

CROSS-GENRE MYSTERIES

The Law West of the Mississippi by *Jim Doherty*

The thing about westerns is that the genre is so all-encompassing, it's hard to find examples of novels, stories, etc., that are classified as "cross-genre."

The western is defined by exactly two things, a particular place, at a particular period of history. Which is to say, west of the Mississippi, after the end of the Civil War but before the beginning of the 20th century. Occasionally a few will be set just before or during the War, or a year or two after 1900, but, by and large, those are the parameters that define the western. And so all-encompassing are those defining parameters, that they subsume all other genre elements that otherwise might apply to a particular story.

The novel that is arguably the most famous western of all, Owen Wister's **The Virginian** (Macmillan, 1902), is basically a romance novel. Set in the West, of course, during the last three and half decades of the 19th Century, of course, but the plot is essentially "boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl." Yet it's that time and place, and the fact that the titular hero is a cowboy, that predominates, superseding the actual plot elements.

James Warner Bellah's novels and short stories about the US Cavalry on the Western Frontier, are not regarded as military or war stories, but as westerns. And the fact that several of these works were adapted into superb films by a director, the great John Ford, who's particularly identified with westerns, only reinforces this impression.

So it is with novels, stories, films, etc., set in

that place and at that time, about professional law enforcement officers trying to solve a crime, or to apprehend a criminal. The era and the locale, rather than the characters and plot elements, define the genre into which they're categorized.

So, a story about a frontier peace officer trying to solve a murder or capture an outlaw is, perforce, a western, due to its setting and its timeframe. And make no mistake. The setting and the timeframe are of equal importance. A story, novel, or drama, set during precisely the same era, but taking place in, say, Victorian London, and featuring a Scotland Yard inspector trying to accomplish precisely the same task as the hypothetical western lawman, is a mystery. Perhaps a *historical* mystery, but solidly within the category of crime fiction.

And a story set in a state particularly identified with westerns, like Texas, Arizona, or Wyoming, but featuring a *contemporary* cop, is a contemporary police procedural, notwithstanding the locale being associated with the 19th century frontier.

Nevertheless, precisely because so many western novels, short stories, films, and TV shows feature lawmen, a piece about the best examples seems appropriate in a *Journal* issue about cross-genre mysteries.

So, saddle up and join a shiver of sheriffs, a muster of marshals, a rhumba of rangers, and a drove of deputies, as they face off against some mighty bad hombres!

Novels

Whispering Smith (Scribner's, 1906), Frank H. Spearman.

My grandfather was a railroad cop for over two decades, and, for a few years, I followed in his footsteps during one of the myriad positions I've held in American law enforcement, so I've always had a fondness for procedurals featuring railroad or transit cops, a taste that has carried over into my western reading as well. There have been a lot of westerns, in all mediums, featuring railroad policemen. Famed and prolific western novelist William Colt MacDonald wrote nine novels about Railroad Detective Gregory Quist, beginning with **Gunsight Ridge** (Doubleday, 1949). Other popular western novels featuring railroad cops include Mike MacKessy's series featuring Eli Ransom, and Max O'Hara's series featuring "Wolf" Stockburn.

The most famous western featuring a railroad sleuth is Frank Spearman's **Whispering Smith**. Spearman, a banker and a train buff, wrote many stories about railroading in the West, but Smith was, by far, his most popular. Never out of print since its original publication, it was filmed eight times between 1916 and 1948, and was also made into a TV series in 1961, starring Audie Murphy (though, oddly, his status as a cinder cop was changed, and he was instead depicted as a detective in the Denver Police in the 1880s). The most popular of the films was probably the 1948 version (Paramount) in which Alan Ladd, making his debut in the western genre, played the title role.

Smith was a composite of real-life western lawmen Joe LeFors, who'd been a special agent

for the Burlington Railroad, and Tim Keliher, who had the same job with the Union Pacific. The novel is loosely based on their pursuit of the famed train robbers Butch Cassidy and Harry "The Sundance Kid" Longabaugh and their Hole-in-the-Wall-Gang.

And it's a corker.

Trail Town (Dial, 1943), Ernest Haycox.

Very fine novel about young Dan Mitchell, Marshal of the Kansas town of River's Bend, the community that, at the moment, is where cattle drives end (until the railroad moves a little farther south), and business booms, but crime rises. He's also a Deputy US Marshal, empowered to take a hand in any federal matters that come up.

Settlers are coming in and starting farms.

And putting up fences.

Fences are anathema to cowpunchers. And some businesses, particularly saloons and brothels, are dependent on the 'punchers. But others are looking forward to the more long-term, steady business that will be coming from the farmers.

And a crooked politician, sensing that the young lawman is an obstacle to his ambitions, is playing all the various factions against each other. Violence will inevitably ensue.

According to some sources, this excellent novel is loosely based on, or at least inspired by, legendary Marshal Tom Smith, and River's Bend is a fictionalized depiction of Abilene, where Smith served as town marshal, ultimately getting killed in the line of duty.

Haycox was one of the very best western novelists ever. *Ever!* He never won a Spur because he died just before the Western Writers of America was founded. But few equaled him, and even fewer surpassed him.

Trail Town was also the source novel for the film *Abilene Town* (UA, 1946), starring Randolph Scott as Mitchell. It doesn't do justice to the novel. But it *does* star Randolph Scott, which is always a good thing.

The Lone Deputy (Macmillan, 1957), Wayne D. Overholser .

In a long and prolific career, Wayne Overholser won no less than three Spur Awards from the WWA, including the first ever given for Best Novel, this for a corking good read titled, simply, **Law Man** (Ballantine, 1953), written under the pseudonym of "Lee Leighton."

Good as **Law Man** is, I prefer **The Lone Deputy**. The title character is young Price Regan, deputy sheriff covering the west end of Tremaine County, Colorado, and town marshal for the incorporated municipality of Saddle Rock. When the yearly snowfall closes off the pass between the two sides of the county, Saddle Rock and the surrounding area are cut off from the county seat for six months of every year. That means Price is all the law there is for that half year.

Settlers are moving into that part of the county, and setting up farms, which Cole Weston, a powerful local rancher, who uses all the unclaimed land for grazing, is not about to tolerate. And Weston's backed up in town by Barry Madden, the local banker who's got political ambitions, and who also happens to be the father of Price's fiancée, Laura. Price stands to lose a lot if he bucks Weston and Madden.

But bucking them is just what he means to do. Price Regan took an oath, and a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. He'll uphold the law. And he'll uphold justice. Not the petty

ambitions of power-hungry autocrats with more money than morals.

Captain's Rangers (Doubleday, 1968), Elmer Kelton.

When the Texas Rangers were first organized in the 1820s, their function was primarily military. They were a mounted force of citizen-soldiers who protected the civilian population from threats like hostile Natives or invading Mexicans. Indeed, during the Mexican-American War, they were federalized into the US Army. Bandit-hunting, when it happened, was a sideline.

Decades later, with the outbreak of the Civil War, and Texas deciding to join the Confederacy, some Rangers opted to don gray, and fight for the Confederacy. Others went north, and fought to defend the Union.

A few, not entirely sympathetic with Secession, but unwilling to bear arms against their home state, elected to stay in the Rangers and fight military threats that were a danger to all Texans, whether Rebel or Loyalist.

With the Union victory in 1865, the Rangers were disbanded. The occupying government, finding that some kind of statewide law enforcement body was necessary, established the Texas State Police. One of the captains was a former Confederate officer named Leander McNelly.

In 1873, with the end of Reconstruction, the State Police was disbanded, but it soon became clear that some kind of statewide law enforcement body was still needed. Consequently, the Rangers were reestablished, this time as a full-time, professional police agency rather than an irregular military force.

McNelly was appointed a Captain in the newly reorganized Rangers, and placed in

charge of a mobile response unit called the “Special Force.” Their immediate assignment was cleaning up the crime-ridden Nueces Strip, a peninsula bounded by the Nueces River to the North, the Rio Grande to the south, and the Gulf of Mexico, to the east.

Native Texan Elmer Kelton, winner of seven Spur Awards, and voted “the greatest western novelist ever” by his brother and sister WWA members, fictionalizes the Nueces Strip campaign in this excellent book. The main viewpoint character is a young rookie Ranger named Lanham Neal, who joins McNelly’s Special Force, a sort of fictional synthesis of real-life Rangers George Durham and N.A. Jennings, who both wrote autobiographical accounts of their time policing the Strip.

This was, as far as I can determine, the first fictional treatment of the crimefighting campaign that established the Texas Ranger legend

And it’s a corker!

McNelly, who fought tuberculosis for years, died, at the age of 33, shortly after he and his men succeeded in taming the Nueces Strip. He was one of the greatest lawmen in the history of the West, yet he is relatively unknown compared to such lesser figures as “Wild Bill” Hickok, Wyatt Earp, Pat Garrett, or Bat Masterson.

His story is also fictionalized in the film *Texas Rangers* (Miramax, 2001), based on Durham’s book **Taming the Nueces Strip** (U. of Texas Press, 1962), and in an episode of the short-lived but excellent TV series, *The Quest* (NBC, 1976–77) titled “Shanklin,” in which Don Meredith plays the titular character, a fictionalized depiction of McNelly.

Kelton went on to write eight more books charting the career of a young Ranger, Rusty

Shannon, from before the Civil War to after the reestablishment of the Ranger Force, all of them excellent.

True Grit (Simon & Schuster, 1968), Charles Portis.

Mattie Ross’s father has been murdered in Fort Smith, Arkansas, by a no-account named Tom Chaney, who immediately takes flight into the adjacent Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Since, aside from tribal Lighthouse Police, only federal marshals have jurisdiction in the Territory³, 14-year-old Mattie, the narrator of this best-selling novel, hires one of Judge Parker’s deputies, Reuben “Rooster” Cogburn, to apprehend Chaney and bring him back to hang. They are soon joined by a Texas Ranger, LaBoeuf, who wants Chaney for the murder of a politician in the Lone Star state.

A classic western novel that became a classic western movie. Twice. The role of Rooster Cogburn won Duke Wayne an Oscar, and won Jeff Bridges a nomination for one.

Borden Chantry (Bantam, 1977), Louis L’Amour

This one fits the parameters of the *Journal* better than most, because it’s not merely about a lawman vs. an outlaw. It’s a whodunit.

The titular character is not a lawman by vocation. But when his ranch fails, he needs to take any available job to support his wife and family, and the position of Marshal for the local town was open. Mostly the job entails keeping drunks in line and tracking the occasional horse thief, but when a dead body is found to have been shot, Chantry’s got to figure out who killed him and why.

Soon other victims turn up dead, and it looks like Chantry might be trying to identify, not merely a murderer, but a species of

criminal that would, in later eras, be referred to as a “serial killer.”

Though most identified with the western genre, L'Amour also wrote a considerable amount of crime fiction while apprenticing in the pulps (including a well-done series of police procedurals) some of which were collected in **The Hills of Homicide** (Bantam, 1983). He was well-qualified to combine a puzzle plot with a story of frontier peacekeeping.

The Strangers (Doubleday, 1984), Loren D. Estleman.

The fourth in Estleman's superb series featuring Deputy US Marshal Page Murdock, who rides for the US District and Circuit Court of Judge Harlan Blackthorne in Helena, Montana (which, in real life, had neither a district nor a circuit federal court at this time; this is Estleman's clever way of creating fictional analogs for Judge Parker, Fort Smith, Arkansas, and the legendary marshals who rode for him).

All the Murdock novels are absolutely first-rate, but this one is particularly good, because it has Murdock facing off against two particularly formidable sets of bad guys.

The first is the titular gang of stranglers, desperadoes who, to discourage pursuit by the forces of law and order, don't merely kill those who hunt them, but torture them to death. They capture them and hang them, but with a regular slip knot that slowly strangles them to death, rather than a hangman's knot that quickly breaks their necks, then leave them to be found by their colleagues in law enforcement. So far, they've used this method on a county sheriff, a railroad policeman, and two Pinkerton operatives.

The other set is Jordan Mercy and his two brothers. The Mercys are famed lawmen, but they have a checkered reputation. Nevertheless, President Hayes has sworn in Jordan Mercy as the Acting United States Marshal for Montana while the incumbent recovers from a medical problem, and Mercy's deputized his two brothers, who are, reputedly, as crooked as he is (think of them as all the bad things you've heard about the Earps in movies and books that treat them unsympathetically, then square it).

So, whether out on the owlhoot trail, or in what should be the relatively safe environs of civilization in Helena, Murdock's facing danger on every page.

Outlaw Kingdom (St. Martin's, 1996), Matt Braun.

The thing about the really well-known frontier lawmen, like the Earps, the Mastersons, Hickok, etc., is that none of them really spent all that much time in law enforcement. Wyatt Earp lived to be 80, and only five or six of those 80 years were spent pinned to a badge. The careers of his brothers, of Masterson, of Hickok, etc., were equally short.

But there were lawmen who truly made it a career. Like Henry “Heck” Thomas or Chris Madsen. Two-thirds of the peace officer triumvirate known as the “Three Guardsmen,” who together logged perhaps four decades as badge toters between them.

Or like the third member of the Guardsmen, Bill Tilghman.

Tilghman was 20 when, in 1874, he was first appointed to the post of deputy sheriff in Ford County, Kansas, and between then until the end of his life in 1924, he served as the marshal

of Dodge City, Kansas (the seat of Ford County), as a Deputy US Marshal in the Oklahoma and Indian Territories, as the Chief of Police of Oklahoma City, as a special investigator for the Governor of Oklahoma, and as the chief, indeed as the entire police department, of the oil boom town of Cromwell, OK, in which capacity he was killed in the line of duty. His career began in the era of Wyatt Earp, Jesse James, and Ned Buntline, and ended in the era Eliot Ness, Al Capone, and Dashiell Hammett. He was a real life cross-genre figure.

Award-winning novelist Matt Braun's **Outlaw Kingdom** fictionalizes what was, perhaps, Tilghman's most famous case, when following the opening of Oklahoma Territory to settlement (prior to which it had been the western portion of Indian Territory), he accepted an appointment as a federal marshal, and was charged with the pursuit of William Doolin, who had taken over the remnants of the Dalton gang, after that crew was largely decimated during an attempt to simultaneously rob two banks in Coffeyville, Kansas. Doolin expanded the gang into an even larger, more formidable crew called the "Wild Bunch," and led them to even greater success. Braun, a native of Oklahoma, who obviously respects his subject, followed this novel up a few years later with a sequel, **One Last Town** (St. Martin's, 1997), set in the Roaring '20s, and telling the story of Tilghman's last law enforcement assignment.

Trouble in Tombstone (Signet, 2004), Richard S. Wheeler.

There've been many novels fictionalizing the conflict between Wyatt Earp and the Clanton Gang in Tombstone, AZ. Some of the

famous, Spur-winning western writers who've tackled this epic showdown include Will Henry in **Who Rides with Wyatt?** (Random, 1955), Nelson Nye in **Gunfight at the OK Corral** (Hillman, 1960), Loren D. Estleman in **Bloody Season** (Bantam, 1988), and Matt Braun in **Wyatt Earp** (St. Martin's, 1994). Others have written books using fictional names for the participants, but obviously basing the plot, characters, and setting, on the events and people at Tombstone, such as W.R. Burnett in **Saint Johnson** (Dial, 1930), Oakley Hall in **Warlock** (Viking, 1958), and Johnny D. Boggs in **Ten and Me** (Avalon, 1999).

My favorite fictionalization of the Earp/Clanton clash is this one by six-time Spur Award winner Richard Wheeler. His version purports to be a heretofore undiscovered first-person account of the events that led to "that trouble in Tombstone" by Wyatt Earp himself, and Mr. Wheeler is so skillful at developing this fictional conceit that one soon forgets it's a novel, and not an autobiographical description of the real-life events.

That said, it's not likely that, had Earp ever actually written his own book-length account, it would have been as admirably readable as Mr. Wheeler's.

Legacy of a Lawman (Five Star, 2011), Johnny D. Boggs.

Spur-winning novel based on the career, and, indeed, the most famous case, of a frontier lawman who's only recently been getting the recognition he deserves.

Bass Reeves, a former slave, was one of the most effective, some would say *the* most effective of all the federal marshals who rode for Judge Isaac Parker. In a career spanning nearly four decades he made over 3000 arrests

(as many as 4000 according to some sources), was in dozens of gun battles, and killed over twenty men in face-to-face shootouts. After 32 years as a Deputy US Marshal, he left federal service and became an officer in the Muskogee, OK, Police.

Arguably, his most famous case was his pursuit of his own son, Ben Reeves, who became a fugitive in the Indian and Oklahoma Territories after murdering his wife when he caught her in bed with another man.

This is the case that Johnny Boggs fictionalizes in this excellent novel.

The narrator is Reeves's friend and colleague, another real-life marshal, Dave Adams, who often partnered with Reeves.

But Reeves and Adams will have more to deal with than just Ben. Bass's fugitive son has hooked up with a gang of professional criminals, hardcases who murder, rob, and rape as a matter of course.

An earlier novel, Bill Burchardt's **Black Marshal** (Doubleday, 1981), also drew on this case, but used fictional names as well as events. Taking nothing away from Burchardt's novel, Boggs's is clearly superior.

For those looking for a non-fiction account of Reeves's career, and of his pursuit of his own son, I highly recommend Art T. Burton's **Black Gun—Silver Star** (U. of Nebraska Press, 2006). A western buff his whole life, Burton is an authority on frontier lawmen and outlaws of color.

Short Stories

"When You Carry the Star" (*Collier's*, 5 December 1931), Ernest Haycox.

Will Denton, a close friend of Sheriff Henry Linza, robs the local bank and kills the banker,

forcing Linza to go after him, despite knowing that it will probably come down to his either killing Denton or being killed. But friendship can't enter into Denton's decision. When you carry the star, duty comes first. Reprinted in Haycox's collection **Murder on the Frontier** (Little, Brown, 1942), and in the anthologies **Gunpoint** (Pyramid, 1960) edited by Leo Margulies and **The Mammoth Book of the Western** (Carroll & Graf, 1991) edited by Jon E. Lewis.

"The Marshal of Broken Lance" (*Short Stories*, 25 Apr. 1938), Frank Gruber.

John Tompkins is the Law in Broken Lance. Which means he's the one who has to keep a lid on hundreds of rowdy cowboys who've just driven their herds to market. And on one cowboy in particular, a hardcase named Dick Sellers, who's pushing for a gunfight. But even if Tompkins wins the shootout, he loses, because killing Sellers, notwithstanding its being plain self-defense, will cause the other cowboys to riot. Solid piece by a famed and skilled pulpster who succeeded across several different genres, including crime, horror, and science fiction. Reprinted in **The Lawmen** (Gold Medal, 1984) edited by Bill Pronzini and Martin H. Greenberg.

"McNelly Knows a Ranger" (*Popular Western*, Feb. 1947), Louis L'Amour.

Chick Bowdrie joins Captain Leander McNelly's "Special Force" of the newly reorganized Texas Rangers to track down the murderer of a friend. First in a series of shorts featuring Bowdrie. Reprinted in L'Amour's collections **Bowdrie's Law** (Bantam, 1984), **The Collected Short Stories of Louis L'Amour—The Frontier Stories—Vol. 7** (Bantam, 2009), and in the anthology A

Treasury of Great Western Stories—No. 8 (Popular, Library, 1972) edited by Anne Keffer.

“Gun Job” (*Collier’s*, 28 Feb. 1953), Thomas Thompson.

Jeff Anderson has, after taming the wild and woolly settlement of Alkali, given up his badge, married his sweetheart, and taken up ranching. But the man who’s taken over his old position isn’t up to the job, and power-hungry Hank Fetterman means to take advantage of that by riding roughshod over the community. Alkali still needs a lawman. A real one. Will Jeff pin on his badge again and take on another “gun job?” Reprinted in **14 Spurs** (Bantam, 1968) edited by Will Henry, **A Century of Great Western Fiction** (Forge, 2001) edited by John Jakes, **The Golden Spurs** (Tor, 1991) edited by Dale L. Walker, and **The Lawmen**, among others. The first short story to be awarded a WWA Spur.

“Three-Ten to Yuma” (*Dime Western*, March 1953), Elmore Leonard.

Deputy Marshal Paul Scallen has to get a convicted hardcase named Jim Kidd onto the train that’ll transport the outlaw to the Territorial Prison at Yuma, AZ. But Kidd’s gang is just as determined to keep the outlaw from making that trip. Suspenseful, and tense, this story was filmed twice. Oddly, in both film versions, the man transporting the prisoner was *not* depicted as a professional lawman, but Scallen’s definitely a career peace officer in the source material. Leonard’s western fiction always had a touch of hardboiled crime to it, and his crime fiction, like his series about Federal Marshal Raylan Givens, often had a touch of the western about it. Reprinted in, among many other venues, **Killers** (Bantam,

1955) edited by Peter Dawson, **The Reel West** (Doubleday, 1984) edited by Bill Pronzini and Martin Greenberg, **Hard-Boiled** (Oxford U. Press, 1996) edited by Pronzini and Jack Adrian, **The Western Hall of Fame Anthology** (Berkley, 1997) edited by Dale L. Walker, and the January 1993 issue of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*.

“Town of No Return” (*Max Brand’s Western Magazine*, Sep. 1953), Fred Grove.

Buck Dancy, famed as a peace officer, has been hired to tame the town of Indian Rock. There’s a faction in town that wants the place made into a decent community for families, and another faction that thinks the town should be run to “suit the saloon trade.” Top-notch “town tamer” story. Reprinted, under the title “The Marshal of Indian Rock,” in **Western Roundup** (Macmillan, 1961) edited by Nelson Nye.

“In the Line of Duty” (**Iron Men and Silver Stars**, Gold Medal, 1967, edited by Donald Hamilton), Elmer Kelton.

Two Texas Rangers, Sgt. Duncan McClendon and rookie Billy Hutto, arrive in the town of Cedarville, to the dismay of the local lawman, Sheriff Prather, who requested a company. Two factions in the community, one led by Litt Springer, a former Ranger with whom McClendon once rode, the other by the group that lynched Springer’s brother, are about to go to war. Prather’s deputy, who gave Springer’s brother up to the lynch mob, has already been killed, presumably by Springer. Prather’s unreliable. Hutto’s untested. That leaves the whole mess in McClendon’s hands. Reprinted in **The Lawmen**.

“Peace Officer” (**Iron Men and Silver Stars**),

Brian Garfield

Ranger Matt Paradise arrives in Coyotero County to “give a hand” to legendary lawman John Morgan, the sheriff of Coyotero. But it’s a hand that Morgan doesn’t want. Indeed, a hand he resents. But Morgan, who lost the use of an arm a year earlier, isn’t the man he once was. And since he’s taken no action against a pair of wanted outlaws currently residing in his county, the state’s sent a Ranger in to see that the situation is addressed. But good as Paradise is, he might not be a match for the two formidable desperados. And reluctant though Morgan is, to say nothing of crippled, he might have to dig deep to find some reserve of courage, and back the young Ranger. Garfield’s one of the very few authors to be awarded both a Spur and an Edgar, and to be the president of both the WWA and the MWA. He was also awarded a National Book Award and was a finalist for a Pulitzer.

“The Guns of William Longley” (**Iron Men and Silver Stars**), Donald Hamilton

Better remembered for his gritty spy novels featuring Matt Helm, a lethal US counterespionage agent who makes James Bond look like an amateur, Hamilton started out as a western novelist (and, in fact, made Helm a western novelist, as well, between his WW2 and Cold War stints in American intelligence), and it was clearly a genre he loved. Two of the best western films of the ’50s, *The Violent Land* (Columbia, 1955) and the Oscar-winning *The Big Country* (UA, 1958), were based, respectively, on Hamilton’s western novels **Smoky Valley** (Dell, 1955) and **The Big Country** (Dell, 1958). In this one, included in the anthology he personally edited, he tells the story of a young man who acquires

a matched brace of Colt pistols purported to have once belonged to infamous frontier outlaw Bill Longley (a real-life desperado in post-Civil-War Texas). Will he turn outlaw like the previous owner of the guns? Or will he take an offered job as a lawman, and use them to uphold justice? Hamilton was twice nominated for an Edgar for entries in the Helm series, but never took home the prize. However, he did win a well-deserved Spur for this excellent short story. Reprinted many times, including in **Great Stories of the American West** (Jove, 1996) edited by Martin H. Greenberg, **A Century of Great Western Stories**, and **Black Hats** (Berkley, 2003) edited by Robert J. Randisi

“The Angel of Santa Sofia” (**The Best Western Stories of Loren D. Estleman**, Ohio U. Press, 1989), Loren D. Estleman.

The only short story to feature Page Murdock. Murdock’s caught up with a long-wanted fugitive, and is taking him back to Helena, Montana, to face trial in Judge Blackthorne’s court. The wanted man seems genuinely repentant, but Murdock’s a cynic. Being a cynic generally keeps him alive, but, perhaps, this time, he’s wrong to be cynical. Or perhaps not. Reprinted in **The Arizonans** (Gold Medal, 1989) edited by Bill Pronzini and Martin H. Greenberg, and **Desperados** (Berkley, 2001) edited by Ed Gorman and Greenberg.

Movies

Union Pacific (Paramount, 1939), written by Walter DeLeon, Jack Cunningham, Jesse Lasky, Jr., and C. Gardner Sullivan, based on Ernest Haycox’s novel **Trouble Shooter** (Doubleday,

1937); directed by Cecil B. DeMille.

Along with John Ford's *Stagecoach* (UA, 1939), this epic film about the building of a transcontinental railroad that will link the US's two coasts in the years following the Civil War helped pave the way for adult westerns that treated comparatively deeper themes than the kiddie "B" oaters that were much more common at that time. Joel McCrea stars as Jeff Butler, hired to maintain law and order as the track is constructed, particularly in the temporary "tent town" that springs up every night at the "End of Track." As I've said, I like westerns about railroad cops.

My Darling Clementine (20th/Fox, 1946), written by Samuel G. Engel, Winston Miller, & Samuel Hellman; based on Stuart N. Lake's book **Wyatt Earp—Fronter Marshal** (Houghton, Mifflin, 1931); directed by John Ford.

Absolute best, but, at the same time, least accurate, of all the many films depicting the "Wyatt-Earp-in-Tombstone" story. Henry Fonda plays Wyatt. And splendidly. Victor Mature, in his very best performance, plays the tubercular Doc Holliday (though he seems a little robust to be someone dying of consumption, and he's depicted as a surgeon rather than a dentist). Like most actors who play Doc in an Earp picture, he steals the show. And Walter Brennan is chilling as "Old Man" Clanton, the patriarch of a family of outlaws. Strong support provided by Ward Bond and Tim Holt as Wyatt's brothers, Linda Darnell as Holliday's paramour, and Cathy Downs as the titular heroine, a wholly fictional character who had nothing to do with the real-life story. But who cares? As Ford is supposed to have said, when you have to choose between

the facts and the legend, "Print the legend!"

High Noon (UA, 1952), written by Carl Foreman, based on John Cunningham's short story "The Tin Star" (*Collier's*, 6 Dec. 1947); directed by Fred Zinneman.

Much lauded classic, for which Gary Cooper, as Marshal Will Kane, won his second Oscar. On Kane's wedding day, he is notified that a notorious killer he sent to prison is arriving on the noon train, where he'll be joined by three of his cronies, who'll then combine to take vengeance on Kane. Determined to do his duty, Kane finds himself abandoned by his deputy, the townspeople he's protected, and even his wife (Grace Kelly). But if he has to face the outlaws alone, then he will. Duty is duty. Demonstrating how close in structure lawman westerns and cop dramas are, *High Noon* was remade, almost shot-for-shot, as an episode of *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984–90), titled "The Afternoon Plane," written and directed by David Jackson, which originally aired on 20 February 1987.

Man with the Gun (UA, 1955), written by N.B. Stone, Jr., and Richard Wilson, directed by Wilson.

Clint Tollinger (Robert Mitchum) is a professional "town-tamer," a man who goes to troubled frontier communities, gets deputized, settles things down (usually with a fair amount of gunplay), and then rides off to find another violence-ridden community needing his extreme form of law enforcement. However, when he arrives in Sheridan City, he's not looking for work. He's looking for his ex-wife, who's working as a "hostess" at a house that provides feminine companionship. But as it happens, Sheridan is a town that needs Tollinger's style of unrestrained frontier

policing, and, though he isn't looking for a job this time around, he's persuaded to stay on, once convinced that Sheridan is, in his words, "... a town that needs doing, and a town that *wants* doing." And "do" he does. Mitchum, an excellent but underrated actor, was particularly effective in westerns and noir crime dramas, and he's riveting as Tollinger.

A Lawless Street (Columbia, 1955), written by Kenneth Gammet, based on Brad Ward's novel **The Marshal of Medicine Bend** (Dutton, 1953); directed by Joseph H. Lewis.

Randolph Scott plays Calem Ware, the law in the town of Medicine Bend. He's managed to, if not quite tame the once wild and wooly town, subdue the more violent elements, but it's taken gunplay and fists to do it, and the violence, after so many years as a peace officer, is starting to weigh on him. When his estranged wife, Tally (Angela Lansbury) arrives in town, that's another distraction. The town's lawless elements finally hire a professional gunman, Harley Bascom (Michael Pate) to take Ware out. And when they meet, it appears that Bascom has successfully eliminated Ware. But has he?

Seven Men from Now (Warner's, 1956), written by Burt Kennedy; directed by Budd Boetticher.

Ben Stride (Randolph Scott) was once the law in Silver Springs, but, when he was voted out of office, he refused, as a matter of pride, to stay on as deputy. Which meant his wife had to take a job at the local Wells Fargo office to keep the family solvent. And that put her in harm's way when the office was robbed. Now the newly widowed and guilt-ridden Stride, with or without a badge, means to hunt down the seven men he holds responsible for his wife's murder. The seven men, that is, aside

from himself. Competing with him is Lee Marvin, in one of his best performances, as a ruthless gunman chasing the same seven men for the bounty (or maybe the loot), rather than justice. This was the first, and best, in a series of six extraordinarily fine westerns, starring Scott and directed by Boetticher, that were released between 1955 and 1960.

Rio Bravo (Warner's, 1959), written by Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett, based on B.H. McCampbell's unpublished short story "A Bull by the Tail"; directed by Howard Hawks.

Sheriff John T. Chance (John Wayne), and his three deputies, one of them a drunk (Dean Martin), another a partially crippled old man (Walter Brennan), and the third an untried kid (Ricky Nelson), are holding a prisoner for murder in the local jail, while outside, the prisoner's wealthy and powerful brother, and dozens of hired guns, scheme to break the prisoner out. Director Hawks, who hated *High Noon*, designed this film as a sort of rebuttal to that earlier film, to show how a "real lawman" would've handled the situation Cooper's Will Kane faced. As far as I'm concerned, both films are great. To show the strong parallels between lawman westerns and more modern cop films, it's worth noting that *Rio Bravo* was remade as a contemporary police movie, *Assault on Precinct 13* (CKK Corp., 1976), written, directed, and edited by John Carpenter. Hawks himself made what was essentially an uncredited remake, *El Dorado* (Paramount, 1967), with Wayne in the Wayne part, Robert Mitchum in the Dean Martin part, Arthur Hunnicutt in the Walter Brennan part, and James Caan in the Ricky Nelson part.

Ride the High Country (MGM, 1962); written by N.B. Stone, Jr.; directed by Sam Peckinpah.

Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea both arrived in Hollywood at roughly the same time. Both started out as extras in silent films, and, with the coming of sound, both their careers seemed to follow parallel lines. Both starred in a string of romantic comedies in the '30s, both played second fiddle to Shirley Temple during her reign as the top box office star of the Depression, and both starred in big budget westerns in the late '30s. And in the postwar era, they both became identified primarily as western stars. Both played Wyatt Earp, Scott in *Frontier Marshal* (20th/Fox, 1939), McCrea in *Wichita* (Allied Artists, 1955). Both played Bat Masterson, Scott in *Trail Street* (RKO, 1947), McCrea in *The Gunfight at Dodge City* (UA, 1959). Both played frontier Pinkerton operatives, McCrea in *The Lone Hand* (Universal, 1953), and Scott in *The Bounty Hunter* (Warners, 1954). Both starred in movies about the building of the railroads in the west, McCrea in the aforementioned *Union Pacific*, and Scott in *Santa Fe* (Columbia, 1951). Both played US Cavalrymen, frontier lawyers, cowboys, ranchers, etc. But in all that time, they'd never been in a movie together. In fact, by the end of the '50s, neither needed to make movies anymore, since, over the years, they'd invested their film income wisely and were both quite wealthy. But they were persuaded to make one more film, appearing together for the first (and last) time. They were cast as two famous, legendary lawmen who, in the closing days of the 19th century (or perhaps the opening days of the 20th, the date isn't precisely specified), are persuaded to come out of retirement and take on one last peacekeeping job. Specifically, they are assigned to go to the mining camp of Coarsegold in the Sierra Nevadas, the "high

country," collect the gold that all the prospectors have mined, and transport it to the bank in Hornitos, the growing town at the foot of the mountain. A previous attempt to transport the gold resulted in the guards being murdered, and the gold stolen, which is why professional lawmen are being hired to do the job. What McCrea doesn't know is that Scott is planning to betray him and make off with the fortune. This did turn out to be Scott's last film, and it was, arguably, his best (though many might argue for one of the Scott/Boetticher collaborations). McCrea was persuaded back in front of the camera for three more films in the early '70's, but, as with Scott, *Ride the High Country* may have been his very best work.

Hang 'Em High (UA, 1968) written by Leonard Freeman and Mel Goldberg; directed by Ted Post.

This was the first American-made western Eastwood appeared in following the phenomenally successful "Spaghetti Western" trilogy he'd made under Sergio Leone's direction between 1964 and '66. In it, he plays Jed Cooper, a former peace officer from Missouri trying to get started in the cattle business in Oklahoma Territory. He's accused of rustling a small herd of cattle he's bought, hung by a group of vigilantes, and left to strangle slowly to death. But he's rescued by a deputy US marshal (western perennial Ben Johnson) riding for Federal Circuit and District Judge Adam Fenton (a fictional analog for Judge Isaac Parker, played by Pat Hingle). Cleared of rustling charges, he's persuaded to return to police work as a deputy marshal for Fenton's court. Cooper's main reason for accepting the job is that it will allow him to go

after the men who tried to lynch him. The beautiful Inger Stevens, as a widowed and traumatized rape victim, provides romantic interest. One of Eastwood's very best westerns, and that's saying a lot.

True Grit (Paramount, 2010) written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, based on the novel by Charles Portis.

There have, of course, been two extraordinarily fine film adaptations of Portis's novel, and choosing between them is hard. For one thing, it seems almost sacrilegious to skip over Duke Wayne's only Oscar win. Nevertheless, I have chosen the remake for several reasons. First, Hailee Stanfield is clearly closer to the age of Mattie Ross than Kim Darby was in the 1969 version, and is more believable in the role. Second, Matt Damon's performance as the Texas Ranger, LaBoef, is clearly superior to Glen Campbell's. Third, for the most part, the remake's more faithful to the novel (not that the original was *unfaithful*, but, in a close call, the decision goes to the remake on the element of fidelity to the source material). Finally, though his interpretation is different, Jeff Bridges's performance as Marshal Cogburn, is, at least, the equal of Wayne's. But both films are great, so do yourself a favor and see both of them.

TV Shows

Stories of the Century (Syndicated, 1954–55)

At a time when TV western series were mostly geared for kids, like *The Lone Ranger* (ABC, 1949–57), *Hopalong Cassidy* (NBC, 1949–52), *The Cisco Kid* (syndicated, 1950–55), and *Gene Autry* (CBS, 1950–55), this series took a more adult approach. Based on actual cases (*loosely* based), it was a

surprisingly frank depiction of frontier violence and criminality. The hero was Matt Clark (Jim Davis), a detective for the Southwest Railroad (a fictional 'road that seemed to extend to every state and territory in the West), who, in each episode, was pitted against some real-life frontier outlaw. Over 39 episodes, he and his female partner (Mary Castle as Frankie Adams during the first season, and Kristine Miller as Margaret "Jonesy" Jones for the second), faced off against almost every western criminal of any notoriety at all, from Joaquin Murrietta in the 1850's, to William Quantrill during the Civil War, to Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (renamed, for some unknown reason, the "Smilin' Kid") after the turn of the 20th Century, with stops along the way for Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Belle Starr, the Apache Kid, the Dalton Gang, et. al. Through it all neither Clark nor his two partners aged a bit. The adult treatment must have impressed the industry, since *Stories of the Century* was the first show to win the Emmy for "Best Western Series."

The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp (ABC, 1955–61)

Hugh O'Brian, who played the title role in this well-made series, like to brag that this was the "first adult western" on TV. Well, *network* TV series perhaps, but, as we've seen, *Stories of the Century* beat it by a year. And it's only the "first" adult network western because the debut episode, "Wyatt Earp Becomes a Marshal," was aired on 6 September 1955, while the premiere of *Gunsmoke*, "Matt Gets It," aired four days later. And at that, *Gunsmoke*, as a radio series, beat *Wyatt Earp* to the airwaves by three years. All of that said,

Wyatt Earp, while often playing fast and loose with the facts, was a well-made show that charted Earp's career as a peace officer beginning in Ellsworth, KS, changing the setting to Wichita, then Dodge City, finally culminating, during the final two seasons, in Tombstone, AZ.

Gunsmoke (CBS, 1955–75)

Wyatt Earp may have beaten *Gunsmoke* to the airwaves, at least on TV, but *Gunsmoke* came out ahead in both quality and longevity. James Arness, Amanda Blake, Milburn Stone, and the various actors who played Matt Dillon's deputies (Dennis Weaver, Ken Curtis, and Buck Taylor) operated like a well-oiled machine, bringing high-quality episodes to the air week after week, for two full decades. Not just the best western, but one of the very best TV dramas in *any* genre. It's also worth noting that a surprisingly large number of episodes were whodunits, with Matt, not merely chasing the criminal, but analyzing clues to identify him (or her).

Cheyenne (ABC, 1955–61)

The first hour-long western series, debuting a few weeks after *Earp* and *Gunsmoke*, starred strapping Clint Walker as a wandering westerner named Bodie, apparently orphaned, and raised by the Cheyenne tribe, which accounted for his having adopted "Cheyenne" as his given name. He'd roam the Frontier taking a variety of different jobs, from cowboy, to prospector, to civilian scout for the Army, to wagon train guide. But in more than 20 of the 100-odd episodes that aired over six seasons, Cheyenne was some kind of a lawman. In the course of the show, he worked as a federal deputy marshal, a county sheriff, a town marshal, a railroad detective, a

Cattleman's Association detective, a Pinkerton operative, and just about every other kind of peace officer it was possible to be in the Old West. Solidly produced, well-written, well-directed, and well-acted, this was a quality show from start to finish. Even in the episodes in which he wasn't a lawman.

Law of the Plainsman (NBC, 1959–60)

Spun off from two episodes of *The Rifleman* (ABC, 1958–63), this series featured Michael Ansara as Sam Buckhart, an Apache and a Harvard graduate, who, after earning his degree, returns to the West, specifically New Mexico, as a deputy US marshal. Ansara, a naturalized American born in Syria, had previously portrayed another Apache, the great tribal leader Cochise, in *Broken Arrow* (ABC, 1956–58), a TV version of the award-winning film (20th/Fox, 1950), which, in turn, had been based on the Elliot Arnold's novel, **Blood Brothers** (Bantam, 1951). In *Plainsman*, Ansara brought the same quiet but undeniable dignity and authority to his portrayal of the Native American lawman that he'd brought to the historical figure. Regrettably, it only lasted a season. In post-cancellation reruns, it was combined with three other short-lived horse operas, *The Westerner* (NBC, 1960), *Black Saddle* (NBC/ABC, 1959–60), and *Johnny Ringo* (CBS, 1959–60), as one of the "spokes" in the "wheel" series *The Westerners* (Syndicated, 1966), which was hosted by Keenan Wynn.

Lawman (ABC, 1959–62)

This might be described as *Gunsmoke*-light. John Russell, a strapping, mustachioed, ruggedly handsome actor, played Dan Troop, the town marshal of Laramie, Wyoming. Peter Brown played his deputy, a kind of younger,

less humorous version of Chester, sans the limp. Peggy Castle played Lily Merrill, owner of one of the local saloons, and a romantic interest for Troop, a fairly obvious counterpart to Amanda Blake's Kitty. Well-written scripts, solid acting and directing, and good production values (typical of all the Warners western shows) kept this one on the air for three years.

Cimmaron Strip (CBS, 1968–69)

As the title suggests, this series was set on what was then called the “Cimmaron Strip,” now referred to as the “Oklahoma Panhandle,” nearly 6000 square miles of unsettled territory, that was designated as part of what was then called “Oklahoma Territory,” the western half of what had been, ’til 1889, Indian Territory. In this series, US Marshal Jim Crown (Stuart Whitman) was the man in charge of keeping law and order in that stretch of frontier that had recently been opened for settlement. Produced by many of the same people behind *Gunsmoke*, it had that show's solid production values. To this is added a kind of “epic” quality. Each episode was 90 minutes. In effect, each episode was virtually a weekly full-length movie. Anglo-American actress Jill Townsend, who you might recall from the 1970's version of *Pooldark* (BBC, 1975–77), played 18-year-old Dulcey Coopersmith, an English rose who came West to join her father, only to find he'd died. Percy Herbert and Randy Boone played Crown's part-time deputies. Episodes ranged from standard, very well-done, “lawman-chases-outlaws” episodes, to “damsel-in-distress” stories (Miss Townsend making a fetching damsel), to character studies like “The Roarer,” about an Army lifer who runs afoul of the law, to “Knife in the Darkness” exploring

the possibility that a knife-wielding predator slashing “professional ladies” to death on a particularly foggy night might be the British serial killer Jack the Ripper (the script for this one was by Harlan Ellison). Regrettably, it only lasted a season, but has been available in reruns ever since, unusual for such a short-lived series.

Hec Ramsey (NBC, 1972–74)

The mystery/western link was particularly strong in this Jack Webb-produced series, which was a spoke on the *NBC Mystery Movie* wheel, rotating with shows like *Columbo* (NBC, 1971–78; ABC, 1989–2003), *McMillan & Wife* (NBC, 1971–77), *Banacek* (NBC, 1972–74), et. al. Richard Boone played the title character, an apparent an old-school “shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later” lawman who'd ridden for Judge Parker early in his career. In 1901, he's hired to be the deputy chief in the police force of New Prospect, OK, under a young former schoolteacher, Oliver Stamp (Rick Lenz), who resents being saddled with an old-school gunfighter. What he doesn't know is that Ramsey's a self-trained criminalist, well-versed in new scientific techniques involving fingerprints, ballistics, chemical analysis, etc. The “Old West” vibe was retained, but every episode was structured as a whodunit.

Paradise (CBS, 1989–91)

Sometimes referred to as “*Little House on the Prairie*, only with guns,” this series featured Lee Horsley as Ethan Allan Cord, a professional gunfighter, mostly on the right side of the law, who plied his trade in and around a small mining town in California called Paradise. When his sister dies, he is given guardianship of her four children, and tries to transition from gunfighter to

rancher/farmer/ surrogate parent. But his skills are his skills, and, for practical purposes, he becomes Paradise's protector, finally accepting the position officially in the third season (by which time the title had changed to *Guns of Paradise*) when he becomes the town's marshal. The second season opener, "A Gathering of Guns," is one particularly beloved by Western fans, since it features Hugh O'Brian returning to the role of Wyatt Earp, Gene Barry returning to the role of William Barclay Masterson, which he had played on *Bat Masterson* (ABC, 1958–61), and John Schneider playing Pat Garrett (Barry Sullivan, who'd played that famed lawman in *The Tall Man*, NBC, 1960–62, being perhaps a little long in the tooth, at 77, to reprise that part). Solid, well-produced, well-written series.

Peacemakers (USA, 2003)

Like *Hec Ramsey*, this series combined frontier peacekeeping with forensic science and whodunit plots. Tom Berenger played US Marshal Jared Stone, a decorated Civil War veteran who was the law in Silver City, Colorado, an old school lawman who's, nevertheless, open to new techniques. Peter O'Meara played Larimer Finch, a Pinkerton operative, originally hailing from England, who'd apprenticed at Scotland Yard, and who's well-versed in such disciplines as fingerprints and ballistic analysis. After the first episode, he decides to stay on as Stone's deputy when he becomes uncomfortable with Pinkerton's union-busting activities. Amy Carlson played Katie Owen, a med school student turned mortician, who had to drop out before graduating when her parents died, necessitating her return to Silver City to take over the family undertaking business (and

guardianship of her kid sister), who functions as the town's coroner and forensic pathologist. Solidly produced, with fine scripts, it only lasted for nine episodes.

A winner of a WWA Spur Award himself, and a third-generation cop, Jim Doherty has always taken inspiration from such real-life frontier peace officers as Bill Tilghman, Leander McNelly, Heck Thomas, Bass Reeves, Sam Sixkiller, etc. He's written several short stories featuring "Gus Hachette," a fictional analog for real-life Prohibition/Depression-era Texas Ranger Frank Hamer, and is shopping a novel about the character