

Kids and Western fiction: A BRANDING ISSUE



By Candace Simar

My generation grew up watching television Westerns: *Fury*, *The Rifleman*, *Bonanza*, *Laramie*, *Daniel Boone*, *Branded*, *The Virginian* and many others. The big screen boasted John Wayne Westerns. As a result I carried a *Bonanza* lunch box, played cowboys and Indians with my friends, dressed in all the cowboy gear my folks could afford and devoured every Western I found at the local library.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, Zane Grey, Janet Holt Giles, Willa Cather and Louis L'Amour felt like personal friends. I searched for books decorated with horses, covered wagons, Indian braves and cowboys of all description.

This current generation of children is inundated with dystopia, zombies, witchcraft, treachery and super heroes on the big screen and on television. Their video games promote this genre, also. Popular toys include black capes, light sabers, wizard hats and swords. Sadly, this translates into a beefy science-fiction section in the young-adult corner of the library. Kids are gorging on books like the “Harry Potter” and “Divergent” series, *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner* and others. Werewolves, wizards, skulls, witches, caped

avengers, swords, demonic monsters and darkened roads plaster the covers of this genre.

Recent interviews with local librarians left me shaking my head. All of them said that children’s reading preference has shifted far away from the traditional frontier stories to that of fantasy and science fiction.

“In the last five years even the Laura Ingalls books aren’t being checked out anymore,” one librarian said. “Kids are reading fantasy, if they are reading. Most would rather play video games.”

I googled Amazon’s top 20 sellers for the young-adult market. Not one Western nor frontier story made the cut. Why not? I decided to find out. I went directly to the experts.

My 12-year-old grandson in Nebraska tried to explain. He was in the middle of yet another Rick Riordan book and was slightly irritated that I interrupted him to talk about Westerns. “My friends would rather read exciting books about super heroes. Cowboys are not cool.”

What? Cowboys are the coolest! Ask any Baby Boomer!

I questioned further, hoping to discover what it was about fantasy books that so intrigued him. My grandson, in a most animated way, tried to explain the excitement of Greek gods threatening the existence of mortal men, super powers and treacherous warlords. He liked the mystery of pretend worlds and imagined galaxies. He loved the invented words and monsters. He couldn’t wait for the sequel to come out. I kind of understood.

Good writing equals vivid language, unique and detailed settings and great action splashed across the page. But no

cowboys? Really?

Moon Over Manifest by Clare Vanderpool (Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books) received the WWA 2011 Spur Award in juvenile fiction and a Newbery Medal from the Association for Library Service to Children.

There was still a market for Western YA fiction. I made up my mind to prove it.

My concern morphed into a formalized survey. Through seven questions I hoped to discover what kids liked to read and what they might read. I discussed my plan with a local librarian and shared my list of questions:

1. Would you be interested in a book about horses?
2. Would you read about adventurers exploring the Western states?
3. Would you choose a book about American Indian culture or U.S.-Indian wars?
4. Would you pick up a book about mountains, prairies or unusual animals (like buffalo)?
5. Would you read a book about early trains, the Pony Express, stage-coaches or discovering gold?
6. Would you enjoy a book about pioneers surviving in uninhabited and hostile settings?
7. Would you read a book about cowboys?

“Good luck,” the librarian said while scanning yet another fantasy book for a middle school student. “The attention span of kids nowadays is down to about 10 seconds.”

Undaunted and armed with my survey, I began presenting the questions to every kid I met. My first official venture happened at a book signing at

Quotable

“It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading. Something that will stretch their imaginations – something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out toward people whose lives are quite different from their own.”

– Katherine Patterson, two-time Newbery medalist and two-time National Book Award winner

Children’s section at *The Bookseller in Grass Valley, California*. Angie Harmon



