

## COMMENTARY

*The Big Sky* (1947)



A[lfred] B[ertram] Guthrie

(1901-1991)

“Guthrie got his first job as a printer’s devil on the *Choteau Advocate* in Montana. In 1926 he went to Lexington, Kentucky, where he worked on the staff of the *Leader* for twenty years, finally becoming executive editor. His first novel, *The Big Sky* (1947), earned an immediate critical and popular success. It treats the era of the 1840 mountain men with a mingling of realism and poetry, and gives a faithful and fascinating picture of Indian life in American literature. Although Guthrie was born in Indiana, his family moved to Montana when he was still an infant, and his love of the West is a rich part of his history and his writing. In 1949 he won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Way West*, which describes the passage of a small emigrant train over the Oregon Trail in the middle months of 1847. Here the mountain men appear again. Guthrie also wrote *These Thousand Hills* (1956), a novel of Montana, filmed in 1958, and *The Big It* (1960). He won an Oscar for the screenplay *Shane* (1953). [*The Big Sky* is] a carefully researched novel about pioneer life...a realistic and persuasive story of the ‘mountain men,’ living and fighting and loving with the Indians. Like the Indians, these men are vengeful, sensual, cruel.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 85, 414

“In writing *The Big Sky*, Guthrie used many of the standard historical sources dealing with the 1830s and 1840s. He ransacked the works of travelers like Nathaniel J. Wyeth and Washington Irving, as well as the writings of later historians, such as Hubert Howe Bancroft and Hiram H. Chittenden. The writer he seems to have followed most was George Frederick Ruxton, an Englishman who traveled extensively throughout the frontier West. Guthrie may have borrowed much of his trapper talk and perhaps some of his characters from Ruxton’s semifact, semifictional work, *Life in the Far West*.

But *The Big Sky* is much more than the scissors-and-paste product of Guthrie’s reading and research in western history. He shapes incidents, scenery, and characteristics to fit his thematic concerns. Guthrie once remarked, after finishing his first two novels, that his major thesis was that man kills or destroys the things

he loves most. *The Big Sky* illustrates this theme in several ways. Boone Caudill, the major character in the novel, kills his best friend and destroys his marriage to an Indian girl because he mistakenly thinks they have been sleeping together. Besides specific incidents that epitomize Guthrie's thesis, the entire novel deals with the seeds of destruction the trappers bring to the mountains.

They love the out-of-doors and sense a new freedom and exhilaration in their occupation. At the same time they strip the Rocky Mountains of its beaver, kill more meat than they are able to use, and exhibit wanton wastefulness in their yearly rendezvous. Boone realizes the destructiveness of his life, as well as that of his companions, when near the end of the novel he tells his friend that they have 'spiled' the mountains and that he does not want to return."

Richard W. Etulain  
"Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration"  
*Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*  
ed. Anthony Arthur  
(G. K. Hall 1982) 150-51

Michael Hollister (2015)