeding like jack rabbits on those plains ever since the days when the first Spanish came there. Nobody could claim or had claimed ownership of those cattle until suddenly they became valuable. Moreover, throughout the War Between the States most of the riders had been away at war and the cattle that might have been branded had gone maverick, and many of their owners had never returned from the War.The cattle were there for whoever claimed them--so Bijah Catlow banded together a group of riders like himself and they went to work, inspired by Bijah's wholehearted zeal and unflagging energy.He threw himself into the work with the same enthusiasm with which he did everything else, and it was his zest that fired the ambition of the others. Morning, noon, and night they worked, and at the end of two months they had a herd of nearly three thousand head ready for the trail.Wild cattle were plentiful in those early years, and the smoke of their branding fires was forever in the air. The riders plunged into the deepest brush and rousted out old mossyhorns and branded them for the Kansas trail, but their work did not go untroubled. Twice they drove off raiding Comanches, and Nigger Jim was gored by an angry bull. They found his ruined body sprawled in the grass near a tiny seep, the earth around torn by the furious battle. A swarthy man, part Indian rather than Negro, he had been a top-hand and a good companion. They buried him on the prairie where they found him.A few days later Johnny Caxton lost an arm. He was snubbing a rope to a tree, and how it happened he never knew. The plunging steer wheeled suddenly and Caxton's arm was caught in a loop of the rope. The steer lunged back on the rope and it snapped tight around Johnny Caxton's arm.Two

days before he had lost his holster in the brush when it was torn from his belt, and although he had found his pistol, he had been carrying it in his saddlebag since then. His horse was some distance off, and he had been stalking the big steer afoot when he got his chance to make the throw.It was hours before they found him, the tough old mossyhorn still backed to the end of the rope, full of fight and glaring wild-eyed, and Johnny sagging against the tree, his arm a black and ugly sight.There was no doctor within a hundred miles, so Bijah Catlow amputated the arm in camp, cauterizing the stump with a hot branding iron.It was a week later, with four of their number a quarter of a mile away riding herd on the cattle, that Bijah awakened to find their camp surrounded.The first man he saw was Sheriff Jack Mercer, formerly on the payroll of Parkman of the OP Bar, and now, as sheriff, reputed to be still on his payroll. Then he saw Parkman himself, Barney Staples of the Tumbling SS, and Osgood of the Three Links. With them were twenty-odd tough cowhands who rode for their brands.Neither Sheriff Mercer or Parkman had ever liked Bijah Catlow. A year before, when Mercer was still a cowhand, Catlow had whipped him unmercifully in a brawl and Parkman hated Catlow because the cowhand could get a girl that Parkman could not.Bijah, who was no fool, knew he was in trouble. Glancing around as he sat up and tugged on his boots, he saw no friendly faces. He had worked for Staples and always turned in a good job, but Staples was a cattleman and would stand with the rest.Mercer leaned his big hands on the pommel of his saddle. Deep within him the fire of triumph burned with a hard, evil flame. "Bijah," he said, "I've got a bronc I say you can't ride. Not if you meet the conditions."Bijah Catlow was not sure how much they wanted the others, but he knew they wanted him. "What's the matter, boys?" he said. "Why the visit?""You're a damned, no-good cow rustler," Parkman said. "We hang rustlers.""Turn the rest of these boys loose," Bijah said, "and I'll ride your bronc--whatever the conditions.""You ain't heard the conditions," Mercer said. "You ride him with your hands tied behind your back and your neck in a noose . . . under that cottonwood over there."Bijah Catlow got easily to his feet and stamped into his boots. He was wearing his gun . . . it was always the first thing he put on after his hat . . . and he had already put both hat and gun on when he got up to stir the fire, half an hour before. Nobody had told him to drop his belt. After all, three of them had guns on them.On his own side, Rio Bray was there, and Bob Keleher and Johnny Caxton, of course. Since his arm had been lost Johnny had taken over the job of camp roustabout, rustling firewood and water for whoever was cooking for the day. They were good men, but Caxton had lost his right arm and still hadn't won much use of his left, although he had been working on it every day."You let them go," Bijah said, "and I'll ride your damned horse."Mercer's smile was one of contempt. "You'll do what we tell you . . . and all of you will get a chance at that same bronc."Bijah thought for a moment that Staples was going to object, but he did not. After all, it was Parkman who was top man here. Bijah knew that when he went for his gun.Nobody expected it, although they all should have, knowing Bijah Catlow.Rio Bray probably guessed it first, for as Bijah's gun came up shooting, Rio dove for the shotgun that lay across his saddle. Rio hit the ground, rolled over, and came up on his belly with the shotgun in his hands, and the first thing he saw was Parkman pulling leather on a plunging horse, blood on his shirt front, and Jack Mercer falling.Rio fired one barrel, then another, and two saddles emptied.The shooting and the plunging of Parkman's horse destroyed any chance they had at the small targets that faced them in the Catlow camp. And about that time Old Man Merridew, who had been out with the cattle, cut loose with a Sharps fifty.The cattlemen's posse stampeded and left Jack Mercer dead on the ground. Parkman managed to cling to his saddle and his horse fled with the others.They were not scared. They were a hard-bitten lot of old Indian fighters, that posse. But they also knew that Old Man Merridew was behind that Sharps buffalo gun, and Merridew was a man who seldom missed what he shot at. It was wide-open prairie where they were, and Merridew was in a tiny hollow of rocks and brush on top of a knoll.Besides, Bijah Catlow had a gun in his hand, and nobody was buying that if there was a way out.There was a way, and they took it. After all, they could always get Bijah Catlow. He wasn't going any place.The law in that section of Texas was whatever the big cattle outfits said it was, and the law said Bijah Catlow was a rustler and a killer. He had killed an officer in performance of his duty, and he became a wanted man.When Parkman became conscious in the big four-poster in his own ranch house he issued the order: "Get Bijah Catlow."There was a good deal of sympathy in the room for Catlow, but nobody spoke up. To do so was to invite ruin.Ben Cowan was not present. He was not even in the state at the time. Had he been, he might have told them not to count their hangings until they had a neck in the noose. Somebody had said that Catlow was not going any place . . . Cowan would have looked his disgust at that. He would have known that Bijah Catlow was already gone.Within the hour the herd was moving over the river, three miles to the north. They drove on through the night and finaDy bedded the herd down two hours after daybreak on a small branch far west of the Kansas trail.By noon they were

moving again, following the trail north that had been made by a herd of buffalo, losing their own tracks in the wider trail of the big herd.Bijah glanced to the south. "Hope there's another herd coming along to wipe out whatever sign we leave," he commented, "because Parkman will be along."Old Man Merridew lifted a skinny arm and pointed it the way his hawk-beak nose was already pointing. "They's a-comin'," he said. "There's the dust!""Maybe that's the posse," Bray suggested.Merridew spat. "Them's buffler," he said. "Maybe eight, ten thousand of them . . . maybe more."Nobody argued with Old Man. He had eyes better than any eagle, and a nose to smell buffalo as far as a man could see. The Old Man was older than anybody knew, and looked old enough in the face to have worn out three bodies . . . but he was wiry, strong, and tough as any old Cheyenne or Comanche.North they drove, with the Drinking Gourd hanging in the sky before them.North they rode, and Bijah Catlow, the flamboyant, good-natured, hell-for-leather Bijah had become an outlaw.It would be another week before Ben Cowan heard the news.Prsentation de l'diteurBen Cowan and Bijah Catlow had been bound as friends since childhood. By the time they grew to manhood, Catlow had become a top cowhand with a wild streak. It took just one disastrous confrontation with a band of greedy ranchers to make him an outlaw. And when he crossed that line, it was up to U.S. Marshal Ben Cowan to bring him in alive--if only Catlow would give him the chance....From the Paperback edition.