



# Let's Talk About ...

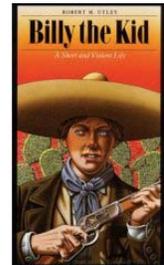
## The Western Experience

“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. The works chosen for this series add to and enrich the picture by giving us different, and perhaps even new, experiences. Within this diversity, a common thread runs through the books: the ways in which individuals confront and deal with an alien culture and a sometimes inhospitable land. Whether depicting the pursuit of the American dream, attempts to start a new life, or struggles to hold onto traditional ways, the books in this series help create a fuller, more complete picture of the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions that ultimately make up the West.”

– James Hadden, for the Idaho Let's Talk About It, Mapping the West, 1986

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**Featured book:** *Billy the Kid : A Short and Violent Life* (1989) by Robert Utley 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.



**Discussion Questions:** [Written by Paul Fees, Senior Curator of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center]

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?



Let's Talk About It is a partnership between the Idaho Commission for Libraries and the Idaho Humanities Council with generous support from U.S. Bank.