‘Best of the West’ rides again

Welcome to the “Best of the West.” Every so often, WWA has published lists of best Western nonfiction books, novels, etc. This time, it’s a little different, but in the same spirit that lively literary discussions generate.

WWA president Chris Enss appointed committee chairs, and committees chose important Western nonfiction books and documentaries, top Western novels, significant movies and influential songs.

I get it. “Best” has many meanings. “Favorite” isn’t permanent. Yesterday, my favorite song was “Deportee: Plane Wreck at Los Gatos Canyon” by Woody Guthrie. Today it’s “All These Things” by Joe Stampley – and I’m no Stampley fan. Tomorrow it’ll return to “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.” The Searchers remains my pick as Best Western Movie, but I’d often rather watch Seven Men from Now.

What makes a Western novel influential? Well, D.B. Newton’s Range Boss (1948) was the first original mass-market paperback novel for any genre, a format that launched, and still launches, many careers. A.B. Guthrie Jr.’s The Big Sky was a major influence on me, yet I’ve never written fiction about mountain men or keelboats. How many writers owe Tony Hillerman thank-yous? The Virginian (1920) is considered the first Western novel, but Mollie E. Moore Davis’s The Wire Cutters was published in 1899. Did Davis influence Owen Wister? Andy Adams’s The Log of a Cowboy (1903) was so important, it’s often called nonfiction despite being written as a novel.

Bad Girls was dramatically significant, stopping all the Hollywood inroads Dances with Wolves paved. But Dances with Wolves likely isn’t made if John Fusco doesn’t write Young Guns.

In addition to the committees’ lists, various WWA members were asked to come up with their influential Western books or novels – leaving the meaning of influential and Western up to the individuals. Hey, Donnie Birchfield called Dashiel Hammett’s Red Harvest a Western. I say the same of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath.

Cheewa James, as you see, wanted to do her Top 10 with Lynda A. Sánchez. They met in the 1960s at Big Bend National Park and resumed their friendship at WWA. C.J. Box sent in a Top 5, but couldn’t break a tie for his last choice. Other Top 10s can be found on Pages 7, 28 and 29.

WWA publishes these lists to stimulate conversation. To make casual fans and even Western writers find Western books, movies, documentaries and songs that might have escaped their radar. Let the debates begin.

C.J. Box’s Influential Novels

C.J. Box is the New York Times bestselling author of Long Range.

• The Big Sky by A.B. Guthrie (1947)
• Little Big Man by Thomas Berger (1964)
• True Grit by Charles Portis (1968)
• The Cowboys by William Dale Jennings (1971)
• Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy (1985)
• Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry (1985)

BEST OF THE WEST

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WHERE TO WRITE

Johnny D. Boggs

WHERE TO WRITE
These lists show top, important, significant, influential works

By Johnny D. Boggs

American society has developed a taste for “greatest” lists. Greatest presidents. Best athletes. All-time movies. WWA is no exception.

During its 60-plus years, WWA has often published its choices of genre favorites. Most recently, in 2013, WWA's 60th anniversary, members were polled to pick the best Western novels, nonfiction books and short stories. A few years before that, members were asked to select the best Western movies (2008), TV series (2009) and songs (2010). In 2000, members picked the 20th Century's best Western authors, novels, nonfiction books, short stories, TV series and miniseries. WWA announced “best” Westerns in 1985 and 1995, too.

This time, WWA president Chris Enss appointed chairs to head various committees. The chair selected members for each committee. The committees also chose what to call these lists: “Top” Western novels, “Important” Western nonfiction books, “Significant” Western movies, “Important” Western documentaries and “Influential” Western songs.

While the theme is “Best of the West,” these aren't “greatest” lists, so in all categories except song, selections are listed chronologically by year of publication/release. Many songs are hard to date and/or have been covered countless times, so that list is arranged by ballot tabulations.

If any choices don't meet your approval, relax. These things aren't permanent, and with 70th and 75th anniversaries of WWA coming up, more “best” lists might be forthcoming.

Western history titles from 1849 to 2012

By James A. Crutchfield

In late 2019, I was appointed by the WWA board of directors to compile a list of the 25 most important Western nonfiction books to appear in the United States between 1840 and the present, as chosen by a committee of WWA members.

The list, chronologically by year of first publication, follows.

The California and Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life by Francis Parkman (1849): The Harvard-educated aristocrat's account of his 1846 trek through the Great Plains and Black Hills to the Rockies.

Roughing It by Mark Twain (1872): Tongue-in-cheek memoir of young Samuel Clemens's 1861–1867 travels across the Western frontier.

The American Fur Trade of the Far West by Hiram Martin Chittenden (1902): The book that Owen Wister Award recipient Win Blevins said “laid the base for scholarship about Rocky Mountain fur trapping.”

The Frontier in American History by Frederick Jackson Turner (1920): Collection of essays, including Turner's seminal 1893 work “Significance of the Frontier in American History.”

FEBRUARY 2021

Novels from The Octopus to Cormac McCarthy

By Preston Lewis

In the 1981 Texas Observer essay “Ever A Bridegroom: Reflections on the Failure of Texas Literature,” Larry McMurtry lamented the impact of “the country – or Western, or cowboy – myth” on the quality of Texas letters.

Wrote McMurtry: “It was clear by then that this myth had served its time, and lost its potency; insofar as it still functioned it was an inhibiting, rather than a creative, factor in our literary life; the death of the cowboy and the ending of the rural way of life had been lamented sufficiently, and there was really no more that needed to be said about it.”

Whether he was being disingenuous or merely throwing other writers off the trail, McMurtry four years later published his classic Lonesome Dove, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that emerged as the lead steer in the 2020 list of top Western novels as compiled by active former WWA presidents.

After earning a 1986 Spur Award, Lonesome Dove became the basis for a 1989 television miniseries that received seven Emmy Awards and prompted the New York Times to note it “reinvigorated both the miniseries and Western genres, both of which had been considered dead for several years. ...”

Other authors making the Top Westerns list ranged from Elmer Kelton to Jack Schaefer to Douglas C. Jones, each with

NOVELS (cont. on page 19)
Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: Evaluating the book’s significance, 50 years after its publication

By David Heska Wanbli Weiden

Fifty years after the book’s publication, much has changed for indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada. Native American Studies departments are found at most major universities, Native literature is said to be undergoing a renaissance and Native politicians are taking office in record numbers. Given the momentous political, societal and global events today, the time seemed ripe for a discussion and reevaluation of Dee Brown’s work.

I spoke with the Native author David Treuer, professor of literature at the University of Southern California and author of seven books of fiction, nonfiction and scholarship. Treuer is Ojibwe from the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. Most recently, he published The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present (Riverhead, 2019), which was nominated for the National Book Award. Given that the book contains an explicit critique of Brown’s work, I could think of no one better to discuss the significance of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee and whether its place in the pantheon of Native history should be revisited. Our interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Why was Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee so important at the time? Why was it such a seminal book when it was first published?

Well, Dee Brown’s book was published at the right time. It was published in 1970 and purported to be the first sort of Indian history of the West. I think that’s not actually true. I don’t think it’s the first, and I don’t think it’s a Native history. It’s a book where a white librarian by the name of Dee Brown put together a story of the West using a lot of contemporary accounts of Native people, but the framework and the perspective and the narrative itself is down-the-middle popular history, not particularly Native.

But the Red Power movement had already taken over Alcatraz; the American Indian movement was just gearing up for all of its hijinks, both positive and negative. America was gripped with a pressing need to really look inward and inspect its character, as it was

First Reads

“This image lingers after reading [Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee]. At the moment of Sitting Bull’s murder his horse sat down and raised a hoof. The horse, a gift from Buffalo Bill, had been trained to perform this trick at the sound of gunshots for his Wild West show. However, some witnesses saw this as a sign the horse was saluting the fallen chief when shots rang out. It is not an easily forgotten scene.”

– Lynn Bueling, poet and newspaper columnist
in the throes of the Vietnam War and civil rights and just shy of Watergate and the Pentagon papers.

And whenever America wants to take a good, hard look at itself, it always looks at us. We are the gauges on the thermometer – Native people in our history and the treatment of us by this country. Let’s measure ourselves up against how we treat Native people. And so it was a book that benefited from some good timing.

It was a massively important book at the time, but now we have the benefit of being able to look back, a generation or two later. So how would you evaluate *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* in hindsight?

It’s OK. You know, it may be a gateway drug, but it’s not even a good gateway drug. The problem with that book is not the information in it. The problem with that book is that it establishes and perpetuates the same old story. The narrative is not only untrue, it’s also damaging. That was certainly the narrative with which I built my own self regard as a kid – that my reservation was where ideas went to die, nothing good happened there, nothing important happened there.

I longed to go someplace that mattered. It was hard to retrain myself and to rethink that the place I’m from means more than simply trauma and drama. And so that’s the problem with that book. I think it can be a useful book if you keep that in mind. But Dee Brown’s book is the best-selling book about Native American history ever published – 10 million copies in print; [almost] 20 different languages. It’s never been out of print in 50 years. It’s time for a new book, and I’ve got just the ticket.

I wasn’t aware of that number. I knew it’s never been out of print, but 10 million copies! Clearly, it’s one of the most important books in that it influenced so many people. But whether it’s the best book is up for debate. You explicitly state that you wrote your book, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* as a counternarrative to *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Is it a corrective or is it a companion to *Bury My Heart*?

It’s a replacement. You can read them as companions, I suppose. If you’re into historiography and literary bibliography, sure. My book wouldn’t exist the way it is if not for *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. But it’s not just a counterfactual history, it’s a counternarrative. I’m trying to create a different kind of story with a different kind of shape.

I’ve read your book *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* and I know the central argument, but for those that haven’t, I’d like for you to give us the thesis and how it differs from Dee Brown’s.

Dee Brown says on the very first page, something to the effect of: This book is predominantly about the Indian Wars in the American West, a time of unparalleled expansion and greed and cries for freedom made by those who already possessed it at the expense of those who didn’t. He ends in 1890 at the massacre at Wounded Knee, and he goes on to say that the culture and civilization of the American Indian was destroyed. So, if you happen to travel to a contemporary Indian reservation and notice the poverty and the hopelessness and the squalor, you will understand why.

What I love about my reservation isn’t the poverty and the hopelessness and the squalor. We do have struggles, but there’s a lot more to it than that. And there’s a lot more to the past than that. And so, I take his ending as my starting point and I flip it around. In my book, 1890 was not the end of American Indian culture and civilization, and Wounded Knee should not be emblematic of that.

1890 was arguably the lowest point *BURY MY HEART* (continued on page 15)
WESTERN HISTORY  (from page 11)


The Great Plains by Walter Prescott Webb (1931): Influential and controversial study of the relationship between the land and the people west of the 98th meridian.


The Year of Decision: 1846 by Bernard DeVoto (1943): Scholarly but readable look at the events of “Manifest Destiny” that led to an Atlantic-to-Pacific United States of America.

Across the Wide Missouri by Bernard DeVoto (1947): Pulitzer Prize winner about the fur trade in the Upper Missouri River Basin.

Cheyenne Autumn by Mari A. Sandoz (1953): Follows the tragic 1,500-mile flight of Northern Cheyennes fleeing imprisonment in the Indian Territory for their homeland.

Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West by Dale L. Morgan (1953): The American Historical Review called this “a scholarly and well-written volume … which may well serve as a base for a complete history of the fur trade of the West.”


Men to Match My Mountains: The Opening of the Far West, 1840-1890 by Irving Stone (1956): Spur Award winner about the California gold rush and other key events by a writer known for biographical novels and biographies.

Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863 by William H. Goetzmann (1959): Studies the Army’s part in exploring the West with a focus on topographical engineers.

The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West by William H. Leckie (1967): First book to chronicle the Black soldiers on the Western frontier after the Civil War.

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West by Dee Brown (1970): Landmark book that Time magazine noted “tallies the broken promises and treaties, the provocations, massacres, discriminatory policies and condescending diplomacy.”

The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60 by John Unruh (1979): Pulitzer Prize finalist still regarded as one of the best researched narratives of westward migration before the Civil War.

Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries by David Dary (1981): Bestselling, Spur Award-winning look at the work, lifestyle and legend of cowboys.

The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West by Patricia Nelson Limerick (1987): Revolutionary myth-busting narrative that showed the economics involved in westward expansion.

Platte River Road Narratives by Merrill J. Mattes (1988): A descriptive bibliography of eyewitness accounts of travel over the Great Central Overland Route from 1812 to 1866.


Panelists were Owen Wister Award recipients Will Bagley, Johnny D. Boggs, James A. Crutchfield, Loren D. Estleman, Max Evans and Robert M. Utley; and historians Chris Enss, Rod Miller and Candy Moulton.

In 2013, a survey was made to select the 10 “all-time greatest nonfiction books” published about the West since 1953 (the 60th anniversary of WWA’s founding). Two of the titles on the 2019 survey – Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee and Undaunted Courage – also appeared on the 2013 review, and two more – Bent’s Fort and The Contested Plains – received honorable mentions.

Individual volumes that were part of a larger, encyclopedic study, such as Dan Thrapp’s Encyclopedia of Frontier Biography, LeRoy Hafen’s The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West, David A. White’s News of the Plains and Rockies 1803-1865 and Ken-
neth L. Holmes’s *Covered Wagon Women* as well as others, were not considered for the 2019 survey.

**Top Bookstores**

Brick-and-mortar shops remain nirvana for writers. Here are 10 favorites:

- **Arizona**: Alcuin Books gets overlooked in Scottsdale but specializes in rare books.
- **California**: Argonaut Book Shop – Near San Francisco’s Union Square, great source for California and Old West history.
- **Colorado**: Out West Books – Grand Junction indy run by an owner who knows and loves the West.
- **Georgia**: Gottwals Books – Family-owned indy based in Byron has four regional locations, large inventory of new/used Western titles.
- **New Mexico**: Bowlin’s Mesilla Book Center – on Mesilla’s historic plaza, specializes in Southwestern fiction, nonfiction.
- **New York**: Strand Book Store – A New York City legend, rare books totaling more than 18 miles.
- **North Dakota**: Western Edge Books – Excellent selection of Western books and friendly atmosphere in historic Medora.
- **Oregon**: Powell’s Books – Founded in 1971, now with four Portland locations and a specialty store.
- **Wyoming**: The Whistle-Stop Mercantile – Douglas shop is also a deli and espresso stop.

**BURY MY HEART** *(from page 13)*

that Native communities in North America had from the time of contact. Our populations were the lowest, we were the most politically disenfranchised, and our control of our homelands was at its most precarious. Our control of our families was most precarious because of boarding schools and allotment. Our population was under 200,000 at the turn of the century. So, 1890 was a low point, but not the end – that’s my thesis. It was a point from which we have been emerging ever since.

And my other thesis, of course, is that Dee Brown commits the same sin that most historians of Native life commit, which is that we see Native peoples as victims of history, not as historical actors. You know, there’s a quote I put in the book from Karl Marx, where he says that all men create history; they don’t always create history with tools of their own choosing, but they make history, nonetheless. And that was sort of a guiding principle of mine as I started off.

In 1890, we were at a low point; we were very disenfranchised, we were very disempowered, we were very vulnerable. Nonetheless, we have been making history before then and subsequently. Not with the tools of our choosing, not from positions of advantage, but we’ve been making history, nonetheless. And not just Native history, we’ve been making *American* history. The other thing that I try to argue against is the idea that Native history is a sideshow to American history.

I think if you want to understand America – full stop – you have to know Native history. Otherwise this country itself doesn’t come into focus. You can’t understand this country without knowing Native history.
The trail to *The Virginian*

By David Morrell

It’s the early 1880s. An Easterner journeying for the first time to America’s frontier finally arrives at Medicine Bow in Wyoming Territory.

“Some notable sight was drawing the passengers, both men and women, to the window; and therefore I rose and crossed the car to see what it was.”

Thus Owen Wister begins his 1902 novel, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains,* guiding readers to a window on a world that most Easterners couldn’t imagine, then leading them beyond that window to an alien universe that Wister elsewhere described as having both the rugged beauty of the moon and the glory of Genesis. The “notable sight” the narrator refers to is a corral in which a spirited horse evades every effort to be roped until a man “with

![Image of Owen Wister](image)

the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin” hurls a rope without seeming to move and succeeds after many other cowboys had failed.

That tiger-like cowboy is the novel’s title character, the Virginian. At the age of 14, seeking freedom, he ran away from his family in the South and roamed the frontier, combining chivalry with independence and resilience, personifying the modern world’s notion of the fictional cowboy. Readers never learn his name, just as they never learn the name of the first-person narrator, a tenderfoot whose baggage has been lost and who tries to find his bearings on what seems the edge of the world.

It’s tempting to associate the narrator with Wister, who in 1885 arrived in Wyoming at the age of 24 after a nervous breakdown and a doctor’s advice to recuperate in simple surroundings. At the time, the medical term for Wister’s collapse was neurasthenia. Its symptoms included headaches, dizziness, stomach troubles, heart palpitations, insomnia and depression. The latter word sounds modern but often appears in Wister’s letters.

His parents and his physician were baffled by the cause, but the reasons now seem obvious. Wister aspired to a career in music, but his grandmother — famed Shakespearian actress, Fanny Kemble — suspected he would be an engineer. His constantly critical mother had artistic pretensions and, mindful of distinguished friends such as Henry James, kept warning her son that only his best would be good enough. His equally critical father — a glum, need-to-be-practical physician — insisted he become a businessman or else a lawyer. No less a musical authority than Franz Liszt judged Wister’s piano and composition skills to be superior (the privileged family had that kind of social connections), but Wister’s father grudgingly relented only enough to allow his son a year to see what he could accomplish as a composer.

Instead of taking the year, Wister immediately surrendered and agreed to work at a brokerage firm. Meanwhile, he wrote a failed novel, significantly titled *A Wise Man’s Son,* about a young man who wants to become an artist and whose father insists he go into business. Wister’s mother kept wondering why he persistently took his temperature and checked his pulse. When she and his father sent him westward, they dispatched two fortyish spinsters to accompany him and make sure he stayed out of trouble.

Wister’s journey required four days via train and a day and a half via stagecoach before he finally arrived at a ranch owned by a family acquaintance. There, he reveled in a spartan, physical life, sleeping on dirt floors or else under the stars, hunting, fishing, riding long distances, and herding cattle amid breathtaking scenery.

That summer in Wyoming would be the first of many, during which he kept a notebook of what he observed or heard about, collecting the colorful
details that fill The Virginian: for example, an eccentric hen named Em’ly, a party at which a prankster rearranged babies so that everybody went home with the wrong infant, and a poker game in which an unhappy gambler called another player a “son of a b----,” to which the offended party replied the equivalent of what became one of the most famous lines in Westerns, “When you call me that, smile.”

Obeying his father’s directive, Wister acquired a law degree from Harvard and practiced in his family’s home city of Philadelphia. But in his leisure, he wrote stories about Wyoming, which he submitted to magazines without success until Harper’s started buying them in 1891. Easterners became fascinated by Wister’s portraits of the West, so different from the clichés in dime novels. In 1892, famed English author Rudyard Kipling moved to Vermont, where he wrote portions of The Jungle Book. This prompted discussions about why America didn’t have its own Kipling to write about the West as Kipling had written about the British Empire in India. In 1895, Harper’s began publishing collections of Wister’s stories, and critics started referring to him as America’s Kipling.

Under pressure to write a novel (he suffered frequent attacks of neurasthenia and referred to his “horror of the pen”), Wister recalled the enthusiasm with which readers had greeted those stories that featured a character named the Virginian. In the strongest, “Balaam and Pedro,” the Virginian reacts to a rancher who savagely mistreats a horse. Wister based the story on an incident he himself had witnessed. His failure to intervene had left him ashamed, but in the story, the Virginian did what Wister regretted not doing. Why not adapt other previously published stories so that the main characters become the Virginian? Wister thought.

In early 1902, during a vacation in Charleston, South Carolina, he combined those revised stories and, in an astonishingly productive two-week period (uncharacteristic for him), wrote 20,000 words of connecting material, eventually doubling the length of the stories. Some of them had a first-person narrator.

Uncertain how to change the viewpoint, Wister decided to allow the first person to come and go throughout the book. The most dramatic use of the device occurs when the narrator, having visited Wyoming on numerous subsequent occasions, no longer a tenderfoot, happens upon a deserted barn where a group of vigilantes, including the Virginian, are about to lynch two cattle thieves, one of whom is a friend of the Virginian and whom the narrator met on his arrival in Wyoming years earlier.

Wister devoted most of The Virginian’s new material to schoolteacher Molly Wood (Wister’s wife’s nickname was Molly). Similar to the Virginian, the character had left her family—in her case, in Vermont—and headed West to pursue her independence. Wister later suggested that writing the new material while under the romantic influence of Charleston prompted the emphasis on the love affair between Molly and the Virginian, who says he would gladly ride a hundred miles to spend only one hour with her.

The novel is as much a romance as it’s about ranching, rustling, lynching, and gunfights. Molly participates in the action, rescuing the Virginian when she finds him near death after an Indian attack. Chivalric romance dominates, though, as when during their wedding night, before they share a tent, they
On the shores of an island.

The biggest difference from the original stories is one that Wister emphasized in a note at the start of the novel. Readers (Wister explained) could “stand at the heart of the world that is the subject of my picture” and look around in vain for the reality of the novel. “It is a vanished world. No journeys, save which those memory can take, will bring you to it now.” The likes of the Virginian “will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday.” Wister mourned that chapters published during the 1890s and written in the present tense now needed “is” and “have” to be changed to “was” and “had.”

Indeed, much had changed – and quickly. In 1890, five years after Wister’s arrival, Wyoming Territory had become a state. Also in 1890, the United States Census Bureau had declared that America had so many areas of settlement that “there can no longer be said to be a frontier line.” To quote from The Virginian, “The free road became wholly imprisoned, running between unbroken stretches of barbed wire.”

During recent trips to the West, Wister had encountered ever-increasing visitors. Once-pristine vistas were now crowded and, in his opinion, spoiled. Venting his disapproval, he didn’t seem to consider the irony that many of those visitors had traveled West because of stories he had written in the 1890s.

In 1902, The Virginian was responsible for attracting even more westward visitors. A phenomenon, it sold 50,000 copies in two months, another 50,000 copies in the third month, and eventually totaled sales in the millions as well as being adapted into a Broadway play, four feature films, two movies-for-television, and a long-running television series. Few novels of any type have been as popular and influential, providing the model for the fictional portrayal of the cowboy, not to mention numerous tropes in countless later Westerns, such as the schoolmarm whom the hero courts and the climactic one-on-one shootout between the hero and the villain.

Readers hoped for a sequel, but Wister didn’t oblige. Instead, his next novel, Lady Baltimore, published four years later in 1906, was about polite society in Charleston (where Wister had completed The Virginian). From ranching, rustling, and chaste bathing in a mountain stream, he now wrote about southern manners and a cake, from which the novel took its name. Darwin Payne’s biography, Owen Wister: Chronicler of the West, Gentleman of the East, describes how Wister became a version of his socially aloof parents and eventually preferred Eastern aristocracy to the populism of the West. “Life in the negligent irresponsible wilderness tends to turn people shiftless, cruel, and incompetent,” he at last decided.

Craving the right sort of approval, Wister dedicated The Virginian to his former Harvard classmate and now president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt: “Some of these pages you have seen, some you have praised, one stands new-written because you blamed it.” The surprising admission refers to “Balaam and Pedro,” the story that had inspired Wister to write The Virginian.

In the original, one of the cruelties the rancher inflicted on his horse was bathed chastely, separately, on opposite sides of an island.

The obituary writer was wrong, of course. Wister was hardly a second-rate author. The Virginian remains a major achievement, both as a vivid, eyewitness depiction of the vanished frontier and as a novel that changed the Western genre.
two novels on the list, and from Willa Cather to Owen Wister to Lucia St. Clair Robson. Rounding out the top five behind Lonesome Dove were True Grit by Charles Portis, Wister’s The Virginian, Robson’s Ride the Wind and The Sea of Grass by Conrad Richter. Other books making the top 10 were Kelton’s The Time It Never Rained, Schaefer’s Shane, The Ox-Bow Incident by Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Jones’s The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer and The Big Sky by A. B. Guthrie Jr.

The conundrum in selecting the top Western novels of all time is in assessing how much of the choice is based on the literary quality of the book or the fact that a movie or television series resulting from the novel greatly broadened the public exposure of the work. Ten of the top dozen books on this list had theatrical or television movies based on them and 17 of the top 25, or 68 percent, spawned movies.

I once read that a novel that sells a 100,000 copies is a rousing success while a movie that sells only 100,000 tickets is a dismal failure, so the magnitude of scale is vastly different between the two media. Good literature may make for good movies and good screen presentations may drive viewers to the original works, though that is hard to quantify with certainty. The common thread tying all the top Westerns together is a good story and, in many cases, a plotline about change.

The earliest book on the list is The Octopus (1901) by Frank Norris, who fictionalized California’s Mussel Slough tragedy that brought to a fatal culmination an 1880 conflict between the San Joaquin Valley wheat growers/ranchers and the Southern Pacific Railroad. Reduced to its basics, The Octopus illustrates the tension between the individual and the forces threatening his security or prosperity, a theme that permeates Westerns.

Second book on the list by date of publication, Wister’s The Virginian (1902) is generally credited with establishing the Western novel as a literary genre and the cowboy as the American folk hero. It features a hero known by his nickname, a schoolmarm love interest and a climactic six-gun showdown. The third book chronologically on the list was Riders of the Purple Sage (1912) by Zane Grey, whose work further shaped the formula of the Western genre.

The themes, plotlines and memes of The Octopus, The Virginian and Riders of the Purple Sage permeate the Westerns that followed. At least one book from each decade of the 20th Century appears on this list, with the 1970s earning seven spots and the 1980s claiming four spots, including Lonesome Dove, which graded out at the top of the list.

The list was compiled by past WWA presidents Kirk Ellis, Sherry Monahan, Rita Cleary, Loren D. Estleman and Preston Lewis, who chaired the selection committee. Members were asked to rank their top 25 Western novels of all time. The rankings were weighted and totaled to determine the final list from among 63 nominated books.

The Top 25, by year of publication:

- The Octopus: A Story of California by Frank Norris (Doubleday, 1901)
- The Virginian by Owen Wister (Macmillan, 1902)
- Riders of the Purple Sage by Zane Grey (Harper & Brothers, 1912)
- Death Comes for the Archbishop by Willa Cather (Alfred A. Knopf, 1927)
- The Sea of Grass by Conrad Richter (Alfred A. Knopf, 1936)
- The Ox-Bow Incident by Walter Van Tilburg Clark (Random House, 1940)
- Shane by Jack Schaefer (Houghton Mifflin, 1949)
- Warlock by Oakley Hall (Viking Press, 1958)
- From Where the Sun Now Stands by Will Henry (Random House, 1959)
- Hombre by Elmore Leonard (Ballantine Books, 1961)
- Monte Walsh by Jack Schaefer (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963)
- True Grit by Charles Portis (Simon & Schuster, 1968)
- The Day the Cowboys Quit by Elmer Kelton (Doubleday, 1971)
- The Time It Never Rained by Elmer Kelton (Doubleday, 1973)
- The Shootist by Glendon Swarthout (Doubleday, 1975)
- Centennial by James A. Michener (Random House, 1974)
- The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer by Douglas C. Jones (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976)
- Arrest Sitting Bull by Douglas C. Jones (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977)
- Wild Times by Brian Garfield (Macmillan, 1978)
- Aces and Eights by Loren D. Estleman (Doubleday, 1981)
A tale of two periods of Western cinema

From Staff Reports

Western films are divided into two groups – those made before 1969’s *The Wild Bunch* and those that followed.

Edmond O’Brien’s words to Robert Ryan at the end of that movie – “It ain’t like it used to be, but it’ll do” – seem like they could have been carved on a tombstone for the Western. But Western films weren’t buried in 1969; some of them just adapted.

That’s why these “significant” Westerns are divided into categories.

The first list, of movies released from 1903 through 1969, was published in *Roundup Magazine* in 2014. Notes about those films can be found at WesternWriters.org/round-up/2014-dec-ru-20westerns.pdf. 1969 is considered a turning point for Western films because Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* redefined what a Western film could be. Film historians David Morrell, Kirk Ellis, Robert Nott, Thomas D. Clagett and Johnny D. Boggs made those selections.

Film historian, producer and screenwriter C. Courtney Joyner chaired the committee (Morrell, Ellis, Boggs and *True West* magazine editor Stuart Rosebrook) that selected the list of Western films released from 1970 to the present. After 1969, Westerns approached the genre either by deliberately embracing pre-1969 conventions or by continuing the reinvention that *The Wild Bunch* had begun.

“As the 1970s dawned, the Western was now in the hands of new generations of filmmakers,” Joyner says. “What would happen over the next 50 years wasn’t the death of the Western, as has been declared time and again, but an injection of creative energy that included respect for what’s come before while exploding myths and clichés.”

Titles are listed by year of release. For the 1970-present list, made-for-TV movies and miniseries were considered, although only *Lonesome Dove* is included here.

**20 Significant Western Movies, 1903-1969**

*The Great Train Robbery* (1903);
*Hell’s Hinges* (1916);
*The Iron Horse* (1924);
*Cimarron* (1931);
*Stagecoach* (1939);
*The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943);
*Red River* (1948);
*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948);
*Broken Arrow* (1950);
*The Gunfighter* (1950);
*Winchester ’73* (1950);
*Westward the Women* (1951);
*High Noon* (1952);
*Shane* (1953);
*Seven Men from Now* (1956);
*The Searchers* (1956);
*The Magnificent Seven* (1960);
*Lone Are the Brave* (1962);
*A Fistful of Dollars/Per un pugno di dollari* (1964);

**25 Significant Western Movies, 1970-present**


Selecting a best Western release this year is as impossible as grabbing ahold of a favorite book as it churns in a tornado. Our televisions are bursting with streaming platforms, offering thousands of films to help keep us planted during lockdowns as theaters are being shuttered. In the middle of the 2020 chaos, there has been a resurrection of physical media despite cries that the form is done. Clint Eastwood, Randolph Scott, Sergio Leone and even William Castle programmers, along with TV classics, are among the dozens of Westerns that have seen special releases. It’s a gluttony of riches under the worst of circumstances, as companies continue to give Westerns, classic and obscure, these presentations.

Michael Mackenzie, senior producer of Arrow Films, knows about giving a movie its proper respect. “One of the truly great benefits of the Blu-ray revolution of the last decades has been the opportunity for films such as the spaghetti Western to be re-evaluated as great films in their own right and shaking off the reputation they have unfairly gained as merely inferior ‘copies’ of their American counterparts,” Mackenzie says.

For Mackenzie, whose specialty is Euro-films, caring about cinema always comes into play. “When determining which titles we release, it doesn’t simply come down to a question of cold, hard cash,” he says. “Sometimes we decide that it’s worthwhile to take a risk on a lesser-known film as part of an effort to build an audience, introducing customers to titles that they might not otherwise have paid any attention to.” That philosophy is embraced by Arrow, Criterion and other companies, resulting in many superb Western Blu-rays this year, with multiple extras.

“We pay considerable attention to the bonus features we include alongside the films,” Mackenzie says. “With vintage titles, we seek out key players whenever possible and we’re acutely aware that we might be recording the last interview a particular actor or director will give, so we regard it as a matter of preserving history. In addition, we aim to ensure the presence of a strong critical voice to place these films into their proper perspective. Fortunately, knowledgeable critics and historians are eager to give these titles the love and attention they deserve.”

***

C. Courtney Joyner reviews Western Blu-rays and DVDs for Roundup Magazine.
Western parody remains one of the most financially successful Westerns ever. **The Outlaw Josey Wales** (1976). Director: Clint Eastwood. Screenplay: Phil Kaufman and Sonia Chernus, from Forrest Carter’s novel. This re-imagining of the Western revenge trope was a financial success and chosen for inclusion in the National Film Registry. Eastwood considers it a career highpoint.


**Heaven’s Gate** (1980). Director: Michael Cimino. The much-publicized failure of this film bankrupted United Artists and made studios reluctant to invest in Westerns throughout 1980s.

**The Long Riders** (1980). Director: Walter Hill. Screenplay: Bill Bryden, Steven Phillip Smith, Stacy Keach, James Keach. Casting brothers as brothers was inventive, but Ry Cooder’s arrangements of traditional songs continue to influence Western filmmakers.


**Lonesome Dove** (1989). Director: Simon Wincer. Screenplay: William D. Wittliff, from Larry McMurtry’s novel. CBS miniseries based on the Pulitzer and Spur-winning novel won seven Emmys, was nominated for 12 more and reinvigorated Western filmmaking and Western publishing.

**Dances with Wolves** (1990). Director: Kevin Costner. Screenplay: Michael Blake, from his novel. The first Western to win an Oscar for Best Picture since *Cimarron* in 1931. Spur- and Western Heritage Wrangler Award-winner.

**Unforgiven** (1992). Director: Clint Eastwood. Screenplay: David Webb Peoples. Eastwood’s last Western to date won four Oscars, including best picture and director, and the Spur Award.


**Smoke Signals** (1998): Director: Chris Eyre. Screenplay: Sherman Alexie, from his short story “This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.” Written by, directed by and starring American Indians, this film-festival favorite was selected for preservation by the National Film Registry in 2018.

**Open Range** (2003). Director: Kevin Costner. Screenplay: Craig Storper, from Lauran Paine’s novel *The Open Range Men*. Western Heritage Wrangler Award winner is a further example of the significance of Costner and Robert Duvall in the genre.

**True Grit** (2010). Director/Screenplay: Joel and Ethan Coen, from Charles Portis’s novel. Quirky remake of the popular 1969 movie that won John Wayne his only Oscar, this Spur winner garnered 10 Oscar nominations.


**Hell or High Water** (2016). Director: David Mackenzie. Screenplay: Taylor Sheridan. Sheridan established himself as the auteur of the Modern West with this Spur-winning Texas caper drama, a Western filtered through a noir sensibility.
‘Ken Burns is the runaway master’ for documentaries

By Candy Moulton

The hundreds of documentary films concerning the American West that have been made since the 1950s represent diverse filmic techniques and varied production values. What is apparent from a review of this material is that they all are strongly rooted in good storytelling. Films range from fully scripted and narrated documentary to those that are action-oriented involving actual events that are filmed in real time, and those that are re-enacted for dramatic effect.

A panel of WWA scriptwriters and producers submitted choices for important documentaries over the past 70 years. Without exception, the work of Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan was recommended by all involved in the review process making them the single most recognized documentary filmmaking team of the period.

“My favorite of all is the terrific Ken Burns PBS series The West (1996), narrated by Peter Coyote with characters portrayed by famous actors Eli Wallach, John Lithgow, Blythe Danner, Jason Robards, Keith Carradine, Tantoo Cardinal, Indian activist Russell Means and many other big name actors,” wrote Thadd Turner of Talmarc Productions.

Television writer/producer Rob Word agreed: “I certainly feel that Ken Burns is the runaway master and, perhaps, I could have given him his own category.”

Heidi Osselaer, who teaches documentary filmmaking and is also a writer/producer, said: “I like filmmakers who take risks and bring us unexpected history, who dig until they find new information, and who value truth over a well-worn popular narrative.”

The Top 20, in chronological order:

Wide Wide World: The Western (1958). An amazing, star-packed NBC broadcast connecting New York host Dave Garroway with a live feed from Gene Autry’s Melody Ranch in Newhall, California. The Western TV boom was in full swing and this Sunday afternoon event covered the history of past Westerns to Gary Cooper’s shooting of The Hanging Tree.

Directed by John Ford, written and directed by Peter Bogdanovich (1971). Covering the complete film canon of award-winning director John Ford with film clips from the silent to the sound classics, rare home movies and interviews with the actors most associated with his movies. It also features numerous Western sequences and even an interview with the curmudgeon director in Monument Valley. Restored and expanded in 2006.

Hollywood: Out West, British series produced and written by Kevin Brownlow (1980). Narrated by James Mason. This film traces the early silent film development of the Western genre. Filled with clips and interviews, including Yakima Canutt, Olive Carey, Tim McCoy, John Wayne and more.

Outlaws and Lawmen, John Byrne Cooke, writer and producer (1996). This three-part film was one of the first to use re-enactment as a technique to bring history to a new audience.

The West, Ken Burns (1996). This nine-episode series chronicles the trek West, with actors voicing diaries and written accounts of pioneers, explorers, settlers, soldiers, and businessmen. It is also a sympathetic look at minorities and especially the destruction and fall of American Indians.


Daniel Boone and The Westward Movement, Native Sun Productions; Gary Foreman, executive producer; Carolyn Raine, producer; Paul Andrew Hutton, writer (2002). Western Heritage Wrangler Award winner.

Wild West Tech (2003-2005) 41 episodes, produced by The History Channel. Hosts David Carradine (23 episodes), Keith Carradine (16 episodes). These episodes are filled with recreations of various technologies that helped define the Western expansion.

Cowboys & Outlaws: The Real Wyatt Earp, Half Yard Productions for History, written and directed by Pip Gilmour (2009). Western Heritage Wrangler Award winner traces the legendary lawman’s life.

The National Parks: America’s Best Idea, Ken Burns, producer and director; Dayton Duncan, writer and producer (2009). Narrated by Peter Coyote. An all-star cast of readers brings life to the story of the United States National Parks system from inception to reality. This film is filled with stunning new HD cinematography of America’s beautiful locations. Another Ken Burns masterpiece of American history. Spur Award winner.

Geronimo: We Shall Remain, Episode 4 of American Experience series, America Through Native Eyes, Sarah Colt and Dustinn Craig (2011). Osselaer writes, “I invited Dustinn Craig to discuss the making of the film to a class I was teaching at ASU a few years back. He told my students how American Experience producers wanted him to make a celebratory film about Geronimo, but when he interviewed his people, the Apaches, they viewed Geronimo as troublemaker who burdened them with decades of abuse. Craig ultimately won the battle with the producers and made the film he felt represented the Native point of view. He is a modern age warrior for Native history.”


The Dust Bowl, Ken Burns, producer and director; Dayton Duncan, writer (2012). The oral histories make this series poignant and significant. Burns generated original primary source materials during the filming that make a lasting contribution to history. Western Heritage Wrangler and Spur Award winner.

The Drift: An American Cattle Drive, written and directed by Geoff O’Gara/The Content Lab for Wyoming PBS (2016). This documentary chronicles the story of an important ranching tradition. Spur Award winner.

Power’s War: Arizona’s Deadliest Gunfight, Dodge Billingsley and Cameron Trejo (2015). Trejo wanted to write about the feud that caused this gunfight but couldn’t reconcile the existing conflicting stories. Osselaer, the historical consultant, ransacked archives for two years and found that the truth was that larger forces, not a feud, caused the conflict. Spur Award winner.

Ol’ Max Evans – The First Thousand Years, Lorene Mills, Paul Barnes (2017). Initially shown in festival and special venues, the film about the Western Writers Hall of Fame inductee and author of The Rounders and The Hi Lo Country was aired on New Mexico PBS in 2019.

Route 66 Women: The Untold Story of the Mother Road, Katrina Parks, a three-part series to be released by PBS in 2021. Diverse women and working-class women take center stage in this incredible feat of documenting the women on the Mother Road.
‘Lonesome Dove is the Star’: On the set of a classic

By Loren D. Estleman

Minutes after I stepped onto the Cook Ranch near Santa Fe, New Mexico, Danny Glover rode past me on horseback, wearing the quilted pants cowhand Josh Deets had made for himself in Larry McMurtry’s frontier masterpiece—and I knew I was watching a classic in the making. It was May 31, 1988. I was on the set of Lonesome Dove.

I was on assignment for TV Guide. The opportunity had come my way courtesy of a favorable review of my novel Bloody Season in the Los Angeles Times. It was my first experience covering a motion-picture shoot. I was as nervous as any of the story’s characters contemplating a trail drive across 3,000 miles.

With good reason. TV Guide was distrusted by many in the television industry. It had a reputation for snarky reviews and features patently slanted to place the subjects in a bad light. After some false starts, I learned to introduce myself as a Western novelist on temporary assignment, and not the enemy. From then on I was welcome.

I came prepared. Although I’d read the 843-page novel in hardcover, I bought the paperback to refresh my memory during the long flight from Detroit. Knowing who’d been cast in the leading roles, I saw it through new eyes. Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duvall were ideally suited to play aging Texas Rangers Woodrow Call and Gus McCrae, whose longtime partnership resembled that of an old married couple.

Nevertheless, I was afraid Hollywood would drop the ball, as it often does when adapting a book to the screen; but that first sight of Glover in those crazy-quilt pants settled the point. Once I’d established myself as a Western fan who wanted the miniseries to succeed, I found everyone on the staff eager to cooperate, with one exception: They were reluctant to arrange an interview with Duvall, who had a reputation for staying in character and resenting interruption. “He’s not the kind of guy you hang out with,” said one cast member, who asked not to be identified. “You don’t make small talk.” This was bad news. Failure to connect with the star would be fatal.

Danny Glover helped me forget that problem temporarily. He granted an interview in his trailer, sitting with his patchwork trousers down around his ankles while he treated multiple cuts and scratches on his legs. He said he kept forgetting to put on long underwear to protect him from cactus in Deets’s outlandish britches.

I asked him, because of the Black cowboy’s equal status with his white colleagues, if the character was less “racial” than Malachi, the drifter he’d played in Silverado three years earlier.

In that role, Glover was constantly denied entrance to saloons and hotels because he was Black.

“No. Deets is much more racial. Malachi went through life placing no limitations on himself. Deets has obvious limitations about what he can do, where he can go.”

I asked, “How does the star of the modern police drama Lethal Weapon identify with a cowpuncher?” He smiled. “The moment I’m on a horse, I’m there.”

Diane Lane, whom I caught up with over a vegetarian salad in downtown Santa Fe, was equally pumped. Looking far too fair and put-together for Lonesome Dove is the Star:

On the set of a classic

“‘When Lonesome Dove first aired, I was working the nightshift at a convenience store. Everyone who walked in the door raved about it. I was so mad at God for making me work at such a crummy place and missing the series, I stubbornly refused to watch it for 20 years. When I finally did, I found it to be everything everyone said about it and more.’”

– Vicky J. Rose, Producer, Jingle-Bob Productions

FIRST VIEWS

“When Lonesome Dove first aired, I was working the nightshift at a convenience store. Everyone who walked in the door raved about it. I was so mad at God for making me work at such a crummy place and missing the series, I stubbornly refused to watch it for 20 years. When I finally did, I found it to be everything everyone said about it and more.”

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the scenes she was about to shoot as Lorena, badman Blue Duck’s sun-broiled, battered hostage, she called herself a “money player”: “I always have the character sort of tucked away in a body part. I have her, and I protect her, and I choose to expose her when it’s appropriate. When you roll the camera, I jump out of nowhere and do everything.” She especially enjoyed Duvall’s encouragement and on-set pranks, which lightened the mood and often led to an enriched performance.

As she described Tommy Lee Jones, his intense dedication rivaled Duvall’s. “He can be such an ominous presence in the room,” she said, remembering their experience shooting The Big Town. “You don’t want to tap him on the shoulder or you might get swatted. I came to the set the first day on Lonesome Dove, and I walked up to Tommy Lee, and it was like, ‘Hey, baby!’ and he picked me up and swung me around. I didn’t know we’d got on so well.”

She offered insight into the character of Lorena, the story’s proverbial prostitute with a heart of gold. “She’s keeping herself closed and only exposing the real person inside to Gus. Lorrie’s a virgin inside.”

As the production continued, Duvall remained elusive. B-team coverage of Gus McCrae’s pursuit by murderous Comancheros, and his desperate decision to bail out of the saddle and cut his bay quarterhorse’s throat to create a defensive breastwork, came off in one take. The set was cleared, too quickly to engineer a meeting.

Instead, I buttonholed Joey Hamlin, the owner of that important mount – a “falling horse,” trained to drop to the right, as was more common, giving camera crews more choice in their shots. The gambit paid off: Instant Coffee’s prior credits included Rambo III and Young Guns. Said Hamlin, “I’m going to ride this horse straight into the old folks’ home.”

The star horse was the Hell Bitch, Woodrow Call’s ill-tempered gray. This one had four stand-ins: one to buck, one to kick, one to stand still and one to lead around by its reins. The biter topped the bill.

Later, I watched McCrae and Call scrambling to provide cover for Deets, whose attempt to rescue an Indian child would bring on his own death. On the first take, they fired too soon, before the native American boy with the lance reached Glover. The boy, behaving professionally, fell as if he’d been hit. Jones whooped: “We saved Deets!”

Jones, smoking (Marlboros, naturally) in his trailer, sported Call’s now-iconic white beard and collar-length hair. In a scene just shot, he’d laughed at a Duvall line – an act distinctly foreign to McMurtry’s humorless trail boss. I asked him about this deviation from McMurtry. He said, “I think a man without humor has shown himself to be not only a boring man, but a poor leader.”

“How would you feel,” I said, “if the real Captain Call appeared at this moment?” Jones laughed again. “He’s here now!”

Two days into the shoot, I had yet to pin down Duvall. Although he was described as friendly – at one point he flew in a troupe of Argentinian tango-dancers to entertain the cast and crew – the staff continued to stall arranging an interview. I fretted: TV Guide wouldn’t accept an article that failed to include the star.

Then the cavalry came.

Before filming the latest in what may have been a record number of prairie burials, a staffer asked everyone to pile into the nearest SUV when lunch was called. (Thus preventing the presence of too many automobiles on the outdoor set.) When the scene wrapped, I climbed aboard the one most convenient – and found myself sitting directly behind Duvall in the front passenger’s seat.
I couldn’t believe my luck. I introduced myself, extending a hand across the seat. He grasped it warmly and invited me to his trailer for an interview.

He was a genial host. Dining on tuna salad, he revealed in the opportunity to play the kind of role he got to do on stage: a character part, rather than the stereotypical hero or villain he usually portrayed in Hollywood. “A lot of people thought I should play Call, but my ex-wife, who’s very sharp—she’s an actress—she said, ‘Bobby, you should play Gus.’” The cast was ideal: “Better-prepared, overall, better people to work with.” About Jones: “When you act with someone who’s there, it’s not like acting. You’re there.”

On the phone, I interviewed Suzanne DePasse, the executive producer (with screenwriter Bill Witliff) who’d acquired the rights from McMurtry. She was as stoked as everyone on the set. “We have an embarrassment of riches. Great source material and the best people in the business.”

So far, everyone I’d interviewed, from director Simon Wincer to Witliff, who’d managed to distill a 300,000-word novel into a 400-page teleplay, agreed that this was a happy shoot, with all parties having the time of their lives.

Ricky Schroder was no exception. He beamed when I called him “Rick;” it seems I was the first journalist not to address the 18-year-old actor as “Ricky.” He opened up to me immediately. “I didn’t even know how to ride a horse before this movie. They took me out to Texas three weeks early. I learned how to rope cattle, bulldog cattle, tie cattle and run. It’s fun.”

Duvall was impressed. “He spent four days in the saddle and it was if it was four years.”

He didn’t exaggerate. During Deets’s moving burial scene, a stray Styrofoam cup threatened to blow into the frame and spoil the take. Schroder leapt into the saddle, galloped out, and scooped the cup from the ground rodeo-style.

He came back to an ovation from cast and crew.

The feat was nearly superhuman: He was allergic to horses. Schroder stayed aboard for 16 grueling weeks thanks to a combination of determination and frequent inoculation.

During a break, he shot a rattlesnake.

“I came to the set the first day on Lonesome Dove, and I walked up to Tommy Lee, and it was like, ‘Hey, baby!’ and he picked me up and swung me around. I didn’t know we’d got on so well.”

– Diane Lane

with a bow and arrow, ate it, and had it skinned to make boots. “Crazy Ricky,” said Duvall.

And the women? “Great women!” Duvall said. Lane, a professional since age 6, bridged their on-screen romantic age difference with ease. The female cast brought experience and personal magnetism to a traditionally masculine drama.

I called Robert Urich (black sheep Jake Spoon) in Boston, where he was wrapping up his TV series Spenser for Hire. He was floored when I recalled that his first Western role was in a Gunsmoke episode. “I didn’t know anyone remembered that!” He told me to watch for Anjelica Huston’s close-up when Duvall rides up to his old flame’s ranch house. “Absolutely radiant!”

Despite all the hardships of location shooting in wild places (duststorms, rainstorms, high winds, blizzards), everyone I met said he or she would do another Western in a minute.

William Sanderson, already well-known as Larry (of Newhart’s “Larry, Darryl, and Darryl!”) was genuine and down-to-earth over lunch in the commissary tent. He pocketed the special mouthpiece he wore as “Lippy,” the piano-player, in order to eat and pass the time in friendly conversation. I enjoyed his company so much I never used my notebook or tape recorder. It seemed wrong to spoil so pleasant a visit with work.

On my last day, I was told Frederic Forrest, cast as Blue Duck after Charles Bronson declined the part, was difficult; but he wasn’t present that week, so I was unable to hear his side.

The Cook Ranch’s old-town set provided background for Duvall’s moving death scene, and Jones’s preparation for his Homeric trek back to Texas to bury Gus. The false-fronted structures and dirt streets stood in for busy Fort Smith, Arkansas, and raw-boned Miles City, Montana. The drive from modern-day Santa Fe took 30 minutes and crossed 100 years.

My article appeared in the February 4, 1989, issue of TV Guide – drastically cut to make room for more photos and a passage I didn’t write, claiming Texas native Jones’s insistence on doing his own horseback riding led to “a confrontation” – a common subject of discussion in Hollywood, and quickly agreed to by the producers. The magazine wanted a controversy.

One casualty was the entire Danny Glover interview. It was among the best, and I’m mortified that he might think me a racist for snubbing the only Black actor in the cast.

A photo of Duvall and Lane did make the cover: at the bottom of a staggered stack of five, pitching ratings “sweeps week,” with a swimsuit model in a skimpy bikini at the top.

The feature cost $20 million and involved 90 principal cast members, 1,000 extras, 90 crew members, 30 wranglers, 100 horses and 1,500 head of cattle.

It’s been 30 years. Most of those I met would go on to other memorable assignments, but none with the impact of Lonesome Dove. Its success, critically and in ratings, rescued both the Western and the miniseries format from extinction.

Witliff’s assessment was classic understatement: “Everybody’s attitude is that Lonesome Dove is the star.”

Duvall’s own prediction was closer to the mark (and the actor who created Tom Hagen, Don Vito Corleone’s consigliere, should know): “This is like the Western version of The Godfather on TV. I think it’s gonna be a hit.”
### AUTHORS’ INFLUENTIAL NONFICTION LISTS

#### Jane Little Botkin
Award-winning Jane Little Botkin’s *The Girl Who Dared to Defy: Jane Street and the Rebel Maids of Denver* is due out this month from the University of Oklahoma Press.
- *The Oregon Trail* by Francis Parkman (1847)
- *On the Border with Crook* by John C. Bourke (1891)
- *Banditti of the Plains* by Asa Mercer (1894)
- *The Chisholm Trail* by Sam P. Ridings (1936)
- *The Longhorns* by J. Frank Dobie (1941)
- *The Mescalero Apaches* by C.L. Sonnichsen (1958)
- *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1970)
- *Blood and Thunder* by Hampton Sides (2006)
- *So Rugged and Mountainous* by Will Bagley (2010)
- *Empire of the Summer Moon* by S.C. Gwynne (2011)

#### Art T. Burton
Retired history professor Art T. Burton has written four history books on the Western frontier and numerous articles for Western magazines.
- *Hell on the Border* by S.W. Harman (1898)
- *Oklahombres, Particularly the Wilder Ones* by Evett Dumas Nix as told to Gordon Hines (1929)
- *Marshal of the Last Frontier* by Zoe Tilghman (1949)
- *Pictorial History of the Wild West* by James D. Horan and Paul Sann (1954)
- *The Buffalo Soldiers* by William H. Leckie (1967)
- *West of Hell’s Fringe* by Glenn Shirley (1968)

#### Kellen Cutsforth
Kellen Cutsforth has authored numerous books and articles about the history of the American West and served as an editor, reviewer and president of several Western history organizations.
- *The North American Indian* by Edward S. Curtis (1907-1930)
- *Black Elk Speaks* by John G. Neihardt (1932)
- *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1970)
- *Son of the Morning Star* by Evan S. Connell (1984)
- *Custer's Luck* by Edgar I. Stewart (1993)
- *So Rugged and Mountainous* by Will Bagley (2010)
- *Empire of the Summer Moon* by S.C. Gwynne (2011)

#### Paul L. Hedren
Paul L. Hedren, who retired from a long career in the West with the National Park Service, is a Spur Award-winning historian of the Sioux War.
- *Custer’s Luck* by Edgar I. Stewart (1955)
- *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* by James C. Olson (1965)
- *Phil Sheridan and His Army* by Paul Andrew Hutton (1985)
- *Crazy Horse* by Kingsley M. Bray (2006)
- *Custer’s Trials* by T.J. Stiles (2015)
- *Grant* by Ron Chernow (2017)
- *Lakota America* by Pekka Hämäläinen (2019)

#### Doreen Chaky
Doreen Chaky, author of *Terrible Justice: Sioux Chiefs and Soldiers on the Upper Missouri*, is working with co-author Adrienne Stepanek on a book about Northern Plains lynchings.
- *The Mountains of California* by John Muir (1894)
- *Trails Plowed Under* by Charles M. Russell (1927)
- *Men to Match My Mountains* by Irving Stone (1956)
- *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown (1970)
AUTHORS’ INFLUENTIAL FICTION LISTS

Candace Simar
Candace Simar learned to love Westerns from her father. “Dad always carried one in his back pocket,” she says. “He’d sneak a read whenever he could get away with it.”

- The Virginian by Owen Wister (1902)
- O Pioneers! by Willa Cather (1913)
- My Ántonia by Willa Cather (1918)
- A Lantern in Her Hand by Bess Streeter Aldrich (1929)
- Hannah Fowler by Janice Holt Giles (1956)
- Johnny Osage by Janice Holt Giles (1960)
- Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry (1985)
- Last of the Breed by Louis L’Amour (1987)
- Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier (1997)
- Comanche Moon by Larry McMurtry (1997)

Susan K. Salzer
Author of four novels and many short stories, Susan K. Salzer’s most recent story, “Final Thoughts,” appeared in the March/April issue of Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine.

- Black Elk Speaks by John G. Neihardt (1932)
- Hombre by Elmore Leonard (1961)
- Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner (1971)
- Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry (1985)
- Woe to Live On by Daniel Woodrell (1987)
- Montana 1948 by Larry Watson (1993)
- Potter’s Fields by Frank Roderus (1996)
- A Road We Do Not Know by Frederick J. Chiaventone (1996)
- No Country for Old Men by Cormac McCarthy (2005)
- Enemy Women by Paulette Jiles (2007)

John D. Nesbitt
Author of traditional Western, contemporary and retro/noir fiction, John D. Nesbitt has won four Spur awards and has been a finalist twice.

- The Virginian by Owen Wister (1902)
- Pasá Por Aquí by Eugene Manlove Rhodes (1926)
- The Postman Always Rings Twice by James M. Cain (1934)
- The Sea of Grass by Conrad Richter (1936)
- Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck (1937)
- The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler (1939)
- The Big Sky by A.B. Guthrie Jr. (1947)
- Shane by Jack Schaefer (1949)
- Riders of Judgment by Frederick Manfred (1957)
- Welcome to Hard Times by E.L. Doctorow (1960)

Irene Bennett Brown
Award-winning Irene Bennett Brown has written numerous novels set in the West for young readers and adults since 1969 – the most recent, Tangled Times, released in 2020.

- We Must March by Honoré Willise Morrow (1925)
- Smoky the Cowhorse by Will James (1926)
- Caddy Woodlawn by Carol Ryrie Brink (1935)
- The Sea of Grass by Conrad Richter (1936)
- The Way West by A.B. Guthrie Jr. (1949)
- Giant by Edna Ferber (1952)
- Andersonville by MacKinlay Kantor (1955)
- Home Mountain by Jeanne Williams (1990)
- These Is My Words by Nancy E. Turner (1998)
- The Hearts of Horses by Molly Gloss (2008)

NOVELS (from page 19)

Ride the Wind by Lucia St. Clair Robinson (Ballantine, 1982)

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford by Ron Hansen (Knopf, 1983)

Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry (Simon & Schuster, 1985)

All the Pretty Horses by Cormac McCarthy (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992)

Other novels receiving votes: A Distant Trumpet by Paul Horgan; Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner; Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya; Biggles in the Afternoon by Ernest Haycox; The Dark Wind by Tony Hillerman; Down the Long Hills by Louis L’Amour; The Earthbreakers by Ernest Haycox; The Enemy Gods by Oliver La Farge; Forty Lashes Less One by Elmore Leonard; The Great Horse Race by Fred Grove; The Hi Lo Country by Max Evans; The Honesman by Glendon Swarthout; House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday; Little Big Man by Thomas Berger; The Long Rifle by Stewart Edward White; The Man Who Killed the Deer by Frank Waters; No Survivors by Will Henry; Old Yeller by Fred Gipson; People on the Earth by Edwin Corle; The Rainbow Trail by Zane Grey; Return to Red River by Johnny D. Boggs; The Rounders by Max Evans; The Searchers by Alan Le May; The Song of the Lark by Willa Cather; Stranded: A Story of Frontier Survival by Matthew P. Mayo; The Terrible Teague Bunch by Gary Jennings; The Treasure of the Sierra Madre by B. Traven; The Turquoise by Anya Seton; Under The Fifth Sun by Earl Shorris; The Untamed Breed by Gordon D. Shirreffs; The Wind by Dorothy Scarbrough; Winter in the Blood by James Welch; The Wolf and the Buffalo by Elmer Kelton; and The Wonderful Country by Tom Lea.
‘Ghost’ still riding sky-high among Western songs

By Micki Fuhrman

“Ghost Riders in the Sky” perpetually tops Best Western Songs lists—even in Rolling Stone. So no surprise it hit No. 1 as most influential song in WWA’s survey of songwriters Jon Chandler, Allan Chapman, W.C. Jameson and Carol Markstrom and music historian Ralph Estes.

In 1948, park ranger/songwriter/actor Stan Jones wrote what Jameson calls “a mini-novel in three minutes.” “Ghost Riders,” reportedly inspired by a disastrous stampede, borrows a minor-key Irish melody (“Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye”), adding pounding hoofbeat rhythm and hair-raising lyrics. Their brands were still on fire and their hooves were made of steel. Their horns were black and shiny and their hot breath he could feel.

Of the 100-plus artists who have recorded it, Johnny Cash’s version is a standout. His thunder-deep delivery puts listeners in the saddle with phantom riders “trying to catch the

Defining the Western song in three-quarter time

I about wore out my grandmother’s recording of “New San Antonio Rose.” That song, by Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, along with “Happy Trails,” by Dale Evans, and “Rawhide,” by Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington, marked me deep in my young years and shaped my love for Western music.

But are all of them Western songs? What makes a song Western?

WWA Spur entry guidelines proclaim a Western song has lyrics “dependent in whole or in part on settings, characters, conditions or customs indigenous to the American West or early frontier.” “Rawhide,” the theme song for the 1959-66 CBS-TV series, qualifies. It’s about cowboys and cattle drives.

Keep them dogies rollin’ Rawhide.

But the Wills’s classic is a “broken song of love.” If it’s Western, as I believe it is, it’s due to its setting, a moonlit path beside the Alamo, and its Western swing style.

The closest the lyrics in Evans’s “Happy Trails” gets to Western is It’s the way you ride the trail that counts. “Happy Trails” is Western because Evans sings it with her husband, Roy Rogers, King of the Cowboys, at the end of episodes of their 1950s-60s Western TV show.

Some songs are more apparently Western than others. It’s easy enough to tell that “Big Iron” and “El Paso,” Marty Robbins compositions recorded on his 1959 album Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs, are Western. Both revolve around Old West gunfights.

But I’d argue that Dave Stamey’s “Orange Cove Auto Repair and Smog,” about a hard-luck, hard-working car mechanic, and “At the Truck Stop,” a contemporary chase song, both on Stamey’s 2015 album Western Stories, are just that.

Ask me what my favorite Western song is today and I’ll say “The Strawberry Roan,” a traditional work about a bronc rider who meets his match.

He’s about the worst buckin’ I’ve seen on the range
He’ll turn on a nickel and give you some change
Ask me tomorrow and I may say “Navajo Rug,” the Ian Tyson-Tom Russell song about a waitress in a canyon-Colorado diner.

Aye, aye, aye, Katie
Whatever became of the Navajo rug and you
Lots of things go into making a Western song. But if you love this music, you’ll know it when you hear it.

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Ollie Reed Jr. reviews Western music for Roundup Magazine.
devil’s herd across the endless skies.” And we all sing along, “Yippee yi yay, yippee yi oh …”

A lyric dropped into Marty Robbins’s head as he drove through Texas on his way to Phoenix for Christmas: “Out in the west Texas town of El Paso, I fell in love with a Mexican girl.” By the time he got to Phoenix – oops, wrong song list – he had finished a draft of No. 2 pick and Robbins mega-hit, “El Paso,” wherein a rowdy cowboy falls for (and kills for) black-eyed Felina (the name, inspired by childhood classmate, Fidelina). Things don’t turn out well for the cowboy but he does get the girl, albeit briefly.

From out of nowhere Felina has found me, Kissing my cheek as she kneels by my side. Cradled by two loving arms that I’ll die for, One little kiss and Felina, good-bye.

The record’s nine verses and three bridges topped nearly five airtime-busting minutes. Grady Martin lent Spanish-style guitar licks, with future “outlaw” Jim Glaser singing sky-high harmony.

Teenager Bob Nolan – of the original Sons of the Pioneers – submitted a poem called “Cool Water” as a high school assignment. Years later, the poem became the stirring lyrics to this survey’s No. 3 most influential song, which isn’t about water at all but, rather, the absence of it. The singer and his pack mule chase a desert mirage, pitifully crying …

Dan, can ya see that big, green tree? Where the water’s runnin’ free And it’s waitin’ there for me and you?

At No. 4, the Sons of the Pioneers’ signature song (also by Nolan), “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” salutes the humble rolling weed of the West with a lovely descending melodic motif. In no other recording is the distinctive Pioneers “voice” showcased more beautifully. Artists from all genres have drifted along with the “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” – among them, Bing Crosby, Pat Boone and … the Supremes. (Western music purists: Googling the last version is not advised.)

Tied at No. 5, “The Ballad of High Noon: Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darlin’” (1952, Ned Washington/Dimitri Tiomkin) started the trend of the narrative movie theme song. Composer Elmer Bernstein said it precipitated the demise of the classical film score. Tex Ritter’s haunting recording utilized only three instruments: guitar, accordion and an unusual Novacord (early synthesizer) percussive line.

Also at No. 5, “The Dying Cowboy,” a cowhand’s plaintive dirge, traces murky origins to the mid-to-late 1800s. Most historians give credit to Francis Henry Maynard (1853-1926). It shares DNA with “The Cowboy’s Lament” (the titles are sometimes interchanged) and, over time, the lyrics to each evolved into “The Streets of Laredo” and “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie.”

Depending on the version, the locale varies from Laredo to Austin to Tom Sherman’s barroom, but the central character is always a cowboy “clothed in white linen” who sorrowfully declares, “I’m shot in the breast and I know I must die.” The chorus paints perhaps the bleakest image found in any Western sad song.

So beat the drum slowly, play the fife lowly Play the death march as you carry me along Take me to the green valley, there lay the sod o’er me For I’m a young cowboy and I know I’ve done wrong

**WWA’s Pen & Ink**

From Staff Reports

WWA’s inaugural Western music CD, Pen & Ink, Voice and Strings – Echoes from the New Frontier, is still available.

Released in 2016 at the WWA convention in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and produced by Spur Award-winning songwriter and novelist Jon Chandler, Pen & Ink features several Spur Award-winning compositions performed by many of today’s premier Americana singer-songwriters.

To order, go to the WWA store at WesternWriters.org.