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Review of *Hot Coffee and Cold Truth: Living and Writing the West*. Edited by W. C. Jameson

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As the title suggests, this collection of essays on “Living and Writing the West” is conversational and engaging, sometimes brash and
humorous. Editor W. C. Jameson arranges the
different voices of twelve popular authors on
Western subjects, and the result is indeed like
listening in on the thoughts and reminiscences
of seasoned writers over a hot cup of coffee on a
chilly morning. For aspiring writers and general
readers alike, this anthology presents an eclectic
array of opinions and stories about the distinct
challenges presented to those who write about
"the West."

Jameson introduces his vision of the book by
recounting his initial response to a particular
novel, Elmer Keaton's The Time It Never Rained
(1973), which inspired his curiosity about the
author's relationship to his subject: "I wanted to
ask him how the western landscape sparked his
imagination, inspired his ideals, and influenced
his style." Ultimately, this became a quest to
assemble these personal statements from profes­
sional Western writers "about their lives and what
inspired them to write." As might be expected,
the personal reflections here approach the subject
from a wide variety of perspectives, expressing
the diversity of training and interests in writers
who work in genres as different as fiction,
poetry, and history, and who write about regions
representing the striking contrasts in Western
environments, from the Southwest desert to the
Rocky Mountains to the Great Plains.

The styles here range from passionately poetic
to wryly professional. Win Blevins and Laurie
Wagner discuss their writings within the con­
text of colorful evocations of Western settings.
Margaret Coel and Paulette Jiles write of integra­
ting family frontier heritage into stories evoking
the "ghosts" and "buried treasures" still present
in Western landscapes. Historians David Dary
and Robert Utley describe how their interests
and research methods evolved throughout their
careers. Fiction writers Don Coldsmith, Robert
Conley, Max Evans; Bill Gulick, Elmer Kelton,
and Richard Wheeler reminisce about pitfalls and
payoffs in their lives as Western writers. The sto­
ries weave together reflections on diverse subjects:
adapting to specific natural and cultural envi­
ronments; learning how to make and break rules; and
paying appropriate tribute to classical and popular
influences, to stupid reviewers and great editors.

"When young writers ask me the secret, I
have to tell them there isn't one," observes Elmer
Kelton. "At least I never found it." Except, he goes
on to say, aspiring writers should always be "reading,
and reading, and reading . . . and writing,
and writing, and writing." Cold truths, perhaps,
but some might find caffeinated inspiration here
as well. Such words of caution are part of a series
of conversations filled with down-to-earth advice,
humorous rants, and sometimes inspiring stories
of dreams vigorously pursued and at least partially
fulfilled. For those who love Western writing,
these are voices worth listening to as you sip your
morning coffee.

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