

DATEBOOK

THURSDAY, MAY 27, 1999

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West-Side Stories

Readers rank the 20th century's best nonfiction this side of the Rockies

The trouble with compiling any best-of list is that the compiler never gets to take part in what makes lists so much fun, i.e., complaining about the omissions afterward. Nonetheless, it's with great pride that The Chronicle hereby surrenders its list of the 100 best nonfiction books of the 20th century written in English about — or by an author from — the Western United States.

The Chronicle Western 100 owes its existence to precisely the kind of griping it may now inspire. One year ago, the editorial board of a major New York publisher disseminated its list of the 100 best novels written in English and published in the 20th century. Critics promptly called the list too old, too white, too male and too representative of the publisher's back-list.

A month ago the same house promulgated a follow-up list of the 100 best nonfiction books written in English and published in the 20th century. They took care this time to change their editorial board until it looked more like America. Sure enough, the nonfiction

DAVID KIPEN

Books

The Chronicle Western 100 lets 20th century English-language nonfiction off the leash. It was devised on the nervy assumption that an unscientific, self-selected sampling of interested Western readers could pick just as viable a list as the editorial board of a venerable Manhattan publisher. That faith has since been amply repaid, with Chronicle readers coming out of the woodwork to write, e-mail and buttonhole their smart, opinionated nominations.

The top vote-getter on the Chronicle Western 100 is Mary Austin's "Land of Little Rain," her classic 1903 account of the terrain between Death Valley and the High Sierra — a book Edward Abbey called "a small, tender, old-fashioned and engaging book, a part of the basic literature of American nature writing."

Hard on its heels were Wallace Stegner's "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," Abbey's "Desert Solitaire" and Ivan Doig's "This House of Sky."

Let no one blame himself for not having read all, or many, or perhaps even any of these

list wound up looking more like America, too — if only America ran westward from New York to the Rockies and then stopped, like a frisky dog at the end of its leash.

books. Blame instead an East Coast literary establishment that tends to get the West wrong only when it isn't ignoring it completely.

Look at the top 10 magnificent writers and reflect that none of them, not one, made New York's nonfiction list. Not Austin, who blazed the trail for a century of writing about the wild. Not Stegner, whose Stanford writing program has nurtured generations of distinguished writers in the West. Not Abbey, whose comic novel "The Monkey Wrench Gang" helped radicalize environmental thinking in America. Not Doig, the Montana-born, Seattle-based master whose impatiently awaited new novel, "Mountain

INSIDE

Complete list of the top 100. B5

Time," hits bookstores this summer. And not Evan S. Connell either, the San Francisco mailman-turned-novelist whose landmark examination of Custer and the Little Big Horn was not only written in the West but published here as well by the late, much-lamented Northpoint Press.

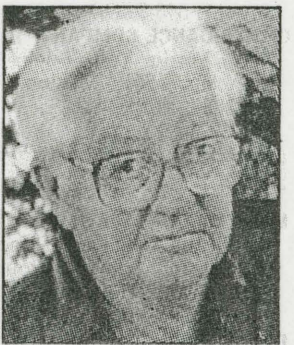
Connell's "Son of the Morning Star" also has the distinction of getting a vote from the man to whom it's dedicated, the gifted San Francisco writer Curt Gentry. "Helter Skelter," Gentry and Vincent Bugliosi's harrowing book about the Charles Manson murders, missed joining "Son of the Morning Star" on the list by the narrowest of margins.

So did books by Mary McCarthy and Susan Sontag, whose origins in Seattle and the San Fernando Valley, respectively,

► KIPEN: Page B5 Col. 1



Mary Austin



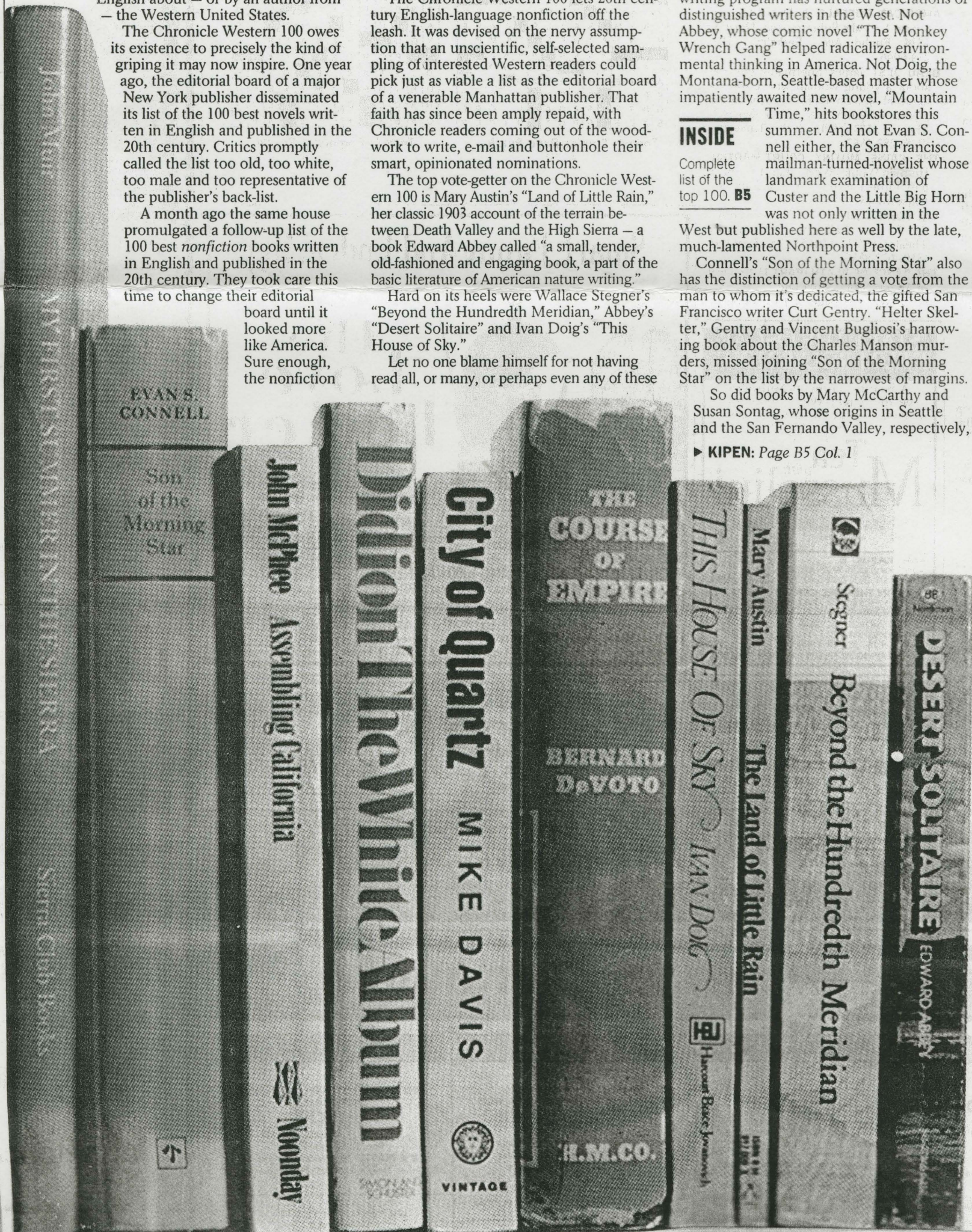
Wallace Stegner



Edward Abbey

The Top 10

- 1 "Land of Little Rain" Mary Austin
- 2 "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian" Wallace Stegner
- 3 "Desert Solitaire" Edward Abbey
- 4 "This House of Sky" Ivan Doig
- 5 "Son of the Morning Star" Evan S. Connell
- 6 Western Trilogy Bernard DeVoto
- 7 "Assembling California" John McPhee
- 8 "My First Summer In the Sierra" John Muir
- 9 "The White Album" Joan Didion
- 10 "City of Quartz" Mike Davis



Readers Rank Doig, Didion Works Among Best Nonfiction

► BOOKS

From Page B1

did not go unremembered. Even Harold Ross, the founding editor of the New Yorker, got a vote via James Thurber's uproarious biography of him, which never quite manages to conceal the quintessential New Yorker's birthplace: Aspen, Colo.

But The Chronicle Western 100 fields too strong a team for us to dwell on its bench, however deep. Better to single out the joy of finding Ursula K. LeGuin's essay collection "Dancing at the Edge of the

CHECKING IT TWICE



Did we blow it? Send your opinion of The Chronicle Western 100 to Book Review, San Francisco Chronicle, 901 Mission St., San Francisco, Calif. 94103, or weigh in via the Web at sfgate.com. Just type "good books" in the keyword box.

World" just a few slots below "Ishi in Two Worlds," the story of the last Yahi Indian as written by LeGuin's mother, the Berkeley anthropologist Theodora Kroeber. Or the ghoulish thrill of seeing Joan Didion's "The White Album" on the list cheek by jowl with George Stewart's "Ordeal by Hunger," his superior reconstruction of what befell the Donner Party, which included some of Didion's forebears.

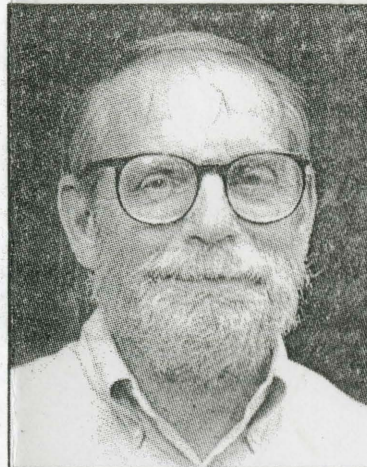
Didion owes her high place on the list in part to the intercession of Cyra McFadden — herself no mean writer of nonfiction, as anyone who's read her memoir "Rain or Shine" can attest. McFadden took time to drop a postcard on behalf of Didion's "White Album" ("still her best book"), Herbert Gold's "Fathers" (not nonfiction and therefore ineligible but "a modern American masterpiece" just the same) and Norman MacLean's "A River Runs Through It" (outpolled by his more frankly nonfictional "Young Men

and Fire").

Both MacLean books had votes enough to make the list, as did multiple books by other writers, but a decision was made early on to adopt a one-book-per-author proviso. One hundred sounds like a lot, but it's not, and too many worthy writers came up short as it is, even without having to compete for a spot against five different John Muir titles.

Ties were broken, rules bent and the continent Solomonically divided at the Rockies.

Tiebreaker discretion also allowed for the placement of Joseph Henry Jackson's "Anybody's Gold" — duly nominated by the readership, not the editor — in the inevitably conspicuous No. 100 slot. The Chronicle's book editor from the 1930s through the 1950s, Jackson championed John Steinbeck and other Western writers when the East Coast wouldn't give them the time of day. He reviewed a book every morning in these pages for almost



John McPhee
His "Assembling California" was No. 7

20 years and, like his opposite number at the Los Angeles Times, Robert Kirsch, read himself into an early grave. To them for their service to Western literature, and to the eru-



John Steinbeck
Co-wrote "Sea of Cortez," at No. 28

dite readers who made this list possible, The Chronicle Western 100 is gratefully dedicated. To those readers who missed their chance to vote, be patient: Nonfiction is only half



Maxine Hong Kingston
Her "Woman Warrior" came in No. 42

the story.

David Kipen is The Chronicle's book editor. He can be reached at kipend@sfgate.com.

The Chronicle's Western 100

1. "Land of Little Rain," Mary Austin
2. "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," Wallace Stegner
3. "Desert Solitaire," Edward Abbey
4. "This House of Sky," Ivan Doig
5. "Son of the Morning Star," Evan S. Connell
6. The Western Trilogy, Bernard DeVoto
7. "Assembling California," John McPhee
8. "My First Summer in the Sierra," John Muir
9. "The White Album," Joan Didion
10. "City of Quartz," Mike Davis
11. "Ordeal by Hunger," George Rippey Stewart
12. "Ishi in Two Worlds," Theodora Kroeber
13. "Americans and the California Dream" (five volumes), Kevin Starr
14. "Cadillac Desert," Marc Reisner
15. "A Sand County Almanac," Aldo Leopold
16. "California: The Great Exception," Carey McWilliams
17. "Arctic Dreams," Barry Lopez
18. "Farewell to Manzanar," Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, James D. Houston
19. "Young Men and Fire," Norman MacLean
20. "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," Dee Brown
21. "Bad Land," Jonathan Raban
22. "The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience," J.S. Holliday
23. "The Art of Eating," M.F.K. Fisher
24. "And the Band Played On," Randy Shilts
25. "The Big Four," Oscar Lewis
26. "The Solace of Open Spaces," Gretel Ehrlich
27. "In the Spirit of Crazy Horse," Peter Matthiessen
28. "Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research," John Steinbeck, Edward F. Ricketts
29. "The Practice of the Wild," Gary Snyder
30. "Dancing at the Edge of the World," Ursula K. LeGuin

32. "Great Plains," Ian Frazier
33. "The Great Plains," Walter Prescott Webb
34. "Land of Giants: The Drive to the Pacific Northwest, 1750-1950," David Sievert Lavender
35. "Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas," Mari Sandoz
36. "City of Nets," Otto Friedrich
37. "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place," Terry Tempest Williams
38. "The Content of Our Character," Shelby Steele
39. "High Tide in Tucson," Barbara Kingsolver
40. "Winter," Rick Bass
41. "Undaunted Courage," Stephen Ambrose
42. "The Woman Warrior," Maxine Hong Kingston
43. "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," Tom Wolfe
44. "I Lost It at the Movies," Pauline Kael
45. "The Devil's Dictionary," Ambrose Bierce
46. "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," Hunter S. Thompson
47. "The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are," Alan Watts
48. "The Hunger for Memory," Richard Rodriguez
49. "Caught Inside: A Surfer's Year on the California Coast," Daniel Duane
50. "This Boy's Life," Tobias Wolff
51. "Books in My Baggage," Lawrence Clark Powell
52. "The California Dream," anthology edited by Dennis Hale, Jonathan Eisen

53. "Men to Match My Mountains," Irving Stone
54. "Love and Will," Rollo May
55. "The Language of the Goddess," Marija Gimbutas
56. "The Air-Conditioned Nightmare," Henry Miller
57. "T. Rex and the Crater of Doom," Walter Alvarez
58. "The Way to Rainy Mountain," N. Scott Momaday
59. "The Man Who Walked Through Time," Colin Fletcher
60. "John Barleycorn," Jack London
61. "Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans," Ronald Takaki
62. "Dirty Truths: Reflections on Politics, Media, Ideology, Conspiracy, Ethnic Life and Class Power," Michael Parenti
63. "The Executioner's Song," Norman Mailer
64. "The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West," Patricia Nelson Limerick
65. "Living Up the Street: Narrative Reflections," Gary Soto
66. "The Captive Mind," Czeslaw Milosz
67. "California Fault: Searching for the Spirit of a State Along the San Andreas," Thurston Clarke
68. "Lonesome Traveler," Jack Kerouac
69. "The Ohlone Way," Malcolm Margolin
70. "An Autobiography," Ansel Adams
71. "The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s-1990s," Norris Hundley
72. "Hole in the Sky: A Memoir," William Kittredge
73. "Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry," Robert Hass
74. "Skid Road: An Informal Portrait of Seattle," Murray Morgan
75. "My Wilderness," William O. Douglas
76. "The Klamath Knot," David Rains Wallace
77. "Sweet Promised Land," Robert Laxalt

79. "The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary," John Rechy
80. "Additional Dialogue: Letters of Dalton Trumbo, 1942-1962"
81. "Final Cut," Steven Bach
82. "The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890," Leonard Pitt
83. "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West," Richard White
84. "Communalism," Kenneth Rexroth
85. "I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked," Upton Sinclair
86. "And a Voice to Sing With," Joan Baez
87. "Miles From Nowhere: In Search of the American Frontier," Dayton Duncan
88. "Winter in Taos," Mabel Dodge Luhan
89. "The Voice of the Desert," Joseph Wood Krutch
90. "Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society," Theodore Roszak
91. "Traveling Light," Bill Barich
92. "The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History," Leo Braudy
93. "Stepping Westward," Sallie Tisdale
94. "Money and Class in America: Notes and Observations on Our Civil Religion," Lewis H. Lapham
95. "Coming of Age in California: Personal Essays," Gerald Haslam
96. "Sinclair Lewis," Mark Schorer
97. "Dashiell Hammett: A Life," Diane Johnson
98. "The Town That Fought to Save Itself," Orville Schell
99. "Hide and Seek," Jessamyn West
100. "Anybody's Gold," Joseph Henry Jackson

Chron copies to:

Nan Graham

Kathy Mosdal O'Brien

Patty Limerick

DATEBOOK

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1999

B1



Acute 'Angle' Wins Reader Poll

Wallace Stegner's novel earns top spot in list of 100 best Western works of fiction

DAVID KIPEN

Books

And people thought counting the Ammiano ballots took forever.

Polling began July 29 for The Chronicle Western 100, our list of the best 20th century fiction written in or about — or by an author from — the Western United States. Since then balloting has been declared officially over at least twice, each time followed by still more reader nominations just too shrewd to exclude.

About 600 people scribbled, typed or e-mailed their opinions on the literature of the West. Each author needed several votes just to make the list, and the top vote-getter had nearly 100 partisans.

That man, had he never written so much as a short story, would still loom large in the annals of Western writing for his nonfiction. His book about the first Grand Canyon expedition, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," came within a few votes of displacing Mary Austin's "Land of Little

Rain" atop the nonfiction Chronicle Western 100, published in May. (The lists will run side by side in this year's Holiday Book Review issue on November 21.)

Although several Wallace Stegner nov-

els and story collections received multiple votes, none drew such impassioned lobbying as his 1971 classic "Angle of Repose." Its twin-track construction, in which a modern historian's research alternates with the frontier struggles of his grandparents a century before, has been much imitated but rarely, if ever, matched.

"Angle of Repose's" lovely title refers to the position in which an object tumbling downward — whether through hillside terrain or through history — comes to rest. Here is where the rest of the topmost 10 found their angles of repose:

Very nearly jumping Stegner's claim was John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," which might have won had Steinbeck's other masterpieces not split the vote. Stegner's old Stanford student Ken Kesey is the highest-ranking living author on the list, with "Sometimes a Great Notion" outpolling his better-known "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" to place third.

"The Call of the Wild," by Oakland's own Jack London, and "The Big Sleep,"

► **BOOKS:** Page B4 Col. 1

BOOK CLUB NEWS



HOW DID WE DO?

Weigh in with your opinion of The Chronicle Western 100 via the Web at sfgate.com. Just type "good books" into the "Jump to" box. Also, sound off on any aspect of our latest book club selection, Chang-rae Lee's "A Gesture Life," by typing "book club" in the "Jump to" box. Postal mail is always welcome at Chronicle Book Club, 901 Mission St., San Francisco, CA 94103.

WHAT'S AHEAD:

■ **TODAY:** Open discussion of "A Gesture Life" on SF Gate at noon, moderated by Chronicle Book Editor David Kipen and BayTV's "Bookmark" host Barbara Lane.

■ **NOVEMBER 18:** Live broadcast of the book club discussion of "A Gesture Life" on BayTV's "Bookmark" at 8 p.m.

■ **NOVEMBER 25:** Reader comments on "A Gesture Life" culled from SF Gate and the mailbag.

■ **NOVEMBER 28:** Print announcement of our next book.

London, Chandler Make Top Five in Chronicle List

► BOOKS

From Page B1

Raymond Chandler's first Philip Marlowe mystery, rounded out the top five. The latter represented the first of many Los Angeles writers, each shown unexpectedly generous treatment by a predominantly Northern California electorate.

More than one in four slots on the list went to the West's female writers. Barbara Kingsolver's "Animal Dreams" and Willa Cather's "Death Comes for the Archbishop" led the way, ranking sixth and seventh. The Cather novel also exemplifies readers' abiding respect for the fiction of New Mexico, which placed more books on the list than any other state but California.

Raymond Chandler and other L.A. writers were shown unexpectedly generous treatment by a predominantly Northern California electorate.

Fitzgerald's "The Last Tycoon" (No. 43) and Joan Didion's "Play It as It Lays" (No. 23) and will form the basis for "Storylines California's" next literary roundtable at 10 p.m. November 20 on KQED (88.5 FM).

The ninth spot on the list almost set off a range war. As reader Jason Bennert of San Jose rightly asked, "By excluding Texas from the list of 'Western states' . . . are you seriously suggesting that any list of the best 20th century fiction from the western part of the United States would be complete without Cormac McCarthy's 'All the Pretty Horses' or 'Blood Meridian,' not to mention the best works of Larry McMurtry?"

Ouch. On the contrary, we simply sug-

gested that any definition of the West had better start somewhere. The Rockies seemed as good a place as any and a better one than most.

Like the "Grapes of Wrath" and "The Big Sleep," Nathanael West's "The Day of the Locust" (No. 8) dates from that *annus mirabilis* of Western writing, 1939. It paved the way for such subsequent Hollywood novels on the list as F. Scott

THE CHRONICLE'S WESTERN 100 LIST OF 20TH CENTURY FICTION

1. "Angle of Repose," by Wallace Stegner
2. "The Grapes of Wrath," by John Steinbeck
3. "Sometimes a Great Notion," by Ken Kesey
4. "The Call of the Wild," by Jack London
5. "The Big Sleep," by Raymond Chandler
6. "Animal Dreams," by Barbara Kingsolver
7. "Death Comes for the Archbishop," by Willa Cather
8. "The Day of the Locust," by Nathanael West
9. "Blood Meridian," by Cormac McCarthy
10. "The Maltese Falcon," by Dashiell Hammett
11. "The Ox-Bow Incident," by Walter Van Tilburg Clark
12. "English Creek," by Ivan Doig
13. "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," by Tom Robbins
14. "Snow Falling on Cedars," by David Guterson
15. "On the Road," by Jack Kerouac
16. "The Joy Luck Club," by Amy Tan
17. "Lonesome Dove," by Larry McMurtry
18. "McTeague," by Frank Norris
19. "My Name Is Aram," by William Saroyan
20. "A River Runs Through It," by Norman Maclean
21. "The Left Hand of Darkness," by Ursula K. Le Guin
22. "Coyote Waits," by Tony Hillerman
23. "Play It as It Lays," by Joan Didion
24. "The Monkey Wrench Gang," by Edward Abbey
25. "Vineland," by Thomas Pynchon
26. "Earth Abides," by George K. Stewart
27. "Crooked Little Heart," by Anne Lamott
28. "The Underground Man," by Ross Macdonald



Wallace Stegner

29. "Where I'm Calling From," by Raymond Carver
30. "Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book," by Maxine Hong Kingston
31. "L.A. Confidential," by James Ellroy
32. "The House of the Spirits," by Isabel Allende
33. "Women in Their Beds," by Gina Berriault
34. "Rumors of Peace," by Ella Lefland
35. "The River Why," by David James Duncan
36. "Riders of the Purple Sage," by Zane Grey
37. "Shane," by Jack Schaefer
38. "Stones for Ibarra," by Harriet Doerr
39. "The Big Sky," by A.B. Guthrie
40. "Trout Fishing in America," by Richard Brautigan
41. "The House Made of Dawn," by N. Scott Momaday
42. "The Milagro Beanfield War," by John Nichols
43. "The Last Tycoon," by F. Scott Fitzgerald
44. "Oil!," by Upton Sinclair
45. "Mariette in Ecstasy," by Ron Hansen
46. "The Virginian," by Owen Wister
47. "A Yellow Raft in Blue Water," by Michael Dorris
48. "Ceremony," by Leslie Marmon Silko
49. "Hawaii," by James Michener
50. "The Postman Always Rings Twice," by James M. Cain
51. "Mrs. Bridge," by Evan S. Connell

52. "The Golden Gate," by Vikram Seth
53. "Stones From the River," by Ursula Hegi
54. "Tell Me a Riddle," by Tillie Olsen
55. "Rabbit Boss," by Thomas Sanchez
56. "Bless Me, Ultima," by Rudolfo A. Anaya
57. "The Man in the High Castle," by Philip K. Dick
58. "Laughing Boy," by Oliver Lafarge
59. "The Corpus of Joe Bailey," by Oakley Hall
60. "Rose," by Martin Cruz Smith
61. "Fat City," by Leonard Gardner
62. "Montana 1948," by Larry Watson
63. "Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down," by Ishmael Reed
64. "Tattoo the Wicked Cross," by Floyd Salas
65. "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," by Ernest J. Gaines
66. "Lying Low," by Diane Johnson
67. "Tales of the City," by Armistead Maupin
68. "Superior Women," by Alice Adams
69. "Field of Vision," by Wright Morris
70. "Nobody's Angel," by Thomas McGuane
71. "Little Big Man," by Thomas Berger
72. "Budding Prospects," by T.C. Boyle
73. "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," by Sherman Alexie



John Steinbeck

74. "Angel Fire," by Ron Franscell
75. "Cowboys Are My Weakness," by Pam Houston
76. "Love Medicine," by Louise Erdrich
77. "Hondo," by Louis L'Amour
78. "Fools Crow," by James Welch

79. "The Vineyard," by Idwal Jones
80. "Fathers," by Herb Gold
81. "The Loved One," by Evelyn Waugh
82. "Paso Por Aqui," by Eugene Manlove Rhodes
83. "Mistress of Spices," by Chitra Divakaruni
84. "Close Range," by L. Annie Proulx
85. "The Color Purple," by Alice Walker
86. "Rock Springs," by Richard Ford
87. "A Distant Trumpet," by Paul Horgan
88. "Tapping the Source," by Kern Nunn
89. "Ask the Dust," by John Fante
90. "Fup," by Jim Dodge
91. "Friendly Persuasion," by Jessamyn West
92. "The Splendid Idle Forties," by Gertrude Atherton
93. "The Carmen Miranda Memorial Flagpole," by Gerald Rosen
94. "Dune," by Frank Herbert
95. "The Palace Thief," by Ethan Canin
96. "Confessions of Madame Psyche: Memoirs and Letters of Mei-Li Murrow," by Dorothy Bryant
97. "Making History," by Carolyn See
98. "The Living," by Annie Dillard
99. "After Many a Summer Dies the Swan," by Aldous Huxley
100. "Johnny Got His Gun," by Dalton Trumbo



Ken Kesey

gested that any definition of the West had better start somewhere. The Rockies seemed as good a place as any and a better one than most.

But cartographic tradition stubbornly refuses to admit the Rockies south into Texas,

preferring to call them the Guadalupe Mountains from the moment they cross the New Mexico-Texas border. Anyone looking at the earth instead of a map can see that the westernmost ear of Texas sits well west of the Rockies, thus allowing McMurtry

("Lonesome Dove," No. 17) and especially the East Texas-based McCarthy ("Blood Meridian," No. 9) into any sensible definition of the West.

Right in our own backyard, Dashiell Hammett's "The Maltese Falcon" didn't need any gerrymandering to join Chandler, Tony Hillerman ("Coyote Waits," No. 22) and Ross Macdonald ("The Underground Man," No. 28) among the West's best mystery fiction. Other fiction expressly about San Francisco fared well on the list too, including Amy Tan's "The Joy Luck Club" (No. 16), Frank Norris' "McTeague: A Story of San Francisco" (No. 18) and Armistead Maupin's "Tales of the City" (No. 67).

But does any of this mean anything, or is it just another list in a year far too full of them? For those of us engaged in the quix-

least these few — blessedly unnumbered — things:

■ That some of us have a lot of reading to do before we can even begin to call ourselves well acquainted with the literature of the West.

■ That catching up on such reading will never be easy until more publishers such as UC Press (which has recently brought "Oil!," No. 44; "Fat City," No. 61; and "The Vineyard," No. 79 back into print as part of its California Fiction series) recognize Western writing's enduring value.

■ And that, wherever the West is, 600 readers have done its literature a large and richly deserved favor.

Chronicle Book Editor David Kipen's col-

s, from the 1930s.
UC Radio. "Chemi-

t. Performances
featuring trum-
rdist Joey De

Contempo-

llection.
92.