



## Living in the Modern Rural West Theme Essay



"Living in the Modern Rural West" theme materials were created by Susan Swetnam, Idaho State University, 2007.

### Theme Essay

The American rural West has been a locus for American dreams and fantasies since the nineteenth century. Those dreams have involved economic success, as a variety of promoters (railroads, land agencies, the U.S. Government itself) urged Americans to begin their lives again in this place of abundant land. Americans have also dreamed that starting over economically would mean re-inventing themselves in a world of new freedom, new opportunity. In all of that open, glorious space, surely any man, any woman, any family willing to work could prosper.

Some immigrants did prosper. The West, however, has always been a place where many people, through no fault of their own, discovered physical hardship, emotional difficulties, even failure. In this place of boundless horizons, they found themselves paradoxically trapped in marginal economic situations; in prejudice; in psychological or physical isolation that made them wonder who they were.

The modern rural West continues to draw immigrants who seek its wide-open spaces, its beauty, its promise of independence. Today, too, however, an array of issues complicates life here. Land-use and conservation debates divide neighbors; urban sprawl threatens to gobble up the very wild spaces that immigrants sought. The West is no more free of prejudice, domestic abuse, or poverty of finances or spirit than any other region.

And yet contemporary Westerners still typically define themselves in terms of the landscape around them, weaving its possibility, its openness, its glorious other-ness into their stories of family and self. With their family or personal roots in the region typically just a few generations old (if that), Western writers' works frequently examine and re-examine what it means to be a Westerner, a family/a person set apart from an imagined "typical" American who is urban or suburban, an inhabitant of somewhere else. Forced to acknowledge that life in the region is not paradisiacal, that divisions of class and race and attitudes and gender do exist, they nevertheless insist that a relationship to the western landscape deeply informs the way that they operate in the world. They take strength from the land; they draw their values from the land; they wrestle with the land's challenges. The land makes and remakes them--individually, and in their relationships to others.

The books in this series, all written by contemporary Westerners, provide a variety of perspectives on rural life in the modern West. Ranging in location across the northern rural West from the Washington, to various regions of Idaho (the largest cluster), to Montana, these books present a realistic portrait of the west, admitting to difficulties and divisions and misery, both personal and familial. Readers will find hard questions and unpleasant truths revealed here, along with wry humor at the quirky nature of life in the region. And yet all of these writers also celebrate the particular Western landscapes that they chronicle, evoking the West's inspirational, restorative power even as they demolish the idea that coming west can solve all problems. The West, they suggest, is still a place where people can "find themselves," although perhaps not in the way that they expected.