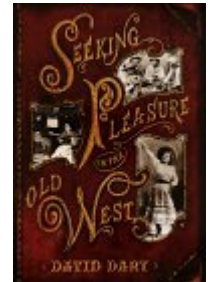


**David Dary.** *Seeking Pleasure in the Old West*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. 352 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-394-56178-3.



**Reviewed by** Kathleen R. Winter

**Published on** H-PCAACA (May, 1996)

*Seeking Pleasure in the Old West* follows David Dary's *The Buffalo Book* (1974), *Entrepreneurs of the Old West* (1986), and *Cowboy Culture* (1989) in describing the lives and times of the early explorers and the pioneers of the westward frontier in the nineteenth century. The joys and hardships of their journeys have been diligently researched and written about in the past few decades, in books such as Dee Brown's *The Gentle Tamers* (1958), John Unruh's *The Plains Across* (1979), and Glenda Riley's *The Female Frontier* (1988), and many original journals and diaries have also been published. Dary's book draws on Unruh's work and other sources, including some unpublished manuscripts, to illuminate for the reader the methods of "seeking" and obtaining pleasure and the various forms of entertainment that were available.

Dary intertwines facts with anecdotes and quotations from journals in chapters that cover early explorers and travelers; mountain men; native Americans; river travelers and citizens of towns and cities along the rivers; emigrants and homesteaders; soldiers; the populace of prairie towns, the desert southwest, and the pacific

northwest; miners; and railroad builders. One chapter, devoted to "Western Pleasure Palaces," describes the Pullman and other luxury railroad cars as well as exclusive hotels and resorts.

Dary's writing is clear and direct, and his use of specific information and details makes for enjoyable reading. We are reminded of the prevalence of drinking, gambling, and whoring in the Old West—which is not new information, but Dary adds poignant and realistic views to the scenes. In one such tableau he describes how, in 1869, a post trader at Ft. Hays, Kansas, raised an orphan buffalo calf that learned to love beer, a treat amply provided by the clientele. The calf was often drunk. The animal's antics, including climbing on the billiard table, which would alarm and offend most "save the animals" activists of our time, provided hilarious pleasure to the people of that region and time. Other examples of entertainment that Dary includes are social bees, picnics, chivarees, play parties (a chaperoned gathering of young people for games and songs), dances, and the formation of town bands. Music played a prominent place in frontier life.

Dary includes lyrics from some songs and square dances, and rules for monte and euchre, popular card games. Some of the unexpected forms of pleasure he describes are the messages the pioneers left for others along the trails; packages and gifts sent from families and friends in the East; civil and criminal trials; hangings; and practical jokes, including the ever-popular snipe hunts; and badger-baiting for unsuspecting visitors. One of the benefits the reader can derive from reading this book is a greater understanding of the individuality of experiences yet the commonalities of these people.

The reader is also aware, however, of a narrow focus on the male, European experience. Except for the chapter on Indians, the brief mention of the "Negro" bands and singers on steamboats, and the descriptions of Mexican fandango dances and balls, Dary does not discuss pleasures for other cultures or for women. He does include some children's games and pastimes. Although Dary gives much information about prostitutes, including names, such as Squirrel Tooth Alice, Peg-Leg, and Cotton Tail, and about the red-light districts where these women might be found, he does not describe for us the kinds of pleasure the prostitutes engaged in outside of their "occupation." A few places in the book were repetitious in the information provided, most notably the discussion of chivarees (pp. 162, 168). The repetition, too, of the phrase "found pleasure" became bothersome after the first few chapters, and the reader feels this could have been varied in some way.

Dary's earlier book, *Entrepreneurs of the Old West*, provided a simple map of trails of 1860 and the railroads of 1900 on the inside front and back covers. Similar maps would have helped this book, especially for the neophyte of the "Old West" era. The Afterword, though interesting, ends with the notion of "modern pleasure providers" and "seekers" and raises the question of whether or not modern pleasures are "satisfying." The last few paragraphs seemed irrelevant to

the rest of the book, as did the last sentence: "Whether or not the changes are for the good will be answered by generations to come."

Many journals and diaries, as well as secondary sources about the explorers and settlers of the nineteenth century, are replete with the drudgery and toil of traversing and settling a harsh country; Dary's book extends our view of the daily lives of these people. The research and writing are sound. For someone new to this subject, Dary's book might be an enjoyable way "into" this historic period--especially because of the individual and specific accounts. The endnotes and bibliography are adequate and will be helpful for those who want to do further reading and research. Such research and a future book about the pleasures of the time from the point of view of women, African Americans, and other cultures would round out our knowledge about these people and this era.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

**Citation:** Kathleen R. Winter. Review of Dary, David. *Seeking Pleasure in the Old West*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. May, 1996.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=445>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.