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Review of The BPI Companion to the Western

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The BFI Companion to the Western. Edited by Edward Buscombe. New York: Atheneum, 1988. Foreword, preface, illustrations, photographs, appendices, bibliography. 432 pp. \$50.00.

Of the numerous volumes claiming to be guides to the cinematic Western, this book is by far the best. For once a jacket blurb is exactly correct when it reads: "Unsurpassed in scope and scholarship, [this volume] sets a new standard for reference books about the [Western]."

This thick, oversized, and lavishly illustrated book is divided into five major parts: a short history of the Western (40 pp.); a lengthy section on historical and cultural backgrounds to the Western (200 pp.); a selective, annotated guide to 300 Westerns (60 pp.); a dictionary of leading actors, directors, and supporting casts (75 pp.); and a brief section with a complete listing of television Westerns (25 pp.). Finally, appendices furnish several helpful charts and tables about the Western and contain a brief bibliography. Thirty full-color plates add much to the attractiveness of the volume.

Sections one and two particularly set this volume apart from comparable volumes. The brief history of the Western is the best abbreviated account we have of the subject, and the long, very useful article devoted to cultural and historical backgrounds is unparalleled in previous studies like this one. Within this section, the discussion of the popular Western novel is notably helpful, and likewise the pages on Masculinity, Mexico, and Violence. Some of these treatments are footnoted, and all contain discussions or listings of Westerns pertinent to the background topic being discussed. Specialists will recognize several well-known interpreters among the contributors, including Christopher Frayling, Phil Hardy, Diane Koszarski, and Stephen Tatum, as well as other notable students of American history and culture: Christine Bold, Edward Countryman, Mick Gidley, and Richard Slotkin.

Only a few limitations or mistakes are of note. Since the annotations were prepared by

nearly fifty different authors, the evaluations of the same film sometimes conflict in two different sections of the volume. In addition, the section on Louis L'Amour is unfair, and those on Landscape and Serious Western Fiction are unsatisfactory. The bibliography is also too brief and opinionated.

Overall, however, the factual and interpretive sections are brilliantly authoritative. For those desiring one volume on the film Western, this is the book to have on their shelves.

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