Robert Roripaugh
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In an essay entitled “Literature of the Cowboy State” in 1978, Robert Roripaugh opened his discussion by declaring, “As far as serious literature from the American West is concerned, the least known, most neglected and uncataloged body of writing […] is that of Wyoming” (26). He goes on to assert that there is little consistency “in the state’s literary output” (26). Twenty-five years later, Roripaugh’s remarks are still valid. Despite an attempt by several well-meaning scholars in the late 1980s to put together a literary anthology for the centennial of Wyoming’s statehood, and despite the recent compilation of a state literary anthology by the Wyoming Center of the Book, to date there has been no coherent literary history written. As Roripaugh also notes in his essay, Wyoming has produced no major literary figure.

With the writing of that essay, and with other essays and public presentations since then, Robert Roripaugh has done at least as much as any other individual to try to bring together a sense of Wyoming literary history. And in his own writing, he has become as significant a figure as anyone else in the state’s literary heritage. Over a period of fifty years he has written and published several short stories, two novels, numerous poems (most of which have made their way into his two book-length collections), book reviews, and articles (most of them about literature). He has also given several public talks, mostly about the literature of Wyoming, and he has served for seven years as the state’s poet laureate.

Beyond the boundaries of Wyoming, Roripaugh has had some recognition at the national level. His short stories and poems have
been reprinted in well-circulated anthologies, a scholarly article received an award from the Western Literature Association, his novel *Honor Thy Father* won the Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame as the Outstanding Western Novel of 1963, and his poetry collection *The Ranch* (2001) was a finalist for the Western Writers of America Spur Award for Poetry in 2002. Thus, in addition to being a leading figure in Wyoming letters, Robert Roripaugh has a significant place in the literature of the American west.

Roripaugh was born in Oxnard, California, on 26 August 1930. His father was a rancher and a petroleum engineer, and his mother was a schoolteacher who also wrote poetry and encouraged him in his writing. He had one brother as well. His father's work took the family to various places in the west and southwest, including Midland, Texas, where Robert attended school for ten years. In high school he participated in sports (football and tennis), competitive speech, and journalism. He graduated from high school in 1947, at the age of sixteen, and began his college education at the University of Texas at Austin the same year, majoring in journalism and geology. In the West Texas country of cattle and oil, the emerging writer formed many impressions that would combine with later experiences in Wyoming and New Mexico to give him a broad sense of life in the American west.

In 1948-49, Roripaugh's family bought a small ranch near Lander, Wyoming, which is in the Wind River country in the west-central part of the state. Life on the ranch for the next several years would leave a lasting influence on Roripaugh and his writing. In 1950 he transferred to the University of Wyoming, where he majored in geology and English, graduating with a B.A. in 1952 and then an M.A. in English in 1953. Also in 1952 and 1953, he published his first poems and short stories in the campus literary magazine.
After completing his M.A., he was drafted into the U.S. Army. During his service (1953-55), he spent one year in Japan. Roripaugh's experiences in Japan also made strong impressions on him and his work, and it was there that he met his wife, Yoshiko, with whom he was married in August 1956.

After his term of service in the military, Roripaugh returned to the University of Wyoming as a fellowship recipient in American Studies and as a part-time instructor in English. The next year, in 1956, he moved to the University of New Mexico, where he undertook doctoral study and worked as a teaching assistant. He also began writing fiction in earnest; "The Peach Boy" (1958) was accepted by the *Atlantic Monthly*, and he was working on a novel that would become *A Fever for Living*. After two years at New Mexico he chose to devote more professional energy to his writing than to scholarly work, and he moved back to Wyoming to take a job as instructor in the English department. From 1958 until his retirement in 1993, he moved through the professorial ranks of Assistant, Associate, and full Professor of English.

In his years as a faculty member, Roripaugh was a versatile writer, publishing short stories, poems, reviews, articles, and two novels. *A Fever for Living* (1961) is drawn from his experiences in Japan, and *Honor Thy Father* (1963) is set in the ranch country that Roripaugh has come to know and love. After these two novels came a poetry collection, *Learn to Love the Haze* (1976), which contains an impressive range of poems both personal and regional.

In 1995, two years after his retirement from the university, Roripaugh was appointed Poet Laureate of Wyoming for a term lasting until 31 December 2002. During that time, Roripaugh took his position seriously and made himself available to the people of Wyoming by giving public talks and attending large and small gatherings of writers. The appointment was followed by two important events in publishing: the reprinting of *Learn to Love the Haze*...

From the time he returned to Wyoming in 1958 until the present, Roripaugh has lived in Laramie, which is the location of the main campus of the University of Wyoming. He has had a loving and lasting marriage with his wife, Yoshiko, and they have had one daughter, Lee Ann, who has now forged her own career as a poet and a professor at the University of South Dakota. At the time of this writing, Robert Roripaugh is still active as a writer and a speaker.

Because Roripaugh has worked alternately in several areas, this study will treat his work by genre rather than zig-zag back and forth in a chronological review of his career.

**FICTION**

Roripaugh’s debut as a published writer came in 1952 as he was finishing his B.A. In the university literary magazine Writing at Wyoming, he placed two short poems and one short story. The next year, as he was finishing his M.A., he had four short stories in the magazine. His publishing credits do not show another poem until 1971; meanwhile, he would publish more short stories and two novels. Thus, the first phase of his writing career is as a fiction writer.

The five early stories in Writing at Wyoming show a developing writer exploring technique and subject matter. “The Day of the Eagle” is the best of these stories and the one that is most in tone with Roripaugh’s later work. In this story, which might remind some readers of Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s “The Watchful Gods” (1950), a fourteen-year-old boy is out riding on his family’s ranch, taking in the sky and landscape, when he sees and shoots a bobcat. As he is skinning the animal, a girl shows up. This girl, like the significant female characters in Roripaugh’s later fiction, has
dark hair. As the boy and girl go to a spring and lie on their backs to watch the sky, an eagle soars overhead, and the boy thinks about stacking hay and plunging into the water. Riding back alone and letting the horse run, the boy feels “wild and strange, like he was maybe an Indian” (7) and associates the girl once again with the hay meadow. This is an impressive story, especially for a young writer. It blends the landscape, wildlife, horse, hay meadow, and girl into a coherent world, an ideal order in which natural elements prevail. The blending results in an artistic vision that one sees time and again in Roripaugh’s work.

After the publication of the Writing at Wyoming stories and the completion of his M.A., Roripaugh’s next published work was based on his experiences in the Army. Two significant works of fiction emerged from his being stationed in Japan: a short story entitled “The Peach Boy,” which appeared as “An Atlantic ‘First’” (first story of national publication by an emerging writer) in 1958, and the novel A Fever for Living in 1961. Both of these works, which are based on a soldier’s experiences in Japan, have strong connections with the American west and its landscape.

“The Peach Boy” focuses on a G.I., Bill Reno, whose impressions of Japan come through a sensibility nurtured in the western American landscape. As Reno prepares to leave the army camp, he observes the pink cherry blossoms, a green field of young barley, and, beyond, “dark blue mountains” that look like “flatirons stuck up into the sunset” (59). Later in the story, Reno has parallel observations about the American west. The fourth segment of the story opens, “When Reno came home that summer the whole valley was ripening into greens and yellows” (64). He sees a “stream winding in gentle horseshoes through the hay meadows,” and beyond the fields he notices “the rounded, sage-dotted hills as the sun began to set” (64); later he sees “ripening oats which rippled like a girl’s hair” (65).
Reno’s sensitivity to natural detail is complemented by his feelings for a non-American, non-white woman. In leaving Japan he also leaves Toyako; in their final meeting in the apartment that they share, they notice and discuss the black crows outside. In this story, as in “The Day of the Eagle,” the dark heroine is associated with the fertile world of plant and animal life. When Reno goes home to the ranch, he returns to the natural world, but the woman is missing. In a bar he listens to jukebox music about “lost loves, death, and hopeless sorrow” (66) and overhears a brash woman reviling her husband for having an “Indian chippie” (66). The episode in the bar makes Reno miss Toyako and dream about her, but in the end he remains forlorn without her.

The forced separation of the lovers correlates with an intriguing image in the narrative. As in Ernest Hemingway’s story “Soldier’s Home” (1925), the protagonist feels pressure from his mother to settle down. As she needles him, Reno sees and hears magpies in a chicken-wire trap outside. The magpies, which are black and white, might well symbolize the relationship between Reno and Toyako as well as parallel the crows outside the apartment in Japan. In the next segment of the story, Reno’s father goes into the trap, catches the magpies, and stuffs them into a canvas sack, which he then submerges in the creek. As he goes through this process, he asks his son if he has decided what he is going to do. The son says no, but he has thought about it. By the end of the story, when young Reno hears the curtains rustle “like the faintly beating wings of a tired bird” (66), the reader knows that the romance with Toyako is dead even though Reno’s feelings are not resolved. This is a delicate, mature ending to the conflicts in the story. It implies that the elemental energy of a cross-cultural, interracial relationship may be subdued.

This story anticipates A Fever for Living in its treatment of the influence of army life on a sensitive country boy. In the third para-
graph of "The Peach Boy," Reno recalls a series of generalized, dreary details from life on the army base, all of which are developed more fully in the novel. After his argument with his mother he sees a recruitment poster in the post office, and he recalls the "authority," "hardness," and "injustice" of the military (65), other features that are also developed at greater length in the novel. But the strongest influence of the army is its introducing the young man to a woman from another culture and then separating him from her. In "The Peach Boy," as in later fiction by Roripaugh, the dark-haired, non-white woman connects with the natural world; a relationship with her may result in ideal fulfillment or, as expressed in the "hillbilly" music on the jukebox, in death and hopeless sorrow.

The broader theme of *A Fever for Living* is the influence of the military upon individual soldiers as well as upon the Japanese people during the military occupation of Japan in the early 1950s. As in the first segment of "The Peach Boy" but in more detail, large parts of the novel are dedicated to showing the dehumanization, the cruelty, the corruption, and the stupidity inherent in military life. Most of this treatment comes through the viewpoint of Paul Travis, a sensitive, intelligent draftee who is ill-suited to deal with the crude mentality of his fellow soldiers and of his superiors.

Equally significant parts of the novel are devoted to the effects of the war and the occupation upon the Japanese. Most of this emphasis comes through a female character named Yōko, with whom Travis has a fated love affair. Several passages in the novel are narrated from Yōko's point of view, and in other sections she holds up her own in spirited dialogue with Travis. She recalls the horrors of the war (in memorable detail), and she reflects upon and speaks eloquently of the difficulties posed by the military occupation and by interaction with American soldiers.

Although some of the criticism of the military may seem heavy-handed to latter-day readers, especially after large doses of
antimilitary writing in the intervening Vietnam era, the young novelist Roripaugh shows command of his material by way of a fine writing style. At one point, when the enlisted men are obliged to watch a mundane movie about the dangers of bad company and venereal disease, the movie projector sounds "like a pheasant flushing from tall cornfields" (91). Such a simple comparison does more through implication than a full paragraph about distant freedom could do. In other places, subtlety gives way to boldness. As Travis reflects upon the exploitation of Japan and its women, it seems to him that the military camp "was an animal-like erection pressing into the body of Japan" (114). Elsewhere, the style often rises to grace, as in a passage in the latter part of the novel: "Outside the cherry flowers bloomed, looking from upstairs offices like white-pink fog on the walls, and fell down onto the sidewalk where they made tiny brown marks when crushed into the concrete by low-quarters and combat boots" (308). Little is superfluous; even a passing descriptive detail contributes to the overall conflict.

Although A Fever for Living may be classified as a military novel, its more original and lasting content lies in the relationship between the two main characters as it is set in the natural as well as in the military environment. The association between the natural world and the dark woman becomes evident in the early pages of the narrative. As Paul Travis is on his way for his first view of Camp Ogawa (a fictitious name, as stated in the disclaimer), he notices the nearby rice paddies and the distant mountains. As he does so, he senses "an undercurrent of vitality about the people and the land" (14). More specifically, he notices the women:

The short Japanese girls had flat noses and slightly bowed legs, but they walked in a quiet, graceful way that reminded him of the Indian girls he had gone to school with in Albuquerque. (14)
The association between the dark heroine and the land takes on more dimension as Travis recalls his native New Mexico, combining memories of the Sandia Mountains, fishing, and hunting with thoughts of “the black-haired Mexican girls” and the “Indians from the Pueblos” (117).

The blending of femininity and the inherent power of nature, as reflected in both western American and Japanese cultures, works as an undercurrent of the novel. The scene in which Travis and Yōko have their first sustained conversation is set in the rice fields, where he is on a walk and she is riding her bicycle. He perceives her as part of nature: “Her corduroy jacket was white like a gull’s wing against the darkened rice in the fields” (97). Later, when they spend a night together, he has a dream of climbing the wall in front of the army camp:

The concrete was rough to his hands and barbed wire caught at his clothes, but when he reached the top he could see, far beyond the wall, field after field of greening rice and metallic-blue mountains, iridescent in the distance. (165-66)

In a later scene, again in their rented room, he is awake and watching her as she brushes her hair:

He wanted to reach out and touch her face, for through her he came outside of himself and became part of the wet land surrounding the camp, where winter wheat was growing now. (234)

This passage is followed by a paragraph in which he imagines her “walking with him down the main street of Albuquerque where some people would think she was Mexican or Indian” (234). Later in the novel he thinks of taking her “to Zuñi Indian dances where you watched and merged with adobe, dust, and the symbolic brown forms in a singing plaza” (343). In this passage Travis
seeks “a sense of freedom that was beyond the grasp of armies or governments” (343), so that the dark heroine—Japanese, Mexican, Indian—might seem like a primitivistic ideal, something to help the Anglo escape the depressing reality of the modern world. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie A. Fiedler describes the archetypal dark heroine as being “primitive and passionate” (206), and he characterizes the companionship of the white and dark races as being “the dream of primeval innocence” (195). To some extent, given the novel’s didactic purpose of displaying the overwhelming ill effects of the military, the dark heroine does seem escapist, as in Travis’s dream in which he tries to climb the wall.

However, Yōko is such a completely realized character in the novel, with her reminiscences of the war and even earlier times, and with her clear observations on the effects of the occupation, that she does not function as a mere cipher. Furthermore, she comes from a culture that Roripaugh portrays as being still in touch with the elemental mysteries of the earth:

> In Japan the people were not insulated from the living world by perfectly heated houses and spring-cushioned automobiles. They knew the earth, the weather, and their symbols were still animals, birds, and fish. The mysteries and myths were still alive, not preserved in universities or collected by rich oilmen. There were no fences around the rice fields, because each farmer knew where his ground ended and his neighbor’s began. (255)

Roripaugh’s characterization of Yōko as a person connected with the power of the landscape makes her a fully functioning character in the story and also fits her out for her role in the denouement of the novel.

In the end, the romance between Travis and Yōko dies, as does Travis himself, the victim of an altercation with his cruel
commanding officer. Shortly after Yōko receives the news of Travis's death, she leaves work at the base and steps out into the world, where she sees a truck amid landscape features that have been prominent throughout the novel:

The truck was turning toward the unseen ocean and going faster and faster down the dirt road between unbroken rice fields, moving toward high mountains to the east, which still held a trace of snow like the sharpened edge of a blade. Yōko watched the dust swirl and drift in the truck's path. It obscured even the mountains like a dirty eclipse before finally settling. (357-58)

The imagery reinforces what is evident in the story, that the love between the American soldier and the Japanese working girl does not fail because of cultural differences but because of the malevolence of the commanding officer. The novel does not shy away from miscegenation, as a more popularized treatment might; rather, it implies that fruition of the romance—i.e., the union of the western American protagonist with the archetypal dark woman of primitive power—would have been desirable if it were not for the intervention of the military, as characterized by the machine that dirties the landscape.

Rebuke of the military is not a lasting theme in Roripaugh's work, and in that respect "The Peach Boy" and A Fever for Living belong to a circumscribed phase in his career. But in his treatment of human relationships in the context of the natural world, in his portrayal of the human spirit synthesized with the power of nature, these two works, along with his earlier story "The Day of the Eagle," have continuity with the best of his writing.

Roripaugh's next publication after A Fever for Living is Honor Thy Father (1963). On the surface, it seems like a big jump from Japan of the 1950s to the Sweetwater country of Wyoming in
1889, from a contemporary novel that follows the viewpoints of several characters to a historical novel that is narrated in the first person. With *Honor Thy Father*, Roripaugh seems to have come home to the center of his work, but there are some common threads between this novel and the one before it.

One significant theme that runs through both novels is the role of individual conscience. In *Honor Thy Father*, the central conflict is between the older way of ranching, as supported by the powerful Wyoming Stockgrowers Association, and the newer ways practiced by homesteaders and small ranchers. Roripaugh does not delineate this conflict as a simple one, but he does have most of his characters aligned with either the old ways or the new. Central to the old guard, especially at the beginning of the novel, is the narrator’s father, Martin Tyrrell, an old-time ranchman who resists the incursions of the newcomers. The most articulate and most ethical of the other faction is the narrator’s brother, Ira, who has studied in the east and who resists the authority of the cattle barons. The narrator, also named Martin but usually referred to as Mart, has sympathies with both sides and, at the age of seventeen, must sort out his own values. At first he feels embarrassed by his brother’s progressive ideas, but eventually he comes to respect both sides.

Ira Tyrrell, like Paul Travis in Roripaugh’s first novel, is an educated young man in a world of men who not only have had little higher education but also sneer at it. Ira rejects his father’s patronage and speaks openly against the Stockgrowers Association, which had tremendous authority in the Wyoming cattle country of the 1880s and early 1890s. The novel alludes to one infamous exercise of the Association’s power: it was able to protect the cattlemen who lynched Ella “Cattle Kate” Watson and James Averill on the Sweetwater River in July of 1889. As a spokesman for the individual conscience standing up against the ruling estab-
lishment, Ira says, "[Y]ou can't respect a person who just drifts along with something he doesn't believe in" (161). A few lines later he says, "The Association wants to make its own laws for its own benefit. You know that nothing will happen to the men who lynched Jim Averill and the Watson woman" (161).

Anyone who takes serious interest in the history of Wyoming or in literary depictions of the conflicts between the Association and the small-time operators must eventually test his or her own conscience against what happened in Wyoming in those years. And not everyone agrees. Asa Shinn Mercer, in his inflammatory book The Banditti of the Plains (1894), issued a bold criticism of the cattle barons who ruled most of Wyoming in the 1880s and 1890s. Owen Wister, in The Virginian (1902), defended the rights of the big cattlemen to take matters into their own hands and hang the men (and women) they called rustlers. To this day, some writers continue to expose the corruption of the cattlemen's clique, while other writers as well as traditional ranchers sympathize with the old guard, on the grounds that territorial law was not adequate in controlling what was then called "the rustler problem."

Another famous injustice from that era, narrated by Mercer, was the Association's importation of hired killers. (Helena Huntington Smith provides more objective treatment and documented research in The War on Powder River [1966].) These men often operated in the guise of cattle detectives like the famous lone-wolf killer Tom Horn, who "took care of" individuals who were undesirable to his employers. A few years after the main action of Honor Thy Father, in the Johnson County War of 1892, the big cattlemen recruited a group of killers to exterminate the small-time operators who defied the Association. Toward the latter part of Mart Tyrrell's retrospective narration, he refers to the "hired Texas gunmen" who "invaded Johnson County" (280), and he goes on to lodge his opinion about suborned killings:
Of course a lot of people will still claim the Association was right and that Clayt, like Tom Horn, was a great man of the kind we needed in those days when Wyoming was a territory of grass, open range, and large ranches sprawled over the best grazing land in unowned claims as big as whole counties. I guess you’ll always find men who think they can solve all their problems by just joining an Association and hiring a Clayt Paulson. (280-81)

By the end of the novel, then, both the narrator and his progressive brother become spokesmen against organized power and its covert maneuvers. Perhaps because the Army does have more insidious power, this novel displays injustice in a more moderate, less melodramatic way than the earlier novel does.

Roripaugh’s great challenge in writing this novel—and, indeed, the challenge of anyone who wishes to write a serious traditional western novel—is to fulfill many of the conventions of the classic form but not to submit to the stereotyped or simplified treatment so often found in the formula western. As Christine Bold observes in Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960, “[I]t is possible to achieve distinction in an overwritten genre, even when conforming to conventional materials” (154). In Honor Thy Father, Roripaugh succeeds in balancing convention with innovation.

Within the traditional story pattern of the conflict between the big ranchers and their less powerful antagonists, the reader meets a variety of recognizable characters: the stately rancher who has carved an empire out of a raw and stubborn land; the less scrupulous cattle baron who has political ambition; the philosophical brother contrasted with the pragmatic brother; the amber-haired ranch girl contrasted with the raven-haired, halfbreed homestead girl; and a handful of minor characters, on down to the Mexican sheepherder and his daughter, the good-hearted prostitute.
Roripaugh works his characters smoothly into a memorable story poised in an historic moment. By setting the story in 1889, he places it in the context of the lynching of Cattle Kate and James Averill, as territorial Wyoming was passing from the free-range way of life to statehood (1890) and fenced ranges. Roripaugh achieves a solid sense of time and place through a variety of detailed accounts of the art of horse breaking, the customs of fall roundup on open range, the growing power of the cattlemen’s Association, and smaller touches such as fording a river or riding the open range. Unlike the less polished novelist who delivers the historical material wholesale from source books, Roripaugh incorporates his detail in graceful passages and at relevant moments as the narrative proceeds. His use of historical material, undergirded by his firsthand experience in ranching and in the open country, helps this novel rise above the typical western.

But it is in thematic depth that Roripaugh truly exceeds the limits of the genre. The pattern of the popular western is to portray a clearly defined conflict. As James K. Folsom shows in The American Western Novel, the conflicts in western novels often take the shape of “polarized points of view” (60) reflected in characters who “have two diametrically opposed sets of ideas” (60). He goes on to observe that “[i]n poor Western fiction the conflict between these two polarized points of view is predictably didactic” (61). With right and wrong in clearly aligned contrast, the typical western concludes in favor of one set of interests—most often, popularly held values. As John G. Cawelti generalizes in his well-known study entitled The Six-Gun Mystique, the formula western tends to “reaffirm the essential benevolence of American progress” and “to further the social order” (78). The genre novel achieves this affirmation by way of clear conflict and firm, unequivocal resolution.

In Honor Thy Father, conflict and resolution do not work as easily as in a conventional western. There is not just one central
conflict, such as the small individual against the corporate force; rather, there is a complex set of overlapping conflicts among the old-guard rancher, his progressive son, their power-hungry neighbor (who aspires to be a senator with the advent of statehood), the homesteaders, the opportunist nesters, the cowboys-turned-ranchers, and the itinerant rustlers, none of whom align with others to simplify the novel’s conflict and thus its theme. The theme of the novel is not, as it might be in more romantic tales, that the individual must fight and win against big business, big politics, and big government and thus reaffirm the value of a social order supported by individual freedom. Nor is it, as Wister and others would have it, that individuals are justified in taking the law into their own hands when the system fails. *Honor Thy Father* shows, through a less assuring set of developments, that historical change does not know right or wrong, that predominantly good people can be flawed, that the beautiful and free must die with the ugly and corrupt, and nobody really wins. The novel shows a maturity in vision by displaying complex problems without easy answers.

Deeper yet, this novel has another feature that links it to the best of Roripaugh’s previous and subsequent fiction—the power of the natural order, especially when synthesized with the dark heroine. Although Mary Lamar is not as central a character as Yōko is in *A Fever for Living*, she has an unmistakable role. Living in a place called Willow Springs and having been born of an Arapahoe mother, she is indigenous to the natural order. With “sleek braids of black hair swinging against her shoulders” (27), she is mentioned in specific contrast with Leah Karr, the blonde-haired daughter of the territorial senator and cattle baron. In later passages, she is related to the willows, the cattails, the water, and the birds, and each time she is brought into the scene, the reader’s attention is directed to her dark skin, hair, or both.

The contrast between the dark heroine and the light one is an age-old convention, dating from the novels of Sir Walter Scott and
James Fenimore Cooper, on through such diverse works as Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* (1913), and numerous conventional westerns by writers such as Ernest Haycox. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler characterizes this tradition with the example of Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). He asserts, “Cora and Alice [. . .], the passionate brunette and the sinless blonde, make once and for all the pattern of female Dark and Light that is to become the standard form in which American writers project their ambivalence toward women” (200-01). In *The Six-Gun Mystique*, Cawelti also traces the convention from Cooper forward:

The blonde, like Cooper’s Alice in *The Last of the Mohicans*, represents genteel, pure femininity, while the brunette, like Cora in the same novel, symbolizes a more full-blooded, passionate and spontaneous nature, often slightly tainted by a mixture of blood or a dubious past. In the contemporary Western, this feminine duality shows up in the contrast between the schoolmarm and dance-hall girl, or between the hero’s Mexican or Indian mistress and the WASP girl he may ultimately marry. [. . .] When the hero becomes involved with the schoolmarm, the dark lady must be destroyed or abandoned, just as Cooper’s Cora must die because her feelings are too passionate and spontaneous [. . .]. (48-49)

Cawelti’s explication applies to a long tradition of works projected for a broad audience. If one changes “schoolmarm” to “Quaker,” the analysis applies to the classic film *High Noon* (1952). The general pattern of conservative western fiction is to have the civilized values prevail over the darker ones.

At its simplest, the contrast works as a set of signals aligning the two heroines with the two sets of values; at its best, the contrast connects with a deeper conflict in values or feelings.
Roripaugh's superior use of dark imagery and the dark heroine lies in his daring to commit his work in a way that Cooper and mainstream western writers have balked at. The unwritten rule in easy (or safe) fiction (and film) has been to let the hero have a walk on the dark side but come back to the white, so that the work will please the popular audience. Roripaugh deserves praise because he does not play it safe with either the dark heroine or the ruling-class values of the Stockgrowers Association—all of this in a narrative structure that, given the associations of the genre, could be expected to reinforce mainstream values.

In this novel that focuses on historical change, the dark heroine represents something that is enduring, the natural order. As Mart observes, "Only Mary seemed a part of the Sweetwater country that I could count on not to change too much" (152). The lasting natural features of Roripaugh's Wyoming come through in many of Mart's narrated impressions, such as this one, early in the novel on a March day:

I heard a meadow lark flute from across a far draw, and I was glad to be riding somewhere, listening to old Blacky snort as he did whenever he wanted to jog-trot and smelling the range so clean and sharp like it always was at green-up time. (19)

Narrating a sunset, he again perceives the timelessness of the land:

The sun going down behind the Rattlesnakes yellowed the sage and grass for as far as I could see, making the land look fresh and new, like you'd never before seen it or the flint-horned Texas cattle grazing there. (30)

When Mart is reunited with Mary on the last page of the novel, he realizes, "[S]he was still a part of the Sweetwater country that
wouldn’t be much different to me no matter how the times changed or who ran stock along the river” (287). And the novel closes with the two of them in a pantheistic embrace, “listening to the meadow larks and the Sweetwater crowding its banks with runoff from the blue mountains . . . and seeing the fresh green of new grass beginning to color our rangeland again” (287). Mary Lamar, like the Japanese heroines of “The Peach Boy” and A Fever for Living, and like the dark-haired shepherder girl in “The Day of the Eagle,” blends with the natural world to express timeless power and vitality. This is the most universal, comprehensive value one will see in Roripaugh’s work.

Although A Fever for Living and Honor Thy Father were both published by a respectable hardcover publisher (William Morrow) and received consistently favorable reviews in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines, and although the second of the two novels won a national award, Roripaugh’s published work for the next forty years would include no more novels. From the 1960s onward his output would be more diversified as he worked back and forth among fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. In the area of short fiction, he has gone on to write several more stories, of which at least three deserve to be read by future generations.

“The Legend of Billy Jenks” (1971), first published in South Dakota Review, was listed in Best American Short Stories as one of the distinguished short stories of 1972, and it went on to be reprinted in The Far Side of the Storm, a prestigious anthology of contemporary western fiction published in 1975. After that, it earned a paragraph of commentary in A Literary History of the American West (1185).

Like other stories by Roripaugh, this one takes place in and around a small town. Although the town is not named, it resembles Lander, Wyoming, which is near the location of the family ranch that has held so much influence in Roripaugh’s work. The
story’s narrative voice—which, like the voice of Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (1930), works as a composite voice for the town—tells how a young man, Billy Jenks, comes to have a grudge against the town and dies at its hands. The troubles begin when Billy’s father, Jack, a “hand-to-mouth cowboy” (139), forces a shootout with Pink Rademacher, the son of the rancher he works for. Rademacher, who has apparently carried on an affair with Jack’s wife, gets a crippled arm for his troubles, and Jack goes to jail for a couple of years. After he comes back to town, he wounds himself with the same .45 he used on Pink Rademacher, and he dies.

Billy takes up his father’s ways, including cowboy garb and the .45, and falls in with “a wino Mexican named Pete Pacheco” (144). They get into quite a bit of trouble for poaching a doe deer, which does not seem that heinous a crime to most of the local folks. The stiff punishment pushes Billy to be more antisocial, and before long he is sent to prison for killing over thirty of Rademacher’s cows. In his absence, Rademacher becomes county sheriff.

When Billy gets out on parole, he begins to keep company with an Arapahoe girl named Violet Running Bull. Being Indian, her family is also on the outside of mainstream society or the composite character of the town, and the reader is reminded that Billy has “Indian blood himself on his mother’s side” (153). Billy and Violet take on a scroungy, ungroomed appearance but do not cause much trouble, and the voice of the story still reflects a sympathetic view of Billy until he and an accomplice (who everybody assumes is Pete Pacheco) rob the town bank and hole up in the express office. From there, Billy insults the townspeople and challenges Pink Rademacher to a showdown. In the fray, Billy wounds Pink and then fires a couple of shots at the trigger-happy crowd, who respond by mowing down Billy and his dark-haired companion. Of course, the accomplice is not Pete Pacheco but Violet, and as the
narrative voice reports, “[A]ll of us saw the cheap gold ring on one thin finger of her left hand” (161).

After that, the voice goes on to tell how Billy became a local legend and how the town resisted his heroic image, partly because Billy “was the hand-to-mouth past that most of us knew too well and wanted to forget” and partly because he made apparent “the greater contempt he felt for the whole town” (162). The narrative persona expresses an ambivalence that the events of the story undercut with irony. The townsfolk are plenty eager to arm themselves and ambush a couple of bank robbers, especially when one of them hurls a nasty insult and the other is thought to be a wino Mexican, and then they do not show much remorse when they discover they have killed the girl instead.

Although the story does not encourage approval of Billy Jenks’s antisocial behavior, it does elicit sympathy for the underdogs in life—in this case the poor whites who are affiliated with the Shoshones and Arapahoes—who fight out their frustrations against the figures of power and authority. And the gold ring on Violet’s hand invites more sympathy than the persona, in its collective self-contradiction, can express. The gold ring humanizes both of the young people, and it also shows that Billy’s antisocial fury was not absolute if he accepted the convention of marriage. “The Legend of Billy Jenks,” like other works by Roripaugh, ends with the death of a person who, partly because of his affinity with darker races, does not fit in with the established order. However, this story does not end melodramatically. Billy Jenks is not a victim of injustice but dies in a situation he has brought on by his own actions. Thus the ending has more moderation in its expression of what, in the broader scale of moral value, is fitting or acceptable. Although the narrative voice floats through levels of diction and grammatical correctness, the implied morality of the story is well controlled all the way through.
In “The Man Who Killed the Split-Toed Wolf” (1977), Roripaugh picks up another thematic thread that runs through his work from “The Day of the Eagle” forward. In this elegiac, almost mythic story about a legendary wolf and the man who killed it, the reader feels again the power of elemental nature and its connection with dark-skinned people.

Like much of Roripaugh’s other fiction, this story is set in the ranch country of central Wyoming in the 1940s and 1950s. Through the use of a narrator who is coming of age in that era, Roripaugh pieces together the story of Slade Wilson, whom everyone knows as the Man Who Killed the Split-Toed Wolf. Wilson’s claim to local fame took place in 1920, and he is now an old man who shows up in town on occasions. Although Wilson is a white man, he seems to have native cunning, and he now lives on Squaw Creek.

The narrator assimilates firsthand observations of Wilson with a photograph in a local history book. Puzzling over the photo, he comes to believe that Wilson in the picture was smiling even when he was “deathly afraid” (24) of the great animal he had slain. The narrator hears stories of the earlier rampages and depredations of the wolf, who had a splayed foot as a result of having been caught once in a trap, and after hearing several unspecific accounts of how Wilson might have killed the animal, he hears a story that seems credible. The storyteller is Charlie Six-Fingers, a Shoshone who breaks horses and who, in his friendship with the narrator, helps him become attuned to nature.

Prior to telling the story, Charlie shows a connection with the wild element as he looks through the history book with the narrator. The reader can appreciate Roripaugh’s fine work with details. After rolling a cigarette in a brown paper, Charlie holds it “pinched between his thumb and first finger” (25), a pose that might remind the reader of the split-toed wolf. Then, “when
Charlie’s eye caught that picture of the men standing above the dead wolf, he ran his hand under the long length of the animal and then sat staring out through the kitchen window at our horses eating hay on a snow-softened meadow” (25). Charlie goes on to tell the story of how Slade Wilson “made scent from the glands and urine of a wolf bitch he trapped near Lost Cabin. He put the scent on his boots when fresh snow was falling and covered himself with white cloth” (26).

This account, coming as it does from a Native American and being preceded by Charlie’s gestures, conveys the mystery of the primitive. There is an unspoken connection between the dead wolf, the man who killed it, and the Indian; and Slade Wilson’s feat, “the one thing he’d ever done that people admired” (27), takes on greater dimension as Charlie Six-Fingers runs his hand along the picture. It is a brilliant touch on Roripaugh’s part, synthesizing a feeling for an earlier era with a deeper feeling of awe for the wild and primordial. Describing an Anglo-American literary tradition in Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860, Richard Slotkin interprets “the Indian in our mythology” as symbolizing, among other things, “the source of creative life-energy and of power in and over the natural wilderness” (560). Roripaugh’s story, like the character within it, puts a finger on the idea that the twentieth-century Indian still has an affinity with the wildness of the wolf and with the man who could kill it.

Roripaugh’s next published story, “Winter Days Are Long: Themes Written by Virginia Shield in Freshman English” (1981), earned him a place in Pushcart Prize VI: Best of the Small Presses 1981-82 as one of the outstanding writers of short fiction during the previous year. The narrative design of this story consists of nine essays, or themes, written by a Native American student in a composition course. Virginia Shield, the person writing the essays, becomes the narrator of a story that expresses her sense of
identity and her sense of loss over the death of her "shadow sister" (8), Michelle Yellowbird.

In the opening of her first theme, a self-introduction, Virginia Shield writes, "I come from the center of Wyoming" (6), a statement that conveys an effort to place herself in the world. In her second theme she expands upon her place in the world:

I would like to tell you how I think of the place on the reservation where I grew up. It was in a flat yellow meadow where our cattle grazed in summer. The cabin was of logs made white by the weather. It had a good tin roof and several windows. My grandfather had built a corral and shed of poles from the mountains. From our back yard on a summer day you can see the hump of timber where he went to cut them. (7)

Virginia Shield, like Yōko in A Fever for Living and Mary Lamar in Honor Thy Father, is associated with nearby fields and meadows and with mountains in the distance. Once again one sees the dark heroine who is integral to the natural world.

In addition to developing a sense of identity as it is shaped by the world around her, Virginia Shield pieces together the story of her friend Michelle, who falls into the bad company of some young white men who beat and rape her and then leave her on the side of the road. In shame and desperation, Michelle kills herself; a year later, her derelict father stabs the main perpetrator.

The story of Virginia Shield finding her place in the world and the story of Michelle Yellowbird coming to a terrible end are brought together in a motif of winter. In her fifth theme, the narrator writes:

Winters on the reservation were very bad. Often there was an early snow in October and then many good days. January and February were hard months when snow was packed over
the roads and frozen slick. The days never warmed up and
you never felt warm even when the sun came out. (11)

In “Theme 8: An Incident Which Changed My Life,” she writes of
the grim end that befell her best friend:

I remember how the moon that night looked frozen in the
sky. I can imagine her alone in the car, the side window
frosted over near her swollen face. The cold, I think, would
have been deep in her bones even with the heater on, the re-
volver heavy and icy against her skin. (15)

And in her last theme, “Winter Days Are Long,” she writes, “My
first semester here is almost ended and it is winter again” (15). As
she narrates the denouement of the story and expresses her guilt
at not being able to be with Michelle the night she died, she
writes, “That is what I must live with through all the winters still
to come. And because I am Virginia Shield I will” (16). Thus the
ending of the story brings together the story of Virginia Shield’s
identity, the story of her friend’s death, and the winter of sadness.

This is a moving story, not just because it evokes sympathy for
people on the reservation (although it does that very well) but be-
cause it gives a sensitive portrayal of a young Native American
person who is moving out into a larger world as she struggles with
the injustice and sadness of the world she comes from. The design
of the story allows Virginia Shield to convey her impressions in
language that is often lyrical, as in some of the passages already
quoted. However, the overall voice of the story is not always per-
fect as the voice of a first-year college student writing an essay.
Sometimes the voice sounds like that of the first-person narrator
of a story without the premise of being a series of essays, as in the
narration of dialogue with the trashy young men or in the state-
ment that “For a moment she looked like the young Michelle
whose thin body spun a broken shadow across our yard at home”
From 1971 to 1975 he published nearly thirty poems in reputable magazines, and in 1976 he saw publication of his first collection of poetry, *Learn to Love the Haze*, published by John R. Milton's Spirit Mound Press, consists of thirty-seven poems grouped into three sections entitled “Yellow Willow,” “This Season,” and “For an
Indian Girl.” Although Roripaugh writes in some standard forms, such as the villanelle and the sonnet, most of his poems are less formal. His poems rarely rhyme, but they do have patterns such as line groups, which often look like stanzas, and line length. His poems are almost always capitalized at the beginning of each line, and most poems fit on a single page. His poetry is generally restrained and decorous, with sharp detail, intriguing imagery, and subtle content. With the exception of some poems in the first section that play upon mild eroticism, the poems in this collection explore topics that recur in Roripaugh’s other work: nature, the dark heroine, the connection between Native Americans and the earth, the passing of time, and death.

The first poem of the book, “Yellow Willow,” like most of the other poems in the first section, works by a progression of images to introduce several of Roripaugh’s familiar themes. In the first group of lines, the speaker of the poem describes October, “a time / Of yellow willow,” as it appears in the “Wyoming foothills” (11). In the second line group, he addresses a person, presumably a woman he loves, and compares her with the features of the tree:

I think your fingers
Have the shape
Of willow, like your eyes.

Then in the third and final group, after stating that he is “Above Brush Creek” (a creek in the mountains west of Laramie), he recalls images that one associates with Japan, especially in scenes from A Fever for Living:

I return to days in yellow-matted
Rooms, the rainy season mist,
Snowy blossoms
Never touched by yellow.
The poem closes with a pensive tone as the speaker, declining to tell more about scenes from the past, states that his "eyes are filled with fall— / And willows slow to yellow" (11). Comparing past with present through their associations with the willows, the poem concludes with a poignant sense of the passing of time.

"Homing," also in the first section of the book, is a stately, erotic poem, well developed in longer lines and longer stanzas than are found in many of the poems in this collection. In this poem, the speaker compares "homing," the instinct of some pigeons to return to their origin, and also the aiming of "some kind of missile" at its target, with the accuracy of a hawk and then with the sexual instinct of a man who is secure with his partner:

The sky-riding hawk would know my mind,
I think, and when the heavy-headed meadow palled
Would find the way of homing like a thread. (20)

At the close of the poem, the speaker, having described his progress "down the supple yellow fields / Where all my horses graze" (21), speculates:

And hawks know more of "homing," I'd suppose,
Than all but some few men like me, who knows
By feel where home is in your silky center——
Golden brown and soft as wild feathers
, Under another sun. (21)

This is a fine poem, both playful and decorous. Like "Yellow Willow" and many other poems, and like much of Roripaugh's fiction as well, this poem sets human experience in the context of natural detail.

In the second section of the book, entitled "This Season," Roripaugh reintroduces a familiar theme. In "Popo Agie" (named for a river that flows by Lander, Wyoming), each of the three line-
groups begins with "The brown girl is calling." Through a succession of images including a "winter-dead willow," a crow that is "black as shining hair," and the girl herself, "moon-eyed, dressed in deer," the poem portrays the dark girl as being integral to the environment of landscape and wildlife (28).

This section introduces another theme that is related to the natural environment—that the distant past is implicit in present landscapes. The poem "Laramie City Dump" is a thoughtful work that, like several of Roripaugh's poems that strive for thematic depth, takes more than a single page to develop its idea. In this poem, the "Sunday collectors" (30) at the dump are compared with miners and hunters, then with Indians:

In not-so-distant falls, Cheyennes  
At hunting camp along the Platte  
Dreamed of shaggy beasts,  
Dancing eagles . . . the sweep  
Of prairie grass a drug . . . (31)

The poem then raises the issue of how modern life seems to be devoid of dreams and visions and how its refuse will hold little interest for future generations. By contrast, the poem suggests that the indigenous people, such as the brown girl in "Popo Agie" and the Cheyennes along the Platte, have a superior contact with the earth and its timeless rhythms.

In the third and last section of the book, entitled "For an Indian Girl," Roripaugh changes his notes to tragic. The first poem in this section, "Elegy for an Indian Girl," reads like a condensed version of his short story "Winter Days Are Long." The poem, which has since been reprinted in an anthology of writings by and about Native Americans (Robertson 10-11), was first published in 1973; the story was published in 1981 and was cited for its excellence. The poem is also singled out for reference in A Literary History of
the American West (842). Its first line, “We've been together a long
time now,” prepares the reader for the deep sympathy the poet has
for the girl, and it helps the reader understand how strongly the
original event must have influenced the writer. After establishing
that he never knew the girl but read “of her end,” the speaker
tells how he usually reads of the Shoshones and the Arapahoes in
the hospital and police sections of the newspaper, and how the
Indians are otherwise regarded as tourist attractions, like “begging
bears” (42).

In the second line-group, beginning with “How was it anyway?”
he reconstructs the events in which two white boys pick up the
Indian girl in “A reservation barroom / Swimming with hollow bi-
son, / Antelope shedding quietly away, A jukebox / Bright as
beads” and take her out to their car (42). In this section, the
speaker uses phrases, such as “winter nights are long” and
“Blurring a frozen moon,” that will reverberate in the short story.

In the poem’s third part, Roripough continues his account of how
the young men beat the title character and leave her out in the
sagebrush, where a tribal policeman finds her. As the officer is
giving the news to her parents, the girl in the car takes his re-
volver and ends her shame and misery (43).

The poem concludes with the effect the girl’s death has had on
the speaker (and the poet):

Quiet girl, your face keeps floating up
From mountain water
In dark dreams.
[ . . . . . . . . ]
I think of eyes brown as any
Antelope, silvery sage in moonlight,
And several shades of silence. (43)

This is a beautiful work, this elegy for a young woman whose way
of life (and death) was connected with the natural environment
but who met a tragic end in the artificial world brought by the whites. This poem and its companion short story lie as close to the center of Roripaugh's work as anything he has written.

This section of Learn to Love the Haze has three other poems that are also of an elegiac or meditative nature, and each of them is, again, longer than a page in print. In "Mitten Spring: For My Father," the speaker describes a visit to a place where he and his father used to stop for water. Time has changed things; the place is littered, a sheepherder has lost an ear to the frost, and another is in "a white-walled ward" in the state hospital (48). Oil exploiters have come and gone, and a dead bull "Is bloating into sky" (49). The speaker concludes that time and people wreak changes even when the landscape seems unchanged. In words that recall Robert Frost, the speaker says, "The man's a fool who holds a spring / Within his eyes and calls it clear." Such a man, who "Remembers morning wind through / Sage, sunlit dust trailing antelope," should "look around" and see the "tire ruts worn / Deeper now" (49). This is a good poem about the passing of time and the abuse of the environment.

"Shorty's Bones," like "Mitten Spring," uses a visit to a scene from earlier in life as the occasion for a meditative poem. After being gone for several years, the speaker returns to the family ranch, which has been sold in the meantime, and hikes up a hill to find the bones of an old ranch horse, now a "weathered wreck" (54). This is an eloquent poem, as the speaker recalls what a "son-of-a-bitch" the horse had been. Now the skull looks "graceful as an eagle's / Wing," grass grows along the vertebrae, and "Larkspur blue as silk / Threads ribs I whacked if Shorty / Wouldn't stand and let himself be saddled" (54). The speaker recalls how his father packed out a bear on the horse and how the horse once took his father home in a blizzard. Recalling a textbook illustration of the ascent of man, the speaker concludes: "We linger / With
transforming skeletons, and trace / A long walk down from Shorty’s bones” (55). In the process of delivering an unsentimental elegy to the horse, the poem fits the death of a common creature into the broader scheme of eons of life and death, and it implies that we who have the ability to speculate on these things will someday be as dead as this horse that was once so alive.

The last elegiac poem in the collection, “For An Indian Bronc Rider Killed In a Highway Crash Near Ethete, Wyoming,” has been reprinted twice in anthologies, one of them the same collection that included “Elegy for an Indian Girl” (Robertson 11-12; Spingarn 121-22). Like several of the best poems in Learn to Love the Haze, it is an ambitious poem, with long lines and line groups and a spread of two pages. Like “Elegy for an Indian Girl,” it is antisentimental. The poem tells, in frank images, that the bronc rider did not die a hero. His death is almost pathetic, as he is detached from the primitive world and stuck in an automobile:

Longing for speed the Pontiac ascends the land in dusk,
   Arrow-shaped by Fisher Body Works,
   Fueled from fossil ferns extinct a quarter-billion years ago
   But pumped by Shell and Humble Oil.
   The Indian cowboy rides the gas booted in flying eagles. (58)

The reason for the crash is equally unromantic:

   His hand is golden in dashboard light, reaching for a pint
   Of Old Crow amber as pine pitch,
   The belt buckle a yellow horse won at Calgary Stampede
   Many, many springs ago and by a boy. (58)

The poem suggests a loss of innocence caused not only by the automotive and liquor industries but also by the glitzy world of rodeo, where the rider wore “shotgun chaps lavender as Zane Grey’s sage, black Stetson / Rolled and creased for mirrors bright”
Before I began writing poetry about our ranch, it had been sold for a number of years. [. . .] When I happened to be in the Lander area and drove past the ranch, I could see changes made by new owners. But there was always a familiar sense of the life I had known while living and working there. There was also a bittersweet feeling of something lost which could not be replaced in reality—a time in my life, a relationship with earth and sky, a unity of family, a vision of

(58). At the moment of the crash, the car “crow-hops” like a bronc does, so that his final ride takes him “Jolting into shrieking sound / Of mares and metal letting go” (59). The rodeo and the car blend together as a complex of influences that helped the bronc rider feel glorious but that also, together with the liquor, cut him off from the fields of his youth and from the Indian horses that graze freely along the highway.

In the years following the publication of Learn to Love the Haze, Roripaugh continued to write more poetry than fiction or nonfiction. Many of the poems of this latter phase have been brought together in The Ranch (2001), which consists of forty-five poems and a Prologue. Well over half of the poems are previously published, and one of them, “Shorty’s Bones,” reappears from the earlier collection. As the title suggests, the poems in this collection are about life in the ranch country, so that the subject matter serves as the unifying element.

In the Prologue, which appears after an opening poem entitled “To Owen Wister” and before the title poem, “The Ranch,” Roripaugh gives a substantial account of the ranch that his family owned within view of the Wind River Mountains west of Lander, Wyoming. He describes the physical layout, his family background, the purchase of the ranch, the kinds of work his family did there, and its influence on his writing career:

Before I began writing poetry about our ranch, it had been sold for a number of years. [. . .] When I happened to be in the Lander area and drove past the ranch, I could see changes made by new owners. But there was always a familiar sense of the life I had known while living and working there. There was also a bittersweet feeling of something lost which could not be replaced in reality—a time in my life, a relationship with earth and sky, a unity of family, a vision of
horses and cattle grazing grassy rangeland in good country [. . .]. (12)

He goes on to comment that “The poems collected in my first volume, Learn to Love the Haze, used Wyoming as a background and source of material, but our ranch was not central to most of the poems” (13). In the last paragraph of the Prologue he summarizes the effect of the ranch upon his work, noting that many of his “short stories and Honor Thy Father draw in one way or another on that piece of land” and that “In a deeper sense, this is true of the poems making up The Ranch” (14).

Roripaugh’s comments in the Prologue lend themselves to a comparison between the two collections of poetry. The first one has bolder imagery, more variety in style as well as in topic, and overall more depth. The Ranch is more uniform, with few poems occupying more than a single page, and it is more even in tone. Collectively, the poems express a quiet celebration of a way of life that is fading rapidly. The poems do not express much criticism, sharp questioning, or deep thinking. Topic is foremost. The poems present evocative sets of good concrete detail, but most of it is literal, without much figurative dimension. Whereas the first poetry collection has poems that resonate with the technique and themes of William Blake, Dylan Thomas, and Robert Frost, the second collection has more technical and thematic affinity with Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Although the poems in The Ranch present well-etched descriptions, they are often prosaic, achieving a straight delivery of material that leaves a lingering unanswered question of “so what?” And, to add to their prose-like quality, the poems have a surfeit of adverbs. In his short stories and novels, Roripaugh uses -ly adverbs with frequency, sometimes three or four times in a single paragraph; this habit becomes noticeable in a collection of poems.
The Ranch has an average of one such adverb per poem, and several poems contain two or more.

Despite these effects, however, The Ranch has value for contemporary readers, especially those who want to see western American life preserved in accurate and affirmative detail. The poems offer many fine descriptions of people, animals, and places. The poems “Taxidermist on Squaw Creek,” “Moon,” “The Old Horseshoer,” “Mary Lonebear,” “The Beekeeper’s Daughter,” and “Swampy” make up character sketches that rank with sketches from Robinson’s Spoon River Anthology and that intersect with other poems in the volume. The low-class rancher Moon, for example, appears in the collection both as a speaker and as a character. And in the poem named for him, “the Old Horseshoer” goes to work on Shorty, the recalcitrant horse that will appear in other poems, including “Shorty’s Bones.”

Of the poems on wildlife, “The Bobcat” reminds a reader of “The Day of the Eagle,” Roripaugh’s early short story in which a boy shoots a bobcat. The poem “Coyotes” makes a nice encomium, evoking a bit of mystery about the wild dogs that sing “One in darkness, one in light.” One of the stronger poems in the collection, in terms of the emotion it evokes, is “The Trap,” which gives an account of a magpie trap like the one in “The Peach Boy.” This description presents more detail about the trap itself, the smell, the chaos of grabbing the birds, and the grim chore of stuffing caught birds into a canvas sack and drowning them. Unlike the short story, the poem does not relate the trap to a human drama; rather, it fades out as the magpies drown, “leaving the cattle / To fatten as they tongued the quiet grass” (34). It implies the theme that some animals must die so that others may grow fat and the owners may prosper, but for the most part the poem is literal and denotative. It presents one more experience of life on the ranch—a more intriguing incident and a less prosaic account than in many poems, but still without the thematic depth of “The Peach Boy.”
“The Trap” comes as close as any poem in the collection to raising a question about experience that is tawdry, indecorous, or disturbing. Gritty details abound in the book, but they are more frequently about lambing out, mowing hay, fishing, hunting, processing meat, and even poaching a deer. “The Trap” gets closer to the edge; it grazes the brink of things we would rather not talk about, but it does not go as far as braver poems—such as Roripaugh’s elegies for the Indian girl and the bronc rider—do.

Overall, the safe, antiseptic quality of *The Ranch* will earn it an appreciative audience. In contemporary western American culture, there is a mainstream attitude, generated from within but attracting people from without, that holds western experience (especially ranching, cowboy life, and rodeo) above reproach. This perspective is expressed in written accounts of family or local history as well as in popularized images portrayed in novels, coffee-table books, western art, cowboy poetry and music, movies, and advertising. *The Ranch* is compatible with that outlook without being slick. One senses that Roripaugh writes with conviction about ranching life as he knew it and as he recalls it. In the Prologue to *The Ranch* he tells how he learned “attitudes and character traits” of admirable stockmen, how he came to know ranching as “a way of life” that entailed “commitment, development of abilities, and use of knowledge gained through experience” (9). He also tells how the ranch “had become, more than anywhere else we had lived, a place where I felt connected with the world” (11). The value of living on a ranch and being in touch with the earth comes through in these poems.

In an interview conducted by his daughter, Lee Ann, Roripaugh discusses his use of natural detail. He states:

I don’t usually use landscape and nature as a subject, but as an influential and believable background for the people
Because many of the poems in *The Ranch* consist of details that are just there, this comment seems to run counter to his most recent practice. However, he goes on in the same passage to say:

I do believe that if we lose too much of our connection with land and nature—and become unable to understand how the earth sustains us—our culture, lives, and humanity will be greatly diminished. (100)

Elsewhere in the interview he says that for him “a poem is usually more personal and direct” than fiction (96). In light of these comments, one can understand that Roripaugh’s motives in writing and compiling the poems in *The Ranch* might be “more personal and direct”—i.e., the expression of a credo derived from one area of experience. Even if the author has been able to use the same influence to ask deeper questions in his other work, and even if *The Ranch* does seem to rely on “a bittersweet feeling of something lost which could not be replaced in reality” (*Ranch* 12), the collection will appeal to readers who revere the mainstream values of the American west, and it will do so with sincerity and conviction.

**NONFICTION**

Roripaugh’s nonfiction has been somewhat varied but can be classified into three general areas: writing about ranching and western experience, semi-scholarly and scholarly articles and reviews on western American literature, and articles on Wyoming literary history.

As is evident from the Prologue and the poems in *The Ranch* as well as from much of his fiction, Roripaugh has maintained an interest in the traditions of ranching. In 1986, this interest took the
shape of an essay entitled “Wyoming Ranch Life Thirty Years Ago,” which appeared in a coffee-table book entitled Historic Ranches of Wyoming. The book contains a wealth of photographs of ranch buildings and scenes, with long informative annotations. It also features an essay by T.A. Larson, the most prominent of Wyoming historians. Roripaugh’s essay is largely informative, drawing upon detail from his family’s experience; it is similar to the Prologue of The Ranch but more thorough in its descriptions of some aspects, such as haying, and in its bringing in of neighbors, some of whom are mentioned in poems in The Ranch, to round out the portrayal of ranch life. (It also has a nice prose account of how Roripaugh visited Shorty’s bones.)

Toward the end of the essay, he discusses the problem of loss, which has troubled family farms and ranches for many years:

But it isn’t easy to give up a ranch, for over the years it takes on values beyond economic return to become, for better or worse, an extension of a particular family’s character and represent those age-old feelings of people for livestock and a piece of land, the placing there of heart, hope, and home [. . .]. (91)

He goes on to address the issue of escapism:

And looking back, those years we lived on the ranch seem not to have been an escape from the reality of a modern world, but rather an exposure to older realities deeply rooted in human experience. (91)

This is a good essay, not only in its conveyance of firsthand detail but also in its attempt to avoid a nostalgic or escapist tone. In this respect, it offers additional perspective to the Prologue and poems of The Ranch.

In his semischolarly nonfiction, Roripaugh has written forewords and introductions to collections of poetry and fiction by other
authors, and he has also written a predominantly informational article on A.B. Guthrie, Jr., for Roundup Magazine, the official magazine for Western Writers of America.

Roripaugh's book reviews, spanning a period of over thirty-five years while he was writing his major fiction and poetry, have appeared mainly in Annals of Wyoming, a journal for professional historians, and in Western American Literature, the leading journal for literary scholars in the field. His reviews have covered such topics as Wyoming history and memoir, ranch life, rodeo cowboys, contemporary western fiction anthologies, fiction by Ivan Doig, and work by and about the western historical novelist Benjamin Capps.

In addition to this general variety of writing about other writers and their books, Roripaugh has written four articles for South Dakota Review, which, since the early 1960s, has been the second leading magazine on western American letters. His most significant article in this group is "Melville's Typee and Frontier Travel Literature of the 1830's and 1840's," which won the Don D. Walker Prize for Best Essay in Western Literary Criticism for 1982. The award not only speaks well for Roripaugh's achievements as a scholar but also complements his other national awards in poetry and fiction. Beyond this recognition, the article reveals interesting connections with Roripaugh's other major works.

In this article, Roripaugh places Typee in the tradition of frontier travel literature and compares the book with works by other authors such as Washington Irving, Francis Parkman, and Josiah Gregg. One point of comparison he cites is Melville's admiration for the natural beauty of nonwhite indigenous peoples. He writes, "When a group of Polynesian girls swam out and boarded his whaler, Melville was amazed by their strangeness, beauty, dances, and the 'abandoned voluptuousness in their character'" (51). He
goes on to discuss an Edenic interlude that Melville had with a Polynesian girl named Fayaway, and he quotes other writers on the unspoiled attractions of Cheyenne women and of women from northern Mexico. Then he generalizes a shared tendency of the writers to express how “primitive experience provided a unique pleasure and happiness which indelibly marked the individual” (57). For these and other Anglo male writers, the dark heroine is a key part of the primitive experience, as is the “unspoiled nature” (53) of the frontier environment, and a reader of Roripaugh’s fiction and poetry will note the presence of these elements.

In particular, the reader may recall the passage in A Fever for Living in which Paul Travis, as he is working his way up to a romance with Yôko, recalls novels he read in college. Among them is Typee, and his memory selects the part “when the Marquesan girls swim out into the bay of Nukuheva and climb over Melville’s ship in wild, naked grace” (112). Later in the same chapter, Travis observes the Japanese women, then goes on to recall the “black-haired Mexican girls,” an “olive-skinned girl who fried chickens,” and “Indians from the Pueblos,” all from his earlier days in Albuquerque (117). The archetypal dark heroine, from the white male perspective, is a synthesis of various nonwhite races that have an affinity with a pristine landscape, as seen earlier in the discussion of Roripaugh’s fiction and poetry. Now, in this essay, one sees how Roripaugh values the primitive attraction in works by other writers. In his words, “Melville’s response to unspoiled nature and its freedom was more than merely aesthetic,” as Melville “escaped from discipline, authority, family” (53). In other words, Melville’s treatment of primitive nature was based on more than one level of personal experience and not just upon observation conditioned by fashionable ideas.

Later in the essay, Roripaugh traces Melville’s “escape from an adult world (the whaler) into childhood (among the Typees), return
to an adult world of experience as a seaman wandering the Pacific, and an escape back to a 'naive dream' of a childhood paradise through recounting the adventures making up the book” (59-60). Then he goes on to quote D.H. Lawrence, who wrote, “We can’t go back to the savages [. . .]. We cannot turn the current of our life backwards, back towards their soft warm twilight and uncreate mud” (60). Roripaugh’s articulation of this realistic awareness squares with his own practice in his fiction and poetry. Although he explores the romantic attraction of primitive elements and indulges in nostalgia (as in The Ranch), his view is not rosy. The pull of the primitive is real, but Roripaugh does not kid himself or his reader into thinking that escape is possible. Quite to the contrary, he shows that the corrupting forces of the modern world too often win out and a negotiation or compromise is the best a person can hope for. In Roripaugh’s work, especially his strongest fiction and poetry, there is no “escape back to a ‘naive dream’ of a childhood paradise” (60). His discussion of Melville serves as a revealing comment on his own view of life and on his own work.

Although Roripaugh has not had a steady production of either academic or creative nonfiction, he has maintained a constant interest in literature of the American west and of Wyoming. In addition to pieces such as the articles and reviews on Western American writing, that interest has resulted in essays on Wyoming literature. In “Literature of the Cowboy State” (1978) and “Wyoming and the Author” (1988), Roripaugh surveys the Wyoming literary scene, including the poetry, fiction, nonfiction, biographies, bibliographies, and literary magazines in the state. He notes the ever-present difficulties of regional literature being perceived as provincial. These essays show a commitment to understanding the history and promoting the well-being of literature in a state that lacks, as he shows, a coherent literary tradition. Recognizing the inherent problems of Wyoming literature, they
encourage reading of Wyoming works, and they contribute to an otherwise sparse public awareness of Wyoming literary history.

As an advocate of Wyoming writing as well as a major creator of Wyoming literature, Roripaugh deserves much credit. And as a writer and scholar who has gone beyond the bounds of provincial interests, he shows by his own example what he encourages other writers to practice—a broad literary perspective and a dedication to aspire to write at the highest possible level.

Roripaugh's work in Wyoming literary history has been complemented by his role as state poet laureate from 1995 through 2002. In this public role, he has continued to bring literature, especially poetry, to the people of the state. He has made it a point to join organizations such as WYOPoets and Wyoming Writers and to attend conferences, judge poetry contests, referee poetry anthologies, present workshops, and give public talks. In a state such as Wyoming, these activities often entail long trips to small, isolated towns to speak to a few interested literate people. Roripaugh's willingness to lend himself to the sparse and scattered citizenry of the state, like his previous professorial work of teaching classes and directing masters' theses, bespeaks a true dedication to the reading and writing of literature.

It is as a writer, however, that Robert Roripaugh is more than a name in the history of a state's literature, for his writing speaks directly across the years, to readers in other times and places. In fiction he has written a handful of works that place him in the tradition of Walter Van Tilburg Clark and A.B. Guthrie, Jr., both of whom he cites in his *South Dakota Review* article "Three Influential Novels of the American West," as well as in other pieces. Both Clark and Guthrie write about ethical problems set in the context of the western landscape. If they are the writers *par*
excellence of Nevada and Montana, Roripaugh is their equal in Wyoming.

In poetry, Roripaugh shows the influence of Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and Dylan Thomas, all of whom, along with others, he cites as influences in the interview with his daughter, Lee Ann. Some of his poems rise to the level of some of the work of Frost and Thomas, but for overall achievement it would be fairer to place him on a par with Robinson and with Thomas Hornsby Ferril, a major Colorado writer of the early twentieth century whom Roripaugh cites in two of his essays and in the same interview. Within Wyoming, Roripaugh joins Peggy Simson Curry, whom he recognizes as also being a versatile writer of fiction and poetry and who was the first poet laureate of the state. The two of them are the leading writers in Wyoming literary history since the time of Owen Wister.

At his best, Roripaugh is a writer of national rank. Works such as *Honor Thy Father*, “The Peach Boy,” “The Legend of Billy Jenks,” “The Man Who Killed the Split-Toed Wolf,” “Winter Days Are Long,” “Homing,” “Elegy for an Indian Girl,” “For An Indian Bronc Rider Killed In a Highway Crash Near Ethete, Wyoming,” “Mitten Spring,” and “Shorty’s Bones,” to name a few of his best works, should earn him readers anywhere and should qualify him to be included in college courses in western American literature. If he had written nothing more than these works, he should have a place in western American as well as Wyoming literary history. For the benefit of all of us, he has written much more; and for years to come, readers who seek high quality writing should find much to admire in Robert Roripaugh’s fiction and poetry.
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Books

Short Stories

Articles and Essays


Selected References


About the Author

JOHN D. NESBITT lives in Torrington, Wyoming, where he teaches English and Spanish at Eastern Wyoming College. His articles and reviews have appeared in Western American Literature, South Dakota Review, Twentieth-Century Western Writers, and other publications. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous literary magazines and collections, including the new Wyoming literary anthology Deep West. He has written a doctoral dissertation (on the classic western novel), a textbook for basic writing courses, and other odds and ends of an academic nature. In western fiction, he has had five short story collections, two contemporary western novels, and ten traditional western novels – including One-Eyed Cowboy Wild, Coyote Trail, For the Norden Boys, and Black Hat Butte – published in various hardcover, large print, and mass-market paperback editions. Nesbitt has won many prizes and awards for his work, including a Wyoming Arts Council literary fellowship for his fiction writing, two awards from the Wyoming State Historical Society (also for fiction), and two awards from Wyoming Writers for encouragement of other writers and services to the organization.

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