

WESTERNS

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EARLY/GOLDEN AGE WESTERNS

Westerns are generally regarded as historical fiction set in the American West, often after the Civil War, though some authors also heavily explore an earlier time period and use settings that match wherever the frontier was for that era. Regardless of the particulars, the settings are a key component of the appeal, with Western readers prioritizing authentic-seeming period details. Characters are often lawmen or cowboys or mountain men (or some other type of profession that involves wandering), and there are often clear-cut good guys and bad guys. The 1940s-1960s is often considered the Golden Age of the genre, and authors who started writing during this time period remain popular, as are some of those who were writing before then.

Louis L'Amour:

L'Amour's work was first published in the 1950s, and he remains immensely popular with Western readers even now, decades after his death. L'Amour's action-paced books are often regarded as the quintessential Westerns. They feature loner protagonists with a strong code of honor who pave the way for civilization and face incredible odds in doing so. His books are also known for their vivid, realistic descriptions of the setting, the authenticity of the characters, and their romanticized depiction of the time and place. Cultural conflict between white settlers and Native Americans are a recurring theme. Start with *Hondo*.

If you like Louis L'Amour:

- William W. Johnstone
- Zane Grey
- Douglas C. Jones
- Ralph Compton
- Elmer Kelton
- John D. Nesbitt
- Max Brand
- Tony Hillerman
- Lee Child
- Alistair MacLean

Elmer Kelton

Kelton's elegiac, atmospheric books capture the West just as it was starting to vanish. His West is less romanticized than L'Amour's, and his heroes also tend to be much more vulnerable and less larger-than-life, though still honorable. There is still plenty of action in these books, though they are more character-driven than most other Westerns. Start with *The Day the Cowboys Quit*.

If you like Elmer Kelton:

- Larry McMurtry
- Louis L'Amour
- Zane Grey
- Peter Brandvold
- Johnny D. Boggs
- Michael McGarrity
- Ethan J. Wolfe

Ray Hogan

Hogan's fast-paced, gritty Westerns depict authentic characters and settings in a direct, straightforward prose style. His characters are entertaining and can skirt the line of being flawed antiheroes rather than straightforward good guys. His work includes standalones and a series about Shawn Starbuck, who drifts through the West looking for his brother. Start with *The Shotgunner*.

If you like Ray Hogan:

- Louis L'Amour
- Zane Grey
- William J. Johnstone
- Wayne D. Overholser
- Jack Schaefer

Max Brand

Brand died in the 1940s, so most of his work is firmly in the Early Western camp, predating the Golden Age. As a result, his books helped mythologize the West and establish the tropes of the genre. He preferred using a vague but rugged fictional setting, which he called the High Mountain Desert, to real places. In his fast-paced, adventure-packed work, larger-than-life heroes have a strong moral code. Start with *Destry Rides Again*.

If you like Max Brand:

- Louis L'Amour
- John D. Nesbitt
- Ethan J. Wolfe

Zane Grey

Like Brand, Zane Grey's work predates the Golden Age, and Grey is even more responsible for establishing the genre's traditions. In his fast-paced, descriptive books, Grey romanticized the West and wrote lovingly about its settings and characters, who have a strong moral code. Start with *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

If you like Zane Grey:

- Louis L'Amour
- Larry McMurtry
- Elmer Kelton

Blast from the Past

Though not as prolific as many of the other authors on this list, Jack Schaefer penned two classic Westerns, *Shane* and *Monte Walsh* that also inspired popular film adaptations. His books feature principled but deadly characters and often focus on conflict between underdogs and rich, powerful antagonists. His work is well-researched and authentic. Start with *Shane*.

Already like Schaefer's work?

- Owen Wister
- Louis L'Amour
- Elmer Kelton

Branching out from Early/Golden Age Westerns

Enjoy this genre but looking to try another one with similarities to it?

- Modern Classic Westerns (William W. Johnstone, Ralph Cotton, Ralph Compton)
- Historical fiction with frontier settings (Allan W. Eckert, Paulette Jiles, Philipp Meyer)
- Literary Westerns (Larry McMurtry, Michael McGarrity)
- Arkansas Connection Westerns (Dusty Richards)
- Classic Adventure (Jack London, Alistair MacLean)
- Suspense (Lee Child)
- Thrillers (Elmore Leonard)
- Mysteries (Robert B. Parker, William Kent Krueger, C. J. Box, Craig Johnson, Tony Hillerman)
- Historical nonfiction about the American West and the frontier (T.J. Stiles, Peter Cozzens)
- Christian historical fiction with American West and/or frontier settings (Tracie Peterson, Kim Vogel Sawyer, Al Lacy, Gilbert Morris)
- Historical romance with American West and/or frontier settings (Linda Lael Miller, Janet Dailey, Caroline Fyffe, Marcia Lynn McClure)
- Christian historical romance with American West and/or frontier settings (Tracie Peterson, Mary Connealy, Janette Oke, Lori Copeland, Robin Lee Hatcher, Lori Wick, Susan Page Davis)

MODERN WESTERN FAVORITES

Modern Western writers started their career after the Golden Age, but in many cases, they continue the traditions of their forerunners, writing books packed full of action and adventure and featuring stalwart heroes. They can often be quite violent. Other modern Western writers deconstruct the genre's tropes.

William J. Johnstone

Johnstone's violent, fast-paced, action-packed books feature a wide range of settings, though they all feature tough, feisty characters. Johnstone's books are also known for their authentic period details. He often writes series, so readers can follow characters through a range of adventures. He is just as likely to write about mountain men as he is cowboys. Start with *Sidewinders*.

If you like William J. Johnstone:

- Louis L'Amour
- Bill Brooks
- Peter Brandvold
- Jon Sharpe

Ralph Compton

Like Johnstone, Compton depicts a wide range of Western settings in his work and writes a mix of standalones and series. Compton's fast-paced, action-packed, violent, authentic books typically focus on the frontier and often feature outlaws, cowboys, and gunslingers as characters. Regardless of their profession, Compton's honest heroes adhere to a strong moral code, no matter what complications are thrown at them. Start with *Death Rides a Chestnut Mare*.

If you like Ralph Compton:

- Louis L'Amour
- Ethan J. Wolfe
- Jon Sharpe
- Peter Brandvold
- John D. Nesbitt

Ralph Cotton

Cotton's gritty, violent, plot-driven books depict really good good guys and really bad bad guys. Justice is always served in the end, and characters with a moral code are rewarded. The books are often but not always part of a series. Start with *Jackpot Ridge*.

If you like Ralph Cotton:

- Louis L'Amour
- Bill Brooks
- Ralph Compton
- Charles G. West

Charles G. West

West's novels, in some ways, are a throwback to the Golden Age. They feature authentic, well-researched period details and action-packed storylines, often connected to real history. However, West's intriguing characters tend to be less straightforward as heroes, with his books instead focusing on everyday people called upon to act heroically rather than larger-than-life heroes. Start with *Duel at Low Hawk*.

If you like Charles G. West:

- Ralph Compton
- Ralph Cotton
- William J. Johnstone
- Louis L'Amour
- Larry McMurtry
- Peter Brandvold
- Jory Sherman

John D. Nesbitt

Nesbitt blends authentic, gritty Old West settings with suspenseful, interesting mystery storylines. His leisurely paced, plot-driven books are thoughtful and highly atmospheric, often with ranch or frontier settings, and include plenty of violent action. His protagonists are heroic and with a strong desire for justice. Start with *Stranger in Thunder Basin*.

If you like John D. Nesbitt:

- Bill Brooks
- Louis L'Amour
- Ralph Compton
- Max Brand

Peter Brandvold

Brandvold's work largely follows traditional genre expectations. His heroic protagonists are often strong, honorable lawmen devoted to justice, and his fast-paced, action-packed, plot-driven books often feature tough, violent adventure. Less traditionally, his work is often highly suspenseful, with ample cliffhangers and twists and turns, and can include explicit sex scenes, which are otherwise unusual in the genre. Romance also often plays more of a role than is usual in most Westerns. Start with *Nordic and Finn*, the first in a series that follows a roving loner and his dog.

If you like Peter Brandvold:

- William W. Johnstone
- Elmer Kelton
- Ralph Compton
- Bill Brooks

Loren D. Estleman

Estleman writes a mixture of urban mysteries and Westerns. His dramatic, character-driven Westerns are authentic, detailed, and atmospheric. They feature lots of violent action, often focused on revenge, and can incorporate mystery elements as well. His characters are often lawmen or bounty hunters. Start with *The Master Executioner*.

If you like Loren D. Estleman:

- Jack London
- A.B. Guthrie Jr.
- Bill Brooks

Wayne D. Dundee

Dundee writes the fast-paced, action-packed Lone McGantry series. McGantry is a former Army scout who works as a cowboy and wrangler. He tends to find himself in violent, dangerous situations, which he is more than capable of handling. The books are often set in Dundee's home of Nebraska, though they sometimes travel to neighboring states, like Colorado and Wyoming. Start with *Dismal River*, the first in the series.

If you like Wayne D. Dundee:

- William J. Johnstone
- Peter Brandvold
- Loren D. Estleman
- Larry McMurtry

Robert Vaughan

Vaughan has written hundreds of books, both in his own name and under pen names, in a wide range of genres. He is, however, best known for his Westerns. A keen student of history, Vaughan often incorporates real-life characters and events into his well-researched, detailed, action-packed work. His work has a sharp focus on good vs. evil. Start with *Long Road to Abilene*, the first in a series about Civil War veteran drifter Cade McCall, who finds himself drawn into historic events during his travels.

If you like Robert Vaughan:

- Jory Sherman
- William W. Johnstone
- Louis L'Amour

James J. Griffin

Griffin writes action-packed, well-researched, authentic, traditional-style Westerns that feature strong, noble protagonists. Good guys and bad guys are clearly differentiated. He is especially interested in Texas Rangers and writes multiple series about them, in both historic and contemporary settings. Start with *A Bullet for a Ranger*, an early entry in his Texas Ranger Jim Blawczyk family saga series.

If you like James J. Griffin:

- William J. Johnstone
- John D. Nesbitt
- Ray Hogan
- Loren D. Estleman

Johnny D. Boggs

Boggs writes Westerns that span a wide range of times and places, as well as other more general historical fiction. His well-researched, evocative, character-driven work often depicts real-life events and features authentic period detail, vivid settings, action-packed stories, complex protagonists, and a keen sense of humor while often exploring thoughtful themes about frontier justice, culture clashes, and loyalty. Start with *Mojave*.

If you like Johnny D. Boggs:

- Richard S. Wheeler
- Elmer Kelton
- Ethan J. Wolfe
- Mary Doria Russell

Blast from the Past

Wheeler started writing Westerns in the 1970s after a long career as an editor for newspapers and books. His character-driven novels often focus on overlooked aspects of the West and feature a wry sense of humor, interesting protagonists, well-plotted stories, and evocative settings. Start with *Anything Goes*, which follows a vaudeville troupe touring rough mining towns.

Already like Clarke's work?

- John Vernon
- Johnny D. Boggs

Branching out from Modern Western Classics

Like modern Western classics but interested in trying other genres?

- Early/Golden Age Westerns (Louis L'Amour, Elmer Kelton, Max Brand, Zane Grey)
- Historical fiction with frontier settings (Allan W. Eckert, Paulette Jiles, Philipp Meyer)
- Literary Westerns (Larry McMurtry, Charles Portis, Michael McGarrity)
- Arkansas Connection Westerns (Dusty Richards)
- Classic Adventure (Jack London, Alistair MacLean)
- Suspense (Lee Child)
- Thrillers (Elmore Leonard)
- Mysteries (Robert B. Parker, William Kent Krueger, C. J. Box, Craig Johnson)
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LITERARY WESTERNS

Modern Classic Westerns sometimes deconstruct the West, but Literary Westerns almost always do so. Many Literary Westerns have historic settings, though others are neo-Westerns with contemporary settings but thoroughly Western themes and places. Unlike more traditional Westerns, which tend to be heavily plot-focused, Literary Westerns usually emphasize character and theme and often have an elegant prose style. They can also feature explicit violence and sex scenes. These Westerns have significant cross-over appeal and are often enjoyed by readers who don't otherwise follow the genre.

Larry McMurtry

Native Texan McMurtry heavily de-mythologized the West in his gritty historical and contemporary Westerns, though he readily admitted to being baffled by how much his work still contributed to re-mythologizing the time and place for a new generation of readers. His melancholy, elegiac, lyrical work is leisurely paced and features flawed, eccentric characters in a brutal setting that is vividly depicted. His work is especially praised for the realistically complex men and women it depicts. McMurtry's work can be quite dark and graphic, though it also has a sharp sense of quirky humor. Start with his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lonesome Dove*.

If you like Larry McMurtry:

- Elmer Kelton
- Conrad Richter
- A. B. Guthrie
- Ivan Doig
- Cormac McCarthy
- Terry C. Johnston
- Mary Doria Russell
- James Michener
- Pat Conroy
- John Irving

Cormac McCarthy

McCarthy started his career writing dark Southern gothic that illuminated the human condition before turning his attention to dark Westerns that do the same. His disturbing, bleak, atmospheric books feature experimental writing styles, dense lyrical prose, brutal characters, thought-provoking psychological and social commentary, and vivid, harsh settings. Start with *All the Pretty Horses*.

If you like Cormac McCarthy:

- Annie Proulx
- Larry McMurtry
- William Faulkner
- Thomas Pynchon
- Margaret Atwood
- Jesmyn Ward

Michael McGarrity

McGarrity writes both contemporary mysteries with Western settings about New Mexican lawman Kevin Kerney and gritty historic family sagas about Kerney's family that overlap as Westerns, historical fiction, and literary fiction. His historic work features complex characters, vivid settings, authentic period detail, and elegant prose. Start with *Hard Country*, the first in a trilogy about the Kerney family in 19th and 20th century New Mexico that blend everyday life on the frontier with real historical figures and events.

If you like Michael McGarrity:

- Larry McMurtry
- Elmer Kelton

Blast from the Past

Ivan Doig drew on his own personal experiences growing up in Montana for his thoughtful, heartfelt depictions of the West. Unlike many other writers, who focus on cowboys, mountain men, and lawmen and include lots of action, Doig focused on homesteaders in his character-driven, lyrical, leisurely paced work and the drama of everyday life in a beautiful but harsh land. His books feature realistic, sympathetic, and well-drawn characters and vivid, detailed settings. Start with *The Whistling Season*.

Already like Doig's work?

- Larry McMurtry
- Kent Haruf
- A. B. Guthrie Jr.
- Louise Erdrich
- Paulette Jiles
- Molly Gloss
- Wallace Stegner

Branching out from Literary Westerns?

Enjoy this genre but looking to try another one with similarities to it?

- Character-driven Early/Golden Age Westerns (Elmer Kelton, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Ray Hogan)
- Character-driven Modern Classic Westerns (Charles G. West, Johnny D. Boggs, Richard S. Wheeler)
- Literary fiction with Western themes (Louise Erdrich)
- Historical fiction with frontier settings (Paulette Jiles, Philipp Meyer)
- Character-driven Arkansas Connection Westerns (Charles Portis)
- Historical nonfiction about the American West and the frontier (T.J. Stiles, Peter Cozzens)

ARKANSAS CONNECTION WESTERNS

Arkansas's heyday as the frontier technically predates the stricter definition of Westerns as occurring after the Civil War, but numerous writers with Arkansas connections have made their name in the genre. Their work spans from traditional-esque modern classics to literary Westerns.

Dusty Richards

Richards grew up in Illinois and Arizona but moved to Arkansas after finishing college and spent the rest of his life in the Natural State, including living in Springdale for many years. He worked for years for Tyson's, taught high school at one point in Huntsville, and was an active member of the state's writing community. His work is full of authentic details, interesting characters, and exciting, action-packed plots, often with more of a focus on women characters and romance than other writers in the genre. Start with *Noble's Way*.

If you like Dusty Richards:

- Ralph Compton
- William W. Johnstone
- Peter Brandvold

Winfred Blevins

Blevins was a Little Rock native who spent his career writing mostly about mountain men and their adventures. He often objected to the classification of his work as Westerns, noting there is not a cowboy to be found among his books. He preferred instead to say his books were set in the West, and his love for the West permeates all his work. His books are also known for their well-researched details about both mountain men and Plains tribes. Start with *The Yellowstone*, the first in his The Rivers West series.

If you like Winfred Blevins:

- William W. Johnstone
- Dusty Richards

Charles Portis

Though El Dorado native Portis wrote in many genres, he is the best-known Western writer from Arkansas, thanks to his classic *True Grit*. His work is darkly funny and features eccentric, entertaining characters and sharp social critiques. Mattie Ross, his determined, unsentimental fourteen-year-old on a quest for vengeance, remains one of the most unique and memorable characters in the Western genre. Start with *True Grit*.

If you like Charles Portis:

- Larry McMurtry
- Paulette Jiles
- Walter Van Tilburg Clark
- Jack Schaefer
- Patrick DeWitt

Blast from the Past

Douglas C. Jones grew up in Northwest Arkansas and the River Valley, graduating from both Fayetteville High School and the University of Arkansas. His Westerns are full of exciting action, accurate period details, and humor. Jones's work is also known for their thoughtful depictions of Native Americans. Jones wrote several novels about the Ozarks when they were the frontier as well. Start with *Season of the Yellow Leaf* for a more conventional Western setting and *This Savage Race* if you want something closer to home.

Already like Jones's work?

- Louis L'Amour
- Larry McMurtry
- Paulette Jiles
- A. B. Guthrie
- Michael Blake

Branching out from Arkansas Connection Westerns

Enjoy this genre but looking to try another one with similarities to it?

- Early/Golden Age Westerns (Jack Schaefer)
- Historical fiction with frontier settings (Paulette Jiles)
- Literary Westerns (Larry McMurtry)
- Historical nonfiction about the American West and the frontier (T.J. Stiles)

Looking for more suggestions on what to read?

- Fill out our online Berryville Library's What Should I Read Next? form.
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf7VfQV7xaYIoTACTX7kX_TdTPHwQ1i9UnqBwVDs3gGrYcpcg/viewform?usp=sharing&ouid=116325047873771509704
- Request a reader's advisory consultation at the library. You can call, email, or stop by the library to learn more.



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