The traditional Western novel … tends to take a definitive and positive view in which people do not get away with lying, cheating, stealing, killing and other forms of abusing fellow citizens …”

— John D. Nesbitt, four-time Spur Award winner
The write stuff isn’t always easy

Once you’ve made the decision to become a writer/author, you’ll soon discover a strange mixture of joy and sheer turmoil all at the same time. One moment, you’ll have a period of self-adulation, quickly followed by torturous introspection. One minute the words flow from your imagination like a fast-moving mountain stream. The next minute finding the correct word or sentence can be like a horse dragging you through prickly pear cactus. Why would anyone choose such a profession?

Westerns: Beyond Tradition

By Loren D. Estleman

Many years ago, when I was WWA president, I edited American West, an anthology of Western short stories by WWA members. Only the best made the cut. Many of the stories I rejected eventually found publication elsewhere. The field was so rich that when it came time to winnow down the contributions for space, I found myself eliminating some submissions because of a misplaced comma.

Some stories, however, announced up front that they had no place in a collection intended to show off our genre. I can appreciate a well-placed cliché as much as anyone, but the first appearance of a line like, “Slap leather, ya sidewinder!” was enough to make me use the manuscript for skeet. That lazy approach to an important historical epoch cost the Western its place in literature, respect in general, and eventually its share of the market. Ironically, the Westerns most frequently cited as examples of what’s wrong with the form never committed that sin; their images were so bold they seared themselves into our culture, crafting scenes imitated so often they became hackneyed. No one ever created a cliché.

You’re likely familiar with most of the following examples. I bring them up again because they never get old. That’s the definition of “classic.”

Nearly all of the tropes we associate with the Western were invented by one writer in one book. Lines like “When you call me that – smile!” and “I’ll give you till sundown to leave town” have been around so long they’ve lost their meaning; yet in Owen Wister’s The Virginian, they represent a society entirely alien to the novel’s eastern narrator. When a man smiles while calling another a “son of a bitch,” the tenderfoot overlooks the nuance. He’s shocked that so deadly an insult should go unmet and fails to note that when the words come from the villainous Trampas, it’s the absence of the expression that carries the menace. The concept of a pilgrim lost in a foreign country is the secret of The Virginian’s lasting fascination, yet it’s seldom mentioned and almost entirely missing from its successors.

The prearranged face-to-face fast-draw contest – another Wister inven-
TRADITIONAL (from page 12)

But here’s another thing I remembered about that long-ago summer. I gave up reading Warbonnet Creek after a few chapters. I couldn’t recall why I quit on it but was determined to find out. I have never thrown a book away.

3 Must-Read Traditional Westerns

“Three traditional Westerns that are a cut above because of unique plot elements.”

The Searchers by Alan Le May (1954): “The quest to retrieve a girl kidnapped by Comanches gets twisted as one searcher’s lust for revenge outrrips his desire for rescue.”

Comanche Captives by Fred Grove (1961): “A cavalry officer overcomes his intense hatred for Indians to courageously defend Comanche captives against vengeance-full white people.”

Winding Stair by Douglas C. Jones (1979): “A young woman’s feelings for a vicious killer complicate the pursuit of justice in 1890 Indian Territory.”

– Ollie Reed Jr., Corrales, New Mexico

WRITE STUFF (from page 13)

real teachers of how to write fiction, and their novels and stories are the means by which they teach,” R.V. Cassill says in his book Writing Fiction. He adds, “Read good things when you can find them. But don’t – if you really mean to master your craft – be afraid of soiling your mind by reading works not exactly of first rank. Sometimes more of one’s basic craft can be learned from second rank work.”

Then there are character development, plot, description, transition, dialogue, rewrites and outright rejection. So, why again did you choose to be a writer/author?

As writers/authors, our cups may never runneth over with cash and coin, but there may be something almost as valuable when you see your words in print. There is a certain pride in being a published storyteller. Our stories are being left for future generations to feel the same (or at least similar) emotions as we do when applying pen and pencil to paper. That’s why we enjoy this business or occupation of writing.

That brings us to those who have chosen to write traditional Westerns. Perhaps there is no more engaging subject and none more challenging. Of course, writing a traditional Western requires all the same parameters of any good story. But attempting to write about a genre where the landscape is as important as your primary and secondary characters, now that’s a challenge.

The unique settings of the American West, whether mountains or prairies, often become their own characters. They might even influence the direction of your work.

Be ready to consume copious quantities of coffee often laced with something stronger than cream to help you find the right words. There are still traditional Western stories to be told. Some publishers may set the time period as between the Civil War and the turn of the (20th) century. But many traditional novels take place during the fur trade or the Western expansion, as in mountain man and wagon train stories.

“From my perspective, a traditional Western novel is a book-length work of prose fiction set in the American West in the 19th century. Some publishers may set the time period as between the Civil War and the turn of the (20th) century. But many traditional novels take place during the fur trade or the Western expansion, as in mountain man and wagon train stories.”

Nesbitt said some traditional Westerns creep into the 20th Century, which is OK with him up to a point.

TRADITIONAL (continued on page 18)
TRADITIONAL (from page 14)

“For me the key to this is technology,” he said. “A traditional Western can have trains and telegraphs, but it should go light on the more recent developments of telephones and automobiles and should avoid all the other terrible things like television and fast food.”

3 Must-Read Traditional Westerns

**Shane** by Jack Schaefer (1949):
“Use of the trope, a stranger comes to town, rights a wrong that no one else can make right, and leaves a hero, doesn’t get any better than this.”

**Hombre** by Elmore Leonard (1961) “A white man raised by Indians is forced to intervene when a stagecoach is attacked by outlaws. [This] is the kind of human conflict story at the heart of all great literature.”

**The High Rocks** by Loren D. Estleman (1979): “This novel is full of western atmosphere, revenge and characters who walk off the page with their spurs jangling.”

– Larry D. Sweazy,
Noblesville, Indiana

Nesbitt said the traditional Western has an identifiable conflict and a definite conclusion or resolution.

“The conflict is often perceptible in terms such as civilization and wilderness, civilization and savagery, and civilization and lawlessness,” he said.

Nesbitt said there are “no wispy, indeterminate, or texture-of-reality endings here,” but conclusions that most often reinforce the broadly held values of our democratic society.

“In what I think of as the better traditional novels, the values implied include poetic justice, in which bad people are punished for their bad acts and good people are rewarded, or at least left free, for their good acts,” he said. “The traditional Western novel … tends to take a definitive and positive view in which people do not get away with lying, cheating, stealing, killing and other forms of abusing fellow citizens …”

Breaking the mold

The way Nesbitt puts it sounds pretty sophisticated.

But there has always been a tendency by critics at large – and by some within WWA’s ranks – to dismiss the traditional novel as “oaters,” “horse opera,” as hack work celebrating an Old West that never was and heroes that owe more to myth than documented accounts.

Well, yeah. The founders of WWA were actually professional writers, people who made their living writing. They knew their market, knew what sold, knew their readers wanted square-jawed heroes, fast guns and thundering hooves.

According to Paul Andrew Hutton, in his introduction to the 2010 WWA anthology *Roundup!*, Westerns outsold mysteries as the most popular fiction genre in 1954.

And I believe it can be argued that for all its top gun in a white hat romanticism, traditional Westerns are truer to the settings and events of the frontier West than detective novels are to the actual daily routine of private investigators or science fiction is to space exploration.

The quality of writing in every genre varies vastly, but those who dismiss traditional Westerns as formula or hack writing are ignoring fine, imaginative work by the likes of Elmer Kelton, Fred Grove, Leigh Brackett, Benja-

TRADITIONAL (continued on page 20)

What makes a Western traditional?

“The traditional Western novel must be set in the western part of the United States with a hero or heroine who exhibits strong traits of individualism, courage and a grounded sense of justice. Judeo-Christian concepts of right and wrong, along with the principles of the Magna Carta, are the invisible foundation of the traditional Western novel. Characters with grit, bravery, daring audacity and valor are the bones.”

– Vicky J. Rose,
Elgin, Texas

min Capps, Ernest Haycox, Dorothy M. Johnson, Will Henry/Clay Fisher (both pen names for Henry Wilson Allen), Elmore Leonard before he turned to crime fiction, and many more.

Writers such as these did not allow themselves to be fenced in by traditional Western conventions, but rather used them to create vivid characters and engaging stories.

“Writers have to break the mold,” said Johnny D. Boggs, who has tallied a record nine Spur Awards for his Western fiction. “If I pick up a Western novel and start reading about a steely eyed lawman, blackhearted villain, saloon girl with a heart of gold and a young, beautiful rancher’s daughter, I’ll likely toss it aside. But when a writer takes those tropes and turns them on
A wind seemed to blow his sleeve off his arm, and he replied to it, and saw Trampas pitch forward. He saw Trampas raise his arm from the ground and fall again, and lie there this time, still. A little smoke was rising from the pistol on the ground, and he looked at his own, and the smoke flowing upward out of it.

“I expect that’s all,” he said aloud.

Countless duels have taken place since that first one, few with such subtlety. It’s that level of restraint – and respect for the intelligence of the reader – that raised this pioneering work from just a prototype to a standard, kept it in print for 120 years, and led to four major Hollywood adaptations and one of the longest-running dramatic series on television. Constancy is the very definition of “tradition.”

There is nothing in Jack Schaefer’s first novel that was new to the Western in 1949. Range war between farmers and cattlemen had been a staple of the form for a generation; and here once again was a taciturn gunfighter in a face-off with pure evil in the person of a man with a quick draw. It was this opening, I’m convinced, that sold Shane to its editors:

He rode into our valley in the summer of ’89. I was a kid then, barely topping the backboard of father’s old chuck-wagon.

Not the most arresting start; certainly not what high school creative-writing teachers call the “hook.” But it sets a tone it never abandons, telling its story from the low angle of a child, with the principal players towering like giants against the Wyoming sky. It’s a boy’s adventure on the scale of Treasure Island and Great Expectations, and as appealing to return to throughout adulthood.

Once again, it all comes down to one scene:

This was the Shane of the adventures I had dreamed for him, cool and competent, facing that room full of men in the simple solitude of his own invincible completeness. …

Time stopped and there was nothing in all the world but two men looking into eternity in each other’s eyes. …

… And the room rocked in the sudden blur of action indistinct in its incredible swiftness and the roar of their guns was a single sustained blast. And Shane stood, solid on his feet as a rooted oak, and Wilson swayed, his right arm hanging useless, blood beginning to show in a small stream from under the sleeve over the hand, the gun slipping from the numbing fingers. …

The next shot rings down the curtain. Then:

… Across the stunned and barren silence of the room Shane’s voice seemed to come from a great distance.

“I expect that finishes it,” he said.

The narrative implies that the boy is now a man, reciting it from vivid memory, bequeathing it to us and placing the finishing touch on a story as indelible as a recurring dream.

Is there a staple more suited to the Western than revenge? Redress for an outrage against one’s friend or family is a motive simple enough to require little exposition. All we need to know is who did what to whom and we’re off and running. Three simple things are what cuts Charles Portis’s True Grit from the herd:

1. Our protagonist. Mattie Ross is no scuttle-jawed former lawman/reformed gunfighter/oaken-hearted farmer, but an adolescent girl, out for justice for the murder of her father.

2. Our hero. Marshal Rooster Cogburn bears a closer resemblance to the fat, lazy county sheriffs who hinder the crusades of the knights-errant galloping through a thousand thread-
TRADITIONAL (from page 18)

their ears, or gives me realistic characters in traditional settings, I’m turning pages and getting envious.

“Writers should not be stagnant. There’s a lot to be said for tradition. But there’s also something to be said for breaking tradition.”

Top traditionalists

On those occasions when traditional Westerns achieve exceptional quality – Jack Schaefer’s Shane (1949), Charles Portis’s True Grit (1968), Larry McMurtry’s Pulitzer Prize-winning Lonesome Dove (1985) and Glendon Swarthout’s The Homesman (1988) are a few examples – detractors of the form pretend they really are not traditional Westerns but literary novels. Never mind that they are about gunfighters, range wars, quests for righteous vengeance, cattle drives, Indian attacks and survival in unforgiving environments. You know, those things traditional Westerns are about.

“If Lonesome Dove isn’t a traditional Western, I’ve been in the wrong business for the last 30 years,” said Gary Goldstein, senior editor at Kensington Publishing Corporation. “Sometimes I wonder that if McMurtry had written it in the 1950s, his publishers would have had him chop it down to 70,000 words. But it’s more than a traditional – it’s a saga.”

Vicky J. Rose, who writes Western short stories and novels under the names V.J. Rose and Easy Jackson, said, “Larry McMurtry claimed he wanted to debunk the myths of the West. Instead, he took every old story and short stories and novels under the names V.J. Rose and Easy Jackson, said, “Larry McMurtry claimed he wanted to debunk the myths of the West. Instead, he took every old story and

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Western author R.G. Yoho said True Grit is an outstanding traditional Western.

“It’s the epitome of a traditional Western, a tale of a daughter’s love for her father and her desire for vengeance when he is murdered,” Yoho said. “Mattie Ross doesn’t only seek out a harsh and unlikely ally, Marshal Rooster Cogburn, in the pursuit of her father’s murderer, she insists on joining him in the search.

“Despite the obstacles, opposition and hardships she faces, Mattie refuses to be stopped. In this case, the rugged individualist just happens to be a young woman.”

Nesbitt said True Grit is a good traditional novel that climbs the scale towards literary quality but falls short of the gratifying ending expected of conventional Westerns.

“The novel does not have a happy ending because Mattie Ross is now an older and bitter woman,” he said.

TRADITIONAL (continued on page 25)

What makes a good traditional Western?

“A good traditional Western novel offers compelling characters firmly set in the decades between the Civil War and early beginnings of the 20th Century who aren’t limited by the culture and mores of those times. While touching lightly on the familiar tropes of what’s come before in Western fiction, the better writer will use those tropes in new and unexpected ways to deliver a fresh, atypical reading experience.”

– Richard Prosch, Jefferson City, Missouri

TRADITIONAL (continued on page 25)

What makes a good Western traditional?

“Whether you are talking to my 12-year-old or my 60-year-old self, I’d say it needs a hero. Now that doesn’t mean he – or she – needs to be a hero from page one – but it helps. And for my money, by the end of the novel, you would want to be that hero – or at least ride along as their sidekick.

Three quickly come to mind: Max Brand’s Silvertip (Silvertip, 1941); A.B. Guthrie’s Boone Caudill (The Big Sky, 1947) and Jack Schaefer’s Monte Walsh (Monte Walsh, 1963).

But I would add: Who wouldn’t want to ride along with Mattie Ross in Charles Portis’s True Grit (1968), J.B. Books of Glendon Swarthout’s The Shootist (1975) or Woodrow F. Call and Augustus ‘Gus’ McCrae in Larry McMurtry’s Lonesome Dove (1985)?

– Stuart Rosebrook,
True West magazine

Trouble Shooter

He said, “I wonder where your heart is, Eileen?”

She stared at him. She whispered, “Why should you wonder?”

He said carefully, “It was to Ben you turned the night your father was killed. Not me.”

“He stood beside me. You were a stranger that night, Frank. You were a man I’d never seen. You had death on your face.”

“I suppose,” he drawled, and sat down again.

– Ernest Haycox
Doubleday & Company (1936)
bare plots than a gallant to inspire our admiration. That makes his final surge of valor at the climax (“Fill your hand, you son of a bitch!”) so effective.

3. Our period. No fictional towns here with colorful names borrowed from the Old Testament (Purgatory, et al): Fort Smith, Arkansas, appears as it was, from the hotels and bord- inghouses swollen with pilgrims come to see the latest execution to the rude dignity of “Hanging Judge” Isaac Parker’s courtroom. And the dialogue is ruthlessly authentic:

“Quincy was always square with me,” said Moon. “He never played me false until he killed me.”

The Western acquired an undeserved reputation for mistreating the subject of the American Indian. Novelists rarely (and Hollywood never) presented Native Americans as mindless savages; although too few of them invested much ink exploring the lives they lived when they weren’t in conflict with white society.

Dorothy M. Johnson changed that. Not satisfied with having shattered the glass ceiling restricting female participation in the aggres-

sively male enclave of the Western, she turned one of the form’s mainstays inside-out to create “A Man Called Horse,” a harrowing story of life as a captive in a Crow camp. Writers before her had made use of the character, but almost always after he rejoined “civilization.” Johnson’s novella takes us through his ordeal from his capture through his trials as a beast of burden to his emergence as a warrior “the equal of any man on earth.”

The moment of turning appears with crystal clarity:

… That was the day he began to understand their language. …

… on that important day in early fall the two young women set out for the river, and one of them called over to the old woman. The white man was startled. She had said she was going to bathe. His understanding was so sudden that he felt as if his ears had come unstopped.

Johnson examines every moment of village life, including the harrowing trial-by-fire of the sun dance, as Horse dangles bleeding from hooks in his pectorals, suspended by rawhide thongs from the top of a sweat lodge. She spares no details, weaving exhaustive research into her story without a seam.

The plot itself is hardly fresh: A hero’s journey from insignificance to triumph predates Greek drama. It’s the author’s attention to detail, and the fresh eye she brings to an old subject, that lifts “A Man Called Horse” miles above the common.

Another female Wister laureate, Lucia St. Clair Robson, dug deeper into the theme with Ride the Wind, a novelization of the story of Cynthia Ann Parker from her capture as a child by a raiding party in 1836 to the rise of her son, Quanah, to become the last hereditary chief of the Comanche Nation. The brutality of both sides in the battle for the plains is laid out in graphic detail: While Cynthia is treated with relative humanity, her former neighbor is degraded and eventually driven to her death by the brutality of her captor and the women and men in his circle. On the other side of the Great Divide, the Texas Rangers sent to “rescue” the prisoners gallop through the camp, trampling women, children and wounded braves, “whoop[ing] with glee whenever an Indian slumped and fell.”

The book opens with an Indian raid on a settlers’ fort, delivering blood-freezing images that at first might appear to be more of the rampant white racism the Western is accused of so often; but like the scene involving the Rangers, it’s thoroughly grounded in fact. This unblinking approach to an

BEYOND (continued on page 26)
TRADITIONAL (from page 20)

Boggs ranks *Shane* among the best traditional Westerns. “Plot-wise, it’s the oft-told Robin Hood/gunfighter rescuing peasants/homesteaders from the evil king/range barons,” Boggs said. “But Jack Schaefer expanded that by telling – quite beautifully – the story through the eyes of an older man remembering his worshipful years as a young boy.”

‘Hick relatives’

Does the traditional Western have a future?

“As long as I’m breathing it does,” Kensington’s Goldstein said. “And, like it or not, eBooks are the future, or play an important role in the future of book publishing. Every week, it seems, I see a dozen new self-pubbed Westerns on Amazon.”

Yoho said there should be a demand for traditional Westerns as long as people can watch John Wayne movies and despite the current political climate and fears about cultural appropriation.

“There’s another reason to be optimistic about the future of the traditional Western,” he said. “The Western is currently experiencing a resurgence in popularity. With his recent productions of *Yellowstone*, 1883, and 1923, Taylor Sheridan has made the Western cool again.”

Rose said the traditional Western novel will never leave us as long as people continue to discover and fall in love with the lore of the Old West.

Perhaps a better question would be ‘Does the [traditional] Western have a future with the WWA?’” she said. “Or has it become to some like those em... ‘Does the traditional Western have a future with the WWA?’” she said. “Or has it become to some like those embarrassing hick relatives people want to forget they ever knew?”

Epilogue

I found *Warbonnet Creek* and read it through. It’s a solid Western.

In 1964, Halleran won a historical fiction Spur for another work, and history plays a significant part in *Warbonnet Creek*, recounting fairly accurately the 1876 confrontation between U.S. Fifth Cavalry troops and Cheyenne Indians in northwestern Nebraska.

That engagement included the storied “first scalp for Custer” episode in which Buffalo Bill Cody kills and scalps the Cheyenne warrior Yellow Hair. But the history in *Warbonnet Creek* serves as backdrop to a traditional Western tale about Mason Kirby, who resigns his Army commission to pursue the three men responsible for the death of his fiancée in a stagecoach holdup.

In the first chapter, Kirby shoots a Cheyenne brave who sneaks into his camp intent on killing the white man. But after that, things slow down as we learn Kirby’s backstory and he plans a showdown with the last of the three villains. There are romantic complications involving a pretty widow.

That’s where the book lost me back in 1961. The buildup to action was just too slow for a 13-year-old boy on summer vacation and distractions like a big backyard and a dog.

But reading it all these years later, I was impressed by the ways in which Halleran deviated from traditional Western norms. All the bad guys get what’s coming to them, but none dies by Kirby’s vengeful hand. He resists the opportunity to dispose of the last and the worst of the lot in order to rescue the winsome widow.

Kirby asks the lady to marry him, and she accepts. Then, in what seemed to me a stark departure from traditional Western conventions of the time, Halleran suggests the couple might consummate the pact by the camp fire instead of waiting for an exchange of vows.

The heroine, after all, was a widow, not some innocent dove.

Hot dang.
ugly episode in history, from which both sides emerged with little to their credit, creates an effect so rare it seems a miracle: We’ve known for many years that if the West was won, it must also have been lost, but Robson leaves the impression that she was the first to discover it.

The outlaw has been a constant in the genre since the dime novels of Ned Buntline. Commonly, this creature preys on banks, stagecoaches, and trains, and is perpetually in motion, galloping full tilt on horseback or sprinting along the roofs of railroad cars traveling at top speed. Rod Miller turns that around in All My Sins Remembered, anchoring his bandit – our narrator – at a roadhouse in the desert, stirring only to dispense soap, water and meals for a fee, while serving dessert on the house: swift, violent death, and a place to rest for eternity:

… When he stood up, propped on his arms atop the rim of the wall, I reached my arm around and with the woman’s butcher knife sliced deep across his throat. Blood gushed out, following the track of the vomit down the well. I pushed him over the wall and listened as he fell, scraping the wall now and then until bottoming out with a thunk that echoed up the well shaft.

This is the pattern of our man’s days: service, then slaughter for the goods his victims carry with them, until the reckoning. Evil as he seems, evil that he is, he awakens our sympathy through flashbacks to a cruel childhood, and unexpected kindness to the youths who pass his way today. Miller tells his story with a minimum of emotion and just the right amount of pathos, masterfully expressed between the lines of his spare prose. A 2022 release, All My Sins Remembered is a late addition to the long string of Western classics and promises that it’s nowhere near its end.

The difference between the “traditional” Western and literature that resonates through the decades is the sense that these stories are not confined to the page. The characters seem to have a life outside the story. Men and women live and die, often violently; but they don’t exist merely to thrill. While they live, other lives are affected, and when they die, others are left to mourn, or at least ask why. That simple premise is what separates the enduring classic from empty tradition.

THE END