Southwesterns

New York Times

Southwesterns
By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN
New York Times (1923-); Dec 24, 1978; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. BR5

Southwesterns

THE RAWHIDE KNOT AND OTHER STORIES

By Conrad Richter.
205 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $8.95.

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

WILLA CATHER, in her little-known "April Twilights," wrote some excellent verses about "the old West, the old time," when olive-skinned sheepherders on the Southwestern plains still sang the songs of Spain. Who, having read it over twice, could get Miss Cather's poem about Spanish Johnny and his mandolin (he played it while waiting to swing for a murder) out of his mind and memory? But Willa Cather unfortunately deserted this part of her frontier heritage when she came to write her novels. She celebrated the settlers, not the mobile frontiersmen who went before them.

The field was left to the good-guy, bad-guy authors who used to beguile President Dwight D. Eisenhower when he couldn't sleep nights in the White House. The formula was always the same: In the shoot-out at high noon the good guy invariably prevailed. What we needed, but never seemed to get, was some realistic appreciation of the tangled bloodiness of the Kit Carson frontier, in which human good and evil were often inextricably mixed in characters who had to stifle any nascent feelings of guilt in order to satisfy the simplest requirements of staying alive.

One man, however, was fitted to deal with the old West, the old time, on terms that would have made sense to westward-going Americans before they could afford to have guilt feelings about what the spreading white civilization was about to do to Comanches, Kiowas and Sioux and the buffalo they lived on. He was Conrad Richter, author of "The Awakening Land," the celebrated Ohio trilogy that carried the story of Middle West pioneer stock out of the forests and into the fields and the towns of the middle America of the mid-19th century. In a foreword to his posthumously published "The Rawhide Knot and Other Stories," Richter's daughter Harvena tells of her father's latter-day fascination with the New Mexico he moved to in middle age. Applying the same standards to stories of the early Southwest that he had used in his novels about the Eastern forests, Richter wrote five tales about the days of Bent's Fort and the Santa Fe and Chisholm Trails. They are published in "The Rawhide Knot" along with three stories of earlier frontiers in Appalachia and Ohio.

Richter doesn't moralize — he would neither endorse nor object to the slogan that the only good Indian is a dead Indian. The pioneers, whether in the days of the French and Indian War or on the desert range of the Chisholm Trail, had to take Indians as they came. Sometimes the Indians were savage innocents who would willingly accept beads and tobacco and brandy in return for privileges granted in sharing a largely empty land. At other times they were ravening wolves. It was "we or they" in Richter's tales about Pennsylvania farm women who had to take axes or knives to Indian marauders in order to protect their more squeamish menfolk who might have preferred death to incurring blood guilt. Frontier wives were simple people: They regarded their clearings as property in the 17th- and 18th-century Lockean sense, as something that belonged to them because they had mixed their labor with fields wrested from the woods. What we tend to forget is that there were no fixed land titles in a pioneer America inhabited largely by nomads. Morality about land tenure came after the surveyors had parceled out a turf that belonged for the immediate moment to whatever tribe happened to be camping upon it. To the frontiersman, the white tribe had equal rights of access with the red tribes. And if there had to be a fight about it, then let the best man win.

Survivability was the test, and courage was the characteristic most prized in Conrad Richter's world. As Richter's daughter notes, violence, cruelty and harshness were necessary to the conquest of new lands. Marriage and death come paired in the Southwestern stories called "Early Americana" and "The Flood," and in the Pennsylvania tale of "The Dower Chest." Marriages were seldom romantic: Women and men took their mates as circumstances and availability dictated.

Pervading Richter's stories is a sense of the transient. His Frank Gant had no compunctions about defending his Southwestern range against Spaniard or Apache. Right or wrong, his squat adobe house on the San Blas plain belonged to him because he had willed it so. He dealt with territorial governors, brass-buttoned Army officers, Mexican dons and hungry Apache and Navajo chiefs like a patriarchal potentate. When the railroad came, with his daughter's heart claimed by a railroad capitalist, he had suddenly to rationalize his sense of being greatly wronged. The railroad had no business in a desert region that should not be confused with "farming country like Kansas." Kansas was a "new country," the desert Southwest was "old," a land in which white people had been present for hundreds of years without ever getting very far with farming. It was immoral for the Southwest to "go in debt with bonds and buy railroad stock with the money."

But the railroad builders had just as much a right of pre-emption as the sheepherders and the cattlemen. Richter makes no judgment. He simply tells it as it was. If people are going to survive and multiply, they will respect neither the nomadic life nor the economy of the unfenced range.

Richter was a born storyteller. The short stories in "The Rawhide Knot," some of which ran in the Saturday Evening Post, contain the shapes of his novels in greatly condensed form. The rhythms come from the singsong of native expression, as when a pioneer father is depicted as "self-willed and opinionated as a pignut hickory" or when the indentured woman Jess tries to tell her pacifistic Amish man Ashael that an Indian armed with a tomahawk has a "soul black as the pots of hell." These are the rhythms of our Homeric age. The Willa Cather of "April Twilights" would have approved. ■

John Chamberlain, a former book critic of The New York Times, is the author of "The Enterprising Americans" and other books.

Thomas S. Buechner in his foreword to **THE ARTS OF DAVID LEVINE** (Knopf, $25) says that Levine's paintings and drawings until now have been kept apart. But one rushes through the paintings here to see not only the gents to the right but Picasso as bull, Buckley as rodent, a tarted-up Susan Sontag, Robert Frost's mad eye gleaming, and — oh, gorgeous! — Dulles as Frankenstein's monster. The attractive, derivative paintings are interesting mainly because they were done by a caricaturist of genius.

Giuseppe Verdi.

William Shakespeare.

James McNeill Whistler.