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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

MAY HIGHLIGHT

RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE BY ZANE GREY

Young and wealthy Mormon Jane Withersteen is being persecuted by her community elders for her friendship with Gentiles and refusal to marry Elder Tull.

Gunfighter Jim Lassiter rides into the fray, looking for the men who killed his sister Milly. He decides to help Jane protect her ranch, but the odds are stacked against them.

Jane and Lassiter must navigate religion and vengeance against a powerful enemy - and they may not be able to win.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

Pearl Zane Grey was born in Zanesville, Ohio in 1872 before moving to Pennsylvania for college. He lived a significant portion of his life in Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania before retiring to Altadena, California in 1920. He died in 1939 from heart failure and is buried in Lackawaxen.

Zane Grey's love of the outdoors was the seed of his writing. He struggled with his mental health, likely having bipolar disorder. Spending time on rigorous hikes and other outdoor activities helped him cope from a young age. (He also strictly avoided alcohol.) He had a tumultuous relationship with his wife, Dolly; though he had a genuine love and appreciation for her, he also carried on many affairs.

Like many other writers, Grey started out in another career before finding success as an author. He went to the University of Pennsylvania on a baseball scholarship and was torn between pursuing writing or a professional baseball career before he veered back to the practical path of being a dentist. Fortunately for Western lovers, he found dentistry so tedious that he wrote in the evenings to offset the boredom of his work, starting out with nonfiction work for outdoor magazines.

His wife Dolly was his editor and greatest critic, keeping him balanced. It is not likely that we would know Zane Grey the author without Dolly; not only did she manage all of his business affairs and negotiate his contracts, she used her inheritance to support them so that Zane could quit his dentistry and write full-time. She even funded the publication of his first three novels after they were turned down by publishers. With her guidance and support, he was able to become one of the first millionaire authors, popular with both female and male readers.

His first novels, *Betty Zane* (1903), *The Spirit of the Border* (1906), and *The Last Trail* (1908) were based on the stories of his ancestors in Ohio. (Betty Zane was his great-grandfather's sister, who saved Fort Henry during the siege of 1782.) His subsequent novels all took inspiration from real trips he took out West, taking copious notes of the scenery, activities, and dialogue he heard. Many of his characters were based on real people he met or learned about on his trips. (For example, the villains in *The Riders of the Purple Sage* were based on prominent early Mormon John D. Lee, who was excommunicated and later convicted of mass murder for his role in the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre.)

Grey was a natural and prolific storyteller. He published about one a year, but when he died his publisher had over 20 more novels to publish. Though his writing isn't as technically strong as some other authors in this year's theme, he drew readers into his stories in a

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unique way. He was able to combine highly romantic, idealistic stories in a vividly described Western landscape and balance the hard reality of what he saw with what he imagined it could be. His love of the West, and of the stories themselves, shone through and contributed to his enduring legacy. (His son, Loren Grey, also grew up to be a writer. First it was professionally in his career as an educational psychologist, and later as the author of a series of Westerns featuring Lassiter, in tribute.)

Riders of the Purple Sage is considered the template-maker for the Western genre. Western novels have their roots in the dime novels of the 1860s, with the first 'official' entry into the genre considered to be Owen Wister's *The Virginian* in 1902. In a way, it is the father of the entire genre, because Grey was heavily influenced by Wister's style, and *Riders* ended up launching the genre into mainstream popularity. (Interestingly, *Riders* did not crack the Top 10 Bestsellers list in either 1912 or 1913; it took several years before Grey started to dominate the bestseller lists.) Once Grey started to dominate the bestseller lists, publishers began giving other authors like Max Brand and Ernest Haycox a chance.

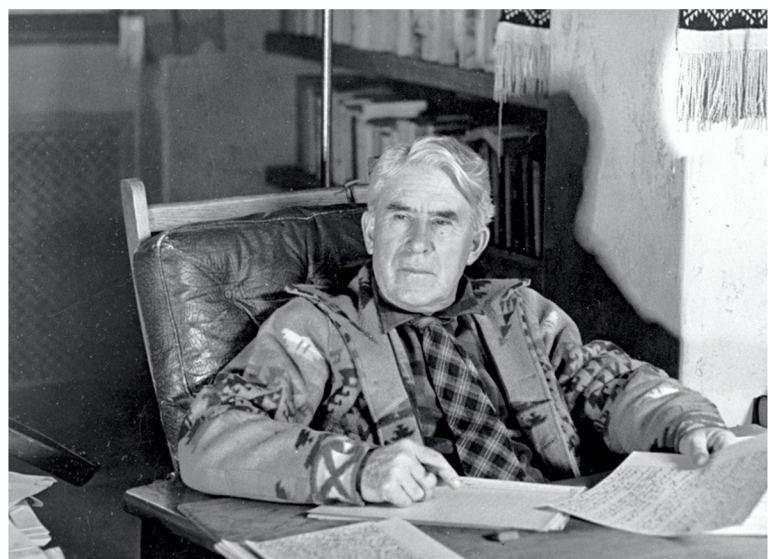
Riders of the Purple Sage was a bit of a hard sell for the publishing world at the time, which was trending towards realism (objective, detailed, focused on social realities) instead of the romanticism which defined Grey's work (emphasis on the emotional experience and nature). However, his timing was spot on for the film industry, where multiple books were made into films. *Riders* has been filmed five times, including the initial 1918 silent film; the most recent version was in 1996 and stars Ed Harris and Amy Madigan. It has also been adapted into a successful opera.

Though the "standard" Western genre has dramatically faded in popularity today, Western themes have splintered and blended into new frontiers, such as the SciFi Western (*Star Wars*, *Firefly*) or detective Western (C.J. Box's Joe Pickett or Craig Johnson's Walt Longmire). Newly published Westerns also center different archetypal heroes, often highlighting overlooked perspectives of minorities.



“REALITY IS DEATH TO ME. I SIMPLY
CAN'T STAND LIFE AS IT IS.”

—ZANE GREY



FUN FACTS

- The 1996 version of *Riders of the Purple Sage* starred Henry Thomas as Bern Venters (who played Elliot Taylor in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*).
- The purple sage of the book title is most likely basin sage, *Artemisia tridentata*. (There are other purple sages, but basin sage is dominant in Utah, the location of the book.) The purple color is only viewed from the aerial perspective, like from on horseback; otherwise the plant has silvery-green leaves.
- Surprise Valley is modeled on Tsegi Canyon in Navajo County, Arizona.
- Zane Grey loved fishing and as one of the first celebrity authors popularized big-game fishing.
- Pennsylvania and Ohio both host museums dedicated to Zane Grey; the one in Lackawaxen is operated by the National Park Service and the one in Zanesville is operated by a local nonprofit, The National Road and Zane Grey Museum. His final home in California was on the National Register of Historic Places but was unfortunately destroyed by the January 2025 Eaton Fire.
- Grey once wrote a twenty-page rant about the uselessness of critics, which Dolly managed to convince him not to publish.

SOURCES & MORE

Articles

- Grey, Zane. *Zane Grey Papers*. Brigham Young University. https://archives.lib.byu.edu/repositories/ltpsc/resources/upb_mss6081
- National Park Service. *Zane Grey*. September 13, 2025. <https://www.nps.gov/upde/learn/historyculture/zanegrey.htm>
- National Road and Zane Grey Museum. <https://www.nationalroadandzanegreymuseum.org/about>
- Outdoors SW. *Zane Grey's Arizona and beyond ...* Retrieved April 5, 2026. <https://www.outdoorssw.com/zane-grey-the-man-and-the-myths>
- *Riders of the Purple Sage Opera*. <https://www.ridersopera.com/>

Books

- Grey, Loren. *Zane Grey: A Photographic Odyssey*. Taylor Publishing. 1985
- May, Stephen J. *Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage: The Real Story behind The Wild West's Greatest Tale*. TwoDot, 2021.

Films

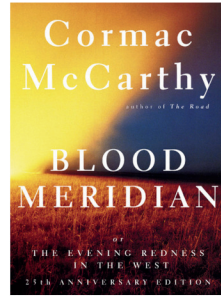
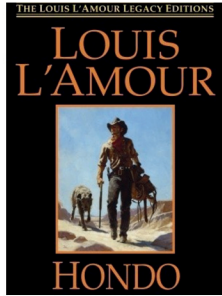
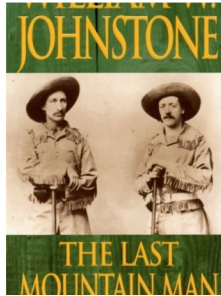
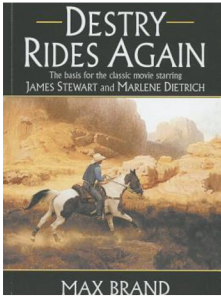
- *Riders of the Purple Sage: The Making of a Western Opera*. 2021. (available on Kanopy)
- *Riders of the Purple Sage*. 1996. (Also 1918, 1925, 1931, 1941).



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

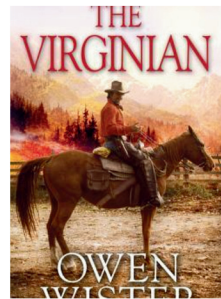
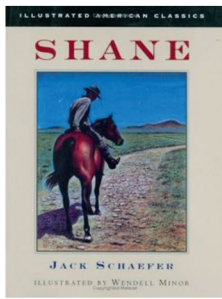
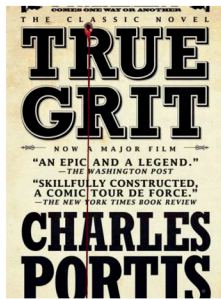
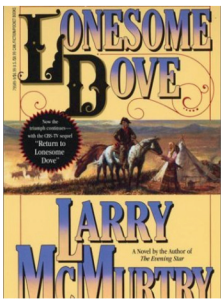
- When Jane first meets Lassiter, the 'Mormon Killer', she decides to use her feminine wiles to turn him from his murderous path. Is this exploitative? If so, who is being exploited? Why do you think the use of feminine persuasion such a common theme in Westerns (and other genres)?
- As Jane gets to know Lassiter better, "the more she respected him, and the greater her respect the harder it became to lend herself to mere coquetry." What does this say about how the author views respect, love, and relationships?
- Jane sees "a murderer who dwarfed in gentleness, patience, and love any man she had ever known" in Lassiter, and this, along with her persecution for refusing to marry, causes her to question her Mormon beliefs. Yet, she does not lose her faith in God. What does this reveal about how the author sees religion? What does the story reveal about your own religious biases?
- How did Jane's treatment of the Gentiles in her community come across to you? Were there contradictions in her beliefs and her actions? What about her action regarding her marriage prospects or her ranch? Describe how you perceived the tensions (or lack thereof). Did the ending of the novel resolve those tensions?
- Discuss how the storyline of Bess (the Masked Rider) was handled, particularly in relation to Venters. Do you feel that Grey handled this well? Was there any part of it that diminished the romance of it for you?
- Why do you think that "The Riders of the Purple Sage" became the 'template' of the genre? What elements, to you, make a Western? Why do you think the traditional genre has waned in popularity?
- Stephen May noted in "Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage" that "How men behaved in relation to women challenged Grey all his life, and it proved to be one of the most difficult hurdles in his fiction." (p. 7) In what way did that tension come through in "Riders of the Purple Sage"?
- Many readers of Zane Grey accuse him of having "purple prose" - overly ornate, flowery writing that draws excessive attention to itself, often hindering clarity and pacing. Would you agree with this sentiment? Why or why not? Do you think that there may be differences over time to what readers view as purple prose (particularly in the post-TV era)?
- Zane Grey once said "Reality is death to me. I simply can't stand life as it is." How do you think this sentiment came through in his writing? Does that statement resonate with you, a reader? If so, how do you cope with not wanting "life as it is"?
- In "My Answer to the Critics", Grey wrote that his readers knew he was true to the settings of his novels, claiming that the readers should be the ones commenting objectively to his novels. The critics "do not know". Do you agree? Is there a role for professional critics, or is the voice of the reader more important? How can the voice of the reader be heard?

READ-ALIKES - RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE



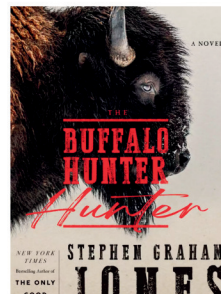
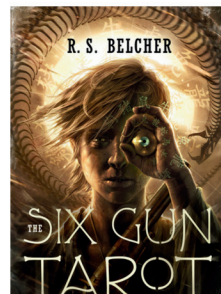
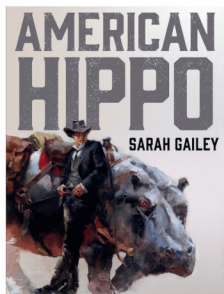
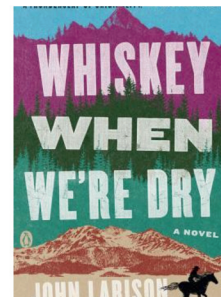
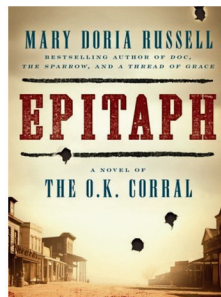
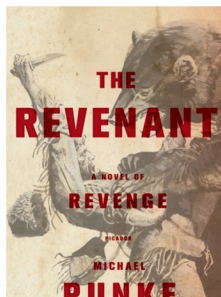
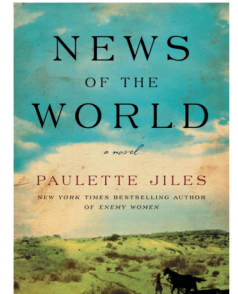
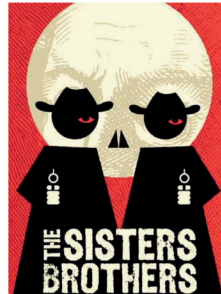
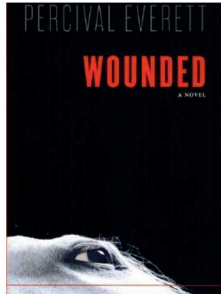
Published before 1985:

- *Destry Rides Again* by Max Brand
- *The Last Mountain Man* by William W. Johnstone
- *Hondo* by Louis L'Amour
- *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy
- *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry
- *True Grit* by Charles Portis
- *Shane* by Jack Schaefer
- *The Virginian* by Owen Wister



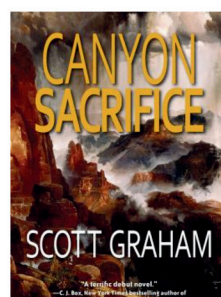
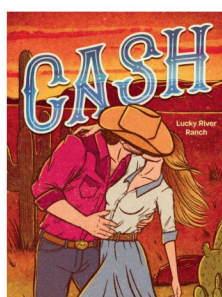
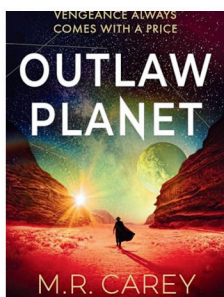
Published since 2000:

- *The Heart in Winter* by Kevin Barry
- *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick deWitt
- *Wounded* by Percival Everett
- *News of the World* by Paulette Jiles
- *Whiskey When We're Dry* by John Larison
- *The Revenant* by Michael Punke
- *Epitaph* by Mary Doria Russell
- *House of Purple Cedar* by Tim Tingle



Blended Genres:

- *Open Season* by C.J. Box
- *The Six-Gun Tarot* by R.S. Belcher
- *Outlaw Planet* by M.R. Carey
- *American Hippo* by Sarah Gailey
- *Canyon Sacrifice* by Scott Graham
- *The Buffalo Hunter* by Stephen Graham Jones
- *Berserker* by Emmy Laybourne
- *Cash* by Jessica Peterson

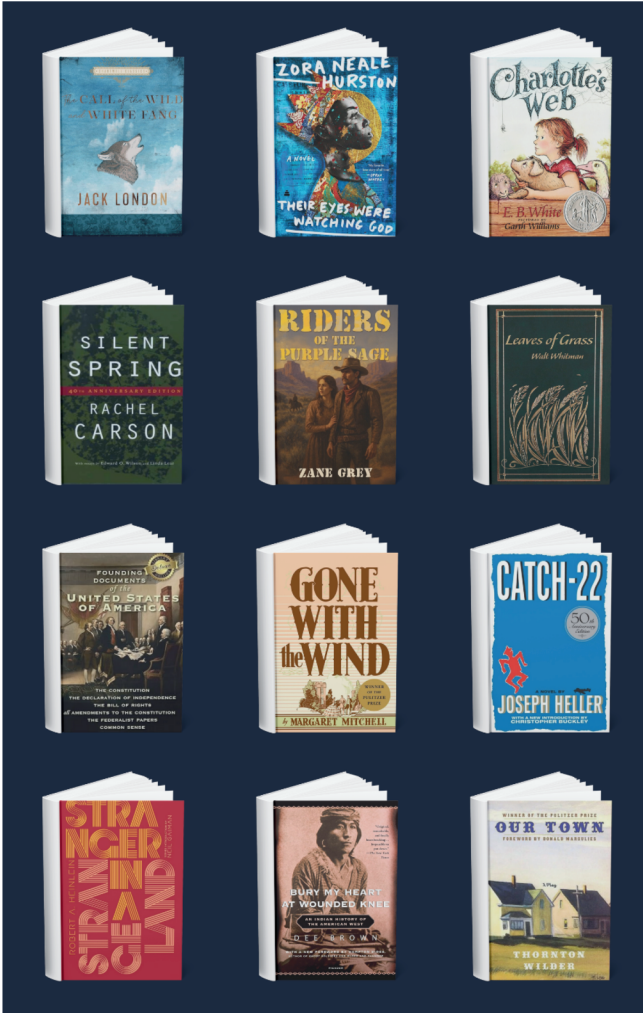


UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

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