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## Review of Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960

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*Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960.* By Christine Bold. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xvii+ 215 pp. \$27.50.

The title of this book is misleading for anyone who hasn't read the book. The book is not about the ways in which popular western fiction served to promote the West, nor even about the ways in which popular western fiction perpetuated the myth of the Wild West. The book is instead about the way the marketing of western formula fiction impinges upon the fiction; it argues that the conditions of composition, publication, and marketing exercise a shaping force on the details of the writing, and, more particularly, that the conditions of authorship for writers of popular western fiction often led those writers to covert individualized expression within the conventions of the genre.

Bold describes well at the outset the conditions of publication for dime and pulp westerns and rehearses the conventional derivation of the formula for westerns. Subsequently she treats chronologically the major authors in the genre—Remington and Wister in novels and slick fiction in the early part of the century, Zane Grey, Max Brand, and Ernest Haycox in both pulps and the slicks

from about 1920, and then three writers of paperback westerns—Alan Le May, Jack Schaefer, and Louis L'Amour; she ends with a group of “anti-Western novelists”—E. L. Doctorow, James Leo Herlihy, and Robert Ward.

The book is valuable in three ways: first, it begins to explore in formula fiction texts—and to show us how to explore—reflections of the conditions of composition; second, it provides a history in considerable detail of that segment of the publishing industry devoted to westerns; and third, it illuminates every text and author treated.

I grew restless, actually, with the author's tracing of the primary theme, for the relationship between evidence and conclusion sometimes seemed very speculative indeed; further, the primary theme is inadequate to subordinate and organize the author's many interests and insights, and I often felt that the critical insights concerning individual authors and works were more exciting than the primary theme of the book: Christine Bold offers a very sensitive, perceptive, and fresh reading of texts one might find stale indeed. But ultimately it is her primary theme which proves most rewarding, for it reveals an aspect of texts hitherto largely unrecognized, not simply in westerns, but in many other instances of formula fiction as well.

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