

BARTON

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Dare to Know

Contemporary Westerns

A subset in which stories occur after the beginning of the twentieth century but still use the themes, archetypes, and tropes of traditional and revisionist Westerns. Contemporary Westerns may compare and contrast with older works, demonstrating the similarities and differences that have transpired since the Wild West era and the time of the classic Westerns (1930s-1960s). The vast Western landscape remains a central character of the story, as are the dangers that continue to threaten interlopers. This subset can examine the morality of violence and vengeance, emphasizing their ruinous impacts and consequences to the culpable and the innocent alike. Protagonists who actively repress or are unable to articulate loss and grief, either one a common theme, may convey their feelings in violent and vengeful acts that are key plot points driving the narrative, and have tragic consequences for themselves and/or others.

Similar to their antecedents, these contemporary stories may explore the theme of civilization versus wilderness but in a modern setting, a period in which the differences between tradition—family farms, small ranches, and a relationship with the land—and modernity—technology, corporatism, and urbanization—are acute. Some characters, while living in modern times, remain unchanged and struggle in a world that has rejected their Old West perspectives. These stories emphasize the passing of an era. Protagonists may possess a moral complexity and question themselves, their purpose in life, and/or the right and wrong of modern issues. Antagonists may be either troubled anti-heroes with righteous motivations and questionable methods, or evil yet multifaceted villains with understandable, although not excusable, reasons for their violence and lawlessness. Howard Breslin’s “Bad Time at Honda” (1947), H. L. Davis’s *Winds of Morning* (1952), Edward Abbey’s *The Brave Cowboy* (1956), Larry McMurtry’s *Horseman, Pass By* (1961) and *The Last Picture Show* (1966), Louis L’Amour’s *The Broken Gun* (1966), and William Decker’s *To Be a Man* (1967) are classic examples.

Common Elements

Descriptions of nature
Isolated ranches
Small towns
Sense of community
Lack of formal rules

Instinctive notions of right and wrong
Loyalty
Search for justice
Redemption

Consequences of one’s actions
Native American spirituality

Modern Literary Examples

<i>All the Pretty Horses</i> (1992) by Cormac McCarthy
<i>Cold Lake</i> (2014) by Jeff Carson
<i>El Paso</i> (2016) by Winston Groom
<i>The Good Old Boys</i> (1978) by Elmer Kelton
<i>The Hot Kid</i> (2006) by Elmore Leonard
<i>The Last Cattle Drive</i> (1977) by Robert Day

<i>On Swift Horses</i> (2019) by Shannon Pufahl
<i>The Round House</i> (2012) by Louise Erdrich
<i>The Sorrow Hand</i> (2018) by Dwight Holing
<i>Texasville</i> (1987) by Larry McMurtry
<i>The Time It Never Rained</i> (1973) by Elmer Kelton