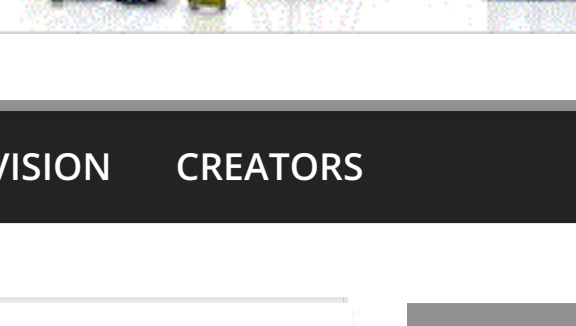




SHOP. CONNECT. ENJOY.



amazon

Privacy



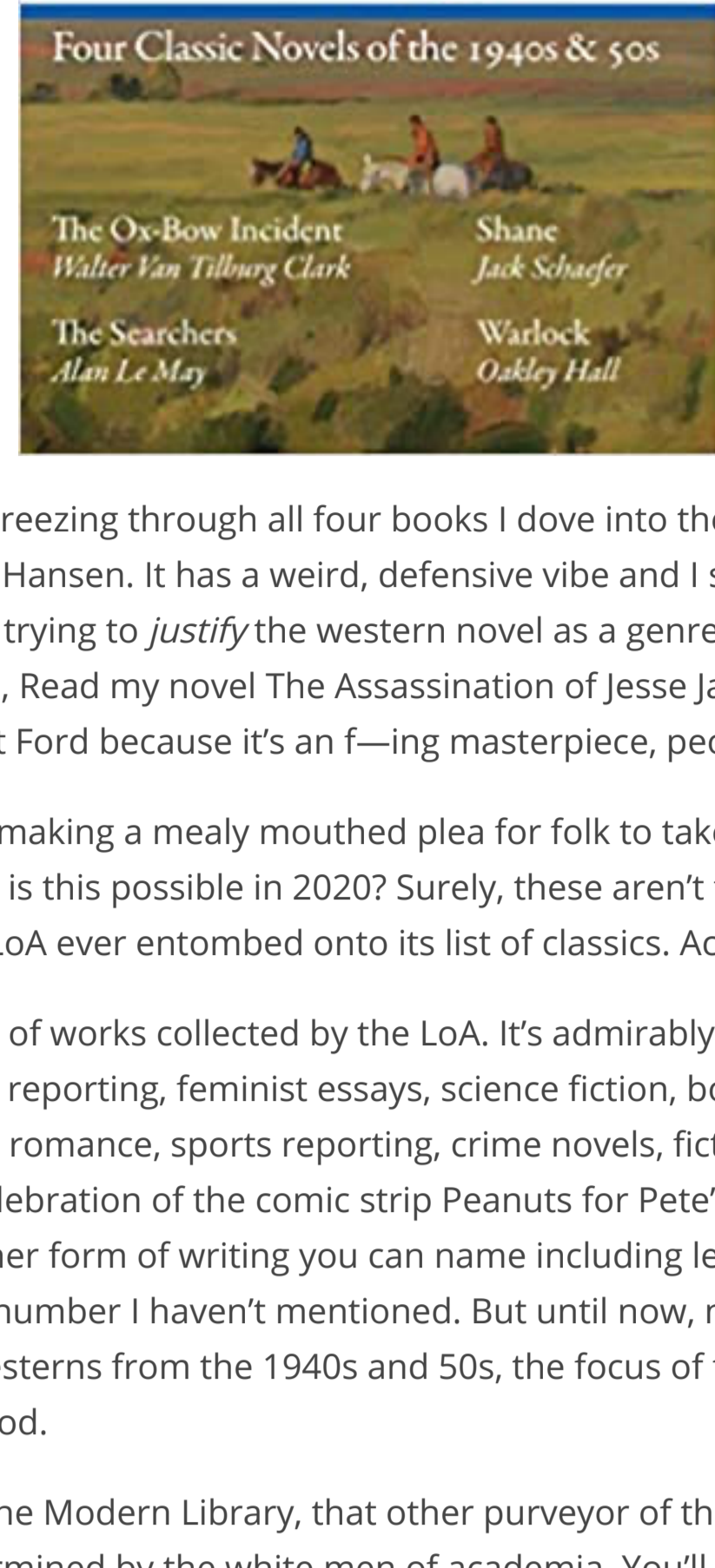
## Western Roundup

*The Library of America finally acknowledges the Western novel. What took them so long?*

December 23, 2020 Michael Giltz

What a great reading assignment! Read four classic Westerns from the heyday of that genre both in fiction and film, which the Library Of America has compiled into one volume. Indeed Hollywood had made all four novels included into movies and I'd seen three of them: The Ox-Bow Incident, Shane and The Searchers.

The odd man out was Warlock by Oakley Hall, a novel and film I'd never even heard about. A quick search showed it is a deeply admired cult classic, loved by Thomas Pynchon among others and reissued by the New York Review of Books imprint NYRB. (Fun fact: that trade paperback publisher has never put out a bad title.)



After happily breezing through all four books I dove into the introduction by author Ron Hansen. It has a weird, defensive vibe and I start to wonder, is Ron Hansen trying to *justify* the western novel as a genre? Really? All he had to say was, Read my novel The Assassination of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford because it's an f—ing masterpiece, people!

But here he is making a measly mouthed plea for folk to take the western seriously. How is this possible in 2020? Surely, these aren't the first Westerns the LoA ever entombed onto its list of classics. Actually....

Look at the list of works collected by the LoA. It's admirably wide-ranging. You've got war reporting, feminist essays, science fiction, books for kids, nature writing, romance, sports reporting, crime novels, fiction and poetry of course, a celebration of the comic strip Peanuts for Pete's sake, and most every other form of writing you can name including letters, oral history, and a number I haven't mentioned. But until now, no Westerns. Not just no Westerns from the 1940s and 50s, the focus of this set. No Westerns. Period.

Head over to the Modern Library, that other purveyor of the acknowledged canon as determined by the white men of academia. You'll find a wildly diverse list in terms of genre, but only two Westerns as far as I can tell: The Ox-Bow Incident, again, and Riders of the Purple Sage by Zane Grey, first published in 1912. You might also count some James Fenimore Cooper novels like The Last Of The Mohicans as proto-Westerns but those are more precursor than actual Western. Others don't count them so I won't either.

Is it possible the Western is the last genre of fiction that gets no respect? Well, there's always self-help. And any time a romance novel is actually good the lit establishment hastily refiles it under "fiction." Still, it hardly seems possible anyone other than Ron Hansen thinks they need to make a case for the Western, or *any* genre or type of artistry. It's all worthy, at least potentially.

Great Westerns are rare accomplishments right along with Wagner's The Ring Cycle and New Orleans jazz and the Crazy Kat comic strip and August Wilson's American Century cycle of plays, and you get the idea.

### The Ox-Bow pontificating

But what about these particular four novels? All are fun to read and the collection coincidentally gets stronger and stronger with each novel. After reading The Ox-Bow Incident by Walter Van Tilburg Clark I was tickled to discover in Hansen's essay that the author was a schoolteacher. No surprise there! The novel has a schoolmarm-ish air as character after character soliloquizes in lengthy, noble speeches neatly detailing what they believe and why. Heck, the novel even begins with riders coming into town and passing an abandoned church. Heavy-handed symbolism? Check!

In the story, two men are swept up in a posse that soon degenerates into a lynch mob determined to punish someone—anyone—for the cattle rustling that's plagued the area. The film version stars Henry Fonda and Harry Morgan of the TV show M\*A\*S\*H. It improves on the novel in every possible way. The novel shows the dilemma these two men face; the movie makes you feel it in your bones as it relentlessly turns a polite novel of ideas into a gut-wrenching morality play.

### Come back, Shane

Shane by Jack Schaefer is a little better and the movie made from it captures the novel very well. Unfortunately, that means the novel is just as weirdly hero-worshipping as the film. Sure, in the film that hero worship of the "real man" Shane is exemplified by the kid. ("Shane! Shane, come back!") But in both film and novel, every other person recognizes Shane as a breed apart, a man among men to an embarrassing degree. The decent, tough, brave-when-he-has-to-be rancher is just as awed and admiring of Shane as the little boy. Middle-aged men tongue-tied around Joe DiMaggio have nothing on the guys in this novel.

I'm happy to read homo-eroticism into just about anything, but can't quite bring myself to do it here. The men and women of the novel don't lust after Shane exactly, played in the film by Alan Ladd. It's pure hero worship through and through. As someone who never put a poster of an athlete or movie star on their bedroom wall, I can't relate. But others can. Most people consider both the film and novel rare classics, with the Western Writers of America naming Shane the best Western of all time.

### The Searchers

I'll take The Searchers by Alan Le May any day. The novel and film are both major works, with people especially revering the movie as one of the all-time great films and the masterpiece of director John Ford and star John Wayne. Wayne plays Ethan, a character maniacally obsessed with rescuing a girl/young woman taken captive by savages. He's joined in this years-long quest by Martin, a younger and more naive man who realizes Ethan is so poisonously prejudiced against all Native Americans that he'll kill the girl if she's gone "native." By the end, Martin stays by Ethan just so he can try and protect her not from the Indians but from Ethan, her would-be savior.

I could spend hours discussing the differing strategies of the film and book. Like all the novels here, it treats any characters not white dismissively or indifferently. That surely reflects the white people of the 1800s and while I want novels told from the Indian and Mexican and female perspectives, it seems unsurprising a novel embedded in the mindset of the white invaders wouldn't be bothered. And make no mistake, Ethan is a frightfully nasty character. It's almost shocking John Wayne agreed to a play him. Saying Ethan is an anti-hero barely covers it, and both the film and novel put him in his place in intriguing ways.

### Discovering 'Warlock'

Finally, as sometimes happens, the novel I never heard of proves the best. Warlock by Oakley Hall is a fictional retelling of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. Hall uses different names because he doesn't want anyone moaning over his lack of historical accuracy.

Like The Ox-Bow Incident, it wrestles with matters of justice. Like Shane, certain men simply stand out as more of what everyone else wants to be or jealously and desire and self-loathing, no tangle so than in the person being worshipped. Shane himself never seemed perturbed by the idolatry of the men around him. And like The Searchers, the violence and tangled plotting of the characters is largely self-destructive, just more all-encompassing too.

It's a great book and surely belongs on any shelf of the best novels. Right alongside Valdez Is Coming by Elmore Leonard and Riders Of The Purple Sage (which saves its animus for Mormons instead of Indigenous Americans) and The Searchers and Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry. Oh and The Assassination of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford. That's an f—ing masterpiece too.

### You May Also Like



The Sisters Brothers' Brings An Arthouse Sensibility To The Western

September 21, 2018



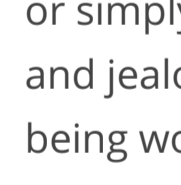
Aloha Rodeo

June 5, 2019



Classics Corner: 'Hard Times'

November 6, 2018



Tags: Alan Ladd, John Wayne, Shane, The Library of America, The Ox-Bow Incident, The Searchers, Warlock

### ← Is It Time To Kill King Arthur?

WW84: Wonder Woman's Weak 80s Adventure →

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

### Leave a Reply

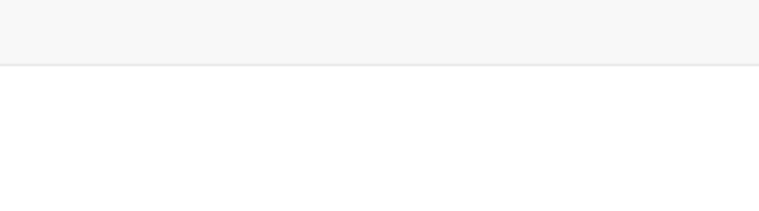
Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Comment

Name \*

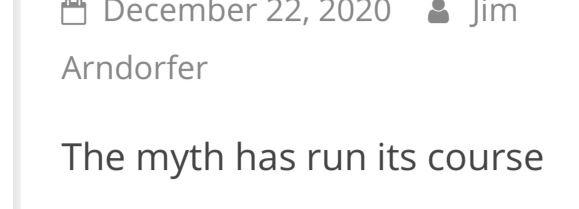
Email \*

Website



Post Comment

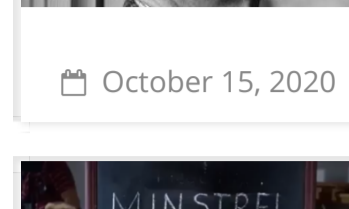
### Featured Stories



Is It Time To Kill King Arthur?

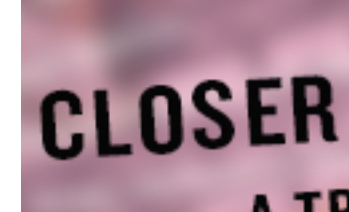
December 22, 2020 Jim Arndorfer

The myth has run its course



The Luke Skywalker Problem

December 20, 2020



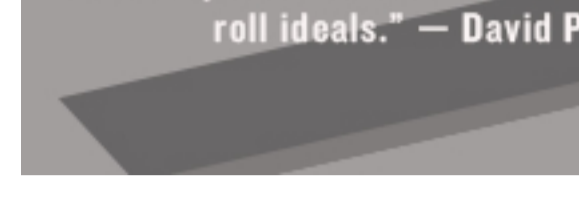
The Strange Fate of Jordan Peterson

October 15, 2020



Six Classic Films that are Just a Little Bit Racist

June 15, 2020



CLOSER TO HEAVEN

A TRIBUTE TO ED ACKERSON

Ed devoted his life to nurturing a creative community that reflected the best of our roll ideals. — David Poe

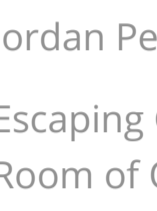
Subscribe to our mailing list

Subscribe

### Social



Twitter



Facebook

### Recent Posts

WW84: Wonder Woman's Weak 80s Adventure

Western Roundup

Is It Time To Kill King Arthur?

The World Needs 'Adventureman'

'Inside Story', or is Martin Amis Just Hedging?

### Recent Comments

Michael Brown On The World Needs 'Adventureman'

Evan On The Strange Fate of Jordan Peterson

Escaping Guru On An Escape Room of One's Own

Pun Nio On We're On A Boat

Nurse with Cats On The Strange Fate of Jordan Peterson



REVOLUTIONARY NEW SNEAKERS



LEARN MORE



We're here for you.

Contact our Autism Response Team

1-888-AUTISM2 (1-888-288-4762)

En Español: 1-888-772-9050

help@autismspeaks.org