

The Social, Psychological and Cultural Significance of Westerns

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By

Arthur Asa Berger

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This book is dedicated to my University of Minnesota mentors: Mulford Q. Sibley (my dissertation advisor), Dave Noble, Ralph Ross, and all the other professors who taught in the American Studies program. Choosing to attend the University of Minnesota was one of the best choices I have ever made, except, of course, for marrying my wife Phyllis in 1961, who, to my good fortune, was also a student there, in the Philosophy department.

Up to our own day, American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement explains American development. Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet challenging conditions. The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people.

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom -- these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out of elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.

—Frederic Jackson Turner, “The Frontier in American History”

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this book turned out to be an interesting and challenging experience and a return to writing about popular culture texts. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in 1965 on a comic strip, *Li'l Abner* (I believe it was the first dissertation on a comic strip), and have published books about comic strips, television shows, and other aspects of popular culture, off and on, since 1970. My dissertation was published and that started me off on my career as a professor and a writer. I am grateful to all the thinkers, theorists, writers, and scholars whose work I have quoted and whose work provided interesting insights into the social, cultural, and psychological significance of Western books and films. Some material in this book by me has been previously published in an altered form. Intertextual theory suggests that all texts are influenced by previously published works so it is not to be unexpected that this book borrows from the ideas and writings of others (and myself) and quotes them in various places, but never for more than 350 words from books.

TAKEAWAYS

These Takeaways offer an overview of some of the topics discussed in the book, which includes discussions of the ideas and writings of many of the most important scholars whose works provide insights into the Western novel and two important Western films. Among the writers and theorists discussed are Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Bruno Bettelheim, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Pierre Bourdieu. This book will be of interest to anyone interested in the Western genre but also to students of popular culture, semiotics, literary studies, narratives, and creative writing.

1.

Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier theory, which explains American character and culture. In essence, he argued that it is the Frontier experience that stripped Americans of European and other influences and led to American individualism.

2.

The origin of the term 'cowboy' is quite interesting. White men were called "ranch hands" and black people were called the pejorative "cowboys."

3.

Bruno Bettelheim on the importance of fairy tales and by implication other stories for the psychological equilibrium involving consciousness, the preconscious and the unconscious.

What Bettelheim wrote about fairy tales can be applied to novels and narratives of all kinds.

4.

The unrecognized psychological gratifications we get from reading stories or seeing plays and films and other kinds of narratives. Uses and gratifications theory focuses upon the way people use texts and not on the way mediated texts affect them.

5.

The ideas of Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman on the notion that everything in artistic texts is meaningful since texts concentrate an enormous amount of information in a small area.

6.

Westerns are narratives that conform to certain formulas or conventions and which contain many hidden meanings and whose impact on their readers, and viewers of Western films and television shows is significant.

7.

Westerns usually take place from the 1850's to the end of the 19th century, though some take place in contemporary times. It is the plots and signifiers such as cowboys, ten-gallon hats, horses, and sixguns that tell us we are watching a Western.

8.

Many scholars argue that the Western was created by James Fenimore Cooper, whose books *The Pioneer* and *The Last of the Mohicans* started the genre.

9.

Among the historically most important Westerns are: Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), Jack Schaefer, *Shane* (1949), *High Noon* (1952) and Larry McMurty, *The Last Picture Show* (1971).

10.

There have been many categorizations of kinds of Westerns. John R. Milton argues in an article in the *Chicago Review* that there are three basic kinds of Westerns: The Cowboy novel, the Historical novel and the Regional novel, but there are many other typologies about kinds of Westerns, which have continued to evolve over the years. Milton lists some dominant plots in Westerns: the Lone Cowboy, the Beautiful woman with a tragic past, the Anti-Hero and the Outlaw.

11.

Westerns are highly formulaic, which means they have stock characters and easily recognizable plot structures that take place in certain locations with conventional kinds of heroes and villains. This formulaic structure makes it easier for readers to understand the meaning of actions in the stories.

12.

We use the term “text” in academic writing to refer to works of all kinds that are being analyzed. Thus, we call novels, films, commercials, cartoons, comics, and so on, texts.

13.

Westerns are narratives, which means they have a linear structure and are sequential. Narratives are one of the fundamental ways people make sense of the world (the other way in logico-scientific) and find meaning in things and events. We find narratives in other popular genres, in conversations, in games and in dreams, and many other places.

14.

Narratives are full of logical holes and rely on the readers to apply their background knowledge to fill in the gaps found in the stories. One literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser, argues that it is readers who bring a book into being when they read the book.

Until then, it is just an inanimate object.

15.

One of the most important way that writers inform readers about what is going on in a narrative text is through dialogue, in which characters disclose things about themselves, reveal their motivations, and provide information about what is happening in the text. Narratives work by providing information to readers about the events in the plot, the motivations of characters, and related concerns.

16.

In texts, each word is important and provides readers with insights into the personalities and motivations of the characters who use these words. An

example I used in the book is the difference between saying that a character “said” and “snarled” or “hissed.” That is, each word has a direct meaning and various connotations of significance. Thus, for example, the word “whisper” suggests secrecy. Every word a writer uses in a book involves a choice and conveys information and meanings to a book’s readers.

17.

In written texts, descriptions of the characters made by the writer also often convey important information. Thus, the names of characters, their age, race, hair style, voice, facial expressions, clothes worn, and the landscape all affect the way readers regard characters. Landscapes play an important role in film and television Westerns but also in written texts, where the descriptions of the landscape can almost be considered as functioning like a character.

18.

It is the actions of characters, which reveal their beliefs, values, motivations, etc. that create the story. Generally in Westerns, there are conflicts to be resolved, unexpected events to be dealt with, and that kind of thing to generate dramatic excitement. In popular fictions genres such as Westerns, there are certain kinds of conflicts that are formulaic: heroes versus villains, truth tellers versus liars and so on. The thoughts of characters and dialogue between them also play a major role in narrative texts.

19.

The Swiss semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure explained that oppositions are basic to language and shape the way our minds make sense of things. The meaning of concepts is based on their being the opposite of another concept and so it is relations between concepts (oppositional) that generate meaning. There is a difference between opposition (such as “happy” and “sad” and negation which is “happy” and “unhappy.” In Westerns, oppositions such as “good” and “evil,” “brave and cowardly” and “hero and villain” are important.

20.

Writers often used stereotyped characters to provide readers with information needed to understand the events in a text and provide motivations and an understanding of the behavior of characters.

Stereotypes are generally negative but can be positive or, in some cases, neutral. We can consider the color of cowboy hats (black for evil and white for good) as a semiotic means of stereotyping.

21.

Although Westerns conventionally take place at a certain time and place in America, they deal with universal themes found in classic novels, plays and other texts, such as the power of love, the desire for the revenge of an injustice, and the undertaking of perilous tasks.

22.

Freudian psychoanalytic theory is an important and useful discipline used to analyze literary texts of all kinds and will be helpful in explaining the significance of various aspects of Westerns. The same can be said about semiotic theory, sociological theory and Marxist theory, which will also be used in discussing the social, political, economic and cultural importance Westerns. These methodologies help us understand how Westerns achieve their literary goals, what they reflect about the societies in which they are found, and the psyches of the creators of the texts and their audiences.

23.

Semiotics is a methodology that deals with how we find meaning in our conversations, everyday experiences, and in texts (in all media) of all kinds. It argues that we are always sending messages to others and receiving messages from others that are encoded in the clothes we wear, the foods we eat, our facial expressions and our gestures, among other things. The term semiotics is based on the Greek word for sign. A sign is anything that can be used to stand for something else. One problem with signs is that they can be used to lie, so we have to be careful about decoding them.

24.

In order to understand the meaning of signs, we have to know the codes that explain them. Signs, according to Saussure (one of the founding fathers of the science) are composed of an object, sound, image, etc. which he called a *signifier* and the meaning that the signifier generated, which he calls a *signified*. Thus, in Westerns, a white cowboy hat generally signifies a hero and a black hat signifies a villain.

25.

Semiotically speaking, Westerns are very rich with many signifiers such as cowboy hats, sixguns, horses, beautiful landscapes, cowboy boots, and sheriff's stars.

26.

According to many scholars, Westerns help reinforce basic American values and beliefs about the triumph of good versus evil, the importance of community, and individualism. Some scholars also connect the "wild west" with the violence that is all pervasive in American society.

27.

Westerns are a genre of popular literature. The term "genre" is French for "kind of." Each genre has certain formulaic aspects and conventions such as ritualistic gun fights, Western clothing (ten-gallon hats) and themes that let readers know which genre they are reading. The settings of Westerns, in small towns in the American West in the latter part of the nineteenth century, are an important Westerns signifier.

28.

The most important popular culture novel genres are romance novels, mysteries, horror stories, science fiction stories, fantasies, and spy stories. Some writers now mix genres and so we can have Western detective stories, Western Romance novels or Western science fiction novels.

29.

Some classic plots in Westerns are: The Union-Pacific railroad story; the ranch story; the "Empire Builder" stories about Western Imperialists; the revenge story, the "Custer's Last Stand" story about battles with Native Americans, the Outlaw story and the "Marshall Story"

30.

There are often mythic elements in Westerns which are discussed in a "Myth Model" in this book that shows how myth informs historical experience, elite culture texts, popular culture texts, and everyday life. Many scholars who write about Westerns deal with their mythic elements.

31.

Media scholars have developed lists of uses and gratifications provided by popular culture genres and texts, such as seeing heroes in action, reinforcing belief in justice and being entertained. Westerns do an excellent job of offering many gratifications to their readers, which helps explain the popularity of Western texts in all media.

32.

The 1953 film *Shane*, directed by George Stevens, is generally considered to be one of the greatest Western ever made. Some of the more important psychoanalytic perspectives on the film by various film writers are discussed along with important mythic elements in the work.

33.

Another classic Western film, *High Noon*, is discussed with a focus on the themes and kinds of conflict, especially moral, found in the film. It is possible to see the film as, in essence, a morality story with a heroic marshal, a cowardly townsfolk and a ruthless killer.

34.

A primer of Freudian psychoanalytic theory is offered to prepare readers for psychoanalytic perspectives on Westerns dealt with in this book. Among the topics discussed in the primer are Freud's theories about the unconscious, the conflict in the psyche between the Id, Ego and Superego, the Oedipus complex, and important defense mechanisms of the Ego.

35.

The ideas of Martin Grotjahn, a Freudian psychiatrist, are discussed. He focuses attention on Oedipal aspects of Westerns and suggests they are, in essence, retellings of the Oedipus story.

36.

A film scholar, Dennis DeNitto, offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Shane* that focuses on the Oedipal jealousy of the son of one of the main characters, the child Joey.

37.

Freud's discussion of symbolism explains the phallic significance of guns, knives and penetrating objects, of all kinds. He also discusses the symbolic representation of female genitalia. Freud suggests that one reason we enjoy literature with hidden sexual content is that we can enjoy these works without reproach or shame.

38.

One of the most important academic studies of the Western, by Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*, is discussed in some detail. Kitses focuses his attention on the difference between the Wilderness and Civilization and offers a chart of bipolar oppositions between the two. These oppositions, he argues, help explain American identity.

39.

A psychoanalytically oriented British anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer, argues in a discussion of national character in his book *The American People: A Study in National Character*, that American character is based on a rejection of the European father as a model of moral authority and European culture, in general.

40.

Another important study of the Western, John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*, uses Marxist theory and psychoanalytic theory to explain the importance of Westerns. Cawelti is interested in the hidden ideological aspects of the genre that are used to shape the consciousness of people who read Westerns and see Western films. Westerns, Cawelti argues, contain certain formulas and widely accepted ideas, which make Westerns particularly interesting for culture critics.

41.

A third important study of the Western, Will Wright's *Sixguns and Society: a Structural Study of the Western*, argues that there are four basic plots in Westerns: the classical plot (1930-1955), the vengeance variation (1930-1960), the transition theme (early fifties), and the professional plot (1958-1970). Each of these plots reflects important social, political, economic and cultural beliefs.

42.

A French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that taste is connected to socio-economic status. He argues that “the idea of personal opinion (like the idea of personal taste) is an illusion.” This suggests that our tastes are connected to our educational level, our status, our wealth and related concerns.

Since the child at every moment of his life is exposed to the society in which he lives, he will certainly learn to come with its conditions, provided his inner resources permit him to do so....Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their retelling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings—came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult.

—Bruno Bettelheim. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

The term *cowboy*, originally written *cow-boy*, was first used by the author Jonathan Swift in the early 18th century to refer to a boy who looked after cows. The common current meaning...dates from the mid-19th century, when it was still hyphenated. The word was first used to refer to an unscrupulous or incompetent trader in the 1970s.

—Macmillan Dictionary

Initially, white ranchers referred to white workers as “cow hands,” with **Black** people in the same position referred to with the pejorative “cow boy.” Over time the term **cowboy** came to apply to anyone in the industry of herding cattle.

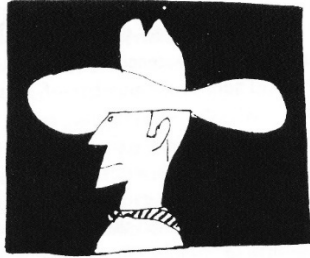
—Ozell Smith

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-word-cowboy>

Contrary to what the homogenous imagery depicted by Hollywood and history books would lead you to believe, cowboys of color have had a substantial presence on the Western frontier since the 1500s. In fact, the word “cowboy” is believed by some to have emerged as a derogatory term used to describe Black cowhands.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-cowboy-photography_n_5882237fe4b070d8cad1f79d

PREFACE



The Social, Psychological and Cultural Significance of Westerns is about cowboy Western books and two important Western films, *Shane* and *High Noon*. My focus is on the psychological, social, and cultural significance of Westerns, a narrative genre of major importance in American popular culture. What you will find, as you read this book, is that while the stories may have relatively simple plot lines, compared to classic novels, and are based on certain formulas, their psychological significance and cultural importance is a very complicated matter.

Fans of Westerns read them to entertain themselves, but, as I will show—in considerable detail—there's more to reading Westerns, or any novel, than meets the eye. My argument is that people read Westerns because these stories provide certain psychological and social payoffs and benefits.

Psychological Payoffs from Stories

This argument, that stories have an important role in our psychological equilibrium, is made by Bruno Bettelheim in his classic study of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*. Children love fairy tales and like to hear them told over and over again. Why does that happen? Bettelheim's answer is that these stories all carry messages to children at various levels of their psyches. He writes (1976:5-6):

Applying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales

carry important messages to the conscious, preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time. By dealing with universal human problems, particularly those which occupy the child's mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures. As the stories unfold, they give conscious credence and body to id pressures and show ways to satisfy these that are in line with ego and superego requirements.

I supply a short primer on psychoanalytic theory, for those not familiar with it, that helps my readers to know something about the fundamental concepts in this theory, since they play an important role in helping us understand the messages Westerns carry to our psyches. My argument, in short, is that Westerns appeal to us because, like fairy tales, they help us deal with unconscious pressures that disturb us and provide many gratifications.

That is, when we read a western, and Westerns have some features similar to what we find in fairy tales. We get two messages. One is overt, which is the plot of the story. But there are hidden or covert messages in these stories, which affect us in important ways, but we are not aware or conscious of getting these messages. Because of the unrecognized psychological gratifications we obtain from these stories, we enjoy reading them and, in some cases, find ourselves wanting to read new versions of these stories over and over again.

Figure 0.1



Yuri Lotman

A Russian communication scholar, Yuri Lotman, has an explanation of why Westerns and other genres or kinds of novels are so important to us. He writes in his book, *The Structure of Artistic Texts*:

The tendency to interpret *everything* in an artistic text as meaningful is so great that we rightfully consider nothing accidental in a work of art...Since it can concentrate a tremendous amount of information into the “area” of a very small text...an artistic text manifests yet another feature: it transmits different information to different readers in proportion to each one’s comprehension; it provides the reader with a language in which each successive portion of information may be assimilated with repeated reading. It behaves as a kind of living organism which has a feedback channel to the reader and thereby instructs him

In academic writing, we use the term “text” to stand for any creative work such as a novel, a commercial, a poem, or a comic book. Lotman’s point is that everything in a text is important and that texts contain an enormous amount of information—so much that when we read a text such as a Western a second time, we get new insights into the story’s meaning. That explains why we can enjoy reading the same book or seeing the same film more than once.

This book, then, is about Westerns as narratives that follow certain conventions and about Westerns as a popular culture genre. But, it is also about the hidden meanings found in these stories by psychologists and other kinds of scholars, and, in addition, the impact these stories may be having on their readers, or viewers, in the case of films and what these stories reflect about American character and culture.

There have been three important scholarly books on Westerns, and I will devote a chapter to each of these books. You can think of my book as similar to a trial before a judge. You, my readers, are the judges. I cite many works with my quotations serving as witnesses, to support my theories and arguments. I like to use quotations so my readers can see what my witnesses/experts had to say about a topic and how they said it.

You may be unfamiliar with some of the ideas expressed in this book, both in what I write and what the authors I quote have to say. So this book may be providing more than you expected, which, to my mind, is a good thing. The more you know, the more you see and understand, so if you come across an idea or theory that strikes you as far-fetched or absurd, consider it as something worth thinking about, at least.

I write in a conversational and accessible style and illustrate the book with my drawings, here and there, to give the book more visual interest. I also offer many quotations to provide my readers with insights from a wide range of thinkers. I like to use quotations so readers can see what the

people I quote have to say and how they expressed themselves. I offer a page of quotations before each chapter from a variety of sources that I believe will be of interest.

I have published a number of academic murder mysteries, so I bring to this study of Westerns my experiences writing works of fiction, which explains why I discuss some of the topics I write about in this book.

Britannica.com offers the following definition of the Western:

Western, a genre of novels and short stories, motion pictures, and television and radio shows that are set in the American West, usually in the period from the 1850s to the end of the 19th century. Though basically an American creation, the western had its counterparts in the gaucho literature of Argentina and in tales of the settlement of the Australian outback. The genre reached its greatest popularity in the early and middle decades of the 20th century and declined somewhat thereafter.

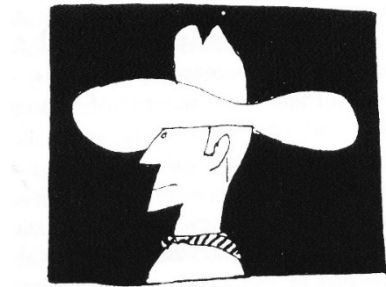
The western has as its setting the immense plains, rugged tablelands, and mountain ranges of the portion of the United States lying west of the Mississippi River, in particular the Great Plains and the Southwest. This area was not truly opened to white settlement until after the American Civil War (1861–65), at which time the Plains Indians were gradually subdued and deprived of most of their lands by white settlers and by the U.S. cavalry. The conflict between white pioneers and Indians forms one of the basic themes of the western. Another sprang out of the class of men known as cowboys, who were hired by ranchers to drive cattle across hundreds of miles of Western pasturelands to railheads where the animals could be shipped eastward to market. The cattle and mining industries spurred the growth of towns, and the gradual imposition of law and order that such settled communities needed was accomplished by another class of men who became staple figures in the western, the town sheriff and the U.S. marshal. Actual historical persons in the American West have figured prominently in latter-day re-creations of the era. Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp, and other lawmen have frequently been portrayed, as have such outlaws as Billy the Kid and Jesse James. The western has always provided a rich mine for stories of adventure, and indeed a huge number of purely commercial works have capitalized on the basic appeal of gunslinging frontier adventurers, desperadoes, and lawmen. But the western has also furnished the material for a higher form of artistic vehicle, particularly in motion pictures.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/western>

There are many definitions of Westerns used by writers with different perspectives on the subject.

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WESTERN



Depending upon how you define a Western, we have had them for a long, long time. It is generally accepted that James Fenimore Cooper created the Western novel with his books, *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and other novels. You will find, as you read this book, many typologies—that is, lists--of kinds of Westerns and discussions of their basic plots and other attributes.

Important Western Novels and Films

I list, below, a sampling of the more important Western novels, and filmed Westerns from the earliest days to the sixties, when they were at the height of their popularity.

I also add a chart based upon a list on Goodreads of the “Best Contemporary Novels from 1960 to the Present.” There have been so many Westerns written and so many Western films made that it would take many volumes in tiny print to record them all. Some of the more important ones are listed below.

Table 1.1 Important Westerns

AUTHOR	BOOK TITLE
Simms, W.G.	The Yemassee (1835)
Paulding, J.K.	Westward Ho (1832)
Wister, Owen	The Virginian (1902)
Grey, Zane	The Spirit of the Border (1905)
Grey, Zane	Shadow on the Trail (1942)
Hough, Emerson	The Story of the Cowboy (1897)
Hough, Emerson	The Covered Wagon (1922)
Brand, Max	The Untamed (1918)
Schaefer, Jack	Shane (1949)
Short, Luke	The Branded Man (1953)
Short, Luke	Rimrock (1955)
McMurty, Larry	Leaving Cheyenne (2002)
Guthrie, A.B.	The Way West (1949)
LeMay, Alan	The Searchers (1954)
BEST CONTEMPORARY	GOODREADS LIST FROM 1960 TO PRESENT
McCarthy, Cormac	Blood Meridian
McMurty, Larry	Lonesome Dove
Portis, Charles	True Grit
Meyer, Philipp	The Son
Abbey, Edward	Desert Solitaire
Stegner, Wallace	Angle of Repose
McCarthy, Cormac	No Country for Old Men
McMurty, Larry	The Last Picture Show
Doig, Ivan	Work Song
Hansen, Richard	Desperadoes
Swarthout, Glendon	They Came to Cordura
BEST SELLERS AMAZON	
Palet, C.J.	Riding Shotgun
Palet, C.J.	Jake
Schwab, Ron	Old Dogs
Isaacson, Liz	The Networking of a Nativity
DIRECTOR	WESTERN FILMS
Edwin Porter	The Great Train Robbery (1903)
D. W. Griffith	Fighting Blood (1911)
Cecil B. DeMille	The Squaw Man (1913)
John Ford	The Outcasts of Poker Flat (1919)
Victor Fleming	The Virginian (1929)
Raoul Walsh	The Big Trail (1930)

King Vidor	Billy the Kid (1930)
Wesley Ruggles	Cimarron (1931)
John Forde	Stagecoach (1939)
George Marshall	Destry Rides Again (1939)
Howard Hawks	The Last Round-Up (1947)
Fred Zinneman	High Noon (1952)
George Stevens	Shane (1953)
John Farrow	Hondo (1953)
Marlon Brando	One-Eyed Jacks (1959)
John Wayne	The Alamo (1960)
Sergio Leone	A Fistful of Dollars (1966)
Henry Hathaway	True Grit (1969)
Sam Peckinpah	The Wild Bunch (1969)
George Roy Hill	Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969)

We can see from this chart that Western novels and Western films (many of which were based on novels and short stories) are an important popular culture genre. Many novelists have based their novels in the western states, but unless the novel has the kinds of characters and plots we associate with the Western, isn't really a Western but, instead, a novel that takes place in the west. Quite a few people who have written scholarly books and articles about Westerns have come up with formulas for the "classic" Western and I will discuss some of these formulas in the chapters to come.

Formulaic Westerns and Contemporary Westerns

There are also differences between the formulaic "classic" Western and some Westerns written in recent years that take liberties with the traditional formula.

For example, Tom Lin published a Western *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu*, which featured a Chinese killer with a ten thousand dollar bounty on his head which focuses not on the traditional Western cowboy hero but on people who helped build the west, like the Chinese, who are not part of the Western mythology. Lin's hero feels attached to the West but alienated from the people living there.

In a review of the book that appeared in *The New York Times* on June 4, 2021, "Gunslingers Comes in All Shapes and Sizes," by Alexander Alter, Lin is quoted as saying, "I began to realize that they kept rehashing the same

themes of settler expansion or white male dominance and that these different takes on Westerns weren't actually different." Lin's book, then, is an attempt to move beyond what he sees as outdated conventions that are uninteresting and stale. It is quite unusual to have a Chinese person as the central figure in a Western. The book has shootouts and other conventions of the Western, but it reflects a different perspective on the subject, putting into the foreground a person from a group usually relegated to the background.

Alter also discusses the work of another Chinese novelist, C. Pam Zhang, whose book "How Much of These Hills Is Gold," takes place during the Gold Rush and is about the "loneliness of the immigrant experience," which she deals with. Zhang argues that the Western is an unfinished genre "that is imperfect and inherently full of contradictions." These books are a response to the way in which Chinese people, and other minorities, have been relegated in the past to a secondary status in Westerns and, generally speaking, in the "cultural history of the West."

Lin's book suggests that many writers still see the Western as an interesting genre but are moving beyond the limitations of the traditional Western formula in their books. What they are doing is keeping part of the formula, but substituting different kinds of heroes than you find in conventional Westerns—in this case, a Chinese gunfighter replacing the formerly all-white heroes with their white cowboy hats. Lin says he believes that the Western never really died out and Westerns are ripe for a revival. His book can be seen as an important contribution to the continuing story of the evolution of the Western.

A Simmons guide to Westerns offers this definition of the genre and lists some basic plots:

According to John R. Milton in his 1963 article in the *Chicago Review*, there are three essential categories of The Western Novel: The Cowboy Novel, so named for its protagonist bent on taming the beasts and the land of the American West, The Historical Novel, which focuses on the events essential to the formation of the West as part of America, and The Regional Novel, which meditates on the specificity and beauty of regions out West like Montana's mountains or Arizona's desert. The truth is, of course, that the definition of what makes a Western is fluid, changing over time and across shifts in cultural values. In what we will define here as a "Traditional Western," you will find the 1800s American West portrayed as a vast and wild expanse, and you will find someone who survives it or tames it. Traditional Westerns feature strong, white, male protagonists exerting