

## Tough Paradise: The Literature of Idaho and the Intermountain West

Annotations by Susan Swetnam, Professor of English, Idaho State University

— *Balsamroot: A Memoir* (1994) traces the interlocked lives of three generations of women in the same family: Mary Blew (who now lives in Moscow, Idaho), her aunt Imogene and mother Doris (who grew up on a failed Montana homestead), and her daughters Elizabeth and Rachel. After a life of apparent independent happiness, "Auntie" comes to live near Blew and soon begins to decline, bringing Blew to explore past lives of women in her family and to face her own longings and her own assumptions about what makes a woman's life satisfying and full.

Mary Blew, who teaches English at the University of Idaho, grew up in Montana and is the author of two collections of short stories in addition to *All But the Waltz* (which won the 1992 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award), and *Balsamroot*. She co-edited *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Western Women Writers*.

### Book reviews

<http://endeavor.med.nyu.edu/lit-med/lit-med-db/webdocs/webdescrips/blew1163-des-.html>

[http://www.mcn.net/~joeb/Reading\\_Matters\\_08.html#balsamroot](http://www.mcn.net/~joeb/Reading_Matters_08.html#balsamroot)

— *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter* (1993) is a collection of autobiographical essays in which Janet Campbell Hale reflects on her youth as a member of a poor, troubled Indian family and on connections between her own identity and Indian culture and history. Lyrical, angry, caught up in the process of writing and self-creation, Hale explores what it means to her to be an Indian in contemporary America.

Janet Campbell Hale, born in 1947, is a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. Growing up on reservations and in cities around the Northwest, she attended college in Berkeley, California, and has published several books of poems, short fiction, several works for children, and two novels.

### Book Reviews:

<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/catalogs/spring98/pg06.htm>

<http://nativeamericas.aip.cornell.edu/old/Reviews/reviews.html#anchor19197>

<http://library.northernlight.com/SL19970613590000337.html?cb=0&sc=0#doc>

### About the Author:

<http://www.nativeauthors.com/search/bio/biohale.html>

<http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/jchale/>

— *Buffalo Coat* (1944) is Carol Ririe Brink's novelized account of events in Moscow, Idaho around the turn of the century. Brink's work details the yearning lives of women and men who feel not quite in tune with their town's spirit, as it traces the rivalries of several town doctors and their visions of life.

Carol Ririe Brink (1895-1981) was born in Moscow, the child of one of the families whose history is adapted in *Buffalo Coat*. An author of many children's books (including the Newbery Medal-winning *Caddie Woodlawn*), she also wrote an Idaho trilogy for adults, *Buffalo Coat*, *Strangers in the Forest*, and *Snow in the River*.

### **Book Reviews:**

Maher, Susan Naramore "Buffalo Coat: Carol Ryrie Brink's Tragic Vision of Opportunity" South Dakota Review. Spring 1995, vol. 33 no. 1

— *Cheerleaders from Gomorrah: Tales from the Lycra Archipelago* (1994), a collection of short stories, catches the rootless lives of ski bums, beautiful young people, and hangers-on in Sun Valley. Wickedly funny, its black humor touches on gender conflict, attempts to communicate, and yearning for meaning in a place many of the characters would describe as paradise.

John Rember, who grew up in the Sawtooth Valley, holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Montana and is currently writer-in-residence at Albertson College of Idaho. He has published a book of stories, *Coyote in the Mountains* and numerous essays, and has worked as a ski patrolman and ranger.

### **Book Reviews:**

<http://www.publicnews.com/issues/829/books.html>

<http://www.bookpeople.net/Book%20Reviews.htm#C>

— *Far Away Places* (1993), Tom Spanbauer's western gothic novel, may remind some readers of William Faulkner. Set on a farm north of Pocatello, it tells of a boy's sudden coming of age in a violent summer of racial prejudice, drought, corruption, and family turmoil.

Tom Spanbauer, who grew up in Idaho, is the author of two novels and lives in Portland, Oregon and New York City.

— *Heart of a Western Woman* (2nd ed., 1993) is a collection of ten stories by Leslie Leek, set in the eastern Idaho mountains and high desert country. The stories tell of independent women who derive identity and strength from the land and from each other. They are often heroic in the face of loneliness, the death of loved ones, or misunderstandings with the men in their lives.

Leslie Leek was born in Idaho and raised in Dubois and McCammon; she teaches Speech and Theater at Idaho State University.

### **Book Reviews:**

<http://www.lib.montana.edu/~notess/focus/bkrev.html>

— *Hole in the Sky* (1992), an autobiography, memoir, and family history, traces the life of William Kittredge. As a child, Kittredge grew up on his family's Warner Valley ranch in the southeastern Oregon desert country, and he felt deep connections to the land and to the cowboys who worked it. As he aged, life became more complicated, as the tensions and dissolutions within his family, new ideas about land use, and his own struggles to come to terms with himself led him away from the ranch to Montana and a new life as a writer.

William Kittredge, who teaches creative writing in Missoula, Montana, is the author of two collections of short stories and a book of essays and is editor of *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*.

### **Book Reviews:**

<http://speakeasy.org/wfp/07/Books.html>

<http://library.northernlight.com/SL19970613430000380.html?cb=0&sc=0#doc>

### About the Author

[http://range4u.com/stories/summer98/conversation\\_with\\_bill.htm](http://range4u.com/stories/summer98/conversation_with_bill.htm)

— *Home Below Hell's Canyon* (1954), an autobiographical account by Grace Jordan, describes the Jordan family's life on a remote sheep ranch in the 1930s in the Snake River Canyon south of Lewiston. With hard work, determination to live a simple, family-centered life, common sense, and good humor, family members adapt to and come to love their new, tough environment and discover strengths in themselves they never knew existed.

Grace Jordan worked as a journalist and taught writing at the Universities of Oregon and Washington. She married Len B. Jordan in 1924; he became Governor of Idaho in 1951. Grace Jordan published five books and numerous feature articles for the *Christian Science Monitor* and *National Observer*. She died in 1983.

— *Honey in the Horn* (1935), a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by H. L. Davis, tells of the lives of Oregon pioneers. With realistic and colorful detail and rough humor, the work describes the quirky individuality and essential isolation of various frontier types of men and women, as it describes the search for a suspected murderer and the yearning relationship between a young man and a gypsy-like horse seller's daughter.

H. L. Davis was born in Oregon in 1896 and died in 1960. He was encouraged in his writing by H. L. Menchen and published several book of poetry and fiction as well as stories, sketches, and articles in such periodicals as *American Mercury* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

### About the Author:

<http://www.tcu.edu/depts/prs/amwest/html/wl0416.html>

<http://elaine.teleport.com/~samc/Curtis/12-Davis.html>

— *Housekeeping* (1981), Marilynne Robinson's best-selling novel, tells the story of two orphaned girls who grow up under the care of their grandmother, then their two fumbling great-aunts after their grandmother dies, and finally, when the aunts flee, their mother's transient sister. Through Ruth, the central character, we discover that "Loneliness is a absolute state," but we also discover her housekeeping grandmother, who "would scan the shores to see how nearly the state of grace resembled the state of Idaho."

Robinson, who lives in Massachusetts, spent childhood summers with her grandparents in Coeur d'Alene and received her PhD from the University of Washington. This 1982 novel, her first, won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation award and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

### Book Reviews:

"Book reviews: *Housekeeping*" *The Horn Book Magazine*. April 1982 v 58 p. 199

"Book reviews: *Housekeeping*" *Commonweal* May 22, 1981 v.108 p. 306.

"Book reviews: *Housekeeping*" *The Nation*. Feb 7, 1981 v 232 p. 152

"Book reviews: *Housekeeping*" *The New Yorker*. March 23, 1981 v 57 p. 157

— *Idaho's Poetry: A Centennial Anthology* (1988), edited by Ron McFarland and William Studebaker, collects works from over one hundred of the state's poets. It is arranged by period, beginning with native American poems from five of Idaho's tribes, moving to pioneer poetry, to poets of the new state between 1900-1940, to "the third generation" of 1940-1980, to contemporary poets.

Ron McFarland teaches English at the University of Idaho and is the author of many books of poetry as well as works about James Welch, Norman Maclean, and other writers. William Studebaker is also a poet and writer of short stories, essays, and articles. He teaches at the College of Southern Idaho.

**For more information on the editors visit their websites:**

<http://www.uidaho.edu/~ronmcf/> (Ron McFarland)

[http://www.csi.cc.id.us/eventsninfo/personnel/ipfacdir/Detail.CFM?Employees\\_EmployeeID=406](http://www.csi.cc.id.us/eventsninfo/personnel/ipfacdir/Detail.CFM?Employees_EmployeeID=406) (William Studebaker)

— *Journal of a Trapper* (1965) recounts Osborne Russell's travels in southeastern Idaho, northern Utah, and western Wyoming between 1834 and 1843 as a trapper with Nathaniel Wyeth, Jim Bridger, and independently. With an observant, "factual" eye colored by the assumptions of his calling, Russell records what the country was like before Eastern settlers arrived: its geography and difficulty of travel, its plants and animals, its weather, its native people.

Osborne Russell, born in Maine in 1814, came west with Nathaniel Wyeth's company in 1834 and spent nine years roaming the northern Intermountain West in search of game. He left the life of a mountain man to settle in Oregon, where he briefly held public office, then went to California. He died in 1892.

**Book Reviews:**

<http://www.xmission.com/~drudy/mtman/html/ruslintr.html>

— *Lives of the Saints in Southeast Idaho: An Introduction to Mormon Pioneer Life Story Writing* (1990) is a study of the ways that Mormons tell the life stories of their pioneer experiences in biographies and autobiographies—what they emphasize and omit and organize, how they interpret events, what sort of language they choose. Using many extended direct quotes from an archive of over 6000 pages of original written material by LDS writers, it argues that not only do the works present rich insights into particular culture in a particular place, but they also deserve to be more widely known because of the enjoyable reading they provide.

Susan H. Swetnam is a Professor of English at Idaho State University. She has lived in Idaho since 1979 and is a freelance essayist in addition to her publications in Intermountain West studies.

— *Lochsa Road* (1991), a series of linked reflections/narratives, describes Kim Stafford's journey alone at a restless, dark point in his life over Lolo Pass, through Montana, and into Wyoming and Idaho. As he travels, Stafford is open to the whims of road experience, connects to the land he travels, and is spiritually reawakened along his "pilgrimage."

Kim Stafford, who grew up in the West, has taught ethnographic and environmental writing for many years and has won a Western States Book Award for his work, *Having*

*Everything Right*. He directs the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis and Clark College.

— *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) is a series of linked stories about contemporary life on and near the Spokane Indian Reservation. Angry, funny, bitter, these stories frankly depict the distance and the psychological and physical violence between people of different cultures, genders, and generations, yet the stories also testify to the power of hope and of cultural traditions.

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, has published three books of poetry and a collection of poetry and prose called *The Business of Fancydancing*, selected by the *New York Times* as one of its 1992 Notable Books of the Year.

**Book Reviews:**

<http://ctr.umkc.edu/user/rjlaroe/Tontrevu.htm>

<http://www.fallsapart.com/rvw-lr.html>

**About the Author:**

<http://www.fallsapart.com/>

<http://www.nativeauthors.com/search/bio/biosherman.html>

— *Myths of the Idaho Indians* (1980) collects, in prose narrative form, stories of the Kutneai, the Kalispel, the Coeur d'Alene, the Nez Perce, the Shoshone, and the Northern Paiute originally gathered by ethnologists, anthropologists, and historians. Myths of creation, of coyote tricksters, of birth and death and justice suggest the rich spiritual and aesthetic life of the tribes.

Deward Walker, Jr., Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, has published several books on Indian culture in the Intermountain West.

**Visit Prof. Walker's Homepage:**

<http://spot.colorado.edu/~walkerde/>

— *Near the Postcard Beautiful* (1993), is a collection of sixteen stories by Gino Sky about living in Idaho, Utah, and California. Often darkly funny, sometimes tough, sometimes lyrical, the stories describe Sky's family members, his friends, and his feelings about events of the twentieth-century West, including the Yucca Flats atomic testing and various aspects of sixties culture.

Gino Sky was born in Idaho and lived in California before returning to his native state. He is the author of two novels (including *Appaloosa Rising*), and several books of poetry.

**Book Reviews:**

[http://www.sage-online.com/1997/October/HTML/arts/book\\_review.htm](http://www.sage-online.com/1997/October/HTML/arts/book_review.htm)

— *Passages West: Nineteen Stories of Youth and Identity* (1990), edited by Hugh Nichols, is an anthology of nineteen short stories about coming of age in the West. Selections by writers including Ivan Doig, Norman Maclean, Wallace Stegner, Mary Clearman Blew, and Vardis

Fisher chronicle the anxieties and joys of young people searching for identity in a distinctive landscape.

Hugh Nichols is a Professor of English and Acting Academic Vice President at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston. He has written about H. L. Davis, Norman Maclean, Dorothy Johnson, and other Western writers.

— *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991) is an autobiographical account which chronicles a disruptive period in the life of author Terry Tempest Williams. In 1983, several sources of stability and inspiration for Williams were shaken, when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and her beloved Bear River Bird Refuge was threatened by the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake. Critical of less-than-sensitive responses to the land, Williams finds her own peace as she comes to embrace continuity in change, both in the land of her LDS ancestors and in rhythms of her family and her own life.

Terry Tempest Williams is Naturalist-in-Residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City. Her books include *Pieces of White Shell*, which won the Southwest Book Award, and *Coyote Canyon*, a collection of personal narratives of Utah's desert canyons.

#### **Book Reviews:**

<http://www.orionsociety.org/williams.html>

— *Sheep May Safely Graze* (1992) is a non-fiction account of the work of one third-generation Idaho sheep ranching family. In chronicling the family's traditions and describing the contemporary context in which the family operates, folklorist Louie Attebery addresses larger questions about the continuity and survival of family traditions and provides a vivid account of a vanishing way of life.

Louie Attebery is a Professor of English at Albertson College of Idaho in Caldwell. An Idaho native, he is an associate editor of *Northwest Folklore* and has many publications on Idaho folklore and literature. He has won the Idaho Library Association medal for the best book on an Idaho subject and the Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities Award from the Idaho Humanities Council.

— *Stories that Make the World: An Introduction to the Oral Literature and Storytelling of the Indian Peoples of the Inland Northwest* (1995) blends commentary about the traditions and contexts of oral storytelling with poetic transcriptions of tales told by Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, Crow, Bitterroot Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille elders. Arguing that oral literature must be understood in terms of its cultural functions and its communal performance, Rodney Frey's book explores and richly illustrates the "aesthetic and spiritual" truth of the stories it contains, while providing some poetic and linguistic guidelines for interpreting such texts.

Rodney Frey is an anthropologist who teaches for Lewis-Clark State College and directs the college's Panhandle Area Programs in Coeur d'Alene. He has done research and published articles and books on the Indian peoples of Montana and Idaho and has worked with public schools since 1974.

— *Stump Ranch Pioneer* (1942), an autobiographical account by Nelle Portrey Davis, chronicles how Davis and her family acquired land in the Idaho panhandle in 1936 after their

ranch in eastern Colorado failed in the dustbowl. The book is full of optimism about the value of hard work and simple, homey life, and about Americans' ability to be self-sufficient and neighborly in the face of Depression hardship.

Nelle Portrey Davis was born in Sidney, Nebraska in 1901. She became an active freelance writer for home and women's magazines and a wife and mother. *Stump Ranch Pioneer* was written at the request of the New York publisher Dodd, Mead, and Company after a sketch about the ranch appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. Davis lived in northern Idaho and eastern Washington until her death in 1986.

— *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) is a memoir describing Basque immigrant Dominique Laxalt's journey, accompanied by his son, back to his homeland after almost fifty years. As the elder Laxalt revisits the scenes of his youth and speaks with relatives about his hard life in America as a shepherd, he comes to recognize that the northern Nevada high desert has become his true home.

Robert Laxalt, born in 1923 to a sheep-herder father and a teacher mother in Alturas, California, is a long-time scholar of Basque history and culture. He has published novels, articles, and non-fiction books about Basques and about Nevada.

— *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (1981) is a novelized account of the life of Polly Bemis, a Chinese slave girl brought to the Warrens mining district of Idaho in the late 19th century. Describing anti-Chinese prejudice in Idaho, the novel also brings to life Polly's courage, hard work, and indomitable spirit as she adapts to life and to love in her new homeland.

Ruthanne Lum McCunn, born in 1946, lived her early life in San Francisco and spent summers in Boise with relatives where she encountered prejudice. A librarian and teacher, she became a writer to depict "the rich Chinese-American history that is totally unmined" and has published several books about Chinese American culture.

— *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West* (1972) presents the reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote, the cultivated Eastern wife of an engineer, who came to the Boise River Canyon in the 1880s. Foote, an illustrator and writer of short stories and sketches, chronicles her ambivalence to Idaho and to the West—she loves the harsh beauty of the land, but dislikes the isolation and the debilitating roughness of the life for women.

Mary Hallock Foote, born in New York State in 1847 to a Quaker family, was formally trained as an artist. Coming west as a bride with her husband in the 1870s, she lived in Colorado, Mexico, Idaho, and California, contributing stories and drawings about life in the West to a variety of Eastern periodicals; some of these are collected in *The Idaho Stories and Far West Illustrations of Mary Hallock Foote* (Idaho State University Press, 1988).

— *We Sagebrush Folks* (1934) Annie Pike Greenwood, an educated, cultivated woman, fell in love with the mountains and the light when her family moved to a Carey Act farm on the Twin Falls North Side Project. She was less charmed, though, by the adverse effects of the frontier, especially on women, and *We Sagebrush Folks* frankly tells, sometimes wryly, sometimes with anger, of the costs that hard work, poverty, and distance could exact on human beings.

Annie Pike Greenwood, who grew up as a "gentile" doctor's daughter in Utah, taught in a one-room school and helped her husband farm until the family lost its land in 1924. She then

taught at Idaho Technical Institute in Pocatello and contributed articles to periodicals including *Atlantic Monthly* and *Colliers*. She died in 1958.

— *Where the Morning Light's Still Blue: Personal Essays about Idaho* (1994) is a collection of thirty-five contemporary essays, edited by William Studebaker and Rick Ardinger, which catch a variety of responses and attitudes to the Idaho landscape. Writers from around the state describe their relationships to very particular places and chronicle their inspiration, frustration, love, and sometimes wry reactions. Quite varied in tone and style, the essays chronicle the diversity of writers' voices working in Idaho today.

William Studebaker, born in Salmon, Idaho, teaches at the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls and is a noted poet, as well as the author of short stories, articles, and books. Rick Ardinger, Assistant Director of the Idaho Humanities Council, is the editor of several anthologies and publisher of Limberlost Press.

**Book Reviews:**

<http://www.lib.montana.edu/~notess/foc695/bkrev.html>

Maguire, James. "Where the Morning Light's Still Blue" Journal of the West. April '97, vol. 36 no 2.



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### Pioneer Encounters with Idaho and the Intermountain West, 1865-1940

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- Jordan, Grace. *Home Below Hell's Canyon*. University of Nebraska Press, c. 1954.
- McCunn, Ruthanne Lum. *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. Beacon Press, 1981.

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— *Mountain Man* (1965) by Vardis Fisher

**From “Idaho” theme materials (1990) - written by William Studebaker, College of Southern Idaho**

Samson John Minard finds the Far West to be beautiful, "the mountains snow-crowned, the valleys berry-laden, the meadows looking like parks," but he also discovers it is ugly when he happens upon Kate Bowden, whose sons were killed, whose daughter was raped and killed, and whose husband was captured by Crow Indians. Kate has gone mad.

From this duality Fisher weaves a historical novel about life in the Far West on the eve of white occupation. The year is 1846, which Bernard DeVoto dubbed "the Year of Decision." It is the year that saw America's greatest expansion, one part of which involved the "mountain men." "For a brief season," DeVoto wrote, "Odysseus Jed Smith and Siegfried Carson and the wing-shod Fitzpatrick actually drew breath in this province of fable. Then suddenly it was all myth again. Wagons were moving down the trails, and nowhere remained any trace of the demigods."

From this mythic fibre, Vardis Fisher wove *Mountain Man*, based on the actual lives of John Johnson (or Johnston) and Jedediah Smith. Smith was compassionate and civilized, Johnson ruthless and vindictive. Johnson's life, as delineated in *The Crow Killer*, published seven years before *Mountain Man*, provided the plot and central theme. Like the real mountain man, Liver-Eating Johnson, the fictional Sam Minard comes west and marries an Indian woman who is killed and scalped by Crow Indians while he is out tending to traps. This enrages the "sensitive" Sam; he declares war on the entire Crow nation. He kills and maims (cuts an ear off) nearly a dozen Indians in hand-to-hand combat. But his passion turns to compassion. He tires of war and makes peace with the Crows.

*Mountain Man* is historical fiction, but however brief the history, its legacy is of the eternal hero, fascinating now and forever.

Vardis Fisher, was born in Annis, Idaho, in 1895 and died at Hagerman in 1968. He wrote over forty books, of which he is best known for *The Mothers*, *Dark Bridwell*, and *Mountain Man*. Any thorough understanding of Fisher requires an appreciation of his twelve-novel series, "Testament of Man," but *Mountain Man* offers the flavor and flair of one of Idaho's best known authors.

## Mountain Man - page 2

1. It has been stated that the protagonist (central character) of a novel must change. Does Samson John Minard change? Is he idealistic? Is he pragmatic? Is he realistic?
2. That the west was hell on horses and women is an old saw; however, there is no doubt that it was hell for Kate. Was her submission to her husband realistic? Is her total devotion to her "dead" children believable? If Kate is the "symbolic" white woman, what might Fisher be suggesting about immigrant women and the westering experience?
3. At the beginning of the novel, Sam is womanless. At the end of the novel, he has shared the lives of two women. How did each affect him?
4. Is Sam's admiration of the wilderness warranted? Is it safe? To what extent is the natural world personified? Does "place" (setting) influence Sam's character?
5. Who is most barbaric, Samson John Minard or the Crow Indians?
6. At the end of the novel, Sam makes peace. With whom?
7. What distinguishes this novel from other mountain man novels with which you are familiar? Is this a good novel? Why or why not?

**\_ *Housekeeping* (1980 ) by Marilynne Robinson  
From "Idaho" theme materials (1990) - written by Helen Lojek, Professor of English, Boise State University**

The world of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* is a world of transience. All of the elements, but especially the waters of Lake Fingerbone, next to which her characters live, threaten to destroy the structures which humans erect to create permanence in the midst of flux. "There was not a soul [in the town of Fingerbone] but knew how shallow-rooted the whole town was. It flooded yearly, and burned once." But Fingerbone "would value itself. . . and live on if and as it could," and so the townspeople erect bridges and houses and schools and attempt to absorb and shelter the wanderers whose very presence reminds them of their own essential transience.

*Housekeeping*, a novel whose quiet, deft humor meshes delicately with its intense thought, is about two sisters, Ruth and Lucille. Their mother takes them to Fingerbone, deposits them on their grandmother's porch, and drives her borrowed car (and herself) into Lake Fingerbone, which also holds the body of their grandfather, who died when his train plunged off the bridge and beneath the freezing waters.

The girls' grandmother, and then great aunt's attempt to care for them, staving off the forces of change with the rituals of housekeeping: whitening shoes and braiding hair and turning back bedclothes. But the grandmother dies and the maiden great aunts, unable to deal with the disruption of order caused by children who inevitable outgrow their shoes, leave Ruth and Lucille to the care of their aunt Sylvie, a genuine transient who rides the rails and sleeps with her shoes on.

Sylvie tries to domesticate herself. But she cannot keep the flood waters out of the house, and though she beats out a fire with a copy of *Good Housekeeping*, she is finally undisturbed by the accumulation of leaves in the corners, mice in the pantry, and swallows in the attic. She prefers to enjoy the dark rather than create an artificial barrier of light between herself and the restless, changing world of nature outside the window.

Human forces draw the girls into community, erecting control zones of permanence and order. Natural forces threaten that permanence, destroying houses and bridges and drawing the girls out of community and into isolation and transience. Lucille opts for order, going to live with the home economics teacher and barricading herself behind dress patterns and nail polish and hair style. Ruth opts for transience, joining Sylvie in an attempt to burn down the house and then going on the road with her.

One main pattern of western American literature is that of men attempting to impose order on nature--to blaze a trail or lay a railroad line or carve out a homestead or tame mustangs. *Housekeeping*, all of whose major characters are women, not only accepts the transience of the natural world but embraces that transience--acknowledging and celebrating the essential loner in each of us.

## Housekeeping - page 2

Robinson's evocation of the tension between the forces of permanence and the forces of change is moving and forceful. Her precise, lyrical description of lake and mountains is so beautiful that one reads more and more slowly, in order to savor every carefully crafted phrase. At the end, when Ruth has accepted transience, Robinson's style becomes both mystical and mythic, stylistically separating itself from the mundane, earthbound, "realistic" world which Ruth has given up. "I have never," explains Ruth, "distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming."

The novel is rich with biblical imagery of fire and flood and Cain and Abel. Just beneath the surface of Lake Fingerbone float the faces of the drowned. In the breezes of abandoned homesteads can be heard the voices of children. The story of two particular sisters thus becomes the story of humanity, and the eternal presence of what is impermanent and lost is a perpetual promise of renewal and resurrection.

Robinson, who lives in Massachusetts, spent childhood summers with her grandparents in Coeur d'Alene and received her PhD from the University of Washington. This 1982 novel, her first, won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation award and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. It lovingly evokes the beauty of the northwest. Through Ruth, the central character, we discover that "Loneliness is a absolute state," but we also discover her housekeeping grandmother, who "would scan the shores to see how nearly the state of grace resembled the state of Idaho."

***Thousand Pieces of Gold* by Ruthanne Lum McCunn**  
**From “Idaho” theme materials (1990) - written by Ford Swetnam, English Department,**  
**Idaho State University**

*Thousand Pieces of Gold* is a fictionalized biography of Polly Bemis, who came to Idaho as a prostitute and eventually married a saloonkeeper and miner, Charlie Bemis. Polly Bemis' personal journey replicates the little-known and terrible history of the Chinese in nineteenth-century America. Chinese men worked western mines and western railways, comprising from one-half to two-thirds of the total workers in those industries from 1855 into the 1870's. In *The Chinese of America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) Jack Chen reports that of the 6,579 miners in Idaho, 3,853 (58.5%) were Chinese, almost invariably working for low wages while generating an enormous gain in U.S. capital. In 1880, 10.4% of the territorial population was Chinese.

Their usual route into the territory was that followed by Polly Bemis: Walla Walla, the lower Snake, and Lewiston, though many others followed the railroad across the Panhandle and still others came to southeast Idaho by following the Humboldt and present-day U.S. 93.

Chinese women were indeed sold into prostitution, as Polly Bemis was. The year before she came to San Francisco, there were 1,500 to 4,500 Chinese prostitutes in the city, living under conditions of indenture much like those McCunn describes. Beatings with sticks, manipulations of the indenturing "contract," and the threat of murder were the usual ways to coerce these women (Shih-Shan Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America*, [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986]).

After 1880, the U.S. began to pass exclusionary laws designed to restrict Chinese immigration. These laws were abetted by anti-Chinese violence in all the western states and territories, including Idaho. In 1885, twenty-six Chinese miners were massacred at Rock Springs, Wyoming; thirty-one died along the Snake River in eastern Washington in 1887. Chinese populations were driven from mining towns like Caribou City, Idaho, back into the Chinatowns of the large cities. The Chinese population of Idaho in 1890 was 2.4%, and, while that figure may represent growth in other populations, it also reflects the campaign against the Chinese. It is these events of exclusion and massacre that create the dilemmas faced by Charlie and Polly Bemis just before their marriage.

1. Ruthanne Lum McCunn has said that she wants to help readers understand what it is like to be trapped between two cultures. How does this book do that?
2. As Polly grows into her new culture in Idaho, what conflicts remain for her?
3. Does Polly ever escape from being trapped between two cultures into a fulfilling sense of having two cultures on which to draw?
4. How is Polly Bemis' story like pioneer narratives in general? How is it unlike?

## Thousand Pieces of Gold - page 2

5. What does McCunn gain by inventing dialogue for characters in her story?
6. How much actual sense of history does McCunn give her readers? Does the narrative style she has chosen limit her ability to present background?

## *We Sagebrush Folks* by Annie Pike Greenwood

*Prepared by Helen Lojek, English Department, Boise State University.*

1. Westerners and western novelists, from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* to Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* have envisioned women homesteaders as the bearers of civilization. Men homesteaders were daring and restless, battling the earth and the elements and always ready to move on in search of fresh opportunities. Women, in contrast, sought to put down roots and endure. They built homes, passed the rudiments of education and civilization on to their children, pushed for churches and schools, and guarded their complexions from the harsh western sun.

To what extent do the Greenwoods fit this stereotypical pattern?

2. Minidoka homesteaders battled with nature, seeking to subdue and control it: they replaced sagebrush with cash crops, worked to bring water where no rain fell, exterminated rabbits. In order to create paradise, they had to be tough enough to survive adversity, much of it natural adversity. This adversarial relationship with nature often persists in contemporary Idaho, leading some to fear that our efforts to exploit nature for our benefit will end by destroying the state. Some suggest replacing the battle image of man versus nature with a metaphor emphasizing co-operation between man and nature.

How does *We Sagebrush Folks* help to illuminate the on-going effort to achieve a balanced relationship between man and nature?

3. This book is filled with wonderful, forgotten details from homesteaders' lives--the fact that farm women sometimes used schools as day care centers, for example, or the incredible joys of a community's first ice cream machine.

What are some other such details, and how do they enrich our understanding of the homesteaders' experience.

4. How would this work have been different if it had been written as a daily diary?
5. Wallace Stegner, summarizing his own experience on a failed homestead (in Saskatchewan), observed

There may be as good ways to understand the shape and intensity of the dream that peopled the continent, but this seems to me one good one. How does one know in his bones what this continent has meant to Western man unless he has, though briefly and in the midst of failure, belatedly and in the wrong place, made trails and paths on an untouched country and built human living places, however transitory, at the edge of a field that he helped break from prairie sod? How does one know what wilderness has meant to Americans unless he has shared the guilt of wastefully and ignorantly tampering with it in the name of Progress?

How does *We Sagebrush Folks* help us understand the shape and intensity of the dream which peopled Idaho?

6. How essential is Greenwood's education to her perspective?
7. Consider the "voice" which narrates these events. Did you like Annie Pike Greenwood as she presents herself? What were her strengths and weaknesses? How well does she understand herself and others? Why did she choose not to tell us the "end" of the story--her return to Utah, the separation from Charles, the fates of her children--when she was so very frank about other unpleasant details?
8. Was Annie Pike Greenwood an early "superwoman"--a woman who did it all, bearing children, cooking, gardening, writing, teaching, politicking, maintaining an attractive appearance?
9. Despite the Greenwoods' isolation, Annie Pike Greenwood manages to place the family's experiences in a larger context. She describes events on the "insignificant" Minidoka homestead against a backdrop of more general concerns: war, national farm policy, awareness of the New York reading audience, and general social and sexual attitudes.

What, if anything, does this larger context add to the narrative?



*Idaho's Poetry: A Centennial Anthology*

**Edited by Ronald E. McFarland and William Studebaker**

**From "Idaho" theme materials (1990) - written by William Studebaker, English Department, College of Southern Idaho**

The following questions are general in nature and are applicable to any and all poems in the anthology. They are intended to help the reader focus on poetic techniques and features rather than specific themes of particular poems, albeit thematic considerations may arise when discussing these questions.

1. Who is speaking?
2. Is there an occasion for which the poem is intended? If so, what is it? Does the poem have a setting (season, year, locale)?
3. How would you paraphrase the poem?
4. Of the five senses, which one does the poet use most frequently?
5. Are there confusing passages? If yes, are there metaphors, symbols, similes, or paradoxical images in these passages?
6. Does the sound (alliteration, assonance, consonance) of the poem fit the meaning of the poem?
7. Does the poem have a pattern?
8. What is your assessment of the poem?