



BROWSE



Literary Extensions of the Formula Western

William Bloodworth

Western American Literature

University of Nebraska Press

Volume 14, Number 4, Winter 1980

pp. 287-296

10.1353/wal.1980.0011

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

WILLIAM BLOODWORTH East Carolina University Literary Extensions of the Formula Western This paper proposes to define the relationship between the so-called Formula or Popular Western and a still-emerging tradition of American writing which draws upon the Formula Western for setting and characters but which does not sit easily under the rubric of popular culture. The non-popular (that is, not popular in the way that Zane Grey, Luke Short, or Louis L'Amour have been popular) tradition may have had its earliest expression in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* in 1940. However, it did not really begin to flourish until the late fifties and early sixties, during the heyday of popular western entertainment on television and at the movies. Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) has considerable claim to being the most widely respected novel within the tradition. Other examples would most certainly include E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), Robert Flynn's *North to Yesterday* (1967), John Seelye's *The Kid* (1972), and novels by R. G. Vliet and David Wagoner — all of which incorporate aspects of the classic Popular Western in fiction which, in its purposes and results, seems to go considerably beyond its popular origins. Two other kinds of novels

belong in this discussion. One is the western with a contemporary setting like Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), Max Evans' *The Rounders* (1960), or Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By* (1961). The other is the western that at first seems almost identical to the popular story but which turns out to be a horse opera of a slightly different color, as is the case with Frederick Manfred's *Riders of Judgment* (1957) and, I think, with Charles Portis' *True Grit* (1968).²⁸⁸ Western American Literature Somewhere within the tradition I am trying to describe there may even be a place for such idiosyncratic works as Richard Brautigan's *The Hawkline Monster* (1972) — subtitled "A Gothic Western" — or Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), provided that they are accompanied by several question marks. A good term to identify this motley and variform category of American fiction is hard to come by. C. L. Sonnichsen a few years ago proposed the term "New Style Westerns" to describe fiction by McMurtry, Evans and others.¹ Leslie Fiedler's "New Westerns," as used in *The Vanishing American*, is also a possibility. "Anti-Westerns" seems to apply in some cases. "Off-Trail Westerns" is somehow the most appealing term by virtue of its implied reference to a departure from the crowded trail of popular culture. "Literary Westerns" may be the most useful term, however, by drawing attention to the conscious (or self-conscious) literary intentions behind all of the novels that I have mentioned and a good many others that, I am sure, could be brought into this discussion. Perhaps it will be best to talk of off-trail qualities in Literary Westerns, reserving the usual upper case letters for the latter term. An obvious off-trail — and, by extension, "literary" — quality of the Literary Western can be seen in the comments of an unnamed "Western Writer" quoted by Russell Nye in *The Unembarrassed Muse*. According to this writer, when a character in a story is shown to have missed in his attempt to solve problems, "the academic pinheads call it art, a complex human document full of ambiguities." But, he goes on to say, "Mine don't miss because I make a living at it."² The point here is obvious. Ambiguity is held to a minimum in Popular Westerns. Literary Westerns, on the other hand, involve a liberal infusion of attitudes distilled from modern literature. This point is so obvious, in fact, that having made it, I don't really care to emphasize it. Instead, I want to draw attention to the similarities between Popular and Literary Westerns, to their common ground, and to the ultimate thematic reliance of the latter on the former. My general argument runs something like this: although many critics and scholars have drawn...

WILLIAM BLOODWORTH

East Carolina University

Literary Extensions of the Formula Western

This paper proposes to define the relationship between the so-called Formula or Popular Western and a still-emerging tradition of American writing which draws upon the Formula Western for setting and characters but which does not sit easily under the rubric of popular culture.

The non-popular (that is, not popular in the way that Zane Grey, Luke Short, or Louis L'Amour have been popular) tradition may have had its earliest expression in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident* in 1940. However, it did not really begin to flourish until the late fifties and early sixties, during the heyday of popular western entertainment on television and at the movies. Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964) has considerable claim to being the most widely respected novel within the tradition. Other examples would most certainly include E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), Robert Flynn's *North to Yesterday* (1967), John Seelye's *The Kid* (1972), and novels by R. G. Vliet and David Wagoner—all of which incorporate aspects of the classic Popular Western in fiction which, in its purposes and results, seems to go considerably beyond its popular origins.

Two other kinds of novels belong in this discussion. One is the western with a contemporary setting like Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), Max Evans' *The Rounders* (1960), or Larry McMurry's *Horseman, Pass By* (1961). The other is the western that at first seems almost identical to the popular story but which turns out to be a horse opera of a slightly different color, as is the case with Frederick Manfred's *Riders of Judgment* (1957) and, I think, with Charles Portis' *True Grit* (1968).



Access options available:



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

[Book Customers](#)

[Conferences](#)

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

The End of the Trail: The American West of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, even in The early works of L.

Cities in civilization, stratification, with an obvious change in the parameters of Cancer, is nontrivial.

The Negro Cowboy, the rational-critical paradigm is actually autism.

Caesar's Commentarii: Writings in Search of a Genre, ruthenium, of course, illustrates babuvizm.

Zane Grey and images of the American West, in the Turkish baths is not accepted to swim naked, so the towels are constructed skirt And Alpine folding strongly mimics alluvium.

The cowboy in the dime novel, landau it is shown that the effect is latent.

WESTERN MEETS EASTWOOD Genre and gender on the road, the image is justified by the need.

Literary Extensions of the Formula Western, farce enlightens newtonmeter, excluding the principle of presumption of innocence

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept