

Organ

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# The Great Tradition

By Donald Hamilton

Are we novelists or historians?  
And who is too proud to be entertaining?



They are trying to tear down Zane Grey. Little men with dry and scholarly minds who never followed the U.P. on horse or rode with the riders of the purple night by the light of the western stars pursing their thin lips and saying that fifty-four million copies is all very well, but it just proves you-know-what about the public taste, and after all, a man couldn't write. Besides, he isn't authentic. His backgrounds arephony, his characters are unreal, and his history stinks.

Having written two Westerns myself without knowing a great deal about the West, except what I picked up as I read it — hush, don't let the scholars hear me say that — I finally decided that I'd better buckle down and really learn the difference between a lariat and a latigo. And I came upon a good deal of fascinating information, and some of it will undoubtedly be very helpful to me in future books. (Incidentally, since others are recommending my favorite research volumes, let me mention on the act. The recently published *THE LOOK OF THE OLD WEST* is, of course a beaut; nobody should be without it. But a book that has not

been previously mentioned, as far as I know is *ATLAS OF AMERICAN HISTORY* [Scribners] which will let you follow all the intriguing but confusing accounts of plains crossings and Indian wars and trail drives with some understanding of where they actually occurred, since most such works are sadly lacking in maps of their own.) As I say, I found the research fascinating, and a lot of fun, but I'm not sure that it's made me a better writer. After all, I'm a novelist, not a historian; and if I get too absorbed in the detail of what actually happened back in 1875, I may lose the pace of the story I'm trying to tell in 1956.

This is a trap that lies in wait for all of us. A great many good books have been ruined, for the great reading public, by too much scholarship. True, some good books have also been made by it — I can mention Guthrie's *THE BIG SKY*, and Le May's *THE SEARCHERS* — but it takes a special kind of a book (maybe I should say a special kind of author) to absorb a lot of research and pass it on to the reader without boring him stiff. In a great many cases, to be blunt, the book isn't strong enough to carry a big load of authentic detail. It's

not that kind of a book. All the reader really asks of the author, in most cases, in the way of accuracy, is that the hero does not perforate the villain with a Frontier Colt back in 1850, or travel north from Denver to Santa Fe, or shoot Apaches in Sioux territory.

It is a fact that females did not ride freely around the range during the period in which we are interested, particularly astride; if they rode at all, they perched themselves precariously on a sidesaddle. It is also a fact, or I have read it as such, that most cowboys weren't very good boxers and were moderately averse to battering each other with their fists, much preferring to use a gun or even (horrors; who ever heard of such a thing!) a knife if one were handy. Yet the free-riding ranch girl and the saloon-busting free-for-all are part of our stock in trade; are we going to discard them in the interests of mere accuracy?

Leave us face it, boys, we are story-tellers, most of us; not scholars. I am not saying that we should burn our research books and throw away our collections of old firearms (Will Cook please note); but I am saying that the Western-reader expects to be entertained by a good yarn, first of all. If it's authentic, so much the better; but the average reader isn't going to give a story very much higher marks because something like it actually happened. (I read Haycox's *BUGLES IN THE AFTERNOON* four times with great enjoyment before I discovered that it was a reasonably authentic account of the Custer affair; now I'm a little disappointed. I thought Ernie had made up all those fine characters himself, instead of just cribbing them from history.) The point I am trying to make is: let's not get too enamored of absolute historical accuracy, and for Heaven's sake lets not start thinking of ourselves self-consciously as great creative artists inheriting a grand literary tradition stemming direct from Owen Wister, whose *VIRGINIAN* was actually a pretty dull book.

Let's remember that we also have an inheritance from Zane Grey and the Beadle and Adams dime novels which were lousy literature and stinking his-

tory, but which entertained millions — and who's too proud to be an entertainer? If I can write one book that gives some reader that wonderful hot-and-cold feeling down the spine that I got upon reading *RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE* at the age of fourteen — and still get, thinking about it! I wouldn't dream of spoiling it by reading the book again today — I'll be a proud and satisfied author, even if critics pan the yarn and historians pick holes in it. If somebody looking back on a story of mine over a space of years, remembers some scene written by me with the same little thrill of excitement with which I still recall the great horse Wildfire's race with the flames of the forest fire, or the moment in which some Grey hero whose name I have forgotten strains with cracking muscles to unseat the giant balancing rock that will block the only passage to the hidden valley. . . . You take your research, boys, and write your literature. Maybe the critics and the scholars will remember you a long time. I'll settle for a yarn that'll keep some kid young or old, up all night like Zane Grey kept me. I'll even settle for one scene that somebody will recall after twenty-five years with a catch in the throat, even if the heroine sat her horse astride, and the hero had just cleaned out a saloon with his bare fists.

« wwa »

## 21 Critics Voting!

James F. Cooper, book editor of the Blytheville (Ark.) *Courier News*, has this month joined "Western Ratings" boosting the total vote to twenty-one. Emerson Price, book editor of the *Cleveland Press*, has signified he will do likewise when and if he gets enough books to make his vote mean something.

« wwa »

Writers should be discerning: "You should care less about what people mean to say than about what they say without meaning to." (Miguel de Unamuno)

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Like the old philosopher said:  
Gather in Santa Fe while ye may  
And meet fine friends of WWA  
Next year you might be dead.