

## Who Owns the West? by William Kittredge

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What appears in the table of contents to be a collection of three central essays framed by a prologue and epilogue was originally published piecemeal in no fewer than sixteen different periodicals ranging in nature from major commercial magazines like *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *Time* to literary magazines like *Antaeus* and *Ploughshares* and to *Audubon* and the German magazine *Geo*. In the essays of *Owning It All* (1987) and in his memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992) Kittredge argued that he and his family, who ran a successful agribusiness in south central Oregon, “ended with a landscape organized like a machine for growing crops and fattening cattle, . . . a dreamland gone wrong.” He rehearses that story in “Heaven in Earth,” the first part of this book, arguing that “We have lived like children, taking and taking for generations, and now that childhood is over.” Part Two, “Lost Cowboys and Other Westerners,” is partitioned into four more-or-less distinct essays that run from ten to twenty pages in length. Those familiar with Kittredge’s nonfiction will know to expect something of a ramble. Gaps in the text indicate sometimes abrupt shifts of focus; the last twenty pages of Part Two, for example, might be thought of as a series of twenty mini-essays. One moment he is at a reception in the Charlie Russell Museum in Great Falls, and the next he is reflecting on his boyhood in Oregon, and the next he is visiting his friend and fellow writer John Rember in Stanley, Idaho. In the third part, “Departures,” Kittredge travels all over Montana, identifying himself as one of those who came “seeking to redefine themselves in a new life.” And it is “not just the well-to-do,” Kittredge advises; always blaming “the rich strangers,” he warns, “is a way of paralyzing ourselves.”

### Author Information

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1932, Kittredge graduated from Klamath Falls High School and entered Oregon State University in 1949. He married at age nineteen and following graduation from OSU in 1954 with a degree in general agriculture, he enlisted in the Air Force. He worked on the family ranch until 1967, and then, following his divorce, he remarried and entered the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa. He received his MFA in 1969 and began his teaching career at the University of Montana, where he became friends with poet Richard Hugo. His first two books, *The Van Gogh Field* (1978) and *We Are Not in This Together* (1984), are short story collections. Beginning with *Owning It All* in 1987, Kittredge shifted his focus to nonfiction driven by personal reflections and political pronouncements. His memoir, *Hole in the Sky* (1992), released by a major commercial publisher, vaulted him into national prominence as a spokesman for environmental issues in the contemporary West. In addition to *Who Owns the West?* (1996), his titles include *Taking Care* (1999) and his most ambitious effort on the subject, *The Nature of Generosity* (2000). Now retired from teaching,

Kittredge's most recent books are a *The Best Short Stories of William Kittredge* (2003) and a novel, *The Willow Field* (2006). In the early 1980s he co-authored the Cord series of genre Westerns with Steven M. Krauzer. He has edited *The Portable Western Reader* (1997), and with his long-time partner Annick Smith, *The Last Best Place* (1991), a monumental anthology of Montana writing.

## Discussion Questions

1. Throughout his career as a writer and teacher, William Kittredge has committed himself to what he calls "The Politics of Storytelling," which involves, as he sees it, the rejection of outdated Western myths and the definition new stories that involve a cure for "anomie" (lack of purpose and loss of ethical values). Can you sum up the myths of the Old West that concern him? What sort of cure does he perceive? That is, what sort of stories does he think should define the New West?
2. Does Kittredge strike you as more of an idealist about the current state of the West and of the natural environment than some writers with whom you are familiar, or less? Reflect in particular here on the third section of Part Three (pages 114–143). Does it strike you that Idaho, like Montana, "is becoming an out-West theme park"?
3. Despite his title, as a rule throughout this book Kittredge tends to focus on Montana; for example, "Montana is a place where independence and minding your own business tend to be regarded as prime virtues" (108). Do you think this view applies equally well to Idaho? Or do you regard Montana as different for some reason?
4. Especially in the four essays that comprise the second part of this book, Kittredge tends to ramble, perhaps to the point of becoming what some critics might call "self-indulgent." Do you think that is the case here? What relevance might the first-person memories and reflections have for his apparent thesis? Does he tend to present himself favorably, or otherwise?
5. Review the brief prologue, "White People in Paradise," and the more fully developed essay that constitutes the epilogue, "Doing Good Work Together: The Politics of Storytelling." What does he have to say about the rage some people feel over their powerlessness and apparent disenfranchisement? Is that rage at all justified? Does he suggest any response other than defining new stories?
6. Where do you think Kittredge's writing is most effective, or at least from your perspective most appealing? Consider such moments as his shooting at the badger (104–105), his reflections on the death of Louis L'Amour and Western writing (73–77), and his observations at the end of the third essay of Part One (32–35).