
J. David Stevens. *The Word Rides Again: Rereading the Frontier in American Fiction*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002. 236p.

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In his introduction to *The Word Rides Again*, J. David Stevens writes that he “watched TV westerns religiously from ages seven to fourteen” (ix). Although he recounts that this religion ended as abruptly as it began, there can be no doubt that he absorbed much from this formative experience, for this book demonstrates a remarkable affinity for, and knowledge of, the western. Like any well-used genre, the western has generated its share of archetypal characters, plots, and themes: the silent gunslinger, the evil oil baron, the lone man against a gang of ruffians, and so on. Stevens is well-versed in all these conventions; indeed, the stereotypes of western fiction, and especially the standard traits of western heroes, provide the core of *The Word Rides Again*. Stevens has a strong eye for character, and it would be fair to describe this book as a study of western character. The book begins with a study of Lydia Marie Child’s *Hobomok*, focusing on Hobomok as a counterpoint to Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, and all of the remaining chapters investigate various literary manifestations of the western hero.

Amid all these heroes, *The Word Rides Again* contends that contemporary scholarship of Western fiction has established a fundamental critical dichotomy between the “popular” (or “myth-making”) western and the “revisionist” western. According to Stevens, implicit in that dichotomy is often a political value judgment that misrepresents these texts. Rather than approach frontier fiction with this kind of critical polarity, Stevens highlights the “interpretive gray area” between the popular and the revisionist western. In doing so, Stevens makes an admirable range of connections between popular frontier fiction and its literary counterpart, examining some well-known western writers—Lydia Marie Child, Owen Wister, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Willa Cather—as well as some lesser-known writers: John Rollin Ridge, Zitkala Sa, and Frank Waters. He contends that exploring this “gray area” will create a “full and multifarious version of Western cultural history” (32-33).

Stevens seems to have a strong sense of the discipline of Western studies, as well as clear ideas about where it ought to go. This larger sense of direction and purpose in the book as a whole translates into thoughtful and well-organized individual chapters. Each chapter provides a refreshing investigation of the genre that often twists critical expectations in productive ways. He draws out complexity in popular westerns, making them appear more “literary,” and looks for ways that revisionist westerns echo popular westerns. One of the most interesting ways in which

Stevens reads against the critical grain in his investigation of the gender and racial stereotypes often implicit and explicit in western texts. Certainly the ideas of racism and sexism in the western novel are not new, and Stevens is not the only critic to pursue them. At times his approach to these concepts is predictable: he provides Native American voices, such as John Rollin Ridge and Zitkala Sa, to balance the depictions of Native American in novels written by whites. In other places, however, his approach offers surprising and innovative interpretations. He reads Bret Harte's stories, for instance, as attacks on traditional family and sexual roles, rather than as traditional frontier tales, as they have been seen by most critics.

Well-researched critical texts most useful to a specialized academic audience often alienate the general reader, but *The Word Rides Again* manages to achieve a balance between the two audiences. I made extensive notes germane to my own professional interests, but I imagine any aficionado of westerns would find something notable in this book. Ultimately, it made me want to saddle up and ride some of these texts again, which is, I think, the ultimate compliment for a critical text: to persuade the reader to return to the subject matter, perhaps with a holster full of new ideas. ✱