

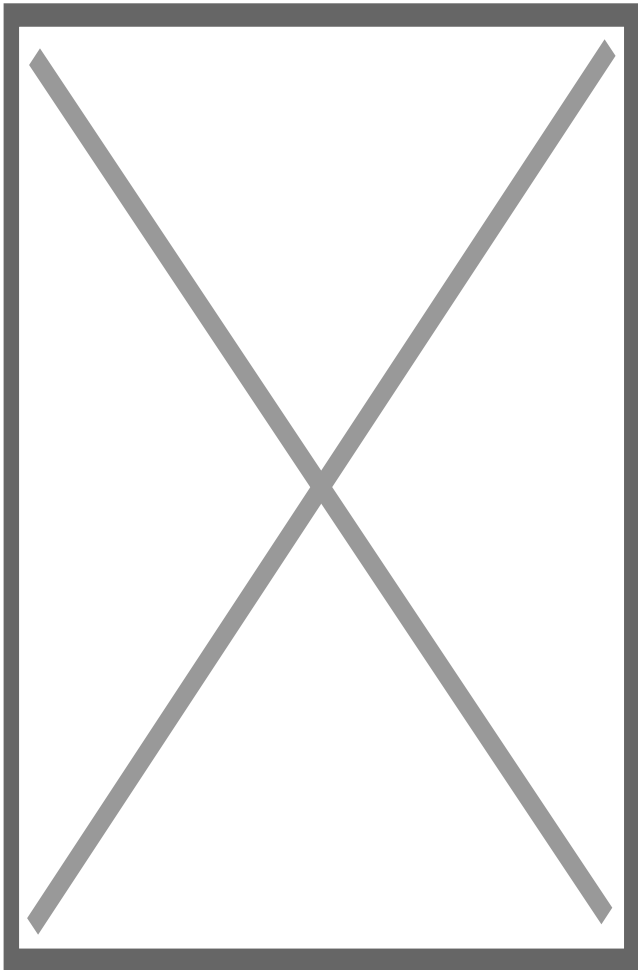
The self-appointed cowboy messiah

Rachel Wagner traces the way frontier fantasies and apocalyptic faith fuel today's gun-obsessed culture.

by [Amar D. Peterman](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue

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In Review



Cowboy Apocalypse

Religion and the Myth of the Vigilante Messiah

By Rachel Wagner

NYU Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

This spring, a movie poster began showing up across my social media feeds. It features Sydney Sweeney sporting blue jeans, a leather belt with a large buckle, cowboy boots, and long bangs that frame her serious, determined expression. Behind her, Halsey leans back against an old, orange muscle car as Paul Walter Hauser approaches the passenger door. Sweeney, striding forward through a dozen arrows planted in the ground around her, holds a black pistol in her right hand. The movie is *Americana*, tagline “Welcome to the New West.”

In *Cowboy Apocalypse*, religion scholar Rachel Wagner examines this new West—a powerful and prevalent American mythology of a “post-apocalyptic space in which the self-appointed cowboy messiah sees himself roaming a refreshed frontier, armed to the teeth, defeating evil and protecting his family.”

Wagner names two foundational influences behind this ideology: Christian apocalypticism and American frontier mythology. Together, they provide “a contemporary story that accounts for America’s beginnings and its endings.” In this story, the West is at once an empty, unsettled expanse ready for the taking and a savage land filled with dangerous animals and Indigenous peoples who threaten the settlers’ way of life. Thus, characters like Buffalo Bill and John Wayne are both explorers and heroes, purifying the Wild West of contaminants as they roam the open plains.

Cowboy apocalypticism is a way of perceiving the world and one’s place within it through a framework of necessary violence. It is a schema of the vigilante messiah in which guns become “tools of self-defense against wild enemies embedded in America’s landscape,” says Wagner. Key to her argument is the belief that this produces an encapsulating narrative about the world and how it functions, one that suits the desires of predominantly White, gun-toting men who view themselves as messianic heroes in the unfolding story of America today. Just as the rough-and-tough cowboys of the West once warred against the Indigenous peoples, so too do modern-day “cowboys” enact violence against immigrants, refugees, and any others who do not (or cannot) assimilate into their mythology of American greatness and “civilized ‘whiteness.’” Wagner notes that because violence is necessary, cowboys must always look for a fight.

This necessity makes the gun a central character and symbol in the cowboy apocalypse. It is, as Wagner describes, “a nimble ambassador across mediated worlds, spilling its effects in all directions.” The deeper a person is rooted in this mythology, the closer he is inevitably drawn to guns. Wagner highlights how this progression is slow but evident as men move from consuming apocalyptic, gun-centric TV shows like *The Walking Dead*, to engaging in online forums and fan conventions, to using firearms in video games, to eventually holding a gun in their hands and, at times, pointing it at another human. This, says Wagner, is the power of “transmedia worldbuilding,” where “belief is participatory” in a substitute world that ties our experiences into a neat core narrative.

Wagner interrogates this pervasive imagination by demonstrating its influence across American culture through rituals, media platforms, live events, and social practices. She begins by insightfully analyzing the gun as an object of interpretive attention, naming 13 ways it can be understood as a cultural object. The gun is a tool, a deterrent, a totem, a souvenir, a toy, a person, a sacrament, and more. This format is bold, persuasive, and compelling.

Subsequent chapters dive deep into the weeds of Wagner’s argument. In one chapter, she examines the presence of the gun and all that it symbolizes in literature that “pre-enact[s] the end times,” from the Lost Cause narratives of *The Clansman* (1905) to the deep racism of the *John Franklin Letters* (1959), the neo-Nazism of *The Turner Diaries* (1978), the dispensationalism of the Left Behind series, thrillers like *World War Z* (2006), and recent novels like Mike Kraus’s *The End of All Things* (2023). Another chapter details the influence of film in creating and solidifying this apocalyptic lens, from the early westerns of the 1900s to nuclear war-themed movies in the 1940s and 1950s to survivalist and “cowboy vs. terrorist” genres that evolved from the Cold War to post-9/11

America.

Another chapter focuses on *The Walking Dead*. A central question of Wagner's analysis is why the show's creators, in taking on the task of creating an entirely new postapocalyptic society, would choose to build a world governed by White male supremacy. "The ideological slate has been wiped clean," she writes, "carving out a narrow, rigid environment in which . . . white men rule without question." She also devotes a chapter to video games, focusing on first-person shooters such as *Doom* and *Call of Duty*. Here, Wagner expands upon the popular argument that such games promote violence and gun fandom in the real world. They are, in Wagner's words, "training modules for soldiers and children."

The remainder of the book follows this implication, as Wagner moves beyond pages and screens to real-world evidence of the cowboy apocalypse's influence. One such example, to which she devotes a chapter, is the reality TV show *Doomsday Preppers*. Unlike *The Walking Dead*, *Doomsday Preppers* focuses on real people, capturing the beliefs and practices of people who believe society's collapse is imminent and are ready, each and every day, to act on those beliefs. Another chapter examines the apocalyptic, good-versus-evil rhetoric of the National Rifle Association. According to Wagner, the NRA and similar gun groups demonstrate a culture of gun fandom that is central to the embrace of apocalyptic beliefs about the world.

Wagner draws on trauma theory and tourism studies to examine the role of nostalgia in an apocalyptic imagination. She looks at the perverse fascination with souvenirs that celebrate the violence of a long-lost past and at dark tourism, in which visitors walk through places where tragedy or mass violence has occurred. She carries many of these themes through an analysis of live-action role-playing and alternate reality games. When pushed to an extreme, she argues, such fantasy play collapses the distinction between fiction and reality. The book concludes with a series of "unfinished stories" told by those "who, in the cowboy apocalypse, would be erased, demonized, or otherwise left out." Here, Wagner touches on feminist theories and theologies, critical race theory, queer theology, afrofuturism, and more.

Cowboy Apocalypse has a wonderful explanatory power. In a society marred by gun culture, Wagner's proposition feels refreshingly clearheaded. For example, she explains that this cowboy narrative is a mythology first and foremost because real cowboys are not like this and never were. "Real cowboys focused on moving cattle. . . . Cowboys were the eponymous boot-strappers. Their guns were a sign of ingenuity and self-sufficiency, not merely tools of the trade." She continues, "Whereas *actual* cowboys led lives of hard work and little excitement, *mythic* cowboys sought adventure. Whereas *actual* cowboys provided a model of simplicity, devotion, and honor, *mythic* cowboys define themselves (and their guns) as forces of ultimate good."

A key strength of the book is its structure, which is built around examining causes and consequences. Early on, Wagner recognizes the appeal of the fictional order and absolute control symbolized in the gun. Guns, and those who wield them, have an unequivocal power. However, she rightly rebuts this desire with a hard truth: "To . . . see the world as a post-apocalyptic wasteland is to reject the web of connection that binds our fates together and to imagine a world in which individual strengths are sufficient for survival." In reality, Wagner claims, the tough guys will not be fine, because we do not exist in isolation from one another. Her emphasis on this communal interdependence strikes me deeply as we see community after community recover from the impact of mass violence in the United States.

There are places, however, where I believe Wagner overstates or misplaces the connection between the digital and fanatic expressions of imagination and its consequences today. For example, she connects the January 6 insurrection to the broader phenomenon of LARPing (live-action role-play), arguing that such forms of play are susceptible to "slippage between playful performativity and transgressive activity." As I understand it, LARPing typically involves young adults who show up with foam swords and paper costumes to role-play as medieval knights. (A quick TikTok search for the term provides boundless, entertaining documentation of such

gatherings.) It is a game that is understood by all parties as pure fiction. Along these lines, Wagner calls the insurrection an “apocalyptic larp,” noting that LARPing involves the projection of a fictional story that characters act within. But, she continues, in ordinary LARPing, “we don’t *really* transform the cardboard box into a car. We just *pretend* to. We suspend *disbelief*, but we do not *believe*.” The danger arises, she argues, when the fictional game spills over into the real world.

I agree with Wagner that the cowboy apocalypse worldview has a deep connection to the events of January 6; I also agree that when role-play confuses fact with fiction, the results can be dangerous. However, by connecting the Capitol insurrection with LARPing, she seems to presuppose that what happened that day began as a form of fiction or fantasy—a shared story that became a reality. But did the people behind this coordinated act of violence ever understand it as fictional? I’m not convinced they did.

This is a minor problem in an overall excellent book. However, it is important to name it, given Wagner’s argument that violent simulations and media directly correlate to a lived expression. I wonder if it would have been more fruitful to compare January 6 not to LARPing but to a game like airsoft or paintball, in which players enact a battle-like scenario, hold real guns, aim them at others, and even inflict a measure of genuine pain. Such games involve more of an embodied element: players actually shoot each other and fear being shot.

Wagner makes an insightful and compelling argument for the influence of the apocalyptic imagination she describes. However, I am not completely convinced that watching *The Walking Dead* or *Doomsday Preppers* or playing first-person shooter games has much to do with embracing an entire transmedia world-building project. While I might not follow Wagner to the far corners of her conclusions, I do appreciate her robust conceptualization and explanation.

In any case, the prevalence of gun violence in the United States—and many of its citizens’ obsession with firearms and the right to bear them—makes it clear that what Wagner describes is not only real but dangerous. For those seeking a detailed exploration of how we’ve arrived at this moment, *Cowboy Apocalypse* is a valuable resource.