



# Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860

*Richard Slotkin*

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In *Regeneration Through Violence*, the first of his trilogy on the mythology of the American West, Richard Slotkin shows how the attitudes and traditions that shape American culture evolved from the social and psychological anxieties of European settlers struggling in a strange new world to claim the land and displace the Native Americans. Using the popular literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries—including captivity narratives, the Daniel Boone tales, and the writings of Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville—Slotkin traces the full development of this myth.

## Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860 Details

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# From Reader Review Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860 for online ebook

## James Murphy says

Regeneration Through Violence is an in-depth study of the ways in which the literature of the American frontier created and supported mythologies arising out of the westward movement from the earliest colonies till the 1850s. His study traces the significant ways American myth has changed as popular responses to the frontier have changed. The earliest Puritan settlers saw the wilderness before them as a vision of hell populated by demonic Indians and transmitted their message by way of the sermon. As settlements moved west the constant contact with Indians and frequent confrontation were responsible for many settlers, especially women and children, being carried into captivity. The literature resulting from this was the popular captivity narratives and their emphasis on the return of those carried off and their hope of redemption. After the Revolution came deeper penetration into the wilderness and the advent of the hunter myth such as stories we associate with Daniel Boone and Cooper's Leatherstocking characters in which the attitudes of settlers favored being more like the Indian and adopting his belief that by using the fundamental resources of the wilderness--trees for building and animals for food--one is renewing the self. Slotkin completes this study, the 1st of 3 volumes, with analyses of how Thoreau's *Walden* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* are examples of the extension of the hunter mythology. Through it all the wilderness is seen as the symbol of the primal states of nature and of human consciousness. But always, Slotkin explains, our relationship with the Indians is the identifying characteristic of American history. Settler and Indian coexistence evolved from the Puritan fear of them as hellish demons to a wary alliance with them during the period of the captivity narratives to eventually arrive at the idealized heroes like Boone and Deerslayer who strive to reap the newly-realized rewards from the wilderness, those of self-renewal or self-creation through the violence of the hunt. So the mythology of the frontier moves from Puritan attempts to save the Indians to personal redemption to a regeneration of the wilderness by its destruction. He concludes this volume by showing how America has used these myths throughout its history and in the shaping of a national character, even to how it contributed to attitudes about the Vietnam War, just ended when this volume was published. This is brilliant grand interpretive history and criticism.

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## Tristram says

### Lonely Hunters Without Hearts?

Which is prior? An idea or a social reality, and how can the one be used to account for the other? Personally, whenever I read works on cultural history, I often wonder how scholars can allow themselves to be led up Hegelian or even more labyrinthine French post-modernist garden paths in that they fail to see the interaction of mind and matter and, in reaction to Marx's dictum of men's social being determining their consciousness, rather simply have it the other way around.

Richard Slotkin's highly impressive study *Regeneration Through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier: 1600 – 1860* is an honourable exception to this one-sidedness in cultural history in that Slotkin not only insists on man being a myth-making animal and the power of myths to shape social reality, but also shows how the reality in which men see themselves contributes to these mythopoetic processes. It was this link between the myth and its breeding-grounds that made *Regeneration Through Violence*, despite some odd mumbo-jumbo passages, e.g. in connection with Thoreau, such a rewarding experience for me.

Slotkin starts with the assumption that a society that does not know the essence of its own myths and their social functions is doomed to re-living its history and to making the same mistakes all over again. Slotkin sees, at the core of American culture, the concept of finding personal and social regeneration in an act of destroying what one has set out to redeem or to improve. He begins his analysis with a close look at Puritan society and its members' claim to having been elected by God through a process of serious self-probing and -exploration. In their desire to hold their ground against their European contemporaries, who often regarded them as living too close to the Indians, who were seen as "savages", the Puritans went to great lengths to distance themselves from the wilderness without – i.e. the unexplored land and its autochthonous inhabitants – as well as from the wilderness within – i.e. the desire to explore what lay beyond the Puritan community. One of the means of doing so were the captivity narratives, which featured individuals that had to face the temptation of throwing off the confines of civilization and of becoming "Indian" and that overcame these temptations with the help of their belief in God and of being proponents of civilization. As time went by, even the Puritans had to renege on their policy of self-isolation and to undertake forays into the wilderness in order to preserve their communities. One of the new ideals was the Indian fighter, who adopted the ways of the Indian in order to be able to defeat him. Nevertheless, learning from the Indians imbued more and more of these Indian fighters with a sense of sympathy for the natives – a development that endangered the Puritans' concept of themselves –, whereas simultaneously the need for hero figures arose, and one of the results of these developments was the genesis of the hunter myth.

Indian tribes like the Delaware relied on the hunter myth as the core of their creation myth: According to their legends, their forefathers lived beneath a lake, and one day a hunter followed a hind on her way to the surface, where he finally hunted her down and killed her. After he had eaten of her flesh, he realized the bounty of Nature and the gods and made his people follow him from their subterranean dwelling-places to the surface. The hunter myth became an important motif in Western literature, e.g. in the Daniel Boone myth, but since the white men did not share the complex traditions of the Indians, they lacked the sense of self-confinement – e.g. the limitation to hunting and killing for the sake of preserving themselves –, and the experience of the hunt became, for them, a means of proving their prowess and their ability to improve and therefore to take over the land. At this point, it might be best to quote from Slotkin himself:

*"Believing in the myth of regeneration through the violence of the hunt, the American hunters eventually destroyed the natural conditions that had made possible their economic and social freedom, their democracy of social mobility. Yet the mythology and the value system it supported remained even after the objective conditions that had justified it had vanished. We have, I think, continued to associate democracy and progress with perpetual social mobility (both horizontal and vertical) and with the continual expansion of our power into new fields or new levels of exploitation. Under the aspect of this myth, our economic, social, and spiritual life is taken to be a series of initiations, of stages in a movement outward and upward toward some transcendent goal. We have traditionally associated this form of aspiring initiation with the self-transcendence achieved by hunters through acts of predation. The forces of the environment and the hidden or dark sources of our personal and collective past – factors which limit our power to aspire and transcend – become the things which, as hunters, we triumph over, control, and transcend. They become, under the aspect of the myth, enemies and opponents, who captivate and victimize us and against whom we must be revenged."* (p.557)

This fateful version of the hunter myth, which is at the bottom of what is commonly called frontier spirit, can even be used to justify American expansion and American participation in overseas conflicts, and Slotkin darkly presages:

*"But the cycle of the myth never really ends. The animal skins on the wall, the tree stumps in the yard, the scalp bounty money in the bank, and the pervasive smell of burning are proofs of what we have been; and*

*they suggest that we still will play, in concept or action, the same role in dialectical opposition to a new Indian, a new social or political antithesis. As the captivities of Mary Rowlandson and Mercy Short suggest, rescue from dark events is never complete. Physical combat with and captivity to the dark forces (whether they are really dark or only imagined to be so) infects the mind itself with darkness. The hunters and the redeemed captives return from the forest to find the people still only restively pacified, still mourning the passing of a Golden Age of complacency, still anticipating new captivities and rescues. The struggle turns inward: Indians are discovered lurking in subversive forces within society itself, in the independence and aspiration of one's own children, in the recesses of one's own mind. A new captivity, a new hunt, and a new ceremony of exorcism repeat the myth-scenario on progressively deeper, more internal levels. Wars are followed by witch-hunts. Moby Dick is a creature of external reality and an aspect of the hunters' minds. It has been said that 'men make a waste land and call it peace'; and the desert is not simply that of a savaged landscape but of a tortured mind."* (p.564)

What may sound like a rather simplified and biased indictment of American capitalism and expansion, of bigoted conformity born out of a desire to fend off and maybe sublimate the urges of libido and the subconscious, which are generally associated with "Indians, is more complex and more convincing because Slotkin thoroughly shows how the hunter myth and the Puritan heritage interacted and how the myth developed and renewed itself in American literature – in both its more popular (e.g. the Boone myth, the popular image of Davy Crockett, the Leatherstocking tales) and its more artistic (e.g. Hawthorne, Thoreau and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which is regarded as the American national myth) forms. Slotkin also distinguishes between the literatures of New England, of the North-West, of Pennsylvania and the middle states and the southern states, and he shows that the hunter myth was not the same everywhere. What makes his study extremely convincing is the attention he pays to the interplay between the myths and their shaping in literature on the one hand and the social realities that existed in a particular region at a given point in time. He even shows how abolitionist literature such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is influenced by the basic American myths, and he provides convincing insight into the different roles the European settlers ascribed to the Indians. Familiarity with the major works that are being discussed, with American history and concepts such as Jacksonian vs. Jeffersonian democracy might be extremely helpful to the reader, and sometimes he will probably have difficulty in seeing the forest for the trees as Slotkin's approach is not afraid of amassing a lot of detail, which will often be taken for granted in later passages of the book.

*Regeneration Through Violence* is therefore not a book that is easily read but nevertheless it is an inspiring and exciting intellectual enterprise, which will help you better understand not only American mentality but also latest global developments.

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### **Shaun says**

This is proving to be a rather trying book to plow through. Maybe my attention span for books is waning? Or I expect too much, a solid journey inside every cover I pick up? Sometimes this book is damn captivating, and the other half of the time I'm delving through repetitious meanderings and wondering if Slotkin could have said just as much with half the paper.

Primarily this is a study of the tension between the Puritan settlers and the native people they had to figure out how to live with when they left Europe - yet, rather than a straight history of this complicated interaction, Slotkin gives you a literary history, tracking tendencies in the published writings of the time (captivity narratives, heroic accounts of battles, etc.) to illustrate the birth of the American frontier mythos.

This is the first in a trilogy, along with *The Fatal Environment* and *Gunfighter Nation*, which follows this thread into contemporary literature (and, presumably into issues such as why men like Ronald Reagan ever work their way into positions of power). I'd love to be able to say with honesty that I'll run for the next one after I finish this, but right now I'm not so sure... although the subject itself is fascinating, and he is clearly deeply invested in the material at hand, Slotkin could have used a more aggressive editor. Or hell, maybe I just got spoiled on the readability of someone like Howard Zinn?

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### **Chris says**

Where Joss Whedon navigated some of the rules for Buffy the Vampire Slayer

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### **Ayne Ray says**

This was a pivotal book in my academic development and a cornerstone of research for my Master's thesis on the mythology of the American West in the works of Sam Shepard. By reinventing the narrative of the Western experience, Slotkin deconstructs Western mythology to purport that the decimation of Native Americans, an unerring belief in the supremacy of white European immigrants, and the greed-filled exploitation of the environment is what truly fueled Westward expansion. An unflinching examination that shows another side of the halcyon glow of the idea of "Manifest Destiny" upon which our society was founded.

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### **Paul says**

Very informative and explains a great deal about the types of stories that are still current in American literature and myth. I particularly found the discussion of the Daniel Boone mythos and Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales to be intriguing. Slotkin also explains the relationship of captivity narratives and hunter-hero /frontier hero tales in American mythos and discusses the complex relationship and dynamic of the Puritan experience to the wilderness in both the exorcism/ purification response and the initiation/conversion response. Slotkin is more negative towards the American mythology than I think is actually warranted. Nevertheless, he does lay out well the issues out that American experience and thinking even now deals with in its looking for ways to connect to the hero's quest, to personal development, and to American political society.

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### **Tom Smucker says**

Mind-bogglingly great so far.

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## A says

I read about half of this for a class in college, where we were looking specifically at Puritan culture and how it interacted with the perceived outside threat of Native American peoples in colonial North America. Really interesting book and something I've been intended to reread in full for at least a decade now. So last year, I pulled it out and made a go of it.

This book is very long and can be rather dry in places (my 4 stars is a downgrade from 5, mostly because some chapters were more of a slog than others). It's also not a straightforward history where you will be provided dates of events for better context. You will need at least a rough understanding of major events from 1600-1860, stuff that most US education does cover but might be worth brushing up on for reference. Slotkin wrote more of a literary history, using primary sources from the period that include: non-fiction firsthand and retold accounts (primarily captivity narratives), sermons and polemics, poetry/verse, and novels/romances. From these Slotkin pulls out the foundational archetypes, narratives, and myths of the American frontier and by extension American culture and a sort of American psyche.

The two main archetypes/myths that Slotkin argues are core to understanding the culture are the twin narratives of captivity and the hunter. The former develops from the Puritans' relation to the wilderness and the natives they associated with the wilderness, though he also provides different attitudes/perspectives (French Catholic missionaries, non-Puritan English looking to stake a claim). Out of the captivity narrative emerges the hunter archetype, a man who has overcome his captivity and begins to identify with the Indian, while maintaining the qualities (in varying shape/degree) of civilized Christian whiteness. As these images cement in the American imagination, questions are raised and the archetypes/narratives become problematized as American identity itself begins to solidify in the mid-19th century. In particular, Slotkin spends some time analyzing Thoreau and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, both of which he argues reveal a culture where art has reached fruition in understanding and grappling with its foundational myths. (Indeed, *Moby-Dick* is a book that seriously interrogates The Hunter archetype and fails to really resolve the myriad of questions it asks.)

One interesting thing (to me, anyway) is how Slotkin integrates Jungian psychoanalytic criticism (and Campbell's later mythopoetic approach) without taking an absolutist approach that some critics in this vein tend toward. Jung, rather, provides a useful framework by which to understand how foundational myths develop and the collective psyche is formed. He treats the archetypes not as inherent or static but as being shaped in relation to culture clashes and the conditions of the environment Puritans entered. You could argue that this is very "of its time," considering that psychoanalytic criticism was popular in the 1960s, but that disregards the strength of the model and the depth it provides. I'm also really interested in Jung's model, so it's nice to see this approach work.

One reason I read this book now is I have a feeling it might offer a lot of insight on why American culture has been so defined by violence and how this violence continues to reverberate today, given regularity of mass shootings and a resurgence in reactionary politics. I think it does offer some insight, especially given his notes on the hunter archetype within militaristic rhetoric of the Vietnam era, but it's not going to provide clear answers that provide a motive, etc. More like pointing to the images we can't seem to shake from our collective imagination, which might at best help us understand some piece of what's driving the why's and wherefore's.

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## Peter says

This is a great big humdinger of a book, and the first of three laying out Slotkin's thesis on the roots and branches of American culture in violent frontier myth. Historiographically, it lays at a transition point in American Studies. The original American Studies scholars explicitly founded it as a Cold War enterprise, a way to foster their vision of America —more or less, that of Cold War liberalism — back when people still thought culture was a big Cold War weapon and that Jackson Pollock was worth CIA money. Slotkin turns away from their vision of America as the culmination of western humanism but still uses a lot of the old American Studies concepts and tropes. These include canonization — Slotkin both crams old AS favorites like Melville and Hawthorne into his thesis and tries to canonize new ones, like frontier writer Nathan Filson — and an attachment to the concept of myth as an explanatory category. Analyzing the frontier as myth goes a long way in American Studies. It's poignant, in a way- the American Studies cadre included many of the first generation of American Jews given equal footing in American schools, and in general it was more nerdy New Yorkers and immigrant's kids — names like Slotkin and DeVoto — defining this picture of America and the frontier than it was sons of the pioneers.

Like the American Studies guys (and like me in some areas), Slotkin is an arch-lumper in this book. American culture as a whole, he argues, is defined by a series of tropes descended from the English encounter with the wilderness. Because some of the first English to do it (and especially to write about it) were Puritans, one major strand of processing that encounter entails seeing the wilderness as a place of evil, a place where good Christians go to become bad and die, a reflection of the dark spaces of the mind and soul. One of the ways the Puritans processed this was through captivity narratives, where a Puritan is captured by Indians, lives with them for a while, and then escapes or is bought back into the fold, chastened and stronger in faith.

But as the frontier expanded and white people got more used to it, the idea of the wilderness as a place of fulfillment got bigger, but with caveats. American litterateurs struggled mightily with how to cope with the identification between the wilderness and the Native Americans (so too, for that matter, does Slotkin, who lumps them all together into one culture more or less at one with nature, etc etc). The whites wanted to master the wilderness the same way they thought the Native Americans had, but it was important that they maintain their special white, Christian status. As mythic figures like Daniel Boone became national (and international) favorites, the frontier became, in narrative anyway, a place for whites to prove their mettle by entering into the wilderness. They could learn from the natives and even befriend them, but would eventually master them at their own wilderness abilities, initiating themselves into the mysteries of the hunter and the warrior. This would lead to the ushering in of white civilization, where the frontiersman would either need to assimilate or move on, the sort of prepackaged tragedy narrative from which Anglo culture gotten so much mileage.

There's a lot of interesting material in this book, overstuffed in that classic AS way with block quotes, stories about publishing, etc. There are fascinating characters like Gilbert Imlay, a Kentuckian comman and lover of Mary Wollstonecraft who sold an enlightenment-tinged vision of frontier democracy to get radical French and British to sponsor a western breakaway state before fleeing a pregnant Wollstonecraft with the money. There's also some interesting stuff where European and northeastern writers wanted to depict the whole thing as capital R Romance, which culminated with James Fenimore Cooper's lachrymose and intricately symbolic tales of the noble savage white guy who was more native than the natives but also white and what a dilemma! But western writers — and most audiences — wanted more realism, i.e. shootings and scalps.

The basic thrust of the analysis seems sound, especially when it leaves the Jungian myth stuff to one side and hews to the material. One thing that encouraged an American monomyth more than anything unconscious was a monolithic capitalist publishing industry centered in New York, that had to try to sell books the whole country would buy. The frontier story appealed to all sections, even as Slotkin details how the different sections interpreted Boone and other figures according to their peculiar lights. My understanding is that American Studies turned more towards questions of creating a national consciousness — and even more to questions of race, which Slotkin does not interrogate enough — after this transition point in the 1970s. It'll be interesting to see if Slotkin's later books, bringing the story of frontier myth to the twentieth century, handles that. \*\*\*\*

<https://toomuchberard.wordpress.com/2...>

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### **Mark says**

I read up to page 320. Lost interest.

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### **Matthew says**

Unbelievably brilliant. Love it or hate it, and despite the occasional wtf moment, this book will permanently alter the way you look at American literature and American history.

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### **C Wegman says**

Fascinating history and a relevant thesis.

Could have been 350 pages shorter. Lots of redundancy.

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### **Matt says**

Generally, I never read the same book twice. Even if I loved the book. There are too many unread classics out in the world, and I am a slow reader.

But I made an exception for Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*. Not because I loved it, however. Not at all. Quite the opposite. This was a tough slog. The first time through, my mind kept wandering away like a toddler chasing bubbles. (As I write this, I am distracting my toddler by blowing bubbles). By the time I finished, it occurred to me that I'd probably skimmed over half the text. I couldn't remember a thing.

This isn't the first time this has happened to me. Usually when I don't like a book, I'm comfortable saying *I don't like this book*. Or if I failed to grasp the concepts, I would say *I don't like this book*. In this case, though, my initial response was at such a variance with other reviews that I felt it necessary to try reading it again.

This time I paid close attention. This time I took notes. This time I got drunk on Yellow Tail and burned through 45 pages which I have now forgotten. The next day, I re-read those 45 pages with a raging headache. This time my experience was the exact same.

I cannot say anything that changes this fact: *Regeneration Through Violence* is an undisputed classic. It attempts to deconstruct America's frontier mythology – and trace its evolution – through an examination of important contemporary literature.

This examination begins with the Puritans and their “captivity narratives.” The captivity narrative is a genuinely American literary tradition, a first-person memoir of a white person's (usually a woman) survival among the savage Indians of the dark woods. Slotkin parses these narratives – chief among them, Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* – to analyze the Puritan's anxieties about life in the New World.

As the pithy title of Mrs. Rowlandson's work implies, Puritans had an external locus of control when it came to the dangers of pre-Revolutionary America. They – or more specifically, their leaders – took the position that all was in God's hands. The Indians took Mrs. Rowlandson because she had sinned; and God delivered Mrs. Rowlandson from their hands because He was good. The underlying theme is a lack of human agency.

This began to change following King Philip's War, one of the most violent per capita conflicts in America's history. One-tenth of military-aged men were killed. When it ended, King Philip's decapitated head decorated Plymouth, a little nugget you probably never heard when learning about Thanksgiving. One of the great heroes of King Philip's War was Benjamin Church. He wrote – you guessed it – a memoir that gave less credence to God's greatness than to the abilities of Church himself. During the war, Church utilized Indian tactics to defeat the Indians, thus making him the forerunner of the archetypal frontiersman who dresses, fights, and lives like an Indian in order to destroy the Indian.

Church's account of his own efforts in the hunting of that great leviathan, King Philip, was completely unrestricted by any desire to fit the narrative into one of the orthodox metaphorical molds...Just as he took his method of fighting from the Indians he fought with, he took the pattern of his book from the pattern of events in his extended hunt of King Philip. In the process he created the prototype of the myth that was to mingle with the Puritan mythology as a characteristic American vision of American experience... In the course of his hunt for the Indian king, Church became more and more like the Indian. Furthermore, he not only accepted this amalgamation of white and Indian characteristics; he actively and enthusiastically sought it...

The discussion of Benjamin Church segues into a long passage on John Filson, a schoolteacher, surveyor, writer and booster. He wrote *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (sic) as a promotional vehicle to spur settlement in the region. He appended an appendix to this volume about the life of Daniel Boone. This appendix took on a life of its own. It willfully ignored the historical Boone and turned him into a fictional character drawn from other mythological traditions and stories. Of course, it is the fictional Boone – as it is the fictional Davy Crockett – that lives in our memories.

[I]t was the figure of Daniel Boone, the solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods, that became the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero of the early republic. The

other myth figures are reflections or variations of this basic type... The figure and the myth-narrative that emerged from the early Boone literature became archetypal for the American literature which followed: an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars.

Slotkin also spends some time – though considerably less – on the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Henry David Thoreau (whose time at Walden was a faint echo of the actual wilderness experience of the early pioneers).

My chief difficulty with *Regeneration Through Violence* is its presentation. This is a book with a thesis, and it's written like a dissertation. That is to say, it is ploddingly written; it is filled with terms of art that are not fully defined; it is maddeningly repetitive; and it is exclusionary. If you are not familiar with the lingo of this particular English Department, or if you have not read every single author that Slotkin mentions, you will find yourself with the uncomfortable feeling that you are once again a freshman in college who stayed up all night drinking peach schnapps instead of doing your homework.

Dense prose and arcane literary comparisons are tough enough. What made this book even more difficult is its insistence on abstraction. I've gone through several reviews of this book – all of them wholly laudatory – trying to figure out what I did wrong. Many of these reviews say things like “this is the best book on the frontier I've ever read.”

I've been reading about “the frontier” my whole life. My bookshelf groans with titles on American-Indian relations, from the Mayflower to Wounded Knee. And I've got to say, this isn't a book about the frontier at all.

*Regeneration Through Violence* is almost entirely divorced from an historical context. Slotkin makes no attempt to lay the historical foundation from which these myths derive. Instead, you get a highbrow, abstruse lecture about ridiculous topics that are entirely untethered from reality. The concept of a national myth is itself notional; Slotkin takes it another step, pounding out ivy-tower passages that are almost parodic:

A significant example of this romanticization is the medieval and Renaissance treatment of the myths and rituals of sacred marriage, an archetype in which the hero-king achieves sexual union with the goddess of nature in the wilderness, thus ensuring the seasonal renewal of human and vegetable life. Underlying the myth and its attendant rituals is the psychological quest of the *anima*, the feminine principle of passivity, passion, and acceptance within the reasoning, cold, masculine consciousness. Achievement of reconciliation between these halves of the mind means the attainment of psychological identify, self-containment and self-contentment. But rather than plumb the metaphor of the sacred marriage, European Christians elaborated the metaphor, ornamented it, and bowdlerized it of those elements that spoke too intimately and too directly to the deeply sexual, unconscious yearning for psychological unity...

And it goes on like this.

I'm not an anti-intellectual. I'm certainly not disdainful of academe in general or Slotkin in particular (I'm

reading his *Lost Battalions* right now, and getting through it quite well). At certain points during this book, however, I just thought it superfluous. Is there really a national myth? Do they really spring from these various authors? Or is Slotkin just projecting, heaping a whole lot of meaning upon some pretty slender novels?

In the end, those substantive questions I've posed are not as important to me as fundamental literary execution. As a reader, I value clarity, no matter the topic. I don't mind subject-complexity; I do mind it when the author adds to that complexity. Here, the prose, the verbiage, the offhand allusions to some author I've never heard of, combine to create an arm's-length reading experience that did not get better the second time around.

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### **Tylernickl says**

Slotkin is a really careful historian and does a fantastic job presenting and interpreting patterns in the primary sources. My favorite chapter was his presentation of how captivity narratives evolved as a genre to absolve Puritans of both their symbolic violence towards their English heritage and their actual violence towards natives. His prose is often pretty dry and the pace felt slow to me as I read this book. Whatever the shortcomings of the words on the page, his overall concept remains really pertinent even today, a time when we delude ourselves into thinking that we're a secular nation that put some mileage between ourselves and the influence of myth.

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### **Peter says**

Just an amazing book. It can be academic and dense at points, and sometimes Slotkin has a tendency to beat points to death. But the wealth of information and breadth of vision more than make up for the shortcomings. I don't think there's a better book on the American frontier; certainly I haven't read one.

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