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The Literary West: An Anthology of Western American Literature

Thomas J. Lyon, editor
Oxford University Press (May 20, 1999)
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No other region of the United States captures the imagination like the West. From the stunning landscape photography of Ansel Adams that adorns so many suburban living room walls, to the ubiquitous consumer culture icon the Marlboro Man, to the “Hi, ho Silver” of radio, television and big screen, one is besieged with projections of the West. But as Lyon points out in his introduction to The Literary West there are two Wests, the one of the imagination and the real one, although the former has often blinded us to the latter. In this exciting anthology of writings about the West Lyon offers some of both to help better understand both the myth of the West and what the myth obscures.

Ultimately, anthologies are praised or derided based upon what the editor has chosen to include and exclude. As Professor Emeritus of English at Utah State University, former President of the Western Literature Association and general editor of A Literary History of the American West (1987), Lyon is certainly aware of the wide variety of material to draw upon and the daunting task of condensing it to just over four hundred pages. In general, he has done an excellent job with his selections. As is expected, included are classic writers on the West such as Louis and Clark, John Muir, Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, Jack Schaefer, John Steinbeck and Wallace Stegner. Current writers are also well represented with pieces by Barbara Kingsolver, Rick Bass, Linda Hogan and N. Scott Momaday among others. Lyon also includes a few writers more commonly associated with helping to create and perpetuate the myth of the Wild West, most notably Owen Wister, Zane Grey and Louis L?Amour. The inclusion of several Chicano/a and Native American voices makes this collection reflect the diversity of the real West. Prose dominates, but there is also a handful of verse and one play.

Some omissions, however, are glaring, most notably Cormac McCarthy and Larry McMurtry, but also Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko. In Lyon’s defense, it is believed that Cormac McCarthy refuses to allow his work to be anthologized; however, a simple confirmation of this suspicion would have diverted the confusion that some readers will undoubtedly experience upon picking up an anthology of the literary West that fails to include the region’s greatest living writer. The most grievous omission on Lyon’s part is an explanation of his criteria for inclusion, which seems mandatory in any work such as this.

In addition to the selections themselves, Lyon provides brief but informative introductions for each of the writers, a substantial general introduction that chronicles the variety of western writing, a historical timeline with more than two hundred titles listed, and a brief “Guide to Further Reading” for the more scholarly minded.

There are several anthologies that compete with this one for room on readers? bookshelves and teachers? required reading lists. The Literary West certainly makes a strong case for its inclusion. For readers seeking a good introduction to the literature of the West with a preference for high-minded representations over popular ones, The Literary West is a good place to start.

ERIK BLEDSOE (February 13, 1999)

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