



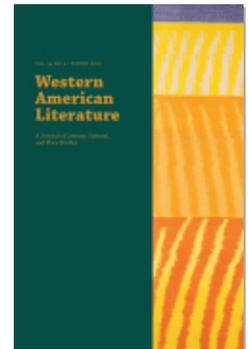
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*Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Violence in
Westerns and the Law* by Justin A. Joyce (review)

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timism: Detaching from Anthropocentrism and Grieving Our Fathers in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*” deeply impressed me, making me rethink not only my understanding of that excellent film but helping me think more seriously about the role of grieving in relation to our climate crisis. Certainly western American literature has its share of grieving and sense of loss, beginning at least as early as James Fenimore Cooper and continuing through T. C. Boyle’s *A Friend of the Earth*. Knox-Russell’s arguments about grief are applicable to many literary texts, especially the subgenre of contemporary fiction labeled “cli-fi” (climate fiction). Although not usually set in space, these science fiction works have much in common with their Space Western counterparts in their depictions of postapocalyptic landscapes. That is especially true of cli-fi film and television series. Likewise I noted in the margin of the table of contents that Lisa Ottum’s chapter on “the power of negative thinking” makes an important argument about dejection and setbacks in this know-nothing Trumpian moment.

Although the fourth section is subtitled “Politics and Pedagogy,” only one chapter focuses on classroom practice and feels somewhat tacked on rather than an integral part of the book. Sarah Jaquette Ray does raise important issues, however, about the emotional toll that some environmental humanities courses may take on their students, especially those focused on climate change or environmental justice.

Part one of *Affective Ecocriticism* and its introduction alone are worth the price of admission. This is one of only a few new books I have felt compelled to add to my library.

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Justin A. Joyce, *Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Violence in Westerns and the Law*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2018. 248 pp. Cloth, \$120.

In *Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Violence in Westerns and the Law* Justin A. Joyce demonstrates how what he calls

“paradigm shifts” in US legal regulations governing gun use have influenced the representation of gun violence in Westerns. His argument is informed by Michel Foucault’s theory of modern disciplinary practices that have led to the formation of subjects characterized by their capability of self-control. Joyce perceives the gunman in a Western movie as an epitome of such a subject. The gunman’s self-restraint is key to how Westerns have defined justifiable gun violence and its necessary conditions. Depictions of justifiable gun violence in Westerns tellingly parallel the major changes of the legal doctrine sanctioning its use, the doctrine’s fulcrum being the idea of self-defense. Its modifications over time reveal an increasing juridical tendency toward the conception of self-defense based on an individual’s recognition of threat. Joyce does not stop there, however; having established a connection between the impact of a series of breakthrough court rulings and the Western’s changing firearm iconography, he offers a theory of the evolution of the genre, the primary criteria of which are the representations of justified gun violence and corresponding constructions of masculinity.

The first three chapters discuss key issues in the development of laws regulating the use of gun violence. Joyce first examines revenge as a legal problem, a cultural phenomenon, and a narrative motif marking the normative limits of gun violence across social discourses and artistic representations. He then goes on to discuss the American self-defense doctrine and demonstrates, based on several breakthrough court cases, that the doctrine departed from the English common law duty to retreat and gradually broadened the definition of self-defense to incorporate a greater variety of actions as justified violence. Finally, Joyce puts in historical perspective the problem of gun possession and use, arguing that this right was initially justified as a notional necessity but ultimately came to be sanctioned as an individual right.

The remaining chapters discuss selected Western novels and films. Chapter 4 concentrates on firearm iconography, juxtaposing the precision of the rifle with the speed of the pistol as reflecting changing notions of defensive violence. Here Joyce uses examples ranging from Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* to Peckinpah’s

The Wild Bunch to show how the Western has been employed to preclude the radical implications of the increasingly individuated conceptions of self-defense. In chapter 5 Joyce refers to Barbara Cruikshank's term "technology of citizenship," which describes a complex of social discourses and practices shaping individual forms of political activity and self-government and applies it to the Western's cultural work. Analyzing several film Westerns as examples, in particular *Shane* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, Joyce demonstrates how the Western's construction of an Anglo hero with a gun who is exceptionally skilled with weapons and capable of self-restraint when it comes to using his skills has helped control gun violence. Chapter 6 is devoted to Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, whose depiction of extralegal violence brings into focus the problem of competing conceptions of justice that may function at any given time, highlighting the processual nature of the law. Chapter 7 problematizes race and justifiable homicide in the neoliberal age on the basis of the TV series *Justified* and Tarantino's *Django Unchained*.

One could perhaps wish for a better interweaving of the narratives of the law and the genre in Joyce's book as one occasionally gets the impression they are parallel but separate. A two-paragraph reference to Jarmusch's *Dead Man* in chapter 3, wholly devoted to a discussion of juridical solutions, exemplifies this structural problem. The future will show whether Joyce's theory of the evolution of the Western genre will have had as much resonance as some of the theories preceding it. What potentially lessens its appeal is that it is grounded in categories that, in essence, are extrinsic to the realm of narrative creation, even if law and literature or film have always been discursively and imaginatively connected. More important, *Gunslinging Justice* leaves out the issue of the contingencies of literary and especially film production that are crucial for understanding the dynamics of genre development across time. Of course with regard to the Western these contingencies have already been thoroughly described by critics, but it seems a bit risky to propose a genre theory that glosses over a crucial factor behind the status of genres.

That *Gunslinging Justice* invites polemical responses ultimately attests to the relevance and strength of the author's argument. The

book is a product of unique academic expertise and a model of interdisciplinary scholarship. Joyce places fundamental works of the Western genre in illuminating new frameworks. *Gunslinging Justice* is a major contribution to the ongoing debate about the Western as a manifestation of American gun culture. This connection between a narrative genre and a broader historical and cultural phenomenon has often been taken for granted. Joyce reminds us that the relationship between the Western and gun culture in the United States has varied and complex dimensions, some of which still await a proper critical scrutiny.

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Laura K. Davis and Linda M. Morra, eds., *Margaret Laurence and Jack McClelland Letters*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2018. 696 pp. Paper, \$39.95.

Margaret Laurence (1926–87) was arguably the best and most successful of all Canadian prairie novelists, known especially for her five-volume Manawaka series, bookended by *The Stone Angel* (1964) and *The Diviners* (1974). Jack McClelland (1922–2004) was her publisher and also the driving force behind the New Canadian Library (NCL), which made available, in addition to Laurence's own work, the writings of Sinclair Ross, Frederick Philip Grove, Gabrielle Roy, Rudy Wiebe, Adele Wiseman, Ethel Wilson, and other leading western authors as well as writers from the rest of Canada. Even today, after the demise of the McClelland and Stewart publishing firm, it is impossible to imagine teaching a western Canadian literature class without NCL texts. The correspondence between these two inveterate letter writers produces some insights on Laurence's writing and the development of the NCL, but it is most useful in documenting the extraordinarily warm friendship between Margaret and Jack and the idealism in their belief in the cause of Canadian literature and even, particularly for Laurence, the role of literature in making the world a better place to live in.

Davis and Morra have done a thorough job of tracking down