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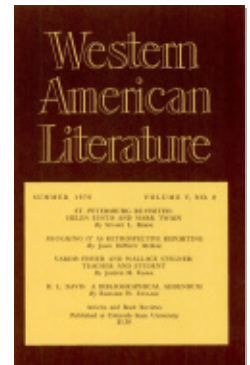
True Grit by Charles Portis (review)

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True Grit. By Charles Portis. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968. 224 pages. \$4.95.)

True Grit, Charles Portis' second novel, is an important contribution to the genre of the western novel. This is so primarily because it is what might be called a "reader's" novel. That is, it is not only enjoyable—and fast-moving—to read, but it is also satirically believable as well. The novel succeeds, very early, in convincing the reader that it actually was written by its protagonist-narrator, Mattie Ross—a sixty-five year old spinster, missing one arm from the very adventure she is recounting, who is managing a bank in a small town in Arkansas.

Portis' command of the rhetorical equipage necessary to convince the reader so completely of Mattie's authenticity is formidable indeed. In order to establish that Mattie is the writer, as well as the narrator and central character of the novel, he allows for her very personality to be revealed so completely that, before he is one quarter through the work, the reader feels as though he both knows, and likes, Mattie Ross. The reader accepts Mattie Ross both as writer-narrator and as a plausible character. She comes to life for the reader, partly because she is full of human faults. The important thing, however, is that these faults are precisely suited to a sixty-five year old spinster recalling her memories of the most exciting time in her life; the time she set out to avenge the death of her father at the hands of Tom Chaney—a no-good, a lout, and a scoundrel. Mattie's faults are precisely those one expects to find in a woman of her age and temperament; she is petulant, she is "rock-ribbed religious," she is self-righteous, she is highly moral (although the only activity she really finds immoral is sexual), and she is firmly and completely convinced that when she kills Tom Chaney it will be because God has directed her to him and helped her to hold the gun. In short, she is a delightful old woman, as she writes about her life fifty years earlier.

Moreover, the young Mattie, almost—but not quite—a different character than her aging narrator-self, possesses exactly the characteristics that one would expect to find in a frontier girl who has been taught to "trust in God and everything will come out right." The young Mattie is headstrong, she is impetuous, she is unafraid of anything except failing in her mission to avenge the death of her father. She is crafty, shrewd, and a careful business-woman. In short, she possesses all the "frontier virtues" so long associated with the protagonists of western novels. In Mattie Ross, however, they become ironic. There is just enough hyperbole at work in *True Grit* to provide the irony Portis seeks, but it is restrained enough to avoid becoming grotesque. For this reason, the reader sees the novel as meaningful as well as funny, or satirical. Mattie, in fact, seems to be everything the "hero" of a western novel should be. The ironic, and significant, difference is that she is not

a twenty-five or thirty year old man—cowboy, sheriff, or miner. She is a little girl, so her “frontier virtues” are ironic.

In addition to providing the reader with such delightful, and believable, characters as the elder and the younger Mattie Ross, Portis provides at least two other characters who satirize the stereotype western novel. They do so with respect rather than maliciousness, however. These two characters are Rueben “Rooster” Cogburn, and a man called, simply, LaBoef. Each of these is, in his own way, a parody of a “Western Hero.”

Rooster Cogburn is fat, in poor physical health, dishonest, a bit cowardly, given to excessive drinking, mean, low, and (in the words of the man who refers Mattie to him as a likely candidate to help her find Tom Chaney) “He is a pitiless man, double-tough, and fear don’t enter into his thinking. He loves to pull a cork.” (p. 23.) Mattie decides he is just the man to help her get Tom Chaney, for he has, in her own words, “true grit”.

LaBoef, on the other hand, is young, handsome, brave, and gallant. He seems, as the reader first becomes acquainted with him through Mattie, to be one character who represents goodness, justice, fair play, and masculine frontier virtue. Mattie, and the reader, soon discover, however, that his only motive in tracking down Chaney is the bounty currently on the members of Lucky Ned Pepper’s Gang, with whom Chaney has recently thrown in his lot.

In this way, then, by drawing satirical, but at the same time believable, characters, Portis has written a highly readable and important western novel. As it satirizes the western novel as a genre, it simultaneously imparts to that genre a new and unforgettable set of characters, led by Mattie Ross. Mattie Ross is certainly a new kind of western protagonist, and a valid one.

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Six-Horse Hitch. By Janice Holt Giles. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969. 436 pages, \$6.95.)

The broad category of “historical fiction” offers a number of choices to the novelist with respect to the handling of his materials. A central problem concerns the proportion of history, authentic detail, and real characters to bring into the novel—and the manner in which such elements of historical actuality will be blended imaginatively into the book’s fictional aspects. One need only observe the differing approaches on the art of Willa Cather in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Kenneth Roberts in *Northwest Passage*, Stewart Edward White in *The Long Rifle*, A. B. Guthrie in *The Big Sky*, and Vardis Fisher in *Children of God* to realize the wide variations which exist in concepts of what the historical novel is and how it achieves its unique