



Getting up to Speed in...Westerns

Here's what Westerns are:

Primarily set in the Western United States from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the 20th Century, Westerns feature the exploits of cowboys, scouts, Indians, gunslingers, and lawmen. The mythic feel of the West and those times, as well as the struggle to survive against myriad dangers, takes precedence over historical accuracy.

Here's what happens in a Western:

The typical Western hero is the loner who rides into town, cleans things up, and rides out again. In traditional Westerns, he's a mythic figure, a sort of medieval knight errant, while in more recent titles he may be portrayed more realistically. Historical figures and events may be featured, but accuracy is not as important as landscape and mood. Plots may be straightforward or complex but they place the hero in the midst of a morality play in which he brings justice and restores order to the community. Survival themes are often important, as is revenge.

Here's why people Like Westerns:

Westerns speak to deep-seated feelings about the land and the men who brought order to the wild, uninhabited country, making it safe for those who followed. Readers appreciate the descriptive landscape and action-filled adventures in which good overcomes bad and justice is the result. The "frame" or atmospheric details make us feel we are there in another time and place. There's frequently a romantic, nostalgic tone and a feeling of timelessness.

Here are key titles to read:

- B. Guthrie's *Big Sky* explores the role of the West as a place for escape and redemption as young Boone Caudill flees his abusive father in Kentucky and becomes a mountain man in the rugged West.
- Will Henry's *From Where the Sun Now Stands* is a Spur award-winning novel by an esteemed storyteller of Western adventures. Appreciation for the land and the people who live there — especially Indians — resonates in his novels. This classic examines Nez Perce Chief Joseph, continually betrayed by a government with which he only wants peace.
- Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, a Pulitzer Prize and Spur Award winner, is the ultimate Western adventure. The action centers around a cattle drive, which pulls the traditional Western characters into a magnificent and stately adventure.
- Jack Schaefer's *Shane* presents the traditional Paladin hero, a man who rides into the community, rousts the badmen, and rides out again, bringing justice to a lawless land.
- In Glendon Swarthout's *The Shootist*, John Bernard Books, the last gunfighter, discovers he's dying from cancer but wants to die fighting. In El Paso, he sets himself up to accept all challengers and meet his end with pride. Western mythos and bleak reality join in this haunting tale.



Here are key authors to know:

- **Don Coldsmith's** numerous novels focus mostly on Indian life during the expansion of the west. His stories capture the spirit of the West with evocative settings, characters, and themes. In the Spanish Bit saga (*The Trail of the Spanish Bit* is the first), his Conquistador hero becomes lost and is rescued by the native Indians
- **Louis L'Amour** remains a vital force in the Western genre, with many of his books re-issued and more than a few re-read by fans. The quintessential practitioner in the genre, L'Amour employs Western landscapes, characters, and virtues, making them synonymous with the best American traits. His action-filled stories of the *Sackett* family cover 200 years of history.
- **Elmer Kelton** stands pre-eminent among contemporary Western writers. Known for his less-than mythic heroes and an elegiac tone, he writes of the disappearance of the American West as ranchers replace settlers. Historical detail, evocative landscapes, and complex characters fill his novels. Try *The Pumpkin Rollers* as an introduction to his work.
- **Ivan Doig** writes primarily of the contemporary West, with a few forays into historical times. His realistic depiction, filled with historical and landscape details, lyrical writing, and love of the land tie him firmly to the Western tradition. *The Whistling Season* looks back on Montana's storied past.
- **Loren D. Estleman's** novels, Mysteries and Westerns, demonstrate the close link between the modern Private Investigator and the Western hero. Both types are dark and gritty novels that feature loners who operate under a personal moral code that ensures that justice is done either within or outside of the law, and neither forms ties that would be akin to "settling down". He has written about Western heroes — Wild Bill Hickock, Buffalo Bill Cody, Billy the Kid — as well as a series featuring a Western lawman, Page Murdock.

Here's how to talk with Western fans:

- A reader's description of Westerns he has enjoyed should make it clear whether he's looking for another traditional Western (a shorter book about cowboys and the Wild West), a more modern story, one that focuses on Indians, or an Adult Western with a much sexier storyline.
- Although fans appreciate action and adventure, they are likely not seeking technology.
- Classic Western themes are returning in movies and television. Links to favorite shows are often a good bet. Audio versions of Old Radio Westerns, such as *Gunsmoke*, are also popular.
- Remember that some fans look for historical figures. Loren Estleman, Matthew Braun, and Richard Parry have all written about Wyatt Earp, for example. Others like Contemporary Westerns, such as Larry McMurtry's *Horseman Pass By* or Ivan Doig's novels of modern-day Montana with heroes on the edge of civilization.

And a few more tips ...

- Popular Western themes include coming of age, revenge, survival, and redemption.
- More contemporary Westerns feature similar loner heroes but the challenges they face have changed, making them more like Private Investigators and the heroes of Thriller and Adventure novels.



- Many traditional Westerns offer old-fashioned stories that please fans of Gentle Reads, which are novels without sex, violence, and strong language. Westerns also cross over with Historical Fiction about the settling of the West, as well as historical Adventure novels and Thrillers. Western Historical Romances are also popular with some Western readers, male and female. Contemporary novels that feature evocative Western landscapes and strong, loner heroes, such as Nicholas Evans's *The Horse Whisperer*, are also likely to appeal to Western fans.
- Although the audience is primarily male, many women also appreciate Westerns.
- The *Spur Award* and the *Western Heritage Award* both recognize notable works about the American West.

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