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Dare to Know

Revisionist Westerns

A subset that began to appear sporadically in the late 1950s and more regularly in the 1960s. Rather than repeating old tropes, revisionist authors subvert and challenge the genre's traditional storytelling conventions. Some of these novels question the myth of the frontier as a place of adventure and opportunity. Instead, authors in this subset may depict the West as a place of violence and cruelty, and portray Euroamerican settlers as guilty of exploiting natural resources and displacing and oppressing native peoples. Other, less accusatory stories offer a still grittier but more nuanced portrayal of the American West. Instead of undermining the Western genre's traditions, a variety of revisionist stories push them in unexpected directions. There is a less clear distinction between heroes and villains in revisionist Westerns; sometimes, there are only killers with varying degrees of malice. In addition, protagonists may be Mexicans, Chinese, or members of Native American bands. Readers might still wish to revisit traditional themes, but revisionist Westerns can also appeal to those wanting to explore relatable, multi-dimensional characters and compelling narratives. Author Gordon D. Shirreffs called this style "off-the-trail stories," an informal term for those novels that do not follow the patterns of the standard Western.

Not all revisionist Westerns were devoted to social commentary, though, some were written strictly for entertainment. For instance, the "Piccadilly Cowboys" were a loose collection of British writers in the 1970s and 1980s who lived in the United Kingdom rather than the United States. Possibly influenced on the cinematic "spaghetti westerns," they wrote their stories based solely on literary conventions and varying degrees of research. Their novels are typically paperbacks that emphasize vividly brutal violence and anti-heroes or sympathetic villains. Protagonists may be amoral drifters who possess the slimmest of moral codes but are more concerned with their own survival. Yet, these stories could be well-written with engaging plots and characters.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1940), Charles Neider's *The Authentic Death of Hendry Jones* (1956), Gordon D. Shirreffs's *Rio Bravo* (1956) and *Slaughter at Broken Bow* (1963), Oakley Hall's *Warlock* (1958), Edmund Naughton's *McCabe* (1959), John Prebble's *The Buffalo Soldiers* (1959), John Williams's *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), Elmore Leonard's *Hombre* (1961), Fred Grove's *Comanche Captives* (1961), Brian Garfield's *Vultures in the Sun* (1963), Matt Chisholm's *McAllister* (1963), Robert MacLeod's *Appaloosa* (1963), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), and Charles Portis's *True Grit* (1968) are classic examples.

Common Elements

The West as a place of conflict and tension
Critical view of the West
Complex characters and themes
Morally ambiguous storylines

Darker aspects of human nature
Bleak and sardonic humor
Pervasive and unheroic violence
Nihilist tone

Modern Literary Examples

<i>American Meteor</i> (2015) by Norman Lock
<i>Anything for Billy</i> (1988) by Larry McMurtry
<i>The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford</i> (1983) by Ron Hansen
<i>Blood Meridian</i> (1985) by Cormac McCarthy
<i>Bloody Season</i> (1987) by Loren D. Estleman
<i>The Borderlands</i> (2000) by Edwin Shrake
<i>Buffalo Woman</i> (1977) by Dorothy M. Johnson
<i>Cherokee America</i> (2020) by Margaret Verble
<i>Dances with Wolves</i> (1991) by Michael Blake
<i>Deadwood</i> (1986) by Pete Dexter
<i>The Drop Edge of Yonder</i> (2008) by Rudolph Wurlitzer
<i>Fools Crow</i> (1986) by James Welch
<i>Ghost Town</i> (1998) by Robert Coover
<i>God's Country</i> (1994) by Percival Everett
<i>Haints Stay</i> (2015) by Colin Winnette
<i>The Horseman</i> (1988) by Glendon Swarthout
<i>How Much of These Hills is Gold</i> (2020) by C. Pam Zhang

<i>In the Distance</i> (2017) by Hernán Diaz
<i>The Last Shootist</i> (2014) by Miles Hood Swarthout
<i>The Loner</i> (1972) by George G. Gilman
<i>Lonesome Dove</i> (1985) by Larry McMurtry
<i>The Manhunter</i> (1970) by Gordon D. Shirreffs
<i>News of the World</i> (2016) by Paulette Giles
<i>Overkill</i> (1972) by John Benteen
<i>The Revenant</i> (2015) by Michael Punke
<i>St. Agnes' Stand</i> (1994) by Thomas Eidson
<i>The Sergeant's Lady</i> (1993) by Miles Hood Swarthout
<i>Sawbones</i> (2017) by Melissa Lenhardt
<i>The Shootist</i> (1975) by Glendon Swarthout
<i>The Sisters Brothers</i> (2011) by Patrick deWitt
<i>Soledad, or, Solitudes</i> (1986) by R. G. Vliet
<i>The Son</i> (2013) by Philip Meyer
<i>Trail of the Spanish Bit</i> (1980) by Don Coldsmith
<i>The Violent Peace</i> (1974) by George G. Gilman
<i>Whiskey When We're Dry</i> (2018) by John Larison