

"The Virginian": Medicine Bow, Wyoming

Dear Jerry: I am going on a pilgrimage to Medicine Bow. In preparation, I have been rereading Owen Wister's "The Virginian". I first read this book when I was a sophomore in high school-- it was required reading. Despite this, I liked it and I've found that my new knowledge of The West has added something extra to it.

In case you aren't familiar with "The Virginian", it was published in 1902 and it is the first Western, the font from which a hundred thousand imitation Westerns have sprung. With this book, Wister created a new genre. It has everything a Western should including The Showdown.

The plot is simple: Molly Stark Brown leaves her native Bennington, Vermont to take a job as a schoolmarm in Bear Creek, Wyoming, two hundred fifty miles by stage coach from Medicine Bow. There she meets and falls in love with The Virginian, a cowpuncher on one of the nearby ranches. Molly comes from impoverished

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but proud Vermont gentility. The Virginian is of no particular genealogy, but has a strong natural sense of what it means to be a "Gentleman". Wister, who was a Philadelphia lawyer turned writer and who was a friend and classmate of Theodore Roosevelt, put into his hero the full expression of Rooseveltian rugged individualism and of muscular, gentlemanly Christianity. The Virginian is a diamond in the rough.

There are three moral issues in the book. Should a young woman rescue the sagging family fortunes by contracting a safe but dull marriage, or should she strike out on her own? In a democratic society, what should be the relationship between the claims of individual merit and those of aristocratic birth? Finally, what is the moral status of lynching cattle thieves in a vast territory where one may be four hundred miles from a court and where the court, if you can get to it, may be completely corrupt? Wister comes out in favor of lynching, Wyoming style, carefully distinguishing it from lynching Alabama style which he reprobates. "They knew what the game was and they risked the consequences". Life is a game. There are rules.

The book is far from heavy with its philosophy. Most of it is local color. Here is the dream of the

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wealthy Eastern intellectual of a hundred years ago;
a dream of simple virtues, of fair and square living
practised in a physically invigorating environment.
The Virginian epitomizes a view of what American
character and history should be.

Be that as it may, I'm going to pay my respects
to Medicine Bow and to the shade of Owen Wister. It's
been on my agenda for years.

Write to me in Salt Lake.

