

When the West gets weird

By Jeffrey J. Mariotte

Night in the desert. The fire has dwindled to a light crackle. A couple of the cowboys are already snoring, others engage in hushed conversation. Suddenly, squeals of terror from the horses break the stillness. A mountain lion? A rattler?

But ... what if what spooked the horses is a spook?

In that case, you've entered the Weird West.

The Weird Western is having a moment. *Westworld* and *Wyonna Earp* are making waves on TV. At the movies in recent years, we've seen everything from *Bone Tomahawk* to *Cowboys and Aliens* to the remade *Lone Ranger*. Comic shops are loaded with Weird Western titles like *The Sixth Gun*, *Pretty Deadly*, *Manifest Destiny* and my own *Desperadoes*. *Red Dead Redemption* is one of the most popular video game titles out there. And on bookshelves, works by Joe R. Lansdale and R.C. Belcher stand alongside series like the *Deadlands* novels from Tor Books and anthologies like *Straight Outta Tombstone* and *Dead Man's Hand*.

What exactly is a Weird Western? As evidenced by the examples above, it's a broad category. It's essentially any work containing traditional Western elements combined with supernatural horror, science fiction or fantasy. There's some crossover with Steampunk, another genre that often relies on Western elements. Typically, the setting is the historical West, and it's portrayed as authentically as possible, because when the weird stuff hits, a believable backdrop is helpful.

Although Weird Westerns are enjoying a rare period of widespread public acceptance, the genre itself goes back more than a century. In August 1868, Edward Sylvester Ellis's *The Huge Hunter: Or, the Steam Man of the Prairies* was published in *Irwin P.*

Beadle's American Novels. Today we'd label it Steampunk, but it was clearly a Weird Western and is perhaps the first story we can label as such.

As pulp magazines replaced dime novels, Weird Westerns flourished, particularly in the pages of *Weird Tales*, where

authors as diverse as Robert E. Howard, Leigh Brackett and C.L. Moore blended science-fictional and horrific elements with Western ones.

In 1935, Gene Autry's first starring role came in the serial *The Phantom Empire*, a Weird Western if ever there was one.

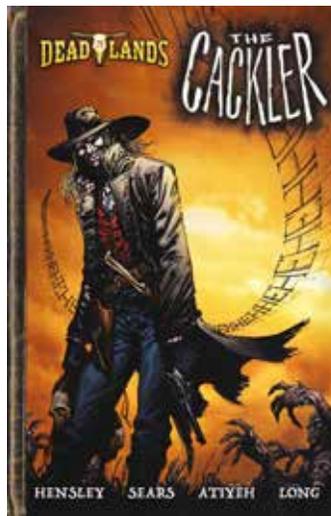
Gene's a singing cowboy whose ranch just happens to be located above the ancient, yet highly advanced civilization of Murlana. A couple of years later, the Three Mesquiteers met their own lost civilization in *Riders of the Whistling Skull*. Other prominent Weird Western films over the next few decades included *7 Faces of Dr. Lao*, *Billy the Kid vs. Dracula*, *The Valley of Gwangi*, *High Plains Drifter* and *Ravenous*.

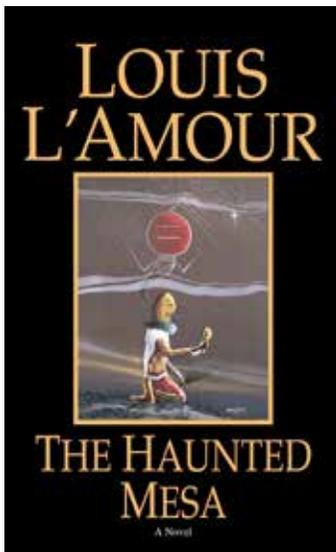
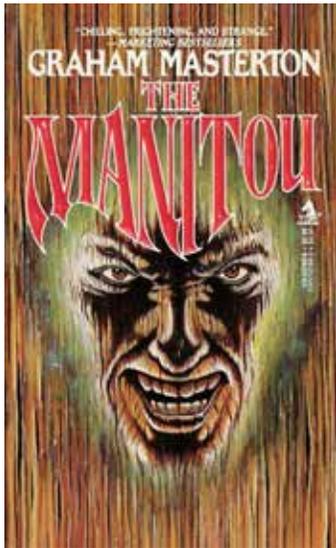
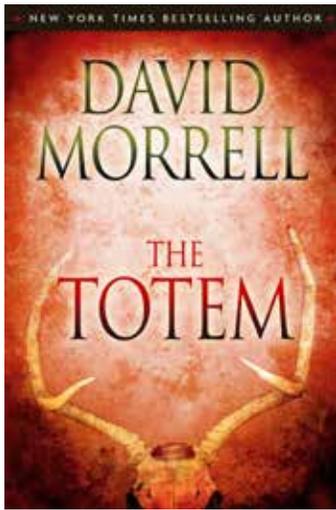
In the world of comics today, Marvel's *Ghost Rider* is a leather-jacket-wearing guy with a flaming skull and a motorcycle, but the character originated as a Westerner riding a horse given to him by an American Indian medicine man. He wore a white, phosphorescent costume, so he'd look like a ghost, but he occasionally found himself up against genuinely supernatural adversaries.

Horror comics often featured Weird Western stories, and DC Comics retitled *All-Star Western* as *Weird Western Tales* in 1972, after Jonah Hex became the book's breakout star. When I created *Desperadoes* in 1997, the Weird Western had largely vanished from the comic racks, but between that and the Weird Western role-playing game *Deadlands*, its popularity rose again, and it has never really faded away since.

As is evidenced by the vast range of different fantastical and horrific elements mentioned here – in a cursory exploration of the field – the Weird Western genre is open to all kinds of ideas. There's no specific formula for a Weird Western. As I mentioned, Western elements are a necessary feature, but stories don't have to necessarily be set in the historical west. A Weird Western can be (and has been) set in outer space – such as Joss Whedon's TV series *Firefly* – in the distant past, in the far future, in other dimensions and in modern times, such as in David Morrell's chilling novel *The Totem*.

The weird element can be subtle, as in *High Plains Drifter*,





in which we don't know until the end that Clint Eastwood has been a ghost all along, or as central to the story as the portal to the Third World in Louis L'Amour's *The Haunted Mesa*.

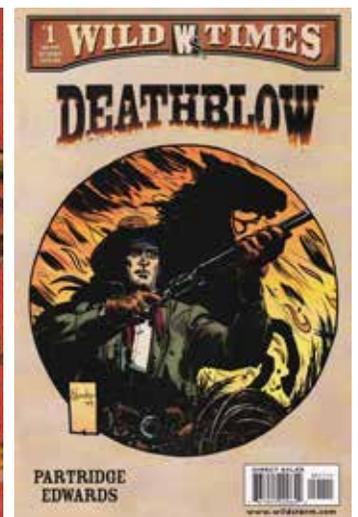
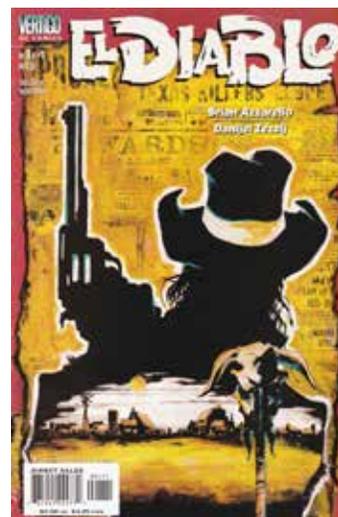
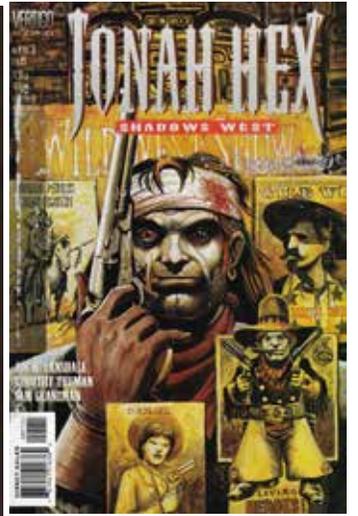
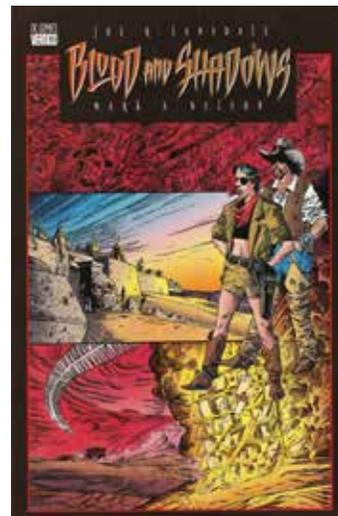
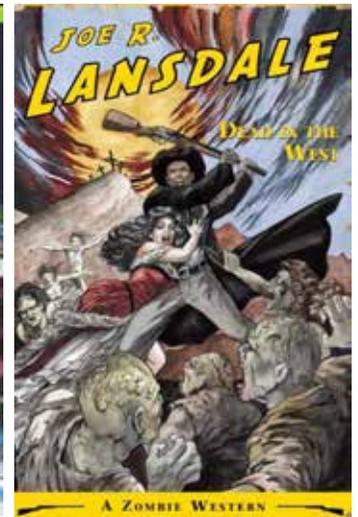
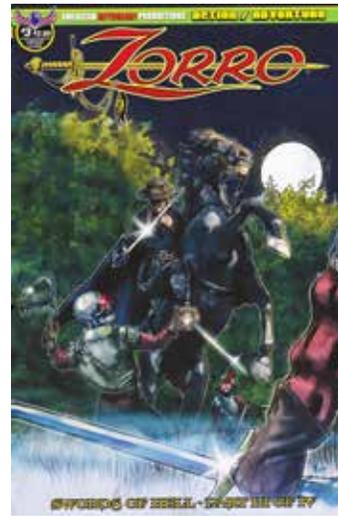
Zombies, ghosts, vampires and werewolves abound, but we also find less common myths and monsters, including some from American Indian lore, like the manitou that features in Graham Masterton's novel *The Manitou* and the 1978 film adaptation starring Tony Curtis.

To my mind, the purest Weird Western is a work of fiction that could be a straight Western, except for the addition of whichever weird trope or tropes the author chooses to include. That said, the weird can't be shoehorned in; it has to be integral to the story. If set on a haunted ranch, for instance, ranch life should be accurately portrayed, but the haunting must be what drives the story to its hopefully terrifying conclusion.

Various publishers – mostly science fiction, fantasy and horror publishers, as opposed to those specializing in Westerns – have been releasing Weird Western material in recent years. Tor Books is probably foremost among them (you're probably familiar with their Forge imprint, which puts out traditional Westerns). Baen Books is publishing an anthology series that began with *Straight Outta*

Hand anthology.

As is usually the case, some of these anthologies are invitation-only. Those that are open to submissions are more likely to be found in science fiction, fantasy and horror market listings than strictly Western ones (Ralan.com is a good one). But they are out there, and seemingly more pop up every week. If you have a hankering to add some spookiness to your setting, you can surely do so.



Tombstone and continues this year with *Straight Outta Deadwood* (in which I have a story) and *Straight Outta Dodge City*. Daw Books, a science fiction and fantasy imprint of Penguin Random House, has put out Weird Western anthologies, as has Kensington Books. The midsize press Night Shade Books made a big mark on the field with its massive *Dead Man's*