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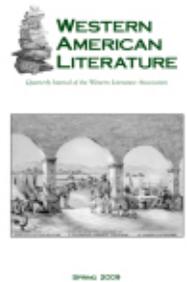
*Modernism and Mildred Walker* (review)

Mary Clearman Blew

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(Review)

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*The Solace of Open Spaces* (1984) the insertion of a female subject into “both the masculine space of Wyoming sheep ranches and the masculine domain of autobiography” nonetheless reproduces a stereotypical racial dominance the text attempts to disguise through presenting a historical account of the geography of Wyoming that “blends seamlessly into a naturalized process of (peaceful) Euroamerican settlement” (16, 18). The emotional and physical violence of Kittredge’s memoir precludes it from any description of peacefulness, and yet, Finnegan argues, the critique of western Euroamerican masculinity in *Hole in the Sky* rests on an underlying romanticization of classic notions of western manhood personified especially by the ranch hands Kittredge worships as a boy and Kittredge’s own shame at never quite living up to their manly ideals.

Finnegan’s discussion of all of these western texts in a postmodern context and her insights about regionalism, narrative structure, and autobiography make this volume an important contribution to the study of western American literature.

***Modernism and Mildred Walker.***

**By Carmen Pearson.**

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 218 pages, \$40.00.

**Reviewed by Mary Clearman Blew**

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Mildred Walker, who wrote thirteen novels, including a young-adult novel and the posthumously published *The Orange Tree* (2006), was well enough recognized during her lifetime to be nominated for the National Book Award for *The Body of a Young Man* in 1960. Her reputation faded, however, and after the appearance of *If a Lion Could Talk* in 1970, her novels went out of print, remembered mainly by a handful of Montana writers who had been influenced early in their careers by Walker’s best-known work, *Winter Wheat* (1944). But beginning with *Winter Wheat* in 1992, the University of Nebraska Press began reissuing Walker’s novels, followed by Ripley Hugo’s literary biography of her mother, *Writing for Her Life: The Novelist Mildred Walker*, in 2003. Now, with Carmen Pearson’s *Modernism and Mildred Walker*, comes the first full-length critical study of Walker’s novels.

To refute the view that Walker is best understood as a regionalist writer and to make the case that her novels deserve greater critical understanding and appreciation, Pearson points out that only four of the novels are set in Montana and argues that the modernist literature Walker was reading and teaching at Wells College in New York after 1955 heightened her under-

standing of her literary heritage and led to a new complexity in her later novels that, ironically, diminished her popularity. In support of this thesis, Pearson presents a far-reaching examination of modernism and discusses Walker's themes of economic needs, of warfare, of women's changing roles, of evolving technology, and of movement and displacement, along with her adaptations of modernist aesthetics in her literary style, concluding that "today, her novels remain relevant and infused with the energy of compromise and the language of movement: her modernism" (177).

A counter-argument might be that, rather than infusing her novels with energy through her reading in modernism, Walker larded her later novels with a ponderous weight of literary borrowings that robbed them of the freshness and spontaneity of her earlier work (some sections in *If a Lion Could Talk*, for example, come perilously near a parody of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1902], with the upper Missouri River in Montana standing in for the Congo River and missionary wife Harriet Ryegate as an unlikely Marlow). Also, as Pearson notes, the public's taste in literature changed during Walker's career. Today it is necessary to read beyond Walker's gentility, her ladylike avoidances, her insistence on the nobility of her characters, in order to appreciate her finest work: *Winter Wheat* and *The Curlew's Cry* (1955). In this respect, Pearson, in her close reading and analysis of style, has done Walker a great service and also a service to those in search of a far-reaching study of modernism and its adaptations in the literature of the American West.

***Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space.***  
**Edited by Susan Kollin.**

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. 268 pages, \$19.95.

**Reviewed by Alex Hunt**  
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Some of the finest work in western American literary and cultural studies is coming to us through the University of Nebraska Press's Postwestern Horizons series, and Susan Kollin's *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space* is a collection of superior scholarship. Kollin's introduction to the volume, drawing on examples including W.'s rhetorical western blunders and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), does an excellent job of explaining the "postal" state of western American studies, and her collection features a number of essays that not only illustrate but no doubt will continue to shape the field.