

Summer 2004

Book Review: "A Yellowstone Reader: The National Park in Folklore, Popular Fiction, and Verse" edited by Richard L. Saunders

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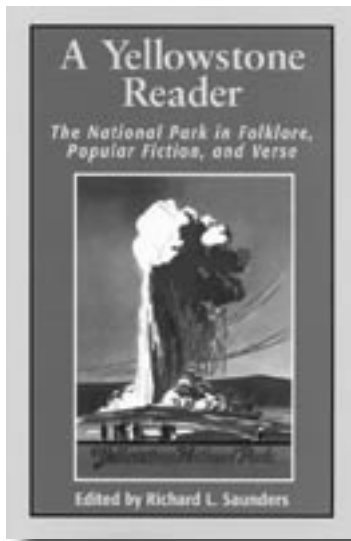


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Publication Information

Hert, Tamsen (2004). "Book Review: "A Yellowstone Reader: The National Park in Folklore, Popular Fiction, and Verse" edited by Richard L. Saunders." *Yellowstone Science* 12.3, 28-28.

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BOOK REVIEW

A Yellowstone Reader: The National Park in Folklore, Popular Fiction, and Verse

Edited by Richard L. Saunders

Tamsen Hert

(Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Press, 2003. xv plus 309 pages, notes, indexes. \$17.95 paper.)

YELLOWSTONE. Thousands of articles and books have been written documenting its history. Hundreds of guidebooks lured travelers to Wonderland through the years. Most publications describe the park as it was, and is. A small fragment of published materials, however, are fictional accounts of this place. In *A Yellowstone Reader*, Richard Saunders has compiled a remarkable anthology of folklore, verse, and novels examining 130 years of Yellowstone fiction.

Saunders chose examples that “illuminate distinct periods in Yellowstone’s cultural history of tourism,” and works “that even an interested reader would find difficult to secure in the original.” Many libraries, however, do have copies of some of even the rarest titles.

The anthology is divided into four chapters. The first, “Folklore and Verse,” includes selections from Jim Bridger’s tall tales and Charles Van Tassell’s “Truthful Lies of Yellowstone Park.” The second chapter, “Novels and Series Fiction,” includes the dime novel “Diamond Dirk; or the Mystery of the Yellowstone.” Published in 1878, this is one of the earliest and rarest examples of fiction set in Yellowstone.

Chapter three, “Short Stories,” uses material by well-known authors of their time—Emerson Hough, Owen Wister,

and Douglas H. Thayer. While other publications can be difficult to locate, short stories can be even harder to find.

The fourth chapter is an annotated bibliography. The book concludes with two indexes: subject and character, and author. A combined index would probably have been more convenient for readers. Also, there are some characters that are not in the index.

For each piece reproduced in the book’s main section, Saunders provides not only the bibliographic citation but also some background on the author. In some cases, he places the material in a historical context. The discussion of each work is amply end-noted and many times provides explanations about geysers, park policies, or definitions—material that a reader unfamiliar with Yellowstone will find most useful. I only identified one mistake in his notes—the Fountain Hotel did not close in 1909, but operated through 1916, and was razed in the mid 1920s.

Anyone with an interest in Yellowstone will want to read this anthology. The visitor will enjoy descriptions of touring the park in an earlier era, while the Yellowstone faithful will seize the opportunity to learn more. For those providing instruction about the park, it will be useful in courses in American studies, American history, and literature. It will also be beneficial to librarians and archivists who maintain collections of Yellowstone publications.

One of its shortcomings is the lack of illustrations. Cover images showing

how the original work appeared would have enhanced each entry. Also, a comprehensive list of libraries (including a contact name) holding Yellowstone fiction collections would have been useful to the interested reader and researchers.

Identifying Yellowstone fiction is not easy. In most libraries, works of fiction are not classified by geographic location. This anthology provides a good starting point in identifying those materials. As time progresses, new titles will be written and other works will be discovered, and these will be added to the body of literature Saunders is calling Yellowstone fiction.

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Tamsen Emerson Hert holds Master’s degrees in American history and library science. She is the Wyoming bibliographer at the University of Wyoming Libraries, where she is also responsible for the Grace Raymond Hebard Collection. She has been doing research in Yellowstone for over 10 years and is working on a history of the park’s hotels, lodges, and camps with park historian Lee Whittlesey.