

## Cowboy Boots

TYLER BEARD

Photographs by JIM ARNDT

*Gibbs Smith, \$15.95 cloth, ISBN 1-58685-522-0*

Are they cool, or are they dorky as all get-out? Are they worn with a sense of hipster irony, or with a straight-faced “We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee” nationalism?

Cowboy boots always evoke strong sentiments. People in, say, Connecticut or New Hampshire may look askance—the heels would definitely scuff up the deck of the sailboat. Certain Manhattanites might manage a droll, “How quaint,” smirk. Still others may interpret the bodacious footwear as an unmistakable badge of redneck pride, tantamount to displaying a KKK decal on the pickup truck window.

But the Beard/Arndt partnership, self-described on the book jacket as “the world’s leading authorities on the cowboy boot,” just can’t fathom such a tepid, crepe-hanging, killjoy approach. Like the song says, “my baby is American-made,” and this rabidly boot-loving author/photographer team cherishes that making on every page of *Cowboy Boots*, a visually explosive catalog spanning a half-century or so of design and production.

There is some history here, as well as some technical discussion of construction, if you’re interested in such things. Beard tracks shifts in taste and trends regarding toe shape and heel height. And for those who feel that the wearers of cowboy boots are irredeemably macho, Beard gives us a surprising glimpse into his inner Dale Evans when he writes:

*Without a doubt, men are simply jealous of the fanciful and extensive choices women are offered in the world of foot-wear. Cowboy boots give guys a chance to wear bright colors and high heels.*

Fine by me—sometimes a lonesome varmint jest wants to feel purty.

Like so many Texans (bless them), Beard has the gift of gab, so much so that you just want to tell him to go on and hush. Keeping himself busier than a tree full of hoot-owls with folksy alliterations and such, much of his text reads like advertising copy, which it sort of is—the book includes an extensive listing of boot makers and vintage boot dealers.

But no matter. The real story lies in the extraordinary photographs by “bootologist” Jim Arndt (he and Beard have collaborated on three other books on western wear). Big-name makers such as Tres Outlaws, Liberty, Little’s Boots, Kimmel, Sorrell Custom Boots, Rocketbuster, Lefty’s Leathercraft, M.L. Leddy, James Leddy Boot Company, Old Gringo, J.B. Hill, and Wheeler Boots lay out a lavish leather-lovers’ banquet. Arndt’s images fill the eye with ornate carving, stamping, tooling, embroidery, inlay, beading, appliqué, painting, staining, and more, ranging from the traditional (writhing vines and floral motifs with a Moorish past) to bucking bronzes, stars-and-stripes, skulls galore, even the stunningly commercial, such as the pair of M.L. Leddy boots with the Jack Daniels “Jack Black” label precisely rendered in black-and-white leather. The gorgeousness of these images also owes a huge debt to the fineness of the color separations and exquisite press registration, as well as the quality and gloss of the weighty, poreless paper stock—and, as fate or economics would have it, the

book was printed and bound in Korea.

For even the casual boot fancier, this book makes it hurt so good. This writer’s pick for best-of booty-call: “The Forty Roses of Our Lady of Guadalupe” pair. Commissioned by Jim Arndt and custom-made by Tres Outlaw for his “sweetest of hearts,” a boot designer named Nathalie Kent, these boots required 400 hours of hand labor. It’s enough to make this Brooklyn cowgirl cry. ■

REVIEWER: **Victoria Thomas** is a westernized writer living in Los Angeles, still in search of the perfect pair of cowboy boots (size 8, needle-nose, Cuban heel, fuschia-pink snakeskin).