Following the critical and commercial success of *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), the mid-1990s witnessed a small resurgence in the production of big screen Westerns. Between 1993 and 1996, over a dozen Westerns were released theatrically in the United States, a level of output not experienced since the 1970s, and, to date, certainly not experienced again at any point thereafter. This 1990s cycle of Western production is notable for its diversity, with films ranging from updated takes on mythical Western heroes like Wyatt Earp, Jesse James, and Wild Bill Hickok to narratives that privileged groups the genre had historically been inclined to marginalize, including American Indians, blacks, and women.

Notably, gun-toting female protagonists came to the fore in three pictures: *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, 1993), *Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1994), and *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995). Of these movies, it is *The Ballad of Little Jo*—director Maggie Greenwald’s saga of an Eastern society woman who, to avoid disgrace after bearing a child out of wedlock, heads West disguised as a man—that has garnered the most attention. Although not as high profile
a movie as *Bad Girls* or *The Quick and the Dead*, upon release the picture garnered positive notices from mainstream critics including Roger Ebert and Leonard Maltin, and has received critical consideration from scholars ranging from B. Ruby Rich to Jim Kitses, whose monograph *Horizons West* remains the most influential study of the Western genre.¹

Examinations of the representation of women in the Western genre have largely limited themselves to analyses of the stereotypes prevalent in classical Hollywood filmmaking. Indeed, the conventional woman characters found in the Western are so well known that they were invoked by the advertising for *The Ballad of Little Jo* as a point of product differentiation. To quote the movie’s tagline: *In 1866, a woman had two choices…she could be a wife or she could be a whore. Josephine Monaghan made the boldest choice of all. She chose to be a man.*

Yet not all Western women were maternal schoolmarms or deviant saloon girls, and gun-toting female screen heroes appeared long before the 1990s. Greenwald acknowledged this in a 1995 interview with Tania Modleski, which was published in *Film Quarterly*. Questioned about what motivated her to make a Western, Greenwald said that the “few [Western] stories that have women as main characters were not interesting” to her. When asked which films she’s referring to, Greenwald responds: “The woman in *High Noon*—not very interesting. . . . Barbara Stanwyck as a land baron—not interesting.”²

As is often the case with filmmakers who set out to offer a critique of the Western, attention is directed not at what are perceived to be the exceptions—in this case, the “few stories that have women as main characters”—but instead toward more general notions about the genre’s conventions, especially with respect to their ideological subtext and historical inaccuracy. Greenwald’s disinterest in revisiting the way in which women were portrayed in the earlier Westerns is evident in *The Ballad of Little Jo*. The narrative of the picture is not one common to the Western. Instead, conventional iconographic elements from the genre, like settings and character types, are grafted onto the kind of “passing” narrative more common to the melodrama or women’s film: a female protagonist is forced to conceal her true status—be it racial, cultural, or economic—in order to “pass” for a member of another social group. Moreover, the film’s premise is drawn from the work of new Western historians who discovered, among other things, that cross-dressing and homosexuality were more prevalent in the “Old West” than earlier scholars could have imagined (or were willing to admit).