

SHOOT THE LEGEND

A novel approach to making Westerns

By Bob Herzberg

Hugh Glass was a trapper, explorer and mountain man. His life really didn't need to be cut and spliced and rewritten. It was certainly action-packed enough.

Yet for some reason, his life is changed quite a bit in *The Revenant*. The 2015 film, also based on portions of the novel by Michael Punke, takes liberties with that source material as well. For those of us somewhat familiar with frontier history, we know that Glass didn't have a Pawnee wife and son; *didn't* watch his Indian son, who didn't exist, murdered by trapper John Fitzgerald; *didn't* take revenge on Fitzgerald in a bloody fight-to-the-death; and didn't stand on two legs for most of his journey back to Fort Kiowa since he crawled or floated downriver most of the way. Nor was there any snow *anywhere* at the time of his attack by a grizzly since it was August.

The tale, allegedly true yet deeply suspected of being a legend, inspired two movies, *Man in the Wilderness* (1971) and *The Revenant*. This was what Hollywood did, sometimes neurotically so: Change it, make it flashier, more "exciting," more over-the-top – which sometimes meant more contrived and unbelievable.

This fall, audiences saw the release of the remake of *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). This is Hollywood cynicism at its finest: If you can't milk it dry, then remake a successful property, put a politically correct 21st Century, super-violent spin on it and *then* milk it dry. The 1960 smash had already spawned three sequels and a TV series.

At least *The Revenant* was based on an incident in Glass's life that brought him a modicum of fame. And it was turned into a Western (or as Hollywood sometimes calls it, "a rural adventure"), which allowed Leonardo DiCaprio to win an Oscar for a difficult role. Possessing a realistically hoarse whisper throughout most of the film (post bear attack), the performance saved audiences the trouble of having to hear the actor's usually failed attempts at a regional accent (paging *The Aviator*, *Gangs of New York*, *Blood Diamond*, etc.).

There was a time many decades ago, somewhere between the 1930s and the 1970s, when Western films (no, *not* rural adventures, *actual* Westerns) took their source material from pulp and literary Western novels. Anything written by someone like A.B. Guthrie Jr. is a literary Western. Anything written by

Frank Gruber can be classified as pulp.

Dozens of these books turned out to be far better material to put on celluloid than the original screenplays churned out by hack screenwriters. Westerns like *The Magnificent Seven* are obviously an exception to this. The film was so creative and action-packed, so full of interesting characters and storyline that it *could've* been inspired by a novel. Instead, it was based on Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's 1954 classic film, *Seven Samurai*.

Hollywood, as usual, wanted guaranteed product, something it could provide which had a surefire fan base of Western readers, as well as those who flocked to the genre anyway. Many of these Western novels, at least pre-1960s, had appeared, piecemeal, in magazines that catered to the action market ("pulp" like *Dime Western*) or, if the writer got more famous and higher-paid, in "slicks" such as *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*.

A quick look at the early works of Luke Short will find that he threw in an abundance of characters and situations all pegged around a single plot point. This not only brought magazine readers back every week to find out what happened, like a soap opera with horses and six-shooters, but it allowed authors like Short, Ernest Haycox, Max Brand and Zane Grey to profit from being paid *by the word*.

However, when Hollywood put these novels on film, it did away with what it felt were extemporaneous characters and unimportant situations and went

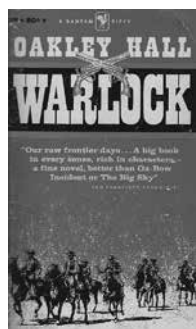


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for the meat on the bone. *Warlock*, Oakley Hall's 1950 novel, is a sprawling work of more than 500 pages with dozens of characters, voluminous exposition, intricate and multilayered plots, and events which unfold over several years – in other words, a Hollywood scenarist's greatest nightmare.

It was a given that all scenes with fights and shootouts stayed in. Romantic scenes could stay too, if they didn't get too sticky. Don't want to put the kids to sleep. Another reason for the gutting of some Western novels is the time factor. What pleased the reader won't necessarily make it into the film if it results in a longer running time. A longer running time means fewer showings, and fewer showings mean less profit.

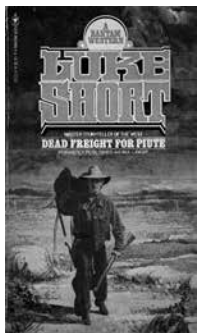
Still another reason for changes from novel to film is the star factor, the presence of a guaranteed cowboy hero giant whose participation in the film version of a book would fuel the project's box office.





That's why the red-headed rancher of Donald Hamilton's *Smoky Valley* becomes the tall, steely-eyed Glenn Ford of *The Violent Men* (1955). And though Randolph Scott was 20 years older than the standard young cowboy hero, his presence helped guarantee profits for 1940s and 1950s film versions of Haycox's *Trail Town*, which became *Abilene Town* (1946); Haycox's *Man in the Saddle* (1951); Short's *Dead Freight for Piute*, which became *Albuquerque* (1948); and Short's *Coroner Creek* (1948).

Of course, a guaranteed Western star's presence can also backfire on a production: the film version of Will C. Brown's



The Border Jumpers would be shot by the great Anthony Mann as *Man of the West* (1958), turning Brown's young ex-outlaw hero in his late 20s into Gary Cooper, who was 56 when the movie was shot. The film's box office suffered at least partly due to the miscasting of the hero. Cooper was nine years older than Lee J. Cobb, the actor who played the hero's villainous uncle.



This was not always the case. Despite the fact that Amos Edwards of Alan LeMay's *The Searchers* was in his 40s (and dies in the novel), he is revised as Ethan Edwards in John Ford's 1956 film version and played by John Wayne, who was in his late-40s at the time of shooting. The combination of Wayne and Ford, with Ethan very much alive at the end for a moving finale, actually improved on the original.

In the 1930s through the 1950s, the hard-drinking, hard-cussing and limping Hopalong Cassidy of Clarence E.



Mulford's novels became, thanks to William Boyd, an upright, honest and clean-living hero in a series of B Westerns and, later, a TV series that was endlessly popular, thus making Boyd, the new holder of Mulford's copyrights, a wealthy man.

It would be a tough job to turn Charles Portis's excellent novel, *True Grit*, into a movie that improved upon its source, but screenwriter Marguerite Roberts, director Henry Hathaway and of course, the Duke, did it better than anyone expected. Paramount turned the balding, fat, mustachioed, eye-patch-wearing and 50-ish Rooster Cogburn into early-60s John Wayne, who conceded to wearing the eye patch, but fought successfully *not* to grow a mustache. Wayne would grow a mustache and underlip beard for *The Shootist*.

Depending on what source you're referring to, there are those who report that Portis couldn't possibly see John Wayne as Cogburn and just as many others who claim that the author had the Duke in mind for the role all the time.

Hal Wallis, who produced the 1969 original, had no qualms about the casting. The Duke was the first one he had in mind for Cogburn, and if Wayne had turned down the role (highly unlikely since he tried to buy the rights to the novel), Wallis was prepared to offer the part to either Robert Mitchum or Walter Matthau. (Oscar Madison shouting, "Fill your hand, you son of a bitch"? I don't think so).

Though *True Grit* was set in Arkansas, Hathaway shot the film in picturesque locations such as Gunnison and Montrose, Colorado, angering Portis no end.

However, adaptation-wise, Roberts, a formerly blacklisted writer who was praised by the conservative Wayne, pored over the novel and, after retaining the first part of the book establishing Cogburn's take-no-prisoners character and young Mattie Ross's tenaciousness, turned sharply away from the source material by the film's climax.

Mattie narrates the novel as an old spinster in the early 1900s. Certainly, in the 1969 film, it's hard to imagine the stubborn, but immensely likable Mattie, as played by a charming Kim Darby, as the old, stuck-up, super-religious, one-armed crone who narrates the novel and actually makes an appearance toward the end of the 2010 remake. It is a pleasure, in the remake, to see Mattie tear an arrogant Frank James a new one with a "Keep your seat, trash!" – a line that was in the novel.

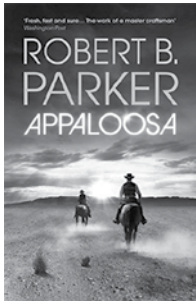
Though Darby is good as Mattie, it's difficult to dismiss Hailee Steinfeld's wonderful performance in the remake. She was nominated for an Oscar; I believe she *should've* won. Certainly, her brief appearance was very much welcomed in Tommy Lee Jones's film version of Glendon Swarthout's *The Homesman* (2014).

Now, we get to the big question between the two film versions of *True Grit*. Was Jeff Bridges the equal or better than John Wayne?

Even though these two marshals are both named Rooster Cogburn and the Coen version is more loyal to the novel, the Duke fits the part better than Bridges. Bridges gave a good performance in the remake, but he did not spend his whole career honing an image, particularly in Westerns. Wayne *was* Rooster Cogburn, from the take-no-prisoners attitude to the

dark past behind the drunken reprobate (Cogburn rode for Quantrill). Wayne's ornery marshal had an edge that I felt Bridges lacked. The Duke had been playing men like Cogburn on screen, in one form or another, all his life.

Robert B. Parker wrote three novels featuring Marshal Virgil Cole and Deputy Everett Hitch before he died on January 18, 2010. Written much in the style of his Spenser mystery novels, the two laconic men seem to have endless



conversations on life and law and order between shootings and town-taming jobs (Hitch always carried a shotgun; Cole was a lawman of the "one-shot/one-kill" school of badge-toters).

Directed by actor Ed Harris, who starred as Cole, with Viggo Mortenson as Hitch, *Appaloosa* was released in September 2008 and grossed more than \$20 million by January 2009.

Not exactly a smash, the film dispensed with the many conversations the two lead characters had in the novel, but Harris still maintained a slow pace throughout. Though there *was* some action, Harris (in my opinion, miscast as Cole) didn't make the film that interesting, though Mortenson's shotgun-packing deputy and Jeremy Irons's cultured villain were certainly a plus. And Renee Zellweger, pre-plastic surgery, was not a strong enough actress to play Parker's tempestuous Allison French, a gal whose presence is supposed to cause the even-tempered Cole to lose focus on the law and get violently jealous. The originally cast Diane Lane would have been a better choice.

We all know that Hollywood will continue with its need to alter on-screen what seemed so attractive between book covers. Hollywood will also take the life of an actual historical figure and make it far more, in its view, "exciting" and "relevant" to 21st Century audiences. It's what Hollywood does. And believe it or not, there are some of us in the paying seats who wouldn't want it any other way.

Western adaptations

By Bob Herzberg

1. *Shane* (1953); novel, Jack Schaffer; screenplay, A.B. Guthrie Jr.

Schaeffer's novella is so beautifully written that it was obvious that Hollywood would change it. Instead, director George Stevens and screenwriter Guthrie *improved* on it, expanding on the age-old conflict of cattlemen versus homesteaders into a beautifully shot, well-acted postwar parable of good vs. evil.

2. *The Big Country* (1958); "Ambush at Blanco Canyon," a four-part serial in the *Saturday Evening Post* by Donald Hamilton; screenplay, James R. Webb, Sy Bartlett, Robert Wilder.

Director William Wyler and his screenwriters turned Hamilton's 1957 story (which he expanded into a 1958 novel) of an eastern dude finding himself in the middle of a range war into a searing antiwar indictment, with the obstinate Terrell and Hennessey clans seen as a microcosm of superpower enmity. A well-deserved Oscar went to the always dynamic Burl Ives.

3. *Day of the Outlaw* (1959); novel, Lee E. Wells; screenplay, Philip Yordan.

Director Andre de Toth and Yordan altered Wells's original so that the hero was no longer the forthright ranch foreman, but the stubborn, autocratic rancher (appropriate casting: Robert Ryan). Painfully, he learns, through the town's takeover by Burl Ives's gang, that the Way of the Gun is wrong. Add de Toth's wonderfully bleak, black and white, frost-bitten wilderness and this is one great film.

4. *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976); novel, Forrest Carter; screenplay, Phil Kaufman, Sonia Chernus.

A white supremacist whose real name was Asa Carter, the author turns his Reb guerrilla into an anti-Union, anti-federal government, master-race hero who was the embodiment of Southern vengeance. Director/star Clint Eastwood and his screenwriters thankfully removed Carter's mythologizing of his

hero and end the film on a positive note of inclusion and reconciliation.

5. *Destry Rides Again* (1939); novel, Max Brand; screenplay, Felix Jackson, Henry Myers, Gertrude Purcell.

Unlike Brand's original or the 1932 film version starring Tom Mix, this film powerfully demonstrated that you can't sweet-talk your way out of a confrontation with evil. Made at the beginning of World War II, with Marlene Dietrich, Jimmy Stewart and a rousing climax (not to mention a great catfight), *Destry* is a bona fide classic.

6. *Buchanan Rides Alone* (1958); novel, *The Name's Buchanan*, Jonas Ward; screenplay, Charles Lang.

Director Budd Boetticher and Lang basically use the first half of one of Jonas Ward's many Buchanan novels and build it up to an exciting climax on a bridge between Mexico and the U.S. A condemnation of both mob rule and racism, the film is still relevant today.

7. *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943); novel, Walter Van Tilberg Clark; screenplay, Lamar Trotti.

Alarmed by the rise of Nazism, Clark wrote a parable of fascist terror, equating it with mob rule. William Wellman's film vastly improves on the novel. With Henry Fonda and Henry Morgan as the righteous heroes, the film retains its power to this day.

8. *Posse From Hell* (1961); novel, Clair Huffaker; screenplay, Huffaker.

The prolific author turned the rescue of a woman kidnapped by three psychopaths into a search-and-destroy mission in which a dysfunctional posse must either grow into battlefield veterans or die in the attempt. Universal wisely cast war hero Audie Murphy (an excellent performance) as the only man who can take charge of the posse members and lead them, not *from* Hell, but *through* it.

9. *The Virginian* (1929); novel, Owen Wister; screenplay, Edward E. Paramore Jr., Howard Estabrook.

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he heard Ken Curtis (playing Charlie) using an accent while telling a few stories (he used this accent on a Sons of the Pioneers radio show). Ford insisted that the actor use the accent for the role, but Curtis objected, not wanting to look foolish. The director was adamant, reminding Curtis that his part amounted to nothing, and he even loses the girl. “If we can’t make you look good, then let’s make you look funny. Play it with that accent and you’ll make it a part people will remember,” Ford said.

When it came to filming the meeting between Ethan and Scar, Ethan taunts the chief with the line, “You speak

pretty good American for a Comanche. Someone teach you?” As they’re about to enter Scar’s tipi, the warrior says to Ethan, “You speak good Comanche. Someone teach you?” Ford added this line, which was never in the script, just before filming the scene. It helps build even greater animosity between the two warriors.

After nearly four weeks in Monument Valley, the production returned to the RKO-Pathé studios in Culver City, California, to film interiors. The film completed its 56-day schedule on Au-

gust 13, 1955. When it was released in May 1956, *The Searchers* proved to be a solid box office hit, earning more than \$5 million, yet it didn’t earn a single Academy Award nomination.

Over the years, *The Searchers* has influenced more filmmakers than almost any other picture except *Citizen Kane*. When John Ford made this movie, he was just trying to make a hit film and prove he had not lost his touch. He did much more than that. With *The Searchers*, John Ford created a masterpiece that will live forever.

RIDING POINT (from page 4)

inability to find a place in society. The anti-heroes James Stewart played in a series of films for Anthony Mann (especially *Winchester ’73* and *The Naked Spur*) revealed an unsettling psychosis at the heart of the Western’s traditional rugged individualism.

The propensity for violence in American society would find full expression in the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s. Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man*, written by Calder Willingham from the Thomas Berger novel, is as much (if not more) about Vietnam than the Cheyenne on the Washita and the Little Big Horn. Sam Peckinpah, who first questioned genre archetypes in *Ride the High Country*, would make in *The Wild Bunch* the decade’s ultimate last-stand film, an at-once fatalistic and nostalgic story of an aging band of violent outlaws doomed to lose their battle against an entrenched, cynical establishment.

The Western’s trend to refract its themes through a contemporary lens

continues. One of 2016’s best films is *Hell or High Water*, written by Taylor Sheridan and directed by David Mackenzie. Its story of Chris Pine and Ben Foster’s bank-robbing brothers pitted against Jeff Bridges’s dogged lawman harkens back to that Depression-era Jesse James narrative, but its setting amid bankrupt, post-boom West Texas is searingly relevant and gives new meaning to familiar tropes. The same is likely to be said of a spate of new Westerns all put into production or scheduled for release within the coming year.

In this special movie edition of *Roundup*, the WWA joins *Showdown* author Lenihan in the encouraging conclusion that “the western’s proved capacity for redefining America’s mythic heritage in contemporary terms would suggest ... that the western is an unlikely candidate for cultural oblivion.” Don’t wrap us in white linen just yet, boys. We’ve still got a long way to go.

TOP 10 (from page 8)

Wister’s 1903 novel is simplistic, talky and morally questionable, with the author clearly siding with the ruthless Wyoming cattle barons against the homesteaders. The performances of Gary Cooper (as the Virginian), Richard Arlen and especially heroine Mary Brian almost make one forget the novel’s repugnant pro-lynching stance.

10. *The Professionals* (1966); novel, *A Mule for the Marquesa*, Frank

O’Rourke; screenplay, Richard Brooks.

It would’ve been hard to top the work of Frank O’Rourke, but Brooks did an excellent job. With sharper dialogue, more cunning twists, and powerhouse acting by a quartet of over-40 macho leading men, *The Professionals* not only dares to define the twisted politics of the Mexican Revolution, but the hidden agendas of all conflicts portrayed as good-versus-evil.

Ethan discovers Debbie’s rag doll at his brother’s burned-out ranch. Michael F. Blake Collection



Ethan standing over Debbie. Courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University

