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Book Review: Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West

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Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West. By William R. Handley. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xi + 261 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00.

"If the West tells us anything," says William Handley, "it is that stories have powerful consequences." This book reads western stories anew, not as familiar tales of individualism but as family dramas with newly thought-provoking consequences for the "nation's racial future." Handley argues that twentieth-century western literature is more preoccupied with marriage than with the frontier. Marriage serves as an analogy for US national unity while also exposing the uncontainable violence at the heart of nation-building. These stories demonstrate that, having destroyed the racial and ethnic "others" against whom the nation defined itself, "imperialism brings its guns home."

Handley begins his close readings by re-considering the influence of Frederick Jack-

son Turner's 1893 "Frontier Thesis" on twentieth-century fiction and historiography. He argues that the essay's power is primarily literary. Rhetorical figures (allegory, antithesis, metaphor) and syntactical constructions (crucially, the passive voice of innocent action) propel Turner's argument, endow it with coherence, and facilitate the nation's escape from historical responsibility. Such rhetorical sleights-of-hand also produce the trope of frontier individualism.

Handley next exposes the centrality of marriage for those most famous popularizers of heroic individualism, Owen Wister and Zane Grey. *The Virginian* is "plot-driven to the altar of marriage." Wister needs this all-white union—southern hero marrying eastern schoolma'am in the West—not only to resolve a nation violently riven by sectional, ethnic, and industrial strife, but to rewrite comedically his first, tragic story. "Hank's Woman" narrates the violent mayhem caused by marriage across ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences in the West. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Grey bolsters white supremacy by demonizing Mormonism. Writing in the midst of an "anti-Mormon magazine crusade," Grey revived paranoia that had died out in 1890 when polygamy was outlawed. Plural marriage had so threatened normative national identity that Mormons were defined as racially different from the "white" American majority.

Handley then turns to four very different writers who dramatize the connections between marriage and nation more violently than ever. Willa Cather (whose "literary corpses," Handley notes, outnumber Wister's and Grey's combined) challenges formulaic expectations of a heroic West. Repeatedly, marriage brings her western immigrants into violent confrontation with ineluctable ethnic differences and the effects of "racialized nationalism." F. Scott Fitzgerald aligns "domestic misery and national destiny" in *The Great Gatsby* through characters' racism, adultery, and multiple murders. For Joan Didion and Wallace Stegner, there are no happy endings, personal or national.

The best their troubled marriages and dysfunctional families can tell us—about the West and the nation—is where things went wrong.

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