**FICTION**

**C.J. BOX**  
*Shadows Reel: A Joe Pickett Novel*  
G.P. Putnam’s Sons  
Paperback, 370 pages, $17  
PenguinRandomHouse.com  

Wyoming game warden Joe Pickett has a penchant for being in the wrong place at just the right time to get involved in dangerous situations. He’s called out to investigate a moose-poaching incident, which quickly turns into a murder by torture. Meanwhile, Joe’s wife, Marybeth, the local librarian, finds a mysterious, sinister – and possibly valuable – photo album left on the library doorstep. Unraveling all these connected pieces will put Joe and his family in serious danger. At the same time, Joe’s friend Nate Romanowski has had his falcon “air force” stolen and his wife beaten. To a man of Nate’s character, this is the same as declaring war. Vengeance and the recovery of his birds leads to a heart-pounding conclusion. The Joe Pickett novels just keep getting better.  

— Carol Crigger

**PETER BRANDVOLD**  
*All My Sins Remembered*  
Wolfpack Publishing  
Paperback, 308 pages, $12.99  
WolfpackPublishing.com  

An excellent, professionally written novel filled with great characters and an action-packed plot. Peter Brandvold has a compelling narrative style. The main protagonist is a physically powerful, exceptional lawman. His outward arrogance hides a sense of tenderness for those close to him. The antagonist is equally powerful physically, an expert woodsman, and ruthless bounty hunter. Brandvold pits these two in believable situations where they must deal with each other’s strengths and talents while challenged by extremes in weather and terrain. A pair of subplots adds to the action and anticipation in this 2023 Spur finalist for traditional Western novel. Brandvold’s style is “show” not “tell,” so the reader is involved in the action and observes character development as the story unfolds. The novel’s resolution continues in its rapid pace and is thorough and satisfying.  

— Jack Mullen

**NATALIE BRIGHT and DENISE F. McALLISTER**  
*Home Is Where You Are*  
CKN Christian Publishing  
Paperback, 248 pages, $10.99  
CKNChristianPublishing.com  

Natalie Bright and Denise F. McAllister kick off another series, “Rafter O Ranch,” for fans of their Christian Westerns. Nathan Olsen takes new wife Indya (a visual artist and former fashion model) and their 8-month-old son from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to his Texas boyhood home (the Rafter O Ranch) for his brother’s wedding. The authors use multiple points of view to explore the tensions between various family members: Nathan’s sister, who has run the ranch in his absence and feels threatened by his return; Indya, who does nothing to hide her distaste for ranch life; and Nathan, frustrated with trying to please everyone. A high point: tragedy, hilarity and family drama collide during perhaps the most eventful wedding in the history of fiction. A pleasurable read.  

— Micki Fuhrman

**JOHN DEACON**  
*A Man Called Justice*  
Self-published  
Paperback, 228 pages, $11.99  

An unidentified lawman, left for dead by brutal killers, revives, but with amnesia, and wreaks revenge. This 2023 Spur finalist for traditional Western novel is fast-paced. The opening action is stark. It is believable, yet unusual, and leads to the introduction of two strong, main characters. Justice, as the lawman calls himself, slowly regains an awareness of skills critical for his hunt to find the men responsible for his near death, but also develops a relationship with the woman who saved him and her son, proving that even the hardest man can have a tender heart. This cleanly written novel sees justice served while the promise of a blossoming relationship will be fulfilled – but not before Justice discovers the truth of who he is. Deacon provides a compelling tale of compassion, sacrifice, and commitment while leaving the reader satisfied yet hungry for the next installment in the series.  

— Jack Mullen

**BUTCH DENNY**  
*The Wonder Stone: And Other Stories About an Early African Settlement in Central Texas: March 1845-November 1864*  
Bent Sun Productions  
Paperback, 165 pages, $32.95  

Widower Josiah Whitlock leaves his Mississippi plantation to start over in Caldwell County in Central Texas. He owns slaves, but he is “progressive” in his treatment of chattel and in other areas as well. How that plays to 21st Century readers might be dicey. *The Wonder Stone* is never a comfortable read, but Butch Denny has certainly done plenty of research in this 2023 Spur Award finalist for traditional Western novel. On the other hand, Denny’s insertions of bracketed explanations — and there are far too many of these — to educate today’s readers rips those readers from mid-1800s Texas, and that’s never a good thing in historical fiction.

**LYNN ELDRIDGE**  
*Hearts and Mountains*  
Wolfpack Publishing  
Paperback, 371 pages, $11.99  
WolfpackPublishing.com  

*Hearts and Mountains* is a unique, well-written take on the saga of the Hatfields and McCoys. Taking place 19 years after the legendary feud concluded, it is the story of Spicy McCoy, a self-taught herbal healer, who is eventually charmed by Stone Hatfield, a man who left the Tug River Valley for Philadelphia to become a surgeon. Their unlikely pairing renews old grudges and memories of the relatives involved in the feud. Lynn Eldridge obviously has a profound knowledge of the time period, along with the history and culture of the area which pepper this 2023 Spur finalist for romance novel. I love the way she writes, because Lynn draws vivid word pictures that allow the reader to easily visualize the towns and dwellings in her story. I’m definitely looking forward to reading any future books by this author.  

— JoEllen Yoho

**KALI FAJARDO-ANSTINE**  
*Woman of Light*  
One World  
Hardcover, 308 pages, $28  
OneWorldLit.com  

The author comes well recom-
resembled; her first short-story collection, *Sabrina and Corina*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, as well as the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize, the Story Prize and won an American Book Award. *Woman of Light* is about Luz “Little Light” Lopez, left to fend for herself as a young woman in 1930s Denver. She has a series of visions that take her back in time to her family’s homeland in a Lost Territory and her present family’s role in it. Beautiful use of language and an excellent read.

– Linda Jacobs

**JOHNNY GUNN**

*Mayhem in Eureka County*

Wolfpack Publishing
Paperback, 284 pages, $17.99
WolfpackPublishing.com

Deputy Sheriff Terrence Corcoran has a pile of trouble dropped in his lap when the beautiful Maria Castellano, wife of the richest mine owner in Eureka, Nevada, is found dead, her face smashed in by a particularly vicious killer. Maria had a roving eye, so in addition to her jealous husband, Corcoran realizes just about any man in Eureka could be her killer. It’s up to him to figure out which one. At the same time, saloon and hotel owner Gordon Hatfield, facing financial ruin, is plotting to burn down his own establishment while simultaneously robbing the Eureka Bank. Bodies pile up as quickly as the many plot twists and turns in this suspenseful novel. Suspects mount almost as quickly. The reader may or may not figure out who the real killer is before the conclusion, but no matter. The enjoyment is following along with Corcoran as he and insurance investigator Art Bellows try to stop the mayhem of the title. The graphically violent ending packs a powerful punch. An excellent tale.

– James J. Griffin

**HARLAN HAGUE**

*Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*

Wolfpack Publishing
Paperback, 236 pages, $10.99
WolfpackPublishing.com

In a strong opening scene, history professor Brett Davis questions his class about the accuracy of historical accounts and stages a dramatic show-and-tell that drives the point home. Afterward, Davis goes camping and, due to “a cosmic force of some sort,” awakens in the year 1864 on the eve of the Sand Creek Massacre. Author Harlan Hague asks for much suspension of disbelief as the professor wakes up in various years and locations, always days before a historical event, and always with his companion, a stunningly beautiful Cheyenne woman. His saddlebags magically contain everything he needs for the journey and, whether hunting or in conflict, he seems incapable of missing a shot. Despite lengthy passages explaining historical events and the political climate of the time, the book does challenge readers to examine the bias of historical writings. Professor Davis ends his journey through time with “a sense of vindication, along with a certain sadness that history is always written by the victor.”

– Micki Fuhrman

**CARLA KELLY**

*When We Meet Again: Two Stories of World War II*

Camel Press
Paperback, 357 pages, $16.95
CamelPress.com

Award-winning romance writer Carla Kelly delivers two tales set during World War II in this collection of two novels, *All My Love* and *Yet I Will*.

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One man went in search of Billy’s motives. What he got was a glimpse of the Kid’s soul.

“Warren’s exceptional gift of creative writing has gotten inside this legendary outlaw.”
– Denise P. McAllister, "Wild Cow Ranch," True West Magazine

“A page-turner of a book.”
– Roy B. Young, "Chasing Billy the Kid"

“Rich with conflict, wistfulness, and an appropriate sense of foreboding.”
– James B. Mills, "Billy the Kid, El Bandido Simpatico"
Love Him. In the latter, a Spur finalist this year for Western romance novel, Kelly weaves a story seldom written about. When the two main characters – a former Lufthansa pilot in a POW camp and the widowed daughter of a sugar beet farmer whose farm the POWs are assigned to work on – are thrown together in 1944 Wyoming, their tragic pasts color their opinions of each other. Within weeks, prisoners and farmers slowly discover that war cannot destroy the humanity in each of us. But prejudices within the POW camp create powerful enemies and newfound friendships are put to the test. This is a superb story of clashing political opinions and cultural differences, strength and love.

— Quackgrass Sally

KAT MARTIN, C.K. CRIGGER, SHARON SALA, JENNA HENDRICKS, KIT MORGAN, KATHLEEN O’NEAL GEAR

Rebel Hearts Anthology

Paperback, 336 pages, $15.99
WolfpackPublishing.com

What a treat to have this group of award-winning authors in one place. Six stories full of drama, cowboys and romance. Kat Martin writes a steamy romance in “Outlaw Ghost.” In “Heart’s Great Temptation,” C.K. Crigger writes about a falsely accused prisoner who rescues a widow. A great combo of shoot-em-up and fiery kisses. In Sharon Sala’s “Irish Kelly and the Heartbreak Kid,” a woman horse trainer, who wears pants, gentles a wild horse. Jenna Hendricks spins a yarn about a kidnapping at the center of a clean, sweet romance in “The Reluctant Train Robber.” An abducted widow in Kit Morgan’s “Redeeming the Outlaw” is surprised to find her deceased husband’s brother, with whom she has a history, is part of the gang. And this year’s Spur winner for short fiction, “No Quarter” by Kathleen O’Neal Gear, about a slave couple at the Battle of the Alamo, is so descriptive the reader might be transported to 1836. Happy reading.

— Denise F. McAllister

L.J. MARTIN

Mud, Blood, and Beer: A Collection of Western Stories

Five Star Publishing
Hardcover, 223 pages, $25.95
Gale.com/five-star

A cook who is a part-time lawman, a drunk drawn into a robbery, a sheriff on the hunt for his wife’s killers – all are delivered with a sassy tang from a no-holds-barred author. The voices are authentic; the characters speak of “Arkansas toothpicks good for little but slitting throats.” The tale of a woman who kills her abusive husband has maybe been down the road a few times, but the one of an Irishman fighting prejudice, although violent, is fresh and appealing with a nice little twist at the end. The last story in the collection, “Eye for Eye,” has been made into an independent motion picture.

— Vicky J. Rose
Death of a Gunfighter
Indicator
Blu-ray, £15.99 (will not play on U.S./Canada – Region A – Blu-ray players)
PowerhouseFilms.co.uk

When Don Siegel and Richard Widmark completed Madigan in 1968, the director found his star, whose hot-tempered reputation preceded him, to be cooperative and collaborative. The two wanted to make another film, and Universal producer Richard Lyons thought he had the property with Lewis B. Patten's novel Death of a Gunfighter. Its story of a hard-nosed sheriff whose town turns against him after he has cleaned it up had multiple layers about turn-of-the-century America and how old-style gunmen no longer fit into the “new,” civilized West.

It was a solid part for Widmark – John Wayne turned down the role – but by 1969, Widmark's status as a movie star had dimmed, as had other 1940s leading men like Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas. They would have career revivals, but in '68 they were stalled, overtaken by Clint Eastwood and Steve McQueen. Lyons had also worked with Siegel, but Siegel passed on directing and recommended Robert Totten, who was directing excellent episodes of Gunsmoke. Widmark was not pleased and had Totten fired, forcing Siegel into the director's chair.

What's remarkable about this on-set chaos is that the final film has so much dramatic quality. Widmark is wonderful, with a great supporting cast, including Carroll O'Connor, Jacqueline Scott and Victor French. As Widmark's love interest, Lena Horne was cast, quietly breaking racial taboos.

Siegel and Totten refused directing credit, feeling that neither had left his artistic mark on the film, so the infamous Directors Guild of America pseudonym “Alan Smithee” was invented. Historically, the Smithee label denotes a cinematic bomb, but was stunned when I saw the quality of the final product. Amazing extras, including a booklet and a University of Southern California student film starring Widmark.

This is an incredible package for a surprisingly good Universal Western of the period that's now being reassessed as the fine work that it is.

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C. Courtney Joyner writes in many formats, including screenplays, fiction and nonfiction. E-mail him at olcourt@yahoo.com.

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NATE MORGAN

Dead Man's Trail: A Carson Stone Western
Pinnacle
Mass-market paperback, 328 pages, $8.99
KensingtonBooks.com

Carson Stone rides with Colby Tate, a bounty hunter who does not like the killing but is trying to save the reward money to get away from hunting men and do something else. At the request of an Idaho Territory sheriff, Stone and Tate go looking for outlaw Chester Potts and for information about what happened to some claim jumpers. Unfortunately, their search leads them into more trouble and puts Carson Stone in places he does not want to be. Written under the pen name of an award-winning author and comic-book writer, Dead Man's Trail, the 2023 Spur winner for original mass-market paperback Western novel, is filled with twists and will leave many readers eager to read the sequel.

– Lowell F. Volk

RANDI SAMUELSON-BROWN

Brand Chaser: Dark Range Western Mystery Series, Book One
Wolfpack Publishing
Paperback, 398 pages, $12.99
WolfpackPublishing.com

This novel bristles with action as it uncovers the dark side of branding and exposes the hardscrabble life and vulnerability of ranchers. Unexpected plot twists and turns engage the reader as well as vivid descriptions of the Colorado landscape with its purple sage-covered plains and mountains. Emory Cross, a young, spunky and spirited woman, is determined to protect the legacy of her family's The Lost Daughter Ranch at all costs. She is offered a lifeline opportunity to be a brand inspector. The story becomes a page turner with suspense and suspicions increasing as branding violations and accusations develop, putting Emory in danger. She meets corruption, modern-day outlaws, drug dealers and biker gangs head on with her non-nonsense attitude and gut instincts. Ultimately, she exposes her family's dark past.

– Sue Ready

CK VAN DAM

Proving Her Claim: On the Dakota Frontier
Pasque Publishing
Paperback, 356 pages, $14.99
CKVanDam.com

A tender love story that grows and flourishes like the Dakota lands the heroine is determined to make her own. With only scattered neighbors miles away, her strong pioneer spirit pushes her forward to work her claim and build a future ... alone. It's by chance that a buckskin-clad stranger enters her life and she soon experiences the deep connection the native Lakota people have to the same lands. But when the past of two cultures clash, our heroine finds she must depend on her quick wit and newfound bravery to stand her ground, all the while discovering a love she never believed she would find. Van Dam weaves a splendid tale of the strength of people out on the frontier – a Spur winner this year for romance novel and Best First Novel.

– Quackgrass Sally

JAMES WADE

Beasts of the Earth: A Novel
Blackstone Publishing
Some readers call James Wade’s *Beasts of the Earth* “grit lit,” a catchall label for gritty Southern fiction usually peppered with characters straight out of noir. But gritty doesn’t come close to describing *Beasts of the Earth*, the 2023 Spur winner for contemporary Western novel. Wade weaves parallel stories: When a young girl is murdered in 1987 in depressed Comal County, Texas, a high school groundskeeper starts a quest to clear a friend suspected of the crime. In 1965 Assumption Parish, Louisiana, a brutal killer named Munday Fischer sets out to find his son, Michael, whose attempt to escape his father leads him to a reclusive poet and possible salvation. Never one to paint rosy pictures, Wade delivers a novel of lyrical prose and violence that is Cormac McCarthy cringeworthy. The characters and stories are often ugly. But the writing is beautiful.

— Johnny D. Boggs

**MARK WARREN**

*A Last Serenade for Billy Bonney*

Five Star Publishing
Hardcover, 384 pages, $25.95
Gale.com/five-star

Mark Warren is a consummate researcher and leaves no stone unturned. He is also quick to praise historians who have devoted decades, even lifetimes, to studying his main character. By combining an exceptional gift for creative writing with research in the historical records of Henry McCarty, aka William H. Bonney, aka “Billy the Kid,” Warren has gotten inside the possible personality of this legendary outlaw. Enlisting the help of fictional journalist, John Blessing, Warren invites us to listen in on jailhouse interviews and a respectful friendship between Blessing and Bonney. We hear from a former teacher with whom Bonney might have been smitten; family members; and former employers. A special bonus at the end of this book is an original composition by Warren – “A Last Serenade for Billy Bonney.”

— Denise F. McAllister

**MARIANNE WIGGINS**

*Properties of Thirst*

Simon and Schuster
Hardcover, 517 pages, $28
SimonAndSchuster.com

“You can’t save what you don’t love.” This simple declaration opens the book and remains central to this epic story – this year’s Spur winner for historical Western novel – set in California’s Owens River Valley after the Pearl Harbor attack. The region grows barren as the Los Angeles Water Department siphons off its lifeblood to slake a thirsty metropolis. Rockwell “Rocky” Rhodes – widowed, transplanted heir to his eastern family’s fortune – struggles to maintain a ranch and protect his family while battling the hated water officials. Their lives are complicated when the government establishes a nearby internment camp for Japanese Americans and the detainees join the ebb and flow of life in the valley. Wiggins’s structure is idiosyncratic. But a nonlinear narrative, shifting viewpoints, and sparse, staccato dialogue don’t detract from a tale that’s rich, evocative, and elegiac from start to finish.

— J.R. Sanders

**POETRY**

**FREDERICK MCDONALD**

*DREAMS AND JOURNEYS*

Harbour Publishing
Paperback, 130 pages, $22.95
HarbourPublishing.com

This collection of more than 50 poems – including the 2023 Spur poem finalist “The Last Request” – reveals the poet and visual artist’s life in two worlds: as a Canadian and as a member of the Fort McKay First Nation. Frederick McDonald writes beautifully on myriad subjects, including his grandfather’s canoe (“that little 14’ canoe that/my grandpa owned floats effortlessly in/the rivers of my heart/ssshhwoooosh”). This collection is, as McDonald calls it, an “Esoteric Relationship,” thoughtful, touching, and thought-provoking.

**JUVENILE**

**JENNIFER COLEMAN** (author) and **KAY MEADOWS** (illustrator)

*CHILI TIME, Y’ALL! HOW TEXAS FOUND ITS STATE CUISINE*

Pelican Publishing Company
Hardcover, 32 pages, $19.99
ArcadiaPublishing.com

Ah, The Lone Star State – home of the best chili, and according to Texans, the only real chili. In Texas, chili is a bowl of tradition, with recipes passed down through families and generations, and which American humorist Will Rogers once called a “bowl of blessedness.” This colorful picture book
traces the origins and development of the official state dish of Texas, which was so honored in 1977 after a heated (pun intended) contest against Texas barbeque. Including fun bits like who produced the first canned chili, the 1893 Chicago Expo chili stand (it was a hit!) and even Lady Bird Johnson’s recipe for Pedernales River Chili, this 2023 Spur finalist for juvenile nonfiction will make you hungry.

— Rocky Gibbons

HECTOR CURRIEL
American Ace: Joe Foss, Fighter Pilot
South Dakota Historical Society Press
Paperback, 130 pages, $19.95
SDHSPress.com

The South Dakota Historical Society Press picked a good subject for its first graphic biography. Aimed at readers 16 and older, American Ace follows the life of Joseph Jacob “Joe” Foss (1915–2003), a South Dakota kid who became enamored with aviation and longed to be a flyer. He got his chance during World War II, but at first the Marine Corps thought he was too old at age 26 to become a fighter pilot. He proved those doubters wrong, however, shooting down 26 enemy planes in just more than three months and receiving the Medal of Honor for his actions at Guadalcanal. Curriel, a Peru native, watercolor artist and illustrator living in Sioux Falls, brings Foss’s story to life with his pen-and-ink illustrations and storytelling skills. The 2023 Spur winner for juvenile nonfiction.

SANDRA DALLAS
Tenmile
Sleeping Bear Press
Hardcover, 241 pages, $17.95
SleepingBearPress.com

“Life is hard on the Tenmile.” That’s what Doc Carlson’s housekeeper, Greenie, tells 13-year-old Sissy Carlson, who has lived with her widowed father in the Colorado mining town all her life. And life in the 1880s doesn’t get any easier for Sissy, her schoolfriends or her father’s patients in this solid middle-school reader from Sandra Dallas. Don’t expect a glossed-over story about mining-camp life in the Rockies. Dallas shows the hardships, even deaths, as Sissy helps her father with his patients and dreams of doing more. Dallas, one of those rare writers adept at writing for kids and adults, tells a sensitive, engaging and well-researched story. Well-deserving of its Spur finalist recognition in juvenile fiction, Tenmile will educate young readers and grownups.

— Johnny D. Boggs

LAUREN R. HARRIS (author) and FELICIA HOSHINO (illustrator)
A Place for Harvest: The Story of Kenny Higashi
South Dakota Historical Society Press
Hardcover, 32 pages, $19.95
SDHSPress.com

This well-written story, a 2023 Spur finalist for children’s picture book, is based on fact, relevant to the times and appropriately explained for children. It is a human story about happiness, the importance of pride in one’s work and how people deal with prejudice. It shows that hard work, no matter what it is, or when and where it is done, has its own rewards. The story explains how Kenny Higashi, a young Japanese American, his family, a South Dakota community and the nation dealt with the impact of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during and after World War II. It’s presented in a manner that young children can learn from and understand at their developmental level. Also included are historical information, photos and records that support the story. The illustrations and colors are soft and warm and well paired to the narrative.

— William Hill

DANI NICHOLS (author) and KRISTIN McNESS Moran (illustrator)
Buzz the Not-So-Brave
Punchline Publishers
Hardcover, 40 pages, $15.99
PunchlineAgency.com

Horses have personalities. And their reactions to different situations are more often an effort to keep themselves safe than an attempt to be mean. Author Dani Nichols and illustrator Kristin McNess Moran have created a delightful, easy-to-read children’s book that highlights the instinctual responses of horses to misunderstood situations. Buzz the Not-So-Brave, a 2023 Spur finalist for children’s picture book, gives readers of all ages an insightful look into how horses often view the world around them. This is a good read for horse lovers of all ages and offers the reader opportunity to view his/her own reactions to everyday situations.

— Phil Mills Jr.

NONFICTION

TED CONOVER
Cheap Land Colorado: Off-Gridders at America’s Edge
Alfred A. Knopf
Hardcover, 283 pages, $30
AAKnopf.com
The San Luis Valley of Colorado is a high desert. Many of the residents are folks who wanted to live off the grid, hide, or are rugged beyond belief. Ted Conover, a New York-based narrative journalist, visited the valley in 2017 and over the following years immersed himself in the local culture. He volunteered with La Puente, a rural homeless shelter. Soon he was traipsing across the barren prairie, offering assistance to “locals” who had fallen on hard times — as if they weren’t already at the bottom of the food chain. Conover finds himself wondering if he could exist in the harsh and unsettled world of his clients. This book answers that question.

— John Neely Davis

MARK LEE GARDNER
The Earth is All That Lasts: Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and the Last Stand of the Great Sioux Nation
Mariner Books
Hardcover, 560 pages, $28.99
HarperCollins.com

There is no shortage of good books on Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. What sets Mark Lee Gardner’s work apart is the way he entwines the lives of these two Western heroes. Following a traditional chronological approach, the author tracks the rise and military fall of the mighty Lakota people. With his characteristic literary flair and deep research, Gardner provides readers with an accessible introduction to Lakota culture and the people’s long struggle with the United States government for control of the northern plains. This work complements other fine analyses by Gary Clayton Anderson, Robert M. Utley, Kingsley Bray and Joseph M. Marshall III. Gardner’s book is his most ambitious to date, and this 2023 Spur Award finalist for historical nonfiction book will surely be a crowd pleaser.

— David C. Beyreis

WILLIAM D. KANE
Country Never Trod: William Lewis Manly’s 1849 Voyage down Utah’s Green River
TwoDot
Hardcover, 271 pages, $29.95
TwoDotBooks.com

This is a non-traditional biography, a personal memoir merging with the biography of the subject character. Any biography told in first person has a problem since the narrative becomes as much autobiography as biography. But first person works in this case. William Kane tells about his retracing the journey of William Manly’s 1849 trip down Utah’s Green River, confirming and correcting earlier accounts of the voyage. He duplicates Manly’s experience by building his own wooden boats. He also describes previous expeditions running the same river and includes interesting history of the area. A useful map of the region showing the voyages is included. The narrative is thoroughly researched in documents and personal experience. Well-told, this Spur finalist for Western biography is a good read for enlightenment and pleasure.

— Harlan Hague

JON K. LAUCK
The Good Country: A History of the American Midwest, 1800-1900
University of Oklahoma Press
Paperback, 350 pages, $26.95
OUPress.com

Jon K. Lauck praises the Northwest Ordinance (1787), the founding document for what was to become the Midwest. It incorporated English common law and, perhaps most importantly, banned slavery, setting up, it might be argued, Midwestern fervor in the Civil War. Lauck does not offer a state-by-state history; instead, he muses on the Midwest as a great incubator of democracy, with such advances as the citizens’ initiative and the push for universal suffrage. Midwestern states were fervently Christian, pro-business and pro-education, resulting in an extraordinary system of colleges and universities with underlying Christian principles, teaching the classics as well as sound agricultural practices and the trades. On race relations, all that can be said is that the Midwest did better than the South. There were early Black and Indian officeholders, but greed for land still pushed out the Indians. Boosterish, but the Midwest doesn’t get much press, so Lauck’s perspective is most welcome.

— John Mort

MIKE McTEE
Wilted Wings: A Hunter’s Fight for Eagles
Riverfeet Press
Paperback, 170 pages, $18
RiverfeetPress.com

Mike McTee, a Montana wildlife researcher and lifelong game hunter, found his calling when a golden eagle was placed in his arms for tagging. He began studying raptors and made a horrifying discovery: An overwhelming number of large birds were dying from lead poisoning. (A hunter shoots an elk, dresses it in the field and leaves the carcass behind for scavengers, including eagles – but the carcass is peppered with deadly lead fragments.) McTee has since led a movement, with much resistance at first, to encourage lead-free hunting by conducting extensive ballistics testing and touting copper ammunition, a safer alternative. Wilted Wings, a 2023 Spur finalist for Best Contemporary Western Nonfiction Book, is an inspiring story of how education is bringing conservationists and hunters together to save America’s raptors. Some sections of the book are unavoidably technical, but McTee makes the subject accessible and enjoyable. Supplemental pages in back provide in-depth advice on choosing lead-free shooting options.

— Micki Fuhrman

MEGAN KATE NELSON
Saving Yellowstone: Exploration and Preservation in Reconstruction America
Scribner
Hardcover, 288 pages, $28.99
SimonAndSchuster.com

Saving Yellowstone is a sweeping narrative that demonstrates how science and the arts contributed to the establishment of the nation’s first national park. Without the scientific expedition, findings and reports of Ferdinand Hayden’s 1871 survey and the literary and artistic contributions of the men who traveled with him, Yellowstone’s region might have been a place of small homesteads and private enterprises rather than a national park. Congress established the park on March 1, 1872, having been influenced by Hayden’s report, articles that appeared in Scribner’s Monthly and a monumental painting by Thomas Moran. In the 2023 Spur winner for historical nonfiction book, Megan Kate Nelson vividly describes the Hayden expedition and the creative efforts of those who participated. Sometimes the narrative is a bit broad as Nelson makes a considerable effort to relate the events in the West with the reconstruction of the South after the Civil War. At other times it is not inclusive enough.
For example, Nelson points out that to establish the park in Yellowstone, the land rights of indigenous people had to be restricted. However, she concentrates her narrative on the Lakotas and barely mentions the Shoshone bands who had the strongest tie to the park region.

— Candy Moulton

STEVEN D. PRICE and THOMAS P. MCCARTHY (editors)

Stories of the Old West: 44 Great Tales of the American Frontier

Lyons Press
Paperback, 386 pages, $19.95
Rowman.com

First published in hardcover in 2018, Stories of the Old West includes excerpts from novels and nonfiction books and shorter works from a who’s who of Western authors of the 19th and 20th centuries: Andy Adams, Ned Buntline, Zane Grey, O. Henry, Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, Owen Wister and many others. The introduction is terse, while the selections have no introduction and are never put into context. Some readers might like to know if they’re reading a short story or an excerpt from a novel. And when you see Frederic Remington and B.M. Bower’s names misspelled—some readers also might like to know that Bower was a woman writing Western fiction in the early 1900s—you wonder if anyone was paying attention.

BOB ROSEBROUGH

A Place of Thin Veil: Life and Death in Gallup, New Mexico

Rio Nuevo Publishers
Paperback, 352 pages, $16.95
RioNuevo.com

One overused word, but so fitting for this 2023 Spur winner for contemporary nonfiction book is powerful. As someone who lived and worked in the Four Corners area in the late 1970s (the Long John Silver’s in Farmington was the best), I can relate to Bob Rosebrough’s memories of the inert bodies strewing the streets of Gallup. This Navajo Nation border town began as a railroad and coal community with a history of alcoholism and violence that made it a constant struggle for the residents and government officials. Interwoven throughout the chapters is the tragic tale of the 1973 death of a Navajo activist named Larry Wayne Casuse, killed while attempting to kidnap the mayor. Through interviews with local citizens and excellent research, Rosebrough examines that fearful incident and tries to understand and explain why it happened. Rosebrough’s able storytelling includes personal challenges such as divorce, depression and the stress of improbably becoming Gallup’s mayor himself, all of which humanize the story. Rosebrough only wanted to make a difference in this special place where heaven and earth are separated by “a thin veil between materialism and spirituality,” and he accomplished his goal.

— Rocky Gibbons

C. GILBERT STORMS

Raphael Pumpelly’s Arizona: The Frontier Adventures of a Young Mining Engineer

Wheatmark
Paperback, 130 pages, $10.99
Wheatmark.com

Silver mining has contributed much to Arizona history, but Tucson, Arizona, resident and historian C. Gilbert Storms broadens the subject’s appeal in the 2023 Spur finalist for biography. Storms’s subject isn’t the stereotypical roughshod miner. Raphael Pumpelly was a 23-year-old graduate of Germany’s prestigious Royal Mining Academy when he arrived in Tucson. He wound up teaching geology and mining at Harvard, but this narrative details Pumpelly’s brief mixings with miners, Mexican revolutionaries and Apaches while working with the underfunded Santa Rita Mining Company in the mountains south of Tucson.

CLYDE W. TOLAND

American Hero, Kansas Heritage: Frederick Funston’s Early Years, 1865-1890

Flint Hills Publishing
Paperback, 334 pages, $24.99
FlintHillsPublishing.com

In this 2023 Spur winner for Best First Nonfiction Book, Kansas historian and semi-retired Iola, Kansas, historian Clyde W. Toland chronicles the early life of “Fearless Fred” Funston—before Funston received the Medal of Honor for his actions during the Philippine–American War. Toland spent more than 35 years researching Funston’s life. This biography documents not only Funston’s early life but paints a vivid picture of life on the Kansas frontier. Toland continues Funston’s story with Heat and Ice: Frederick Funston’s Exploration of Death Valley, Alaska, and the British Northwest Territory 1891-1894 and Yankee Hero: Frederick Funston, “Expedicionario” in the Cuban Liberation Army 1896-1897, both also published last year in paperback from Flint Hills Publishing.

ELLIOTT WEST

Continental Reckoning: The American West in the Age of Expansion

University of Nebraska Press
Hardcover, 704 pages, $39.95
NebraskaPress.unl.edu

Don’t let the page count deter you. What you’ll hold in your hands is the culmination of 20 years of research and thinking about the American West by Alumni Professor Emeritus at the University of Arkansas, Elliott West. At a time when the future of Western fiction appears, shall we say, in flux, nonfiction works about the American West continue to attract a healthy readership. West is an excellent writer; these pages practically turn themselves. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 and its impact on westward expansion represents the point of departure for his central thesis, that there was a “Greater Reconstruction” after the Civil War, one in which the “emerging West and modernizing America” intertwined to combine “continental connections, steep economic growth and conversion, The Pacific turn, the land made over, scientific and technological acceleration, and racial reordering.” The West is a big canvas. West uses brush strokes small and large to depict his engaging and thought-provoking perspective.

— Tom Carpenter

Reviews

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Roundup reviews contemporary and historical Western anthologies, biographies, nonfiction books, memoirs, novels, short story and poetry collections.