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Dare to Know

Western Fiction

Fiction that features the American West during the period of westward expansion.

This wide-ranging genre typically depicts events occurring west of the Mississippi River between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century. Novelist Louis L'Amour labeled his corpus of work “frontier fiction,” as many books involved pre-war long hunters and frontiersmen and their modern-day counterparts. These and similar titles by other authors share numerous common themes with more traditional Westerns. A mixture of fact and myth, Westerns are primarily shaped and driven by the Euroamerican settling of the American West, involve elements of the period, and rely on the characteristics of the frontier era. In addition to entertainment, the genre offers readers a sweeping sense of epic adventure, discovery of the unexpected, and boundless variety. Either on horseback or by wagon train, characters defy social conventions in pursuit of endless possibilities, challenges and crucibles, and incredible opportunity, all beyond the constraints of bureaucracy and technology. The complex characters, rich settings, and enduring themes are specific and exclusive to the genre, although the presence of research, historically accurate settings, and realistic actions varies widely. Focus is often given to the prairies, mountains, and deserts of the western frontier, a harsh yet beautiful landscape that is almost a central character. A sizable amount of text may be reserved for descriptions of the wide-open spaces, and nature’s obstacles—storms, drought, locusts and grasshoppers, rough terrain, and wild animals—can play a large role in the stories.

Prevailing themes are the tensions between wilderness and civilization, nature and culture, and individual and community. Westerns emphasize the extent of modernity, usually by the contrast between the wild lands—the plains, deserts, and mountains, and their native inhabitants—and the trappings of progress—towns, railroads, ranches, and farms. The vastness of the West seems to promise individual freedom, fresh starts, and national greatness, while cities and towns require cooperation and compromise. First into the untamed land were the vanguard of civilization—the hunters, trappers, cowboys, prospectors, and soldiers—who were followed by the small farmers, ranchers, and entrepreneurs. The agrarian advance, the building of the railroads, the mining booms, the great cattle drives, the Indian wars, and the exploits of peace officers and bad men provide ample fodder for Western authors. These stories explore the resolution of conflict through violence, the exercise of physical strength and courage, and the concerns of moral dramas and dilemmas.

Westerns can serve as a framing device to examine the social concerns, attitudes, and mores of the time in which the novel is published and the society that produces them. More often than not, they emphasize the virtues of moral and physical daring, rugged individualism, hope, and faith, and quite a few openly decry racism, sexism, and imperialism.

Western fiction grew out of the frontier and adventure stories of the early nineteenth century, and “penny dreadfuls” and “dime novels” of the mid to late, and captured a nostalgia and romantic yearning for an era and way of life that was ending, or never existed in the first place. Westerns share a common setting, but novels and authors can differ significantly in terms of narrative structure, language, themes, locations, and characters. The first thirty years of the genre’s existence saw authors refining the literary formula. From the 1930s through the late 1960s,

Westerns were one of the most sought-after genres in popular literature. The genre began shrinking in terms of output in the 1980s and 1990s, but the 21st century has seen a modest resurgence. While the volume of recent works does not approach the post-war heyday of the 1950s, the quality tends to be high, especially given the reluctance of publishing houses to take risks on a supposedly outdated genre.

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) is considered the first Western novel, and other foundational examples include Andy Adams's *The Log of a Cowboy* (1903), B. M. Bowers's *Chip of the Flying U* (1906), Clarence E. Mulford's *Bar-20* (1906), William MacLeod Raine's *A Texas Ranger* (1910), Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), Hal G. Evarts's *The Cross Pull* (1920), Johnston McCulley's *The Mark of Zorro* (1924), Walt Coburn's "The Ringtailed Rannyhans" (1927), Ernest Haycox's *Free Grass* (1929), and William Colt McDonald's *Gun Country* (1929).

Common Elements

Westward expansion	American Indians	Dusty saloons
Civilization vs. wilderness	Homesteaders	Wagon trains
Western archetypes (e.g., cowboys, scouts, gunfighters, bounty hunters, lawmen, outlaws, gamblers)	Conflict	Railroads
Lawlessness	Wilderness and vast landscapes	Stagecoaches
The pursuit of justice or revenge	Cattle ranches	Manhunts
U.S. Cavalry	Cattle drives	Shootouts
	Wild and woolly cow towns	Saloon brawls
	Gold and silver mines	Gambling
	Mining camps	Friendly or hostile relations with American Indians

Benefits of Reading

Allows readers to understand the cultural significance of the American West	Inspires readers with examples of resilience, competence, physical courage, strength of character, and vitality
Enables readers to examine the settling and evolution of the West, both positive and negative	Encourages readers to consider the fundamental tension between one's individuality and contributing to society
Provides readers with an opportunity to explore the history and mythology of the West	Demonstrates to readers the concepts of family, faith, hard work, and dreams for a better tomorrow

Westerns can be divided into three subsets: traditional Westerns, revisionist Westerns, and contemporary Westerns.