
B.M. (Bertha Muzzy) Bower and the Erasure of Women's Westerns

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Abstract

"For about 40 years, B.M. Bower was a leading author of popular westerns in the United States, whose sales were rivaled only by Zane Grey. She published an average of two novels a year in addition to numerous short stories, which appeared in both "respectable" hardcover format, and as short stories and serial novels in the pulps. The humor and satire that have long been a part of the popular western tradition can be traced to Bower, but she also deserves credit as a founder of the anti-western. She depicted a complicated, modern west whose inhabitants drive automobiles as often as stagecoaches, and grapple with such "modern" social ills as domestic violence and alcoholism. Despite attempts by her daughter and granddaughter to publish her biography, Bower is virtually unknown today, while the careers of her male counterparts have been well-documented. In this paper I want to trace the material relations that structured Bower's erasure. In particular I want to challenge naturalized accounts of the western as a man's genre that women could only access by masquerading as men. In fact, popular western authorship in the early 20th century was far more negotiable than is commonly assumed: women like Vingie Roe, Katharine Newlin Burt, Lupe Loya, Muriel Newhall, Cherrie Wilson, and others, published popular westerns, and they did not have to adopt male pseudonyms to do so. But, as in so many domains of human activity, their contributions were largely unrecognized because they lacked forms of power enjoyed by their male counterparts. Using Bower's unusually rich archive as a resource, my paper will argue that a lack of access to certain gendered forms of power undermined Bower's reputation both during her lifetime and after her death."

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