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 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.

DAVID KIPEN
Books

The Chronicle Western 100 lists 20th century English-language nonfiction off the leash. It was devised on the nerve assumption that an unsentimental, 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 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 Time," hits bookstores this summer. And not Evan S. Connell either, the San Francisco malamute-turned-novelist whose landmark examination of the West but published here as well as by the late, much-lamented North Point 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. "Heber Shelter," Gentry and Vincent Bugliosi's harrowing book about the Charles Manson murders, missed making "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,

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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

John McPhee
His "Assembling California" was No. 7.

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

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

The Chronicle's Western 100

1. "Land of Little Rain," Mary Austin
2. "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," Wallace Stegner
3. "Desert Solitaire," Edward Abbey
6. The Western Trilogy: Bernardo Deba
8. "My First Summer in the Sierra," John Muir
10. "City of Saints," Mike Davis
11. "Osprey of History," George Rippey
16. "California the Great Surplus," Gary McMillen
17. "Arctic Dreams," Barry Lopez
18. "Firing the Madison," Sherman Alexie
19. "Western History," Marilyn Moseley

23. "Knock on the Band Played On," Randy Falco
24. "Big Time," Robert Lewis
29. "Darwin at the Edge of the World," Lawrence Wright
30. "Great Plains," Ian Frazier
33. "Crazy Horse the Strange Man of the Dakotas," Ben Schmidt
34. "City of Nets," Olaf Swinton
36. "The Content of the Character," Shelby Steele
37. "Wildfire," Rick Bass
38. "Hunting for Treasure," John McPhee
40. "The Executive's Song," Norman Mc康
41. "The Legacy of Comstock: The Unofficial Story of the American West," Patricia Nealon
42. "Living Out West: Narrative Nonfiction," Gary Soto
43. "Captive West," Carolin Miller
44. "California Gold," Searching for the Spirit of a State Along the San Andreas," Thomas Cline
45. "Crossing in the West," Jack Remington
46. "The White Box, Alphonso Murgan
47. "Assembling California," John McPhee
48. "This Boy's Life," Tobias Wolff
49. "Riders in the Sky," Lawrence Clark Powell

51. "Man in Match My Mountains," loving living
52. "Love and War," Bill Moyer
55. "The Rio and the Cutter of Dunes," Wallace Stevens
56. "The Rites to Rainy Mountain," H. Scott Moncrieff
61. "The Executive's Song," Norman Mc康
63. "Living Out West: Narrative Nonfiction," Gary Soto
64. "Captive West," Carolin Miller
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68. "Assembling California," John McPhee
69. "This Boy's Life," Tobias Wolff
70. "Riders in the Sky," Lawrence Clark Powell
72. "Man in Match My Mountains," loving living
73. "Love and War," Bill Moyer
74. "The Language of the Goddess," Marija Gimbutas
75. "The Air-Conditioned Nightmare," Henry Miller
76. "The Rio and the Cutter of Dunes," Wallace Stevens
77. "The Rites to Rainy Mountain," H. Scott Moncrieff
78. "The Man who Walked Through Time," Camille Par
82. "The Legacy of Comstock: The Unofficial Story of the American West," Patricia Nealon
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96. "The Rio and the Cutter of Dunes," Wallace Stevens
97. "The Rites to Rainy Mountain," H. Scott Moncrieff
100. "A Stranger From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans," Ronald Takaki
Chron copies to:

Nan Graham
Kathy Mosdal O'Brien
Patty Limerick
Acute ‘Angle’ Wins Reader Poll

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

David Kipen

Books

A
nd 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 scrawled, 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 much, 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 novels 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" outpacing 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,"

BELOW

BOOK CLUB NEWS

DO YOU KNOW WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE AUTHOR?

TELEVISION B9
THEATER LISTINGS B2
MOVIE LISTINGS B5, B6
COMICS B8

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 1999

INSIDE

Complete list of The Chronicle’s best 20th century Western fiction. B4

In the column "A Gesture Life," Bay TV’s "Bookclub" will air a special "Mark Kipen's Western 100" program. The show, which will air on Monday, November 19, will feature interviews with authors about their works. The program will air at 8 p.m. Eastern Time. For more information, please contact the program at 415-433-2980.
London, Chandler Make Top Five in Chronicle List

> BOOKS

From Page 81

Raymond Chandler's first Philip Marlowe mystery, rounded out the top five. The latter presented 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 Archivist" 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.

Like the "Grapes of Wrath" and "The Big Sleep," Nathanael West's "Day of the Locust" (No. 8) dates from that annual minable of Western writing, 1939. It paved the way for such subsequent Hollywood novels on the list as F. Scott 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," next literary roundtable at 10 p.m. Monday, Nov. 20 on KQED (88.5 FM).

The ninth spot on the list almost saw 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 suggested 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's "Lonesome Dove," No. 17 and especially the East-based McCarthy 'Blood Meridian,' No. 9 into any sensible definition of the West.

Right in our 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 Ambrose Bierce'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 quixotic pursuit of achievement, certification and, possibly, culture, it matters. And to all who know the Western readers have done their literature a large and richly deserved favor.