



Butcher's Crossing

John Williams , Michelle Latiolais (Introduction)

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In his National Book Award–winning novel *Augustus*, John Williams uncovered the secrets of ancient Rome. With *Butcher's Crossing*, his fiercely intelligent, beautifully written western, Williams dismantles the myths of modern America.

It is the 1870s, and Will Andrews, bred up by Emerson to seek “an original relation to nature,” drops out of Harvard and heads west. He washes up in *Butcher's Crossing*, a small Kansas town on the outskirts of nowhere. *Butcher's Crossing* is full of restless men looking for ways to make money and ways to waste it. Before long Andrews strikes up a friendship with one of them, a man who regales Andrews with tales of immense herds of buffalo, ready for the taking, hidden away in a beautiful valley deep in the Colorado Rockies. He convinces Andrews to join in an expedition to track the animals down. The journey out is grueling, but at the end is a place of paradisaical richness. Once there, however, the three men abandon themselves to an orgy of slaughter, so caught up in killing buffalo that they lose all sense of time. Winter soon overtakes them: they are snowed in. Next spring, half-insane with cabin fever, cold, and hunger, they stagger back to *Butcher's Crossing* to find a world as irremediably changed as they have been.

Butcher's Crossing Details

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From Reader Review Butcher's Crossing for online ebook

Lynne King says

Andrews dropped to his hands and knees and swung his head from side to side like a wounded animal. "My God!" he said thickly, "My God, my God".

"A whole winter's work," Miller said in a flat dead voice. "It took just about two minutes."

"Andrews raised his head wildly, and got to his feet. "Schneider," he said. "Schneider. We've got to--"

"Miller put his hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy, boy. Won't do no good to worry about Schneider."

I went to bed last night still thinking about this remarkable book. I put it on the bedside table and I vaguely recall thinking about buffalo as I slowly slid into the lost world of dreams. I awoke at 3 am and was so wide awake in fact that I made myself a black coffee with honey, slowly opened the doors to the terrace and stood there looking at the Pyrenean mountain range. My much beloved mountains but one that I would soon leave. Time was relentlessly moving on. Thoughts of this book like a stampede of horses took over my mind. I didn't want to let go and only wished to remain on this mesmerizing carousel moving at death defying speed, while a kaleidoscope of exquisite and yet horrifying images flashed by. All the elements were present, superimposed with the colours white and red. It was surrealistic.

This isn't just a story about a young man, Will Andrews who leaves Harvard to go west and in fact to find himself but it is also about all aspects of nature and how it has such a profound and important place in our everyday existence. And the reason why Andrews was taking this trip in 1873 was not because of buffalo which were really in vogue at that time but because he had become very influenced at college by a lecture given by Ralph Waldo Emerson. This would prove to be a divine calling in more ways than one.

He believed - and had believed for a long time - that there was a subtle magnetism in nature; which if he unconsciously yielded to it, would direct him aright, not indifferent to the way he walked. But he felt that only during the few days that he had been in Butcher's Crossing had nature been so purely presented to him that its power of compulsion was sufficiently strong to strike through his will, his habit, and his idea. He turned west, his back toward Butcher's Crossing and the town and cities that lay eastward beyond it; he walked past the clump of cottonwoods toward the river he had not seen but which had assumed in his mind the proportions of a vast boundary that lay between himself and the wildness and freedom that his instinct sought.

I really don't believe that Andrews knew what he was letting himself in for when he headed west in 1873. He had money in his pocket and in no time after his arrival at Butcher's Crossing, a small Kansas town in the back of beyond, he had met Mr. McDonald who bought and sold buffalo hides. Andrews' father had given him a letter of introduction to McDonald as he knew him in Boston through the church. He thought perhaps that Andrews could help McDonald out in his business. This isn't for Andrews though and his whole purpose of being there is to get out into the country and so he's told to contact Miller, a buffalo hunter. He also met Francine, a prostitute who teaches him a thing or two and he sees her again upon his return.

So the upshot is that with Andrew's finance, Miller agrees to lead an expedition to the mountain country, in the Colorado territory where he was convinced buffalo were to be found. Fred Schneider comes as the skinner and Miller's religious sidekick Charley Hoge will be driving the wagon with a team of oxen and will be the camp man.

So this epic journey begins. We are involved here with four individuals, who are all so different and the clash of personalities soon begins when they cannot find water. The attention to detail here is remarkable. They then get lost but finally find the hidden valley with five thousand buffalo.

I was however surprised with the ease with which Miller shot them. Very few stampedes and I was hoping at one stage that perhaps he would be injured in one of them. I really felt for the buffalo. The detail about skinning of the animals just seemed to slip into the fabric of the book as if it were a normal daily occurrence. It had a dreamlike quality to it.

This was meant to be a short trip but Miller seemed to turn into an individual who was possessed and wanted to shoot the entire herd. Such slaughter. Due to this, the men are delayed and nature steps in with all her majestic glory. They end up being snowed in for eight months. However, this certainly wasn't a boring life regardless of this being a case of survival with all of its hardships. Recriminations begin to fly from Schneider and even the bible loving Hoge starts complaining. The latter had recently been taking to the bottle and his bible readings were becoming more and more frequent.

But upon their journey back to Butcher's Crossing, the fast flowing river decides to take and take it did. What an incredible episode here.

The consummate beauty of Williams' exquisite writing flows continuously throughout this work.

In essence this is a relatively simple story for a western. I expected cowboys and Indians for some obscure reason and there was only one reference made to Indians.

Nevertheless *"Butcher's Crossing" is very much the Wild West, although a west on the brink of change. The railroad is coming, it is said, and there are fewer and fewer buffalo about (and the few Indians left are not worth bothering with). Still, all the familiar elements remain: the rough-hewn men, the choice in the bar of either beer or gut-rot whiskey, and the hooker with the heart of gold.*

This is a splendid book and I love it as I do Stoner. These two books are perfect. I've never come across this before and to see how due to Williams' style of writing, we have here a western of such exceptional quality that it will no doubt stay around for a long time. And the next book for me? Augustus of course. I have ordered it and I should imagine that I will soon be reading my third perfect book.

Parthiban Sekar says

Bulls-eye:

After reading this book, I have felt myself becoming one of those naive victims from this story. At first, I was unaware of what is going to happen amidst the scurry behind shrubs and rocks, and the constant thuds of distant hooves. I was slowly made to believe that everything is normal without knowing what lies beneath. I suppose that I was taken for granted.

Eventually, there was this strange feeling of foreign intervention which made me question my own existence and my very own purpose in this life. There were chaos and confusions everywhere, and bodies hitting the ground at regular intervals. The need to survive shattered our unity. The sunlight revealed the intrusion of hunters, watching with stoic interest, indifferently pulling the trigger, and putting us to an eternal sleep. But, high above, there was the Sun slowly passing behind us, after beating on us all day. Everyday was an equinox of life and death.

The onset of the winter drew the men back to their camps and some of our lives were spared. I resumed my old life indifferently, away from the flayed bodies. The men strove against the winter with our hides and survived on our flesh. Several months later, there was no sign of them but the strong stench of the wastes they left behind.

It made me wonder that what was that these men were after: were they looking only to earn a living from the hides, or find a meaning which might lie under the hides?

Birds-eye:

With the lively descriptions of the travel of the hunting party, it was hard not to go along with them to the faraway mountains and the wild prairies. But, a sense of question always kept gnawing at me: what is there to find among buffaloes, that cannot be found among people? The lovely analogy between the undressed harlot and the skinned calf stands out to be some of the best parts I've read so far.

So, the way I see it: this inquisitive work of art seems to ask one and only one thing: *Is there any meaning, after all?*

Disclaimer: Please ignore any silly errors and inferences as I made myself write after a really long time. Nevertheless, try reading this compelling book, may be not from buffalo's perspective like me. Not Joking! Ha Ha!

Howard says

John Williams wrote four novels. None of them, however, sold many copies during his lifetime. I remember some years ago seeing and scanning stories about John Williams with headlines such as “The Best Writer You Never Heard Of,” or something similar. And that certainly applied to me. I had never heard of him, and I couldn't read his books because they were out of print. In fact, although there were critics who praised his work his books sold few copies before disappearing – literally in some cases -- into the trash bin of history.

He received his greatest, but fleeting, publicity when his epistolary novel set in ancient Rome, *Augustus*, won the National Book Award in 1973. But it didn't sell many copies either.

Fast forward to 2013:

A dramatic change occurred when the New York Review of Books (NYRB) re-issued *Stoner*, a novel about a quiet, unassuming, and in many ways, forgettable professor teaching literature at the University of Missouri, which had originally been published in 1965. Suddenly, everyone had heard of John Williams, at least those who read books. He had become an overnight success – almost a half-century after he had written the book -- and almost two decades after his death.

A year later, NYRB re-issued *Augustus*.

However, these were not the first Williams novels to be re-issued by NYRB. The first was *Butcher's Crossing*, originally published in 1960, and re-issued by NYRB in 2007. It had not attracted the readership that *Stoner* did six years later, but it benefited from the popularity of that novel, even to the point that *Butcher's Crossing* is now in development as a movie.

The town of Butcher's Crossing is a rag-tag collection of shacks and shanties located on the Kansas prairie.

In the late 1870's, its primary commercial activity is the collection and shipment of buffalo hides to the east. Will Andrews, a young Bostonian imbued with the teachings of Emerson and Thoreau, drops out of Harvard College and travels west in a quest for – well, for something that he can't quite explain, but obviously includes a search for self. In some ways he pursues a course opposite to that of Stoner; while Stoner deserted nature (the farm) for academia, Andrews deserts academia for nature.

Eventually, because he wants to take part in a buffalo hunt, and because he has some money, Andrews agrees to bankroll a hunt led by an experienced hunter named Miller. To assist the enterprise Miller hires Charley Hoge, a one-handed, whiskey-swilling, Bible-thumper to serve as teamster and camp cook and Schneider, an experienced skinner. Young Andrews main job will be to assist Schneider, even though he knows nothing about skinning animals, but is expected to learn.

I'm not going to divulge any more of the plot, because I don't want to be guilty of spoilers and because it's too damn difficult to do anyway. But I will tell you that the passage across the arid western Kansas and eastern Colorado plains almost ends the hunt even before the hunters arrive in the Colorado Rockies where Miller is certain a huge buffalo herd will be found in a valley that he visited years before.

The hunters find the herd but they tarry too long in the Rockies and have to spend the winter there. Winter in the Rockies means snow – a lot of it – and as a result the hunters find themselves engaging in another battle of survival against the forces of nature.

Just as it is impossible to explain in a brief summary why *Stoner* is such a great novel, so it is with *Butcher's Crossing*. It is a western novel. No, that's not right. It is a novel set in the west. Despite the fact that the story is populated by many stock characters – even the prostitute with the requisite heart of gold – they are overcome by a pared down, austere, but clear and vivid prose that contains no gimmicks or grammatical games.

Joanne Greenberg, who is best known for her book *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, knew Williams and admired his talent long before most of the rest of us even had a clue. She was quoted as saying that Williams “wrote like a Shaker would ski – without a wasted motion.” Perfect; I wish I had thought of that.

Anyone looking to read a traditional western in the mainstream of the genre needs to look elsewhere. This is a book that shares more in common with Melville's *Moby Dick* than anything ever written by Louis L'Amour. If, on the other hand, you are an admirer of Cormac McCarthy, than this book would likely appeal to you.

[*Butcher's Crossing*] is a novel that turns upside down the expectations of the genre – and goes to war with a century of American triumphalism, a century of rejuvenation through violence, a century of senseless slaughter. – John Plotz, *The Guardian*

The finest western ever written. – Oakley Hall, author of *Warlock*

'The West' never existed. It's a dream of 'the East.' – John Williams

Algernon says

One of the joys of reading chaotically, picking up books from the TBR stack at the whim of the moment and not according to some master plan, is to discover that successive reads turn out to be related after all. **The**

Great Gatsby is concerned with the Great American Dream - that success is waiting right around the corner for anyone determined enough to reach for it. **Butcher's Crossing** is about another facet of the Great American Dream, the myth of the pristine land, a Garden of Eden where Man can go to find beauty, peace and dignity.

Will Andrews is a child of the modern world, growing up in Boston around 1870 in a reasonably wealthy family. His imagination is fired up by the discourses of Ralph Waldo Emerson and he decides to leave Harvard and strike West, not in search of wealth or fame, but chasing the meaning of life and spiritual fulfillment.

At the gate of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back with the first step he takes into these precincts. Here is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find Nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her. [Emerson]

His destination is Butcher's Crossing, a dusty settlement on the Kansas frontier, catering to buffalo hunters. The harsh travelling conditions, the gruff locals and the dingy, derelict houses do little to curb his enthusiasm, his eyes ever turning towards the westward prairie. He turns down an offer to join in the profitable business of tanning buffalo hides, preferring to look out for a guide into the wilderness:

It was a freedom and a goodness, a hope and a vigor that he perceived to underlie all the familiar things of his life, which were not free or good or hopeful or vigorous. What he sought was the source and preserver of his world, a world which seemed to turn ever in fear away from its source, rather than search it out, as the prairie grass around him sent down its fibered roots into the rich, dank dampness, the Wildness, and thereby renew itself, year after year.

His moderate savings enable him to finance a hunting expedition towards a secret location in the the Colorado mountains, a pet project of Miller - a lone wolf hunter with a difficult personality but with 20 years experience in the field. The team is completed with Miller's one handed partner Charley Hoge, a drunken Bible thumper and by a hired hand - a professional skinner of a contrarian disposition, always grumbling and challenging Miller's leadership.

The novel really takes off once the expedition sets out on the trackless prairie, with Williams wonderful prose capturing both the 'true grit' of saddle sores, debilitating tiredness, thirst, mind numbing boredom, and the poetry of the boundless vistas, the sea like quality of being at the center of the universe and moving in a timeless bubble outside the reality of civilized East Coast. Miller is like a force of nature, pushing all of them forward mercilessly, reading the lay of the land, the sun and the winds with consummate skill. What is missing in this landscape is the object of the hunt - the buffalo has already been hunted to near extinction and is present only as mounds of white bones or the occasional wounded stray. Miller's obsession with the herd hidden in his secret mountain valley reminds of Melville and his Captain Ahab chasing another impossible dream.

Miller's dream though turns out to be true, as the heavy bull driven cart comes at last to the high pass opening into a vision of paradise, a veritable Shangri-la hidden from covetous eyes, as perfect a camping place as I ever encountered on my own mountain treks:

A long narrow valley, flat as the top of a table, wound among the mountains. Lush grass grew on the bed of the valley, and waved gently in the breeze as far as the eye could see. A quietness seemed to rise from the valley; it was the quietness, the stillness, the absolute calm of a land where no human foot had touched. Andrews found that despite his exhaustion he was holding his breath; he expelled the air from his lungs as gently as he could, so as not to disturb the silence.

As a sidenote, I'm not familiar with the detailed history of the Colorado territories in the XIX century, but it seems to me Williams is ignoring completely the Native American angle. A single instance of meeting a destitute Indian family scraping a meagre living on the plains makes it seem like the author deliberately ignored their historical presence as outside the scope of his novel - he needed a pristine setting in order to make his point.

The promised herd of buffalo is here in great numbers, resplendent in their autumn coats, well fed on the bountiful grass and as yet unafraid of the danger humans represent. Young Andrews education turns to a bloody and gruesome page, as the idillic landscape becomes a scene of indiscriminate slaughter and Miller's goal of wiping out the herd completely is revealed as the spirit of the modern world that gets drunk on power and immediate profit without any thought for long term consequences or preservation of resources ['Drill Baby, Drill!']. Miller's unhinged mind is blind to all appeals at reason and moderation, as the gathered skins far outstrip the carrying capacity of their cart. Nature or karma strikes back, and the expedition is trapped in the high mountain valley by an early snowstorm.

Once again, the writing knocked me down as it describes the struggle for survival and the tensions between the four members of the team, the long tedious months of being cooped up in an improvised shelter, the lack of even the most basic comforts. A weary and disillusioned Andrews comes down in the spring and slowly makes his way back to Butcher's Crossing for a big finale in which the falsity, the destructive nature of the American Dream is reaffirmed in an emphatic way.

Young people', McDonald said contemptuously. 'You always think there's something to find out. Well, there's nothing. You get born, and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies in school. You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you - that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done. Only you ain't done it, because the lies told you there was something else. Then you know you could of had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only the it's too late. You're too old.

This is a bleak revelation, but I have the feeling a necessary one. The lessons have been painful, but Andrews is still young and a small hope exists that he will step into his next adventure with his eyes open. Being more circumspect does not mean giving up altogether. At least this is how I like to look at the outcome.

I am surprised the novel is not better known, it is probably the most literate, thoughtful and brutal analysis of the Western myth I've come across since watching Jeremiah Johnson at the Cinemateque. I can see how modern writers like Larry McMurtry or Cormac McCarthy may have been influenced in their approach by this definitely unromantic look at the Frontier.

Dolors says

Williams' biggest achievement in this novel is that there isn't an ounce of overblown characterization in the diverging life perspectives that populate *Butcher's Crossing*, an emerging town in the Great Plains of the old west. In spite of the bison hunters, the dusty brothel with the purring prostitute, the inexperienced city boy Will Andrews from Boston, and the drunkard who nurses his whiskey with a mucky Bible and prayerful gibberish, this is not the predictable Western the reader might anticipate. Clichés are exploited to serve the story, not employed to construct it.

An omniscient narrator delves deep into the psychological dimension of the characters who grope in the darkness of their beings in search of answers to questions not even formulated. In spite of their disparate temperaments, the four men share the common bond of confronting their insignificance in relation to the

impassive grandeur of the natural world. Contrasted experience, mental strength and resilience prove to be useless when nature serves as mirror to the men's obsessions, ignored fears and misconceptions, a mirror that reflects their most savage selves.

William's prose is unsparing, brutal, jagged. There isn't a trace of sentimentality in the crude lyricism of his sparsely constructed sentences, yet one will detect something deeply touching in the icy narrative voice that plucks the petals, one after another, slow and steady, of Will's blossoming innocence.... Or is it immaturity? Driven by his need to fill the empty void that is festering inside him, he escapes the viciousness of civilization to experience a moment of self-revelation embraced by the purity of "Mother Nature". What he finds instead terrifies his tender, trusting disposition. An alien, murderous drive built on numbing detachment, absurd carnage, gratuitous suffering.

When Will's journey comes to an end, he emerges as a different person, his restlessness has dissipated and a sobering calmness has taken possession of his being. The idealistic youth has been substituted for a man who finally accepts he cannot escape himself, a man who feels comfortable with his emptiness like the reader has grown used to hearing the unwritten echo of silence and to appreciate the chilly texture of the color white.

This is an unorthodox bildungsroman more than a Western and John Williams discovers that Ace up his sleeve at a carefully studied pace. The claustrophobic sensation that emanates from his writing could easily be compared to the one provoked by the infinity of open space, that of frosty snow covering the earth and night and day becoming an unbearable succession of blinding darkness and blinding whiteness and the maddening impression of being locked in the small boundaries of our diminutive, suffocating consciousness. But whose consciousness? What is hidden underneath the characters' frenzy to tame the wild, to put down the unconquerable, but the projection of the "American Spirit"?

Will's infantile desire to experience a sort of epiphanic oneness with Nature is the story of a young country ruling history that is seeking to reaffirm its ethos by fighting its foe, mindless of the consequences, heedless of the fact that what remains after massive butchery is the putrid stench of blank stares and vacant-eyed slaughterers.

So yes, many might consider this book a Western; but I insist it might easily be something else. Quite something else, indeed.

Ted says

... he believed - and had believed for a long time - that there was a subtle magnetism in nature, which, if he unconsciously yielded to it, would direct him aright ... (48)

Now Andrews could see the herd clearly. Against the pale yellow-green of the grass, the dark amber of the buffalo stood out sharply ... Many were lying at ease upon the soft valley grass; those were mere humps, like dark rocks, without identity or shape ... some were grazing lightly, others stood unmoving, they huge furry heads slumped between their forelegs, which were so matted with long dark fur that their shapes could not be seen. (127)

... without identity or shape ... their shapes could not be seen

Butcher's Crossing is usually classified as a "Western", I guess because of its setting: in Western Kansas and the mountains of Colorado, in the 1870s. But this background produces, in Williams' telling, a story that has little resemblance to either "traditional" or more contemporary western literature (from authors like Zane Gray, Max Brand, Louis L'Amour, Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy; or novels such as *The Ox-Bow*

Incident or *Shane*). The story has no cowboys, *almost* no Indians, no settlers, no ranchers, no gunfights, no sheriffs, no bandits.

So if you're in the mood for a "Western" novel *a la* McMurtry or Cormac, look elsewhere. You won't find it here.

What you will find is a haunting, mysterious story of an Easterner who has come to the American West, for reasons that are not clear to him. It is a short but deep novel, unforgettable, and maybe somewhat disturbing.

Will Andrews has left Harvard in his third year, with his share of an uncle's bequest, and traveled to the American West, in search of a man who his father knew for a time back in Boston, a man named McDonald. When he manages to track McDonald down in Butcher's Crossing Kansas, McDonald is engaged in a buffalo hide business, buying from buffalo hunters and reselling to buffalo robe makers in the east. Andrews tells McDonald that his father "admired" him because McDonald was "the only man he ever knew who came out here – who came west, and made a life for himself." (18)

As they talk, Andrews

paused and let his gaze go past McDonald, away from the town, beyond the ridge of earth that he imagined was the river bank, to the flat yellowish green land that faded into the horizon westward. He tried to shape in his mind what he had to say to McDonald ... What he sought was the source and preserver of his world, a world that seemed to turn ever in fear away from its source, rather than search it out, as the prairie grass around him sent down its fibered roots into the rich dark dampness, the Wildness, and thereby renewed itself, year after year. (21)

But McDonald is simply a stepping stone to the West. Andrews has no interest in a job which McDonald offers him, he's searching for something else. As he haltingly explains to McDonald, "... I came out here to see as much of the country as I can." ... "I want to get to know it. It's something that I have to do." "I don't have anything figured out. I just want to know more about this country." (22-3)

Besides Andrews and McDonald, there are only four other named characters in the novel; Miller, the buffalo hunter; Charley Hoge, Miller's sidekick and the hunting party's wagon driver and cook; Francine, an attractive "whore" in Butcher's Crossing who is in turn attracted to Andrews; and Schneider, the final member of the hunting party, hired as chief skinner. Oh yes, and one more, probably the most important other than Andrews: Nature. Call her Mother if you want.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature, and Transcendentalism

Williams has placed two quotations directly following the title page, before we see a word of his own writing. The first of these says:

At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back with the first step he takes into these precincts. Here is sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find Nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her.

The quote is from an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson titled *Nature*. (view spoiler)

In Emerson's first published work, also called *Nature*, but a longer work than the previous essay, Emerson wrote

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life ... which nature cannot repair. *Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space*, - all mean egotism vanishes. *I become a transparent eyeball*; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God ... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. *In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon*, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

In *Butcher's Crossing* (p. 45) Williams writes, of Andrews' recollections of the life he has left:

Sometimes after listening to the droning voices in the chapel and in the classrooms, he had fled the confines of Cambridge to the fields and woods that lay southwestward to it. There in some small solitude, *standing on bare ground, he felt his head bathed by the clean air and uplifted into infinite space*; the meanness and the constriction he had felt were dissipated in the wildness about him. A phrase from a lecture by Mr. Emerson that he had attended came to him: *I become a transparent eyeball*. ... Through the trees and *across the rolling landscape, he had been able to see a hint of the distant horizon to the west*; and there, for an instant, he had *beheld something as beautiful as his own undiscovered nature*.

In the above quotes, the italics highlight phrases that are almost identical. What Williams has done is to modify Emerson's thoughts, and give him credit through the reference to Andrews' recollection of the Emerson lecture. And what he has also done, is put front and center a link between his novel, and the New England transcendental vision.

But Williams' version of this vision is quite different from that of the nineteenth century New England transcendentalists. And the main differences are all on display right here.

1. Emerson's references to a Universal Being, to God, to "uncontained and immortal beauty" are missing.
2. Emerson's "wilderness" becomes Williams' "wildness". A small change perhaps, but it reminds us of the second quote which Williams prefaced the novel with, from Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*:

Aye, and poets send out the sick spirit to green pastures, like lame horses turned out unshod to the turf to renew their hoofs. A sort of yarb-doctors in their way, poets have it that for sore hearts, as for sore lungs, nature is the grand cure. But who froze to death my teamster on the prairie? ...

3. Emerson's "tranquil landscape", becomes for Williams a "rolling landscape", and Emerson's "distant horizon" lies specifically, for Williams, "to the west". Both of these changes link to Andrews journey to *Butcher's Crossing*.

4. Finally, Emerson speaks of man's "own nature"; for Williams/Andrews it is "his own *undiscovered nature*", another link to Andrew's yearning to discover himself.

The Hunting Party

Andrews tells McDonald that he wants to talk to someone who knows buffalo hunting; McDonald tells him to find Miller. This he does, in the saloon. Miller sits with Charley Hoge. Francine is waiting on them.

Miller tells Andrews of a valley in the mountains he discovered ten years prior, filled with buffalo, that he reckons no man has ever seen, except "Maybe some Indians a long time ago, but no man." Andrews suggests that Miller take a party there now, and agrees to stake the expedition. Miller leaves for Ellsworth to buy a wagon, supplies, and hire a skinner.

While Miller is gone, Andrews has a few days hanging around the town. He gets on Charley Hoge's good side when Andrews mentions that his father is a Unitarian minister. He talks with McDonald and Francine. And he spends a lot of time walking to the edge of town and contemplating the rolling land to the west.

... he felt that only during the few days that he had been in Butcher's Crossing had nature been so purely presented to him that its power of compulsion was sufficiently strong to strike through his will, his habit, and his idea ... the river he had not seen, but which had assumed in his mind the proportions of a vast boundary that lay between himself and the wildness and freedom that his instinct sought ... He felt that ... wherever he would live hereafter, he was leaving the city more and more, withdrawing into the wilderness. He felt that that was the central meaning he could find in all his life ... (48-9)

And also, "... he realized that the hunt he had arranged with Miller was only a stratagem, a ruse upon himself ..." (48).

Andrews doesn't really care about the buffalo hunt, nor even "seeing the country" as the typical traveler sees an unfamiliar land. He wants to *go into* that unexplored country, looking for something that he's sure he will find, some sort of communion with nature, that will reveal to him something that he doesn't yet know.

So, starting with Emerson's exaltation of Nature, Williams has now prepared the ground for a story about a young man seeking self-discovery in a consuming vision of a Nature which, for the author, is neither divine nor benign. Williams will tell the story not in the fields and woods which Emerson knew in the east, but on the vast plains and in the high mountains which he, Williams, knew in the west. Andrews believes he knows what he is seeking. Whether he does know is the question.

New England Transcendentalism

(view spoiler)

The Hunt and its Aftermath

On the 25th of August the four men leave Butcher's Crossing, heading west. It's Part Two of the novel. The reader has three fourths of it still to read. Will Andrews has an unknown portion of his journey to knowledge of himself, of life, the world, and Nature to travel. And the reader of this review is just about finished.

Butcher's Crossing is one of the most enjoyable reads I've had in a long time. The style in which it's written is unusual, almost dreamlike in numerous passages. As indicated above, much of the narration is on the level of Andrews' inner perceptions of the outer world. I found the final outcome of Andrews' journey of self-discovery to be enigmatic, as were the resolution of some other plot lines. I think it would be a wonderful

novel for a book club to discuss. The more I reread sections for this review, the more I found. (view spoiler)

My final judgment of the novel: its *conception* is magnificent; the execution is not quite so finely wrought. Williams is at times heavy-handed in his promulgation of the interrelated metaphors and themes, and is prone to the occasional clumsy/awkward sentence when what he's trying to express needs too many qualifications and nuances. These flaws in execution, to my mind, largely disappeared in his next novel, *Stoner*. However, I personally found this novel, which I read before *Stoner*, to be a more interesting story.

At the end, Andrews rides enigmatically into the west.

He gathered the reins firmly in one hand, touched his horse's flanks with his heels, and rode into the open country. Except for the general direction that he took, he did not know where he was going; but he knew that it would come to him later ... He rode forward without hurry. (274)

Darwin8u says

[It was that nothingness of which McDonald had spoken back in

Cecily says

Why read a historical novel about a privileged Harvard dropout who wants to find himself by going on a buffalo hunt?

1. It's by John Williams, who wrote one of my three favourite novels, **Stoner**, which I reviewed [HERE](#), as well as the almost as good **Augustus**, which I reviewed [HERE](#).
2. Hunting is not what it's really about (probably like *Moby Dick*?).
3. It was a good follow-on from **Cold Mountain**, which I reviewed [HERE](#): two totally different US landscape-based stories, set only a few years apart.

What This Is - and Is Not

- This is a road movie - without the road, the car, or the film cameras.
- It's a Western - without cows, cowboys or ~~indians~~ native Americans.
- It's a character-based story - but the main characters don't speak or move (because they're the landscape and weather).
- It's about big beasts, big wilderness, big ambitions, some big characters - but it often focuses on the minutest details of how things looks, sound, and feel (see quotes near the end).
- It's about quests and dreams (of meaning for one; of wealth for another); aspects have a mythical air – but

harsh reality dominates, and it's not the standard "American Dream" of wealth (success, fame, power).

- It's a coming-of-age story or bildungsroman (thanks, Dolors) - except that the end of the journey seems more like the beginning of Will's growing up.
- It's about life (finding purpose in it, as well as basic survival) - but there's bloody death and butchery.

Landscape

“He believed there was a subtle magnetism in nature, which if he unconsciously yielded to it, would direct him aright.”

I often seek quiet landscapes for solace, thinking, escape (preferably woodland). I like to listen and touch. I'm not brave or reckless enough to go anywhere really wild, and although I eat meat, I'm no hunter. Nevertheless, I can relate to underlying theme of this story more than I expected.

Will Andrews heads west, not to make his fortune, but to find meaning in his life. The landscape quickly has a profound effect, though it doesn't really clarify things for him. He longs for the distant mountains but “did not know precisely what hunger or thirst they would assuage”. How many of us long vaguely for something, without being sure how or if it will fix things?

After only a month away from Boston, he barely remembers home, which seems “in a very distant time... The image would not stay with him. Unreal, it thinned like brown fog.” He quickly feels at home in the tiny settlement of Butcher's Crossing, but yearns to go further, into the wilderness: in “a hint of the distant horizon” he sees “his own undiscovered nature”.

As he travels, he comes to identify with his surroundings, “He felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape”. He has “the feeling that he was being absorbed” and “promised... a richness and a fulfilment for which he had no name”. After only a few weeks, “He had been here in the high valley for all of that part of his life that mattered... He could not think of himself outside of where he was”. Is this peace or an unhealthy form of disassociation?

But what's it all for? When they eventually leave the valley, after much hardship, Will “felt vaguely that he would be leaving something behind, something that might have been precious to him, had he been able to know what it was.”

This thwarting of uncertain ambitions, this lack of resolution, reminded me of Stoner.

Faith, Religion, Ritual

Does everyone need faith in something? I'm not sure (I don't think I have faith in anything much), but that's the suggestion here.

Charley Hoge, the waggon driver, has a simple but profound faith in the words of his dog-eared Bible, and a fair amount of faith in Miller, the experienced buffalo hunter. Miller's faith is also in Miller: his vast experience of the beasts and their environment. Schneider, the skinner, has faith in his own experience, so it's no surprise that he and Miller don't always agree. McDonald, the hide trader, has hope of future prosperity when the railroad comes through town.

Will is the faithless one: the son of a preacher who pressed Emerson more than God on his son. That is surely why Will now seeks answers in the wilderness, and why “the reality of their journey lay in the routine

detail... a ritual, more and more meaningless as it was repeated, but a ritual which nevertheless gave his life the only shape it now had”.

There is also a ritualistic aspect to the hunting, killing, and skinning: “a rhythm in Miller’s slaughter... Like a dance, a thunderous minuet created by the wildness that surrounded it”. Does that make it somehow sacred, or profane and greedy?

If my Biblical knowledge were closer to Charley’s than Will’s, I’d probably spot more, but wilderness is significant in the Christian story, and just as Genesis has a six-day creation, Miller’s preparation for the journey is six days, as it the first leg of it (after which, they are literally off the beaten track).

I’m not sure if it’s the author’s intention, but you could easily sermonise along the lines of the perils of chasing material gain, versus the importance of searching for deeper truth.

Transformation

From the most ancient myths and stories, physical journeys have paralleled personal journeys of transformation. That is true here – not just of Will, but even the characters who are used to venturing out for weeks on end.

There are the obvious physical transformations from weeks in the saddle, then the hard labour of hunting and skinning etc, but the psychological changes are greatest, and most profound. As things get tougher, each man has to wrestle his own demons, as well as the other men, and the conditions in which they’re living, travelling and, hopefully, surviving - physically and mentally.

“He thought at times that he as moving into a new body, or into a real body that had lain hidden beneath unreal layers of softness and whiteness and smoothness.” Later, these feelings are echoed when he loses his virginity.

Survival

If you like survival stories, there’s plenty here. They travel in uncharted territory, where only one of them has been before, and that was ten years earlier. They have supplies, but need to make them last, and can’t ever go too far from water. The terrain and weather are always a risk, as is the greed of trying to get just a few more hides.

Seeing this Through Other Eyes

Some books are so deep or strange, they inspire hugely varied and very creative reviews. This is, in some ways, a very simple story, but I was struck by the variety of my friends' reviews: they are almost all 4* or 5*, but the themes and ideas the pick out are remarkably diverse. I think that indicates how much depth there is beneath the surface.

I think this could make a wonderful film - but only in the rights hands. It needs to focus on careful shots of the landscape, rather than wild west clichés: enormous vistas, as well as careful light, highlighting details close-up. Stephen Poliakoff would be perfect, though in 2010, Sam Mendes was reported to be adapting it. He's made some excellent films, but I'm not sure I'd want to see his version of this.

Descriptions of Minute Details

This is also a notable feature of his first (disowned) novel, **Nothing But The Night**, [HERE](#).

- “He became aware that his hands were tightly clenched; the tips of his fingers slipped in the moisture of his palms.
- “Flat lines of sweat ran through the glinting beads of moisture that stood out on his forehead, and ran into his tangled eyebrows.”
- “He noticed the minute beads of sweat that stood out distinctly above her full lip and caught the sunlight like tiny crystals.”
- “The rich buffalo grass... changed its color throughout the day; in the morning, in the pinkish rays of the early sun, it was nearly gray; in the yellow light of the midmorning sun, it was a brilliant green; at noon it took on a bluish cast; in the afternoon, in the intensity of the sun, at a distance, the blades lost their individual character and through the green showed a distinct cast of yellow, so that when a light breeze whipped across, a living color seemed to run through the grass, to disappear and reappear from moment to moment. In the evening after the sun had gone down, the grass took on a purplish hue as if it absorbed all the light from the sky and would not give it back.”
- “When he inserted the rod into the breech of the barrel the hot metal hissed, and the drops of water that got on the outside of the barrel danced for a moment on the blued metal and disappeared.”
- “He heard nothing save the soft whistling of the wind around his ears, which were beginning to tingle from the coolness. The southern reaches of the valley were softening in a faint mist that was coming down from the mountains... the sunlit white vapor twisted and coiled upon itself before a thrusting wind that was not felt on the ground here in the valley.”
- “The mountainside was a riot of varied shade and hue... He thought that if he listened he could hear the sound of growth... the fragrant air, spiced with the odor of crushed pine needles and musty from the slow decay that worked upward from the earth.”

Other Quotes

- “It was a freedom and a goodness, a hope and a vigor that he perceived to underlie all the familiar things of his life, which were not free or good or hopeful or vigorous. What he sought was the source and preserver of his world, a world which seemed to turn ever in fear away from its source.”
- “She was a presence which assuaged a need in him that he barely knew he had, until the need was met.”
- “Caught in the ugliness of sleep... defenceless... in the innocence of sleep” he “had never seen a part of her that he was seeing now.”
- “It wasn’t you, it was me.” (Published in 1960!)

Williams' Four Novels, Compared

See the end of my review of his first (disowned) novel, **Nothing But The Night**, [HERE](#).

RK-ïsme says

Wonderful book. Read it. Americana at its best. "Stoner" was a book that made me look into my life as I am. "Butcher's Crossing" took me back to my youth when I wandered, and lived in my tent in the mountains, became lost in a snow storm in the North. But more than anything it took me back to this:

"He could hardly recall, now, the passion that had drawn him to this room and this flesh, as if by a subtle magnetism; nor could he recall the force of that other passion which had impelled him halfway across a continent into a wilderness where he had dreamed he could find, as in a vision, his unalterable self. Almost without regret, he could admit now the vanity from which those passions had sprung."

The "unalterable self", of course is found to be "a nothingness" and we continue. We can continue into the unknown being certain that there is no meaning or we can return to what we know and still be nothing. Just as Stoner accepts his fate 'stoically' (at least the popular view of stoicism), so the young William Andrews accepts his losses and carries on with no sense of regret.

Williams wrote true classics. His sentences often read like the Old Testament, reminding me of Cormac McCarthy's style. Perhaps McCarthy's style with Wallace Stegner's thoughtfulness. Indeed, I should not be surprised to learn that McCarthy had read Butcher's Crossing prior to writing Blood Meridian. There are many commonalities.

Strangely, for myself, this book touched many memories of dreams, of events and of emotions of my youth, as cited above. Even my philosophical beliefs were brought into play. Finally, I think of one of my great grandfathers who rode away from home one day in Montana in the 1890s. He was never heard of again. Such was the nature of the times. Such is the nature of this book.

Orsodimondo says

TERRA DI CONFINE

Pubblicato nel 1960, cinque anni prima di "Stoner", e ambientato intorno al 1870 tra Kansas e Colorado, tra prateria e montagne, "Butcher's Crossing" è il romanzo western per antonomasia, il paradigma del western, tutto quello che ci si aspetta da un western.

"Open Range-Terra di confine" il bel film western del 2003 diretto e interpretato da Kevin Costner.

In più c'è l'enorme talento di questo scrittore, che non spreca parole e neppure le lesina, le cerca con precisione che rimane nascosta, le organizza con perizia e pacatezza, con potere evocativo e incredibile capacità descrittiva: e fa centro, come un grande tiratore, come i migliori cacciatori di quell'epoca. In questo modo, un western diventa una storia mitologica, mistica, archetipica, senza tempo, universale.

Questa come quelle che seguono sono immagini della celebre scena di caccia al bufalo del film "Balla coi lupi" diretto e interpretato da Kevin Costner nel 1990, vincitore di ben 7 premi Oscar.

Un libro che avrebbe potuto non finire mai, la trama, per quanto ben strutturata, non è certo l'asse portante, l'obiettivo principale.

Un libro che avrei voluto non finisse mai.

Un romanzo che potrebbe anche essere migliore di “Stoner”: ma si tratta di due capolavori, difficile dire quale vince, è una bella lotta.

La prateria, gli zoccoli, i fili d'erba, gli argini di fiumi e torrenti, la pelle che si arrossa e indurisce, i muscoli dei cavalli, le ruote del carro... la sete, la fatica, il caldo, la sensazione di essere al capolinea... l'approdo, il focolare, il whiskey e il caffè, come si arrota un coltello e come si prepara una cartuccia, come si costruisce un recinto o un capanno, come si lega un cavallo... e poi la caccia... la natura prevedibile e quella imprevedibile, la natura mite e quella selvaggia...

E con la stessa pacatezza Williams racconta un massacro, una lunghissima scena d'apocalisse, piena di sangue e polvere, come se fossimo nelle trincee della Prima Guerra Mondiale.

Il sogno di Miller è forse di essere più grande di dio? Perché, questi cacciatori sembrano interessati quasi più ai sogni che alla selvaggina, sono dreamhunters, la caccia è soprattutto a quello che sembra irraggiungibile...

Da Ulisse in poi lo sappiamo bene, il vero ritorno a casa è impossibile: la Butcher's Crossing che ritrovano è molto diversa da quella che hanno lasciato, non solo perché il tracciato della ferrovia è stato spostato 50 miglia più in là e non toccherà più l'abitato, non solo perché la pelle di bisonte non ha più acquirenti...

Il ventenne protagonista, probabile discepolo di Ralph Waldo Emerson, citato in epigrafe, ha lasciato Boston, il mondo civilizzato e ordinato, ha lasciato l'università di Harvard, per cercare un'altra scuola e per scoprire il West, la frontiera, per scoprire se stesso.

Capisce che la natura da e toglie, proprio come la vita – che fare l'amore è più facile del previsto: le sue scoperte sono tante, ed enormi, ma non sono sicuro che riescano a racchiudere tutta la sua solitudine, e la sua inquietudine.

Dopo Melville, prima di Cormac McCarthy, Williams sa costruire un romanzo di formazione, e un romanzo epico, con la stessa tranquillità e naturalezza dell'artigiano che ha compiuto gli stessi gesti da sempre, e col talento degli artisti.

Cathrine ?? says

5★

In his third year at Harvard, Will Andrews leaves his studies to go west. After hearing a lecture by Ralph Waldo Emerson his quest is to find and experience his **“unadulterated self.”** The year is 1873 as he arrives in Butcher's Crossing Colorado. He decides to fund a buffalo hunt as a way **“to see as much of the country as I can. . . I want to get to know it.”** I picture that scene in *Dances With Wolves* when the character played by Kevin Costner relates that he wants to see the West before it is all gone, and then later when he and his tribal friends come upon the scene of buffalo slaughtered for their hide and left to rot. As Michelle Latiolais writes in her excellent introduction, **“Andrews seeks the wilderness so the he can be 'a part and parcel of God, free and unconfined’; what he will later encounter in nature is more akin to the malice of an Old**

Testament God.”

Later as he participates in the greedy slaughter of five thousand bison he **“did not know who he was, or where he went.”**

John Williams, author of another favorite of mine *Stoner*, gives us a harrowing, unadulterated, and unromanticized vision of unchecked United States westward expansion, pillaging, and slaughter. This is not the glorified version of *How The West Was Won* which so many still cling to today and it's a part of our collective soul as a nation. It was a tough read. I'm always saddened by the epic tragedy of what happened to our native tribes and the animal they so desperately depended upon. But I'm pleased that this masterful writer gave us this authentic American western novel.

To end on a positive note, as I was nearing the conclusion (so grateful for the timing here), a 90 second video by The Nature Conservancy popped up in my newsfeed about continuing efforts to reestablish these magnificent beasts to the plains. This is in recognition of President Obama's signing of bipartisan legislation naming the bison America's 1st national mammal on May 9, 2016 (link below). Perhaps this will insure that they never appear on the extinct species list.

<https://www.facebook.com/GetHistoryNo...>

Patrick says

I enjoyed this sparse and dark novel set in Kansas and Colorado in the period after the Civil War. Strong characterisation and very atmospheric. This is *Moby Dick* brought to a rapidly changing American West. A precursor to the novels of Cormac McCarthy.

Ken says

Penned in 1960, John Williams' *BUTCHER'S CROSSING* anticipates and in many ways eclipses Cormac McCarthy's western works because it not only nails the rapacious greed of the buffalo hunters it describes, it reaches for more abstract and troubling themes that go to the very essence of man and his place in the world.

Will Andrews, the protagonist, is but a 23-year-old preacher's son when he shows up in *Butcher's Crossing* with money and a dream in hand. He winds up payrolling a buffalo hunt to a hidden valley known only to a hunter named Miller. Along with his whiskey-swilling, Bible-thumping driver, Charley Hogue, and a sardonic skinner named Schneider, Miller leads Will and the others across the spectacular western landscape to their fates in a land of milk, honey, and blood. Along the way, you are treated to some fine nature writing, such as this:

"For a long time after he had bedded down, Will Andrews listened to the silence around him. For a while the acrid smell of the smothered pine log's burning warmed his nostrils; then the wind shifted and he could no longer smell the smoke or hear the heavy breaths of the sleeping men around him. He turned so that he faced the side of the mountain over which they had traveled. From the darkness that clung about the earth he lifted his gaze and followed the dim outlines of particular trees as they rose from the darkness and gradually gained distinctness against the deep blue cloudless sky that twinkled with the light of the clear stars. Even with an extra blanket on his bedroll, he was chilled; he could see the gray cloud of his breath as he breathed the sharp night air. His eyes closed upon the image of a tall conical pine tree outlined blackly against the luminous sky,

and despite the cold he slept soundly until morning."

The hunt scenes and the constant personal battles between the fire of Miller and the ice of Schneider give the book its brutal punch and provide the richness from which the theme will grow as the narrative grinds to its relentless conclusion. It's no coincidence that Miller's name is one letter away from "killer." An Ahab of the Mountain Valleys, Miller knows his prey so well that the beasts stand no chance. The blood and gore are smeared upon the entire party, and though Will spends one memorable scene in a freezing cold river trying to scrape it off, it is as much a legacy to each individual as is Lady Macbeth's stained hands.

Of course, despite being master of the bison, even Miller cannot subdue nature, and nature collects her due -- abundantly, as is her wont, when human folly and greed allow. The simple yet epic depictions of the fall and winter, of how frail these four men are in the face of it, and of their struggle to return with their furred fortunes, are both appalling and gripping.

In addition to the moral issues, Williams plays the coming-of-age card as well, constantly using darkness and light with their ancient, metaphoric grips on our imaginations and fears. Here Will listens to the frightful rantings of a merchant named McDonald:

"Well, there's nothing,' McDonald said. 'You get born and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies in school. You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you -- that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done. Only you ain't done it, because the lies told you there was something else. Then you know you could of had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only then it's too late. You're too old.'

'No,' Andrews said. A vague terror crept from the darkness that surrounded them, and tightened his voice. 'That's not the way it is.'"

Let's see: a literary western with great writing, realistic and rich descriptions, epic characterization, deep and disturbing themes, coming-of-age angst, and the audacity to flirt with the meaning of life.

If you've got the patience for the long ride out and the long ride back, you might want to deal in. And if you hate westerns, consider it a morality play set in the west and move them doggies out....

Jeffrey Keeten says

"You get born, and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies at school. You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done. Only you ain't done it, because the lies told you there was something else. Then you know you could of had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only then it's too late. You're old."

Will Andrews bought into the Manifest Destiny rhetoric of Horace Greeley, *Go West, Young Man!* The year is 1873. He has three years of education at Harvard and to throw off the yoke he feels settling around his young shoulders he decides to head to Kansas. His father, a Unitarian Minister, gives him the name of a man he knew named McDonald as a person who might be able to help him settle in out west. If the father had known what a **den of iniquity** that most of Western Kansas was at this point he might not have been so encouraging of his son to head West.

Butcher's Crossing is a hide town. A town that exists only as a central point for Buffalo hunters to bring their hides for sale and to drink and get their ashes hauled. McDonald is the buyer of hides and he is buried in paperwork. He tries to hire Andrews to help him in the office, but Will did not come West to sit behind a desk. He asks for directions to a reliable Buffalo hunter. At one time there were millions of Buffalo stretching from Canada to Mexico, but after decades of slaughter their numbers have greatly diminished. By 1873 the large herds numbering in the thousands have been broken up into small pockets of a hundred or less. The meat is left to rot and the hides are being sent back East to be made into coats. Later the bones of the deceased Buffalo are picked up off the plains and ground into fertilizer.

Large Mound of Buffalo Bones

It was an eradication of a species on an epic scale.

The numbers of Buffalo today have come back from the brink of extinction. There are about 200,000 Buffalo being raised for the parks service and for meat. They are such a majestic animal and it truly would have been tragic if they had disappeared forever.

My Great Grandfather Ashley Joseph Ives in his Buffalo coat.

Andrews finds Miller and provides the cash to supply one last great Buffalo hunt. Miller had seen a large herd numbering nearly 3,000 a few years before in a valley in the Colorado mountains. It has always been his dream to go back. Andrews also meets Francine, a prostitute from St. Louis who was tired of all the competition in Missouri and liked that she could pick and choose her customers in this small backwater town in Kansas. Andrews, except for a furtive few moments with a willing cousin has very little experience with women.

"He pulled away from her a little to look at her soft heavy body that clung to him like velvet, held there of its own nature; there was a serenity on her face, almost as if it were asleep; and he felt that she was beautiful. He was assailed by the knowledge that others had seen this face as he was seeing it now; that others had kissed her on her wet lips, had heard the voice he was hearing, had felt the same breath he was feeling upon his own face, now. They had quickly paid their money, and had gone, and others had come, and others. He had quick and irrational image of hundreds of men, steadily streaming in and out of a room. He turned, pulled away from her, suddenly dead inside himself."

As they journey to Colorado Andrews discovers how unprepared he is to do this much riding and this much work for this many long hours, finding himself beyond bone tired, so tired he can barely remember who he is.

"Day by day the numbness crept upon him until at last the numbness seemed to be himself. He felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape; sometimes one of the men would look at him, look through him, as if he did not exist; and he had to shake his head sharply and move an arm or a leg and glance at it to assure himself that he was visible."

They find the Buffalo.

They kill the Buffalo.

They reduce a herd of 3,000 down to a few hundred.

I was rooting for the Buffalo. I wanted a stampede, or any intervention that would wreak vengeance upon the

hunters for their greed.

Buffaloes can reach speeds of 35mph.

"At night, when the two of them rode wearily out of the valley to the small red-orange glow that marked their camp in the darkness, they found Miller slouched darkly and inertly before the fire; except for his eyes he was as still and lifeless as one of the buffalo he had killed. Miller had even stopped washing of his face the black powder that collected there during his firing; now the powder smoke seemed a permanent part of his skin, ingrained there, a black mask that defined the hot, glaring brilliance of his eyes."

I know people who hunt and I know people who kill. There are those that go out to hunt for a specific purpose and there are those that go out to kill anything that is moving. I've walked along the river that flows through my family property after people have been through there shooting squirrels, birds, and rabbits, not to eat them, but just for the sport of it. Everything is silent, a condemnation of our failed stewardship colors the air. There is something inherently missing in people who choose to treat life this way. I used to hunt with my friends and family and then I shot my first deer soon after turning 15 and that was my last time. I walked up to the dying deer hidden by the grass. He had looked so large when he had stared across the field at me and in death looked so tenderly small sprawled on the ground. The stain was larger than the gain.

I sold my rifle.

To keep a herd from running away you have to kill their leader first.

"The buffalo passed their wounded leader, and ran beyond him some three hundred yards, where their running gradually spent itself, and where they stood, milling uneasily about. The old bull stood alone behind them, his massive head sunk below his hump; his tail twitched once or twice, and he shook his head. He turned around several times, as another animal might have done before sleeping, and finally stood facing the two men who were more than two hundred yards away from him. He took three steps toward them, and paused again. Then, stiffly, he fell on his side, his legs straight out from his belly, The legs jerked, and then he was still."

That bull had fought off all his competitors. He'd won the right to inseminate and pass along his bloodline to the next generation. He stood between his herd and every threat that nature could throw at him. *"The old bull carried thick scars on his sides and flanks that could be seen even at a great distance."* A bullet fired from a man two hundred yards away that he couldn't even see exploded through his chest cavity, punching through both his lungs, drowning him with his own blood, and he didn't even get a chance to fight.

The hunting party stayed too long in the mountains, greed overrides common sense, and nature comes calling.

Many more trials and tribulations await the less than heroic characters that populate this novel. John Williams is a wonderful writer. His book Stoner is one of the best books I've read in a long time, so despite this being a subject matter that I find particularly distasteful the writing was superb. This is an epic western with all the grandeur of inspiring descriptions of the landscape and the wonderful character sketches of the rough and tumble people who for a time made their living on the plains of Kansas. They cleared the land for the farmers and the ranchers that were coming close behind them. My Great-great Grandfather Thomas Newton Keeten came to Kansas in the 1880s, so he was part of the migration of farmers who settled after the near eradication of the Buffalo and the Indians had been "pacified". He broke the sod, built a house, helped form the Methodist church that I was baptized in, and is buried in the cemetery among the bones of the Buffalo.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Marita says

Is the sighting of large herds of buffalo on a hidden track nine or ten years previously good enough reason to set off on a buffalo killing expedition? Miller thinks so, and young Andrews is keen to join, and he needs no persuading to both invest money and join as learner skinner. But this is no simple adventure story.

Why is Miller, leader of the expedition, so obsessed with finding this herd and killing every single bison in it? Why does the fanatically religious Charley tag along almost against his will? What is it that compels Schneider the master skinner? What is it that Will Andrews, newly arrived from Boston is looking for? These are Will's thoughts early in the novel: *"But whatever he spoke he knew would be but another name for the wildness that he sought. It was a freedom and a goodness, a hope and a vigor that he perceived to underlie all the familiar things of his life, which were not free or good or hopeful or vigorous. What he sought was the source and preserver of his world, a world which seemed to turn ever in fear away from its source, rather than search it out, as the prairie grass around him sent down its fibered roots into the rich dark dampness, the Wildness, and thereby renewed itself, year after year."* What will the expedition bring? During the course of their travels Andrews often reflects on his reasons for being there: *"Before, his eyes had remained for most of the time fixed upon Miller's back; now they strained into the distance, toward the uneven hump of earth, now sharp, now blurred, upon the far horizon. And he found that he hungered after them much as he had thirsted after the water; but he knew the mountains were there, he could see them; and he did not know precisely what hunger or thirst they would assuage."* and *"... he looked upon himself, and did not know who he was, or where he went."* What will Andrews discover about himself and his partners?

John Williams takes us through the minutiae of their journey, with magnificent descriptions of the landscape, the agony and exhaustion of the men, the contented sound (or not) of the livestock and at times the silence. Beauty and horror exist side by side here. Stupidity and greed take over as Miller obsessively decimates the vast herd as if they were goldfish in a bowl. Piles of corpses are left rotting and stinking. But that is not all that is rotten... And then it seems that nature itself steps in to avenge the mass slaughter.

This is a thought provoking novel, and words that kept popping into my head were 'arrogance', 'stupidity', 'greed', 'futility' and 'illusion'.

Photo: My own from a visit to the Badlands in South Dakota in 2000.

Tony says

People, here and elsewhere, are agrief over the most recent national election. A common question is, "How could this happen?" For the handful of people who are not asking that question rhetorically, I could reply "I don't know" or I could attempt a lengthy answer about how the choice meant different things to different people, different oxen being gored. I'd never finish the longer answer. In the unlikely event that the first or second explanation didn't cause a disagreement, eventually ennui would set in, because, really, the explanations would never end. It would be like asking "What is an American?" Maybe like this . . .

Four men head west. It's Miller's plan. He thinks he knows where one of the last great herds of buffalo is, hidden through a pass in the Colorado Rockies. With him is Charley Hoge, one-handed, with a need for

whiskey and his well-worn Bible, but useful and loyal. Schneider, too is along, a cold, dark presence, a skinner, sharpened distrust. And lastly is Will Andrews, with three years of Harvard in him and bankroll enough. Andrews is searching for . . . something. He doesn't know what.

Three of them are on horses, with Charley Hoge on the cart harruping the oxen. Only three horsemen, but their journey will be apocalyptic enough. Miller turns Ahab-like, determined to erase the entire herd. Till Schneider stops, as if he has heard a distant thunder. The killing stops; the men look upward. And there: the first snowflake.

All their bloodlust, all their hubris; but they have miscalculated. They have gotten in, but they can not get out.

Some hold that the writing of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a prophecy. And not a rosy one. Butcher's Crossing was published just as the first troops were landing in Vietnam. I read this as more troops are in Afghanistan mountains. The miscalculation need not be precisely prophesized when the lesson is universal. Nor, I think, is the allegory limited to War.

What was Andrews searching for? Another character, McDonald, tells him this:

"Well, there's nothing. . . . You get born, and you nurse on lies, and you get weaned on lies, and you learn fancier lies in school. You live all your life on lies, and then maybe when you're ready to die, it comes to you-that there's nothing, nothing but yourself and what you could have done. Only you ain't done it, because the lies told you there was something else. Then you know you could of had the world, because you're the only one that knows the secret; only it's too late. You're too old."

Andrews protests.

"You ain't learned, then," McDonald said. "You ain't learned yet. . . ."

As I was saying, some of you have asked, "How could this happen.....?"

And having nothing to do with this book or review.....

R.I.P. Leon:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbUwk...>

Carmo says

Que motivação pode levar os homens a deixarem-se reduzir aos instintos mais básicos?

O que leva o homem a desafiar os elementos, a arriscar a vida com uma faca no bolso?

Que prazer, que satisfação, que desejo secreto o leva à matança selvagem, até não restar mais nada?

O apelo do desconhecido?

Testar todos os limites? De sobrevivência, de força, de coragem?

Para provar o quê? Que o homem é um eterno solitário, que a demanda em busca de um sentido para a vida pode ser a essência da própria vida?

Ou então, para chegar ao fim, sentir a vida a escapar-lhe entre os dedos e perceber que nada fez sentido?

Foi uma leitura feita ao ritmo de uma montanha russa.

Adivinha-se, pressente-se a tragédia naquela persistência insana. Depois, quando menos se espera vem a calmaria, relaxamos, respiramos de alívio e embrenhamo-nos na paisagem, na pacatez da pradaria...

Não dura muito, rapidamente e sem aviso somos arrastados para mais um turbilhão; às vezes surpreendentemente belo, outras simplesmente aterrador.

E pensamos sempre que o homem, o ser humano racional, é o mais misterioso e indómito dos animais.

Só queria ter mais livros de John Williams para ler!

Betsy Robinson says

In the 1870s, Will Andrews, a young man fresh out of three years at Harvard College, travels west and, with a band of hunters, heads further west in search of buffalo because he is seeking Nature (intentional capital “N”).

Andrews felt that the mountains drew them onward, and drew them with increasing intensity as they came nearer, as if they were a giant lodestone whose influence increased to the degree that it was more nearly approached. As they came nearer he had again the feeling that he was being absorbed, included in something with which he had had no relation before; but unlike the feeling of absorption he had experienced on the anonymous prairie, this feeling was one which promised, however vaguely, a richness and a fulfillment for which he had no name. (106)

This is the best description of my experience reading this book that I can imagine.

I am a vegan. I don't proselytize; I feed my dog meat and am grateful that there are people who are willing to slaughter the lambs so that she can eat them. But I'm most comfortable living in a way that causes the least amount of harm to other sentient beings. So it was with some discomfort that I decided to read about a buffalo hunt. I won't lie. It was difficult. I felt sick to my stomach reading about the preparations to slaughter—for their hides—an entire herd of animals, trapped in a valley. But I kept reading because I trust that if John Williams wrote it, it's about more than violence. But that was another reservation—my trust is almost reverential: I so revere his book *Stoner*—I've read it twice and am now in the process of studying it chapter by chapter—that, in a way, I was nervous about being let down.

There is no let-down in *Butcher's Crossing*. The man writes with a pure life energy and depth of understanding, along with skill, flawless technique, and such visceral descriptions that, for a lot of this book I was in pain. Just when I thought I could not physically endure what I was feeling during the killing, there came relief:

During the last hour of the stand he [Andrews] came to see Miller's destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood or a lust for the hides or a lust for what the hides would bring, or even at last the blind lust of fury that toiled darkly within him—he came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to the life in which Miller had immersed himself. And he looked upon himself, crawling dumbly after Miller upon the flat bed of the valley, picking up the empty cartridges that he spent, tugging the water keg, husbanding the rifle, cleaning it, offering it to Miller when he needed it—he looked upon himself, and did not know who he was, or where he

went. (137)

A transcendent point of view of the horror of disconnection from Source—a disconnection that is a particular malady of non-Native people; this was a White man's hunt and slaughter and devaluing of or blindness to life.

And after the evening of butchery, just when I thought I might throw up, an understanding of the horror:

It came to him that he had turned away from the buffalo not because of a womanish nausea at blood and stench and spilling gut; it came to him that he had sickened and turned away because of his shock at seeing the buffalo, a few moments before proud and noble and full of the dignity of life, now stark and helpless, a length of inert meat, divested of itself, or his notion of its self, swinging grotesquely, mockingly, before him. It was not itself; or it was not that self that he had imagined it to be. That self was murdered; and in that murder he had felt the destruction of something within him, and he had not been able to face it. So he had turned away. (151)

I've never been a terribly athletic person or one who is drawn to daredevil activities, but I understand the spiritual journey of "using yourself up" and thereby experiencing your essence. Although I find quite enough uninvited pain in just living, I understand the draw of everything from Outward Bound survival experiences to the Native American Sundance—where people go to their physical limits and maybe even beyond. But in all these rituals, the pain is experienced by the person who chose it: there is the risk of death, bearing unbearable pain. In Williams's *Butcher's Crossing*, yes, the men endure the violence of nature and weather and hunger and thirst. But the real violence is what they wreak on others—from the horses and oxen who serve them to the hundreds of buffalo they slaughter for (SPOILER) no apparent purpose other than the ritual of it.

I read the last thirty pages of this book in a state of breathlessness. How would this end? My worst fear was that it would turn into a romantic noble cowboy fantasy. Then, when Andrews joined with a woman, I worried that it would devolve into some pat message about balanced male/female energies. Neither of those things happened. I will not spoil the ending. It is not a warm, comforting message, but it is true. My faith and trust in John Williams are validated.

Jessaka says

"A cold wind blew across the prairie when the last buffalo fell..... a death wind for my people."
~~Sitting Bull

They came down into valley, and the buffalo herds were moving darkly over the land like waves on the ocean. The men slowly moved in on them. The first shot went to kill the leader of the herd, more shots would follow. My mind stopped. The buffalo just stood there in wonder of what was going on, and one by one they were killed.

Zoeytron says

The bright flare of a match, the creaking of saddle leather, and the mournful lowing of the oxen. The smell of scorched coffee permeates the air, joining the stink of buffalo hunters too long on the trail. Later, the confusion of the herd is rampant amidst the air made hazy and heavy by gun smoke. The force of nature takes its toll, as it always will. The horror of the elements, and the sheer beauty.

I searched for this book based solely on the fact that the author is the man who penned **Stoner**. Ended up finding a copy at an out-of-state library, courtesy of Mobius. After reading, I had to stifle a snort at the tag on the spine of the book. It sports a label categorizing it as a Western and topped with a picture of a cowboy hat. This novel is so much more. The author is a veritable virtuoso with his deceptively simple writing.
