

LIVING IN THE MODERN RURAL WEST



Theme Essay

Updated in 2021 by Shelley McEuen

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, and the U.S. Government itself) urged Americans to begin their lives again in this frontier of abundant land. Americans have also dreamed that starting over economically would mean re-inventing themselves in a world of new freedom and 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; others failed. Others were exiled from their homes. The myth of reinvention is often romanticized, and it has frequently excluded the experiences of early settlers, refugees, and particularly Native Americans, whose families have lived in the West for many generations. These stories, taken collectively, speak to a west where physical hardship, emotional difficulties, displacement, and in some cases generations of being marginalized have all been part of the western experience.

In this place that once held boundless horizons and possibilities, today's West finds itself wrestling with unprecedented challenges: large increases in population, catastrophic drought, economic shifts from small farms/operations to big agriculture/timber, arguments over water rights and sovereignty, and ever-increasing apocalyptic fires. Despite these vast difficulties, the modern rural West continues to draw those who seek its wide-open spaces, its beauty, and its promise of independence.

Even though today's West is no freer of prejudice, domestic abuse, or poverty of finances or spirit than any other region, contemporary Westerners still typically define themselves in terms of the landscape around them and their strong sense of belonging to a particular place, 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 for extended generations or alternatively just a few decades (if that), Western writers' works frequently examine and re-examine what it means to be a Westerner, a family or 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



LIVING IN THE MODERN RURAL WEST

BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES
**LET'S TALK
ABOUT IT**
AT YOUR LIBRARY

not paradisiacal, that divisions of class and race and attitudes and gender and sovereignty do exist, they nevertheless insist that a relationship to the western landscape deeply informs the way that they operate in the world.

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 Washington, to various regions of Idaho (the largest cluster), to Montana, these books present a portrait of the west, admitting to difficulties and divisions and misery, both personal and familial, legal, and environmental. Participants will examine hard questions and difficult truths and ultimately appreciate how today's West has been shaped by four centuries of mythology and migration. They can gain new cultural perspectives on their home and also recognize their friends and neighbors as well as themselves.

