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Review of *He Was Some Kind of a Man: Masculinities in the B Western* by Roderick McGillis

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It takes something of a masochist to watch close to two hundred B westerns, but Roderick McGillis claims to have done that in researching this book. For those of you who are not film history buffs, a B movie was a cheap, relatively short (sixty to seventy-five minutes), formulaic genre film made to be the second half of a double feature. A lot of B movies were westerns because they were cheap and popular, particularly with boys and young men. They had their own stars, many of whom moved on to television, which killed the B movie: Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy), Bob Steele, and Johnny Mack Brown. John Wayne began in B westerns but graduated to the top of the bill in John Ford’s Stagecoach. Like author Roderick McGillis, I remember when B westerns were a staple of early afternoon television programming on just about every local channel. I also recall realizing by the time I was ten that these films, though bearing different titles, were sometimes hard to tell apart: white hats versus black hats, the same set and stock footage, the inevitable chase on horseback, the climactic fight between hero and villain. For McGillis, the nostalgia for a mythic, morally unambiguous American past communicated by these movies reinforces his own nostalgia for them as a crucial part of his boyhood.

Like many scholar-critics (including myself), McGillis sees westerns as a celebration of a traditional definition of masculinity played out in a symbolic landscape. They have a pedagogical function: to teach boys how to be proper men in a capitalist society. The western hero’s persona is replete with masculine symbols, particularly the gun and his connection to his horse. Anyone who wasn’t masculine and white was Other. While the hero preferred male companions over women and often wore outfits that could be read as camp, he was exclusively heterosexual. After an introduction that sets out his main ideas, McGillis offers chapters that develop what he sees as the major components of the B western: the code of the hero, nostalgia, the gun, romance, horses, landscape, and the western as a reinforcement of capitalistic values. There are extensive discussions of individual films which refer to the most important ideas in the large body of critical writing on the genre. McGillis is particularly good at making critical and psychoanalytical theory intelligible for the layman.

I wish McGillis had spent more time discussing the ways in which he sees the B western differing from the classic postwar A westerns. Since he includes numerous references to Shane, which is definitely not a B movie, it is not clear how the mythology of the more distinguished films differs from the minor films on which he focuses. I don’t find anything original in He Was Some Kind of Man, but for readers who haven’t perused much of the literature about the western, or movie buffs who share the author’s passion for B westerns, the book provides a good overview.

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