

# The Western Experience

## Theme Essay

*[This essay is adapted from the "Mapping the West" theme brochure developed for Idaho Let's Talk About It by Dr. James Hadden, Boise State University, 1986.]*

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.

The works chosen for this series don't fit this traditional or mythic mold of the West, but they do reflect the West. While they don't challenge our larger-than-life view of the West in the way that *Cat Ballou* or Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* does, they add to and enrich the picture by giving us different, and perhaps even new, experiences.

The chosen books have historical settings from the 1850s (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*) to the 1970s (*Angle of Repose*); a variety of geographical locations from the Southwest to the Rocky Mountains to California; and physical landscapes encompassing desert, mountain, valley, and plains. They focus on a variety of individuals--some representing the traditional western character: cowboy, heroine, outlaw, homesteader ; some not so traditional: Roman Catholic priests, the downtrodden, and a normal middle class family; and a variety of cultures: white European, Native American, and Hispanic.

Within this diversity, however, 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. They may be "the lasting lines...to be looked on again and again."

**Death Comes for the Archbishop** (1927 ), by Willa Cather, is a novel in which two Roman Catholic priests from lush "civilized southern France move to the arid regions of New Mexico to "convert the lost souls" of the Indians and Mexicans who populate the area. The novel quietly depicts the various cultures that exist in the American Southwest and sympathetically shows the values and history of each.

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**Brave Cowboy** (1956), by Edward Abbey, tells the story of Jerry Bondi who is struggling as a single parent while her husband serves jail time for refusing to register with the draft board. Jack Burns, the brave cowboy, has a plan to solve all of Jerry's problems. But, Jack finds himself getting into trouble and encounters adventure as he must now run from justice.

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**A Bride Goes West** (1942 )is a collaboration between the experiences of Nannie Alderson moving West to Montana, and the writings and ideas of Helena H. Smith. The novel describes Western historical events and looks at the obstacles the Alderson family had to struggle to overcome. Alderson not only had to readjust her life in a new environment, but she also had to help her children make these crucial adjustments.

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**Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life** (1989), by Robert Utley, examines American history, American myth, and the great legend of Billy the Kid. Utley, a well-known historian, examines the life and pursuits of Billy the Kid and through this narrative, provides a story based on biographical information.

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**Buffalo Girls** (1990), by Larry McMurtry, examines the myths and legends of Western history. In the novel, the legendary, Calamity Jane, looks at the differences between her life and other legends that derived from the frontier. Calamity Jane must move through a self-discovery process and as McMurtry portrays this, Calamity Jane appears to be a real woman instead of a legendary figure. In McMurtry's novel he addresses not only issues of American myth and legend, but also America's values and idealistic images.

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**English Creek** (1984) is the last book in Ivan Doig's series, *This House of Sky*. In this highly evocative novel, Jick, the narrator-protagonist, tells the story of the summer when, as he says, "things came apart." Much like Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose*, Jick sorts out his family's past and his attachments to that past, as well as his place in it.

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**Fools Crow** (1986), by James Welch, is a novel that examines the struggles of Indians in the West. The novel is set in 1870 and revolves around the Blackfoot Indians, a small tribe in Montana. The Indians must struggle to maintain their identity, land, and traditions as the white men threaten the area. The main character, Fools Crow, has the ability to foresee the future and know that they must find some way to fight back or regain what they feel rightfully belongs to them.

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**Letters of a Woman Homesteader** (1913), by Elinore Pruitt Stewart, is a selection of letters written by a woman homesteader, Elinore Stewart. The letters span a four-and-one-half-year period (1909-13), during which Stewart worked as a housekeeper for a Wyoming rancher. Blessed with a literary background, a finely tuned ear, a sharp eye, and a delightful writing style, the letters are as warm, as witty, as descriptive and as alive as they were in 1909.

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**The Virginian** (1929), by Owen Wister, is an American classic that tells the story of a cowboy known as the Virginian. Struggling on the Wyoming frontier, the cowboy must fight the enemy and find a way to win over the woman. The author, Owen Wister, used his own experiences journeying out West to write passionately and realistically about the West as compared to the East. Wister saw the West as the answer to many moral dilemmas and a means to a great story.

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**Yonnonديو** (1974) by Tillie Olsen, is a "novel" of the thirties, and it reflects the depression that fostered it. It is the story of the Holbrooks' pursuit of the American Dream as they move from a coal-mining town in Wyoming to a ranch in South Dakota to a slum in Omaha. Olsen shows, in a highly impressionistic fashion, the dream rooted in the Holbrooks: "An education is what you kids are going to get. It means your

hands stay white and you read books and work in an office." She also shows the dream constantly being denied. *Yonnonddio* is the story of grinding poverty and its effects on the members of the family: the cruelty it creates in the father; the pain and depression it creates in the mother; and--what is perhaps most horrible--the crushing of the children, particularly Maisie, who creates an imaginative world that she jealously guards from intrusions by the outer, the real, the nightmare world.