
W.C. Jameson, ed. *Hot Coffee and Cold Truth: Living and Writing in the West*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. 206p.

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W.C. Jameson opens this collection of autobiographical essays by recalling its inspiration: a day, twenty years ago, that he encountered Elmer Kelton's classic novel, *The Time It Never Rained*, which chronicles a Texas community's struggle during the region's severe seven-year drought in the 1950s. At the time Jameson was himself already a successfully published writer, but he deeply admired Kelton's craft and wished he could ask Kelton the kinds of questions we all want to ask a mentor, if we're lucky enough to have one. With *Hot Coffee and Cold Truth*, Jameson gives us that opportunity, or at least the next best thing: a chance to sit by the fireplace or in a local café and read the advice of a dozen established writers and household names in the canon of Western writers.

These are all writers who chose to be local rather than national (although several acquired national reputations as a result). They chose to identify as Westerners and to live on the land about which they wrote and continue to write. They also represent a particular era in Western writing: they are all from Jameson's own generation or those preceding it. The book's roster includes Win Blevins, Margaret Coel, Don Coldsmith, Robert J. Conley, David Dary, Max Evans, Bill Gulick, Paulette Jiles, Elmer Kelton, Robert Utley, and Richard Wheeler. All were born between 1916 and 1943, with one youngster in the mix: poet Laurie Wagner Buyer, who was born in 1954, making her fifty-four this year.

More, perhaps, than the wonderful mix of writing styles, genre work, and relationships to the West that this group comprises, Jameson's focus on writers born in the first half of the twentieth century makes *Hot Coffee and Cold Truth* a particularly valuable and interesting book. The essays offer a snapshot of the thinking of these writers as they look back on careers that saw tremendous change not only across the Western landscape, but also across Western genres: the rise of the great era of Western films, the peak and decline of Western dime- and magazine fiction, the emergence of the American Indian Rights movement and the development of our understanding of American history, and the Western movement of the Beat generation. These seismic changes in the geographic, cultural, and literary landscape of the West are not the focus of this collection, but they emerge as fundamental factors shaping the experiences of these writers, their professional choices, and their senses of themselves as writers and as Westerners. For this alone the book is worth reading as record and testimony of a generation.

In terms of the book's mission—to provide a forum for mentoring and writing advice—there is little here that cannot be found in a number of writing guides. We hear the usual: develop a work ethic, weather rejection, stay committed, write every day, write what moves you, listen to your real editor (not your inner editor), and develop a solid grasp of craft techniques such as focusing on characters' physical qualities that have something relevant to do with the story in which they appear. That sort of thing. But this same-old advice is delivered in a Western no-nonsense mode that is a refreshing change from the airy intellectualism of literary craft guides or the manic flair of how-to books that offer sure success in the commercial book market. Take, for example, Max Evans' advice to young writers who aren't readers: don't become a writer. Because, as he points out, "they don't have the dedication, the reading, or enough plain life experience to make a pencil-point dent on a real writer's butt" (102).

From a teaching perspective, I'm not sure I would assign *Hot Coffee, Cold Truth* as a required text in genre writing courses, except for courses on Western writing, although I might use specific chapters. But the book's value isn't limited to teaching writing. It's a great resource for courses on Western culture, Western literature, or even American autobiography. It contains within it much of what is unique, exasperating, inspiring, politically incorrect, and wise about the West and the people who see themselves as Westerners. For example, take Win Blevin's unabashedly romantic, hyper-masculine view of landscape he knows so well and loves so much—"I want to see again how slickrock undulates, smooth and sexy as a woman's belly" (8)—which he offers up alongside a Beat-like individualism: "As a writer I am what I am. Deal with it" (13). Or take Laurie Wagner Buyer's hard-won realization that "the earth did not care if I lived or died. The West could give a hoot if I stayed or left" (33). Out of this experience came the discovery of a Western treasure. As she writes: "I discovered that in the process of loving something that could not love me in return I exhumed the intrinsic value of what I needed to love in myself" (32).

Ultimately, though, it's not the writing advice nor the sheer cultural richness of these essays that makes me return to them. It's the sense of community they engender. Perhaps the greatest paradox, in a landscape of many great paradoxes, is that the West, for all of its wildly eccentric, fiercely private, and steadfastly independent peoples, would be a place to find community. These writers don't sound like Generation Y Facebookers text-messaging from their rafts on the Colorado River. They don't sound like recent graduates of Iowa's Writer's Workshop, schooled to reach audiences well beyond the boundaries of the plains states. They are not collecting friends or marketing themselves to strangers. But they are inviting us into their homes and their hearts as writers. What better opportunity to join a community can one be offered within the pages of a book? ✱