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New Essays on Clint Eastwood by Leonard Engel (review)

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Book Reviews

Leonard Engel, *New Essays on Clint Eastwood*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2012. 313 pp. \$24.95.

This collection of seventeen essays is a significant contribution to scholarship on Clint Eastwood, building upon the scholarship of Drucilla Cornell in *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity* (2009) and the first set of Eastwood essays collected and edited by Leonard Engel (2007). While Engel's earlier book concentrated mostly on Eastwood's big-screen Westerns, this one is broader in scope, including examinations of early television work and of recent films such as *Invictus* (2009), *Hereafter* (2010), and *J. Edgar* (2011). As these essays demonstrate, Eastwood is a thoughtful, daring, and ever-evolving artist who should also be seen as "undeniably rounded" (55).

Eastwood's artistic range and depth are clearly on display in these essays, and students of Westerns will find new insights. Edward Rielly, in "Rawhide to Pale Rider: The Maturation of Clint Eastwood," shows that Eastwood embraced the Western for its thematic possibilities, refusing to write off the genre as cliché bound. Other essays by Craig Rinne, Stanley Orr, and Philippa Gates bravely take up *Unforgiven* (1992), despite its status as the "most analyzed of Eastwood's films" (140).

Masculinity reverberates through Eastwood's films, and the contributors to this volume reveal how Eastwood consistently undermines easy notions of what it means to be a man. Cornell writes in her foreword that Eastwood's movies both foreground "[t]he undoing of masculine hubris" and "engage with all the complexities of what it might mean to be a good man" (x). Eastwood's interest in the fraught connection between living as a man and living up to society's ideas about what men should be is suggested in almost every essay in this collection. Writing about *Bronco Billy* (1980), Dennis

Rothermel reveals Eastwood's rejection of "the juvenile fantasy of masculinity and courage" (101). Arguing for a view of *Mystic River* (2003) as a tragedy, Robert Merrill and John L. Simons see the film's determinism in a complex nexus of childhood sexual abuse, adult murder, and the received masculine roles of detective and violent avenger. In "Lies of Our Fathers: Mythology and Artifice in Eastwood's Cinema" William Beard focuses on Eastwood's skeptical view of the individualistic male hero. Beard demonstrates brilliantly how *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) rejects the feel-goodism of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001) by depicting "how the sausage of charismatic patriotism is made" (245). One crucial element in this manufactured patriotism, Beard shows, is the idea of individual male soldiers who always act out "the reassuring spectacle of buddies risking their lives for one another" (240). Finally, to take one last example, John M. Gurlie and Engel analyze *Gran Torino* (2008) as a family film in which the central character matures from loner to a man invested in the needs of others, a community not of "bloodline kin." In this film Gurlie and Engel see Eastwood "passing the keys of American manhood to immigrant sons of another race" through the conviction that male self-sacrifice, a defining feature of manliness, can be broadened to include not just one's buddies but "all of humanity" (275).

As a whole this collection should prove valuable not only to students of Eastwood but also to readers interested in how America's films speak about, and sometimes against, the nation's dominant values.

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Michael C. Steiner, *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2013. 328 pp. \$39.95.

Editor and contributor Michael C. Steiner declares that "a basic purpose" of *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West* "is to expand our understanding of western regionalism and American regionalism in general by uncovering a woefully neglected intellectual tradition. . . . The radical regionalists in this book paved