

Fishtrap

2014 The Big Read

True Grit by Charles Portis

Supplemental Reading List

Featured Title

True Grit by Charles Portis (1968)

“True Grit is when you are a 14 year-old girl from Yell County, Arkansas, and you’ve just shot a dangerous outlaw and the gun’s recoil has sent you backward into a pit, and you are wedged in the pit and sinking fast into a cave below where bats are brushing your legs, and you reach out for something to hold on to and find a rotting corpse beside you and it’s full of angry rattlers, and then it turns out you didn’t kill the outlaw, he’s up at the rim of the pit laughing at you, about to shoot you – and you don’t lose your nerve. That’s True Grit.”

- Eliot Fremont-Smith, *The New York Times*

I don’t usually like to start anything with a quote, but I just couldn’t write anything better that summed up *True Grit* quite like this one. For those that haven’t been properly introduced, *True Grit* was written by Charles Portis, and was published in 1968. It has twice been adapted for the silver screen; it won John Wayne one of his two Oscars, and the remake collected 10 nominations, including best picture, director, adapted screenplay, actor and supporting actress.

True Grit is told from the perspective of 14 year-old Mattie Ross, shortly after the end of the American Civil War. Mattie leaves her mother and siblings in search of Tom Chaney, the hired hand that robbed and murdered her father. In order to hunt him down, she hires a U.S. Marshall with “True Grit”, Rooster Cogburn. They are joined by Texas Ranger, LaBoeuf (pronounced “La Beef”), who had already tracked Chaney across several states. Together, Mattie, Cogburn and LaBoeuf follow Chaney into “Indian territory” in order to bring him to justice.

Although Mattie is telling us this story, she tells it years after the fact. We hear the voice of an old woman telling of her adventures in the Wild West, as remembered and filtered through time. Hers is the voice of frontier America, recounting shootings, stabbings and murders without inflection. She quotes the

bible and often colours her story with lessons learned in a 19th century Presbyterian Sunday School. In *Mattie*, it is easy to see shades of what will eventually be called America's Manifest Destiny. And, despite her searching for the right U.S. Marshall to help her catch her father's killer, she most certainly demonstrates the true grit she was hoping to find in Cogburn.

Outwardly, Rooster Cogburn is everything that *Mattie* is not; he is fat, violent and alcoholic. He is a veteran of the Confederate Army, as well as the border gang of William Clarke Quantrill, a violent group that earned its notoriety by massacre. Although Cogburn could easily have been pigeon-holed as a violent and one-dimensional character, Portis gives him more depth by weaving a moral centre, not completely unlike *Mattie's*, through his being. He is bold, loyal and possessed of a strict sense of right and wrong. And, like *Mattie*, he is as stoic as he is unwavering in his determination to find Chaney and bring him to justice. Cogburn, however, is a symbol of an already passing era in American history, one of reconstruction, adventure and the Wild West. He describes these eras as if they were already behind him, and they were more freewheeling and courageous. He is almost illiterate and, when filling out his fee sheets, he complains of the "regulations laid down by Uncle Sam," and that "...if you don't have schooling you are up against it in this country, sis...that man has no chance anymore. No matter if he has got sand in his craw, other will push him aside, little thin fellows that have won spelling bees back home." Cogburn is not unaware that his time is passing. This is made all the more evident when, in the final chapters, *Mattie* attempts to find Cogburn at a travelling "Wild West Show" in which he has been performing for the last few years of his life.

In the end, *True Grit* is a novel of change; but, traditional values such as courage, loyalty and justice still have their place in the new world, just as new values are accepted and prized. As I said, I could not write a better synopsis of *True Grit* than Mr. Fremont-Smith of *The New York Times*, above. Go – get the book and read it. Now. I promise you won't regret it.

(<http://www.thenanfang.com/blog/tag/true-grit-book-review/>)

Elementary Companion Novel (5th – 8th grade)

***The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* by Karen Cushman (1996)**

In 1849 a twelve-year-old girl who calls herself Lucy is distraught when her mother moves the family from Massachusetts to a small California mining town. There Lucy helps run a boarding house and looks for comfort in books while trying to find a way to return "home."

The Ballad of Lucy Whipple is about a girl and her family moving West to California during the Gold Rush. Lucy lost her dad and a younger brother before

they left for California, but her mom, brother, and two little sisters make the trip with her. Lucy is really unhappy about moving away from Massachusetts and her grandparents, and hates Lucky Diggins, California and all of its dirt. Throughout the book Lucy dreams about moving, and saves her money to move back East. The only thing that keeps her going is her books. The Whipples go through a time when they lose Butte, the only boy left in the family. Lucy makes many friends while living in Lucky Diggins, but she doesn't know at the time. After long summers and winters, and a devastating fire Lucy's mom and new husband decide to move to the Sandwich Islands. Lucy makes the choice to stay behind to move back East with another family that is leaving. When it is finally time for her to go, she can't. She realizes she loves this place, and writes to her mom telling her "home is where I am loved and safe and needed. And that's Lucky Diggins". Lucy ends up living happily ever after in Lucky Diggins as the librarian at the new library.

Joseph High School US History class companion book

***Letters of a Woman Homesteader* by Elinore Pruitt Stewart (1913)**

From School Library Journal

Grade 7 Up—After deciding that city life as a laundress wasn't for her, Elinore Pruitt, a young widowed mother, accepted an offer to assist with a ranch in Wyoming, work that she found exceedingly more rewarding. In this delightful collection of letters, she describes these experiences to her former employer, Mrs. Coney. Pruitt's charming descriptions of work, travels, neighbors, animals, land and sky have an authentic feel. The West comes alive, and everyday life becomes captivating. Her writing is clear, witty, and entertaining. The 26 letters are brief and tell about her life on the ranch in the early 1900s. The author frequently and unnecessarily apologizes for being too wordy; she begs forgiveness for many "faults," like being forgetful, ungrateful, inconsistent and indifferent, all without apparent cause. On occasion, language reflects the racial prejudice of the time. Many times, Pruitt attempts to portray the culturally diverse characters she meets by writing their various dialects as they sound. Kate Fleming's narration is as smooth as the writing, perfectly transitioning from one accent to the next. She reads with a calm, down-to-earth tone, which suits the writing well.—*Kariana Cullen Gonzales, Lincoln Consolidated High School, Ypsilanti, MI*

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Other Charles Portis novels

***Norwood* (1966)**

Charles Portis's first novel which follows its namesake protagonist on a misadventurous road trip from his hometown of Ralph, Texas, to New York City and back. During the trip, *Norwood* is exposed to a comic array of personalities and lifestyles. The novel is a noteworthy example of Portis' particular skill rendering Southern dialect and conversation. Out of the American neon desert of Roller Dromes, chilli parlours, country music, and girls who want "to live in a trailer and play records all night" comes ex-marine and troubadour Norwood Pratt. Sent on a mission to New York he gets involved in a wild journey that takes him in and out of stolen cars, freight trains, and buses. By the time he returns home to Texas, *Norwood* has met his true love, Rita Lee, on a bus; befriended the second shortest midget in show business and "the world's smallest perfect fat man"; and helped Joann "the chicken with a college education," realise her true potential in life. As with all Portis' fiction, the tone is cool, sympathetic, and funny

***The Dog of the South* (1979)**

Ray Midge is waiting for his credit card bill to arrive. His wife, Norma, has run off with her ex-husband, taking Ray's cards, shotgun and car. But from the receipts, Ray can track where they've gone. He takes off after them, as does an irritatingly tenacious bail bondsman, both following the romantic couple's spending as far as Mexico. There Ray meets Dr Reo Symes, the seemingly down-on-his-luck and rather eccentric owner of a beaten up and broken down bus, who needs a ride to Belize. The further they drive, in a car held together by coat-hangers and excesses of oil, the wilder their journey gets. But they're not going to give up easily. amazon

***Masters of Atlantis* (1985)**

Lamar Jimmerson is the leader of the Gnomon Society, the international fraternal order dedicated to preserving the arcane wisdom of the lost city of Atlantis. Stationed in France in 1917, Jimmerson comes across a little book crammed with Atlantean puzzles, Egyptian riddles, and extended alchemical metaphors. It's the Codex Pappus - the sacred Gnomon text. Soon he is basking in the lore of lost Atlantis, convinced that his mission on earth is to administer to and extend the ranks of the noble brotherhood. *Masters of Atlantis* is a cock eyed journey into an America of misfits and con-men, oddballs, and innocents.

***Gringos* (1985)**

Jimmy Burns is an expatriate American living in Mexico who has an uncommonly astute eye for the absurd little details that comprise your average American. For a time, Jimmy spent his days unearthing pre-Colombian artifacts. Now he makes a living doing small trucking jobs and helping out with the occasional missing person situation--whatever it takes to remain "the very picture of an American

idler in Mexico, right down to the grass-green golfing trousers." But when Jimmy's laid-back lifestyle is seriously imposed upon by a ninety-pound stalker called Louise, a sudden wave of "hippies" (led by a murderous ex-con guru) in search of psychic happenings, and a group of archaeologists who are unearthing (illegally) Mayan tombs, his simple South-of-the-Border existence faces a clear and present danger. amazon

Fiction

The Jump-Off Creek by Molly Gloss ()

From Publishers Weekly

Set in the high mountain country of Oregon during the 1890s, this first novel is a quiet, unsparing portrait of pioneer life, recounted simply and without romanticism. Drawing on pioneer diaries, journals and hand-me-down stories of her own ancestors, Gloss displays a deep awareness not only of the brutal hardships of frontier life, but also of the moral codes and emotional attachments of the people who settled there. Drawn by the freedom the West offers, Lydia Sanderson leaves a disappointing marriage in Pennsylvania and comes to Jump-Off Creek to homestead a place of her own. Tim Whiteaker, "gone cowboying" since the age of 13, and his partner, the half-Indian Blue Odell, raise cattle nearby. Three wolfers, squatting on abandoned property near Jump-Off Creek and walking the thin edge of the law in order to earn a marginal living, provide much of the tension within the novel. The author's intimate understanding of the harsh physical conditions and of the rituals and practices of frontier life (there are long descriptions of how to brand cattle and how to mend a roof) sometimes overshadows a deeper delineation of character. However, most of the scenes are handled with a restraint that communicates the characters' endemic loneliness, and the dialogue, though spare, is rich enough to convey their emotional conflicts.

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The Hearts of Horses by Molly Gloss (2012)

From Publishers Weekly

Gloss's austere latest (after *Wild Life*) features a wandering taciturn tomboy who finds her place in rural Oregon while the men are away at war. After she leaves home in 1917, 19-year-old Martha Lessen plans to travel from farm to farm in Elwha County, Oregon, breaking horses left behind by owners away fighting. She winds up in small town Shelby, where farmers George and Louise Bliss convince her to stay the winter with them after she domesticates their broncos with soft words and songs instead of lariats and hobbles. While breaking the town's horses, Martha meets a slovenly drunk, a clan of Western European immigrants and two unmarried sisters running a ranch with the help of an awkward, secretive teenager. When Martha's not making the rounds or riding through the Clarks

Range, Louise tries her hand at socializing (or, perhaps, breaking) her, but Martha chafes at town dances, social outings and Louise's hand-me-down church dresses. Gloss's narrative is sometimes as slow as Martha's progress with the more recalcitrant beasts, but following stubborn, uncompromising Martha as she goes about her work provides its own unique pleasures. (*Nov.*)

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Shane by Jack Schaefer ()

The novel opens with the entrance of a mysterious stranger into the life of Joe Starrett, a moral, hardworking Wyoming farmer. The stranger reveals little about himself except that his name is Shane. Joe, however, trusts the man and offers to let him stay on the farm. Before long, Shane becomes a part of the household. To Joe, he is a worker and friend on whom he can rely. To Joe's son, Bob, he becomes a hero. To Joe's wife, Marian, Shane becomes a dear companion.

While staying on the farm, Shane fights his own emotional torment. He longs to settle down as a farmer and forget his past deeds as a gunman, which haunt him. When he learns about the tensions in the village, he does not want to become involved, fearing his own reactions. He cannot, however, stand by and let Fletcher, a wealthy and greedy villager, seize the land of Joe and the other farmers who have homesteaded their farms. In the end, he decides he must use his ability as a gunman to fight for Joe and protect his farm. Although he realizes that his involvement will probably end in bloodshed, he feels he must prove his loyalty and friendship to Joe.

The duel takes place in the saloon. Shane first shoots and kills Wilson, Fletcher's assistant. When Fletcher fires on Shane and injures him, he kills Fletcher as well. Fearing he will never again be accepted or trusted in the valley, Shane decides to leave immediately, without even saying goodbye to the Starrett family that he has come to love.

Joe and Marian are crushed that Shane departs without even saying farewell or allowing them to say thanks for saving their farm; but they know that Shane has positively touched their lives forever. Thebestnotes.com

All the Pretty Horses by Cormac McCarthy ()

The tale of John Grady Cole, who at sixteen finds himself at the end of a long line of Texas ranchers, cut off from the only life he has ever imagined for himself. With two companions, he sets off for Mexico on a sometimes idyllic, sometimes comic journey to a place where dreams are paid for in blood. Winner of the National Book Award for Fiction. Amazon

Nonfiction

Savages and Scoundrels: The Untold Story of America's Road to Empire through Indian Territory by Paul VanDevelder ()

What really happened in the early days of our nation? How was it possible for white settlers to march across the entire continent, inexorably claiming Native American lands for themselves? Who made it happen, and why? This gripping book tells America's story from a new perspective, chronicling the adventures of our forefathers and showing how a legacy of repeated betrayals became the bedrock on which the republic was built.

Paul VanDevelder takes as his focal point the epic federal treaty ratified in 1851 at Horse Creek, formally recognizing perpetual ownership by a dozen Native American tribes of 1.1 million square miles of the American West. The astonishing and shameful story of this broken treaty—one of 371 Indian treaties signed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—reveals a pattern of fraudulent government behavior that again and again displaced Native Americans from their lands. VanDevelder describes the path that led to the genocide of the American Indian; those who participated in it, from cowboys and common folk to aristocrats and presidents; and how the history of the immoral treatment of Indians through the twentieth century has profound social, economic, and political implications for America even today. Ama

Four Lines a Day The Life and Times of an Imnaha Ranch Woman by Janie Tippett (2011)

In the 1930's, a girl moved to a rural community along the Imnaha River in northeast Oregon's Wallowa County. There, in country so remote that electricity didn't arrive until the 1960s, she married and built a life of hard work and deep friendships with family and neighboring ranchers. Through it all, she kept a diary—four lines a day—for sixty years. This is the story of the life of Mary Marks, revealed by those diaries and conversations with her long-time friend, Janie Tippett. As much as anything, this is a story of friendship between two women, a friendship built on a common love for ranching and for the wild, rugged country of the Imnaha.

Escape Velocity by Charles Portis, edited by Jay Jennings (2013)

Though Charles Portis is best known for his fiction writing, he is also a prolific essayist, travel writer, and newspaper reporter. Collected here in *Escape Velocity*, edited by Jay Jennings, is his "miscellany" — journalism, short fiction, memoir, and even the play *Delray's New Moon*, published for the first time in this volume. Portis covers topics as varied as the civil rights movement, road tripping in Baja, and Elvis's visits to his aging mother for publications such as the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Saturday Evening Post*. Fans of Portis's droll Southern humor and quirky characters will be thrilled at this new addition to his library, and those not yet familiar with his work will find a great introduction to him here. Also

included are tributes by accomplished authors including Donna Tartt and Ron Rosenbaum.
Amazon

Rick Steber

Red White Black

A True Story of Race and Rodeo

Red White Black tells the true story of the 1911 Pendleton Round-Up. Three men of different skin colors – Jackson Sundown, John Spain, and George Fletcher – are brought together during the finals of the Northwest Saddle Bronc Championship. What happened that September day, the judges' decision and the reaction of the crowd in the aftermath, forever changed the sport of rodeo, and the way the emerging West was to look at itself.

Jackson Sundown was on the Nez Perce retreat, but rather than surrender at Bear Paw with his uncle, Chief Joseph, he escaped to Canada and lived with Sitting Bull. Returning to the United States as a fugitive, Sundown eventually, at age 53, whipped the cowboy at his own game and became the first man of color to win the All-Around title at the Pendleton Round-Up.

John Spain was from white pioneering stock. When Buffalo Bill brought his Wild West show to Oregon in 1902, John and his brother were inspired to form a show of their own. They traveled the Northwest with a string of bucking horses and put on riding exhibitions. After a roping accident cost John his right hand, he had to learn to ride with his off-hand and made a comeback at the Pendleton Round-Up.

At the outbreak of World War One, the cowboys of Eastern Oregon formed their own cavalry unit, Troop D. George Fletcher, an African American, tried to join, but Jim Crow, the strict segregation of the races, was the law of the land and George was not allowed to join his peers. He was drafted into the segregated Army, served in France, was wounded and never again was able to compete in the sport of rodeo.

Rick Steber, who spent four decades researching this story, has more than 30 titles under his belt and sales of over a million books. Rick is the only Oregon author to have won the prestigious Western Writers of America Spur Award – Best Western Novel. He is a keen observer of the changing American West and he articulates these changes in prose that are boldly descriptive, invigorating and creative. His writing has been compared to Hemingway, Fitzgerald,

Tales of the Wild West Series of Books by Rick Steber

Oregon Trail – Vol.1

Indians – Vol.3

Cowboys – Vol.4

Miners – Vol. 9

Pioneers – Vol. 11

Young Adult related fiction

Other Karen Cushman titles

Will Sparrow's Road, in which Will Sparrow, liar, thief, and runaway, encounters a series of con artists as he makes his way from his sad and sorry life toward whatever comes next. Each time he is tricked, he resolves to trust no one and care for no one, but luckily for Will—and for us—he cannot keep his guard up forever. Come join Will Sparrow on the road in Elizabethan England



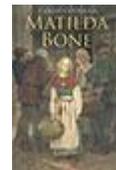
In ***Alchemy and Meggy Swann***, Meggy is newly come to London with her only friend, a goose named Louise. Meggy's mother was glad to be rid of her; her father, the alchemist, doesn't want her after all. But just as her father seeks to transform base metal into gold, Meggy sets out to change her condition for the better. In doing so, she finds herself to be braver and stronger and friendlier than ever she though possible.



Francine in ***The Loud Silence of Francine Green*** is an eighth-grader at All Saints School for Girls, which she calls the Sinless Academy for the Maidenly, in Los Angeles. It is 1949. Russia has just tested its first atomic weapon. President Truman has called for the development of the hydrogen bomb. Communists are in power in Russia and China and, some say, in Hollywood. Francine has never questioned authority. The new girl at school, Sophie Bowman, questions everything from the existence of God to the wisdom of waging war with nuclear weapons. Sophie changes Francine's life.



Lonely, proud, and superior, ***Matilda Bone*** was raised by a priest to know a lot about Heaven and Hell but not much about this world. Sent to be assistant to Red Peg the Bonesetter in the medical quarter of a medieval town, she learns to cherish and enjoy this life instead of merely waiting for the next.



Rodzina is a novel of the orphan trains, which took orphaned and homeless children from the slums of big cities to new lives in the west. Rodzina, big, sad, and angry, travels west from Chicago looking for someone to belong to.



In ***The Ballad of Lucy Whipple***, Lucy is dragged unhappily from her home in Massachusetts to the gold fields of California. She misses her dog, her grandparents, and her public library and wants to go home. Eventually Lucy learns where home really is.



Alyce, in ***The Midwife's Apprentice***, is a homeless girl known only as Brat who longs for a name, a full belly, and a place in the world. She takes refuge in the warmth of a dung heap one night, where she is found by the village midwife. Brat changes her name to Alyce and sets about making her dreams come true.



Catherine, Called Birdy is a medieval girl with no power and little value in a brutal world. This is the diary of her 14th year when her father tries to arrange her marriage and Catherine struggles to avoid it

Other Young Adult Fiction

The Case of the Deadly Desperadoes by Caroline Lawrence (2012)

The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate by Jacqueline Kelly (2011)

The Misadventures of Maud March by Audrey Coulombis (2007)

Our Only May Amelia by Jennifer Holm (2002)

One Came Home by Amy Timberlake (2013)

Behave Yourself, Bethany Brant by Bethany Brant (1986)

Rapunzel's Revenge by Dean Hale, Shannon Hale; Nathan Hale (illustrator) (2008)

Young Adult Non Fiction

Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U. S. Marshal by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, R. Gregory Christie (Illustrator) (2009)

Websites

The National Endowment for the Arts – The Big Read –
www.neabigread.org

The unofficial Charles Portis website includes lists and links to many articles about the author and reviews of all of his books -
<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~wvest/>

Karen Cushman - www.karencushman.com

U.S. Marshals Service -The official website of the United States Marshals Service includes a timeline and much history and background information - <http://www.usmarshals.gov/index.html>

Films

- ***True Grit*** (1969) starring John Wayne
- ***True Grit*** (2010) Coen Brothers, starring Jeff Bridges
- ***Rooster Cogburn*** (1975) starring John Wayne and Katherine Hepburn
- ***True Grit: A Further Adventure*** (1978) starring Warren Oates
- ***The Ballad of Lucy Whipple*** (2001) starring Glen Close

