

A READING LIST for the PRESIDENT-ELECT

A Western Primer for the Next Administration

in which, the **Rocky Mountain Land Library**
asks a handful of the West's most insightful writers:

What Western books would you urge on the next inhabitants of the White House? What do they need to know about our region, and where can they find that information, inspiration, and guidance?

Clearly, no one person has all the answers to the challenges facing our region, or to the perils facing the planet at large. But it is important to acknowledge just that, and begin to learn from more diverse sources of tradition, knowledge, and inspiration.

The Rocky Mountain Land Library asked a simple question to a panel of Western writers: What books would you urge upon the next President? What does the next administration need to know about the American West?

Our respondents were both generous, and inspired, with their remarkably diverse recommendations. I'm sure they would all agree with Rick Bass, when he wrote: "Anything I recommend would be freighted with its omissions." But that may present an opportunity: great books and worthy authors await our further discoveries.

As partial redress to this list's inevitable omissions, the Rocky Mountain Land Library has surreptitiously added its own list to the books recommended below. In lieu of a full respondent biography, you will find critical titles and/or references that any White House Librarian needs to share with the next administration. The writers who built our reading list all have critical stories to tell. You will see that their work forms the core of the expansive Western primer we all need.

We wish the President-Elect well, for all the challenges he will face. And we hope the new administration knows, in its heart, that it doesn't need to have all the answers. There's benefit, and joy, in learning.

Jeff Lee, director
Rocky Mountain Land Library



A Resource Linking Land and Community

www.landlibrary.org

Laura Pritchett

—author of the novel **Sky Bridge**, and editor of **Home Land: Ranching and a West That Works**

Dear President-Elect,

To get you in the right mood for the job ahead, I suggest you start by reading **Truck: A Love Story** by Michael Perry. You won't stop laughing for weeks and you'll be endeared to the West and some of its unruly inhabitants. Immediately following I would read any of Rick Bass' works — either his fiction or his non — for the sheer humanity and grace. **The Lives of Rocks** is a good choice, as is **The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness**, and then, perhaps, if you could, you could finally protect his beloved Yaak Valley in upper Montana. That would be great. Next up: For its wisdom and clarity, I hope you'll read Linda Hasselstrom's **Between Grass and Sky** and then Alexandra Fuller's new book, **The Legend of Colton H. Bryant**. Good to know about the land and what's being done to it. **Resistance** by Barry Lopez and **Plainsong** by Kent Haruf (both fiction) and **Where the Rivers Change Direction** (nonfiction) by Mark Spragg would be next on my list of recommended reading to you. You'll just flat-out enjoy these, and they'll take your mind off your own woes by entralling you with other people's woes. Then you could tackle something like Patty Limerick's **Something in the Soil**. In between these selections, you could always pick up a poem by one of my favorite poets, Aaron Abeyta. Finally, I'd like to ask you to read the authors in **Pulse of the River: Colorado Writers Speak for the Endangered Cache la Poudre**, and then help us do just that — protect our rivers and our West. Thank you, President-Elect, for being the readerly type and for guiding our country (and the West) into a clearer-headed, kinder version of itself. Good luck.

Stanley Crawford

—garlic farmer, novelist, and author of the memoirs **Mayordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico** and **A Garlic Testament: Seasons on a Small New Mexico Farm**

Water: A Natural History, by Alice Outwater, is the one book I would thrust into the hands of the next President. Dealing with the primordial users and manipulators of water, from beavers and buffalo to prairie dogs, fresh water clams and mussels to alligators, Outwater's elegant survey describes the ecological baselines that so much of human activity has destroyed, disrupted, or diverted — and generally ignored. Natural systems worked: they stored water, built soil, cleaned waste, prevented erosion. There are useful lessons here for the reconfiguration of human systems, which so often have depleted groundwater, washed away soil, and which have failed massively to deal with waste products. This is a book I'm sure the beavers and buffalo and prairie dogs and alligators would all heartily approve of.

Teresa Jordan

—artist, rancher, author of **Riding the White Horse Home: A Western Family Album**, and co-editor of **The Stories That Shape Us: Contemporary Women Write About the West**

Toward a Nation That Works

For the Next President: Some Lessons from the Rangeland Conflict

The rangeland conflict among ranchers, environmentalists and land agencies has been one of the most brutal disputes in the contemporary West. Today, however, successful models of collaboration and restoration show us a way to create healthy land and vibrant communities not only for the West but also for the nation at large. Please, Mr. President, start with the just-released **Revolution on the Range: The Rise of a New Ranch in the American West** by Courtney White, which provides an up-to-the-minute overview of what works. Other essential reading includes two books by Daniel Kemmis, **Community and the Politics of Place** and **This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West**; **Beyond the Rangeland Conflict** by Dan Dagget and Jay Dusard; and **Working Wilderness: The Malpai Borderlands Group and the Future of the Western Range** by Nathan Sayre.

Stephen Trimble

—photographer, and author of **The Sagebrush Ocean: A Natural History of the Great Basin** and **Bargaining for Eden: The Fight for the Last Open Spaces in America**

To understand the big Western issues, our new President must grapple with public lands, tribal sovereignty, aridity, and the clusters of urban sprawl and amenity-based resort towns that construct a New West archipelago on top of the Bedrock West.

Start with Wallace Stegner, our wise elder, and **Marking the Sparrow's Fall**, a collection of his best essays edited by his son, Page. If the President needs further convincing about the importance of aridity, see **Cadillac Desert** by Marc Reisner. For one final case study about the consequences of hubris and denial (useful lessons after the Bush years), see **Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California** by William deBuys and Joan Myers.

That the West is rural is now a myth. **Atlas of the New West** by William Riebsame is ten years old, but lays out the facts of this changing landscape and introduces two crucial commentators, Patricia Limerick and Charles Wilkinson. For more of Patty Limerick, move on to **Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West**. For Wilkinson, start with **The Eagle Bird: Mapping a New West**. Mark Klett photographs the ideas in these books by matching historic photos with his wry modern eye: **Third Views, Second Sights: A Rephotographic Survey of the American West**.

For a range of authentic western voices and visions, read **This House of Sky** by Ivan Doig; **Who Owns the West?** by William Kittredge; **The Anthropology of Turquoise** by Ellen Meloy; **Storming the Gates of Paradise** by Rebecca Solnit; and, for one complicated and eloquent Indian voice, **From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which is Our America** by Simon Ortiz. This list is a tiny sample from a shelf of books that sing truly of the American West.

William deBuys

—author of **River of Traps: A New Mexico Mountain Life** and **Valles Caldera: A Vision for New Mexico's National Preserve**

A Prospective Presidential Reading List

Edmund Morris, **The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt** — on the power of the Presidency.

Wallace Stegner, **Sound of Mountain Water** and **Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs** — essays on the spirit and character of western lands.

Marc Reisner, **Cadillac Desert** — the all-important story of water.

Jefferson Morganthaler, **The River Has Never Divided Us** — simply the best book on the border.

Charles Wilkinson, **Crossing the Next Meridian** — still relevant because we are still crossing.

Leslie Marmon Silko, **Ceremony** — for someone with time for only one novel.

Peter Barnes, **Capitalism 3:0: A Guide to Reclaiming the Commons** — how to protect common interests in the West (or anywhere).

Tim P. Barnett, et al., “Human-Induced Changes in the Hydrology of the Western United States,” Science DOI: 10.1126/science.1152538, published online January 31, 2008, and/or Richard Seager, et al., “Model Projections of an Imminent Transition to a More Arid Climate in Southwestern North America,” Science 316 (May 25, 2007): 1181-1184 — fearsome challenges lie ahead as the arid lands grow more arid.

Brookings Institution, Metropolitan Policy Program, “The Intermountain West: America's Mega-Urban Future,” July 2008. — a surprising, even shocking, glimpse into the crystal ball of regional growth.

Dan Flores

—historian, and author of **The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains** and **Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest**

For a grasp of human nature applicable to the West: Robert Wright's **The Moral Animal** and William Kittredge's **The Nature of Generosity**. For an understanding of deep-time continental history and what the fate of previous empires in the American West can teach us: Charles Mann's **1491**, Jared Diamond's **Collapse**, and David Stuart's **Anasazi America**. For a sense of the career of the greatest public servant in western history, Donald Worster's **River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell** (for which slot I somewhat reluctantly replace Wallace Stegner's **Beyond the Hundredth Meridian**, the perennial favorite on Powell). For a critical look at how an activist federal government might tackle a great environmental crisis: Worster's **Dust Bowl**, and Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy of global warming novels, **Forty Signs of Rain**, **Fifty Degrees Below**, **Sixty Days and Counting**. For the best modern understanding of western history as it was lived: Richard White's **It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own**. And for a crystal ball into the West as it might play out, Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars novels, **Red Mars**, **Green Mars**, **Blue Mars**.

Char Miller

—historian, author of **Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism**, and editor of **Water in the West**

To help Barack Obama or John McCain get up to speed on several key issues confronting the modern American West, I'd suggest they (and their staff), read: Robert Gottlieb, **Reinventing Los Angeles** (an innovative examination of how to green urban society); Nancy Langston, **Where Land and Water Meet** (a primer on the bewildering context of land-management policies); Char Miller, **Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism** (forgive me, but conservationist Pinchot's activism explains many of our contemporary dilemmas); Stephen Pyne, **Tending Fire** (superb analysis of new approaches to fire management); Luis Alberto Urrea, **Across the Wire** (a brilliant depiction of immigration's human face); Robert Wilshire, et al., **The American West at Risk** (a comprehensive exploration of resource issues imperiling our future); anything by Rebecca Solnit, Terry Tempest Williams, Richard Nelson, and Rick Bass (because they're our most insightful and inspired nature writers); *High Country News* (they consistently publish the nation's best environmental reporting).

Jenny Shank

—novelist, and book editor for the online *New West* (www.newwest.net), one of the West's best sources for literary news, interviews, and book reviews

Death Comes for the Archbishop by Willa Cather

Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness by Edward Abbey

Winter in the Blood by James Welch

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

Woman Hollering Creek by Sandra Cisneros

Dakota by Kathleen Norris

In the Loyal Mountains by Rick Bass

Plainsong by Kent Haruf

Close Range: Wyoming Stories by Annie Proulx

Gallatin Canyon by Thomas McGuane

Michelle Nijhuis

—winner of the Walter Sullivan Award for Excellence in Science Journalism, her work appears in several journals, including *Orion*, *Audubon*, and *High Country News*, where she serves as contributing editor

Books for the Next President

The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl by Timothy Egan and **Bad Land: An American Romance** by Jonathan Raban: Two voices on how and why hoaxed homesteaders busted the limits of the Great Plains — and how their legacy influences the West.

Tortilla Curtain by T.C. Boyle: A biting, necessary novel about race and class relations in southern California.

The Devil's Highway: A True Story by Luis Alberto Urrea: The human consequences of U.S. border policy, by a master storyteller.

The Wild Trees by Richard Preston: A terrific scientific adventure, and a reminder that wildness endures in the West.

Neither Wolf Nor Dog by Kent Nerburn: A painfully honest conversation between a white man and a Lakota elder.

The American West as Living Space by Wallace Stegner: No one describes the region's wonder and wrongheadedness quite like Stegner. This little book of lectures distills his views.

Linda Hasselstrom

—rancher, poet, author of **Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher**, and co-editor of **Leaning Into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West**

High Country News: The president should subscribe, or read the online magazine regularly in order to see the best, broadest, deepest, and most objective reporting on all sides of issues affecting the West.

Daniel Kemmis, **Community and the Politics of Place**: Kemmis is a practical politician whose ideas are not mere theory, but evolved while he was creating community as mayor of Missoula.

Dan Dagget, **Beyond the Rangeland Conflict**: As an environmentalist, Dagget dived into the conflicts over land with ranchers, and discovered practical solutions that brought people together to preserve resources, rather than creating animosity and loss.

Wendell Berry, **Another Turn of the Crank**: Wendell Berry has been writing about the importance of local economies, locally produced foods, and related topics throughout his life. All his books provide insight, but this one is so succinctly applicable to the precise problems we face today that it may be his best. And that's in spite of the fact that he's not from the West.

Marc Reisner, **Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water**: If anyone has written a better summation of the water problem, I haven't seen it.

Kirkpatrick Sale, **Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision**: In these days of subdivisions, polluted imported food, climate change, rising energy prices, Sale's vision of bioregionalism seems even more applicable than it did 20 years ago.

Iroquois League of Six Nations, **The Great Law of Peace of the People of the Longhouse**: The Great Law, developed before whites arrived on the continent, outlines a system of government in which men, women, and nature are all respected, playing strong and independent roles in social, political, and economic life, with citizens holding the primary power. The president, and particularly some of his Washington comrades, may need a reminder that this law served as one of the bases of our own democratic philosophy.

Barry Lopez

—writer of fiction and nonfiction, author of **Of Wolves and Men**, and co-editor of **Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape**

The American West and the American South have served the United States admirably as the country has sought a national identity, a way to represent itself to other countries. They have done this by contradicting the nationalized versions of America that are promulgated by the country's jingoists in government and business and by its mass media, which feeds too frequently on the bankrupt imagery of America as a tolerant melting pot and the world's avatar and savior. The literatures of the West and the South have resisted eloquently the homogenization that a "national character" or a "national geography" imply. The forceful voice of resistance in the West has come, in our lifetime, from the likes of Wallace Stegner (**Beyond the Hundredth Meridian**), Patricia Limerick (**The Legacy of Conquest**), Marc Reisner (**Cadillac Desert**), and Cormac McCarthy (**The Border Trilogy**), revisionists all. I would ask members of the next administration to peruse such writers, perhaps beginning with John Unruh's **The Plains Across**, not so much to be better informed about the American West but to rediscover the primacy of the local in American life. It is the integrity of the regional voice, and the constant need to reconcile the voices of the country's many distinct regions, that will make us memorable as a civilization, not the marketing of one voice for all.

George Sibley

—educator, essayist, and author of **Dragons in Paradise: On the Edge Between Civilization and Sanity**

What should the next president read for a "Western States Primer"? If he were to have time to read only one book (thinking realistically), it should be Wallace Stegner's story of John Wesley Powell's attempt to wake up the federal government about the West, **Beyond the Hundreth Meridian**. Stegner lays out beautifully the tragic-comedy that occurs when the back-East colonizers meet the out-West boomers with a few intelligent humans (Powell) trampled in the middle. After that, if he wanted to go lighter (a little), I'd recommend A.B. Guthrie's whole unfolded saga of the slow death of the West that begins with **The Big Sky** (1947) and wraps up with **The Last Valley** (1975). And if he wants to go heavier, I'd recommend Richard White's great **It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West**. Beyond that — I don't want to overwhelm the guy; if he works his way through either the light or heavy track there, he'll know enough to feel guilty about what he'll probably think he has to go ahead and do anyway.

Rick Bass

—author of the novel **Where the Sea Used to Be**, and editor of **The Roadless Yaak: Reflections and Observations About One of Our Last Great Wild Places**

Anything I recommend would be freighted with its omissions, but for profiles in courage, read Doug Peacock's **Grizzly Years** — the story of post-war healing in the wilderness — and Terry Tempest Williams' **Refuge**, which, like **Grizzly Years**, gets at the heart of the intensity — the spirituality — that exists between westerners and the land, regardless of whether all would call it that. John Graves' **Goodbye to a River** for its elegiac sweetness and incredible land-wrought language, **Song of the World Becoming** — poems by Pattiann Rogers, anything by McCarthy, but most topically, **The Road**; anything by Tom McGuane and Jim Harrison, **Angle of Repose** by Wallace Stegner, **Desert Solitaire** by Edward Abbey. **Last Stand** by Richard Manning, to better understand Montana (and Western) politics. **Plainsong** by Kent Haruf, to celebrate decency. **An Unreasonable Woman: A True Story of Shrimpers, Politicos, Polluters, and the Fight for Seadrift, Texas** by Diane Wilson, to celebrate valor. And so many more — I'd love to say more.