

CENTENNIAL by James Michener

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When I was about ten years old, I used to spend Saturday mornings at the movies. For a quarter I could see three feature films and a whole flock of cartoons. I remember those mornings with fondness, the theater littered with howling kids and mounds of popcorn, the hours flickering past with the tall striding forms of Rory Calhoun, Johnny Weismuller, and Van Johnson. We came to cheer heroes and boo villians. We wanted no personality development, no subtleties. We demanded Action--that is, plenty of gunfire and heroism, and the sidekick for comedy relief. No girls--for goodness sakes, no girls. Love scenes made us slide down in our seats and reach around for our popcorn. We really did say things like, "Oh, mush!"

I recalled all this as I read Centennial by James A. Michener (New York: Random House, 1974), a generally excellent historical novel about the West. Here is the trapper, the cowboy, the shoot-out; here is the stolid farmer and his sensitive and suffering wife; here is the noble Indian, the drought, the English gentleman, and the wagon train; here is even the beaver, the horse, and the rattlesnake. It's as though all the characters of my childhood were herded together and passed in review.

Yet, despite the cliches, the book is generally fun and worthwhile. Starting when the earth was formed eons ago, and touching most significant developments since then (like the coming of animal life and the appearance of each new generation of settlers), Michener has put together what is sometimes pompously called a panorama of America. Michener is a marvelous storyteller. He makes you feel the exhaustion of the little female beaver building a dam for her young, or the loneliness of the trapper isolated six months a year. As a whole, the book (over 900 pages) may be the best introduction to the history of the West. Through the six or eight generations of characters, one acquires a vague sense of what it was like--and perhaps that's what history is all about.

(Advice: If you do read it, skip the first section--about 75-100 pages--and the last one of two sections.)