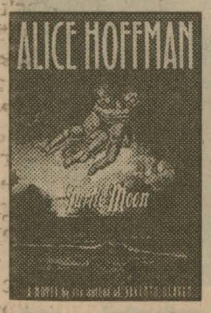
'Turtle Moon' characters compelling

by Lauren Glen Dunlap

In Verity, Fla., where "the sky is filled with heat waves and parakeets," it reaches 99 in the shade – if you can find shade.

In Verity, it's usually so quiet "you can hear the strangler figs dropping their fruit on the hoods of parked cars," and in spring the roads are covered with the smashed shells of turtles – "hard green globes the size of Scooter Pies" – which have mistaken the town lights for moonlight.



The town's cheap rents and wild hibiscus have drawn a population of divorced women from New York, women with hair turned green from chlorine, who drink diet sodas and talk about their troubled children. And in Verity, notwithstanding its name, there is a lot of lying going on.

Keith Rosen, "the meanest boy in Verity," is telling many of the lies. At 12, he steals "lunch money, teachers' wallets, birthstone rings right off his classmates' fingers." He cuts school to hang out at Burger King, and when on a dare he pierces his own ear with an embroidery needle, he doesn't even bleed – that's how mean he is.

Keith is getting addicted to trouble as much as his mother, Lucy, and the other divorced women in town are addicted to Dr Pepper.

As in her last novel, "Seventh Heaven," Alice Hoffman creates in her new one the smell, feel and taste of a small town, a delightfully palpable geography. Like other Hoffman novels, **"Turtle Moon"** (Putnam, $21.95) features an angry adolescent, a divorced mother, a haunted survivor, and a ghost – a real one – among an array of characters whose lives are marked by disappointment.

Unlike the earlier novels, "Turtle Moon" also features a corpse. In a town where the last major crime was in 1958 – "when one of the Platts shot his brother in an argument over a Chevy Nomad they had bought together on time" – there has been, astonishingly, a murder. One of the divorced women in Keith and Lucy's pink stucco condo is found dead on her kitchen floor, still clutching four quarters for the basement dryer. The woman's infant daughter is missing – and so is Keith.

Enter Julian Cash, a man who grew up in Verity, at least until he was sent off to reform school, and whose own mother "fainted the first time she saw

Books

The West and all of us in it

Another stanza in hobo hopefulness

■ **"Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West"**
by Wallace Stegner
Random House, $21

by Ivan Doig



In another Times, in another place (considerably Eastern), editors some years ago whomped together a bunch of us they chose to call "Writers of the Purple Sage." Most of us were fortysomething then, and a few even lived somewhere around sagebrush.

The exception on both counts was pictured in distinguished manner, beneath a California oak, and presented in big, hey-look-who-we've-discovered typeface as: William Stegner.

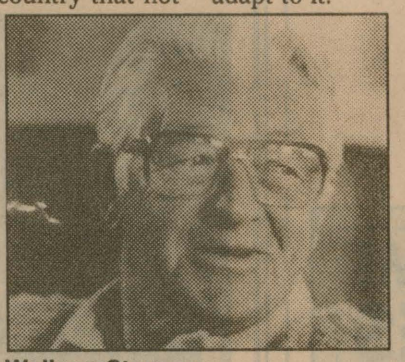
West of the Hudson, that first name has always been pronounced "Wallace." But at least they got it right that W. Stegner, Pulitzer Prize novelist, National Book Award winner, essayist, conservationist, historian, teacher and consummate citizen of the West, is our chairman of the board.

Early in his majestic sum of 29 books was "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," Stegner's breakthrough novel based on his own family and their version of that hobo anthem of Western hopefulness; not quite half a century later, here is another inspired stanza, "Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs," from that same restless lilt.

In these 16 essays, even those with the telltale sheen of deadline magazine work are pleasurable enough, come right up to you with typical Stegnerian common sense. And three are the brilliant crystallization of his lifetime of thinking about the American West.

One kinship I have always felt with Wallace Stegner is the square-built Western kid sort, that although we both are descendants of a West of hell-raisers, we ruefully recognize ourselves as, at most, born to raise heck. Yet chain us together to a keyboard and we'd fairly soon admit we have differences.

Likely he thinks the plots of my novels are somewhat, shall we say, unbridled; possibly I think his main characters hew a bit too closely to his own persona. But maybe a little orneriness in our different directions is to be expected. As usual, he has spoken for many Western writers, and Westerners, who have had to pull up our socks and try to make something of ourselves: "There is something about exposure to that big country that not only tells an individual how small he is, but steadily tells him who he is. I have never understood identity problems."


Wallace Stegner

The backbone of this book is precisely about that big country and all of us in it, in his central trio of essays titled "Living Dry," "Striking the Rock" and "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur." They previously stood alone as a slim academic paperback called "The American West as Living Space," findable only if you somehow already knew of its existence, so it is particularly gratifying to have this essence-of-Stegner in broader publication.

In "Living Dry," he does a diamond-hard distillation of our settlement of this half-continent of mostly unreliable rain, to the conclusion, "And what do you do about aridity, if you are a nation accustomed to plenty and impatient of restrictions and led westward by pillars of fire and cloud? You may deny it for a while. Then you must either try to engineer it out of existence or adapt to it."

The engineering of water where there mostly isn't any is just as trenchantly dealt with in "Striking the Rock," as are the signs he sees of adapting ourselves to the land's circumstances – "the seedbeds for an emergent western culture" – in the finale of the three, "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur."

It is a cause for wonder that Stegner, born in 1909 and thus a witness to every haywire development in the West since then, can remain full of hope. But strong writers, the enduring hedgehog type, are said to know one big thing, and Stegner powerfully has always known his: "I really only want to say that we may love a place and still be dangerous to it."

In the quibble department, I wish Random House had retained Stegner's useful bibliography that backed up "The American West as Living Space," or even better, had this splendidly cross-referential thinker furnish a suggested reading list covering this entire collection of topics.

And to author and editor alike, I'll say that I don't see how it would hurt us Western boyos to lay off the use of "man" and "men" when we mean people in general, i.e. including women. (Especially since some of Stegner's most affecting passages are in his "Letter, Much Too Late" to his mother.)

Like his region, Wallace Stegner has exemplified extraordinary variety. If, after the novels "Crossing to Safety" and "Angle of Repose" and the inspired history/biography "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian" and the marvelously unclassifiable "Wolf Willow," anybody still needs to be introduced to the work of this eloquent writer, this book of essays is a good place to start. The essential Stegner is in them, patient as a mountain range, hopeful as a bluebird.

(c) Los Angeles Times

■ Seattle writer Ivan Doig's most recent novel is "Ride With Me, Mariah Montana."

Western History, Every Which Way

Oxford's 23 provocative essays don't try to resolve the great feud over frontier history—they celebrate it.

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WEST
Edited by Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (Oxford University Press: $39.95; 872 pp.)

Reviewed by Ivan Doig

"Nightly dissipation did not slow down the workers who, by the spring of 1868, realized they were not mere laborers on a railroad but participants in the greatest race in history. The Central Pacific was winging across the level deserts of Nevada. The Union Pacific was battling through South Pass."

—Ray Allen Billington
"Westward Expansion," 1960

"A family story lies at the heart of American western history."

—Kathleen Neils Conzen
"The Oxford History of the American West," 1994



TIMES PHOTO

Down the canyons of time here in the West, something like a Tolstoyan echo is ringing these days: Happy history is all alike, while every unhappy history is unhappy in its own way.

For the past five or so years, headline writers have not been able to resist telling us with terms such as *showdown* and *shootout* and other macho bull roar that, lo, the "old" frontier history and the "new" western history are in conflict. In a lot of ways, they are: consider the quotes above, one oldfangledly exuberant that things were at their "greatest" when the tracks of a transcontinental railroad were being laid across the West, the other politically corrective in its chiding stipulation that the West needs to be thought of as domestic at "heart."

Even those of us leery of scholarly arguments perk up at a match over whether the American West is properly a Mrs., Mr., Ms. or myth, don't we? But where to begin, in any sorting of suddenly omnipresent western historians (28 of them here in "The Oxford History" alone) and their oldness or newness?

How about with the fact that, battling or otherwise, the Union Pacific railroad never passed within a good many miles of South Pass, Wyoming.

Ray Allen Billington was a dashing classroom lecturer (no, you can't look up my Northwestern University transcript and find out what grade he gave me; I simply sat in on his popular "Cowboys and Indians" course) who, when he stopped to think about it, knew perfectly well that it was the Oregon Trail wagon trains that crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass and that the later Union Pacific railroad route ran farther, um, south. But in his textbook persona Billington was a busy interpreter of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 key-to-all-the-doors-of-the-kingdom assertion that "the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization . . . the line of most rapid and effective Americanization." Today's generation of textbook-dominating historians, quite a number of them born and raised in the West and/or forged by the heated issues of the 1960s—do not see the West's past along that inexorable and triumphal frontier alignment.

Into the middle of all this comes the just-issued "Oxford History of the American West," and, at 4 pounds, 3 ounces, it makes considerable ripples.

Fortunately for its target audience of "readers who wish to be well informed, but not overwhelmed," the Oxford's trio of editors looked at their expanse of pages and decided to organize, organize, organize:

Section I, Heritage, with essays such as "Native Peoples and Native Histories" and "The Spanish-Mexican Rim."

Section II, Expansion, with essays including "A Saga of Families," "Religion and Spirituality" and "Violence."

Section III, Transformation, which takes in wide-ranging essays such as "Wage Earners and Wealth Makers" and "Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity."

Section IV, Interpretation, about the West on the page, palette, celluloid, bumper sticker and so on, more of which anon.

"This volume does not ignore the concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner or his intellectual legacy," co-editor Clyde A. Milner II maintains in this book's introduction, "but its assembled authors make their own case for the significance of the history of the American West." The zestiest of those cases seemed to me in articles such as Jay Gitlin's "Empires of Trade, Hinterlands of Settlement," in which he joyfully rummages through world history looking for attachments to America's frontiers ("This is also a story of—in the words of the historian Fernand Braudel— 'dietary frontiers.' ") and the hey-history-does-have-consequences essay, "Contemporary Peoples/Contested Places," by Sarah Deutsch, George J. Sanchez, and Gary Y. Okihiro. Perhaps not coincidentally, this latter survey of racial, ethnic and cultural flash points is the most California-centered piece in the book.

Let us now dispraise the "Literary West" segment and get it over with. Thomas J. Lyons' chapter is one of the most traditional in the book, and the tradition I have in mind is the old one of historians staying determinedly out of date, by a decade or two, about anything that smacks of modern writing. For anyone wanting specifics on prose in the American West since, say, Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It" was published in 1976, this 1994 Oxford treatment is shy of Rudolfo Anaya, Rick Bass, Mary Clearman Blew, Harriet Doerr, Michael Dorris, Gretel Ehrlich, Louise Erdrich, Judith Freeman, Linda Hogan, Barbara Kingsolver, Maxine Hong Kingston, Cormac McCarthy, Thomas McGuane. . . .

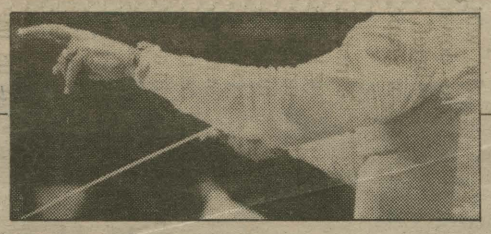
On the other, "newer" historical hand, if you had the impulse during "Dances With Wolves" to yelp out "Kevin, leave that wolf alone! Put that wolf back where you found it!" then has Richard White got an essay for you. When White goes over the ground with his encyclopedic artillery, a piece of historical territory never quite looks the same afterward. In his "Animals and Enterprise" essay, he ranges back to when "the West was a biological republic," carries the story to the European-wrought change to "animals of enterprise, which gleaned the energy of western ecosystems . . . to produce hides, meat, and wool that found markets all over the world" and up to just yesterday with his conclusion that although "Dances With Wolves" "seemed to reject the commodification of animals . . . the film itself was a commodity: the audience paid for the sentiments, and the animals were highly trained. Regarded this way, the film was also what it condemned: yet another stage in the evolution of animals of enterprise in the West."

Perhaps as remarkable, in its way, as White's eon-wide grasp of topics is the Oregon factor. In 1965, Earl Pomeroy of the University of Oregon brought out "The Pacific Slope," which made the invaluable (and then-newish) point that the West is also a citified place. Pomeroy's successor at Oregon, Richard Maxwell Brown, now one of the deans of western history in his own right, shows the same calm, independent thinking in his Oxford consideration of the roots of American violence; Brown not only discerns a violence-employing "Western Civil War of Incorporation" from the 1850s to 1919, but he also he maps it out and decodes it for you.

Taken all in all, then, "The Oxford History of the American West" seems to me best at its most provocative. If the approaches of the "new" western historians end up costing the West its trademark clichés, its Louis L'Amourism and John Waynery, so much the better. A side of America where the mission church of San Xavier del Bac sits like a conquistador's dropped jewel box outside modern Tucson; where Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac peered with wild surmise from U.S. Forest Service lookout towers in Washington's North Cascades in forest-fire summers past; where the corduroy and velvet fields of the Sacramento Valley agricultural factory practically run into the runway of the Sacramento airport; an American palimpsest of so many maps, mental and actual, surely deserves ongoing histories, in the plural.■

Ivan Doig, recipient of the Western Literature Assn.'s Distinguished Achievement Award, is writing a novel set in the West during the Depression.

Dictators on the Dais



Page 2

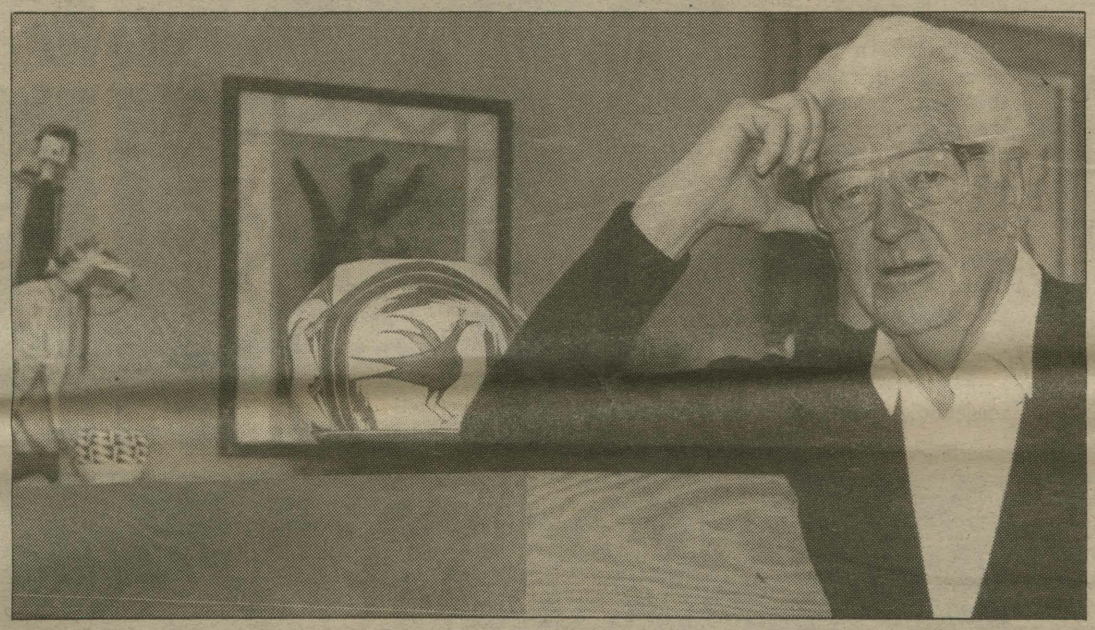
BOOK REVIEW

LOS ANGELES TIMES • SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 1992

UNDER THE Great Wide Sky

WHERE THE BLUEBIRD SINGS TO THE LEMONADE SPRINGS
Living and Writing in the West
By Wallace Stegner
(Random House: $21; 227 pp.)

Reviewed by Ivan Doig



Wallace Stegner

In another Times, in another place (considerably eastern), Sunday editors some years ago whomped together a bunch of us they chose to call "Writers of the Purple Sage." Most of us were 40something then, and a few even lived somewhere around sagebrush, but the exception on both counts was pictured in distinguished gray-haired presiding manner beneath a California oak and presented to the readership in big hey-look-who-we've-discovered typeface as:

William Stegner.

West of the Hudson, that first name has always been pronounced "Wallace." But at least they got it right, back there, that W. Stegner, Pulitzer Prize novelist, National Book Award novelist, and essayist and conservationist and historian and teacher and consummate citizen of the West, is our chairman of the board.

Early in his majestic sum of 29 books was "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," Stegner's breakthrough novel based on his own family and their version of the wanderings within that hobo anthem of Western hopefulness, and not quite half a century later here is another inspired stanza, "Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs," from that same restless lilt. In this collection of 16 essays, even the ones with the telltale sheen of deadline magazine work are pleasurable enough, all come right up to you with typical Stegnerian common sense, and three are the brilliant crystallization of his lifetime of thinking about the American West.

One kinship I have always felt with Wallace Stegner is the square-built Western kid sort, that although we both are descendants of a West of hell-raisers, we ruefully recognize ourselves as at most born to raise heck. Yet, chain us together to a keyboard and we'd fairly soon admit we have differences. Likely he thinks the plots of my novels are somewhat, shall we say, unbridled; possibly I think his main characters hew a bit too closely to his own persona. But maybe a little orneriness in our different directions—and those of Stegner's Stanford students as diverse as Larry McMurtry, Tillie Olsen and Ken Kesey—is to be expected, too. As usual, he has spoken for many Western writers, and Westerners, who have had to pull up our socks and try to make something of ourselves: "There is something about exposure to that big country that not only tells an individual how small he is, but steadily tells him *who* he is. I have never understood identity problems."

Please turn to Page 8

Doig is the author of "This House of Sky," soon to be reissued in a 15th anniversary edition.

Guess/Jordache: The Bottom Line

SKIN TIGHT
The Bizarre Story of Guess v. Jordache
By Christopher Byron
(Simon & Schuster: $23; 352 pp.)

Reviewed by Frank Rose

Americans like to think there's a rational explanation for everything, from the twinkling of the stars to the vagaries of human behavior. Among other things, our faith in reason has given us the American legal system, which is based on the idea that there's an objective truth out there, a quantifiable reality that can be nailed down if enough people hammer at it for enough time. But every once in a while, something comes along to suggest that the powers of reason we put so much trust in are actually little more than the hallucinatory firings of a hyperactive cerebral cortex. Something like the jeans war.

Designer jeans appeal to a more primitive region of the brain, the part responsible for (among other things) lust and greed. And in the final analysis, this is what "Skin Tight," Christopher Byron's controversial account of the unimaginably convoluted vendetta between two wildly successful jeans makers, comes down to—the primacy of primitive emotions, their ability to short-circuit all the high-minded institutions of Western civilization and go straight for the id. Coarse cotton fabric becomes invested with sex and catches fire with consumers, and then—whoa, stand back.

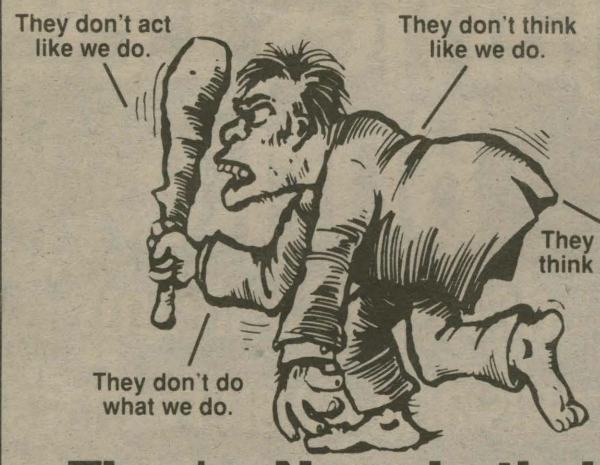
The story begins in 1977, when the three Nakash brothers—Sephardic Jews from Tel Aviv who've settled in Brooklyn—lose one of their discount-jeans stores to vandals during a power failure in New York. With $120,000 in insurance money, they launch their own jeans line, giving it the vaguely European-sounding name of Jordache and shrewdly putting their cash into a TV spot that shows a blonde wearing skin-tight jeans as she gallops through the surf astride a pounding steed. Having thus tapped into the universal language of adolescent female sexuality, the Nakash brothers see their enterprise mushroom within a year into a $75-million business. But then comes the recession of 1982 and the need to hedge their bets amid a softening economy.

The investment they settle on is Guess? Inc., an upstart jeans company owned by the Marciano brothers of Beverly Hills—a Sephardic Jewish clan from Morocco by way of Marseilles. For $4.7 million, the four Marcianos part with half their company and give the Nakashes equal representation on their board.

Please turn to Page 13

Rose is a contributing writer at Premiere and has written for several other magazines, including New York. He is currently working on a book on the William Morris Agency.

THERE'S AT LEAST ONE IN EVERY OFFICE



They're Neanderthals!

RAVE REVIEWS

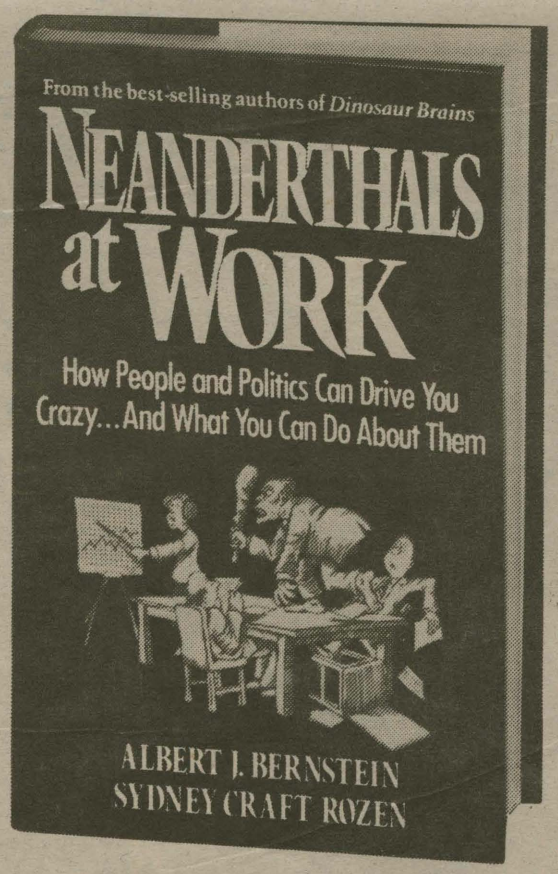
"Bernstein and Rozen's previous book on the workplace, *Dinosaur Brains*, hit the bestseller list, and no doubt, this latest effort will follow suit."—*Booklist*

"A superior self-helper that actually gets down to business."
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"You'll come away from every chapter with valuable insights about yourself, the people you work with, and the company you work for."
—Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

"Anyone who works in an organization of even moderate size will have trouble putting this down."
—*Library Journal*

The Evolutionary New Follow Up to the Bestselling *DINOSAUR BRAINS*



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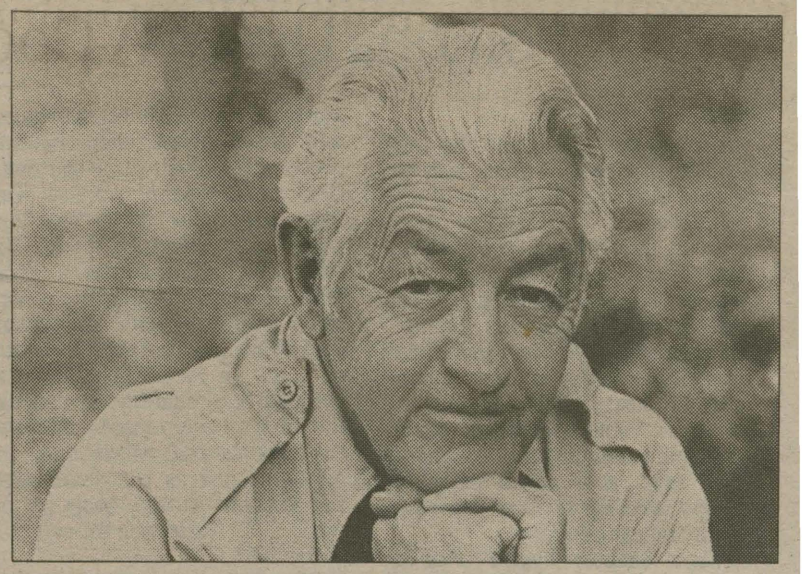
'Bluebird'

Continued from Page 1

The backbone of this book is precisely about that big country and all of us in it, in his central trio of essays titled "Living Dry," "Striking the Rock" and "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur." They previously stood alone as a slim academic paperback called "The American West as Living Space," findable only if you somehow already knew of its existence, so it is particularly gratifying to have this essence-of-Stegner in broader publication. Here's the beginning:

"The West is a region of extraordinary variety within its abiding unity, and of an iron immutability beneath its surface of change. The most splendid part of the American habitat, it is also the most fragile. It has been misinterpreted and mistreated because, coming to it from earlier frontiers where conditions were not unlike those of northern Europe, Anglo-Americans found it different, daunting, exhilarating, dangerous, and unpredictable, and entered it carrying habits that were often inappropriate and expectations that were surely excessive. The dreams they brought to it were recognizable American dreams—a new chance, a little gray house in the West, adventure, danger, bonanza, total freedom from constraint and law and obligation, the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the New Jerusalem. Those dreams had often paid off in parts of America settled earlier, and they paid off for some in the West. For the majority, no. The West has had a way of warping well-carpentered habits, and raising the grain on exposed dreams."



Wallace Stegner in 1980, when he won the Times' Robert Kirsch Award (given for a body of work by a writer from the West or featuring the West).

Lots of lessons in that one paragraph, an impressive number of them about the art of writing. Parallel constructions, alliteration, deft change of sentence rhythm from that 40-worder which crescendos in "the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the New Jerusalem" down to the honest power of that four-word dream-breaker: "For the majority, no." More vitally, though, he sweeps us at once into his exploration of the great theme of the West, the clash of its ecologies and its cultures.

Elsewhere in the book, Stegner says with a bit of a sigh that "the whole West, including much of California, is arid country, as I've been reiterating ad nauseam for fifty years." Here in the essay "Living Dry," he does a diamond-hard distillation of our settlement of this half-continent of mostly unreliable rain, to the conclusion: "And what do you do about aridity, if you are a nation accustomed to plenty and impatient of restrictions and led westward by pillars of fire and cloud? You may deny it for a while. Then you must either try to engineer it out of existence or adapt to it." The engineering of water where there mostly isn't any is just as trenchantly dealt with in the next essay, "Striking the Rock," as are the signs he sees of adapting ourselves to the land's circumstances—"the seedbeds for an emergent western culture"—in the finale of the three, "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur."

It is a cause for wonder that Stegner, born in 1909 and thus a witness to every haywire development in the West since then, can remain full of hope. But then strong writers, the enduring hedgehog type, are said to know one big thing, and Stegner powerfully has always known his: "I really only want to say that we may love a place and still be dangerous to it."

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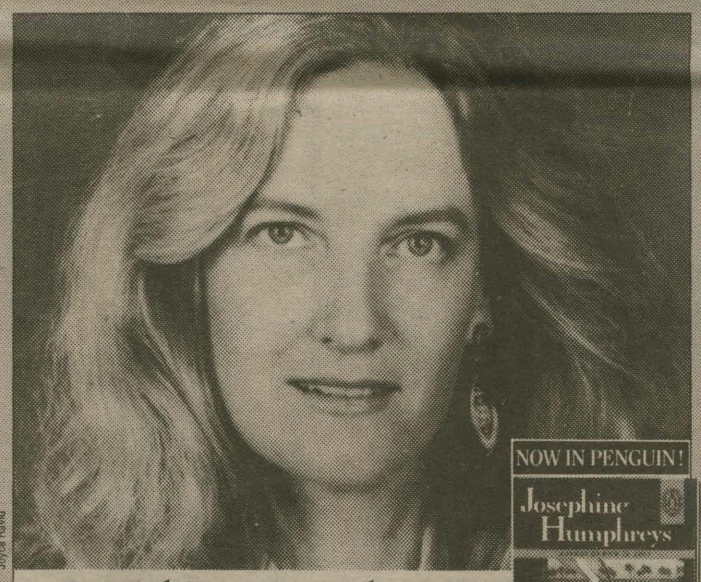
Like his region, which he has christened for us the native home of hope, Wallace Stegner has exemplified extraordinary variety. If, after the novels "Crossing to Safety" and "Angle of Repose" and the inspired history/biography "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian" and the marvelously unclassifiable "Wolf Willow," anybody still needs to be introduced to the work of this eloquent writer, this book of essays is a good place to start. The essential Stegner is in them, patient as a mountain range, hopeful as a bluebird. ■



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"A deft and generous portrait of the human heart."
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

PENGUIN BOOKS

Title:	Where The Bluebird Sings	LAT date:	
To The Lemonade Springs: Living And Writing In The West(G)			
Author:	Wallace Stegner	Hard $	21
		Paper $	
Publisher:	Random House	(No. Pages)	229
Reviewer:	Ivan Doig	Sent:	3|12|92
Copy due:	April 1	(Words/Fee)	1100|$400
Pub. date:	April 3	ISBN	
Reviewed jointly with:			

12 May '94

Dear Alex--

Herewith, the review of the Ox of American Western History. Please note that, for reasons too tedious to go into, I work in triple-spacing, so these 8 pp. add up to about 1300 words.

Hope you're thriving.

best,

Oxford –
– s' what less expand & + work-shop.
p. 37 – 4 sacred mtns of Navajos
p. 40 – Skinwalker pic
p. 41 – · Blessingway
p. 45 – Pueblo vignette
p. 46 – " " aftermath
p. 47 – weapons, animals, & pathogens
p. 79 – another vignette
p. 80 – trade jargons
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read to p. 89 – pick up later
· left side of America
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609 – TR & Muir
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Josiah Royce, Willa C, Mgrma Ivory, Sequoyah(?), Sarah W'mucca,
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His succ @ 02, RMB, now / 7 · deans 7 Wm his in his own
turn, shows · same calm, indep't knack way of doing his as nobody
thinking
else has befor + his
7 roots 7 Am violence; You will not think of · shootout
@ · O.K. Corral even same again read Brown o.

Brown not only postulates a violence-
employing "Wm civ War 7 Encorpn," from · 1500's to 1919,
he maps it out + decodes it for you.

Ivan Doig

17021 Tenth Avenue N.W., Seattle, Washington 98177
(206) 542-6658

Ivan Doig
[redacted]
Non-fiction
Cloth

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Edited by Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor,

and Martha A. Sandweiss

(Oxford U. Press, $39.95; 872 pp.)

Reviewed by Ivan Doig

"Nightly dissipation did not slow down the workers who, by the spring of 1868, realized they were not mere laborers on a railroad but participants in the greatest race in history. The Central Pacific was winging across the level deserts of Nevada. The Union Pacific was battling through South Pass."

--Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion, 1960

Billington, 2nd edition, p. 447

#

"A family story lies at the heart of American western history."

--Kathleen Neils Conzen, in The Oxford History of the American West, 1994

Oxford, p. 315

#

Down the canyons of time here in the West, something like a Tolstoyan echo is ringing, these days: happy history is all alike, while every unhappy history is unhappy in its own way.

For the past five or so years, headline writers have not been able to resist telling us with terms such as showdown and shootout and other macho bullroar that, lo, the "old" frontier history and the "new" western history are in conflict. In a lot of ways, they are: consider the quotes above, one oldfangedly exuberant that things were at their "greatest" when the tracks of a transcontinental railroad were being laid across the West, the other politically corrective in its chiding stipulation that the West needs to be thought of as domestic at "heart." Even those of us leery of scholarly arguments lest they prove to be merely academic perk up at a match over whether the American West is properly a Mrs., Mr., Ms., or myth, don't we? But where to begin, in any sorting of suddenly omnipresent Western historians (28 of them here in the Oxford History alone) and their oldness or newness?

How about with the fact that, battling or otherwise, the Union Pacific railroad never passed within a good many miles of South Pass, Wyoming.

#

Ray Allen Billington was a dashing classroom lecturer (no, you can't look up my Northwestern University transcript and find out what grade he gave me; I simply sat in on his popular "cowboys and Indians" course)

who, when he stopped to think about it, knew perfectly well that it was the Oregon Trail wagon trains that crossed the Continental Divide at South Pass and that the later Union Pacific railroad route ran farther, uhm, south. But in his textbook persona Billington was a busy interpreter of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 key-to-all-the-doors-of-the-kingdom assertion that "the frontier is the outer edge of the wave--the meeting point between savagery and civilization....the line of most rapid and effective Americanization." Today's generation of textbook-predominating historians, quite a number of them born and raised in the West and/or forged by the heated issues of the 1960's, do not see the West's pasts along that inexorable and triumphal frontier alignment. Into the middle of all this comes the just-issued Oxford History of the American West, and, at 4 lb. 3 oz., it makes considerable ripples.

Frontier Thesis, p. 10

Fortunately for its target audience of "readers who wish to be well informed, but not overwhelmed," the Oxford's trio of editors looked at their expanse of pages and decided to organize, organize, organize:

Oxford, p. xi

Section I, Heritage, with essays such as "Native Peoples and Native Histories" and "The Spanish-Mexican Rim."

Section II, Expansion, essays including "A Saga of Families," "Religion and Spirituality," and "Violence."

Section III, Transformation, which takes in wide-ranging essays such as "Wage Earners and Wealth Makers" and "Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity."

Section IV, Interpretation, the West on the page, palette, celluloid, bumper sticker and so on, more of which anon.

"This volume does not ignore the concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner or his intellectual legacy," co-editor Clyde A. Milner II maintains in this indeed voluminous book's introduction, "but its assembled authors make their own case for the significance of the history of the American West..." The zestiest of those cases seemed to me in articles such as Jay Gitlin's "Empires of Trade, Hinterlands of Settlement" in which he joyfully rummages through world history looking for attachments to America's frontiers ("This is also a story of--in the words of the historian Fernand Braudel--'dietary frontiers.'") and the hey-history-does-have-consequences essay, "Contemporary Peoples/Contested Places," by Sarah Deutsch, George J. Sanchez, and Gary Y. Okihiro; perhaps not coincidentally, this latter

survey of racial, ethnic, and cultural flashpoints (its subheadings include "Delano," "San Francisco City Hall," and "Florence and Normandie") is the most California-centered piece in the book.

Ox/ed, p. 648, p. 651, p. 655

Let us now dispraise the "Literary West" segment and get it over with. Thomas J. Lyons' chapter is one of the most traditional in the book, and the tradition I have in mind is the old one of historians staying determinedly out of date, by a decade or two, about anything that smacks of modern writing. (In three successive editions of their standard American history textbook, between 1937 and 1950, Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager opined that the Southern author of The Sound and the Fury wrote "tales signifying nothing;" their 1950 edition thus missed the news that William Faulkner had won the Nobel Prize for Literature the year before.)

South of American Republics, 1st ed., p. 568

For anyone wanting specifics on prose in the American West since, say, A River Runs through It was published in 1976, this 1994 Oxford treatment is shy of Sherman Alexei, Rudolfo Anaya, Rick Bass, Mary Clearman Blew, Joan Didion, Harriet Doerr, Michael Dorris, Gretel Ehrlich, Louise Erdrich, Judith Freeman, Molly Gloss, Linda Hogan, Teresa Jordan, Barbara Kingsolver, Maxine Hong Kingston, Craig Lesley, Cormac McCarthy, Thomas McGuane, Norman Maclean...

On the other, "newer," historical hand, if you had the impulse during Dances With Wolves to yelp out "Kevin, leave that wolf alone! Put that wolf back where you found it!" then has Richard White got an essay for you. When White goes over the ground with his encyclopedic artillery, a piece of historical territory never quite looks the same ~~to you~~ afterward. In his "Animals and Enterprise" essay, he ranges back to when "the West was a biological republic," carries the story to the European-wrought change to "animals of enterprise, which gleaned the energy of western ecosystems...to produce hides, meat, and wool that found markets all over the world" and up to just yesterday with his conclusion that although Dances With Wolves "seemed to reject the commodification of animals...the film itself was a commodity: the audience paid for the sentiments, and the animals were highly trained. Regarded this way, the film was also what it condemned: yet another stage in the evolution of animals of enterprise in the West."

Oxford, p. 237, p. 238, p. 273

Perhaps as remarkable, in its way, as White's ~~panoramic~~ eon-wide grasp of topics is the Oregon factor. In 1965, Earl Pomeroy of the University of Oregon brought out The Pacific Slope, which made the invaluable (and then-newish) point

that the West is also a citified place. Pomeroy's successor at Oregon, Richard Maxwell Brown, now one of the deans of Western history in his own right, shows the same calm, independent thinking in his Oxford consideration of the roots of American violence; Brown not only discerns a violence-employing "Western Civil War of Incorporation" from the 1850's to 1919, he maps it out and decodes it for you.

Oxford PO 412-13

Taken all in all, then, which is 23 chapters' worth, The Oxford History of the American West seems to me best at its most provocative, its least chorusy. If the approaches of the "new" western historians end up costing the West its trademark cliches, its Louis L'amourism and John Waynery, so much the better yet. A side of America where the mission church of San Xavier del Bac sits like a conquistador's dropped jewel box outside modern Tucson; where Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac peered with wild surmise from U.S. Forest Service lookout towers in Washington's North Cascades in forest-fire summers past; where the corduroy and velvet fields of the Sacramento Valley agricultural

factory practically run into the runway of the Sacramento airport; an American palimpsest of so many maps mental and actual surely deserves its ongoing histories, in the plural.

###

Ivan Doig, recipient of the Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award, is writing a novel set in the West during the Depression.

Title: Oxford History of the American West

LAT date:

Author:

Hard $

Paper $

Publisher:

(No. Pages)

Reviewer: Doig

Sent:

Copy due: June 1

(Words/Fee) 1000-1400

Pub. date:

ISBN $475.00

Reviewed jointly with:

Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times
Times Mirror Square
Los Angeles, CA 90053
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30 March '92

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Assistant Book Editor
Los Angeles Times Book Review
130 S. Broadway
Los Angeles CA 90012

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Ride herd on the word "boyos" on p. 5 for me so it doesn't come out "bozos", promise?

all best,

LAT – Alex Ratsin

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228 pp. ##

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WORD - ESC, Transfer, Save, select Unformatted, Enter, Type in file name.

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PFS Write- F2, 5, 3 and then type in a filename.

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Ivan Doig
[redacted]
April 3, '92
Non-fiction
Cloth

WHERE THE BLUEBIRD SINGS
TO THE LEMONADE SPRINGS
Living and Writing in the West
by Wallace Stegner
(Random House: $21, 229 pp.)

Reviewed by Ivan Doig

NY Times Magazine Dec. 27, 1981 — cover story

In another Times, in another place (considerably eastern), Sunday editors some years ago whomped together a bunch of us they chose to call "Writers of the Purple Sage." Most of us were forty-something then, and a few even lived somewhere around sagebrush, but the exception on both counts was pictured in distinguished grayhaired presiding manner beneath a California oak and presented to the readership in big hey-look-who-we've-discovered typeface as:

William Stegner.

West of the Hudson, that first name has always been pronounced "Wallace."

But at least they got it right, back there, that W. Stegner, Pulitzer Prize novelist, National Book Award novelist, and essayist and conservationist and historian and teacher and consummate citizen of the West, is our chairman of the board.

Early in his majestic sum of 29 books was "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," Stegner's breakthrough novel based on his own family and their version of the wanderings within that hobo anthem of Western hopefulness, and not quite half a century later here is another inspired stanza, "Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs," from that same restless lilt. In this collection of 16 essays, even the ones with the telltale sheen of deadline magazine work are pleasurable enough, all come right up to you with typical Stegnerian common sense, and three are the brilliant crystallization of his lifetime of thinking about the American West.

One kinship I have always felt with Wallace Stegner is the square-built western kid sort, that although we both are descendants of a West of hell-raisers, we ruefully recognize ourselves as at most born to raise heck. Yet, chain us together to a keyboard and we'd fairly soon admit we have differences. Likely he thinks the plots of my novels are somewhat, shall we say, unbridled; possibly I think his main characters hew a bit too closely to his own persona. But maybe a little orneriness in our different directions--and those of Stegner's Stanford students as diverse as Larry McMurtry, Tillie Olsen, and Ken Kesey--is to be expected, too. As usual, he has spoken for many Western writers, and Westerners, who have had to pull up our socks and try make something of ourselves: "There is something about exposure to that big country that not only tells an

p. 10 {

be dangerous to it."

In the quibble department, I wish this publisher had retained Stegner's ~~learned~~ useful bibliography that backed up his central trio of essays in their "Living Space" incarnation, or even better, had ~~him~~ furnish a suggested reading list covering this entire collection of topics. And ~~while they were at it, an index, on behalf of~~ this splendidly cross-referential thinker. To author and editor alike, I'll say that I don't see how it would hurt us Western boyos to lay off the use of "man" and "men" when we mean people in general, i.e. including women. (Especially since some of Stegner's most affecting passages in this book are in his "Letter, Much Too Late" to his mother.)

p. 50, for example

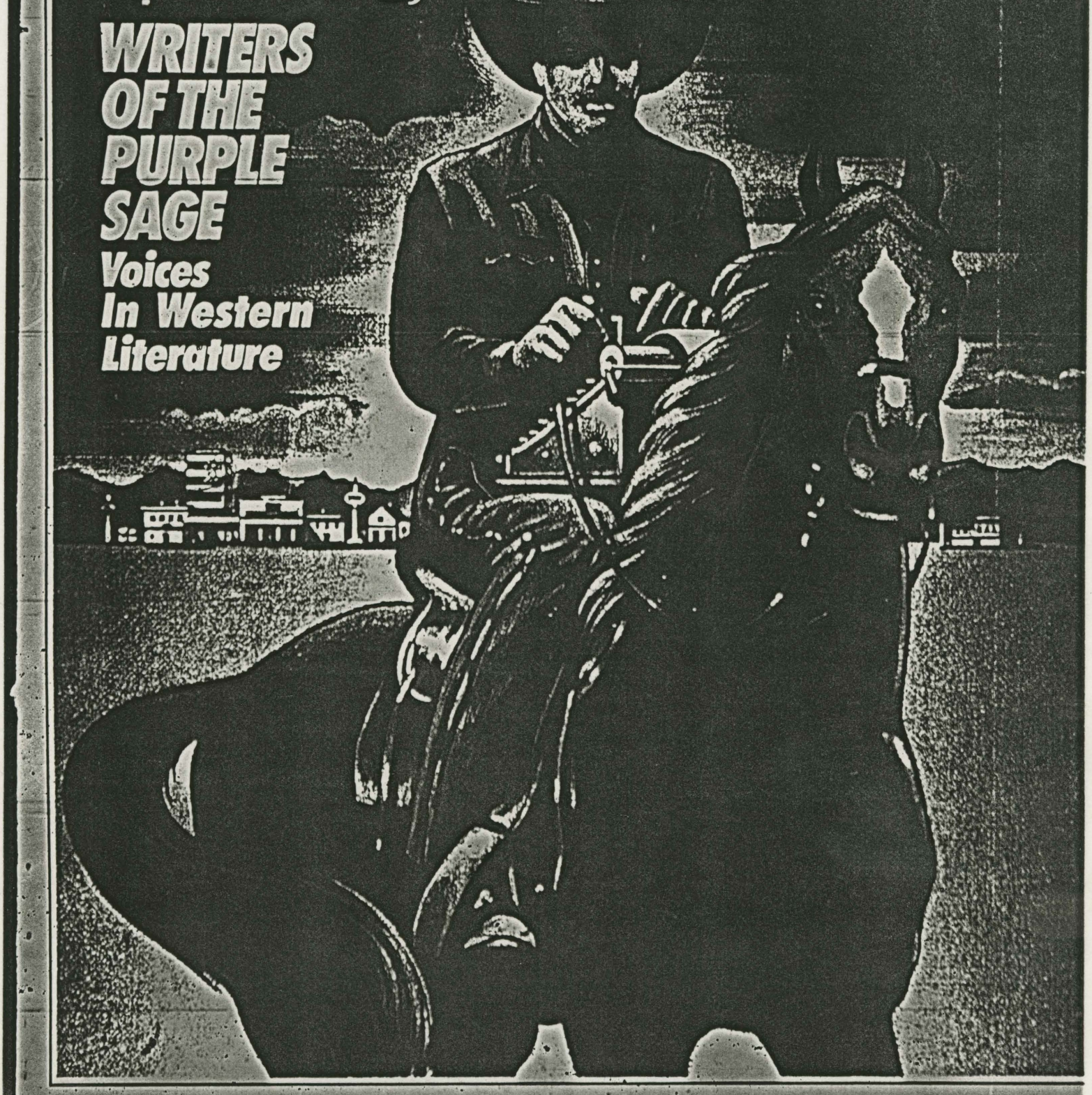
Like his region, which he has christened for us the native home of hope, Wallace Stegner has exemplified extraordinary variety. If, after the novels "Crossing to Safety" and "Angle of Repose" and the inspired history/biography "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian" and the marvelously unclassifiable "Wolf Willow," anybody still needs to be introduced to the work of this eloquent writer, this book of essays is a good place to start. The essential Stegner is in them, patient as a mountain range, hopeful as a bluebird.

Doig is the author of "This House of Sky," soon to be re-issued in a fifteenth anniversary edition.

The New York Times Magazine
DECEMBER 27, 1981 / SECTION 6

WRITERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

Voices In Western Literature



WRITERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

As the American West becomes the focus of increasing national attention, a group of writers is quietly building a new and intriguing body of literature examining the modern-day life of this energy-abundant, still largely untamed and fast-changing region.

By Russell Martin

Montana cattle rancher, trainer of cutting horses and literary man, Thomas McGuane, gets right to the heart of the matter as he begins "Nobody's Angel," his new novel, which will be published early this spring. "You would have to care about the country," he writes. Hard terrain, vacant spaces and that sense of human relation to land that at times becomes oddly sacramental have featured prominently in nearly everything that has ever been written about the West, beginning with those first venerable old tales of cowboys and Indians, prospectors and settlers. Perhaps the Western land holds such power because it shelters so much beauty; maybe the sweeping landscape's haughty indifference to human concerns is what fills it with nagging mystery. Or have writers in the West been spellbound by terrain simply because Western society and culture have appeared too paltry and fragmented to bother with?

Whatever the reasons, McGuane and a group of contemporary Western writers that includes Rudolfo Anaya, William Kittredge, N. Scott Momaday, John Nichols, Leslie Marmon Silko and others (see box, page 22) have in recent years been quietly creating a vital new body of work. Their writing is focused on the landscape, as were the older Western tales, but it is shaped by the West's modern mix of gaudy rhinestone pretensions and grand energy-rich aspirations, its isolation from and importance to the mainstream of American life.

This new Western literature is only beginning to catch the attention of the reading public outside the region's boundaries. The blockbuster best sellers, the books the critics can't praise enough have yet to be written. But the works that exist are clearly beginning to coalesce into something significant and intriguing.

Patrick Fitzpatrick, McGuane's protagonist in "Nobody's Angel," is typical of the hero now emerging in Western fiction. A "fourth-generation cowboy outsider, an educated man, a whisky addict and until recently a professional soldier," he returns to his family's Montana ranch hoping to recarve his place into its pastures and mountain range land, to find some psychic safety, a home base. But splintered familial connections, a love affair that becomes quickly doomed once it appears to have a chance to succeed and, perhaps most decisively, the thing that Fitzpatrick calls "the sadness-for-no-reason" combine to push him away.

This theme haunts most of the heroes of the modern Western novel; it is perhaps the one that defines the essential concern of the region's new fiction — rural people searching for the safe place. In a part of the country where lives are anchored and identified by glacial peaks, by desert washes, by seas of grassland that reach away forever neither the Western novelists nor their characters can escape the tyranny of distance, the wide geographies of time and place that separate individuals from one another, from shared reassurances.

It is not merely coincidental that the work of the contemporary Western writers is emerging as an important component of North American literature at precisely the time that the West itself is coming awkwardly of age, finding itself the subject of national attention. Energy companies barrel into the open spaces to get at the enormous resources that lie beneath them. Immigrants from the depressed Northeast pour onto the interstates, in station wagons instead of wagon trains, in search of jobs instead of gold. Western cities and towns swell and ache with their booming populations, and the West's political voices, many of them reactionary, grow louder by the day.

Poignant, vigorous fiction is well nurtured by this brand of societal tension, chaos and uncertainty. The resonant literature of the American South emerged at around the same time that that region began to examine its, and the nation's, legacy of shame, and to try to find ways to expiate its sense of guilt. Middle Western writers, like Sherwood Anderson and Upton Sinclair, had to come to grips with some sordid provincialism during the period when the central heartland of the country began to lay claim to a measure of national influence. The exodus from the inner cities of the Northeast in the 1950's spawned a suburban New England literature characterized by the middle-class disillusionment and self-doubt found in the works of such writers as John Cheever and John Updike. And later, at a heady time when the nation thought it could be traditionless, always in transit, a kind of California-based West Coast literature emerged, its authors contending there was nothing of merit save the wide vista of individual potential; no archaic rules, no burdens from other eras.

Then somehow, perhaps because American literature had finally reached the final boundary of the Pacific Ocean, the nation turned inward again, began to look at what we had, at everything that had a little staying power. Endurance caught the American eye again and "a sense of place" began to mean something to a nation of itinerants.

□

The new Western literature stands in stark contrast to earlier Western writing, which was concerned not so much with settling in as with heading boldly into the territory. Its literary stock in trade was saddle-worn clichés and melodramatic formulas, but its reward was high adventure — blazing rifles, stout ponies galloping across the badlands, Zane Grey's rider loping into an open American consciousness. "The sage about him was breast-high to his horse, oversweet with its warm, fragrant breath, gray where it waved to

Russell Martin is a fourth-generation Coloradan who writes about the contemporary West.

THOMAS McGUANE *"The West is a wreck," he says. "I'd like to document that without getting totally depressing."*



Paul Fusco/Magnum

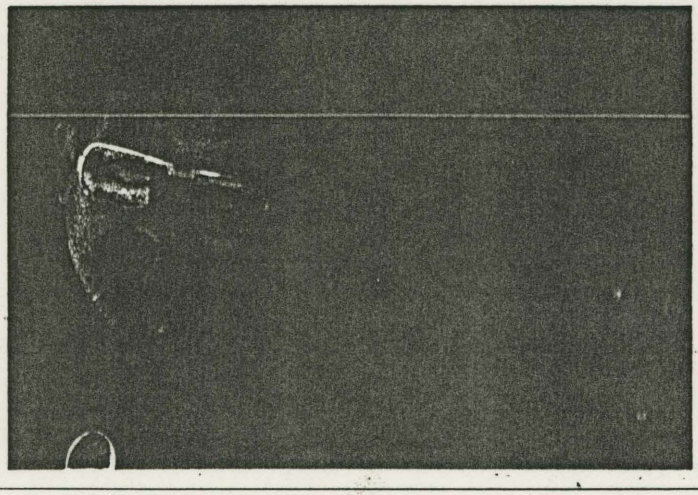
WILLIAM STEGNER

"The West does not need to explore its myths much further," he writes; "it has already relied on them too long. . . . The West is politically reactionary and exploitive: Admit it. . . . The West . . . is guilty of inexplicable crimes against the land."

maybe more now than ever. Ralph Lauren is decking everyone out in denim shirts and is peddling Western cologne that must smell something like greasewood smoke or old saddle leather. Men in three-piece suits sport Tony Lama boots and buy tacky cowboy paintings and gaudy Indian jewelry. All of a sudden, New York cab drivers are punching in old Hank Williams tapes as they cruise across the Queensboro Bridge.

And in the midst of all this cluttered Western chic, the Western writers, possessed by a kind of regional insecurity, wonder if anyone east of the wide Missouri really gives a damn about the literature they're producing. "No book about the American West is ever taken seriously by the New York critics," complains the novelist, essayist and self-proclaimed "wild preservative" Edward Abbey, the region's one literary figure who looms a bit larger and crustier than life, in part because of his extravagant narrative voice. "Most other regions of our nation . . . have been recognized as legitimate locales for our national literature. Even California . . . . But the West. The real West . . . remains little more, in the literary world, than an old joke."

'Whether the West's primary importance is as our last best hope for an energy panacea or as the last bold and untamed territory we've got, this is the place that everyone is watching.'



But it is no longer accurate to say that the contemporary literature of the West is being ignored entirely. TriQuarterly, the respected journal of art and literature based at Northwestern University, devoted its spring 1980 issue to current Western work. Although a couple of the writers whose stories were published in that edition seem to have been included simply because they've driven through the Rockies on Interstate 80 a time or two, the collection as a whole makes a convincing case for the quality of contemporary Western fiction.

Numerous Western colleges and universities now offer courses in historical and contemporary Western and Southwestern literature. At least two literary journals are devoted solely to Western writing, and Rocky Mountain Magazine, a Denver-based publication inaugurated in 1979, now offers a regular mass-circulation forum for some im-

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

As an Indian, he is steeped in a culture that believes in the importance of passing on stories.

Terrence Moore

OTHER WESTERN VOICES

Culturally, the West is as varied as its land forms, and the contemporary Western writers represent all of the region's ethnic and social variety. In speaking for the region — the palpable place of droughts, zoning wrangles, battered traditions and slim-legged, lonely men trapped in boom-town honky-tonks — they end up speaking for themselves, for what they individually perceive. But all of them work at forging meaningful connections with the past, at coming to grips with the enchanting, sometimes crippling spell cast by open land, at finding purpose, sharing goals.


Terrence Moore

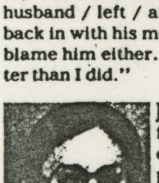
N. SCOTT MOMADAY, 47, is a Kiowa Indian and a 1969 Pulitzer Prize winner for his disturbing novel "House Made of Dawn," a book about a Jemez Pueblo man who cannot recover his tribal identity nor, without it, a sane sense of himself. Momaday teaches English at the University of Arizona and writes poetry and lyric prose — virtually all of it directed at an attempt to settle the question of his ancestry, to divine its meaning, to weigh its value. Momaday is concerned with cultural disintegration and its attendant whittling away of personal power and knowledge, but he is also fascinated by the fragments of his rich cultural past which remain to be found, charmed by what he considers an almost mystical rope of stories, that bind past with present.



LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S work stresses the efficacy of words and stories — their abilities to heal and set things right. In "Ceremony," a novel full of stylistic experimentation, one of many poems that interrupt the text says of oral stories: "They aren't just entertainment / They are all we have ... to fight off / illness and death."

"Ceremony" deals with a Laguna Pueblo man's return from the South Pacific in World War II and his struggle to return to land-centered sanity, his realization that only a kind of ritual purification can overcome life's pain. "Storyteller," Miss Silko's new collection of poems, stories and fragmented bits of memory, similarly asserts the importance of the telling. "It will take a long time, but the story must be told," says an aging man in the title story. "There must not be any lies."

Miss Silko, 33, was raised on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, which is the setting for much of her work. An assistant professor of English at the University of Arizona in Tucson, she is currently on leave after recently having been awarded a prestigious and generous five-year MacArthur Foundation "prize fellowship" that she says will allow her to begin another novel. Miss Silko's voice is versatile, sure, strong — often funny. In "Storytelling," a Laguna woman runs off with a tall, good-looking Navajo and returns to her husband 10 months later. She tells her husband that the Navajo said he would kill her if she didn't go, "And then it / rained so much and the roads / got muddy.... My husband / left / after he heard the story / and moved back in with his mother. / It was my fault and / I don't blame him either. / I could have told / the story / better than I did."



JAMES WELCH, 41, half Blackfoot, half Gros Ventre, writes with laconic Indian humor as well, but his poems and novels, "Riding the Earthboy 40," "The Death of Jim Loney" and the widely acclaimed "Winter in the Blood," come at you first with the cold force of a fist. His spare prose is precise and understated, quietly suited to the bleak tone of his tales. "Winter in the Blood" is the story of a nameless Indian man in his early 30's who is haunted by his own emotional paralysis and the bitter pull of his reservation home. "Coming home was not easy anymore," he says. "It was never a cinch, but it had become a torture." Writing in The New York Times Book Review, the novelist Reynolds Price said, "The story it tells ... has as much to say of the bone-deep disaffection and bafflement ... of several million Americans of varied origins ... as of any smaller group."


Joel Snyder

NORMAN MACLEAN, at the age of 78, the eldest of the contemporary group and a native Montanan, is a retired William Rainey Harper Professor of English at the University of Chicago. "A River Runs Through It," his delightful 1976 collection of stories from his youth, is his first fiction, written only after his retirement. But this single book has gained him legions of fans, captivated by his humor, his deft winding of stories around odd, incidental details, and his sure and certain wisdom. "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing," he writes in the title story, one about the eclectic enchantment of that sport and the perplexing depths of familial relationships.

Maclean is now locked away in a small log cabin in Montana, at work on a second book — surrounded by the high sweep and roll of the country that has captivated his imagination for nearly four score years. A reviewer writing in The New York Times called Maclean's work "acerbic, laconic, deadpan," adding that his voice "rings out of a rich American tradition."


Richard Feldman

JOHN NICHOLS, 41, has lived in the West for only a little over a decade but he has already produced a trilogy of novels set in a thinly veiled Taos, N.M., his home. The three, "The Milagro Beanfield War," "The Magic Journey" and, last summer, "The Nirvana Blues," comically trace the evolution of a small, delightfully backwater Hispanic community into a trendy mecca peopled by the lost souls of a lost generation.

At its best, Nichols's humor — his parodies of life styles and his affectionate treatments of frowzy rural pursuits — is artfully crafted. He can even pull off an engaging spoof of that pristine, panoramic imagery that sometimes regrettably seems to be a kind of rosy Western rule of thumb: "Stars hovered like awed fireflies above the nervous little city. Honky-tonk music from dozens of funky bars danced among the valley's myriad security lamps forever frozen at the foot of the mysterious mesa ... the brightly lit lime-green bubble over Tennis Heaven's indoor courts glowed silkily. Into the enchanted night faintly echoed a rythmic thwock! caused by rackets leisurely pummeling high-altitude balls inside that rippling diaphanous gem."

In his 1979 memoir, "If Mountains Die," in which he laments the tumult of changes bearing down on the real Taos, Nichols writes: "For some reason, the East had overwhelmed me.... But in New Mexico, my relationships soon cut through class lines and occupations." There is a sense in his newest fiction, however, that the community that engulfed and charmed Nichols in the late 1960's has become a place that he dislikes. And his comedic style seems, on occasion, awkwardly inappropriate to the subject of dismal change, of the loss of something fragile and important — that same drab denouement that finds description in nearly all the Western writers' work. — R. M.

pressive Western journalism and fiction.

The fiction of the Old West, the mythic stuff, the head-'em-off-at-the-pass novel, survives, of course. Its great popularity has remained nearly constant for more than three generations in large part because of the reassurances it offers.

The most successful author of Western romances at work today is Louis L'Amour, a 73-year old southern Californian who has written 80 horse operas, 33 of which have been made into movies. His book jackets boast that there are now more than 100 million copies of his books in print around the world. "Comstock Lode," his newest book and his longest work of fiction to date was published earlier this year. A startling 600,000 copies are currently in print. L'Amour prides himself on the authenticity of his portrayal of the early West. In "Shalako," a 1962 paperback now in its 16th printing, the frontiersman Buffalo Harris explains why nobody ever asks where a man's from out West: "We don't figure a man's past is important. We want to know what he is now. The fact that his great-granddaddy was a fightin' man won't kill any Indians today...."

But, of course, L'Amour's portrayal of the frontier — the wild, bold, disconnected country that offered anonymity and new beginnings to its swarthy immigrants — is as distant from truth as Zane Grey's. The grimmer reality is, for instance, that it has always mattered where you're from out West. Third- and fourth-generation Westerners still call themselves Scots and Swedes and Basques. And at least until recently, another person's past mattered mightily, especially if it was anchored in Ireland, Mexico, China or, ironically, in the bison-blackened soil of the Western plains.

□

"The Western writer should go away and get his eyes opened, and then look back," writes the novelist and historian Wallace Stegner, a winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. "But not back into history. The West does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long. It has no future in exploiting its setting either, for too consistently it has tried to substitute scenery for a society.... The West is politically reactionary and exploitative: Admit it. ... The West as a whole is guilty of inexplicable crimes against the land: Admit that, too. The West is rootless, culturally half-baked. So be it."

Stegner, 72, now retired from his Stanford University teaching post and his directorship of the Stanford Writing Center, remains the dean of Western American letters. His histories and biographies of *(Continued on Page 40)*

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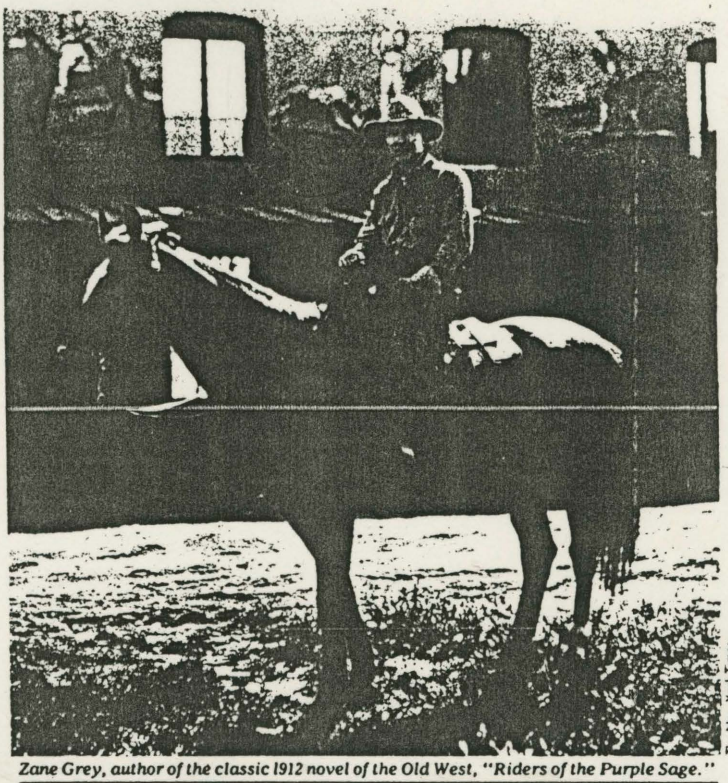
The New York Times

Zane Grey, author of the classic 1912 novel of the Old West, "Riders of the Purple Sage."

principles and epochs — do not seem to possess the same need to paint the look and texture of the country. Their language is often acerbic, angry, facetious. Unlike those native writers who want to convey something of what it feels like to have the land well up like tears inside you, they speak with passion about the defilement of terrain and culture, about the drab descent into sleazy complacency that many believe is now under way in the Rocky Mountains.

A kind of outrageous comedy is central to the thematic body of Abbey's work — a freewheeling willingness to be brash, irresponsibly satiric, happily excessive. His is a kind of gallows humor poised against the heartless destruction of mountains and deserts and against the mechanized diminishment of the human spirit.

Abbey, 54, has spent most of his adult life in the West, captivated by the spare, bare intensity of desert canyons and mesas. A smirking pessimist, Abbey sees little hope for America's last wild country or for the society's gaudy material pretensions, but he is continually fascinated by the possibilities that reside in chaos. "If enlightenment fails," he writes, "we have as always the traditional solution — disaster — to fall back upon."

Abbey first received wide attention following the 1968 publication of "Desert Solitaire," his personal celebration of Utah's canyon country and a lamentation about its slide into civilization. "You're holding a tombstone in your hands," he writes in the introduction. "A bloody rock . . . throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose?"

What Abbey had to lose was anonimity. "Desert Solitaire" gained national prominence right at the time millions of Americans were beginning to form an environmental consciousness, and its author became a kind of cult hero, sought after on the university lecture circuit, begged by scores of magazine editors to write a few thousand words about anything.

But Abbey says he really wanted only to be writing fiction — good fiction. Of his six published novels, only "The Monkey Wrench Gang" (1975) has received any substantial literary attention — in large part because what he calls this "comic extravaganza" invents a kind of ecological guerrilla warfare that insists that the only way to do battle against the systematic destruction of the West is to blow up all the bridges and dams, chop down the power poles and pour syrup into the crankcases of every bulldozer you can find. "Good News," his 1980 apocalyptic nightmare about some final pitched struggle between the city and the country, was heralded by virtually no one. Depressing, tedious and surprisingly lacking his trademark of boisterous excesses, the book was bad news for those who are still waiting for the quintessential Abbey fiction.

But he remains optimistic on that account, wounded a little by the critical arrows, but still dedicated to one day producing what he calls "The Fat Masterpiece." "That accomplished, I shall retire to my hut in the heart of the desert and spend the remainder of my days in meditation, contemplating my