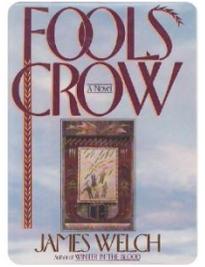
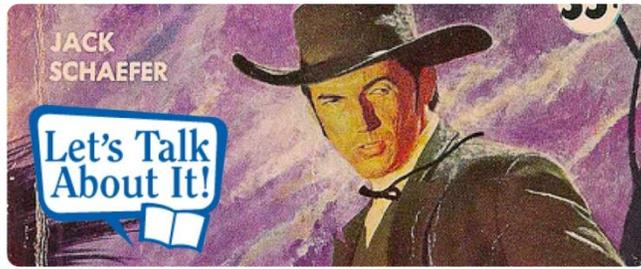


Western Fiction



Why Am I Reading This?

The West. For many, the West is more than a direction found on a compass, even more than a geographical location found on a map. The word carries connotations, snippets, and images from a host of sources that all go into making up an imaginative collage of the West: a water hole from a Louis L'Amour novel; a Remington statue; a line ("Smile when you say that") from Wister's *The Virginian*; the ubiquitous over-the-bar painting of "Custer's Last Stand"; a postcard of a jackalope; a dim flicker from a Saturday afternoon movie when Roy or Gene or The Duke rode into town in the first reel, sized up the problem, saved the day, and rode off into the sunset in the last reel.

Developed by Dr. James Hadden, Professor, Boise State University (1986)

Book List

Contemporary Western Fiction:

Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life by Robert Utley

Buffalo Girls by Larry McMurtry

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

English Creek by Ivan Doig

Fool's Crow by James Welch

God's Dogs by Mitch Wieland

Jackalope Dreams by Mary Clearman Blew

Reservation Blues by Sherman Alexie

The Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver

The Brave Cowboy by Edward Abbey

The Professor's House by Willa Cather

Classics of Western Fiction:

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner

Honey in the Horn by Harold L. Davis

Shane by Jack Schaefer

Sometimes A Great Notion by Ken Kesey

The Virginian by Owen Wister

Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

Contemporary Western Fiction:

Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life

Billy the Kid is both a simple narrative of the life of Henry McCarty Antrim (alias William Bonney aka Billy the Kid) and an analysis of his place and times, and the context of his life. It provides a means for considering his real importance to American history and, particularly, American myth. In fact, Robert Utley says that his purpose is to comment on violence in American society. Utley is known primarily as a historian of the Idaho Wars. As a National Park Service historian, he produced guides for such complex sites as Custer (now Little Bighorn) Battlefield. *Billy the Kid* grew out of Utley's highly regarded analysis of New Mexico's Lincoln County War, *High Noon in Lincoln: Violence on the Western Frontier*, and is aimed, he says, at "stripping away the veneers of legendry." By the time of Billy's death in 1888, newspapers and the sensational press (such as Police Gazette) had already made the Kid a larger-than-life outlaw chieftain. So the legend of Billy the Kid had been building for at least three years, and the manner of his death did nothing to discourage it. Within a year, Pat Garrett, in association with writer Marshall Upson, had published his own account, *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid*. Fact and fiction about the Kid would evermore be inextricably intertwined.

Author Information

Robert Utley was born on October 31, 1929, in Bauxite, Arkansas. During his childhood, his parents, Don Williams Utley and Valeria Haney, moved him to northwestern Indiana, where he attended high school. Later, he attended nearby Purdue University, receiving a Bachelor of Sciences in history. He then attended Indiana University for graduate school, receiving a Master of Arts in history in 1952. Following his graduation, Utley served in the U.S. Army, and later worked for the National Park Service. Utley has written sixteen books on the history of the American West. He was a former chief historian of the National Park Service. Fellow historians commend Utley as the finest historian of the American frontier in the 19th century. The Western History Association annually gives out the Robert M. Utley Book Award for the best book published on the military history of the frontier and western North America (including Mexico and Canada) from prehistory through the 20th century.

Utley lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with his wife Dr. Melody Webb, also a historian.

Discussion Questions for Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life

1. Though it is difficult to do, try to reconstruct what you knew and thought you knew about Billy the Kid before you read Utley's biography. How do the facts of his life correspond to your understanding of his life?
2. Myth is a narrative (which can be true or partly true) that helps us to explain our world. The myth of the West is a complex of many myths and symbols. It helps define—in both positive and negative ways—what it means to be an American. How does the narrative of Billy the Kid's life contribute to the myth; that is, in what ways is Billy the Kid's life a symbol, and of what?
3. Do the facts of the Kid's life undermine or sustain the myth?
4. Is Billy the Kid a hero? If so, to whom? To what other western heroes or outlaw heroes can he be compared? (Are there any heroes in *Billy the Kid*?)
5. Do women play a role in this story? How do the women confirm or break stereotype? Are there women here about whom you would like to know more?
6. Does "stripping away the veneers of legendry" to reveal the "real" Billy the Kid make him more important to western history and myth? Less important? Does it change anything?
7. There seems truly to have been a chivalric "code of the West." How is it manifested in Billy the Kid's story?
8. A frequent theme in discussions of the American character and American literature is one of innocence—the naïve seeker, the American Adam, the innocent in the midst of corruption. How is "innocence" a theme in *Billy the Kid*?
9. To what extent is Billy the Kid's story influenced by what Utley calls the "cultural medley (p. 18) of southern New Mexico?

Buffalo Girls

Author Larry McMurtry challenges the traditional renderings of the myths and legends of the American West. *Buffalo Girls* demonstrates his ambivalent attitude about the validity of 19th-century myths in the 20th century.

McMurtry's writing both contributes to the myth-making and legend-building and makes us face the consequences of glorifying a less-than-perfect past or people. Biographies of Calamity Jane support certain aspects of her legendary exploits as a hard-living woman who survived incredible odds to function in traditional male roles such as military scout and freight wagon driver. McMurtry reminds us that the historical figures who functioned on the frontier were flawed; led lives of incredible hardship and boredom; and suffered severe emotional and physical deprivation. What emerges in *Buffalo Girls* is a human experience which is frequently neither inspirational nor consistent with the legend. The question McMurtry brings to us is: if the legends like Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill Cody are meant to embody values we associate with our mythic perceptions of the West, and if these legends are phoney, fabricated images, how valid are the values we've claimed from our mythic past?

Author Information

Larry McMurtry was born in 1936 in Wichita Falls, Texas, and grew up in Archer City, Texas. His father and uncles were cattlemen who dated their heritage from Charles Goodnight's era. McMurtry, who describes himself as a "herder of words," turned to a career in letter. He earned a B.A. from North Texas State College and an M.A. from Rice University, and received the Wallace Stegner Fellowship in 1960 to attend Stanford University. He spends a good deal of time on college campuses lecturing, reading and writing. His rare book shop, Booked Up, based in Washington D.C., has branches in Dallas, Houston, and Los Angeles. He resides part of the time on a ranch near his hometown of Archer City.

Discussion Questions for Buffalo Girls

1. What values do you think of when considering the myth(s) of the American West?
2. How have you evaluated the legends like Calamity Jane and the others in the past? Do they have a special meaning to you?
3. Does McMurtry's inclusion of the less heroic side of the legends' lives undercut or make the American myth more meaningful for you? Do these characters—like Calamity Jane—have to be larger than life to make them worth remembering?
4. As you consider the “westering” experience, do you think it meant something different for men and for women? Does *Buffalo Girls* support or oppose your previous assumptions?
5. If myths distort the truth, what should our reaction be? In your mind, what is more real, myth or fact? How authentic must the details about a legendary figure like Calamity Jane be? Do distortions or lack of solid information invalidate the importance of these figures to you?
6. What do you think McMurtry's response is to the 19th-century American West myth? Is he mourning its loss? Is he merely debunking the western experience?
7. What evidence do you see that we still value the events, people, and myths of the American West today? Do you see current meaningful applications of the Western myth?
8. Have the myths of the West been made too much of or been made to sound too important?
9. If the myth still has meaning, are these values still desirable? Are they attainable?
10. What is a buffalo girl, exactly?

Ceremony

Tayo, the hero of Leslie Marmon Silko's groundbreaking novel *Ceremony*, is a half-blood Laguna Indian who returns to his reservation after surviving the Bataan Death March of World War II. As he struggles to recover the peace of mind that his experience of warfare has stolen from him, Tayo finds that memory, identity, and his relations with others all resemble the colored threads of his grandmother's sewing basket. The elements of his personality feel knotted and tangled, and his every attempt to restore them to order merely snags and twists them all the more. Tayo's problems, however, extend far beyond the frustrations and alienation he encounters in trying to readjust to peacetime. Having risked his life for an America that fundamentally disowns him, Tayo must confront difficult and painful questions about the society he has been fighting for. As Tayo searches for self-knowledge and inner peace, the reader, too, embarks on a complex emotional journey. In observing Tayo's efforts to come to terms with a society that does not fully acknowledge his humanity, one may initially feel personal sympathy with his character. However, as Silko's narrative steadily metamorphoses into an indictment of social and historical forces that have led to Tayo's suffering, the reader's feelings are likely also to transform, as simple pity gives way to solemn contemplation of the atrocities that our native peoples have been forced to undergo.

Author Information

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 to a family whose ancestry includes Mexican, Laguna Indian, and European forebears. As she grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation, she learned the stories and culture of the Laguna people from her great-grandmother and other female relatives. After receiving her B. A. in English at the University of New Mexico, she enrolled in the University of New Mexico law school but completed only three semesters before deciding that writing and storytelling, not law, were the means by which she could best promote justice. She married John Silko in 1970. Prior to the writing of *Ceremony*, she published a series of short stories, including "The Man to Send Rain Clouds." She also authored a volume of poetry, *Laguna Woman: Poems*, for which she received the Pushcart Prize for Poetry. In 1973, Silko moved to Ketchikan, Alaska, where she wrote *Ceremony*. Silko has followed the critical success of *Ceremony* with a series of other novels, including *Storyteller*, *Almanac for the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes*. Nevertheless, it was the singular achievement of *Ceremony* that first secured her a place among the first rank of Native American novelists. Leslie Marmon Silko now lives on a ranch near Tucson, Arizona.

Discussion Questions for Ceremony

1. Readers sometimes find the reading of *Ceremony* a disorienting experience, in part because Silko frequently shifts scenes and time frames without warning. How does this technique help the reader to participate in Tayo's thoughts, emotions, and experiences? Is its influence on the narrative consistently the same, and is it always effective?
2. How does Tayo's status as a half-breed influence his choices, his thinking, and the way he is perceived by other characters in the novel? What tensions and conflicts does his mixed ancestry contribute to Silko's story?
3. For what reasons do Tayo and his cousin Rocky join the Army? In what ways do they and the other young Native American men benefit from their armed service, and why do these benefits evaporate once the war is over?
4. *Ceremony* has been described as a story of struggle between two cosmic forces, one basically masculine and one essentially feminine. Assuming this to be true, what are the images of masculinity and femininity that Silko presents? Is this gendered analysis an adequate way of understanding the novel? Are there important ideas that it leaves out?
5. *Ceremony* offers the suggestion that the European settlers of America were created by the "witchery" of a nameless witch doctor. What is the effect of this assertion? Does it make white people demonic by intimating that they are agents of evil, incapable of doing good? Or, to the contrary, does it somehow absolve them from blame because they are merely tools of the "Destroyers" and are not really responsible for their actions?
6. How do the poems and legends that are interspersed in Silko's text influence your reading of the novel? Why do you think Silko centers Emo's tale of debauchery (pp. 57-59) on the page in the same way that she centers the older, sacred stories?
7. One aspect of white culture that Tayo especially resents is the way in which its educational practices, particularly instruction in the sciences, dismiss Native beliefs as "superstitions." What are the similarities and differences between the way Tayo feels about the treatment of his ancestral beliefs and the way in which a believer in the creation stories of Genesis might respond to Darwinism? To what extent is the novel a story of the struggle between technology and belief?
8. Blindness and invisibility are recurring motifs in *Ceremony*. What does Silko suggest through her repeated uses of inabilities or refusals to see?
9. Silko, who has suffered from headaches, depression, and nausea similar to those that plague Tayo in her novel, has said, "I wrote this novel to save my life." How is *Ceremony* a novel of salvation, for Tayo, for its author, and for its readers? What are the limits to the salvation that it appears to offer?

English Creek

The days of arriving summer, the rangeland green at last across northern Montana, the hundred-mile horizon of the Rocky Mountains, form the backdrop for Jick McCaskill's coming-of-age late in the Depression. Jick is fourteen and able now to share in the full life of family and town and ranch in the sprawling Two Medicine country. His father is a roustabout range rider turned forest ranger; his mother, from a local ranching family, is a practical woman with a peppery wit. His idolized brother Alec is eighteen and strong-minded, set on marriage to a town girl and on a livelihood as a cowboy. Alec's choice of "cow chousing" throws the McCaskills into conflict, and through Jick's eyes we see a family at a turning point—"where all four of our lives made their bend."

The course of the book follows the events of the Two Medicine country's summer, a season of humor and escapade as well as drama. Jick accompanies his father on a horseback journey to count sheep onto mountain rangeland allotted by the national forest—a routine yearly duty that leads to the revelation of a long-kept family secret. The Fourth of July, a time of rodeo and picnic and all-night square dance, is the summer's social zenith, brought to life by Jick's journey from innocence. But it is an end-of-August forest fire that brings the book, as well as the McCaskill family's struggle within itself, to a stunning climax.

Author Information

Ivan Doig was born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, in 1939 and grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front where much of his writing takes place. His first book, the highly acclaimed memoir *This House of Sky*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. A former ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor, Doig is a graduate of Northwestern University where he received bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism. He also holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. Doig is the only living writer with books in the top dozen on both lists: *English Creek* in fiction and *This House of Sky* in non-fiction. He lives in Seattle with his wife Carol, who has taught the literature of the American West.

Discussion Questions for English Creek

1. Much of the success of *English Creek* stems from the credibility of the narrative voice. Show how Jick McCaskill's acute sensitivity and observant personality make him a prime candidate for creating a balanced narrative structure. How does Doig artistically meld Jick's psychological musings with his more historical accounts?
2. The novel is in great part about Jick's journey into maturity, into wisdom. How does Jick bridge the gap between boyhood and manhood? Who is particularly influential in his coming of age?
3. Laconicism is a common characteristic of the ranchers and mountain men in Western film and fiction. Jick inherits his father's wry wit; show how he uses it to deal with life's bitter situations.
4. Is Alec a foil to Jick? Are there key choices that Alec makes and particular events in his life that save him from being a flat character and make him, rather, someone worth serious consideration?
5. At the end of Chapter One, Jick says, "Skinning wet sheep corpses, contending with a pack horse who decides he's a mountain goat, nursing Stanley along, lightning, any number of self-cooked meals, the hangover I'd woke up with and still had more than a trace of—what sad sonofabitch wouldn't realize he was being used out of the ordinary?" Jick's pack trip with Stanley Meixell is a jolting thrust from innocence to experience. What prompts Jick to discard his first impressions of Stanley and delve deeper into the meaning of the man behind Dr. Al K. Hall?
6. Why is Beth eager to avoid looking back? Compare and contrast Jick's attitude toward the past and its stories with his mother's attitude. Do the deaths of Varick and Alec rattle Beth into retrospective musings, even regret about what might have been?
7. Discuss how the Double W embodies the characteristics of the classic villain of the West.
8. Consider Velma Simms and Leona Tracy and how Doig paints their entrance into a room full of males. Compare and contrast the adoration they receive with the more quiet acknowledgement Beth receives from the men who love her. Why is Leona so alluring to Alec, even Jick? Is her highly physical role in the novel, a role charged with sexual tension, somehow comparable to the role of Cather's Lena Lingard in *My Antonia*?
9. The 4th of July dance adds mystery and musicality to the novel. Discuss the imagery surrounding this "beautiful haunting" and how the scene helps Jick to see his parents in a way that illuminates "all that had begun at another dance, at the Noon Creek schoolhouse 20 years before."

10. Why does Varick McCaskill listen to Stanley's advice about the fire in Flume Gulch? Were Jick not "prey to a profound preoccupation," would the novel have turned out the way that it does?

Fools Crow

Fools Crow, James Welch's third novel, quietly and persuasively nudges the reader to re-examine stereotypic notions of how the West was won. Indians in popular westerns attack without provocation and shoot flaming arrows into canvas covered Conestogas. They terrorize ranchers and massacre columns of mounted soldiers. They scalp, plunder and destroy with a vicious "uncivilized" disregard for political or spiritual law. In short, Indians by this view had no idea of "right" and "wrong" beyond an animal instinct for survival, and thus settlers and soldiers could justify the extinction of these "heathen" savages. The only good Indian was a dead Indian. The Indian as "noble" savage is an equally sentimental and popular stereotype, though polar opposite the heathen, amoral redskin. Noble savages live much like Adam and Eve; innocent of their own nakedness, they commune in perfect harmony with all creatures and at times walk with the gods. They embody natural wisdom in a guru-like way, forever making speeches full of memorable aphorisms concerning eagles and bears, and they would much rather smoke a peace pipe than harm any animal or human "brother." Both stereotypes are false in that they portray humans as all "bad" or all "good," when in reality each of us—of any race—is a complex mixture of both. Stereotypes are often hard to dispel because, although they don't contain the whole truth, they may contain part of it. *Fools Crow* gives the reader an opportunity to listen to the Native American version of how the West was won.

Author Information

James Welch was born in 1940 in Browning, Montana. He received his B.A. from the University of Montana. He was the most consistently productive American Indian author of the 20th Century. Welch was a part of the Montana literary renaissance of the 1970s that also gave us William Kitteridge and other less familiar names. Welch's first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Riding the Earthboy 40*, was also one of the first books of poetry by an unambiguously Indian writer, about Indian subjects. It was also the first such book arguably legitimate literature in its own right rather than a literary curiosity. Welch once said that being known as the best American Indian novelist from Montana is a pretty backhanded compliment. His own work extended beyond such carefully circumscribed success. Jim Welch's death in 2003 put an untimely end to a distinguished literary career. In the decades to come, his reputation will grow the way he would have wanted it to, as an important voice of American literature, that of a writer who was Indian.

Discussion Questions for Fools Crow

1. What codes of conduct do the characters follow? What makes a Pikuni feel pride? Shame? What behaviors are honorable and dishonorable? Think of specific examples from the book?
2. Wallace Stegner praises the story for the “inevitability of its events.” Were the events truly inevitable? What might have changed the outcome? Use specific situations from the book to discuss this. How about the raid on the Crows? How about the Pikuni’s failure to listen to the white medicine man?
3. Blame for Yellow Kidney’s trouble is laid on Fast Horse, but Yellow Kidney also blames himself. What conduct did Yellow Kidney think he is being punished for? What lesson does Yellow Kidney learn?
4. Why do the Pikuni pay such close attention to their dreams? Where do the Pikuni believe knowledge and power come from? Where do members of the dominant American culture believe knowledge and power come from?
5. In many Native American cultures, the idea of “balance” is a central religious goal. Bad things happen when the world is thrown out of balance, and ceremonies must be performed to set things right again. How does this notion of balance affect the lives of the Pikuni?
6. Among the Pikuni, what are the uses of teasing?
7. Sometimes non-Native Americans say, “Why should I feel guilty about the deed of my ancestors? I didn’t take away the Indian’s land.” How would you guess Native Americans would feel about the deeds of their ancestors? Does this help to explain why Native Americans might expect non-Native Americans to bear the guilt for what happened generations earlier?

Faraway Places

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. Thirteen-year-old Jake Weber witnesses the brutal murder of a Native American woman by the town banker. Jake's parents forbid him to speak of the killing or name its perpetrator, even as the woman's African American lover stands falsely accused. The crime and what follows it forever alter Jake's view of his parents and the world around him. *Faraway Places* won widespread praise for its vivid narrative and incantatory style, and Spanbauer displays singular skill in inhabiting the mind of a troubled adolescent boy. Tom Spanbauer, who grew up in Idaho, is the author of two novels and lives in Portland, Oregon and New York City.

Author Information

Tom Spanbauer is a critically acclaimed author and the founder of Dangerous Writing. As a writer he has explored issues of race, of sexual identity, of how we make a family for ourselves in order to surmount the limitations of the families into which we are born. His four published novels *Faraway Places*, *The Man Who Fell In Love With The Moon*, *In The City Of Shy Hunters*, and *Now Is The Hour*, are notable for their combination of a fresh and lyrical prose style with solid storytelling. As a teacher his innovative approach combines close attention to language with a large-hearted openness to what he calls 'the sore place'--that place within each of us that is the source for stories that no one else can tell. His introductory workshop is an underground legend among emerging writers in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The community of writers that has formed around him is dedicated to the proposition that "Fiction is the lie that tells the truth truer." Tom lives, writes, and teaches in Portland Oregon.

Discussion Questions for *Faraway Places*

1. In an interview, Spanbauer said, "It is just the way life is that there is darkness and there is light. So many artists, I think, make the mistake of either trying to create an upbeat message or a nihilistic one. An artist doesn't really have to try for either because if he looks closely at his world, he will find great tragedy and great ecstasy standing right next to each other." What is the darkness in *Faraway Places*? What is the light?
2. In what way does this novel reflect Idaho as a "tough paradise"?

God's Dogs

Ferrell Swan has fled the shambles of his life for the vast and empty landscape of Idaho's high desert. Here, Swan strives to escape that past and its failures—even to escape memory itself. He seeks solace in sunrises and sunsets, wild mustangs and wheeling hawks, and the coyotes that roam his one hundred acres of scrub land. Through visits from his stepson and his ex-wife, through occasional contacts with odd and reclusive neighbors, Swan confronts himself in order to realize his humanity.

Author Information

Mitch Wieland was born in Dover, Ohio, and has lived in Seattle, Los Angeles, San Diego, Tuscaloosa, and Tokyo. He holds an MFA from the University of Alabama, and once served as fiction editor off Black Warrior Review. Wieland is currently as full professor at Boise State University, where he has taught for sixteen years. One of the founders of Boise State's MFA program, he was its director for four years. Wieland founded the Idaho Review in 1998 and continues to serve as its editor.

Wieland is the author of *Willy Slater's Lane* and *God's Dogs*. *Willy Slater's Lane* received starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist*, and was optioned for a film. The *New York Times* called the novel immensely moving." *God's Dogs* was named the Idaho Book of the Year in 2009, and was featured in the Best of the West 2009 prize anthology. *God's Dogs* was also a finalist for the 2010 John Gardner Fiction Book Award, and was cited as a Book of the Year by *New West.com*.

Wieland's short stories have appeared in *The Best of the West*, *The Southern Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Yale Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Shenandoah*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, and other publications.

Wieland is the recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Christopher Isherwood Fellowship, and two Literature Fellowships from the Idaho Commission on the Arts. As a Boise State University Arts and Humanities Fellow, he is currently working on a novel set in Japan. He is represented by Wendy Weil of the Wendy Weil Agency.

Wieland lives in Boise with his wife Cynthia, an artist, and his son Benjamin.

Discussion Questions for *God's Dogs*

1. Coyotes are an important presence in this novel. Comment on what they illuminate about Ferrell's character, or Rilla's. What makes them so important?
2. For Ferrell, the West seems open enough to release him from conflicts and responsibilities that he would rather not face. Is he right about this quality of western open space? To what degree is he able to escape into open landscape?
3. What does this novel reveal about the nature of reconciliation or forgiveness? Who forgives whom? What makes forgiveness effective? How long does it last? What obstacles have to be removed in order for characters to reconcile? What benefits accrue to those who forgive or are forgiven? Do you feel that reconciliation has been accomplished at the end of the novel?
4. Robert Frost wrote in the New England poem, "Mending Wall," "Good fences make good neighbors." Do Wieland and Frost understand neighbors similarly? Why or why not? Are neighbors different in New England and in arid Idaho?
5. What insights does this novel offer about love and marriage? How important are geographic movement and Idaho landscape to the relationship between Ferrell and Rilla?
6. The novel is thick with allusions and self-conscious about rituals. Consider references to Christ's forty days in the desert, the ritual of Christian communion, references to Western heroes riding off into the sunset, and more. What do these allusions and rituals add to the book?
7. What does Ferrell Swan need to learn? Does he learn it? What role does Idaho play? What does his name suggest about his prospects for growth?
8. A character in the novel says, "A man should stay where he was born. Your brain gets tuned to the land you come from, to these trees and hills, these pastures and fields, this very air. When you are raised in a single place, you get hardwired for it, programmed into the seasons, summer thunder and winter snow, all the rest." Is this true for *God's Dogs*? What do you think of this wisdom?
9. After the title, is there a God in this book?

Jackalope Dreams

The departed men in her life still have plenty to say to Corey. Her father, a legendary rodeo cowboy who punctuated his lifelong pronouncements with a bullet to his head, may be the loudest. But in this story of Montana—a story in which the old West meets the new and tradition has its way with just about everyone—it is Corey’s voice we listen to. In this tour de force of voices big and small, sure and faltering, hers comes across resonant and clear, directing us to the heart of the matter.

Winner of the 2008 Western Heritage Award, *Jackalope Dreams* plays out against the mythology of the Old West—a powerful amalgam of ranching history, Marlboro Men, and train robbery reenactments. This story of the newly orphaned, spinsterish Corey is a sometimes comical, sometimes poignant tale of coming-of-age a little late. As she tries to recapture an old dream of becoming a painter—of preserving some modicum of true art amid the virtual reality of modern Montana—Corey finds herself figuring in other dramas as well, other, younger lives already at least as lost as her own.

Author Information

Mary Clearman Blew grew up on a small cattle ranch in Montana, on the site of her great-grandfather’s 1882 homestead. Her memoir *All But the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family*, won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, as did her short story collection, *Runaway*. A novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, appeared in 2008 and won the Western Heritage Center’s prize for fiction. Other awards include the Mahan Award for contributions to Montana literature, the Idaho Humanities Council’s 2001 Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities, a Handcart Award for Biography, and the Western Literature Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award. She has taught creative writing at the University of Idaho since 1994.

Discussion Questions for *Jackalope Dreams*

1. In what ways does this novel seem to “talk back” to the mythical West and the genre *Western*? For example, do guns and gunplay, horses and horseback rides, private property, and the outdoors appear in expected places and ways?

2. Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian* is credited with inaugurating the cowboy western and a number of western themes and conventions. Among the features of Wister’s novel is a cinematic eye that surveys and admires the rugged beauty of both the hero and the landscape. When we first see Wister’s Virginian, he moves “with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin.” How does Blew’s introduction of the body of her heroine depart from Wister’s introduction of The Virginian, or the countless films that have eyed their Gary Coopers and Clint Eastwoods with equal care and admiration? Does Blew’s novel continue its opening interest in the bodies of its characters? If so, what does the narrator show us with her eyes? In what other ways is Corey Henry like or unlike a typical western hero(ine)?

3. What does the title, *Jackalope Dreams*, mean? What does the jackalope mean to Corey? Why do you think Blew chose this title?

4. *Jackalope Dreams* is set in contemporary Montana, and Blew currently lives and works in Idaho. Which of the author’s observations about contemporary Montana also apply to contemporary Idaho?

5. What do voices in Corey’s imagination add to the novel? Does she make peace with them?

6. The novel makes several references to Old and New West, or old order and new order. Is one better than the other – for Corey, or for anyone?

7. In her trilogy of family memoirs – *All But the Waltz*, *Balsamroot*, and *Writing Her*

Own Life – Blew seems to replace damaging patriarchal stories with women's stories, however mundane and unfinished. To what extent does *Jackalope Dreams* continue the work of the family memoirs, replacing a patriarchal Old Western narrative with a New Western story more life-affirming for women?

8. Sometimes the novel is grim. Is it also funny? If so, where and why? What does it satirize?

9. Recall some western regional stereotypes that occur in this novel. How are they handled? Does Blew approach any stereotypes with humor? Which ones, and to what effect?

10. Who are the regional insiders and outsiders in this story? Do they “belong” differently to this community? Is it a good or bad thing when newcomers arrive in a small western town? Does this book suggest any solution to the problems of regional exclusiveness?

11. Westerns are notoriously violent. When is this book violent, and to what ends?

12. What is the relationship between Corey's problems and those of the young people in this novel? How can Corey help her students? How can they help her?

13. If you have read other books by Mary Clearman Blew, you'll notice at least two things in this book that are often important to this writer – education and horses. What does Corey learn from horses? Do horses help her relationships with *people*? What does she regret about her education? Is she a good teacher?

Reservation Blues

To read about Native American reservation life is usually to read about illness and despair. Fiction originating from that life is also, of course, capable of wild happiness and celebration; but the darkness is a fact of life and art. James Welch, in his superb novel “Winter in the Blood,” observes his characters’ suffering from the corner of his narrative eye; Reynolds Price, in his moving novella “Walking Lessons,” confronts the sorrow directly. Sherman Alexie, whose 1993 collection, “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,” was justly applauded, writes about characters who are squarely in the middle of reservation life but who report it to us from a point of view that is simultaneously tangential to the mainstream of that life as well as part of its sad, slow rhythms. Here, for example, from his first novel, “Reservation Blues,” is Mr. Alexie’s description of the Indians’ mythic coyote: “a trickster whose bag of tricks contains permutations of love, hate, weather, chance, laughter and tears, e.g., Lucille Ball.” He catches the ancient and the contemporary, the solemn and the self-mocking, at once; he evokes dreary days of watching black-and-white television reruns in a place of “poverty, suicide, alcoholism,” where “Indian Health only gave out dental floss and condoms.” When Mr. Alexie writes at his best, he creates stinging commentary, and he shows his determination to make you uncertain whether you want to laugh or cry.

Author Information

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He received his B.A. in American studies from Washington State University in Pullman. His books of poetry include *Face* (Hanging Loose, 2009), *One Stick Song* (2000), *The Man Who Loves Salmon* (1998), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *Water Flowing Home* (1995), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *I Would Steal Horses* (1992), and *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992). He is also the author of several novels and collections of short fiction including *Flight* (Grove Press, 2007); *Ten Little Indians* (2003); *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000); *Indian Killer* (1996); *Reservation Blues* (1994), which won the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award; and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which received a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Alexie and Chris Eyre wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*, which was based on Alexie’s short story, *This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*. The movie won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

Discussion Questions for Reservation Blues

1. This is a book about (among many other things) stereotypes. What are some of these: for example, think about Father Arnold when he first came to the reservation, the Seattle radio station interview with Thomas about religion, Betty and Veronica, Calvary Records, and bars in New York City.
2. What do you think of the magical and supernatural elements of the novel? And what about the element of dreams—present in one way or another on almost every page?
3. And what about the chronology of the narrative, the order in which events are presented? (Especially in Chapter 9)
4. What do the poems that begin the chapters add to the impact of the novel? Of these, do you have a favorite poem?
5. Thomas Builds-the-Fire is a storyteller. Storytelling is obviously a major part of Native American culture. What kinds of stories does Thomas tell? How do his contemporaries on the reservation respond to them?
6. Alcoholism is a major problem and theme of the novel. Of the characters, which ones especially have—or have had—this problem? Who have not?
7. *Reservation Blues* has a distinctive kind of humor. Did it make you laugh a lot?
8. What are Thomas's feelings about the United States government? (See especially pp. 154–55.)
9. The themes of fatalism and free choice are prominent in the book. What kind of statement does this book make about these two attitudes toward life?
10. Do you think this book presents men fairly? Women?
11. Whatever label we give *Reservation Blues*, it certainly has *historical* dimensions. Of course, the entire history of Indian/white relations is involved, and the “Indian wars” from the 1850s through the 1890s, as well as the specific history of the Spokane Reservation. Then there's Robert Johnson and the history of blues and rock music. What historical elements that you know about are especially useful in reading the book? What more would you like to know about history related to it?

The Bean Trees

Marietta Greer leaves home in a beat-up '55 Volkswagen bug, determined to get away and to avoid pregnancy. Heading west and savoring her freedom, she changes her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. A forlorn Cherokee woman drops a baby in Taylor's passenger seat and asks her to take it, and she does. Taylor names the little girl "Turtle," because she clings with an unrelenting, reptilian grip. With Turtle in tow, Taylor lands in Tucson, Arizona, with two flat tires at an auto repair shop called Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. It also happens to be a sanctuary for Central American refugees. Taylor meets the human condition head-on, as she experiences motherhood, responsibility and independence. The heart of this funny, inspiring book is its affirmation of risk-taking, long and friendship, abandonment and belonging, commitment and everyday miracles.

Author Information

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona, and has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Her books include *The Bean Trees*, *Homeland*, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike*, *Animal Dreams*, *Another America*, *Pigs in Heaven*, *High Tide in Tucson*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, *Small Wonder*, *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands*, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, *The Lacuna*, and *Flight Behavior*.

Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20th Century by *Writers Digest*. In 2000 She received the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts. In 2011, Kingsolver was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for the body of her work.

Discussion Questions for The Bean Trees

1.

The Brave Cowboy

We are in jail. A jail mankind has created. We have incarcerated ourselves. In a free world—free in both senses of the word—devoid of restrictions and costing nothing. In this kind of world, mankind has created, erected, imposed barriers and restrictions and pitfalls of all kinds—social, economic, political, even oral. Such is the message Edward Abbey sends in this novel. Caught in his own limbo, the cowboy himself, Jack Burns, has been reduced to herding sheep. Jack Burns is a cowboy, not of cows, but of nature. Abbey has drawn Burns' character out of the western land, that geography, specialized topography where supposedly all good cowboys come from—pine forest, surrounding desert flats and mountains, all bordered by a winding river. Yet we get little of the calf-roping, hard-hitting, straight-shooting, bronc-busting stereotype Hollywood has conned us to expect. There are many approaches one could take in evaluating this novel. Symbolism, imagery, the unities, character, plot, theme, structure, and more. The jail is a microcosm of the world. We have the intruder, Jack; the inmates; the caretakers, guards, both good and bad; the overseer, a well-intentioned but inept and bungling sheriff. A social system has been established, oblivious to and totally outside of, almost scornful of, the natural world. Devoid of and unaffected by pure cool water, lush green grass, fresh cold wind, or snow-pocked peaks to which Burns, as a would-be "everyman," must return for purification, rejuvenation, life.

Author Information

Edward Abbey was born on January 29, 1927. He grew up in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. His first glimpse of the American Southwest was in 1944 when he hitchhiked to Seattle and then to Arizona. After serving as a U.S. Army rifleman in Italy from 1945–1946, he enrolled at the University of New Mexico, where he earned his B.A. in 1951. While an undergraduate at UNM, Abbey explored the Southwest and began his writing career. From 1951–1952, Abbey was a Fulbright scholar in Edinburgh, Scotland. He enrolled as a graduate student in philosophy at Yale University in 1952, but lasted only two weeks there. He returned to the West in 1954, and received an M.A. in philosophy from UNM in 1956. His thesis was titled, "Anarchy and the Morality of Violence." Abbey's first novel, *Jonathan Troy* came out in 1954; his second, *The Brave Cowboy* in 1956. Abbey began a career as a seasonal employee for the National Park Service at Arches National Monument, Utah, in 1956. He stayed with the National Park Service for almost 15 years. Abbey died of a circulatory disorder at his home in Oracle, Arizona, on March 14, 1989.

Discussion Questions for The Brave Cowboy

1. How does Abbey reveal Jerry's love for Jack?
2. What does the General reveal by his abrupt change of attitude?
3. Evaluate the demise of the guitar.
4. Is Sheriff Johnson a good guy or a bad guy?
5. Is Paul doing the right thing by continuing his protest?
6. Is Abbey's use of fate with Hinton's truck effective or artificial?
7. How does the mountain heal?
8. When did you make the plat connection between Burns and Al Hinton?
9. How well does Jack like his horse?
10. How does the judge's sympathy affect Paul Bondi's resolve?
11. How effectively does Jack's rustic demeanor contrast to Paul's cultured education?
12. Discuss some important symbols.
13. What is the theme of the story?
14. How does Gutierrez function as a symbolic character?
15. Describe some ways Abbey achieves the feeling of helplessness.

The Professor's House

In Willa Cather's nicely paced, neatly plotted novel, there are several tales of adventure. In the action of "Tom Outland's Story," she offers a kind of novel-within-the-novel, in which a precocious boy's innate curiosity, largely unschooled intellect, and youthful ambition lead him to discover a cultural treasure hidden in the Blue Mesa. In the deftly handled comedy of manners involving "The Family," she depicts in subtle detail the social pretensions, professional rivalries, and the delicate jousting between the sexes that take up so much attention in sophisticated adult relations, especially when money and status heighten the domestic drama. Combining the two, the novelist paints a striking psychological portrait of a highly intelligent man experiencing not entirely unpleasant altered states as he faces the first signs of old age. On each level of *The Professor's House*, the question of personal and professional happiness is defined in a different way.

Author Information

Willa Sibert Cather was a writer celebrated for her novels of the immigrant experience on the American frontier, including *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918). Cather was born in Black Creek Valley, Virginia, December 7, 1873, and in her tenth year she moved with her family to a farm in Red Cloud, Nebraska. While a student at the University of Nebraska (1891–95), she published her first short story and contributed to the *Nebraska State Journal*. After earning her degree, Cather worked in Pittsburgh as an editor and writer for *The Home Monthly* and the *Daily Leader*, and published a book of verse, *April Twilight* (1903). She then moved to New York, where she edited *McClure's Magazine* (1906–1912) and wrote short stories, publishing a collection in 1905 (*The Troll Garden*). Her experiences in Nebraska informed much of her work, and during her long career she was a prolific and well-regarded writer, known for strong female characters and acute observations of life. She won a Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for her novel *One of Ours*, and received several honorary degrees and awards during her life. Her novels include *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *Lost Lady* (1923), *Shadows on the Rocks* (1931) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Cather died April 24, 1947 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Discussion Questions for The Professor's House

1. This novel is named, not after its protagonist, but after his house. It is a house in which no one lives, that has been "dismantled" [3], and that, even when inhabited, was "almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be." Why, then, is it so important to Professor St. Peter--and, indeed, appear to become more so in the course of the novel? How does Cather establish the house's character and use it to indicate the character of her protagonist? Compare her description of St. Peter's old house to her treatment of the family's new residence and other houses, like Louie Marsellus's "Outland" and the abandoned cliff-dwellings on the Blue Mesa.

2. Although St. Peter has pursued a life of the mind, Cather describes him in highly sensual terms: "for looks, the fewer clothes he had on, the better." [4] He luxuriates in the ornamental shrubs and flowers of his French garden, and in swimming. His keenest memories--of his youthful voyage along the coast of Spain and the dahlias he bought as a student in Paris--vibrate with sensuous detail. Why does such a sensual--and in some ways even hedonistic--man seem to disapprove of his family's pursuit of worldly pleasures and possessions? In what ways does St. Peter's hedonism--if such it is--differ from theirs?

3. Although the St. Peters initially seem happy, the reader gradually realizes that the family is torn by jealousy and resentment, and that its patriarch has effectively withdrawn from its affairs. At what points do these characters become aware of their emotional disconnection? Why are they unable--or unwilling--to overcome it?

4. One reason for the divisions in the St. Peter family is Tom Outland, who was Godfrey's pupil, his daughter's fiance, and, ultimately, her benefactor. In what ways has Outland fragmented the family, both while alive and after his death, and why did the family let him do so? Why do nearly all the members of the household stake some kind of claim on him, as evidenced by Kathleen's remark to her father: "Our Tom is much nicer than theirs"? [113]

5. Why does St. Peter remain so strongly attached to Tom Outland almost a decade after the young man's death? Cather equates the boy with the Professor's discarded younger self: "He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed...places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been--and yet he was terribly wise." [241] What other reasons might there be for the Professor's devotion? To what kind of wisdom is Cather referring in the preceding passage? How did St. Peter lose it as he grew older and what did he acquire in its place? In what ways does Tom Outland's story recapitulate the older man's?

6. Alongside the spartan Outland, who refused to contaminate his friendships with any element of self-interest, Cather gives the professor a son-in-law, Louie Marsellus, who is unabashedly materialistic. In marrying Tom's one-time fiance, Louie has also become the main beneficiary of his discoveries. But wealth alone may be insufficient: Louie seems intent on replacing Tom in the professor's affections, just as he jokes about having Tom's talismanic blanket made into a dressing-gown. Does Cather want the reader to dislike

Louie, as his brother-in-law Scott McGregor does? In what way does Louie conform to period stereotypes of the social-climbing, luxury-loving *nouveau riche*? Why does the professor feel affection for him, even though Louie's values seem diametrically opposed to his?

7. Is St. Peter subconsciously attempting suicide when he falls asleep without turning off the gas stove in his old study? What significance do you find in the fact that he is saved by a woman? How clearly does Cather allow us to know the motives of any of her characters?

8. *The Professor's House* is a novel of oppositions--youth vs. age, instinct vs. contemplation, solitude vs. domesticity. Yet we should be careful not to read those oppositions too simplistically. Although St. Peter mourns the way he has sacrificed his truest self to the demands of society and family, Tom Outland is equally haunted by the way he betrayed his friendship with Roddy Blake, who had committed the crime of selling Indian relics to a German buyer: "Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it." [229] Does Tom suffer from his inhuman idealism just as the professor suffers from his unthinking compromises? In what other ways does Cather introduce ambiguity into this novel's moral scheme? Does she suggest any way in which her opposing values might be reconciled?

9. Where does Cather draw analogies between St. Peter's betrayal of his ideals and events in the larger world? In what ways does the novel's milieu function as a macrocosm of its protagonist's psyche?

Classics of Western Fiction:

Angle of Repose

Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for its distinction as a novel about the West that transcended "regional" and "pioneer" stereotypes. Geologically, the angle of repose is the slope at which rocks stop rolling down a mountain. In the novel, it serves as a metaphor for the accommodation, the equilibrium, that Susan and Oliver Ward arrive at in relation to each other and to the circumstances of their lives. In its larger application, it suggests "the uneasy truce in which all paired opposites rest," the opposites in the marriage of the Wards and in the culture of the American West. Lyman Ward, the narrator, sifts through his grandmother's letters trying to penetrate the "hidden lode of Susan Ward's woe." Himself orphaned as a small boy and brought up by this grandmother, he is now crippled, fifty-eight years old, and a retired historian. In his searching, he comes upon what turned the marriage of his grandparents into an unloving, unforgiving truce that lasted the rest of their lives, and in doing so confronts some hard truths in his own existence. Lyman ultimately muses that there may be some intersection of lines after all, "the angle at which lines prop each other up," even though "the leaning together from the vertical produces only a false arch." The false arch lacks a keystone, but "the false arch may be as much as one can expect in this life." That may be the book's ultimate wisdom, a wisdom Lyman (and we) may or may not be big enough to accept: "Wisdom is knowing what you have to accept."

Author Information

Although sometimes categorized as merely a "western writer," Wallace Stegner (1909–1993) was more than that: he wrote 30 books, both fiction and nonfiction, served as a mentor to many young writers, and worked in support of conservation issues throughout his lifetime. Wallace Stegner was born on February 18, 1909, in the rural community of Lake Mills, Iowa. Most of his childhood was spent moving from place to place as his father, George Stegner, a restless schemer, searched for a way to get rich quick. The family finally settled in Saskatchewan, Canada, although Stegner's father alternated between living with his wife and two sons to roaming the frontier, in search of his ultimate opportunity. George Stegner's life ended violently when he killed a woman he was with and then took his own life. Stegner purposely set out to be unlike his father by becoming bookish. His father became, for Stegner, the model for many characters in his books: characters who

relentlessly and thoughtlessly sought personal gain without any consideration for who or what they destroyed in the process. Stegner graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1930 (Utah), a master's degree in 1932 and a doctorate in 1935 (Iowa). He worked as an instructor at various institutions, and in 1937, published his first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, which won first prize in a contest sponsored by the publishing company Little, Brown. He won \$2500, which at that time was a fortune. The book became a literary and financial success and helped gain Stegner a position as an instructor at Harvard University. Stegner married Mary Stuart Page in 1934. The couple enjoyed a 59-year marriage and had one son, Stuart Page.

Discussion Questions for Angle of Repose

1. Whom does Lyman like best—his grandmother or his grandfather? Do his sympathies change as he studies their lives? As the reader, do yours?
2. Is Oliver Ward's story one of success or failure? Was he "too honest?" Is it possible to have too much integrity?
3. Was Susan Ward's destiny determined by the era in which she lived and the limitations that era placed on a woman's freedom? Do you think of her as a woman ahead of her time? How does Susan's life in the West compare to her life in the East?
4. Are there differences today between people living in the West and the East? What is it that makes one a "Westerner"?
5. What does the term "angle of repose" mean?
6. Susan often wonders if she made the right decision in marrying Oliver. Would someone like Thomas Hudson have brought her more happiness? What do you imagine Susan's life would have been like if she had stayed in the East? How did her years in the West shape her character?
7. Why does the novel end with Susan's return to Idaho? Why is it significant that the details of her life in the house in Grass Valley are given to us through the present only?
8. Does Lyman Ward (the narrator of the novel) finally manage to reconcile his past with his present, to find an acceptable identity of his own, or to make peace with himself?
9. Is Lyman correct in concluding that a friendship like Susan and Augusta's is not possible today? Do you agree with his reasons?
10. Lyman's stoic determination to "go it alone" is, in some ways, reminiscent of the traditional "maverick hero" of the West. To what extent is Lyman in fact a maverick hero? Is your perception of him different at the end of the book than at the beginning?

Honey in the Horn

This 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. The book offended a lot of Oregonians; he left Oregon but continued to write about the land he knew.

Author Information

H. L. Davis was born in Yoncalla, Oregon, in 1896 and died in 1960. The son of a school teacher, he held many odd jobs as a youngster and later briefly attended Stanford University in 1916-17. He joined the U.S. Cavalry and served at the Mexican border before settling into writing poetry and short stories.

Discussion Questions for Honey in the Horn

1. What are the themes of Honey in the Horn?
2. Did this book change your vision/image of the American pioneer? How?
3. Would you agree that this book is a mixture of humor and tragedy? Why?
4. Though a novel, could it just as easily be called a history book?
5. What feeling(s) did you take away or lessons did you learn from reading Honey in the Horn?
6. How would you rank H.L. David and Honey in the Horn with works of other Pulitzer prize winners of his time such as Hemingway, A.B. Guthrie, Wm. Faulkner, and Steinbeck, or even Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the book to which Honey in the Horn is most often compared?

Shane

He rode into our valley in the summer of '89, a slim man, dressed in black. "Call me Shane," he said. He never told us more. There was a deadly calm in the valley that summer, a slow, climbing tension that seemed to focus on Shane. "There's something about him," Mother said. "Something . . . dangerous . . ." "He's dangerous all right," Father said, "but not to us." "He's like one of these here slow burning fuses," the mule skinner said. "Quiet . . . so quiet you forget it's burning till it sets off a hell of a blow of trouble. And there's trouble brewing."

Jack Schaefer is best known for this timeless classic.

In the summer of 1889, a mysterious and charismatic man rides into a small Wyoming valley, where he joins homesteaders who take a stand against a bullying cattle rancher, and where he changes the lives of a young boy and his parents.

Author Information

Jack Schaefer was born in the decidedly *midwestern* city of Cleveland in 1907, and he grew up immersed in a world of books and literature. Both his parents were avid readers, and his lawyer–father, a "Lincoln nut" as Schaefer affectionately characterized him, was a friend of Carl Sandburg's. As a boy, Schaefer read "everything in sight." At Oberlin College, Schaefer's concentration in Greek and Latin classics seemed to presage a future in esoteric scholarship. Significantly, he also studied creative writing. Having earned a B.A. degree in 1929, he went on to graduate studies at Columbia University. There he specialized in eighteenth–century English literature--unlikely fare indeed for the future author of *Shane*. Yet Schaefer soon wearied of the minutiae of scholarship. Schaefer turned to journalism, at which he worked prodigiously for the next two decades. Spurred on by the high standards of the papers he worked for and by his own "Germanic zeal," he resolved "to try to write well, be literate and direct and concise, express firm conviction based on thorough research and honest reasoning and supported by sound arguments." He accomplished all that, to be sure. But what would immeasurably enrich and ultimately define his fiction was a sensibility of uncommon subtlety and depth that would enable him to touch the heart as have few writers in America before or since.

Discussion Questions for Shane

1. What accounts for the continuing appeal of the western in the 21st century U.S.?
2. What are characteristics of the western hero?
3. In your opinion, does Shane adequately represent that western hero image?
4. What about Schaefer's writing did you enjoy?

Sometimes A Great Notion

Concerned with the ongoing timber strike in the fictional coastal range town of Wakonda, *Sometimes a Great Notion* revolves around the very proud and unyielding Stamper family, who decide to continue logging despite the acrimony and pleading of their neighbors. Literally teeming with symbolic imagery, the novel engenders some conflicted loyalties in the reader, as even the most reprehensible behavior on the part of some of the characters manages to elicit our sympathies. Kesey's unique prose structure, rich in style and nuance, stands in stark contrast to the inability of most of the characters to openly express themselves, their desires, and their feelings. One could easily make the case that this book is mainly about the labor struggle or encroaching modernity or the timber industry or Oregon itself; but, at its roots, it seems to be about the underlying and driving motivations that characterize the complexity of interpersonal relationships. While propelled by some of the basest of human emotions — hubris, stubbornness, revenge, jealousy, envy — *Sometimes a Great Notion* is also marked by some of the noblest: love, loyalty, camaraderie, and kindness. Not merely a book about the Pacific Northwest, *Sometimes a Great Notion* is about the unseen intricacies that shape and command who we are, where we live, and how we relate to others, ourselves, and the places we call home. *Come look...* it's all there to see.

Author Information

Kenneth Elton Kesey (September 17, 1935 – November 10, 2001) was an American author, best known for his major novels, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*, and as a counter-cultural figure who, some consider a link between the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s. "I was too young to be a beatnik, and too old to be a hippie," Kesey said in a 1999 interview with Robert K. Elder. Kesey's experience as a test subject for experiments with mind-altering drugs at a Veterans Administration hospital at Menlo Park, California led to his first great literary success, with the counter-cultural *tour de force*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. Despite the success of *Cuckoo's Nest*, his next work, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, is generally considered by literary critics as his most important work. His innovative use of the first-person narrative was an important contribution to twentieth century novelist technique.

Discussion Questions for Sometimes A Great Notion

1.

The Virginian

The Virginian emerged as a mythic character between 1891 and 1893 in a series of short stories. He developed from “one of thousands” to a cowboy who is “one in a thousand” – a natural, heroic figure. The author stated his hero “wasn’t anybody in particular...he has characteristics of half a dozen men.” The Virginian expresses the 19th-century attitude toward women when he says of Molly Wood, “...all women ought to be somethin’ to a man.” The remark reinforces the sense in which women were seen as the society’s centers for morality and as requiring the protection of men. Molly is the means by which the masculine hero can display his natural chivalry—his “Code of the West.” The marriage between Molly Wood and The Virginian allows Wister to make another statement about the politics of the time. As a Northeasterner, her marriage to the Southerner turned Westerner is indicative of the emphasis on healing the divisions created by the Civil War. The Virginian is a new type of western hero, transcending regional conflict between North, South, and West./ Their marriage involves taking the best from eastern and western value systems and blending individualism and commitment to community.

Author Information

Owen Wister was born in Philadelphia in 1860, enrolled at Harvard where he made influential friends like Theodore Roosevelt, studied music in Europe, but was recalled to a business career by his father. In 1885, he began the numerous trips to the West and entered Harvard Law School. He began writing his western fiction in 1891 and wrote *The Virginian* in 1902, a novel which became an immediate best seller. Frederic Remington illustrated a number of his writings. Wister died in 1938 after publishing a number of western stories, other novels, histories, and political essays.

Discussion Questions for The Virginian

1. Why does The Virginian have no personal name except “Jeff”? And why is he the Virginian and the Southerner, and not, say, the New Yorker or the Pennsylvanian?
2. Many people advised Wister about how the book should have ended differently. Wister’s mother found the trip to the East when the Virginian and Molly visit her relatives to be unneeded. Others believed the Virginian should have been killed in the duel with Trampas. What elements of the story do you find the most satisfactory or the least satisfactory? Why?
3. The narrator says, “... true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing.” What do you think Wister means by this, and do you agree?
4. Do you agree with Judge Henry’s defense of Wyoming lynching of rustlers?
5. Is the Virginian’s success not only in ranching but in other businesses a part of the model we connect with the cowboy figure? Are the struggling cowboy and the rancher who builds a dynasty both part of the model Wister wants to establish?
6. Do you see evidence that the cowboy myth still is a viable part of our popular culture or political thinking today?
7. In 1955, Bernard DeVoto, a well-known writer about the American West, stated that Wister’s simple formula of good versus bad “eliminates all problems of ethics, social action and human motivation.” Do you agree?
8. Do you agree with Judge Henry’s defense of Wyoming lynching of rustlers?