



Reviews



I See by Your Outfit: B Westerns and Some Recent Texts about Cowboys —Perry Nodelman

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“Sputnik. Once the astronauts went up, children only wanted to play with space toys.”
—Stinky Pete, in *Toy Story 2*

This is Stinky Pete the Prospector’s explanation, in Disney Pixar’s *Toy Story 2*, of why, after many decades, the long-term obsession with cowboys and the Wild West in American culture suffered a rapid decline from the mid-1950s onward. Since then, as Stinky Pete suggests, space toys and space stories have been far more prominent. But in the 1940s and 1950s, there were cowboys everywhere from lunch boxes and colouring books to Saturday morning TV series. A child of that time (as I was), Roderick McGillis has especially fond memories of the B westerns produced by lesser Hollywood studios from the 1930s on through the 1950s, memories he explores in his fine book *He Was Some Kind of a Man*.

Without ever removing the rose-coloured glasses of nostalgia, McGillis views B westerns with the steely-eyed gaze of a tough-minded cultural critic. “I have no desire to return to a childhood past that I remember as troubled and difficult,” he writes. “If nostalgia is a feeling of loss and a desire to restore or renovate what is lost, then I have no nostalgia for my own past. And I certainly have no intention to lament the passing of the cowboys that are my subject” (45). Instead, borrowing a term from literary scholar Svetlana Boym, he indulges in what he calls “reflective nostalgia”: “The past is of use when we use it to reflect upon the present and future” (47).

For McGillis, the cowboy is doubly evocative—the

hero in a fantasy world that he feels nostalgia for and that is in itself inherently nostalgic: “no boy aspiring to become the hero he desires to emulate can accomplish such becoming because the hero is always a man of the past, always already out of touch with changing times, always a figure of regression, and paradoxically always already old even though he never ages. . . . He is, in short, a fantasy” (4). He is specifically a wish-fulfilling role model, a version of psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan’s “ideal-I” for young viewers.

He is also an ideal of masculinity in particular. As McGillis notes, the heroes of B westerns are “steadfast, independent, resourceful, self-reliant, aggressive, rational and controlling” (1). They are especially controlling of their own potential for desire and thus represent most centrally the need for such control in male viewers: “The cowboy, always a bundle of contradictions, beckons the man to a more exciting life, while at the same time teaching him the virtues of restraint and austerity” (11). He represents freedom, but it is a freedom gained by means of self-denial and isolation from others:

Self-sufficiency is the fantasy of manhood. The cowboy needs no one but his horse, and perhaps a sidekick or two to share the trail with. The freedom the cowboy and his horse experience is, however, double-edged. On the one hand it allows for the realization of full independence, but on the other

it entails the near-masochistic self-discipline of a man willing to push his body to the limit, willing to do without the comforts of home, willing to do without pleasure in any conventional sense. The cowboy’s mastery of the horse is self-mastery. The horse’s obedience is the cowboy’s own submission to repression. (118)

Paradoxically, then, much of what is repressed is what conventionally defines adult behaviour: respectability, regular hours of work, and sex. To be a B-movie cowboy is to live the playfully irresponsible (and sexually inactive) life of a boy. Indeed, according to McGillis, “the ‘boy’ is our ideal of masculinity” (18). Real men do not work in offices, change diapers, or cut down on sweets or gunplay.

Real men, for the most part, play. The cowboy myth centrally involved grown men like Roy Rogers or Gene Autry playing—putting on costumes in order to become the “Roy Rogers” or the “Gene Autry” that the costumes represent and encouraging child viewers to do the same. The old cowboy ballad “The Streets of Laredo” says, “I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy.” McGillis’s discussion of cowboy outfits as “camp performances” (98) views them as key to what makes a cowboy a cowboy: “kids like to dress in costume and to pretend to be other people, and I suspect that they are fully aware that their heroes are doing the same—that is, dressing up and pretending to be guys who can



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accomplish impossible deeds of horsemanship and marksmanship” (97). What is interesting is how the outfit invites behaviour that transforms the man who wears it—or at least suppresses “unmanly” behaviour inappropriate to it.

As well as drawing on theories of camp and drag and offering a Lacanian analysis of the cowboy hero as ideal-I, McGillis derives insights from a range of ideological theories and cultural approaches, including shrewd and persuasive discussions of race and stereotyping, queerness and homosociality, the psychological significance of horses and guns, and the ambiguous relationship between the B western’s usual identification of bankers and businessmen as villains and their cowboy hero’s involvement in consumer culture. Indeed, the book’s main strength is the way it combines diverse theoretical threads into a complex reading of what seems at first to be so simple.

In popular culture nowadays, cowboys only occasionally ride the range, primarily in texts that put twists on the old stories: the cowboy as toy in the Toy Story movies, the cowboy as homosexual in *Brokeback Mountain*, the cowboy as defender against interplanetary invasion in the graphic novel *Cowboys and Aliens* and the recent film based on it.¹ According to McGillis, however, while the B westerns are “no longer part of living culture . . . what they said about masculinity remains with us” (30).

So, too, does the cowboy myth. As McGillis points out, “the cowboy and the western landscape continue to occupy a place in advertisements for clothing, cars, cologne, beer, and even headache remedies” (55). *Brokeback Mountain* could not have announced itself as daring without first assuming that audiences would remain familiar with the old story of which it offers a variation; moreover,

searches through the books sent to *Jeunesse* for review and through some online resources revealed texts for young people that also relate to the old cowboy story. There were not many; in an imaginative world dominated by spacecraft and zombies, it surprised me that there were any at all. I found myself wondering what kinds of stories these more recent texts might be telling. How do they or do they not relate to the B westerns McGillis discusses? Moreover, how might his discussion of B westerns throw further light on these more recent texts for young people?

In the *Toy Story* movies, the leader of the toys that come to life when their owner Andy (John Morris) leaves the room is Sheriff Woody (Tom Hanks), a cowboy—more accurately a miniature figure of a cowboy. The movies insist throughout that Woody and the other figures he interacts with are toys more significantly than they are the characters their appearance represents; you can see by Woody's outfit that he is a cowboy, but appearances are only surface deep. In the first movie, the belief of Andy's new toy Buzz Lightyear (Tim Allen) that he is actually the spaceman he represents identifies him as mentally unbalanced: "YOU—ARE—A—TOY!!!" Woody insists. "You aren't the real Buzz Lightyear! You're a—aw, you're an action figure! You are a child's plaything!" Buzz eventually accepts Woody's faith that "[b]eing a toy is a lot better than being a Space Ranger." It means being needed and loved by a child. It means, especially, that a child can have the fun of entering

in the imaginative play world represented by the toy's surface appearance.

In other words, Woody's cowboyhood matters primarily as an opportunity for children who own figures like him to imagine the Wild West story world he represents, but they can enjoy the fantasy as healthy play only so long as they remember it is a fantasy. Play is what matters, not the belief in what one plays at. Cowboy life is most significantly a form of fantasy, a performance. These movies are less centrally versions of the cowboy myth than they are representations of how young people can best engage with that myth as well as with the stories the other toys relate.

Toy Story 2 underlines the importance of that engagement by exploring Woody's roots as a character in a TV show so old it was shot in black and white. Up to this point, Woody has been whatever sheriff Andy chose to imagine, not this specific TV Sheriff from the 1950s with a specific back story. Once aware of his history, Woody must make a choice between being played with as a beloved toy or being preserved as the Sheriff of TV, an untouchable artifact too precious to be played with by mere children. His choice is obvious: toys are not for preserving history or keeping myths intact but for being interacted with, for playing.

They must, however, be played with properly. The violent behaviours exhibited by the toy torturer Sid (Erik von Detten) in the first movie and the uncontrollably enthusiastic toddlers in the third one should clearly be

avoided. They are too freewheeling, too far away from the back stories provided by the toy manufacturers just as much as keeping toys in their original boxes is staying too close to them. At the end of *Toy Story 3*, young Bonnie (Emily Hahn), who dresses her toys in inappropriate costumes and imagines them in roles contrary to their intended appearance, clearly needs the lengthy lesson about the proper way to play that Andy, now seventeen and heading off to college, gives her as he passes his most beloved toys on to her. Andy describes the characters of his toys in ways that conform to their external appearance, thus ensuring that she will play with them in terms of something like the ideologically correct scripts their producers have sanctioned. As McGillis suggests of B westerns and the toys and games that related to them, these toys work to construct good, obedient consumers: “The connection between cowboys and children may be a form of nostalgia, but this nostalgia serves corporate masters” (170).

Despite his insistence on his toyhood, then, and his distance from the Woody of early TV, the toy Woody still remains significantly a cowboy—indeed, the films delineate a role for him that is not much removed from McGillis’s view of the B-western hero. Except for his firm commitment to Andy and to his developing relationship with Buzz Lightyear, both of which echo the relationships between many sidekicks in the old westerns, Woody is something of a loner. Little Bo

Peep’s (Annie Potts) pursuit of him in the first movie makes him uncomfortable, and he is anything but upset later on, when Jessie the Yodeling Cowgirl (Joan Cusack), his friend from the TV show, finds herself more attracted in the toy world to Buzz Lightyear. Forced in all three movies to choose between indulging himself and service to others, he heroically chooses sacrifice and the pursuit of villains and is rewarded with reintegration into a loving community he can sustain by remaining a little detached from it. The old masculinity, still ideologically correct, is still being passed on in these movies about how children can most successfully interact with stories like the cowboy myth.

The B-western version of cowboy masculinity also survives in the imagination of third-grader Kevin Mason in Lois Peterson’s short novel *The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw*. After his mother leaves a note in his lunch box saying she can no longer look after him, Kevin finds himself in a car with a social worker on his way to a foster home. As he waits for a train to go by, he sees the name Knuckles McGraw in a graffiti tag on one of the cars, and thinks, “*Knuckles McGraw* sounds like the name of a cowboy who rides the range. A cowboy with beef jerky in his back pocket and a can of beans stuffed in his saddlebag. A cowboy who wears a hat with a greasy string hanging down the front of his shirt and boots with rattling spurs. One who carries a red bandanna to spit into whenever he feels like it” (3–4). After deciding to become Knuckles McGraw, he then

names his horse Burlington Northern after the railcars passing by: "If he was a cowboy called Knuckles McGraw, he would call his horse Burlington for short. He would leap onto his back without needing a hand up. He'd grab the reins and lean low over the saddle as he rode into the night, leaving behind the busy principal and the welfare lady" (4). From this point on, Kevin thinks of himself as Knuckles and insists that others call him that.

In *He Was Some Kind of a Man*, McGillis speaks of his own childhood: "For me, the identification with the cowboy provided a complex cover and compensation for a troubled home life. To enter the world of the cowboy was to escape the anxiety of home. In addition, the belief in right and in a masculine honour that would defeat all villainous activity was comforting" (58). Kevin is escaping in much the same way: confronted by a strange new environment, "Knuckles McGraw wonders what Burlington Northern would eat for supper. And how fast they would have to ride across the plains to escape from this strange family and make it back home before dark" (19). Later, after meeting his grandparents for the first time, Kevin explains his cowboy fantasy to his grandfather: "When times are tough and the tough get going, we head out to the range. . . . We sleep under the stars. And I make coffee over the campfire. I don't really like coffee, but when I'm a cowboy I drink it. And no one can catch us even though we're on the run. It's just me and the horse. Under the big sky" (89–90).

As well as an escape, the cowboy fantasy offers Kevin a useful image of masculinity—a maleness defined by its toughness and self-control. As Knuckles, Kevin tells himself, "cowboys don't cry. A cowboy with supper in his saddlebags and a horse called Burlington Northern has nothing to cry about" (4).²

For McGillis, "In the films, these heroes were often father figures, but not to me. My father was the terror; I was the hero. The hero was I in fantasy" (58). In his cowboy fantasies, Kevin, who has never known his father, seems to have imagined that he is his own father—a paternal protector against his own vulnerability, as Sheriff Woody acts as father to the other, more vulnerable toys. He has a vague memory of a man in a cowboy hat "who let Kevin Mason sit on his back as he trotted around the room like a horse until he fell off" (42). Based on that recollection, Kevin surmises that his father might have been a cowboy—perhaps a cowboy like Knuckles McGraw. The man in the hat, however, turns out to have been his grandfather, with whom Kevin goes to live at the end of the book. With a father figure in his life, Kevin will no longer need to be Knuckles McGraw, just as the cowboy fantasy Woody represents need no longer exist for Andy once he heads off to college and life as an adult. As with B westerns, cowboys are still for kids and offer ways for kids to fantasize.

Since kids nowadays do not usually experience many cowboy stories, however, *The Ballad of Knuckles*



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McGraw leaves one central question unanswered. Where did Kevin get his ideas about Knuckles McGraw? How did he arrive at such a detailed knowledge of the cowboy myth? He owns a lunch box depicting *Wagon Train*: “when he chose it as the thrift store, his mom told him it might be an antique. It might be worth something” (1). Later, Liddy, the woman in his new foster home, offers more specific information: “did you know it’s from an old TV program, *Wagon Train*? I don’t think it’s been on for years” (25). Many, many years, in fact—more than fifty, for *Wagon Train* ended its prime-time run in 1965, and it seems unlikely that either Liddy or Kevin might have ever seen it. The *Toy Story* movies are equally silent on how Sheriff Woody, a toy from the fifties, entered into young Andy’s life many decades after the marionette Woody’s TV show was cancelled.

Apparently without knowledge of what Woody originally represented, Andy has had to imagine his own Wild West while playing with him, but he does so in a surprisingly familiar way. The third movie opens on Woody in a typically barren western landscape, riding his trusty horse Bull’s Eye alongside his cowgirl sidekick Jessie as he attempts to thwart a train robbery—a scene reminiscent of many B westerns (at least until the train nearly falls into a canyon and Buzz Lightyear zooms in to save the day, a moment that foreshadows *Cowboys and Aliens*). As it turns out, however, these events have taken place inside Andy’s imagination. That what he imagines should turn out to be so much like a B western is as surprising as Kevin’s equally B-westernish depiction of Knuckles McGraw. We might conclude that the cowboy myth remains archetypal, a myth so powerful that it remains somehow accessible by young minds even without the experience of actual examples. There is certainly that feeling about the image on the

cover of *The Ballad of Knuckles McGraw* and repeated at the start of each chapter, of a cowboy, one arm held high as his horse rears back; as McGillis points out, this iconic image of male power goes back at least as far as Jacques-Louis David's painting *Napoleon at St. Bernard* (1800) and was repeated often in B westerns (106–07).

David's horse-conquering *Napoleon* may have been best known in recent decades in brandy advertisements, so perhaps the cowboy survives in popular culture even without specific new versions of his story being told. In the recent texts I am considering, however, the main source of nostalgia for cowboys seems to be their creator's own childhoods. Having worked in public libraries for thirty years, as she reports on her website, Lois Peterson might well be old enough to have childhood memories of the cowboy heyday. The same might well be true of the creators of the Toy Story movies. I know it to be true of Anne Carter's picture book *Tall in the Saddle*, because the author's note announces it: "As a child, Anne Carter donned her cowgirl duds every chance she got. Now an author, parent and teacher, she has revisited the imagined landscape of her childhood in this, her first picture book for children" (n.pag.). Her story then represents nostalgia at one remove, offering child readers what the author is nostalgic about but that they might not otherwise know about.

Tall in the Saddle is another report of a child's cowboy fantasies—another confirmation of the extent

to which the cowboy myth is now understood as being, most significantly, material for fantasy. As such, it represents a retreat from the constraints of adult social reality into a safely cloistered play world of imaginary freedom. After playing cowboys with his son, a father heads off to work. As the son tells the story, however, the father's bicycle soon turns into a horse, and he rides off to a cowboy-movie day of cow herding and rustler chasing. Once more as in *Knuckles McGraw*, this book imagines a father as cowboy, an ideal-I to which to aspire. David McPhail's illustrations reveal what the text does not mention: the boy is out on the range also, riding along with his father and duplicating every move he makes—including at one point a twinned version of the Napoleonic horse-rearing pose. As a father becomes a cowboy hero and a son emulates him, the book acts as primer for young readers in the cowboy as ideal masculine role model, in what acts as a complex form of nostalgia, the nostalgic adult writer apparently passing on her childhood nostalgia for what was already then a nostalgic version of an idealized past and an idealized version of civilization-free manhood. The B western rides again, headed straight for the hearts and minds of young readers now—especially, surely, young male ones.

Gilles Tibo's picture-book story *The Cowboy Kid* also centres on the cowboy fantasy as a ride into freedom. In it, a homeless teenaged boy who lives "deep in the canyons of the city" imagines himself to be "a cowboy

of the streets and alleys, a garbage-can roper, a chain-fence rider,” and flees from people who talk to him, “his feet clip-clopping as he galloped down the sidewalk.” One day, though, the boy awakes “on the other side of sleep” to find his oil-tank horse transformed into a real one. Mounting it, he rides up into the sky and is joined by rocking horses, statue and merry-go-round horses, and the horses in museum paintings, “all free together in one great wild race under the pale white moon.” The race goes on forever: “On stormy nights you can hear the thunder of their hooves echoing in the darkness.” Indeed, Tom Kaspas’s final illustration shows the horses depicted on a young child’s bedsheets leaping up to join the wild race as the child watches in delight, another youngster infected with the nostalgic and impossible fantasy of cowboy freedom.

Unlike the books I have been discussing, David Bruins’s *Ninja Cowboy Bear* picture-book series offers no representation of a surrogate for young readers—no child in the story who imagines the cowboy life it depicts. For that matter, and despite the cowboy who is one of its three protagonists, the series hardly depicts cowboy life at all. It involves the friendship of three oddly assorted characters who almost never behave as their appearances and names might suggest. They do what human children do (paint pictures, read books, fly kites) and also sometimes what human adults do (bake pies, collect honey from hives, descend from the sky in parachutes). The series focuses on their differences from

each other, but while the ninja seems to be an especially agile gymnast and the bear very strong, the cowboy’s main skill seems to be skipping rocks in a pond—only vaguely a matter of sharpshooting. When the three compete, the cowboy turns out to be best at collecting the most raspberries, and when the ninja suggests they jump on beds, the cowboy prefers painting pictures. In the third book in the series, *The Call of the Cowboy*, the main problem is the cowboy’s inability to keep quiet, a habit that clearly distinguishes him from the taciturn heroes of the old west. All this raises one key question: why is he being depicted as a cowboy at all?

I suspect these characters exist primarily as representative fantasy characters from the world of literature. Child readers with even the slightest experience of picture books will already be aware of bears who talk and interact with humans; those who play video games or watch children’s cartoons on TV will probably be aware of ninjas. As for cowboys, well, there is Sheriff Woody. Despite being evacuated of just about any cowboy content but the traditional outfit, this cowboy is here a recognizable marker of the conventional world of children’s fantasy rather than a hero of the wild west.

The ninja, the cowboy, and the bear are all identified as “he”; they are all male. Does this cowboy then remain an ideal of masculinity in any way? I think he is, but in a way that downplays his cowboyhood: he is as boisterously boyish as his two companions

are—and then, he and his two amigos repeatedly learn to move beyond self-indulgence toward an awareness of each other's needs that redefines ideal masculinity as caring and nurturing. All three might then represent role models for boys, advice on how to be ideally boyish: but I suspect that the ideal of repressing self-indulgence in favour of concern for others relates to the repressive freedom of B-western heroes only because, as McGillis argues, that vision of masculinity survives its earlier presentation in those movies and still remains hegemonic enough to be taken for granted in picture books like these. This cowboy is only cowboy-like because he is a representative male in our time.

Julie Danneberg's American picture book *Cowboy Slim* reveals how hegemonic that vision of masculinity is by claiming to challenge it. On his first day of work on a ranch, Slim tells the other hands, "I've always wanted to be a real cowboy." Unfortunately, though, he has a habit of writing poetry, and according to the others, "Real cowboys whip those dogies into shape. They don't mess around with no fancy, perfumed words. . . . Poetry is sissy stuff." (It is interesting here, as in *Knuckles McGraw*, how sentences about what cowboys do and do not do are inevitably disciplinary and repressive.) Slim's attempts to emulate the conventional behaviour of the cowboys he has dreamed of end in disaster—in Margot Apple's illustration, his moment of riding a rearing horse, his face full of fear as he confronts a reluctant dogie, is anything but Napoleonic. Later,

however, when he manages to stop some spooked cattle from jumping off a cliff by reciting his poems to them, he becomes a revised version of the hero he hoped to be. Being a "sissy" has its benefits. That Slim and his poems find acceptance from the other hands represents an attempt to manipulate an apparently still powerful myth of cowboy masculinity into a new and more currently acceptable shape—a manipulation that seems merely to confirm the enduring power of what it purports to move beyond.

That power is the central concern, and centrally confirmed, in Ang Lee's widely discussed R-rated film *Brokeback Mountain*. Ennis (Heath Ledger) and Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal), two sheep-herding cowboys who find themselves in each other's arms and hearts, are versions of the male sidekicks found in so many B westerns. Of sidekicks, McGillis says, "no one would accuse (the operative word here) these men of homosexuality. The irony is that such men refuse the enforced heterosexuality of marriage and domesticity and at the same time remain staunchly and independently heterosexual" (88). Seen in that light, Ennis and Jack's love affair (and their attempts to disguise it in failed heterosexual marriages) either exposes what the cowboy code works very hard to closet or else represents a serious breach of it. In either case, the result is not pleasant; both Ennis and Jack suffer the emotional consequences for years after their first encounter, and Jack eventually dies brutally as a result of acting on



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his sexual needs too openly. It is easily possible to conclude that, as LorE Denizen of the blog *Logic and Orgasm* suggests, *Brokeback Mountain* “is actually the film the Religious Right wants you to see, a cautionary tale of sin and it’s [sic] consequences, a veritable *Reefer Madness* for the *Queer-Eye* age.” Ennis and Jack’s ongoing anguish seems to confirm that the code is the way things are and ought to be. In light of the movie’s brooding tone and its apparent empathy with its protagonists, though, it seems more likely to be intended to operate as a tragedy, a story of star-crossed lovers fated to suffer because of the oppressiveness of the code. One way or the other, in a world much less utopian than the happy ranges of *Cowboy Slim*, *Brokeback Mountain* offers no alternative to the suffering it depicts, no sense that it is possible to be a cowboy and gay and happy.

After Jack’s death near the end of *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis visits Jack’s childhood bedroom and finds two objects there: first, a small plastic figure of a cowboy, emblematic of what Jack (and, presumably, Ennis himself) aspired to be, openly on view on a bedside table, and then, hidden in Jack’s closet, the shirt Jack secretly stole from him after their first times together. Later, tragically alone in his sparsely furnished house trailer, Ennis opens a closet where the same shirt now hangs, hidden beneath another shirt. Entering the closet, he fondles the shirt—as firmly closeted and desperately alone and unhappy a gay man as it is possible to be. The code triumphs.

Equally closeted through most of Nikki Tate’s two books about her is Joselyn Whyte—a teenaged girl of the 1860s known to many as Joe. In *Jo’s Triumph*, having been orphaned and dropped off by her brothers at the Carson City Home for Unfortunate Girls, Jo cuts off her hair, puts on trousers, and gets a job riding for the Pony Express. In *Jo’s Journey*, Jo, still disguised as a male, sets out to find gold in

the Cariboo. While not specifically about cowboys, these books about life in the old west certainly engage many of the standard tropes McGillis identifies in B westerns. Jo has experience of horses from her previous life on the family farm as well as the requisite empathy with and control of them: "Pa used to say some folks had the touch with horses and he was right proud his daughter was one of them" (*Jo's Triumph* 49). Her main task as a rider, however, is to be accepted as male, and to do that, Jo adopts behaviours readily recognizable to cowboy aficionados; she becomes taciturn, hard-riding, clever, brave, and none too clean.

It is the last that gets her into serious trouble, after her inherently unmasculine nature makes it impossible for her to resist bathing in a stream and her deception becomes apparent to a fellow Express man, who observes her and says, "Joe? I'd say you was missing some parts" (95). He then tries to blackmail her into abetting his attempt at robbery. After Jo outwits him and reveals his attempted crime, he chooses to keep her gender a secret: "What? and tell them a *girl* stopped me from getting what I wanted?" (135). His need to maintain his own masculine facade allows her to stay inside her closet, a need that reveals the extent to which the facade is just that. If a girl can become something like a cowboy by putting on the outfit and playing the part, and if a cowboy can maintain male respect by hiding his weakness, then the outfit is the essence of the cowboy, and presumably, it always keeps closeted

what would appear to be unmanly and sissyish, even in actual males.

In *Jo's Journey*, Jo emulates the cowboy urge for freedom by taking off even further away from civilization: "like my pa, God rest his soul, used to say, 'Settling is for mud in the bottom of a river, not for a man with dreams'" (8). She develops a cowboy sidekick relationship with her friend Bart, and the two make their way through typically harsh landscapes ("some of the toughest terrain I had ever seen—worse, even than the canyons and passes in Utah territory or the rough going through the Sierra Nevada mountains" (61). On the way, Jo gets mixed up with a typically greedy businessman with a telling disrespect for horses and eventually reveals enough true cowboy grit to triumph, for "only the very strongest, the most determined, survived to see the Cariboo," prompting Jo to ask herself, "Would I be one of them?" (61). When she reveals her secret to Bart after heroically saving his life and he calmly accepts it, however, it is clear she has managed to transform herself into something very like a cowboy. You can become what you play at. All it takes is the right outfit and the will to hide what it does not represent and act in terms of what it does.

At least, that is all it takes sometimes. In Susan Juby's *Another Kind of Cowboy*, Alex Ford's cowboy outfit only does its job for people who are not paying enough attention. Alex knows he is gay, but when his new friend Cleo first meets him, she sees him as a virile cowboy:

“The boy, who had very dark eyes and was wearing sexy cowboy gear—a big silver belt buckle, shiny pointy-toed boots, and a high light-gray cowboy hat—gave me a little lip curl. In fact, I think what he gave me was a cool, genuine cowboy smile” (44). Alex has learned to ride after his father, who loves the idea of having a cowboy son, won a horse “from an old cowboy in a poker tournament” (10). This supposed young cowboy has secret desires, however: “Alex might be dressed like a cowboy but he didn’t feel totally comfortable with the role. Real cowboys dreamed of girls with big hair and tight jeans. . . . His dreams ran more to other cowboys” (20–21; note again how often ideas of the real and the genuine come into play). Alex also has a secret desire to become involved in a sport he really loves—dressage—an activity the novel strongly marks as effeminate or gay: Alex’s father “referred to Western as ‘real riding’. . . . English was ‘fancy riding’ done by ‘sissy riders’ with ‘useless horses’” (89–90), by men who are “a little light in the riding slippers, if you get my meaning” (107). Furthermore, when Alex does begin dressage, his instructors are a gay male couple.

A lot of people are not the least bit fooled by Alex’s outfit. His father’s girlfriend tells him that his father “doesn’t see . . . that his precious son bats for the wrong team. Although, personally I don’t see how he could miss it” (257). As for himself, while “Alex’s heart was in the world of men—mighty steeds and fireman hats—the land of cowboy . . . that didn’t mean he wanted to

be a cowboy” (91). Consequently, unlike the more successful but less fortunate masqueraders of *Brokeback Mountain*, who do want to continue to be cowboys, Alex eventually finds the courage to come out to his friends and his father, first about wanting to do dressage and then about his sexuality.

The logic of the outfit still reigns, however: by the end of the novel Alex is not only happily out and involved with a boyfriend, but also happily without the cowboy hat and the boots and the belt buckle, clothed instead in what his father referred to earlier as “them sissy pants” (105) and engaged in the activity of dressage. Once he no can no longer pretend to be or hope to become what the outfit represents, he no longer needs to wear it; despite his continuing identification with and mastery of horses, his act of becoming another kind of cowboy means being no kind of cowboy at all.

According to the clever epigraph of *Another Kind of Cowboy*, a quote ascribed to *The Manual of Horsemanship*, “The greatest difficulty in equitation is to keep the horse straight.” Not so the rider. Near the end of this novel, as his father gives Alex the horse he needs for dressage, he tells him,

“It’s like Rudy Chapman down at the Wheat Sheaf used to say. Just ride her straight.”

Alex shot his dad a wry look and Mr. Ford blushed.

“Well, you know what I mean.”

Alex nodded. He knew exactly what his dad meant. (339)


That the cowboy outfit acts as a closet suggests that heteronormative males can also use it to hide their non-cowboyishness, and thus begin the transformation of themselves into real men. In Irene Morck's picture book *Tiger's New Cowboy Boots*, a young city boy heads out to help with his uncle's cattle drive decked out in new cowboy boots. He expects the others to acknowledge their excellence, but nobody notices them—and meanwhile, the boots get dusty and gouged and soaked as Tiger does his work. Finally, after he saves a calf and gets it safely across the river, the others notice and admire the “muddy, stained, soggy, cut-up boots,” just like their own. Having adopted the outfit, Tiger manages to act like the ideal it represents and is praised when he does so.

Becky Citra's short novel *Sam's Ride* describes the process by which another city boy visiting his grandfather's ranch learns to overcome his fear and ride a horse. Once more, the process begins as he puts on the outfit: “he tugged the boots over his socks. They fit perfectly. He put the hat on. It slid down over his eyes and made him feel mysterious. ‘You look like a real cowboy,’ said grandpa” (11). Once outfitted, however, Sam needs to adopt the controlling attitude toward horses and himself that comes with the costume: “You have to show him you're the boss” (16). After a fall, Sam


refuses to get back on the horse: “I'm not a cowboy,” he says (37). He despairs of living up to his rancher grandfather, who has “muscles of steel” (21), and his dead father, apparently an ideal cowboy in his youth, for yet once more, as in *Knuckles McGraw* and *Tall in the Saddle*, the ideal is to become the perfect cowboy your father was, and Sam has literally to step into his father's old boots and then try to act as he once did. After Sam finally learns to ride and heroically saves the day by doing so, Grandpa recognizes him as “[t]hat boy of mine. He's something else” (56).³

What I find most interesting about *Sam's Ride* is the extent to which it takes its ideal-I for granted as the way things ought to be. At the beginning, Sam does not like horses and decides to spend his two weeks on the ranch doing what he likes: reading. Not only is he never given the chance to do so, but the novel never suggests that he might reasonably choose to act in ways that more honestly interest him or that any young male might ever legitimately be allowed to choose not to become more cowboy-like. The outfit trumps the personal identity that it has been donned in order to closet.

That Sam's mother is flying off to a conference is one of the few details in *Sam's Ride* that specifies its setting in the present; the story could have happened any time in the century or so during which cowboys and ranchers have ridden the wild west. Describing how the cowboys in westerns set in different times wear similar clothing and use similar firearms, McGillis adds, “The landscape



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in these films constitutes . . . a fantasy chronotope—time and space exist in free-flowing combinations that disregard temporal and spatial realities” (147). This is a mythic space in which the myth can recur again and again without much reference to the inevitable variations of history. So what happens to the myth when it becomes attached to more specific times and places?

As *Jo's Journey* reveals, not a lot. As I suggested earlier, Jo still tries to be the conventional ideal cowboy and meets what seem like typical cowboy-movie characters and events despite the specific context of the Cariboo gold rush. Moreover, while readers know that the ranch young Jason lives on in Elaine Wagner's short novel *Racin' Jason* is in contemporary Saskatchewan and that Jason has a “nookum” and a “mishoomis” instead of a “grandma” and a “grandpa,” this Ojibwe boy undergoes a manhood ritual involving a horse on a ranch that is not much different from Sam's and with clear ties to the cowboy myth (albeit not the parts of it in which Indians are bad guys). Jason, who lost his parents in a car accident, has empathy with a horse, also rescued by his grandparents: “Jason felt a special bond with the young colt. He understood some of the difficulties the colt would have faced growing up without help. Just as this colt had been abandoned in the storm, Jason's parents had died in the automobile accident” (10). Both the horse and Jason remain stalwart in the face of difficulties, and at the end, after riding the horse to victory, Jason tells it, “Today we are both warriors” (47). Both are loners tough enough to survive and triumph through sheer will and determined calmness, and in both being tough and having empathy with a horse, Jason becomes yet another version of a cowboy hero, in spite of his specific location in rural Saskatchewan and his racial heritage.

So do young Rob and Luke in B. J. Bayle's *Shadow Riders* as they head out to try to recapture their family's stolen horses. Since they do so by joining up with the Royal Northwest Mounted Police on their first march across the prairies in 1874, however, this fairly conventional story of young men on horses bravely chasing after rustlers through a bleak western landscape is intermingled with real historical events and people. "Except for the two kids and their parents," says Bayle in an author's note, "the characters in *Shadow Riders* were once real, and events in the story were derived from books, diaries, journals, and pamphlets found in museums and libraries. In no way can be overstated the contributions of these courageous men to the building of Canada." The novel in fact suggests that those contributions might well have been overstated by historians, however, for in it Rob and Luke's knowledge of the country often gets Mounties with foolish eastern assumptions about horses and such out of trouble. At one point, one of the officers tells them, "I fear I would have been in dire straits had you not been with me" (70). It seems, indeed, as if the Mounties could not have survived without them.

While saving the day for the force, the two boys are tough young sidekicks on the trail of physically unattractive rustlers with scars, led by "Kamoose Taylor—the worst outlaw in the West!" (227). They ride through a bleak landscape as tough as they are: "Long before they reached the fort, the running horses' trail

had been wiped clean by the wind that blew constantly across the hard packed soil" (19). Furthermore, the two brothers, one of whom is adopted and Aboriginal, are a version of The Lone Ranger and Tonto, two amigos in the wild who fight evil together across racial barriers. While there is a surprising and ahistoric absence of racial prejudice in the book—no one ever expresses any disdain or lack of respect for any Native people—the Aboriginal brother is as taciturn as Tonto and, as the younger brother, a willingly subservient follower of his older brother's leadership.

Eventually, *Shadow Riders* concerns itself with the adopted brother learning about his heritage as a Blackfoot, the white brother worrying about losing him to his birth family, and their final commitment to brotherhood forever without any rejection of the Blackfoot connection; we are at a great distance from my childhood games of cowboys and Indians in which the "savages" always lost and were always bad. Despite these efforts to locate the story in a specific historic context and offer a more realistic view of white/Aboriginal relations, however, *Shadow Riders* remains as formulaic as the rearing (if riderless) horse silhouetted on its cover and as conventionally concerned with how these boys come to be the right sort of men. It seems that once an author chooses to tell a story set in the North American west and involving horses and the males who ride them, it is hard to resist B-western tropes.

Thus, Norma Charles's *Boxcar Kid*, a story about a logging family from Quebec coming to British Columbia's Fraser Valley in 1909, has nothing to do with the cowboy myth except the fact that the characters think of their new home as "the Wild West" (8). Once identified in that way, however, the Fraser Valley becomes the setting for its protagonists' cowboy-like evolution into manhood. A scholarly boy who fears horses, Luc turns out to be tenacious, brave, and self-governing enough to conquer his fear, cope with the uncivilized landscape of a wild new frontier, and even ride a horse to save the day, just as Sam does in *Sam's Ride*. Luc's ability to read and translate may represent his family's best hope for success in an age beginning to move beyond horses and muscle power, but the novel remains focused on showing that brainy boys like him do not necessarily lack more traditional cowboy-like forms of male power.

Erik, the young Norwegian immigrant who arrives in Saskatchewan in 1908 in Adele Dueck's *Racing Home*, has a surprisingly similar journey into manhood. While the novel focuses on details of building a sod house and such, and while the only characters named as cowboys are horse rustlers, Erik reveals an apparently requisite sympathy with and command of horses, proves his bravery, endurance, and overall cowboy-like manhood clearly enough to gain the respect of his stepfather and stepbrother, and defeats the horse rustlers. The frontier remains the place where boys become strong, silent,

male-approved men.

The apparently inevitable connections between the western landscape and the masculinity of the cowboy myth become particularly apparent in the CBC television series *Heartland*. While not especially directed at an audience of young people, this show is based on Lauren Brooke's series of novels that is directed at young people. Those novels, published by Scholastic in the United States, take place on a horse farm in Virginia, and the Canadian TV series moves the location to a ranch in Alberta. The *Heartland* business of healing troubled horses and the series' central focus on how two sisters, the business-oriented Lou and the horse-sensitive Amy,⁴ manage to keep the business afloat after their mother dies in a car crash remain the same, but the change of locale affects almost everything else—and almost always in ways that make the story resemble the B western.⁵

Originally British herself, Brooke provides her protagonists with a British father who was once a champion show jumper until he had a serious accident; in the TV series, the father's (Chris Potter) accident took place when he was a cowboy champion on the rodeo circuit. Brooke's father's accident left him in a wheelchair; the TV series father, now a recovered drug addict, works as a cowboy on a nearby ranch. While Brooke's characters moved from England to buy their Virginia farm, the TV *Heartland* has been in the family for generations as a cattle ranch, and

Jack (Shaun Johnston), the grandfather who lives with the sisters there and once ran the place as a ranch, is a conventional B-western cowboy: strong, solitary, emotionally constrained, exceedingly taciturn. Like the novels, however, the series focuses less on him than on his granddaughters. Furthermore, the traditional role of the money-minded but heartless rich rancher next door is here taken by a woman, and the typical B-western dispute between horse lovers and bankers is played out in the central dispute between the horse healer younger sister Amy (Amber Marshall) and her older, horse-hating, and business-minded New York banker sister Lou (Michelle Morgan). This is a cowboy story centrally about females.

Furthermore, just about all the males depicted seem damaged in some way—as much in need of healing as the horses are. Jack is too old to be a conventional cowboy hero—a hero past his prime—and other males with whom the sisters interact also diverge from that ideal. The new hand Ty (Graham Wardle) is a hotheaded young offender from the city; the vet Scott (Nathaniel Arcand, an Aboriginal actor), secretly in love with the older sister Lou, is another former young offender; another hand, Ben (Beau Mirchoff), is orphaned and arrogant; Lou's business executive boyfriend Carl (Anthony Lemke) is an uptight city slicker, as unlikeable and money-mad as B-western businessmen always are; and Lou and her sister Amy only slowly become aware that their damaged and absent father lives nearby and

that their angry grandfather hates his son enough to have kept him out of their lives. When the father does show up, he is as hotheaded, damaged, and unheroic as all the rest.

What the show depicts, then, is a conventional B-western situation—an orphaned family's dire straits as the bank threatens to foreclose on the mortgage and close down their ranch, deeply in need of a cowboy hero to save the day—but with no appropriately heroic cowboy hero in sight. Apparently, however, no cowboy hero is needed; again and again, the sisters manage to save the day, themselves, horses, and others, all on their own.

Indeed, saving the day is what they do best. In one of the earlier episodes, the TV characters prepare a promotional video with a slogan borrowed from the covers of Brooke's novels: "Heartland: Healing horses, healing hearts." The episodes typically offer parallel plots, as a horse's difficulty mirrors that of one of the human characters, usually a male one, and as Amy and Lou find ways of healing both. Having moved Heartland to Alberta while preserving its central concern with caring and healing, the series transforms the ranch into a conventionally feminine enclave in the midst of a traditionally macho setting and focuses on how its tender-hearted femininity can transform, and above all, soften the machismo the sisters encounter. Once more, then, cowboy masculinity is front and centre, albeit not so single-mindedly taken for granted and celebrated as

it once was on the movie screen. Real cowboys, it turns out, have feelings and the ability to express them once healing women go to work on them. Still, though, they rarely start out that way. The men on *Heartland* almost always have to learn how not to be too strong or too silent—in other words, not to be too cowboyish.

In this way, here as in most of the other texts I have considered, cowboy masculinity remains the taken-for-granted assumption about the way men usually are and even, often, the way they ought to be. For all its untraditional need to heal, even *Heartland* celebrates when young Ty goes on a cattle roundup in one episode and earns the borrowed hat that has allowed him to masquerade as a real cowboy. In its consideration of recent movies such as *True Grit* and *Cowboys and*

Aliens as part of an upswing in interest in westerns, an article in *The Globe and Mail* quotes University of Toronto English professor and western specialist Garry Leonard: “If they tried to remake *Shane* [the 1953 western starring Alan Ladd] now, it would bomb abysmally. But if they try and remake a western now that has no discernible connection to what westerns have been, it would also bomb. You’ve got to somehow use the old to make sense of the new” (Lederman). If the texts I consider here are evidence, the old tends to make sense of the new by dragging its old values along with it, triumphantly undermining the new. The traditional ideologies of masculinity and the nostalgia for a retrogressive vision of the past that McGillis describes remain firmly in place.

Notes

¹ McGillis does point to one old B western that involved cowboys interacting with an alien civilization: *The Phantom Empire*, a twelve-chapter serial about Gene Autry’s encounter with an ancient but highly advanced underground civilization.

² *Cowboys Don’t Cry* is the name of a Canadian novel for young people by Marilyn Halvorson, first published in 1987 and later made into a movie. It centres on a teenager whose mother has recently died and his relationship with his father, a famous rodeo star with a drinking problem.

³ The relationship here between horses and masculinity echoes the pattern that Christine Doyle finds in American novels about boys and horses: “Though occasional, necessary incidences of shooting—usually involving rifles—occur in these series, none of the writers seem to have contemplated putting six-guns into the hands of their heroes in order to make men of them; instead, developing masculinity seems to be deflected onto the knight’s—and cowboy’s—other signifier, the horse. Indeed, each of these writers chooses to make the boy hero’s intimate relationship with one or more horses a crucial part of his development” (282–83).

⁴ As well as having a strong empathy with horses, the TV Amy has excellent taste in literature; a scene in the twelfth episode of the first season shows her reading my own Dear Canada novel, *Not a Nickel to Spare: The Depression Diary of Sally Cohen*, published by Scholastic Canada.

⁵ I have read the first four of the twenty-five Heartland novels. My comments on the TV *Heartland* are based primarily on the first season and a few episodes from the next three.

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Perry Nodelman is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Winnipeg and author of *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. He has never been on a horse.