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Winter November, 2016

# Dreaming of Idaho: Illuminating the Literature of Idaho through Zane Grey's Thunder Mountain

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**Dreaming of Idaho: Illuminating the Literature of Idaho through Zane Grey's *Thunder Mountain*.**

Odds are that most Idaho writers did not grow up dreaming of becoming an "Idaho" author. Smart money would assume they simply desired to write, and be prosperous in writing, and geographic location played no part in their decision to put pen to paper. However, readers often like to associate authors with geographic regions. This is because the work either contains elements of that region within its content or the author has some connection to the area through birth or place of residence. Idaho readers are no different in that regard, embracing writers such as Vardis Fisher or Mary Hallock Foote. While "Idaho author" may seem like a simple concept to define, it is actually a nuanced literary construction. For example, Ernest Hemingway is often considered an Idaho author but he is also claimed by many other states and places around the world. This essay will examine what goes into making a writer an Idaho author. This undertaking will use Western genre novel writer Zane Grey's 1932 novel *Thunder Mountain* which is set in Idaho to examine this literary exploration. *Thunder Mountain* is a fictionalized telling of the Idaho mining camp of the same name.

What is our collective fascination with the fictions and truths of the West and by extension Idaho? Robert Penn Warren tapped into something true when writing about a character briefly seeking solace in the physical and metaphorical West in *All The King's Men* (1946).

*"For West is where we all plan to go some day. It is where you go when you get the letter saying: Flee, all is discovered. It is where you go when you look down at the blade in your hand and see blood on it. It is where you go when you are told that you a bubble on the tide of empire. It is where you go when you hear that thar's gold in them-thar hills. It is where you go to grow up with the country. It is where you go to spend your old age. Or it is just where you go. (p.286)"*

But this Robert Penn Warren character is only a visitor to the West -- an interloper or outsider --

defining what the West is for us.

Zane Grey's *Thunder Mountain* might certainly be viewed in the same way towards its description of Idaho. *It* is a fictionalized telling of the Idaho mining camp of the same name. The story centers on a rough and tumble cowboy from Missouri turned miner, who garnered his reputation in Montana. He takes under his wing a tenderfoot father and daughter from out East and helps interpret the wild west of Idaho for them. Ironically, this outsider interpretation for others of Idaho, its landscapes and experiences, is reminiscent of many writers who live in and write about Idaho. Grey was not from Idaho, nor did he live here. *Thunder Mountain* is his only significant work with a setting in Idaho. So then, is Grey's interpretation of Idaho an accurate one? Is this Idaho literature?

Grey was known to write formulaic novels. Ronald (1975) describes the Zane Grey formula in this manner.

*"An Easterner - that is, an innocent - arrives in the West. He, or she, has been a failure in the past and seems unprepared to meet the challenges ahead. The land at first seems harsh and unforgiving - the sun is too hot, the canyons too deep, the peaks too rugged, the rivers too swift. Problems are compounded by the appearance of evil, of men who live by their guns and who care nothing for the rights of others. Gradually, however, the neophyte becomes a man. Rather than be beaten by the environment, he learns to conquer the elements, and in doing so acquires a deep appreciation for the land. (p. 13)*

*Thunder Mountain* definitely follows this familiar plot-line but Ronald also notes that "(m)ost important, the Zane Grey formula is an outgrowth of the author's personal experiences, a reiteration of his own journey to the frontier" (Ronald, 1975 p.13). Grey did indeed experience Idaho as he journeyed to the remote area around Thunder Mountain on a multi-day horse packing trip. This trip served as the basis of inspiration for the rich descriptions he includes in *Thunder Mountain* such as this description along a canyon in the Salmon River:

*"Somehow it had induced lingering hours of happy reverie, to which he had long been a stranger. The place was down around the bend from the valley, where a bench of sage nestled under a great wall. The melodious murmur of the stream came up; the warm sun beat down; the sweetness of sage almost intoxicating; the solitude was omnipresent; and across the canyon a tremendous broken slope as many-sided as that mountain*

*could boast. Long glistening slants of talus, rugged narrow defiles winding up, grassy benches fringed with fir, huge sections of splintered cliff hanging precariously, and patches of black lodge-pole lines stepped endlessly to the blue sky (p.15)."*

This trip has been documented in at least two articles (Kimball 1973; Waite 1996) and each approach this trip through the eyes of an Idahoan marveling at the otherness of Zane Grey with his fancy saddle and Japanese cook that accompanies him. Despite the otherness of Zane Grey's camping provisions, it could be argued that Grey did indeed experience Idaho and this experience is found with the surprisingly descriptive prose of *Thunder Mountain*. Ronald (1975) notes that Grey had once stated "My inspiration to write has always come from nature. Character and action are subordinated to setting (p.14)." Ronald concurs but suggests alternatively that "Character and action are not subordinated to setting, but rather are developed by it. The three work together, with setting providing the impetus for change (p.14-15)." As setting plays such an important role in the development of Grey's work, it could then be thought that the setting of Idaho is the primary protagonist in *Thunder Mountain* since, as Ronald suggests, it is the vehicle which not only drives the plot but also initiates change in the characters. From this angle, *Thunder Mountain* is indeed a book about Idaho and should be embraced heartily as part of its literature.

However the geographic Thunder Mountain itself serves as its own warning against accepting Grey's interpretation without considering some additional complexity. A historical treatise on the mining camp: "Many stories have been written about Thunder Mountain... most of them all too strongly embellished with fiction in an effort to make them more interesting, even though most of these (are) fictional efforts on the part of authors, (they) destroy the true concept this historical attraction (Willson, 1962, p.3-4)". One wonders what these fictions of Thunder Mountain might inform about Idaho itself. How does Idaho fare as an attraction in the fiction of Idaho? How true... how fair... how real are these works to Idaho? Could the creators of these "fictional works" rightly be called Idaho authors? Or is Idaho simply a setting for these writers?

Another historical work frames Thunder Mountain in these terms: “Thunder Mountain had a romantic name anyway: acting as a sounding board for lightning which danced off nearby Lightning Peak, that somewhat inconspicuous mountain offered legend writers a welcome opportunity to display their talents (Oberbillig & ISHS, 1966, p. 8).” While these historical works are referring to the mining promotional material regarding Thunder Mountain, they still ring true with the concept of Idaho and the West as places of both fictions and inspiration.

In suggesting that *Thunder Mountain* is Idaho literature, we must examine its reception in Idaho. Idaho libraries and their collections are potentially good barometers as to how to categorize various literature. Libraries require concrete definitions in order to catalog, shelve, and locate materials in their collections. These gray areas in the definition of what is an Idaho author, such as those presented by *Thunder Mountain*, present a challenge for libraries in collection development, presentation, and organization of materials. Patrons often ask for works by Idaho authors and good reader’s advisory practices would have libraries provide resources to identify such writers. In developing these resources, libraries have constructed definitions and subject headings as to what an Idaho author or work might be.

The Boise Public Library maintains an Idaho Room Collection that houses materials related to Idaho that is primarily non-fiction. A summary of their collection policy is that the Idaho Room Collection will contain:

*“All published materials about Idaho in general are collected, with a specific emphasis in selected categories on material relating to Southwest Idaho or in some cases the Boise area only... With the exception of the works of a very few prominent Idaho writers such as Vardis Fisher and Mary Hallock Foote, fiction is not collected.”*

It is very interesting to note that the collection contains fiction such as works by Vardis Fisher and Mary Hallock Foote. This indicates that there must be some additional Idaho criteria to make it into that collection as a fiction writer. Unfortunately, neither *Thunder Mountain* nor Zane Grey meet this criteria as the work is not found within the Idaho Room Collection. Ironically, a

work about Zane Grey's trip to visit Thunder Mountain (Waite, 1996), and another about Thunder Mountain itself (Willson, 1962) are both found within the Idaho Room Collection<sup>1</sup>. So perhaps Thunder Mountain makes the cut but *Thunder Mountain* does not?

Despite not being found in the Idaho Room, *Thunder Mountain* is available in Boise Public Library's main collection as Zane Grey is a popular writer of the Western genre. Looking closely at the record in the catalog, one sees the subject heading "Idaho-Fiction" associated with this work<sup>2</sup>. This subject heading is also found in the Worldcat record for this work.<sup>3</sup> So on the one hand, *Thunder Mountain* falls under the subject Idaho-Fiction but on the other does meet the criteria of being authored by a prominent Idaho writer per the Idaho Room Collection policy.

This two-tiered collection of Idaho literature is very similar to that of Albertsons Library at Boise State University. Albertsons Library maintains an Idaho materials collection. However instead of separating by nonfiction and fiction, Idaho works are gathered by author or content.

The library maintains a research collection of [Idaho materials](#). This collection provides information about Idaho, and supports research for Boise State University faculty and students, as well as for the local community. Monographs of 49 or more pages, about Idaho, by an Idaho author, and/or published by a "small press" in Idaho, are collected, with these exceptions: documents, cookbooks, and genealogy and consumable materials. An Idaho author is defined as a person who was born in Idaho and/or is living in Idaho at the time of publication. The library also maintains a selective collection of State and Federal publications, compact discs and videos that are significant in documenting the history, culture and environment of Idaho.

(<https://library.boisestate.edu/about/colldev/>)

*Thunder Mountain* is found both within Albertsons Library's Idaho research collection, as well as in the main collection of circulating materials. So while Zane Grey might not be considered an Idaho author by birth or residence, *Thunder Mountain* still meets the criteria to be included

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<sup>1</sup> Search undertaken 6/28/2016 at <http://www.boisepubliclibrary.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Search undertaken 6/28/2016 at <http://www.boisepubliclibrary.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://uidaho.on.worldcat.org/oclc/1279105?databaseList=638>

under the subject heading of Idaho-Fiction, as well as found within the Idaho research collection at Albertsons Library.

While it is hard to say if the inclusion of *Thunder Mountain* in these libraries is due to its geographic setting in Idaho or because of the popularity of Zane Grey in general what can't be disputed is that Grey experienced Idaho and attempted to reflect that experience within its pages. Experience should not be discounted and perhaps is one of the most important criteria to describing what Idaho literature is. In his book *The Literature of Idaho: An Anthology*, Maguire (1986) attributes a quote to author Wallace Stegner about what might make legitimate writing which is that those authors "had one great virtue in common: they knew what they were talking about." (p. 134). It could be argued that Grey 'knew what he was talking about' in his fictionalized story of *Thunder Mountain* because he translated his Idaho experience within its pages.

I would argue that the best criteria for someone to be considered an Idaho author or a work to be considered Idaho literature is *experience*. This is both a collective and individualized experience. Literature helps develop the identity of the reader, by the reader either accepting or rejecting each work as "Idaho" based on their own individual and complex notions of what makes Idaho... Idaho. Sometimes these notions are tangible experiences while others cannot easily be articulated; yet the reader can still distinguish the "Idaho-ness" of what they are reading through the reflection of their own lives. An author not only reports in their work on a moment in Idaho but keeps and reinforces what Idaho is, and perhaps what it could be in a reader's mind.

Blew (1999) writes about the community of authors in Idaho supporting each other through the common undertaking of simply writing in Idaho. For this community of writers there was no "aboutness" regarding their work only they shared a common understanding of what it was to be an author in the West.

This commonality, trust, and acceptance are also shared with their readers. You are a

reader in Idaho; reading a book about Idaho; by an author with some tie to its content or place. Idaho is a land of communities, communities of writers, communities of readers, a community of literature, which all work to define what is Idaho. Book, author, and reader form their own community and the strength of this union depends on the common bonds and boundaries between all three. If Idaho becomes one of these bonds, or a bridge to mutual meaning, then a work, and its author should be considered "Idaho". This connection to Idaho is based on mutual understanding, experiences, and trust. If, for example, you read Anthony Doerr's Boise-based short story "For a Long Time This Was Griselda's Story" from *The Shell Collector* (2002) but did not trust the historical veracity of the material based on your own experiences and understandings, perhaps then the connection between author, reader, and work, is tenuous. There is little commonality for the reader to build from or categorize that work for the reader. Thus for that reader, the work is not Idaho enough to be included within the category of Idaho literature.

This sort of reader assessment is a perfectly acceptable criterion for what is Idaho literature, because like the West, the definition of Idaho literature remains slippery. Lyon describes "(o)ur image of the West was prone to a certain dreaminess (1999, p.1)". Our certain dreaminess of the West, indeed... for perhaps it is our certain dreaminess of what is Idaho that is what we truly use to define Idaho, its literature and its authors. I have often heard it said, whether rightly or wrongly, that you cannot consider yourself a true speaker of a foreign language until you begin to dream in that language. Perhaps this premise is true also for Idaho authors (maybe even its readers too) - You can't consider yourself an Idaho author until you begin to dream of Idaho or inspire others to dream of Idaho. That is what true Idaho author should be, someone whose work allows us to look and dream of Idaho in new and true ways through different eyes. To put it simply, Idaho literature is that which illuminates Idaho for the reader. The works that allow us to dream and understand Idaho in richer and deeper ways, are those of the true Idaho author.



So is *Thunder Mountain* Idaho literature? In my estimation it most certainly is. As such is the case then so can its author, Zane Grey, be counted as an Idaho author, for *Thunder Mountain* is a portal for the reader to dream and wonder and ultimately discover Idaho for themselves.

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