

Living in the Modern Rural West

Overview

The contemporary western writers featured in this theme have a variety of perspectives on rural life in the modern West. Ranging in location across the northern rural West from Washington, to various regions of Idaho (the largest cluster), to Montana, their books present a realistic portrait of the West, admitting to difficulties and divisions and misery, both personal and familial. Readers will find hard questions and unpleasant truths revealed here, along with wry humor at the quirky nature of life in the region. And yet all of these writers also celebrate the particular Western landscapes that they chronicle, evoking the West's inspirational, restorative power even as they



demolish the idea that coming west can solve all problems. The West, they suggest, is still a place where people can “find themselves,” although perhaps not in the way that they expected.

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

Book List

- *Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land* by Diane Josephy Peavey
- *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* by Annie Proulx
- *Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age* by Susan Swetnam
- *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country* by Kim Barnes
- *The Sky Fisherman* by Craig Lesley
- *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Gutterson
- *Traplins: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley* by John Rember
- *Winter Range* by Claire Davis

Theme Essay

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

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

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

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

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

Series Discussion Questions

1. What attitudes about the rural West and Western landscape do you see appearing across multiple books in this series? Is there a contemporary “myth of the West” that writers seem to share? (Remember that “myth” can mean “controlling story”—it doesn’t have to mean “false” story.)
2. What social and personal problems are discussed in these books? Are those somehow caused or exacerbated by the characters’ residence in the rural West? Or might they happen anywhere?
3. Some of the writers represented in this series are native Westerners; others are immigrants. Do native Westerners seem, as a group, to think of the rural West differently than the imports? If you’ve read both John Rember’s book and Diane Josephy Peavy’s book (both set in the same general part of Idaho, though separated by a major pass), comparing their perspectives might be especially revealing.
4. Many of these books are about Western families. As writers consider their relationships to their parents and grandparents, what kinds of questions do they ask? What sort of answers, if any, do they find? How does living in the rural west seem to have influenced their family life?
5. Many of these books are about relationships with Western neighbors. How does the nature of Western landscape influence people’s interactions? Do you think that these patterns are like those elsewhere, or different? People often claim that neighbors are “friendlier” in the West. Do these books bear that out?
6. Which of these books do you think are especially well-written? Why? What features of style/plot/character make them so?
7. As a Westerner yourself, do you identify with particular writers in this series? Which ones, and why?
8. How do these books, taken as a whole, comment on stereotypical images of the West as a place of freedom, individual growth, and opportunity? Do they support those stereotypes, undermine them, or both? Do you agree with their conclusions?

For Further Reading

The “Contemporary Voices” section of the extant “Tough Paradise” Let’s Talk About It Theme, in addition to the “Western Experience” Theme, include many books that would make fine supplements to “Living in the Modern Rural West.” Here are some suggestions for additional reading:

All Over Creation, by Ruth Ozeki

A rollicking novel set on a family farm in the heart of Idaho potato country, featuring a zany cast of characters involved in a plot that raises questions about genetic engineering and agribusiness.

Breaking Clean, by Judy Blunt

An unflinching but wry memoir about a woman’s life on an isolated ranch in Montana, and her decision to leave her marriage and that life behind.

Catching First Light: 30 Stories and Essays from Idaho, by Ronald E. McFarland.

Narratives and meditations that vividly catch the texture of rural Idaho life.

The Cyanide Canary, by Joseph Hilldorfer and Robert Dugoni

The story of a lawsuit stemming from an industrial accident in Soda Springs, exposing environmental crime and its human costs.

Forged In Fire, edited by Mary Blew and Phil Druker

The second volume in the series begun with *Water*.

Hate is My Neighbor, by Tom Alibrandi, with Bill Wassmuth.

An account of how the North Idahoans banded together to fight the Aryan Nations, a white supremacist group, in the 1980s.

King of the Mild Frontier, by Chris Crutcher

A funny, irreverent, poignant work about growing up in Cascade, Idaho, in the 1950s and 1960s.

My Mother’s Lovers, by Joy Passanante.

A novel which begins in Idaho about a teenaged girl whose parents, eccentric hippies, don’t fit into their mill town home.

Ring of Fire: Writers of the Yellowstone Region, edited by Bill Hoagland.

Short stories, poetry, and memoirs from Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana writers about living in the rural west.

Short of a Good Promise, by William Studebaker

A memoir of growing up in Idaho, lyrical and tough.

Standing Up to the Rock, by Louise Freeman–Toole.

A memoir of family and cattle ranching in the Hell’s Canyon area.