

Books and Authors from the Southwest Literary Tradition

The rugged landscapes of the southwest have long inspired some of America's greatest literary works.

The Sea of Grass
By Conrad Richter

The southwest landscape features prominently in this classic. Published in 1936, *The Sea of Grass* presents in epic scope the conflicts encountered in settling of the American Southwest. Set in New Mexico in the late 19th century, *The Sea of Grass* revolves around the classic, but often-violent clashes between the pioneering ranchers, whose cattle range freely through the vast sea of grass, and the farmers, or "nesters," who build fences and turn the sod. The book suggests questions such as: Why is the wild grassland of New Mexico so sustainable for ranching, yet so inhospitable for wheat and corn planted by farmers and settlers? The hardscrabble life of ranching, for example, is reflected on page 94: "With a desperate skill born of long experience in this dry land, they had caught the diminished rains and rushed into growth and seed."

Conrad Richter (1890-1968) moved to Albuquerque in 1928. A lover of history and folklore he studied American Southwest history by reading diaries, military maps and charts, letters, and newspaper clippings. He also interviewed elderly residents about their experiences. This gave his characters authentic details and diction as he developed themes of fortitude and perseverance. He won the 1951 Pulitzer Prize for *The Town* (1950), an appealing portrayal of pioneer life.

The Sea of Grass, Conrad Richter, Curtis Publishing Company 1937.

Cover Photograph from https://www.goodreads.com/book/photo/115482.The_Sea_Of_Grass.

Conrad Richter Photograph by Carl Mydans from <https://oldfloridabookstore.blogspot.com>

Death Comes for the Archbishop

By Willa Cather

Another classic from the Southwest, this is perhaps Willa Cather's best known novel, the one that made her one of America's best known authors in the early 20th century. This book captures the ruggedness and challenges settlers and missionaries faced in the southwest. It presents the sweeping story of a single human life lived simply in the silence of the southwestern desert. In 1851 Father Jean Marie Latour comes to serve as the Apostolic Vicar to New Mexico. What he finds is a vast territory of red hills and tortuous arroyos, American by law but Mexican and Indian in custom and belief. In the almost forty years that follow, Latour spreads his faith in the only way he knows--gently, all the while contending with an unforgiving landscape, derelict and sometimes openly rebellious priests, and his own loneliness. Out of these events, Cather gives us an indelible vision of life unfolding in a place where time itself seems suspended. (*Goodreads*)

“The sandy soil of the plain had a light sprinkling of junipers, and was splotted with masses of blooming rabbit bush, - that olive-colored plant that grows in high waves like a tossing sea”. Page 95

Willa Cather (1873-1947) was born in 1873 and graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1895. She began a career in journalism and writing while still in college. She wrote her greatest artistic achievement, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1927 invoking the beauty and history of the landscape of the Southwest. Drawing upon the life of Archbishop Lamy, a Catholic French missionary to New Mexico in the 1850's her story is of a man who ministers to the Mexican, Navajo, Hopi, and settler people of his diocese.

Death Comes For The Archbishop, Willa Cather, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1927

Cover Photograph from 1902. Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Library.

Jacket Woodcut by Stephen Alcorn.

Longer Biographical Sketch, Amy Ahearn, found at <https://cather.unl.edu/life/longbio>

Bearstone

Face-to-face with the last grizzly in Colorado

By Will Hobbs

Bearstone is a story of 14 -year-old Cloyd Atcitty, a troubled Native American youth who has a history of not attending school. Instead he is more often wandering and exploring the canyonlands near his grandmother's home in White Mesa, Utah. He has run away from a group home for Indigenous youth in Durango and is now being driven to spend the summer working for an old rancher named Walter. While hiking in the cliffs above Walter's ranch, Cloyd discovers a turquoise bearstone in an ancient burial. Knowing that his people, the Utes, have a special relationship with bears, he decides to keep the small stone in hopes it will bring him strength.

Will Hobbs (1947--) is the author of twenty novels for upper elementary, middle school and young adult readers, as well as two picture book stories. Seven of his novels, *Bearstone*, *Downriver*, *The Big Wander*, *Beardance*, *Far North*, *The Maze*, and *Jason's Gold*, were named Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association. ALA also named *Far North* and *Downriver* to their list of the 100 Best Young Adult Books of the Twentieth Century. "A grizzly bear had been killed in the mountains where I go backpacking every summer, the San Juans of Colorado. This happened in 1979, when grizzlies were thought to be extinct in Colorado. I began to think about writing a made-up story about the last grizzly in Colorado."

Bearstone, Will Hobbs, Aladdin Paperbacks, 2004.

Cover Photograph and photograph from <https://www.willhobbsauthor.com/will/meetwill.html>

Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert

By Terry Tempest Williams

This book is almost a field guide to the rugged but beautiful red rocks country of Utah but goes beyond the dry descriptions of a field guide to relay the author's intimate, tactile experiences and love for this unique environment of rocks, canyon, steams, and valleys. This love of the colorful red rocks of southern Utah is captured in her imagery and intimate descriptions of that landscape as well as historical anecdotes and vivid storytelling. She says her objective is to engage readers, especially young readers, and hopefully transmit to them her appreciation of the rugged environment and encourage them to become advocates that will defend the land against exploitation.

"Would you believe me when I tell you this is family, kinship with the desert, the breadth of my relations coursing through a wider community, the shock of recognition with each scarlet gilia, the smell of rain." *Red*, page 157.

Terry Tempest Williams (1955--) is an American writer, educator, and conservationist. Her writing, exemplified by this book is centered on the American West, especially by the arid landscapes of Utah. Her work focuses on social and environmental justice ranging from issues of ecology and protection of public lands to women's health.

"I'm so aware of the limits of language. I think there just has to be something deeper, and for me, courage comes from that sustained focus that's rooted in community. And that's what the West is for me, these beautiful extended communities where we reach each other through water, through land, through history." *Terry Tempest Williams*

Red: Passion And Patience In The Desert, Terry Tempest Williams, Vintage Books, 2002.

Book Cover Photograph from <https://www.goodreads.com>. Terry Tempest Williams Photograph from <https://stage.studio-weeren.com/mesarefuge>.

Hondo

By Louis L'Amour

The book, *Hondo*, is interesting in that the book sprang from a 1953 movie of the same name starring John Wayne. But rather than the book inspiring the movie, the screenplay was based on a short story by L'Amour, "The Gift of Cochise." He subsequently developed a full-scale novel based on the short story. From the bookcover: "He was a man etched by the desert's howling winds, a big, broad-shouldered man who knew the ways of the Apache and ways of staying alive. She was a woman raising a young son on her own on a remote Arizona ranch. And between Hondo Lane and Angie Lowe was the warrior Vittoro, whose people were preparing to rise against the white men. Now the pioneer woman, the gunman, and the Apache warrior are caught in a drama of love, war, and honor."

“To each of us is given a life. To live, with honor and to pass on having left our mark, it is only essential that we do our part, that we leave our children strong.”
Hondo, page 86.

Louis L'Amour (1908-1988). Louis Dearborn L'Amour was an American novelist and short-story writer. His books consisted primarily of Western novels (although he preferred to call them, Frontier Stories. At the time of his death almost all of his 105 existing works (89 novels, 14 short-story collections, and two full-length works of nonfiction) were still in print, and was widely considered one of the world's most read writers.”

Cover Photograph from <http://www.louislamour.com/novels/hondo.htm>.

Louis Lamour Photograph from

<http://www.rirelevant.com/lifestyle/5-great-quotes-from-louis-lamours-education-of-a-wandering-man/attachment/louis-lamour-photo/>