Book Review: The Word Rides Again: Rereading the Frontier in American Fiction

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The method of The Word Rides Again is straightforward. J. David Stevens first constructs a model of the popular Western novel or "frontier narrative," complete with standard genealogy and a concise review of fifty years of critical response, and then uses that template to demonstrate that some "mainstream" novels (Hobomok, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Death Comes for the Archbishop) are actually frontier fiction in disguise, while some frontier fiction (by Bret Harte, Owen Wister, and Frank Waters) is actually more complex or problematic than the stereotype would suggest. (He also reads fiction by two Native American writers, John Rollin Ridge and Zitkala-Ša, as revisionist Westerns.) Stevens's goal is "to pull back on [the] political reins" by bucking the trend of recent Western criticism, which risks falling into "a demagoguery created in the name of interdisciplinarity, multiculturalism, and political progressivism." To this end he "eschew[s] jargonized philosophical posturing for close textual study," the result being "pretty much what one might expect": a series of individual readings making cautious use of theoretical insights from across the political and critical spectrum and aiming to offend no one.

Some parts of the book will be useful to me as a teacher. His discussion of the Remington-Wister-Roosevelt connection is a handy brief summary that I may end up assigning to students in a Western literature or Realism and Naturalism class, and his claims for the literary value of Waters's The Man Who Killed the Deer have convinced me to consider it for future syllabi. Perhaps his most daring reading is of Cather: he argues that "the impulses, biases, and events of Death Comes for the Archbishop can be understood together if the book is read as a thematically straightforward, if slightly amended, version of the popular frontier novel."

After a while Stevens's relentless defense of the Western against the straw man of theoretical oversimplification becomes wearying. And the tone is explicitly nostalgic: "The conscious design of The Word Rides Again . . . was to return to its own brand of yesteryear in which discussions of frontier literature were not automatically polarized and charged with the political voltage that they are today." People who take frontier literature seriously won't find much that's new in this book, and people who don't take frontier literature seriously aren't likely to be persuaded to do so by Stevens's chiding.

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