Big Horn Gunfighter by Robert Kammen, and *Long Henry* by Robert Kammen, and *Wind River Kill* by Robert Kammen, and *Wyoming Gunsmoke* by Robert Kammen (review)

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Richard Ford's "Great Falls" and Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried" are the best examples of the understatement and gentle insight that run throughout most of the tales in this collection. Ford's narrator recalls his experiences as an adolescent boy watching through a series of ambiguous episodes the break-up of his parents' marriage. Ford's achievement is that he manages to identify clearly and simply the subtle and sudden forces that can change the course of a life forever. O'Brien's story depicts a platoon of young soldiers in Vietnam "humping" a burdensome load of physical and emotional baggage across mountains, through jungles and into ambushes, stopping only to joke away their fears or dream of loves left behind. Ultimately, the objects carried in their packs become symbols of the men themselves, as their fading photographs and assortments of weaponry become physical manifestations of their hopes, horror and courage.

Other stories, such as William Kittredge's "Phantom Silver," are more boldly imaginative in their approach and evocative in their imagery. Kittredge transforms the legendary figure of a Lone-Ranger-type Western hero from a rescuer of the innocents into an aging, incestuous shell of a man, mutilated in form, whose silver bullets fire impotently into the onrushing tide of the Pacific Ocean near San Francisco. Frederick Busch's "Dog Song" similarly employs brutal, almost surrealistic images in a haunting tale of memory and betrayal.

One only wishes there could have been a little greater variety of subject matter in the stories selected for this volume. There are, for instance, a few too many stories about middle-aged, middle-class men suffering the angst of a life or marriage "on-the-rocks." But this is a minor quibble with what is otherwise an outstanding collection of stories by some very promising voices in American fiction.

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Big Horn Gunfighter. By Robert Kammen. (New York: Zebra Books, 1987. 222 pages, $2.50.)

Long Henry. By Robert Kammen. (New York: Zebra Books, 1987. 219 pages, $2.50.)

Wind River Kill. By Robert Kammen. (New York: Zebra Books, 1987. 203 pages, $2.50.)

Wyoming Gunsmoke. By Robert Kammen. (New York: Zebra Books, 1987. 223 pages, $2.50.)

In the last hundred years, Wyoming has appealed to a wide variety of western writers, to the point that a paperback Western with an emphatically Wyoming setting can capitalize upon an established mystique. Zebra Books, a publishing house that has produced quite a few paperback Westerns in the

past few years, has recently brought out four books by Robert Kammen, novels with potentially blood-stirring settings such as the Big Horn Basin, the Powder River Basin, and the Wind River country. Unfortunately, a reading of these books shows that Wyoming is up for grabs to anyone who presumes to write about it.

It should be a standard rule among authors not to write about something that one knows nothing or very little about, but it seems to be an assumption of hack writers that one can make up for deficiencies by dipping into a few source books. Thus, a writer can come up with an ample amount of topographical references, landscape descriptions, and historical touchstones, so that the fiction has a superficial appearance of verisimilitude. But this fragile illusion dissipates like campfire smoke when the reader encounters the .30-06 in territorial Wyoming, oak trees in the most unlikely places, and native Spanish speakers who commit errors that could only come from an inept use of an English-Spanish dictionary.

Kammen's Wyoming, however he might have acquired it, is more familiar to the viewer of "B" movies and the reader of formula fiction than it is to anyone with a realistic sense of place, history, character, or literature. His Wild West is a place full of "scum" (a pet word) such as hired killers, double-crossers, opportunists, cheats, gamblers, drunks, whores, and arch-villains. Even though these are all cardboard figures, the reader's lingering sense of reality calls for a few more characters who do not spend all their time drinking, gambling, drygulching, and continuously killing in self-defense.

Even stock characters such as the gothic villain, the light and dark heroines, the greasy old mountain man, and the hard-headed ranch woman could be entertaining if they were presented with more skill. The narrative point of view is vagabond and arbitrary, expedient at best. These books abound with clumsy syntax and punctuation, overused words, sloppy and inaccurate diction, misused idiomatic expressions, and strange metaphors. For example, a bulky, no-necked marshal is referred to as the cattle baron's "lapdog" (*Big Horn Gunfighter*, p. 43), and the glass-eyed villain Terrapin "is looking for a nest egg to fall back on" (*Wind River Kill*, p. 49). The carelessness is reinforced by poor proofreading.

It would not be fair to dismiss these books simply because a birch tree or a flock of quail is out of place, but it is difficult to praise books that have so many instances of negligence in basic writing, basic narrative craft, use of source material, and in general respect for the subject and the genre. As Wyoming approaches the centennial of its statehood, its residents are reviewing their state's heritage, part of which is the literature. Natives and newcomers, literary artists and popular romancers, poets and cowpokes—all these and more have interpreted Wyoming and have helped characterize a Wyoming of fact and fiction. It is too bad that these Zebra Westerns have so little to offer, even to the popular pulp tradition. As pure escapism they could be worth something, perhaps even $2.50 a throw, if they were better done.

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