# Western Subgenres

**(Courtesy http://www.cuebon.com/ewriters/Wsubgenres.html)**

**Australian** westerns are a rare exception to the 'time and place' bounds of the genre. Usually, the American protagonist isn't satisfied with the rapidly-filling western United States, and instead settles in Australia's vast outback. George T. Miller's 1982 film *The Man from Snowy River*, based upon a Banjo Patterson poem written in 1890, is a good example.

**Black Cowboy (buffalo soldier)**
These westerns feature a protagonist of color. Gerald Haslam's story *Rider* is a fine example. (Historians say the actual frontier was relatively colorblind, and Wild Bill Hickok hired several Blacks for his traveling extravaganza.)
The US Army's 9th and 10th Cavalry 'buffalo soldiers' gained fame for their actions in the west. Z.Z. Packer's novel *The Thousands* is a good example of this subgenre. (This aspect of history sets up a clash of political correctnesses -- if that's a word -- because several warlike Indian tribes came to respect their military prowess.)

**Bounty Hunter** tales center upon these morally ambiguous characters. Peter Brandvold's novel *Bounty Hunter Lou Prophet* and Phyllis de la Garza's novel *Bounty Hunter's Daughter* are two obvious examples. While not the main characters, a group hired by an implacable Wells Fargo company drives the action in George Roy Hill's 1969 film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

**Cattle Drive** westerns are set amidst this definitive frontier activity. Often the young protagonist makes long strides toward manhood during these gruelling journeys. Larry McMurtry's novel *Lonesome Dove* (filmed as a TV miniseries by Simon Wincer), and its sequels, are famous examples. Clay Fisher's novel *The Tall Men* is another.

**Civil War** westerns are defined by that milieu. (Pitched battles were fought as far west as New Mexico.) Afterward, former soldiers carried Blue/Gray antagonisms throughout the frontier. Johnny D. Boggs' novel *Camp Ford* is a comprehensive example. Howard Hawk's 1970 film *Rio Lobo* places John Wayne in a similar role.

**Cowpunk** is a subgenre that derives its name (and irreverant tone) from science fiction's 'cyberpunk.' These tales depict all sorts of bizarre happenings on the remote frontier. Elisabeth Scarborough's novel *The Drastic Dragon of Draco Texas* mixes ethnic mythology with comedy and horror, and a love story to boot. The TV show and movie *Wild Wild West* arguably fit this category.

**Doctor and Preacher** are two types of protagonist in this subgenre. Such lead characters are committed to peace and healing (or know they should be), in an often-violent milieu. An obvious example is Lee H. Katzin's 1969 movie *Heaven with a Gun*, starring Glenn Ford. TV's fictional *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* was well-known, while Robert B. Parker's novel *Preacher* is a newer example.

**Eurowestern** tales come, as the term implies, from Europe. Karl May's German-language novels, starting in 1892 with his *Winnetou I*, brought the allure of the rugged frontier across the Atlantic. Sergio Leone's classic 1966 'spaghetti western' film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* places Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef in the white and black hats. (Often this subgenre is more gritty; in a an emotional, violent, and even dusty sense, than its American cousins.)

**Gunfighter** tales are an iconic western subgenre. In reality, two armed men facing each other on a dirt main street happened only rarely, yet it's central to these plots. Often a 'white hat' protagonist reluctantly agrees to go up against a cruel 'black hat' villain (whether an outright criminal or a corrupt VIP), on behalf of oppressed settlers. Jack Schaefer's 1949 novel *Shane*, as filmed by George Stevens, places Jack Palance in this classic example. Fred Zinnemann's 1952 film *High Noon* does the same with Gary Cooper.

**Humorous or Parody** is a theme that needs no explanation. Mel Brook's 1974 film *Blazing Saddles* towers over this subgenre. Gene Kelly's 1970 film *The Cheyenne Social Club* is another example. Ellen Recknor's novel *Prophet Annie* is full of wry humor.

**Indian wars** dominate this subgenre. They are usually accurate, in a historical sense, and will also reflect the worldview of the author. James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 novel *The Last of the Mohicans* remains a classic. Douglas C. Jones's novel *The Court Martial of George Armstrong Custer* vividly depicts a "what if?" cultural clash. (Was General Custer a hero or a villain?)
Many older American films depict the Indians as ruthless savages to be swept aside. In Arthur Penn's 1970 film *Little Big Man* the natives are wise and noble indigenes, and white Americans cruel interlopers. Kevin Costner's 1990 film *Dances With Wolves* portrays a more realistic mixed bag.

**Land Rush** stories usually focus on Oklahoma, or a few similar events in which vast tracts of land were suddenly opened to homesteading -- whether the resident Indians liked it or not. Al and Joanna Lacy's novel *The Land of Promise* is one example. Ron Howard's 1992 film *Far and Away* has a dramatic portrayal.

**Lawmen (Texas Rangers)**
This subgenre centers around the honest lawmen who brought order and justice to the wild frontier. Often the protagonist is, or is based upon, an actual person. Jack Cumming's novel *The Last Lawmen* is a realistic example.
The Texas Rangers were founded in 1823, and by 1847 they were already depicted in fiction. In 1856 they appeared in <u>two</u> novels: *Bernard Lile*, by Jere Clemens; and *The Rangers and Regulators*, by A.W. Arrington. Chuck Norris's TV show *Walker, Texas Ranger* is a modern example.

**Mexican wars (Texan independence)**
Stories in this subgenre include the decisive geopolitical events of 1845 - 48. Marion G. Otto's novel *Hugh Harrington* is a good example.

Many Texan tales feature the siege of the Alamo. Stephen Harrigan's novel *The Gates of the Alamo* is a clear example.
(Mexican stories often depict the secession of Texas, and the US invasion of Veracruz and Mexico City -- but with heroes and villains reversed.)

**Modern Indians** is an overlapping subgenre, in that its stories are set in the present day, and the protagonist must bridge a venerable heritage with American culture and technology. Tony Hillerman's novel *Coyote Waits*, filmed for TV by Jan Egleson, is perhaps the best known example. (Hillerman's books are often listed with the 'mystery' genre, as they feature the Navajo tribal police. To his credit, they're immensely popular in Navajo country.)

**Mormon** tales center upon the settlement of Utah in the 1840s and 50s, under the leadership of Brigham Young. There was much heroism and teamwork, and a negotiated harmony with the local Indians. Marilyn Brown's novel *The Wine-Dark Sea of Grass* is an unstinting depiction. *From Everlasting to Everlasting*, by Sophie Freeman, mirrors real-life experiences. (Many of these novels are published by imprints associated with the LDS church.)
Reflecting the controversy that has long dogged that religion, some depictions are rather nasty. Arthur Conan Doyle's 1902 novel *In the Country of the Saints* is a well-known example.

**Outlaw** westerns focus on the black hats, the colorful villains of that era. The Dalton Brothers, Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and many others became legends in their own time. Eugene Manlove Rhodes' 1927 novel *Paso por Aqui* (later reprinted as *Four Faces West*) depicts an unusual robber hunted by the famous marshal Pat Garrett. (In fiction, this character type is known as an 'anti-hero.')

**Prairie Settlement** tales are not quite 'westerns,' but fall within the time-and-place bounds of the genre. They depict the taming of the vast flat plains of the midwest, during the 1800s. Ole Rolvaag's classic novel *Giants in the Earth* depicts a Norwegian family enduring bitter winters and maddening loneliness, as civilization slowly follows them west. While intended for children, Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" series is enjoyable by all. (It is based upon her actual experiences, and was later filmed several times.)

**Prospecting (gold rushes)**
This subgenre focuses on the quest for sudden riches, whether as a comfortable silver mine owner or a hardscrabble gold panner. In the 1860s, Bret Harte and Mark Twain immortalized these characters even as the California gold rush was in full swing. (Harte's assignment of a peculiar spoken accent to Sierra gold miners remains controversial.)
Jack London extended the 'western' genre northward, with realistic accounts of the 1896 gold rush into Alaska and the Yukon Territory. His novel *The Call of the Wild* stands out.

**Quest** westerns involve a protagonist on a mission, set against a harsh untamed frontier. Cameron Judd's novel *The Quest of Brady Kenton* is an oft-cited example of this

subgenre. Elmer Kelton's *Cloudy in the West* is another.

**Railroad** stories center upon a titanic project: the bridging of the east and west coasts by the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines. Rugged geography, indentured Chinese workers, and international scandals add depth to this milieu. John Ford's 1924 film *The Iron Horse* remains a classic, while Herschel Daugherty's 1963 film *The Raiders* depicts the social and economic effect of those spreading rail lines. (The 'golden spike' meeting in 1869 was seen as a reuniting event for a post-Civil War America.)

**Range wars (sheepmen)**
These stories center upon a peculiar western rivalry, as the best grazing land was rapidly claimed by ranchers, while homesteading farmers began to fence it in. Owen Wister's classic 1902 novel *The Virginian*, later filmed at least twice, depicts Wyoming's fratricidal Johnson County War.
A few subgenre tales focus on shepherds, many of them Basque immigrants, and the wool merchants who owned the flocks. Zane Grey's 1922 novel *To the Last Man* depicts a cattlemen vs. sheepmen feud (based upon real Arizona history) so vicious its title is a literal description. A controversial modern tale is Annie Proulx's 1997 short story "Brokeback Mountain," later filmed by Ang Lee.

**Revenge** westerns are a relatively dark subgenre. A determined protagonist, often a young survivor of some cruel massacre, goes after the perpetrators. Witnesses to crimes were few, and law enforcement scarce (and sometimes corrupt), leading to such harsh individual actions. Charles Portis's 1969 novel *True Grit*, soon filmed by Henry Hathaway (also remade by the Coen brothers), follows a determined young Mattie Ross on such a mission.

**Romance** is an overlapping subgenre, which features such a relationship, but in the format of a 'western' novel. A.H. Holt's *Silver Creek* and Morgan J. Blake's *Redemption* are two such novels.

**Town-tamer** westerns are well described by their name. A lone gunman, or sometimes a group of friends, take on the corrupt leadership of an isolated town, and risk their lives to bring freedom. Frank Gruber's story "Town Tamer," filmed by Lesley Selander, is a clear example. Lawrence Kasdan's 1985 movie *Silverado* is a great depiction. (John Sturges' 1960 film *The Magnificent Seven* extends this subgenre into rural Mexico.)

**Trapper or Mountain Man** tales are set earlier than other western subgenres, when Indians dominated and the landscape was entirely roadless. Often the rugged protagonist is the only white man for hundreds of miles around, and he'll find an Indian bride. (Many of these men became scouts when the US Army and westward-bound settlers required guidance.) Louis L'Amour's novel *To the Far Blue Mountains* depicts the earliest English settlement of the Appalachians, in the 1500s. A.B. Guthrie's novel *The Big Sky* crosses the continent, and James Michener's sprawling *Centennial* is another example.

**Wagon Train** westerns are a quintessential subgenre. The Oregon Trail was the interstate

highway of its era, with lumbering Conestoga wagons, and hardships that were often extreme. Zane Grey's 1936 novel *The Lost Wagon Train* is a classic example. George Stewart's episodic novel *Sheep Rock* follows waves of settlers through a remote Nevada desert.

**Women** protagonists lead this subgenre. Some tales idealize their courage and triumphs, as with the real-life Annie Oakley. Opposite this, Dorothy Scarborough's 1925 novel *The Wind* is a harsh depiction of a young woman's life in frontier west Texas. (So harsh that Texan leaders protested.)