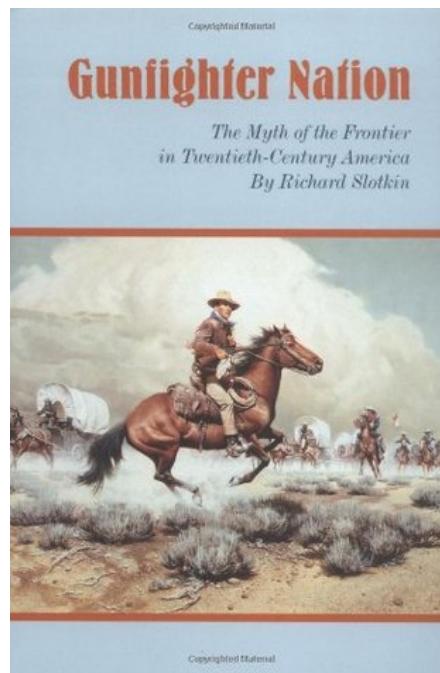




Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America

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Gunfighter Nation completes Richard Slotkin's trilogy, begun in *Regeneration Through Violence* and continued in *Fatal Environment*, on the myth of the American frontier. Slotkin examines an impressive array of sources - fiction, Hollywood westerns, and the writings of Hollywood figures and Washington leaders - to show how the racist theory of Anglo-Saxon ascendance and superiority (embodied in Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West*), rather than Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of the closing of the frontier, exerted the most influence in popular culture and government policy making in the twentieth century. He argues that Roosevelt's view of the frontier myth provided the justification for most of America's expansionist policies, from Roosevelt's own *Rough Riders* to Kennedy's counterinsurgency and Johnson's war in Vietnam.

Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America Details

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From Reader Review Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America for online ebook

Peter Zingg says

You have to read this book in conjunction with Slotkin's free online film history course on iTunes U: Western Movies: Myth, Ideology, and Genre.

The bibliography includes hundreds of westerns and related genre films, and Slotkin's tracing of the how the lingo of the western invaded military planning and thinking in postwar America is fascinating. A terrific way to appreciate history, filmmaking and American cultural reference points.

Ciera says

Read this for a history class and honestly didn't think I'd finish it because its really long, but its actually an amazing read. Slotkin uses Western movies to further explain the "myth of the frontier", which is something I found quite interesting as the book progressed. If you are a fan of old westerns and a history buff, then I highly recommend you read this. I particularly enjoyed how he not only discussed how the movies reflected the expansion of the west in the 1800's, but also the way it affected the lives of Native Americans in the American west.

Peter says

:extremely Jim Morrison voice: "This is the end..." a good seventeen-hundred pages later and we're at the end of Slotkin's trilogy on frontier mythology. Bringing it into the twentieth century, I'm surprised he doesn't refer to the Doors, he refers to so many other things... maybe he did and I don't remember...

This book talks about a lot of westerns. A looooooot of westerns. It's encyclopedic! Which doesn't always make for the best read, truth be told. It makes some interesting points about counterinsurgency and frontier mythology, like how both sides of counterinsurgency — the notionally constructive "hearts and minds" angle and the bloody genocidal side — are prefigured in various kinds of western myths. Probably should've thrown that into my dissertation! Ah well.

Like the other installments in the series, this is thesis-heavy. It puts a lot of chips on the opposition between a "progressive" (think Teddy Roosevelt- a manically exterminationist idea of progress) and a "populist" vision of the frontier, playing itself out in dime novels, movies, and politics. I don't think this is wrong but I do think he's overly-schematic with it. Moreover, he's too sanguine about the goodness of populist visions of the west- pretty much any vision of western settlement involves dis inheriting the Native Americans, so... anyway, I fell behind with reviews so it's been a while since I've read this one. I remember it having some interesting asides, but being really long. *****

Courtney says

Lengthy read but decent. I might have enjoyed it more if I wasn't taking notes at the same time. Plus it had to be finished in a week for discussion. Of course some chapters are much more interesting than others, depending in what you're looking to get out of the book. Fans or those familiar with early westerns may be more inclined to enjoy it. I've only heard of a lot of the mentioned films in passing. I do feel it's appropriate to start or end this book by watching a classic Western. Maybe SHANE or something with John Wayne.

Once I got to the section on Vietnam it became too boring for me, so I skimmed. The conclusion was really good. Very nice wrap up, even coming full-circle with the same intro story.

Paul Ewing says

Described as a slog or a boring read, I'm really getting into it. I love Slotkin's presentation of the frontier as seen by Frederick Jackson Turner and Teddy Roosevelt. I was surprised at Slotkin's theory that Roosevelt's take on the frontier has been more influential on American popular culture than Turner's. Turner's take was Populist Agrarian and academic. Roosevelt defined the frontier as a place where Social-Darwinist Progressive Urbanites ruled like feudal lords over a Conservationist commons created by and for America's power brokers. Although technically Turner was the more sophisticated historian of the two, TR's impact dominated the work of "dime novelists, Wild West show impresarios, the writers of Western fiction and the makers of Western movies...." (p.61. 1998 Univ. Oklahoma Press edition)

Kristin says

Slotkin creates a totalizing vision of American mythology, culture, and politics in this text. It is an impressive study and narrative of what he calls the "Frontier Myth." Two criticisms: 1) he could have used a better editor -- it is 660 pages, has multiple examples to make one point, and repeats itself a bit; 2) to cover this much history (first contact through 1991), Slotkin has to paint some periods, ideas, and groups with broad strokes.

Overall, an important book and a good book.

James Murphy says

This was a reread. I remembered it as intellectually stimulating. But, first read in the mid-90s, I didn't remember details. Specifically, I didn't remember that some of my worldview comes from Slotkin. I remember once telling a Goodreads friend my ideas about America's manifest destiny vaulting the Pacific to include the Philippines and Japan and later to wash up on the shores of Korea and Vietnam. "Remember, you heard it from me first," I told her. But in fact Slotkin's early pages of Gunfighter Nation are about Theodore Roosevelt's progressive ideas of reviving the American myth of westward expansion by thrusting the country's power into the Pacific and into imperialism. Not my interpretation at all, but trace elements of Slotkin carried by me so long I'd forgotten its origins.

The book is brilliant, I think. It's the 3d volume of Slotkin's acclaimed trilogy which, beginning in 1600, traces our changing ideas of the frontier and how they developed into a national myth reflecting the meaning of and need for the westward movement. From the early colonial attitudes of savagery seen in Biblical terms through the influences of such icons as Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's fictions through the

wagon train migrations, the spreading agrarianism, through the railroad expansions and the overwhelming of the Indians to the Custer myth being used as a symbol of the end of frontier. (It's Slotkin who's written that the most important fact of American history is its relation to race, by which he means Indians even more than African-Americans.) By 1890 the frontier was gone. Roosevelt saw a need to revive the spirit which began as a regeneration through violence.

Beginning there in history and beginning with his tabloid title, Slotkin leads us into a superb, comprehensive analysis of America's 20th century. Our culture, politics, and foreign policy can be seen, he writes, in the light of the authority the myth of the frontier holds on our imaginations. Dime novels helped keep the idea of the western frontier alive. Slotkin shows how Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows expanded into popular western novels and eventually such iconic movies as *Shane* and *The Wild Bunch* and how they express American character and foreign policy. His main idea is that at key moments of ideological stress in the century--race relations, for instance, or the Cold War--the frontier myth always provided language and structural devices defining a direction forward. If you're interested in the idea of the Old West, in the cultural and political history of America and how it's been shaped by our attitudes about the frontier, you'll find this fascinating. It's no stretch to say the book's full of fundamental truths.

It's dense with information and ways of seeing. Adorned as it is with the technological phraseology of myth, it's a formidable read which is complicated by Slotkin's style. He produces thick, heavy paragraphs constructed of long Proustian sentences layered with clause after clause and often shored up with a parenthesis or two. The paragraphs begin with an idea which flows through extrapolation, as if by gravity, into insight of great depth, so that paragraph endings carry great weight. There's page after page of this tight insight and argument after argument explaining point after point accumulating in a work of overriding analytic--here's that word again--brilliance.

For Slotkin as for many of us a watershed moment for American self-perception and purpose was the Vietnam War. I've read many books about most aspects of the war, but Slotkin--and I'd also forgotten this valuable element of the book--provides as clear a discussion and analysis of why we went there and why we failed as I've read anywhere. The last one-third of the book is mostly devoted to an analysis of Vietnam in the light of our frontier myth. The war is seen through our mythography of historical progress in terms of white European culture entering the terrain of primitive non-white cultures, the same impulsive thrust which drove us westward across America. As a continuation of the "savage warfare" with which we won the west, it was thought a necessary part of our competition with the Soviets during the Cold War.

The role of the hero is also discussed. We no longer have Daniel Boone or Custer. But Slotkin shows how the idea of them and others was developed and used by such leaders as Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan. And how the work of men like John Wayne or William S. Hart became so closely associated with our ideas of frontier myth that they helped to sustain it.

I regret that a review such as this only scratches the surface of such rich material. I can't recommend *Gunfighter Nation* enough. In fact, the entire trilogy. *Regeneration Through Violence* and *The Fatal Environment* are the 2 volumes preceding it.

Carol Storm says

Great history of violence in America and on the movie screen . . . the chapters on *HIGH NOON* and *THE WILD BUNCH* make it a must read!

J.I. says

It must be said how boring this book is. It is very, very boring. It works, mostly, by taking a political structure/myth/stand/action/etc. and comparing it to a movie. Part of the problem is the overlong breakdown of the movie, which goes beyond being helpful and instead just goes on. Add into this that this book is DENSE with references (660 pages of text is accompanied by 110 pages of notes and a 60 page bibliography) and you are getting ready for a snoozefest.

That being said, it is an extremely interesting analysis on the myth of the frontier in both popular culture and social/political policy. It is by no means complete and ignores the (not ignorable) impact from other genres/mediums/events, but it is still very incisive and intelligent. If you're the type of reader that can derive a form of pleasure from something that is not pleasurable to read (I'm serious, it's beyond boring), then you'll be satisfied with this book.

Rick Hollis says

I grew up on TV Westerns. So I thought I thought this might be fun to read. I won't say it was fun, Slotkin can be dense reading, but it was fascinating. It is also rather thick: 660 pages of text, 160 of footnotes, 8 of filmography and 21 of index for a whopping 850 pages.

As an example Slotkin spends 12 pp on the Searchers, followed by 10 pages on the Magnificent Seven, both in the context of the Vietnamese War.

This turned out to be a good bit denser than I expected. Truthfully I read about 1/2, skimmed 1/4 and barely turned pages on the other 1/4.

Dave says

If you can slog through this puppy, Slotkin will blow your mind. I read this unwieldy tome for a class this semester, but I have a feeling I'll be using Slotkin's thought processes for a long time past December. As a friendly warning, if you like to read/watch movies/exist without thinking too much, this might be a good book to stay away from. If you're interested in powerful myths that guide both personal and national actions, then you might consider cracking at least the intro and first section.

Jordan Bradford says

This is one of the few books that really changed my thinking from College. Read it (yes it's a slog) but then watch as you see everything from Gunsmoke, to "The Searchers" (which became one of my favorite films), to "Apocalypse Now" in a new light.

Mr. Twinkie says

It disturbs me when I read about young men in the USA glorifies a racist like Theodore Roosevelt just because "he was a real man". That is just pure nonsense.

Rant over. Although, Slotkin's books are quite impressive in both scope and depth they are also beginning to get outdated. Much of his source material is based on old books and his almost revisionistic analysis of the frontier myth also needs more test. Yet, nobody seems to be willing to take up the task which is a shame for students of the american frontier. Until that happens this is the best books on the idea of the american frontier in mythological terms.

Yes, my present lecturer in american frontier myth at my university would probably disagree.

Steve says

This terrific book goes through American culture throughout the 20th century and describes its media and politics in terms of our national myth: the dynamic of the frontier and regeneration through violence. Everything from foreign wars like WWII and Vietnam to domestic troubles like unionism and race riots is defined through this myth as a dispute between civilization and progress on one hand and savagery on the other. There's never a chance of conciliation between the two sides, so it has to be resolved through violence that destroys the forces of savagery and makes victory complete.

This myth originated in colonial times, but evolved into a national mythos to be exploited by a white male power structure to legitimize its control. In the decades after the Civil War, Theodore Roosevelt codified it into both a racist doctrine that accused blacks and immigrants of holding back progress, as well as a macho mindset that characterized objections to economic rapacity as feminine and sentimental.

Slotkin examines a long list of political policies, world events, and media sources to explore these themes. The Western movie, of course, becomes very important in the 20th century as a 'mythic space' to explore and reinforce the myth in the public imagination: he does a thorough job of analyzing movies from *The Gunfighter* and *Rio Grande* to *High Noon* and *The Wild Bunch* in scene-by-scene detail to demonstrate how they utilize the structure of the myth. You may get the feeling after the umpteenth analysis that he's being rather too thorough, but he finds interesting details that reflect how current events made the media's use of the myth evolve to fit the times.

At 660 pages plus footnotes, this is not a casual read. Slotkin is scholarly but never abstruse, and he makes his case in a way that should fascinate people interested in American history, politics, and how myth operates in a modern culture.

Paul says

Richard Slotkin gives an extra-ordinarily good discourse on literary and film media analysis. Slotkin connects politics, ideology, war, and cultural myth from the 1880s to the early 1990s in this tome. Particularly interesting is Slotkin's analysis of Populist and Progressive (as well as red-blooded Conservative) political ideologies. The most surprising aspect of Slotkin's analysis is the connection of

racism (or "racialism") to Progressive political ideology as part of Theodore Roosevelt's explanation of the Myth of the Frontier. A draw-back may be Slotkin's over-reliance on the shadow side of American political practice and what feels to be a heavy-handed noting of racism as a part of American mythos. I would argue countervailing non-racist themes have been present in American ideology from the start and onwards. (I would see Slotkin's anti-racist tone to partly be a case in point). It is also a very long read, even for a dedicated literary critic. (It has taken me something close to a year to finish it). However the connections to American film, narrative and myth and its low degree of jargon make Slotkin's work a worthwhile and fairly easy read.
