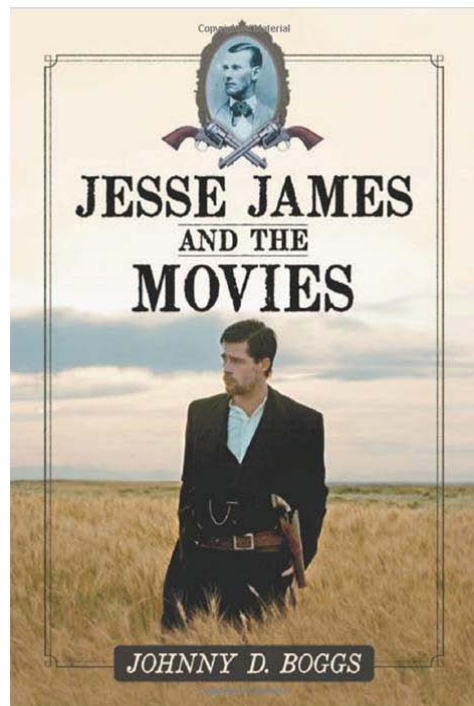


# JESSE JAMES AND THE MOVIES

Johnny Boggs

McFarland Books

2011

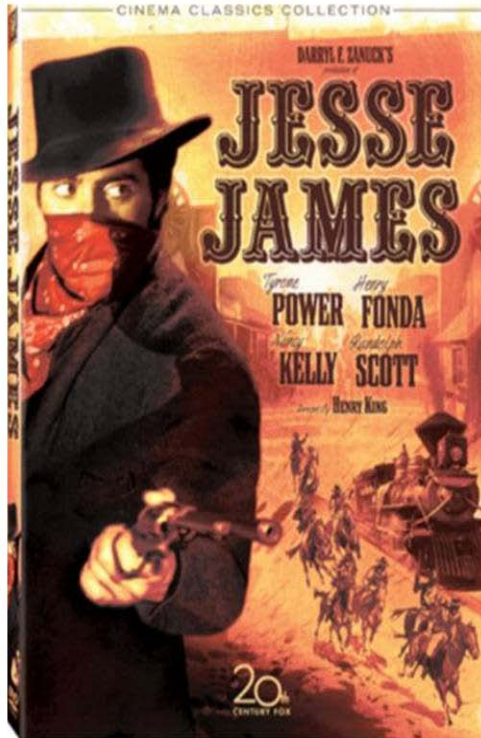


Next to Billy the Kid, Jesse James is probably the most famous true life western bad man history and motion pictures have bestowed upon the American culture. The nomadic and solitary nature of the Kid, often depicted in near existential terms as a killer with both a six shooter and a brooding angst, has made him a shade more popular with fans of the misunderstood school of miscreants, but Jesse, a criminal blue collar figure with his brother Frank backed by a changing cast of supporting players in the bank and train robbing business, has done pretty well for himself in the fame department as well.



Jesse had only been in his grave a scant 26 years when in 1908 Hollywood came calling, the result being an eighteen minute effort titled *The James Boys in Missouri*. His daring exploits were subsequently presented on the nascent silent screen a number of times including two occasions when he was portrayed by none other than his very own son, Jesse James Jr., whose acting skills did not add a great deal to the James family legacy.

Although Jesse Sr. would continue to be seen in a wide variety of cinematic productions, mostly of the “B” grade variety during the sound era, with very few reflecting historical fidelity, it was 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s big budgeted *Jesse James*, produced in 1939 and starring Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda as Jesse and Frank, that truly cemented the outlaw’s reputation among cinema goers. Most films after this borrowed at least partially from this movie, its own historical accuracy often highly questionable, and Jesse, as portrayed by such actors as Audie Murphy, Wendell Corey, Robert Wagner and Robert Duvall would continue to be a fixture on westerns both in the movies and on TV for the next sixty years, his most recent incarnation being Brad Pitt in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*.



In his new book *Jesse James and the Movies*, film historian Johnny Boggs has done an outstanding job of exploring and describing the extensive Jesse James film canon. His meticulous and impressively balanced examination of these forty odd movies, where Jesse's participation ranges from central character to simply a name foisted on a secondary character to add more color to an otherwise drab screenplay, is heightened by the author's in-depth research into the true historical facts which the cinema has attempted, rarely with great success, to emulate.

*Jesse James and the Movies* is an extremely entertaining and informative book on all fronts. In addition, this reviewer is most gratified to learn that Mr. Boggs is currently at work on a similar volume detailing the celluloid career of Mr. William Bonney, AKA Billy the Kid.

Can't wait.

Bruce Dettman

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