



The Novel of the Cowboy

FOR A CENTURY NOW, novelists captivated by the history of the West have been writing about the life of the cowboy. Fewer than a hundred novels of the cowboy genre can be said to have literary qualities, yet the genre retains a great popular appeal; and occasionally its adventurous narrative and cowpoke characters say something basic about the human condition.

Criticism of the cowboy novel seems to have gone through three stages of a refining process—somewhat like flour sifted through the silks of an old-fashioned flour mill. The first sifting of the novel in the 1920s and '30s produced the “bran,” substantial but uncomplicated critiques, measuring fictional versions of cowboy life against the critics' first-hand knowledge of range and trail activity. Authenticity is the chief criterion for the judgments of J. Frank Dobie, Phillip Rollins, Douglas Branch, and Walter Prescott Webb. The second sifting yielded the “shorts,” gritty commentary still insisting that the novel must be true to cowpuncher life, but beginning to search for universal implications in the fictional re-creation of range and trail activities. Joe B. Frantz and Julian E. Choate, Jr. examine cowboy fiction in their study, *The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality* (1955), and conclude that the genre has evolved from the romance to the realistic novel by the '20s and later is often “fragile prose-poetry.”

Only recently the third critical sifting has occurred, producing critical attitudes with scholarly objectivity, although occasionally, like the ultimate product of the flour mill, drier than the original materials and not so palatable unless consumed with a grain of salt. Critics of late, too, are devoting considerable energy to assessment of earlier critics of the cowboy novel.

The history of the fictional cowboy begins early. No sooner did the longhorn cow chasers of the South Texas brush country begin to learn their business from the Mexican vaqueros after the Civil War than dime novelists introduced the cowboy as a western hero. Beadle's Dime Novel readers, however, demanded unrelenting action, so Dime Novel heroes were more often pursuers of outlaws than of cattle. Then in 1878, Thomas Pilgrim, a Texas attorney using the pseudonym of Arthur Morecamp, published *Live Boys; or Charley and Nasho in Texas*, the first authentic narrative of a trail drive from Texas to Kansas, according to Dobie. In *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest* (1942), Dobie praises the novel for its realistic depiction of the cowboy's job. The essential experience of the trail drive is cap-

tured in descriptions of thunderstorms, stampedes, rampaging rivers and confrontations with outlaws, which Charley and Nasho witness as members of Captain Dick's trail crew.

It was not until the turn of the century, however, that observers and participants began to see the fictional possibilities in the life of the working cowboy. Eastern journalist Alfred Henry Lewis, who spent his restless youth as a ranch hand in Texas and Arizona, re-created his experiences in *Wolfville* (1897) and six subsequent volumes. Although they are collections of tales about Arizona frontier activity more than they are novels, Lewis's narratives introduce one memorable character, the garrulous and witty Old Cattleman, who, as narrator, filters frontier experience through the consciousness of a pragmatic ex-cowboy, and elevates this experience to the status of the tall tale.

In the year Lewis's *Wolfville Days* and *Wolfville Nights* (1902) were published, another easterner who had been to the West created a cowboy novel which was very little involved with the cowpuncher's vocation but which established patterns of avocational activity to be emulated by cowboy novelists for the next thirty years. Although Dobie said Harvard man Owen Wister's hero in *The Virginian* "does not even smell of cows," he joins most critics in praising Wister for capturing the "code of the range" and creating an unforgettable hero.

A year later, a bonafide cowboy chose the trail drive narrative as the vehicle for relating not only the adventures but also the hardships of the puncher's life. Andy Adams, native of Indiana, had herded cattle and trailed horses from San Antonio to Kansas a few times, but much of his cowboy knowledge came from listening to cowboys and cowmen tell stories about their lives as he rode the Texas brush country collecting horses. When Adams settled in Colorado after a decade in Texas, he wrote *The Log of a Cowboy* (1903), considered by many to be the best of the cowboy genre. Almost plotless, the narrative is structured around a trail drive from the Rio Grande to Montana in 1882. The serious business of the drive, as well as the campfire storytelling, the pranks and the cowtown sprees are narrated by trail crewman Tom Quirk. Sharp detail and first-person narration give events of the drive an immediacy not present before in fiction about the cowboy. Wister created an immortal cowboy hero, but it was Andy Adams who first breathed life into the everyday working cowboy as a protagonist in fiction.

Adams's later novels about cowboys and cattlemen are not considered to be as successful as his first. Cowhand Quirk again is narrator in *A Texas Matchmaker* (1904), story of an early Texas cattle rancher's thwarted efforts to marry off his cowboys and thereby produce some young life on his ranch. Adams employs Quirk's point of view to describe another trail drive in *The*

Outlet (1905), but despite a more complicated plot, the novel rehashes much of the material of the first novel. *Reed Anthony, Cowman: An Autobiography* (1907) is not notable for its reflection of cowboy life, but Adams explores for the first time the evolution of an early Texas cowboy into an influential cattleman. A knowledgeable observer and a collector of facts, Andy Adams left as his heritage not only one outstanding cowboy novel, but two plot motifs, the trail drive and the cowboy success story, for subsequent novelists to play their variations on.

Before 1920, novelists who produced range fiction of literary value generally took their cue from Adams and aimed for authenticity, although they ignored the plot potentials Adams's work suggests. George Pattullo, who came to Texas from Boston to learn about western life, created a believable New Mexico cowboy named Lafe Johnson, who becomes a sheriff and finally a rancher in *The Sheriff of Badger Hole* (1912). The New Mexico cowboy writer, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, acclaimed for his faithfulness to the facts of the cowhand's life, published his first novel, *Good Men and True*, in 1910. Rhodes digresses in his novel *Stepsons of Light* to observe:

Let the dullest man tell of a thing he knows first hand, and his speech shall tingle with battle and luck and loss, purr for small comforts of cakes and ale or sound the bell note of clear mirth; his voice shall exult with pride of work, tingle and tense to speak of hard-won steeps, the burden and heat of the day and "the bright face of danger"; it shall be soft as quiet water to tell of shadows where winds loiter, of moon magic and far-off suns, friendships and fire and song. (pp. 65-66)

Herein, Rhodes tells much about his own strengths as a novelist of the cowboy. His weaknesses are several, critics point out. His cowboy characters are often one-dimensional, his women characters are self-conscious paper dolls, his plots episodic and his structure flawed. But most say he is a master at depicting the cowboy's occupation and conveying the landscape of New Mexico. Realistic dialogue and sharp humor are trademarks of this cowboy-writer as well, although some say his cowpunchers' speech is too literary. Although he wrote most of his work as an expatriate of his beloved Southwest, his command of place and cowboy's vocation come from his sharp observation of New Mexico where he held many jobs during his youth and early manhood between 1881 and 1906. He punched cattle, wrangled horses and even at one time washed dishes to survive. Mostly self-educated in book learning, Rhodes was a thinking cowboy and his philosophizing digressions are often as interesting as his plots.

Rhodes is best-known for his short novel *Pasó por Aquí*, in which the soft-hearted outlaw Ross McEwen risks his own safety to nurse a Mexican

family near death with diphtheria. Pat Garrett, the sheriff in pursuit of the gallant bank robber, is touched by the outlaw's humane act and allows him to escape.

Rhodes's portrayal of a cowboy's everyday life is more evident, however, in the novels *Bransford in Arcadia* (1912), *The Desire of the Moth* (1916), and *Copper Streak Trail* (1917). It is a corrupt banker, law enforcement officer or lawyer who challenges the cowboy heroes of each of these novels. The cowboy triumphs in the end, but it is his everyday activities on the ranch or the trail or his socializing with companions that the reader finds believable and interesting in these tales.

In *Stepsons of Light* (1920), Rhodes describes in detail his own horse ranch in the San Andres mountains. In the first chapter of the novel, the author explains the ranch roundup in his description of Bar Cross Ranch activities. The story itself hinges on cowman Charlie See's foiling of the scheming deputy sheriff's efforts to hang an innocent puncher for murder.

Rhodes's most successful novel financially was *The Trusty Knaves* (1931). Another story of an outlaw with heart, this novel conveys the feel of the cattle drive as George Carmody searches for grass and water during a drought. W. H. Hutchinson sums up best why Gene Rhodes's work is an asset to the fiction of the cowboy: "It is a fact that . . . the totality of the free range experience was summated in his personal life, that makes his writings come from the 'inside-out,' from a deep wellspring of personal experience that was the abiding strength of his life" (p. xxii, Introduction to *The Rhodes Reader*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975).

As the ranching industry became big business, spreading across the western plains, and fences began to define ranch boundaries, writers gained perspective. They began to explore at least four thematic possibilities. Adams had structured novels around the cattle drive and the cowboy success story. A good many earlyday cowboys had run away from their midwestern or southern homes and headed west to become cowpunchers, and by 1920 old-timers were recounting those youthful adventures. Novelists were soon building fiction with these materials about the making of a cowboy. A few sensitive writers began also to examine the life of the ranch wife who had followed her cowboy into an often barren existence.

The ready-made structure and limited time element of the trail drive, which Adams employed so skillfully, challenged Emerson Hough, who as a young lawyer in New Mexico witnessed the growth of the cattle industry. Events of his best-known novel, *North of 36* (1923), take place on a trail drive from Caldwell County, Texas, to Abilene, Kansas. The drive outfit includes Alamo, a memorable lead steer, Jim Nabours, old cowboy foreman and boss of the Del Sol outfit, and Taisie Lockhart, female owner of the

ranch. Details of the drive are graphic. Critic Douglas Branch reports that an old cowboy pronounced the characterization of Nabours the “genu-wine stuff,” but portrayal of Taisie is not so successful. She is out of place on the drive, not because she is female, but because she is more sentimental girl than courageous frontier woman. Her lover, Don McMasters, is a less forceful reincarnation of the Virginian.

The steer Alamo is considered by some critics to be the most interesting “character” in *North of 36*. In the next notable trail drive novel another steer steals the show. Walter Gann gives lead steer Sancho equal billing with cowhand Bill Sanders in *The Trail Boss* (1937). Sanders’s admiration, and finally his defense, of the remarkable animal dominate the action of the otherwise predictable plot. It was not until 1965, when Benjamin Capps won the Western Writers of America Spur Award for his account of a would-be trail boss in *The Trail to Ogallala* (1964), that the trail drive narrative received attention for realizing its potential for dynamic character development. Two years later, Robert Flynn published a compassionate parody of the traditional trials of the cowboy on a drive in *North to Yesterday* (1967).

Many of the most melodramatic of the trail drive novels, like Zane Grey’s *The Trail Driver* (1937), described realistically the spartan and sometimes dangerous life of the cowhand on the trail. Characterization, however, separates Capps’s and Flynn’s fiction from the earlier yarns. Both have consciously chosen to portray what seem at first to be stereotyped cowhands in their novels. Trite nicknames—Dandy, Professor, Scratchy, the Kid, and the Colonel—lead Capps’s readers to expect the usual one-trait cowpunchers. Instead, Capps creates motivated, believable and three-dimensional cowboys, including Bill Scott, who should have been trail boss, but is compelled to take over the drive without seeming to usurp the stupid Blackie’s titular power as boss.

Flynn exaggerates his characterizations in *North to Yesterday* to satirize trail drive stereotypes. He depicts a latter-day drive organized by old storekeeper Lampassas, who has longed to go up the trail all his life. Absurd and comic as they seem, the cowboys Flynn creates are human. Lampassas, his broken-down cowhands, and the runaway girl Covina and her baby stubbornly chase the longhorns and their dream north on foot toward Trail’s End. Although Flynn allows his comic touch to degenerate into slapstick often, the muted tragedy implied in the situation of a motley bunch of has-beens searching for their impossible dreams suggests both the potential of human beings and the usefulness of the trail drive theme for exploring that potential.

Before Flynn’s story appeared, Richard Gardner in *Scandalous John* (1963) had created a deranged old cattleman with the same intent Flynn

has in his depiction of Lampassas. Old John McCanless's herd is a single cow; his trail crew, a single Mexican named Francisco Jimenez Xumen, but he pushes on to die tragically in a gun battle in Chicago. Robert Day's modern-day cattle drive across Kansas in *The Last Cattle Drive* (1977) gives another novelist an opportunity for raucous humor in sharp satirical needling of the cowboy myth.

When fences and railroads began to proliferate across the Southwest and West after 1880, a cowboy's ambitions and lifestyle had to be redefined. Those punchers with foresight had already begun to build herds and acquire land of their own, while others remained itinerant, hiring out their skills as whim, season and pay dictated. At least two novelists of the cowboy have written penetrating studies of the cowboy who became a rich cattle baron. The reader can only assume that Jim Brewton, whose New Mexico ranch in Conrad Richter's *The Sea of Grass* (1937) is "larger than Massachusetts with Connecticut thrown in," has built his spread from scratch with grit and shrewd maneuvering. Brewton resents and fights the squatting nesters who seem bent on destroying his "sea of grass." Ben Capps's *Sam Chance* (1965) is the most perceptive chronicle exploring the evolution of the Civil War soldier into Texas cowboy and finally cattleman who becomes a legend in his own time. Willing to work hard, suffer deprivation and risk death, Sam slowly builds his herd and stakes his land claims. What he believes about his relationship with Martha, his wife, reveals how he feels about himself, as his obsession with acquiring cattle and land grows. He thinks,

Then, too, she did not understand his occupation with the forces that he studied and estimated and manipulated: grass, cattle, land, climate, water, equipment, men—how he felt impelled to work with them on a grand scale, how he was wrapped up in planning with them, how he was challenged, intrigued with the possibilities.

Aging finally into an irascible, misunderstood eccentric, Sam lives to confront the legend already abuilding around his colorful history when a small booted boy with toy sixguns threatens him during a train trip. The tyke tells Sam he is pretending to be Sam Chance, who "was a big, big giant, and he shot Indians and buffaloes and cows and people too. And branded them. . . . I think he lived once upon a time."

In three of Larry McMurtry's novels, his most astute characters are old cattlemen who have also been hard-working cowpunchers all their lives. Lonnie's granddad, Homer Bannon, in *Horseman, Pass By* (1961) and Jim Carpenter's stepuncle, Roger Wagonner, in *Moving On* (1970) exhibit the pragmatic resoluteness of two old cowmen whom the world has passed by,

but who cling tenaciously to values and ways that have served them well all of their lives. In the character Gideon Fry in *Leaving Cheyenne* (1963), McMurtry traces the life of a twentieth-century cowboy who struggles mightily to live up to the code his cattleman father has instilled in him. He never gives up, and his stubbornness ultimately leads to his death.

In both Capps's and McMurtry's cowboy-to-cowman sagas, the best friends of both determined protagonists are happy-go-lucky cowboys without ambition. Sam Chance has given hell-raising friend Lefors numerous opportunities to settle down with him as a partner, but Lefors's restless roaming finally lands him in jail in Denver where he dies. Johnny McCloud cowboys for Gid all his life in *Leaving Cheyenne*, but he never buys a foot of land—nor does he want to. Both punchers exemplify more nearly how a fair number of cowpokes lived during the time a few ex-cowboys became cattle barons.

One other phenomenon of cowboy life has provided structure for the cowboy tale. After the Civil War, adventurous adolescents, some runaways or orphans, went west dreaming of becoming cowboys. Their education as cowhands resulted in their lifetime devotion to what they believed was the best life offered. In *Cowboy* (1928), Ross Santee narrates the making of a cowboy out of an East Texas farm boy who graduates from horse wrangler to cowpuncher before he is twenty. John Culp's *Born of the Sun* (1959) and *The Bright Feathers* (1965) feature teenagers who learn the art of survival and earn the status of manhood on the trail. Jack Schaefer's *Monte Walsh* (1963) narrates Monte's life as a cowboy from age sixteen to his death forty-one years later. In his time the public attitude toward Monte's vocation changes, but Monte's independent spirit never alters.

Roscoe Banks, orphaned in preliminary skirmishing which led up to the Wyoming Johnson County fracas, strikes out on his own at sixteen in William Decker's *To Be a Man* (1967). He drifts from ranch to ranch across the Southwest, serving well wherever he cowboys. Finally, crippled and old, he settles in Coconino, Arizona. Roscoe himself sums up what "to be a man" really means to him when a friend reminds him that his kind isn't in demand anymore. Roscoe says,

Maybe so, but people have been telling me that all my life and I've managed to get along. . . . If I'd of raised a son I'd of made sure he knew things people like us know. Not just how to part cows and calves, but what it takes to be a man, what his word is worth, and things that really matter.

Seventeen-year-old Charley in *The True Memoirs of Charley Blankenship* (1972) by Capps runs away from his Missouri home to learn about life as a

cowboy on the trail and on a series of ranches. He comes home for a visit after ten years, but he will not stay long. He believes himself "too good a cowhand to give up the business."

And what of the women who came west to marry cowboys or cattlemen? Few novelists have ventured to write fiction which reflects the woman's point of view in the cowboy novel. Frontier wives were strong or they perished. Sam Chance's wife Martha in Capps's novel dies at age forty-two. The puzzled doctor observes before her death that she "appears like a woman dying of old age." Lutie Brewton, unable to cope with the cultural barrenness that she found when she came west to marry Jim in *The Sea of Grass*, disappears finally for many years, abandoning a young son who turns outlaw. The only novel of the cowboy to develop fully the point of view of a woman protagonist is Dorothy Scarborough's *The Wind* (1925). Set in West Texas during the drought years of the 1880s, the novel contrasts two feminine responses to the hard life of early-day ranching. Cora, robust, beautiful and outspoken, accepts the hard work of raising four children and caring for her man Beverley on their hard-scrabble ranch. She is a survivor, but Cousin Letty, fresh from the green hills of Virginia, is finally driven mad by the wind, the isolation, and the grim marriage she shares with Lige on the Godforsaken Cross-Bar Ranch. Lige loves Letty, but his struggle to survive as a small-time rancher leaves little time for comforting the lonely, vulnerable girl, who has married him for a home. Scarborough's realistic depiction of the cowboy-rancher's back-breaking work and unrelenting worries is sympathetic. Nature is the adversary here, and it wins the battle. The novel ends tragically with Letty's murder of her seducer and her horrifying surrender to madness as a West Texas sandstorm closes in.

No other cowboy novels filtered through the sensibility of a woman have appeared since Scarborough's, although the novel of the cowboy has become fair game as a vehicle for social commentary. In Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), Jack Burns's disdain for present-day social values brings on his ignominious death as he clings stubbornly to the code of the Old West. C. W. Smith explores contemporary Anglo-Mexican relationships in West Texas ranch country in *Thin Men of Haddam* (1973). The complexities of this relationship are reflected in the stories old cowboy-preacher Bond narrates unceasingly as he rides the range in a jeep with Mendez, a young ranch foreman with a gargantuan guilt because he has made it while his people are still living in squalor.

Clair Huffaker, taking his cue from Kipling, brings East and West together in a tale of the most original trail drive yet described. In *The Cowboy and the Cossack* (1973), fifteen assorted cowboys under the leadership of Levi Dougherty land a herd of Montana longhorns on the coast of Siberia in 1880. The Slash-Diamond outfit is met by an equal number of renegade

Cossacks under Rostov, who are to help drive the herd to a destination the cowboys have not foreseen. During the drive, not unlike one from Texas to Kansas amid dangers and hardships, hostilities metamorphose into friendships, and dislike for each other as foreigners is displaced by admiration as they combine skill and courage to complete the long hazardous drive.

Gary Jennings's intent in *The Terrible Teague Bunch* (1975) is to deflate the cowboy myth. An old trail boss, L. R. Foyt, who decides while driving a herd off the Texas caprock in the Blizzard of 1902 that "there's got to be an easier way for a man to make a living," drifts to East Texas with his "simple" friend Eli. There he teams up with Gideon Karnes, an articulate oil field rigger, and Moon Boudreaux, a Cajun logger, to rob a train. Their independent determination gets them nowhere. Their intricate plans lead only to failed expectations. They are failures as outlaws, but turn out to be decent Good Samaritans when widow Wilmajean and daughter Heather need help. In *Jory* (1969), Milton Bass preaches more than he creates in his exploration of man's potential for violence, chronicling the deadly adventures of an adolescent cowboy with a talent for gun fighting.

In recent years, the modern working cowboy, often more victim than hero, has given novelists a theme. Max Evans in *The Rounders* (1960) chronicles the ongoing battle Dusty Jones and Wrangler Lewis wage against Old Fooler, a deceptively mean bronc, and Jim Ed Love, their wily, penny-pinching boss. Not so successful is Evans's next novel, *The Hi Lo Country* (1961). The improbable romance of Big Boy Matson and Mona Birk, former call girl, dominates the story, but details of the hard life of cowboys on drought-stricken New Mexican ranches in the 1930s are graphic. Evans's short novel, *One-Eyed Sky* (1962), is a stark narrative about the kinship of three survivors, an old cowboy, an ancient cow and an elderly coyote. In *My Pardner* (1963), Evans introduces the preacher-cowpoke, Old Boggs, who knows the "isins and ain'ts of the world." On a horse drive from Starvation, Texas to Guymon, Oklahoma, in the early 1930s, twelve-year-old Dan gets an education in self-reliance from Old Boggs. In William Decker's most recent novel, *The Holdouts* (1979), ranching techniques are modern, but the cowboy's work is still hard. He is as independent and ingenious as always, as he goes about solving a cattle rustling mystery.

The most knowledgeable and perceptive contemporary novelist to write of both historical and present-day cowpunchers is Texan Elmer Kelton. He grew up on a ranch around story-telling old cowhands, so Kelton acquired first-hand much of the knowledge of cowboy life he depicts in his fiction. For a number of years Kelton wrote popular Westerns. Then in *The Day the Cowboys Quit* (1971), Kelton recreated the Canadian River cowboy strike of 1883, when cowboys rebelled against ranchers who would dictate whether they could start herds and own land of their own while

employed as punchers. In the novel, Kelton introduces cowboy Hugh Hitchcock, who sees both sides of the dispute. Hitchcock's breadth of character is Kelton's announcement to his public that character development has become important in his novels.

In both *The Time It Never Rained* (1973) and *The Good Old Boys* (1978), Kelton characterizes memorable Texans. Charlie Flagg, self-reliant and stubborn, weathers the 1950s West Texas drought, defiantly refusing federal aid for his hard-hit ranch in *The Time It Never Rained*. Charlie's courage, his love for his land, his strong loyalties to his wife, his son and his Mexican employees, and even his struggles against nature and his adversaries say much about human nature and human courage.

Hewey Calloway in *The Good Old Boys* is the other kind of cowboy. He wants no part of land ownership or domesticity, although he is sorely tempted when he returns to his brother's ranch in 1906 for a visit. His sister-in-law Eve is determined that he settle down. Hewey's philosophy is that "the Lord had purposely made every person different," and he cannot "understand why so many people were determined to thwart the Lord's work by making everyone the same." Almost innocently, Hewey often finds himself in trouble. He is sometimes rowdy and often impulsive. At the last minute, he bids goodbye to his intended, schoolteacher Spring Renfro, and rides off with his old sidekick Snort Yarnell to join another cow outfit. Spring lets him go, recognizing he is a free spirit. There are no stock characterizations in this book. Both the men and women are unique and real. Kelton explores here with a sure pen the complexities of the kind of human spirit that can never alight in one place long.

Kelton's last two cowboy novels suggest that writers more intrigued with human nature and its potential than with social commentary may yet succeed in conveying, through the fiction of the cowboy, the drama, the complexities and the uniqueness of western life, and at the same time reveal universal truths about the human spirit. Old Charlie Flagg mourns to young Manuel in *The Time It Never Rained*, "All the old principles that a man is anchored to, they've come a-loose; nobody's payin' attention to them anymore. He's an old grayheaded man living in a young man's world, and all his benchmarks are gone." Manuel answers, "The good benchmarks are still there, Mister Charlie."

The knell has been sounded by some critics for the novel of the cowboy. The requiem may be premature if talented novelists write with their eyes on the good benchmarks in cowboy fiction.

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