

Twentieth Century Western Writers

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY WESTERN WRITERS

PREFACE

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PREFACE

Professor George Woodberry of Columbia University once noted in a famous essay that the language and literature of the Western World rest on three main supports: the Bible, the Arthurian legends, and the Norse sagas. They enrich even casual conversation. In the last hundred years, however, a new mythology has come to rival the first three in familiarity and influence—the mythology of the American West—the West that Never Was. Western movies and western books have penetrated to regions where the Norse tales, the legends of King Arthur, and even the Bible are unfamiliar. Western films not only are seen all over Europe; they are manufactured there. Novels about the American West are written in England, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Italy; cowboy clubs and Indian clubs flourish in Germany and France; Westerners societies are active in England and on the continent. At a newstand in Switzerland I have seen paperback westerns in four languages offered for sale, and blue jeans are standard equipment for youths in most European countries, including Czechoslovakia—perhaps even Russia. The lore of the mythical west is part of European culture. The west belongs to everybody.

Fiction about the west, mythical or real, has been with us for a long time, has provided diversion and escape for millions of people all over the world, and is as good a barometer as we have for measuring the impact of the western idea on readers everywhere. It has been an object of interest to historians of culture, so much so that books and articles about it appear with almost frightening frequency. Well over twenty books in at least three languages have discussed the western motion picture, and the western novel has received almost as much attention. The time is ripe for an encyclopedic work telling what can still be learned about earlier writers and their books and assembling the essential facts about those who are now producing.

This sort of information is by no means easy to find and verify, but other major problems arise at the beginning. First, the west has to be defined. Are the Dakotas, Nebraska and Kansas part of the west? Should the northwestern states be included? Is California, like New York, a separate country attached to the United States? Is Los Angeles culture, as John Milton describes it in *The Novel of the American West* (1980) “a phenomenon of its own, or perhaps a vulgarization of the East”? Does the western novel include fiction about northern Mexico—about Canada—about Alaska—about the westernmost state, Hawaii? The Rocky Mountain states are the core of the area, but where are the outer limits?

Next, the western novel has to be defined. Here one finds himself in even deeper water, for attitudes toward the west and its myth have changed radically over the years and western fiction has changed with them. Furthermore, as the west has become urbanized, fiction has tended to leave the cattle range and the small western town and gravitate toward the big cities. As Larry McMurtry observes in a controversial article in the *Texas Observer* (23 October 1981), “Granting certain grand but eccentric exceptions, virtually the whole of modern literature has been a city literature.” The “Western or cowboy myth” has “served its time and lost its potency,” and writers, including McMurtry, have left the range. Is there, then, such a thing as the western city novel? Probably not, since big cities are said to be pretty much alike. Is a detective story set in San Francisco (Elizabeth Atwood Taylor, *The Cable Car Murder*, 1981) truly a western novel—or a three-generation chronicle of a dynasty of Dallas merchants (Warren Leslie, *The Starrs of Texas*, 1978)—an international espionage story centered on the atomic activities at Los Alamos (A.E. Maxwell, *Steal the Sun*, 1982)—a novel with supernatural overtones about a little colony of outsiders in the Colorado Rockies (Marilyn Harris, *The Portent*, 1980)—the rape of a Mexican-American community in northern New Mexico by developers, cultists, and fast-food emporiums (John Nichols, *The Nirvana Blues*, 1981, last volume of a trilogy)—a novel of Texas low life set mostly in a Fort Worth cafe (Dan Jenkins, *Baja Oklahoma*, 1981)?

Does a western setting make a western novel? The answer must be tentative no, but anyone who wants to discuss the subject must first decide where the fences are.

Furthermore, the western novel is not what it was. The years between 1940 and 1980 have seen an almost complete reversal of attitudes toward the west, its history and its meaning. The romanticized view, the view of the western myth, is no longer taken for granted. Mention "the winning of the west" and someone will inquire acidly, "Do you mean the raping of the west?" The loss of faith, general in the world, includes loss of faith in the American pioneers, the developers, and the army units who brought "civilization" to the west. Realism, disillusion, and cynicism darken the prevailing mood. Compare Owen Wister's *Virginian* with Ben Baker, the repulsive, tobacco-chewing cowboy husband of Melissa in Marguerite Noble's Arizona novel *Filaree* (1979). The gulf between them is as deep as the Grand Canyon. Many critics have observed that there are no heroes any more. They were never as common in western fiction as in western movies, and close study reveals that unheroic, even comic, leading men have always been acceptable in western novels. Since the 1950's, however, viewpoint characters have become more and more flawed, defeated, and even repulsive. A good example is Curly Roy in Bobby Jack Nelson's Texas novel *Brothers* (1975)—self-centered, given to homicidal rages, lawless, savage, a rebel who "could outfight any man, bed down any girl, and tear apart anyone or anything that tried to fence him in." Curly is what the western hero has become.

The image of the west has darkened over the years, but the picture has changed radically in other ways. Division and subdivision, development and decline have been at work, making generalization difficult. When some authority, usually an academic person, asserts that the western novel is thus and so, one has the right to ask, "Which western novel?" They come in all sizes, shapes, and colors.

In the beginning there was some uniformity. Bret Harte introduced the American public to California with "The Luck of Roaring Camp" in 1868 and popularized the upside-down morality which became a characteristic of the genre, including the figure of the good-bad man and the prostitute with the heart of gold. Helen Hunt Jackson (*Ramona*, 1885) and Adolph F. Bandelier (*The Delight Makers*, 1890) talked about the Western Indian. Alfred Henry Lewis (*Wolfville*, 1897) used Tombstone, Arizona, scenes and characters, accepted Harte's skewed morality and invented the dialect which became more or less standard in later novels. At the same time the dime novel was turning to western characters, beginning with Buffalo Bill Cody, and making Buck Taylor, an actor in Cody's Wild West Show, the first cowboy hero. The western story, as an international audience came to know it, was waiting to be born.

Owen Wister acted as midwife in 1902 with the publication of *The Virginian*. The peculiar ethical system known as the Code of the West was a motivating force in Wister's story, and the west itself, as a maker of men, was played up. The first walkdown (confrontation with pistols) on the streets of a western town closed the action. Cowboy character was crystallized in the persons of Jeff, the Virginian, and his friend Lin McLean. Important also were Wister's background and education. A Harvard graduate, he wrote like the gentleman he was and is said to have brought the western "up to *Atlantic Monthly* standards." Thanks, at least in part, to him, the western novel after 1902 followed two divergent paths—the high road of well-written and well-plotted stories, often appearing in leading American magazines, and the low road of standard, formula, or commercial fiction exemplified in thousands of pulp-magazine stories and popular novels. The bulk of western fiction published during the first half of the century kept to the low road, but between high and low there were many intermediate types. Zane Grey, for example, published his first novel, *The Heritage of the Desert*, in 1910, and dozens of skilful writers—Ernest Haycox, Luke Short, Alan LeMay, and Will Henry/Clay Fisher, for example—traveled in his footsteps.

The specifications for high-road, middle-road, and low-road novels included, often enough to be thought of as a rule, a hero with a flaw or major fault, a "morally ambiguous character," as John Cawelti describes him (*Focus on the Western*, edited by Jack Nachbar, 1974), a sweet, pure, and unspoiled heroine; and a vicious villain whose destruction brings matters back into equilibrium. The plot begins with confrontation and ends in a violent showdown, but the violence is necessary for good to triumph over evil and is regarded as a cleansing of the temple. For this reason *Time* magazine in 1960 in a much-quoted article called "The Western: The

American Morality Play" noted that the good guys always win; the bad guys always lose.

A morality play, of course, is symbolic of reality—does not strive for realism—and although the mythical west resembled the real west, the elements were selected and recombined to create a region that was really out of time and space. Writers of "westerns" (with small "w") have always been proud to point out that their stories were "authentic"—accurate in detail. Louis L'Amour and Will Henry think of themselves as historical novelists, and their novels are indeed well researched, but the stories are so firmly rooted in the conventions of the western that they come closer to epic or romance than to realism. It is significant that a writer of westerns need never have been in the United States. Karl May did very well in 19th-century Germany without ever seeing the Pecos country of which he wrote. A century later J.T. Edson sits in his study at Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, England, and chronicles the adventures of the Floating Outfit in the Texas Panhandle. When he began his writing career in 1961, he had never been to the United States. He crosses the Atlantic every year now to attend the annual meetings of the Western Writers of America, but he does not visit the range of the Floating Outfit. He doesn't have to. He couldn't if he wanted to. It is all in his head. Likewise, the Englishman Terry Harknett, the creator of *Edge*, finds the mythical west in his imagination. He doesn't even come to meetings.

Why do Americans and others keep the mythical west going when the reality is close at hand? The answer is, they need it. The West that Never Was offers more than amusement for an idle hour. As Jack Nachbar phrases it, the western "defined for all Americans their traditional ethics, values, and sources of national pride" (*Focus on the Western*, 1974). This is a function of myth the world over, and for half a century the western did it for Americans, and for all others interested. The frontier which the myth defined or distorted lasted only about 25 years (1865 to 1890), but it provided something Americans desperately needed—a heroic age. Every nation or ethnic group wants to look back to the deeds of mighty ancestors, and the frontier west was all the Americans had to serve the purpose, so they made the best of it. When the reality was not satisfactory, as in the case of Wyatt Earp, they changed the facts to fit the specifications.

The foundations of the western (with or without the capital letter) were laid between 1900 and 1918, but after World War I building styles began to change. New and better writers appeared. "Slick" magazines, like the *Saturday Evening Post*, featured serialized westerns. Harvey Fergusson (*Wolf Song*, 1927), Eugene Manlove Rhodes (*Pasó por Aquí*, 1926), and Conrad Richter (*The Sea of Grass*, 1937) were at work on the high road. The top middle-road professionals—William MacLeod Raine, Eugene Cunningham, Max Brand, Charles Alden Seltzer, W.C. Tuttle, B.M. Bower, and a dozen more—were in full production, and the pulp magazines flourished and prospered. Range novels were still popular but the field was expanding to include a wide variety of backgrounds and character types: miners, peace officers, railroad builders, mountain men, army officers, Indian leaders, Pinkerton detectives, bandits, gamblers and even, as time went on, preachers, editors, and traveling salesmen. Often a vein of humor came to the surface, and a surprising number of characters were created for laughs.

Before the century was half over, however, the old days and ways were coming to a close. Since the 1890's disillusion had been growing in the United States, a legacy from earlier European thinkers and writers. The pioneers and frontiersmen were no longer heroes or bringers of civilization; they were thieves and exploiters with grimy hands. The Indians were no longer bloodthirsty savages; they were noble human beings, wronged and outraged by the greedy white man. The westward movement was a piratical enterprise which deprived Indians and Mexicans of their birthright.

The Indians found defenders first. Harold Bell Wright gave the Apaches a voice as early as 1923 in *The Mine with the Iron Door*. Edgar Rice Burroughs idealized Geronimo in *War Chief* (1927); Oliver La Farge searched the soul of a young Navajo in *Laughing Boy* (1929); Will Levington Comfort did the same for Apache Chief Mangus Colorado in *Apache* (1931); Mary Austin gave the Papagos credit for a sense of humor in *One Smoke Stories* (1934); and Elliott Arnold in *Blood Brother* (1947) presented Cochise as a great and noble leader, a statesman, a poet, and a philosopher, a proud and sensitive man much superior to his white antagonists. By 1962 when Jane Barry published *A Time in the Sun*, few Americans doubted that the Indians were right and the white man was wrong, and the way was prepared for N. Scott Momaday's

Pulitzer-Prize-winning *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and for Forrest Carter's *Watch for Me on the Mountain* (1978), which portrays Geronimo as a heaven-sent leader with supernatural powers, in a class with Beowulf, Siegfried, and the Cid. National guilt feelings were not strong enough to suggest giving the country back to the Indians, but they did lead to the payment of many millions of conscience money to these natives and to new directions in western writing.

A similar transformation was waiting for the Mexican, downgraded in American fiction since 1846. Harvey Fergusson had written sympathetically about New Mexican Latinos in *Blood of the Conquerors* in 1921, but he had seen their plight as hopeless. Robert Herrick in *Waste* (1924) mourned the decay of village honesty and simplicity and the triumph of American materialism. Thanks to writers like Raymond Otis (*Little Valley*, 1937), and Frank Applegate (*Native Tales of New Mexico*, 1934), the Mexican-American began to be a person in the 1930's, but he had to wait until the 1960's to become an important person. José Antonio Villareal (*Pocho*, 1959) is credited with being the first Chicano novelist, but a number of important writers have seized his torch, among them Richard Vasquez (*Chicano*, 1970), Raymond Barrio (*The Plum Plum Pickers*, 1971), and Rudolpho Anaya (*Bless Me Ultima*, 1972). These men are certainly western novelists but not by the earlier definitions.

The role of blacks in the westward movement has also had an increasing amount of attention, but their appearance as focal characters in western fiction has been limited. Black sharecroppers were occasionally featured (John W. Wilson, *High John the Conqueror*, 1934), but the first appearance of a black soldier as a principal in a western came with James Warner Bellah's *Sergeant Rutledge* in 1960. Fictional and documentary studies of black pioneers in the West multiplied after the publication in 1965 of *The Negro Cowboys* by Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones. Clay Fisher published his novel *Black Apache* in 1976.

As these new voices became stronger, some of the older ones grew weaker. The pulp magazines declined in the 1950's and almost disappeared. Production of conventional westerns was severely curtailed, though a hard core of seasoned veterans—Louis L'Amour, Wayne Overholser, Lewis B. Patten, Nelson Nye, Frank O'Rourke, to name a few—continued to produce, and energetic new writers appeared. The traditional western never died—never came anywhere near dying—but it did suffer shrinkage and had to make concessions to popular taste, including the demand for sex and violence. It was a sign of the times, of a craving for what the older authors offered, that popular novels of the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's were revived and reprinted in quantities and made up a substantial part of the paperback offerings in the 1970's.

A sign of the times also was the rise of satirical, burlesque, or humorous westerns—proof that the traditional western was under fire. *The Ballad of Cat Ballou*, by Roy Chanslor (1956) was an early example. For two decades after that, mocking the western seemed to many authors and movie producers a good way to go. Titles included such satires as Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1965), Charles Portis's *True Grit* (1968), Bill Gulick's *Liveliest Town in the West* (1969), John Templeton's *Charlie Eagletooth's War* (1969), and *Blazing Saddles* (1974), by Andrew Bergman.

The conventional western was not only spoofed and ridiculed and parodied; it was elbowed aside by new developments, beginning with a series of pessimistic treatments of the cowboy and his work. Edward Abbey in *The Brave Cowboy* (1957) demonstrated that there was no place in the 20th century for the old-time, independent product of the great open spaces. In 1960 Larry McMurtry in *Horseman, Pass By* (*Hud* in the movie version) concentrated on a young Texan without soul or morals who raped the black cook in the presence of the teenage narrator and killed his stepfather in order to take over the ranch. Nobody called him to account.

In the same year Max Evans published *The Rounders*, on the surface a hilarious story about two cowboys at a lonely line camp and in town, actually a close look at two ineffectual human beings who can't get ahead. J.P.S. Brown's *Jim Kane* (1970) followed the fortunes of a conscientious cattle buyer in northern Mexico who got his livestock to Chihuahua but was cheated out of his profits by his crooked employers. William Decker in *To Be a Man* (1967) showed that the values of the honest cowhand were archaic in the 20th-century west. Robert Flynn's *North to Yesterday* focused on a cattle-country Don Quixote who tried in vain to duplicate the cattle drives of the 1880's. Only Elmer Kelton (*The Time It Never Rained*, 1973) found the men and mores of the early-day cattle kingdom still alive here and there in Texas.

The final transformation—perversion might be a better word—of the western was the birth of the adult western, known to the publishing industry as the “wicked” or “porno” western. *Time* magazine had noted the existence of the type and called it by name in 1959 (“The American Morality Play,” March 30), but it really began to flourish in the 1970’s. Its elements were brutality for its own sake and explicit sex in large quantities. The paperback editors discovered that there was a tremendous appetite for these commodities and began producing them for the mass market. Most of the books came in series named for the central character, and a house name was used for the author. Since titles in a given series appeared as often as once a month, a battery of writers was needed to turn them out. For money, established craftsmen toiled anonymously to give bloodthirsty or sex-starved readers what they wanted. One of them regrouped and started a series of his own (Foxy) when he found out where his interests lay.

Excessive violence appeared early in novels about the Apache campaigns as writers described in detail the tortures inflicted on captives, and series novels (Fargo, Sundance) featuring violence appeared in the early 1970’s. A new day dawned, however, in 1971 with the publication of the first Edge novel—*Edge: The Loner*. Captain Joshua Hedges, home from the Civil War, finds that men of his former command have evened scores with him by murdering his crippled younger brother. He tracks them down one by one and kills them as painfully as possible. Edge was conceived by Terry Harknett, an Englishman writing under the name of George H. Gilman. His publishers warned, “Here is mean, bone-chilling, raw stuff...not for the faint-hearted reader.” British readers were not faint hearted. They organized a George H. Gilman fan club and praised the Edge books as “a real breakthrough.” The water never ran low in Harknett’s well. Number 34 in the Edge series was published in 1980, with world-wide sales of 4,000,000 copies. He kept on writing and started two new series. J. T. Edson’s violent Westerns, written in England, became almost as popular as Harknett’s.

British readers apparently wanted their violence straight, with no time wasted on heavy sex. American readers, on the other hand, seemed to prefer raw sex with only a seasoning of violence. The Captain Gringo series, with the house name Ramsey Thorne on the cover, is credited with pioneering the wicked western in the United States in 1975. Publishers immediately saw a golden opportunity, and new series publications sprang up in rapid succession. The John Slocum series bore the name of Jake Logan; Shelter, of Paul Leder; Raider, of J.D. Hardin; Lashtraw, of Roe Richmond; Trailman, of John Sharpe; The Executioner, of Don Pendleton; Faro Blake, of Zeke Masters; Longarm, of Tabor Evans. The list was still growing in the early 1980’s. Bedroom scenes were frequent and detailed. Older readers shook their heads in amazement as they contemplated what had happened to the once-righteous western.

They had reason to be astonished at other developments in the field. One was the appearance of “faction” (a combination of fiction and fact) in such novels as Ron Hansen’s *The Desperadoes* (1979) and Robert Houston’s *Bisbee 17* (1979). Tremendously popular were Western romances by a long list of authors, mostly women, with Janet Dailey (*This Calder Sky*, 1981) and Jeanne Williams (*The Valiant Women*, 1980) in the lead, with sales in the millions. Detective stories (Tony Hillerman, *People of Darkness*, 1980) were popular and “thrillers” (stories of suspense, catastrophe, ordeal, international intrigue, the supernatural) published in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s filled an eight-foot shelf. Ingenious plot devices abounded, for example, an invasion of vampire bats from Mexico carrying bubonic plague to the Navajo Reservation in Arizona in Martin Cruz Smith’s *Nightwing* (1977), and the maneuvers of secret agents at the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory in A.E. Maxwell’s *Steal the Sun* (1982). The list would include three-generation family chronicles, caravans moving west to California and Oregon, drug smuggling on the Mexican border, Indians trying to adjust to the white man’s world, Texas politics, homosexuals in the cities, college athletics, the oil business, the Mexican Revolution. These and many more western themes were exploited by good writers in the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s. There was even a vein of true humor in such novels as Bonner McMillion’s *So Long at the Fair* (1964), Gary Jennings’s *The Terrible Teague Bunch* (1975) Darby Foote’s *Baby Love and Casey Blue* (1975), John Reese’s *Omar, Fats, and Trixie* (1976), and William Brinkley’s *Peepers* (1981).

Apart from all these, and perhaps above them, stand a group of superior novelists, beloved by the academic communities, whose works are westerns only in the fact that the western

environment is a shaping force in human character and destiny. William P. Bloodworth ("The Literary Extensions of the Formula Western," *Western American Literature*, Winter 1980) describes some of them as "Literary Westerns" and includes Walter Van Tilburg Clarke's *The Oxbow Incident* (1940), Frederick Manfred's *Riders of Judgment* (1957), Max Evans's *The Rounders* (1960), Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By* (1961), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), Charles Portis's *True Grit* (1968), and R.G. Vliet's *Rockspring* (1974).

John Milton (*The Novel of the American West*, 1980) takes a different approach to the superior group. He discusses 14 western novelists who, in his view, can claim "high seriousness and literary quality," among them Willa Cather, Oliver La Farge, Conrad Richter, Vardis Fisher, Frank Waters, Paul Horgan, and A.B. Guthrie, Jr.

To these lists might be added the names of important west coast writers like H.L. Davis and Gertrude Atherton, and others from the Rocky Mountain region and the southwest: Dorothy M. Johnson, William Eastlake, George Sessions Perry, William Humphrey, Glendon Swarthout, Benjamin Capps, James Gilmore Rushing, Douglas C. Jones, Oakley Hall, and Richard Martin Stern. New writers with reputations still to be solidified would include Norman Zollinger, Neal Claremon, Alan Harrington, Bruce McGinnis, Earl Shorris, and fifty more.

Without doubt western fiction has come a long way in a century and has moved far from its roots. It has gone from illusion to disillusion, from a few types to many, from the country to the city, from easy imitation to literary competence. It is not easy to define or to locate, and its moods and ramifications continue to multiply. In the midst of all the change and confusion, however, the novel of the west continues to be written and read. Even the traditional western, changed sometimes beyond recognition, is alive and apparently sound at heart. It remains to be seen whether it will be choked and destroyed by excrescences like the porno western, or will win free of them, keeping the western myth relatively unchanged. It seems safe to predict, however, that the world will want to keep the West That Is, the West That Was, and the West That Never Was for the foreseeable future.

—C.L. SONNICHSEN

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The selection of writers included in this book is based on the recommendations of the advisers listed on page xvii.

The entry for each writer consists of a biography, a bibliography, and a signed critical essay. Living authors were invited to add a comment on their work. The bibliographies list writings according to the categories of western fiction and other publications, and is further subdivided under pseudonyms. Series characters are indicated for novels. Original British and United States editions of all books have been listed; other editions are listed only if they are the first editions. As a rule all uncollected western short stories published since the entrant's last collection have been listed.

Entries include notations of available bibliographies, manuscript collections, and critical studies. Other critical materials appear in the Reading List of secondary works on the genre.

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