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Review of *Ace of Hearts: The Westerns of Zane Grey* By Arthur G. Kimball

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Ace of Hearts: The Westerns of Zane Grey. By Arthur G. Kimball. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1993. Appendix, bibliography, index. 278 pp. \$27.50.

This is a broad-ranging, thorough, relatively concise and useful book. It offers a reading of Grey that gets beyond the reputation—and beyond *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Moreover, it spells out what a serious reading of that most celebrated western suggests—a depth that belies Grey's rating as a "formulaic" writer. It also offers a direct response to a number of critics—Ann Ronald, Cynthia Hamilton, John G. Cawelti, among others—who have commented on Grey. Kimball finds much to disagree with but much to build on in his predecessors' work. He refutes their articulations of a Grey formula: if there is one it is far more complex than has been realized. What Grey really proposes is a variety of responses to the West.

The central unifying influence Kimball perceives—aside from the settings—is the romantic relationship between Grey's male and female protagonists who invariably fall in love and marry. Hence his title. He presents a complete analysis of the love interest, of responses to the land, and of the action-adventures that characterize Grey's work. His attention to the "erotic elements" promised on the dust-jacket, however, is somewhat disappointing. While he discusses the phallic gun and the

rape motif at some length, there is less on the eroticism of Grey's landscapes than one would wish.

On that score *Riders* alone is a psychosexual theme-park. One question raised by such an exhaustive study—all fifty-seven westerns are synopsized in the appendix and most are referred to in the text—is, who is expected to read it? While many a night janitor might devour the entire *oeuvre*, few students get far beyond *Riders*. In some areas Kimball spreads his references a bit thin for all but the hardcore enthusiast. The book is, of course, a useful addition to any academic collection of writings on the West, but at times this reader—of a mere fistful of Grey paperbacks—felt hopelessly outgunned.

A significant issue Kimball raises is the elusiveness of the western formula. Like the American Dream, of which it is a variant, the western is diverse, accommodating contradictory desires. It is an Edenic refuge *and* a battlefield; an object of desire *and* a source of violence; it liberates *and* enslaves. Kimball sees Grey's heroes as supreme individuals not yet tarnished by over-ambition, yet only a step away from the power and corruption they oppose (an echo of Turner's one note of warning in his Frontier essay).

Was Grey's ambiguity deliberate, or merely reflective of his own uncertainty? I'm not sure that Kimball answers that one. But through his discussion of characters, plots, and resolutions he shows that the harder one tries the harder it becomes to encapsulate the western experience in any single formula, and that in their very variety, Grey's novels underscore the point.

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