



# Let's Talk About ...

## The Western Experience

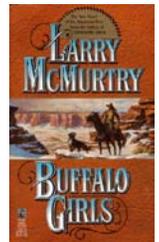
“For many the West is more than a direction found on a compass, even more than a geographical location found on a map. The word carries connotations, snippets, and images from a host of sources that all go into making up an imaginative collage of the West. The works chosen for this series add to and 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:** *Buffalo Girls* (1990 ) by Larry McMurtry

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.



### Discussion Questions:

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. 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?
4. 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?



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