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Review of *New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture* By Michael L. Johnson

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New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture. By Michael L. Johnson. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. Photographs, notes, suggested readings, index. xii + 408 pp. \$29.95.

You will either love this book or, well, dislike it. As one of the jacket blurbs puts it, it's all here—"movies and fashion, historians and architects, chili eating and two-stepping." The blurbist might have added: "and kitsch, travelogue, literature, poetry, cartoons, and a lot of unbridled gee whiz." Broad in scope, *New Westers* won't be remembered for analytical depth (though it may itself become an artifact of its time). What is not here, and what this reviewer sorely missed, is more of the author. In just over four hundred pages, Michael Johnson reveals precious little about what *he* thinks is the meaning of the West in contemporary culture.

To be sure, Johnson has produced a readable text that attempts to survey why the West—real, imagined, and mythical—is so popular these days. But the way he has gone about it, to this reviewer at least, is frustrating. Just when Johnson begins to pursue a point, he starts quoting someone else, citing that person's ideas and agreeing with them. For punctuation, he adds an "Amen" or its equivalent to finish another's thought. The result is a clever weaving together of what the author thinks are the best passages from what others have said—historians, literary critics, art critics, writers, poets, politicians, journalists, psychologists, and cowboys, real and impersonated. What's missing is a purposeful, analytic synthesis of all that material. There are kernels here, but they are few.

A New Wester is broadly defined as anyone whose fantasies take place in the West, or who enjoys scenery and jeans, wants to live outdoors, seeks escape from an America gone wrong, or searches for a sense of identity from ancestors and the national heritage. In the broadest sense, a New Wester is someone who has any interest whatsoever in the West or in western things—from reading good western

literature or collecting bad art to traveling through the West or buying "realistic" western memorabilia. When Johnson comes to history and literature, he puts a finer point on things. There are New Wester historians who have challenged traditional, Turnerian historical interpretations, and there are New Wester writers and literary critics who write and speak about place, endurance, historical continuities, "deeper ethnic realities," and the adoption of qualities more feminine (home, nurturing, community, cooperation, survival) than masculine (westering, moving on, individualism, confrontation, exploitation, killing). As Johnson puts it, the new western literature will be "less and less that of monocultural fatherland, more and more of multicultural motherland." In the end, a New Wester can be someone who represents departure or someone who has replaced Madonna and Donald Trump with Dale and Roy Evans as cultural icons. His or her West is "a contingent reinvention," a place "susceptible to fluidities of identity."

Read at will. As just a plain westerner, I failed to recognize much of the West of substance here. Perhaps that was the point.

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