

The Age of McMurtry

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Toward the end of J. Frank Dobie's life, things took a sharp left turn in Texas politics, literature, and culture. Politically, Dobie and many of his allies were old-line liberals of the Roosevelt-Truman stripe, minority liberals in a conservative, one-party Democratic state led by such notables as Pa Ferguson, Coke Stevenson, John Nance Garner, William P. Hobby, Sr., Sam Rayburn, and Lyndon B. Johnson. There had always been a number of Dobie liberals in Texas, but the new liberals of the sixties were of a kind that Dobie and his ilk were not prepared for. These new men and women were more obstreperous, more inclined to march for what they believed in, more racially and ethnically liberal, more radical in all ways. The new trends in politics started slowly: a genuine liberal, Ralph Yarborough, was elected to the U.S. Senate. What had been a relative handful of Bohemians seen on campuses and at Scholz Beer Garten in Austin morphed into Beats and then hippies and Yippies and Peaceniks. They fought against segregation; they marched with farm workers; they formed a new brand of Democrats and began publishing *The Texas Observer*; they exulted in the election of John Kennedy and mourned over his death

in Texas; they radicalized the campuses and fought the establishment; and, once Vietnam bogged the country down, they demonstrated against Lyndon Johnson and “his” war. In many ways, the rise of the new liberalism made the conservative Democrats see a new light and shift to the Republican Party, the natural home of many of the conservative Democrats. Democrats like Phil Gramm and John Connally and Rick Perry shifted allegiance to the party of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. The political revolution in Texas took place during the sixties and seventies, about the same time Larry McMurtry and a new wave of writers burst upon the scene.

The changes from conservative to liberal lasted much longer in literature than in the political culture of Texas. For a while there it seemed that Texas was abandoning the old ways of conservatism and reactionary politics. In the sixties, it seemed that a real revolution might be taking place. It turns out, of course, that the political winds did not blow strongly, for by the end of the century, the reaction had set in and the state was firmly in right-wing hands; those Democrats who became Republicans were just the beginning of the trend away from liberalism.

The changing of parties fitted a pattern that should have been predictable. After all, Oveta Culp Hobby, whose husband had been a Democratic governor and whose son was to serve for more than a decade as lieutenant governor, had come out for Eisenhower in 1952 and was made the first secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. Governor Alan Shivers, elected as a Democrat, led the “Shivercrats” into the Eisenhower camp against Adlai Stevenson. Most people were pretty clear that the Democrats in Texas were not heavily committed to the national party. During the fifties, the liberals saw as their enemies Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson. It was only later that Lyndon B. Johnson began his crusades for voting rights and “the Great Society.” Even when Johnson was pushing for the Voting Rights

Act and the establishment of reforms like Medicare, the state was only mildly liberal, though it looked for a time as if the conservative state of Texas was joining the mainstream Democratic Party.

What seemed to be taking place in politics in the middle of the century was also taking place in literature and music and the general culture of Texas. The mid-to-latter part of the twentieth century in both Texas and the rest of the nation reminds one of many reactions to ages of progress and exuberance. The Victorian Age in Britain and America gave way to revolution and reform in both literature and politics. In Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, during what some have called the “Yellow Nineties,” writers like Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Stephane Mallarme, Joris Karl Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire, and Algernon Swinburne broke away from what many saw as the certainties of a Victorian world. It was the beginning of a new round of literary decadence, and what took place in Texas in the 1960s was the beginning of a similar literary decadence.

Literary decadence is not a pejorative term: it simply means that the literature turns from robust and energetic to ironic and satiric, and in many case to experimentalism of form. Alfred Lord Tennyson gives way to T. S. Eliot, Charles Dickens to Virginia Woolf. One good description of literary decadence in general and in America is by critic Thomas Beers in his book called *The Mauve Decade*. Beers discusses the literary reaction against American Victorianism at the end of the century. He demonstrates that all across the land there was a strong reaction to what Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner called, in a co-written novel, *The Gilded Age*. Twain and Warner described a period when big business ran rampant, when railroads crossed the continent, and government giveaways to the railroads made men like C. P. Huntington, Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, and Mark Hopkins rich at the peoples’ expense. This was an era when John D. Rockefeller and his peers created huge monopolies and when

politicians truly believed that the business of government was business. (That phrase belongs to Calvin Coolidge, who came along a generation or more after "the Gilded Age," but who still admired the robber barons and the rapacious corporations.) Writers like Frank Norris attacked the giant corporations; Upton Sinclair raked unscrupulous businessmen over the sharp edges of his pen; politicians like Eugene V. Debs began serious leftist movements. The labor unions were in their infancy. Journalistic muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell Baker began pointing out the crookedness of city and state governments and the sickness of business society. In American literature the imagists flourished and T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound stirred up both poetry and criticism. The late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of existentialism, a philosophical movement most people associate with the French intellectuals of the immediate post-World War II era. But existentialism is clearly the defining factor in the novels and poems of Thomas Hardy, the poems of A. E. Housman, the stories and novels of Ernest Hemingway. The German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche laid down many of the principles of the movement: God is dead, life is absurd, man is free either to become a superman or live in chaotic misery. Nietzsche's effects were not much felt in the Texas of the early and mid-twentieth century and certainly not in the works of Dobie and his followers. Life has meaning for them, nature has meaning, progress is possible, and there are some eternal verities. But there are no eternal, essential verities in Hardy, Hemingway, Housman. Man is "a stranger and afraid in a world he never made," Housman says, and his line is echoed in French existentialist Albert Camus's novel title, *The Stranger*, one of the chief documents of the age, and a work clearly influential in the Age of McMurtry.

In Texas about the time of the death of Dobie, movements mirrored those of fin de siècle America and Britain and France

and much of Europe. Certainties faded, and there were strong reactions against entrenched political bosses like Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn and John Connally. There was a stirring of union sentiment in a so-called “right-to-work” state. We saw the Old West of Dobie satirized, and the sacred cow of the oil industry, the 27.5% depletion allowance, come under fire. The sixties found us facing campus unrest like the rest of the nation, and writers like Larry McMurtry, Billie Lee Brammer, Edwin “Bud” Shrake, and a small host of others began looking beyond the cult of Longhorn and Aggie football, the adoration of the old trail drivers and cowpunchers, and the sanctity of the Alamo. Three years before Dobie died in 1964, both Billie Lee Brammer and Larry McMurtry published their first novels. Both were departures from what one had come to expect from Texas writers. Brammer’s *The Gay Place* pictured a Texas in a state of serious change. Liberals were making a stir in Austin, and the governor of the state, Arthur “Goddam” Fenstermaker, was making liberal noises under his supposed conservative banner, much as Lyndon B. Johnson was to do later in his career. Fenstermaker was clearly a take-off on Johnson, soon to be president of the United States. The crudity that Johnson’s intimates had always seen in private was unveiled for the public—and LBJ was not amused. Nor were the more solid of Texas citizens. Partly because there was “language” and the sexual activities were not merely hinted at, Johnson is supposed to have told Billie Lee that he could not get far into *The Gay Place* because it was too dirty for him. This from a man whose language was as crude as some of his actions.

While Brammer wrote harshly about Texas politics, Larry McMurtry took a dimmer view of the ranchman’s world than Dobie ever did. In McMurtry’s novel, which Tom Pilkington said “dragged the western kicking and screaming into the twentieth century” (*Literary History of the American West*, 511), we see a

West in a sharp moral decline. Hud, the character who lent his name to the movie made from McMurtry's novel, was not interested in the virtues that Dobie had long espoused for the western hero. Homer Bannon, Hud's stepfather, is out of what Dobie called "the old rock," but Hud kills him and will sell off the land that Bannon has nurtured for so long. Hud is only interested in the money to be made off the ranch, and he does not care how the money comes in. He will drill for oil on land that Homer held sacred for cattle, and Hud is not above selling the diseased cattle that Old Wild Horse Homer Bannon had to kill in the novel.

What Pilkington is really telling us by saying that McMurtry dragged the western into the twentieth century is that he turned the western from romantic/realistic fiction toward the ironic, that he helped to institute a revolution in literature in the state. Since irony is the mark of a decadent literary period and since there is always a movement in a literary and cultural period from myth and romance toward realism and irony, this mauve period in Texas literature and culture was to be expected. McMurtry, Shrake, Brammer, Dan Jenkins, and a dozen other writers of the period are ironists and satirists. Irony shows the reality behind the sham. Satire has been defined as poking fun at people and institutions in order to reform them, but another definition of satire is that it simply makes fun of people and institutions. Period. All the writers who might be called mauve were practitioners of irony and satire. McMurtry's first three novels satirize the ranching West and the small towns in ranch country. Jenkins takes on sports and sportsmen. Shrake satirizes the whole culture of Texas from cities to industrialists to politicians. Brammer largely confines his satire to the political and social scene. Even a straight-line West Texas writer like Jane Gilmore Rushing wrote a 1961 short story entitled "Against the Moon," which painted an ironic picture of ranch women. (The story was turned into a novel in 1968 and elaborated on the theme of the young wife whose husband and the

other menfolk are interested in hunting and cowboying and expect “the little woman” to stay home contentedly.)

The cities had already come under some fire before the Age of McMurtry was underway. Two Fort Worth novels of an earlier period give unflattering pictures of city life. In 1926, a journalist named Frank Elser wrote a novel entitled *The Keen Desire*, which showed the underside of Fort Worth’s Tenderloin area and the rackets world of newspaper life. Then in 1941, James Atlee Phillips wrote a scathing novel about Fort Worth and its country club set. *The Inheritors* pictured Fort Worth as a place of Philistines and trust-fund trash. The novel did not have a terrific impact across the state and nation, but it rubbed some Fort Worthians raw. In 1952, Madison Cooper’s novel of Waco life, *Sironia, Texas*, created a similar stir in Waco. Cooper’s incredibly long and detailed depiction of upscale and downscale Waco lambasted this old cotton city on the Brazos. These city novels ran counter to the old romantic Texas of Dobie and company, for they came before a time when irony had become endemic. Shortly before McMurtry’s first novel, Hermes Nye wrote *Fortune Is a Woman* (1958), a small paperback original about Dallas in the 1930s that was a mild slap at the eastern-leaning and upwardly striving city on the Trinity. It never got the audience it deserved because it was a hundred-thousand-copy paperback and passed largely unnoticed except among Nye’s friends. Nye, a lawyer, writer, folklorist, and coffeehouse singer, had his autograph party at a cut-rate drugstore in Dallas, which lays another layer of irony on Texas life and culture.

Beginning in the mid-fifties, even outsiders began taking an ironic and satiric look at Texas. Edna Ferber’s *Giant* and the movie that followed it laid bare a number of flaws found in Texas life. She exposes matters of bigotry, vulgarity, and political malfeasance. It was one thing for an outsider like Ferber to take on the Texas myth, but when natives began what turned out to be a

relentless assault on the shibboleths of Texas, the day of Dobie's certainties was almost over. Elser and Phillips and Cooper and Hermes Nye constituted a small and barely burbling spring, but with McMurtry and those of his generation, the spring became a river of discontent.

Another Texan, Terry Southern, may exemplify the ironic even more strongly than McMurtry and Brammer. Southern (1924–1995) made such a splash outside Texas that he is often overlooked as a native writer. Born in Alvarado, a small town twenty-five miles south of Fort Worth, Southern attended Southern Methodist University before he saw service in World War II. After the war he took a degree in philosophy from Northwestern University and went to Paris to study at the Sorbonne on what remained of his G. I. Bill. In France, he wrote a story for George Plimpton's inaugural issue of *The Paris Review*, and in 1958, three years before McMurtry and Brammer saw their first novels in print, Southern published *Flash and Filigree* and the next year, *The Magic Christian*. His novel *Candy* (cowritten with Mason Hoffenberg) was published in the United States but later had the distinction of being banned in France. It was made into an unsuccessful film in 1968. Needless to say, *Candy* was not the sort of thing that Dobie or the establishment figures of the Texas Institute of Letters of the fifties would have approved. Several of Southern's Texas stories came out as early as 1955 and are reprinted in his 1967 collection, *Red Dirt Marijuana and Other Tastes*. A few of stories in *Red Dirt Marijuana* reappear in his 1991 novel, *Texas Summer*, one of his few works set in Texas. For a number of years following his early novels, he devoted himself to screenwriting, authoring or coauthoring some of the great cult films of the sixties. He cowrote *Dr. Strangelove* with director Stanley Kubrick in 1964, the year Dobie died. *Strangelove* became the signature movie of the antiwar period, and it is always listed among the greatest films ever made. Peter Sellers, who played sev-

eral roles, most notably the Kissinger-like Strangelove, is stamped on the sixties as almost no other actor unless it is Peter Fonda, who starred with Dennis Hopper and Jack Nicholson in Southern's *Easy Rider* (cowritten with Fonda and Hopper). Southern also adapted Evelyn Waugh's novel *The Loved One* for the movies, and he wrote the Jane Fonda film *Barbarella* and adapted John Fowles' novel *The Collector* for the movies. Terry Southern spent a couple of years in the early 1980s as a writer on the television show *Saturday Night Live*. He ended his career teaching screenwriting at Columbia University. It may help to place Southern firmly in this era of Beats and hippies by remembering that he is the only writer to appear on the cover of the Beatles' famous album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

During these years other writers began presenting a picture of Texas that would have been out of kilter with the works of the Old Three. Edwin Shrake's *But Not for Love* came out the same year as *Horseman, Pass By* and *The Gay Place*. In that novel, Shrake not only gives us pictures of Bohemian life in Fort Worth, but he excoriates the new millionaires who were making Texas a center for industries like electronics. And, like the others, Shrake is not careful of his language—or perhaps he is careful to shock by being the first writer to use the “m-f” word in Texas fiction. This new and irreverent brand of writing took place at a time when teachers were being fired for teaching J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* because of its use of the “f” word.

If you discount Terry Southern, who is the most un-Texan of Texas writers, Brammer and McMurtry and Shrake made up the vanguard of Texas writing and are the chief figures who taught us to see a new Texas. Things in Texas literature were never the same after these writers led the way. I am not sure that either Brammer or McMurtry meant to usher in a new age, but they did. Brammer, who only wrote the one novel, is, in certain quarters, a revered figure, but he is remembered as much for the waste of his

life as for the novel. A talented journalist, Brammer succumbed to the drug culture and died early of an overdose. He is still remembered fondly by people who knew him and who have celebrated him in books and articles, but it is McMurtry who became the representative of his age, the leader in the anti-Dobie movement. His leadership is made clear by his early essay "Southwestern Literature?" in his 1968 book of essays, *In a Narrow Grave*, and his later "Ever a Bridegroom" in the *Texas Observer* in 1981. McMurtry has remained the writer most often referred to as the star of Texas fiction. But it can be argued that he just happened to come along at a time when a new Texas was being born. But there is no doubt that he did much to make the Texas of the second half of the twentieth century markedly different from the Age of Dobie.

McMurtry created a Texas that looked different from the Texas of Dobie. Even in his novels about ranch life, McMurtry is aware that the acids of modernity were eating away at the Texas of Charlie Goodnight and Shanghai Pierce and Teddy Blue Abbott. From *Horseman, Pass By* to his recent works, life on the plains and prairies and ranches lacks the solidity of the world Dobie lived in and wrote about. The exuberance of the Texas mystique is gone, ranches are being broken up, cattlemen are losing their independence, and small towns are dying off. The few McMurtry characters who resemble Dobie heroes are clearly pictured as a few years away from extinction. Homer Bannon of *Horseman, Pass By*, Gideon Fry of *Leaving Cheyenne*, and Roger Waggoner of *Moving On* may have the traits that Dobie so admired in his old-timers, but they are dinosaurs in a world of oil wells and private planes.

One serious departure McMurtry makes from the realism/romanticism of Dobie is that the younger writer fills his world with grotesques and caricatures who reflect the absurd state of the world and the existentialism that was creeping into modern Texas. As time passed and McMurtry became a success,

the number of characters who are outright grotesques increases. In his first three novels, *Horseman, Pass By*, *Leaving Cheyenne*, and *The Last Picture Show*, we have our fill of satiric portraits, but few of them are the unbelievables and grotesques seen in his later novels. His novels of the seventies and beyond introduce us to characters as absurd as Danny Deck in *Some Can Whistle* or Vernon Dalhart in *Terms of Endearment* or Uncle El and his workers in *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*. But even when McMurtry's characters are not as outlandish as Godwin Lloyd-Jons of *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* and *Some Can Whistle* or the seven-foot-tall African, Mesty-Woolah, of *Anything for Billy*, McMurtry's characters tend to be caricatures of one kind or another. Even the old Texas Rangers Woodrow Call and Gus McCray are eccentric caricatures. Neither is a round character who makes us see the human side of people. They are types out of the western movies. Call is the stiff-upper-lip cowboy hero seen so often in Gary Cooper or John Wayne movies. Gus is the garrulous sidekick who is part Gabby Hayes and part James Stewart. It is instructive to note that McMurtry conceived these characters as movie heroes and hoped that he could sell a script that would attract John Wayne to play Call, James Stewart as Gus, and Henry Fonda as Jake. But none wanted to play a character declining into old age, so McMurtry turned his film project into a novel. In the television miniseries, Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duvall are better as Woodrow Call and Gus McCray than the Duke and James Stewart would have been, and Jake, who is hanged in mid-series, could have been played by almost anyone. In *Lonesome Dove* we see not only cowboy stereotypes but cartoon characters like the girl who can run faster than the wind and the dastardly and unbelievable Indian Blue Duck, the murderous Indian.

Part of the reason for the proliferation of McMurtry's eccentrics is that after the film success of *Hud* and *The Last Picture Show*, he has tended to see his work in terms of film scripts.

And films about modern Texas almost demand a cast of eccentrics the way earlier films about the Lone Star State required steely-eyed cowmen like John Wayne in *Red River*. It may be that one of the things that distinguished the Age of McMurtry from the Age of Dobie is the pervasive effect of the movies on American life. There were movies during Dobie's period of ascendancy, of course, but the movies about Texas were most often horse operas or celebrations of the Alamo, the Republic, and the early days of the Lone Star State. But from *Giant* (1956) forward, the picture of Texas that emerged in the movies tended to show the greed of the oil barons, the rapacious nature of the cattle kings, and the vulgarity of Texans. James Dean's Jett Rink in *Giant* is emblematic of the kind of vulgarity Texans indulged in when they struck it rich. Even if the emerging picture of Texas was overdone and satiric, it became the way America saw Texas, and writers from McMurtry onward were likely to show us a Texas of absurdity.

Absurdity reigns in the novels of others in this period of revolution, decadence, and existentialism in Texas writing. Edwin Shrake, more at home in the wild and whirling world of Brammer and other overt radicals, may have been quite sure that he was involved in a revolution. A sports journalist, Shrake was a member of the group that Jay Milner writes about in his *Confessions of a Mad Dog*. The group that some called "Mad Dog Inc." included Milner, Brammer, Larry L. King, Gary Cartwright, Willie Morris, Pete Gent, Ann and David Richards, and—to a lesser degree—Dan Jenkins. The Mad Dogs, except for Jenkins, were far to the left of McMurtry.

It hardly needs to be said that Texas had been content with itself from the days of San Jacinto until the late 1950s. For most of its history it had been the largest of "the forty-eight." It had cattle and oil and land. And the land that was not in private ownership had been left to Texas by the annexation agreement in

1845. No other state controlled its public lands, and Texas's ownership of those lands paid off handsomely when oil was struck on state land and a great amount of money was set aside for the Permanent University Fund devoted to the University of Texas and Texas A&M University. Texas was, to quote George Sessions Perry, "a world in itself." But the aftermath of World War II changed all that—or began the change. The fifties and sixties began the shattering changes in old Texas. The Lone Star joined the Union and began to savor all the angst, disillusionment, existentialism, bohemianism, and literary Modernism of the rest of the country. Television and film helped defeat Texan insularity. The eternal verities had long since been called into question in much of the world, but French intellectuals like Albert Camus and John Paul Sartre made existentialism a byword in the colleges of the East and finally in small pockets in Texas by the late fifties. Young Texans, urged on by the French and by Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsburg and the Beats of San Francisco, began to be ashamed of the state in a way that would not have occurred to J. Frank Dobie.

And then the election of John F. Kennedy did much to highlight Texas as the land of the misbegotten. Despite the fact that Kennedy chose Lyndon Johnson as his running mate, rabid right-wing Texans went after the Irish Catholic Kennedy in full cry. The Reverend Wally Amos Criswell, pastor of the largest Baptist church in Christendom (that absurd billing was often promoted by the First Baptist Church of Dallas in Criswell's day), wrote a tract against Kennedy before the Massachusetts senator had secured the nomination. Dallas oil millionaire H. L. Hunt had the screed printed and personally slipped copies under the doors of the delegates to the Democratic nominating convention. Even worse, the bumbling Hunt was caught doing it. After Kennedy was elected, the right wing in Texas became even more virulent. A crowd in Dallas spat on Lyndon Johnson and Lady Bird, and

someone hit United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson with a placard on a visit to Dallas.

Before Kennedy could serve out his term, he was killed in Dallas, the home of Neiman Marcus, H. L. Hunt, Lee Harvey Oswald, W. A. Criswell, and Jack Ruby. The aftermath of the murder of Kennedy cast a blight on Texas that lasted for a long time in the nation's consciousness and for an even longer time in Texas. Someone said, after the assassination, "It could have happened anywhere." Some disaffected Texan replied, "But it didn't." That retort was played up for years as a comment on Texas lawlessness. Kennedy's election had given the political left in Texas a life. Until the late fifties, Texas had been far to the right of most of the country. The Democrats who controlled Texas politics had been much more conservative than even northeastern Republicans. John Kennedy was in Texas on November 22, 1963, to help patch up differences between the old-right Democrats like John Connally and the new liberals represented by Senator Ralph W. Yarborough, Maury Maverick, Jr., and Henry B. Gonzalez. (Nelly Connally, in a 2003 memoir, denies that Kennedy was in Texas to patch up a rift, but her arguments are not fully believable.) John Connally, the sitting governor, had long been a sworn enemy of Ralph Yarborough and the "Democrats of Texas," an organization founded, and funded, by Ms. Frankie Randolph of Houston.

McMurtry was never the kind of outspoken liberal that Willie Morris was. Mississippian Morris was a crusading editor of *The Daily Texan* at the University of Texas, a Rhodes Scholar, and Ronnie Dugger's successor as editor of *The Texas Observer*, the state's only liberal publication at the time. Morris later went on to become editor of *Harper's*. Under his hand, the staid old magazine published Norman Mailer and other radicals in its pages. Morris at *Harper's* was helpful to the career of Larry L. King, as irreverent and anarchistic a writer as any to come from the Lone Star State.

Though not much is made of politics in McMurtry's essays or public pronouncements, it may be that the millionaire entrepreneur of Archer City has not outgrown his liberal ways. In March of 2002 he wrote a tongue-in-cheek article for the *Los Angeles Times* in which he takes some shots at the Bush administration and the Iraq war. In his essay, he casts the war as a movie with Tom Cruise playing George Bush and Jack Nicholson playing Vice President Dick Cheney. Of Cheney he says, "cooped up as he is, lurching only rarely out of his grotto to deliver his grumpy, power-to-the-powerful utterances, he almost achieves malevolence. And nobody beats Jack at malevolence" (11 Mar. 2002, B13). Other actors cast in McMurtry's projected movie are Clint Eastwood as General Tommy Franks, Meryl Streep as Laura Bush, and Adam Schindler as press spokesman Ari Fleischer. So apparently the enfant terrible of early days still rides the journalistic range.

The "better dead than red" ethic of the Joseph McCarthy's rabid anti-communism and right-wing ideology was challenged by more and more citizens. Larry McMurtry, Grover Lewis, and John Lewis, then students at North Texas State College, published a little mimeographed sheet called *CoExistence Review* that was a precursor of many of the underground papers that began to be published in Texas and the United States as the fifties and sixties saw a heightened awareness of liberal values. McMurtry and his colleagues were early in the era of change, for McMurtry was graduated from North Texas State in 1957.

The late fifties began the age of the underground newspaper of protest and cynicism. *The Village Voice*, the most famous of the alternative papers was begun in New York in 1955, and it was not until the sixties that the country was awash with underground papers of all sorts promoting radicalism, drugs, sex, rock 'n' roll, and civil rights. *The L.A. Free Press* was started in 1964, *The Berkeley Barb* in 1965, and *The San Francisco Oracle* in 1966. In 1968 Brent Stein, using the name Stoney Burns, began the radi-

cal Dallas paper *Notes from the Underground*, a paper quickly dismantled by the Dallas Police Department. But it was back in circulation within a few days.

By the sixties, rock music had progressed (or regressed in the minds of the mainstream Americans of the time) from the raucous lyrics of Elvis Presley and Little Richard and Texan Buddy Holly to the left-leaning, heavily antiestablishment works of Bob Dylan and a host of radical singers. In 1963, Bob Dylan's first album came out. It was titled *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and included such songs as "Blowing in the Wind," "Masters of War," and "Talkin' World War III Blues." Dylan had begun life as Bob Zimmerman, a Jew from Minnesota, but he renamed himself in honor of Dylan Thomas, the antiestablishment Welshman who died of drink in New York City in 1953. Dylan Thomas's two successful reading tours of the United States made him a cult figure among the young of the emerging Bohemian revolution, and his remarkable readings helped give rise to the poetry readings in coffeehouses around the country.

Young Bob Dylan's songs played off many anti-establishment themes. He was influenced by the songs of the disaffected: Mississippi Delta blues, gospel songs of backwoods churches, protest songs from the Depression era, and mountain music before it became Grand Ole Opry fare. Dylan's songs have hints of Jimmie Rodgers and Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie and the Reverend Thomas A. Dorsey, gospel singer and author of "Precious Lord Take My Hand." Dylan signaled to the new generation that "The Times They Are A-changin'." The radical Weathermen, who espoused revolution in American, took their name from Dylan lyrics that ran, "You don't need a weatherman to tell which way the wind blows." Answers were indeed "blowin' in the wind."

Not only did we see the rise of underground papers in Dallas and Houston and Austin, but little towns like Denton had an

antiestablishment paper called *The Denton Voice* in imitation of New York's *Village Voice*. Most of these papers were short-lived, but they had a serious impact on college students and left-leaning intellectuals. TCU's distinguished historian Paul Boller, who taught at SMU in the fifties and sixties, found himself in hot water with the Dallas establishment and was referred to by the *Dallas Morning News* as "an obscure professor" who was making trouble on the Hilltop, as SMU styled itself. Like many liberal professors, Boller was under an unofficial indictment by the conservative establishment. His book, *Memoirs of an Obscure Professor*, is an accurate portrayal of the way the leaders of Texas fought the changing times. *The Dallas Morning News* of that era presented the college professor in cartoons wearing tennis shoes, a beret, a ratty Van Dyke beard, and smoking through a cigarette holder. If the state of Texas had an official reactionary newspaper in the fifties and sixties, it was the *Dallas Morning News*, though there was no real liberal media outside the underground papers and *The Texas Observer*. The *News* was the standard bearer for the Hard Right, just as Dallas was home to some of the country's most reactionary citizens. Among the more flagrant was H. L. Hunt, who wrote a book called *Alpaca* (1960), which espoused the notion that people should be given votes in proportion to their wealth. In the 1950s Hunt met Dan Smoot, an SMU graduate and former FBI man who was an early member of the John Birch Society, and sponsored him on a radio show called "Facts Forum." Hunt also sponsored a radio show called "Life Line," a program of right-wing politics and fundamentalist Christianity. Dallas elected a Republican congressman named Bruce Alger who was one of the most reactionary politicians ever to serve in the U.S. House—at least before the days of Dick Armey and Tom DeLay. General Edwin A. Walker (whose flagpole flew the American flag upside down as a sign of distress) had been dismissed from the army for proselytizing for the right. He lived in a mansion on Turtle Creek

Boulevard and was probably the target of Lee Harvey Oswald's first assassination attempt.

Dallas was also home to Melvin E. Bradford of the University of Dallas, once the Wallace Party chairman for the county and later a Republican spokesman. During Ronald Reagan's first term, Mel Bradford was nominated for director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, but he was adjudged by Reagan conservatives as too right-wing and denied the post. Another Dallasite with far-right credentials was Bill Carruth, a John Bircher, whose fortune derived from early Dallas settlers. Carruth was a quieter voice who joined with Bradford and others to espouse right-wing causes. Long after the leftist fervor had died down, Carruth sought to become a behind-the-scenes mover for right-wing ideas in Dallas and at the University of North Texas, McMurtry's alma mater. But despite all the reactionary fervor in Dallas in the fifties and sixties, there was a strong coffeehouse/folk singing flavor that mimicked San Francisco and Greenwich Village. Hermes Nye, Michael Murphy, Lu Mitchell, B. W. Stevenson, Steve Fromholz, and many others of the left sang regularly at *The Rubiyat*, a coffeehouse named for the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, whose *carpe diem* philosophy seemed perfect for the sybaritic and disaffected. When a mini-Woodstock was held in Lewisville, a dozen miles outside Dallas, coffeehouse singer and songwriter Lu Mitchell wrote a folk-like protest song with the wonderful lines, "We were lewd and loose in Lewisville/ The Dallas News told us so." And the *News* told us so about many things: the perfidy of the left, the sanctity of American values, the dangers brought to us by rock 'n' roll, college professors, student protesters, and naked young people demonstrating at what were then called "happenings."

Hermes Nye, a cohort of Lu Mitchell's and author of *Fortune Is a Woman*, spoke out for liberal causes in Dallas at a time when such sentiments were unpopular. Nye came to Dallas from his native

Kansas, married the daughter of a successful businessman, and worked in the father-in-law's company for years. His novel about Dallas of the thirties owed a great deal to the Dallas of Nye's sixties. His self-published *Sweet Beast, I Have Gone Prowling* (1972) carries his iconoclastic views forward to the Age of McMurtry. Nye's Dallas was in the tradition of James Atlee Phillips's *The Inheritors* and Madison Cooper's *Sironia, Texas*, curious books that didn't attract the attention that McMurtry's did. *Sironia, Texas's* size of over a million words makes it more or less unavailable to general readers (Larry McMurtry called it a doorstep), but it is a magnificent production and shows a southern city of moderate size in all its pettiness and in some of its magnificence.

In many ways Waco is a Texas eccentric itself. It was once a great cotton center and had as one of its great features the Cotton Palace Exposition, a kind of state fair of agriculture. It is home to the world's largest Baptist university, but, oddly enough, the city has been "wet" longer than many Texas towns and cities. It sits in the middle of German and Czech country and has a flavor of Old Europe mixed with a Deep South tinge. Back in the nineteenth century, Waco had a red-light district that was very much in the open, and it was home to William Cowper Brann, whose paper, *The Iconoclast*, was a precursor of many of the underground papers of the sixties and seventies. Brann, who called Baylor University a "great storm center of misinformation," was gunned down by a disgruntled Baylor supporter on the streets of Waco in 1897. Before he died, Brann pulled his own gun and killed his attacker.

So while there were bursts of outraged liberalism at the time of Brann and in Texas in the 1940s and 1950s, it took the Cold War/Vietnam period for the times to change significantly. All across America after World War II, the times were indeed a-changin', and the changes were soon evident in Texas. In Crystal City in South Texas, Hispanic groups like PASO (Political

Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations) and La Raza were helped by the Teamsters Union to elect a slate of Hispanics to run the city government. In Rio Grande City, a melon strike broke out, and the Texas Rangers were called in to break heads. In 1968, a Farm Workers March, begun in the Valley, aimed for the state capitol in Austin. Governor John Connally met the marchers in New Braunfels and urged them to stay away from Austin, but the group made it all the way to the steps of the capitol. Egged on by new Texas politicians like Senator Ralph Yarborough and a band of liberals that included Ann Richards, Henry B. Gonzalez (later to be a U. S. congressman), state senator A. R. "Babe" Schwartz, attorneys Oscar Mauzy, David Richards, Otto Mullinax, and Wayne Burnett, liberals seemed about to flourish. At the time Texas had a number of liberal federal judges, notably Sarah T. Hughes of Dallas, who swore in Lyndon Johnson as president aboard Air Force One while it was still parked on the runway in Dallas following the assassination of Kennedy, and William Wayne Justice, a man hated by conservatives and as beloved by liberals as Ralph Yarborough.

Texas's storied vulgarity, the radical rightward politics, and the assumed backwardness made many new Texans ashamed of the state in a way that J. Frank Dobie never was. The vulgarity that Texans had always gloried in became something to be explained away. It may be that Texas vulgar reached its apogee when the Shamrock Hotel was opened to great and embarrassing fanfare in 1949. *Life* magazine covered the opening of the hotel decorated with thirteen shades of green—the selfsame hotel parodied in the movie *Giant*, a film that caused new Texans a good deal of discomfort but a sense of "I told you so: see, we are that vulgar." Texas the rough and tumble and independent was suddenly reduced to Texas the embarrassing. Texas oilmen, long thought to be tough, resourceful roughnecks like Spencer Tracy and Clark Gable in *Boom Town*, are now shown to be beneficiar-

ies of the 27.5% depletion allowance on oil, and by lobbying for and accepting that tax break marked themselves as feeders at the federal trough.

Neiman Marcus, which Texans had long thought of as the symbol of Texas good taste, was revealed as an emporium of Texas vulgarity with its Christmas presents costing a million or more dollars. Stanley Marcus, who came back to Texas from Harvard in 1927 with the mission to invent culture—and teach Dallasites to eat dark chocolate and ape French fashions—saw himself as the bearer of the best that has been thought and said on the East Coast. Neiman-Marcus was refinement itself, and southerners and southwesterners all came calling. One famous cartoon showed a farmwoman standing in front of a shack somewhere in East Texas with an oil well gushing in the background. The cut line reads, “Wonder what time Neiman Marcus closes?” And William Humphrey, who had long since moved to New York, wrote a short story about a family like the Beverly Hillbillies who load up in an old pickup, drive their oil money to Dallas to stay at the Adolphus Hotel, and make straight away to Neiman Marcus.

Segregation remained in place longer in Texas than in many other parts of the South. The Southwest Conference was fully segregated until 1966 when Jerry Levias received a scholarship to SMU. North Texas State College had integrated much earlier. In 1956 Abner Haynes and Leon King became the first black athletes to play football for a non-black college in Texas. Haynes became an All-American at North Texas State and went on to be the most important player in the new American Football League when he signed with the Dallas Texans in 1960, fully six years before a black athlete was admitted to the Southwest Conference. Dallas schools fought integration, and well into the seventies Dallas was called “the most segregated city in America.” In the spring of 2003, the thirty-year-old desegregation order was lifted,

but by then white flight had made the Dallas schools a minority operation.

David Richards, once married to ex-governor Ann Richards, has told the liberal story in his *Once Upon a Time in Texas: A Liberal in the Lone Star State*. Richards, a labor lawyer, fought the fights associated with unions, underground papers, segregation, migrant workers, and the attempts to overturn the Johnson/Rayburn axis that controlled Democratic politics in Texas. In his book, Richards re-fights all the old fights involving John Connally, who was Johnson's Democrat and Nixon's Republican. He lays out the perfidy of the *Dallas Morning News* back in the days when it was the standard bearer for reactionary politics. Richards replays the struggles over the rights of underground papers, like Austin's *Rag*, over the movement to unionize Texas and the battles fought against Birchers and other rabble-rousers.

Not only was Texas literature and politics undergoing change, but even the music of the state moved from the traditional to the experimental. Texas and Tennessee had been the strongholds of traditional country and western music. Many of the stars of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry were Texans. Jimmie Rodgers, Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzel, Milton Brown, and Hank Thompson had been the stars of the Dobie era, but by the seventies and eighties, Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings and Jerry Jeff Walker were introducing a new kind of "outlaw" country music to Texas and the world. This "outlaw" or "progressive country" had its center in Austin, which began vying with Nashville to be the mother church of country music.

During these years, other musicians went against the mainstream. Latin-flavored Tejano and conjunto music were anti-establishment, as was much indigenous rock 'n' roll. The best-known Tejano musicians were Flaco Jimenez, "Little Joe y La Familia," Freddy Fender, and Joe Teusch of Dumas, who renamed himself Joe "King" Carrasco after Gomez Fred Carrasco, a famous

San Antonio gangster killed in a prison break in Huntsville. Joe (King) Carrasco and the Crowns bill their music as Tex-Mex rock 'n' roll. Texas rock 'n' rollers included Roy Orbison, Doug Sahm (of the "Sir Douglas Quintet" and later allied with Flaco Jimenez and Augie Meyers as "The Texas Tornados"), Domingo "Sam" Samudio (of "Sam the Sham and the Pharoahs"), the strange "? and the Mysterians" (known only for the hit "96 Tears"), blues singer Marcia Ball (formerly of "Freda and the Firedogs"), and, of course, Janis Joplin, who got her start singing at Threadgills in Austin in the sixties.

Another revolutionary musical icon was and is Kinky Friedman, who added genre mystery fiction to his musical career. Friedman, whose father was a professor at the University of Texas, organized a band called "Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jew Boys," which featured "They Ain't Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore." As of 2003, Friedman began writing a column for *Texas Monthly* and announced his candidacy for governor of Texas.

The Austin music scene's most famous venue was Armadillo World Headquarters, an old armory building in downtown Austin that became the headquarters for rock/country/conjunto for most of the late twentieth century. The early story of Texas iconoclastic music is best told in Jan Reid's *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*. (A side note: Heidelberg, the publisher, was a short-lived publishing company started by David Lindsey, later to become the finest crime novelist of the Age of McMurtry.)

In the process that took Texas from a ranching, oil-derrick state to an urban, industrialized region, there is no question that Larry Jeff McMurtry "broods like an aged eagle" over the state's literary scene in a way that nobody else does. He is the main figure because he has had the most critical success and has made the most money. There was a time when a non-Texan would invoke the name of Dobie if Texas literature came up in conversation or in print. Now one is likely to hear, "Is there anyone else writing in

Texas except Larry McMurtry?" This rankles Texans with a taste for literature, but even to Texans who don't keep up with the state's literary scene, the question seems reasonable. A recent cover profile in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* is typical of the McMurtry legend. The cover photo shows him standing in the deserted street of Archer City looking dour. The article makes it seem as if McMurtry is the only story in Texas literature. But the McMurtry legend has some questioners: Scott Blackwood, in reviewing Don Graham's *Lone Star Literature* in the *Austin American-Statesman* on November 3, 2003, calls, "El Paso's own Cormac McCarthy . . . possibly Texas's greatest contemporary writer." Blackwood, himself a recently published fiction writer, is seconding a good many critics in lauding McCarthy. Blackwood laments the fact that McCarthy is absent from Graham's book, but notes that McCarthy does not allow his work to be reprinted. Some have questioned whether Cormac McCarthy is really a Texas writer at all. A relative newcomer to Texas, McCarthy began his career in Tennessee, where he wrote several novels in the Faulkner manner before moving to El Paso and choosing to remain aloof from the local literary establishment. His novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) caused a small stir in literary circles, and his Border Trilogy of *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain* made his name here and in other parts of the country. Some younger Texas critics organized the Cormac McCarthy Society, a kind of literary fan club, and have praised his works immensely. Others have dismissed him as someone writing mostly of Mexico and remaining distant from the locals. McCarthy was given a MacArthur "genius award" and seems to have no need for fellowship among his peers. Some have even questioned whether McCarthy is as good as his partisans allege. The role that he plays in Texas literature is still unsettled. And to borrow (and twist) a line from Waylon Jennings's song about Bob Wills, "When you're down in Texas, McMurtry's still the king."

Since McMurtry is the central figure of his “age,” more about his own career needs to be said. To go back a ways: McMurtry burst onto the scene in 1961 with the novel, *Horseman, Pass By*. The book won the Texas Institute of Letters award for the best fiction of the year and would have enjoyed the same fate, I suspect, as most TIL winners: it would have sold a few thousand copies and lain fallow awaiting McMurtry’s next book. But in 1963, the novel was turned into the blockbuster movie *Hud* starring Paul Newman, Melvyn Douglas, and Patricia Neal. This was just the beginning for the young Texas writer; each of his first three novels was filmed. *The Last Picture Show* was an Academy Award winner that made the careers of Cybill Shepherd, Ben Johnson (a character actor in many John Ford westerns), and Cloris Leachman. Johnson and Leachman won Academy Awards, as did McMurtry and Peter Bogdanovich for adapting the novel for film. The third film from what is now called *The Thalia Trilogy* was *Loving Mollie*, a real dud made from one of McMurtry’s best novels, *Leaving Cheyenne*. Had it not been for the movies made from the first three McMurtry novels, the young author might have gone through the next twenty-five years as “a minor regional novelist,” as a T-shirt he once wore proclaimed him. But those three novels and the two excellent films established McMurtry as the new voice of Texas letters.

But Larry McMurtry was not through after his successful early novels and movies. Now, forty years later, he is author of more than thirty books and manages to produce a book a year. He went from novels about small towns to novels about the cities and then to a multiplicity of subjects. But no matter how far afield he wanders, his intellectual and literary base is Texas.

McMurtry has spoken out against Texas writing and writers, and he has argued in more than one place that the day of the bucolic novel was over and that Texas authors should confront the more complex life of the city. At first he practiced what he

preached and followed the *Thalia Trilogy* with what Clay Reynolds, Mark Busby, and other critics have called the *Houston Trilogy*—*Moving On*, *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*, and *Terms of Endearment*. They make an interesting contrast to his early works, which the author himself dismisses as juvenilia. The three Houston novels are the essence of the mauve period, though later novels like *Some Can Whistle*, *Texasville*, *Buffalo Girls*, *Anything for Billy*, and *Duane's Depressed* focus heavily on absurdism and the grotesqueries of life. But it is in the Houston novels that we see most strongly McMurtry's break with what at one point he calls "country and western" fiction. The characters in all three novels, like so many of McMurtry's characters, are feckless or disappointed or grotesquely eccentric. I don't think any one of the novels is a success, though *Terms of Endearment* became a successful movie starring Shirley MacLaine and Jack Nicholson. Each of those novels bears a stamp that has marred many of Larry McMurtry's novels. The trouble is that he can't contain himself. He has a book moving along smoothly, and then suddenly the novel is off down some trail that is only tangentially connected to the plot he is developing. The result of these meanderings is that McMurtry produces books filled with interesting plots entangled by subplots that distract. At least two hundred pages of the July Johnson subplot and a few other extraneous matters could be cut from *Lonesome Dove*. The July Johnson material takes us away from what we most want to follow, that is, the movement of Gus and Woodrow and their crew up the trail. I could point to dozens of places in that novel and most of the later ones where the story gets away from McMurtry. It is possible to argue that the McMurtry subplots are in keeping with postmodern fictional tendencies, but they are probably the result of his inability to edit and delete.

I mentioned earlier the eccentric grotesques like Blue Duck and Danny Deck in *Some Can Whistle* and noted that McMurtry's tendency toward the absurd and unbelievable marked his later

novels, but even Danny Deck in the 1972 *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* is on the far edge of ordinary. Deck publishes a novel, drops out of school, marries an unbelievable girl/woman who hates him, and begins wandering the country from Texas to San Francisco and back. He falls in with some Ken Kesey types, visits a mad uncle who employs a worker who has sex with a posthole, and drifts drunkenly about the West and Southwest. In Deck's later appearance in *Some Can Whistle*, he is found wearing a caftan and living in a town like Archer City in an adobe mansion. Danny has made his money by writing a television show, and now he is living with the madcap bisexual Dr. Godwin Lloyd-Jons and some equally grotesque hangers-on. Out of nowhere, Danny receives a phone call from the daughter he never knew he had and has to rejoin the world briefly to get her and her absurdist entourage back to his home, which is not far from Wichita Falls. One hopes that Deck is not autobiographical, though there are some scary parallels between him and his author. McMurtry married briefly, went west and fell in with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, and wound up living in a remote town on the South Plains of Texas. Readers of Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* remember that Kesey and his pranksters loaded up in a psychedelic bus and headed for Houston to visit McMurtry, who was teaching at Rice at the time. McMurtry has none of Danny Deck's fecklessness, for he has always worked hard. In addition to more than thirty books of fiction and nonfiction, he has written for newspapers and review journals and runs one of the largest bookstores in the country in his native Archer City. His bookstore is scattered all over the small, dusty town that we are all so familiar with from *The Last Picture Show*. There is little else in Archer City now. McMurtry has filled many of the town stores with his books—probably half a million by now.

It is not clear why all of McMurtry's novels are botches, but they are. Even the good ones. I can think of no McMurtry novel

that does not have a serious flaw. The one thing he can't resist is the prolonged riff that could be cut out to make the book better. Some years ago, I heard McMurtry say he writes five pages a day, day in and day out. At home or away. Such discipline may lure him into these sidelights that detract from his fiction. Sometimes they are funny and interesting, but even then they interrupt the main point of the book. It is hard to think of a McMurtry novel that is not in some way absurdist fiction. Think of some of his characters: Blue Duck, Earl Dee, the killer in *Some Can Whistle*, the General and Aurora and Vernon in *Terms of Endearment*, Uncle El and his mad wife in *All My Friends*, all the characters in *Anything for Billy* and *Buffalo Girls*. The list could fill many pages. Even his normal characters often stretch credulity. Patsy Carpenter of *Moving On* cries hard and soft and often throughout the book. Gus and Call are a fine pair of eccentric Texas Rangers living past their times. One is taciturn and stolid, the other garrulous and full of fun. At one point Gus says, "I always wanted to shoot an educated man." Duane in *The Last Picture Show*, *Texasville*, and *Duane's Depressed* moves from normal to odd over the course of the sequence. McMurtry loves a funny scene, and he will write them even when they don't fit the story. But he is also deadly serious about many things, including his fiction and his nonfiction and apparently his business interests.

It is really hard to know what to make of Larry McMurtry. He is remote and unfriendly on most occasions. He is generous and open on others. He is a true intellectual and a writer of madcap scenes. His essays on film, on the West, and on literature are serious. He is a fine essayist, and in his essays he manages to avoid the drifting asides that mar his fiction. His early essays—the ones he is famous for as a critic—are pamphleteering in that he is at pains to rid the Texas literary world of Dobie, Bedichek, and Webb. Part of that is sound criticism, but part of it is to pave the way for Larry McMurtry. He does what William Wordsworth did

in “The Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*.” Wordsworth wanted to rid the world of Alexander Pope and the poetry of the past in order to prepare the way for his kind of verse. McMurtry is doing some of the same things in “Southwestern Literature?” and “Ever a Bridegroom.”

It is not fair of me or anyone else to focus full attention on the two famous or notorious essays that McMurtry wrote about Texas writing, for he has written many clear and intelligent essays on many subjects. The essays collected in *Film Flam* mark him as a serious film critic in the class with James Agee and Pauline Kael, two of America’s best-known and most-trusted commentators on movies. Some of the essays from that volume are incisive essays on Hollywood in general, on television, and on McMurtry’s life in the film world. Even some of the essays in *In a Narrow Grave* are memorable, though the tone often used in that volume is sarcastic and ironic. Witness the piece on the old fiddler’s convention and the building of the Astrodome in Houston. But everyone admires “Take My Saddle from the Wall: A Valediction,” which is an essay on an uncle as well as a paean to the spirit of the American West. In *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond*, McMurtry looks at the art of storytelling and his own role in the creation of fiction. He notes that the German critic Benjamin is careful not to confuse the novelist with the storyteller and then McMurtry says,

The question I want to investigate is how someone like myself, growing up in a place that had just been settled, a place, moreover, in which nothing of consequence had ever happened, became a novelist instead of being content to worry over an old woman who had been traded for skunk hides, or a dairy farmer who had given way to despair. Does mere human memory, the soil that nourished storytelling, still have any use at all? (34)

The volume explores serious questions about novel writing and about how McMurtry himself developed from a failed cowhand on his family's ranch to a writer of fiction. In a book that has some of the same meandering qualities I have criticized in his fiction, McMurtry does a good job of showing how his life and his family and his place shaped him into the author of so many novels.

In *Paradise* McMurtry writes from a vacation in far-off Tahiti about the marriage of his parents and the late-learned fact that Hazel McMurtry had been married before she married Jeff, Larry's father. Part memoir and part recollection of a life with his parents, the book shifts back and forth between his vacation in Tahiti and the Marquesas and his memories of his parents' marriage and, after more than forty years, their separation. At the end of the book, he returns to visit his mother in the hospital in Wichita Falls. She is dying, and he says, "When I squeezed her hand, there was no response. I was there but she was far, far as the Marquesas, near the place where the light leaves. She had, perhaps, been waiting, though and perhaps knew I was home. She died the next afternoon" (159). This very short book is revealing and moving and shows a side of McMurtry not often seen.

Roads is a book about McMurtry's drives across America. He is a famous long-distance traveler like his main character in the novel *Cadillac Jack*, and in this volume he says he wants one last go at the highways of America. Along the way in this delightful book, he wanders far afield, telling tales about places on the way and people who have lived and are living in the byways of America. It captures something about McMurtry's interests and curiosity about a life he often seems aloof from.

Sacagawea's Nickname: Essays on the American West is a compilation of a dozen essays he published in *The New York Review of Books* over the years, ranging from the Lewis and Clark explorations to lives of the Zunis and the Five Civilized Tribes to writ-

ers like Angie Debo and Janet Lewis. McMurtry notes in the introduction that he had reviewed much fiction over his career but had avoided books about the West. The essays here are his return to the subject that has absorbed him, either consciously or unconsciously, for his entire life. The essays in this collection show McMurtry at his best: He is clear, intelligent, and constantly using his essays to learn about the world around him.

The two most famous of the McMurtry essays brought down a great deal of criticism on his head, for the Dobie legacy was alive when he wrote "Southwestern Literature?" in 1968. There was a second outburst when "Ever a Bridegroom" appeared in 1981. The Dobie legacy continues in the works of people like Elmer Kelton and a host of Texas writers who write of a romantic/realistic Texas, but there are many more who have been freed to write existential or satirical material since McMurtry made the genres respectable. The list could include scores, among them John Henry Irsfeld's *Little Kingdoms*, a gritty and terrifying novel about a trio of killers terrorizing West Texas, or the mystery fiction of David Lindsey, who presents Houston as more of a wasteland than McMurtry ever imagined. And it is not surprising that Mexican American writers like Rolando Hinojosa, Tomás Rivera, Lionel Garcia, Max Martínez, Aristeo Brito, and Américo Paredes are not only violently anti-Dobie but much in the McMurtry world of satire and absurdism. Paredes has a buffoonish J. Frank Dobie take-off named H. Hank Harvey in his bitter Brownsville novel *George Washington Gomez*. (Don Graham thinks Paredes might have meant H. Hank to represent Walter P. Webb also, for he had little use for Webb, whose hagiographic book on the Texas Rangers showed them in a light far different from the view the Texas Mexicans had of the *ranches*, whom they saw as a blood-thirsty band of enforcers of white supremacy in a brown land.) Paredes wrote *George Washington Gomez* back in the thirties when he was a newspaperman in Brownsville and long before he earned

his Ph.D. at the University of Texas with a dissertation on the corridos written about the Mexican border hero Gregorio Cortez. Paredes's study of Cortez was published as *With His Pistol in His Hand* and set him off on a distinguished career as a professor and folklorist at the University of Texas. Many Texas Mexican writers credit Américo Paredes with beginning the movement toward an authentic Mexican-American literature. If Paredes is not thought of as the begetter of Tex-Mex lit, then the honor is often accorded Tomás Rivera, whose 1970 book *And the Earth Did Not Part* ("y no se lo trago la tierra"), is the first noteworthy narrative of Texas Mexican life. Rivera's book (later retranslated by Rolando Hinojosa as *This Migrant Earth*) tells the story of a family of migrant farm workers moving north with the crops during the hard days when bracero laborers followed the harvests from the Mexican border to the northern parts of the Midwest.

The most important of the Texas Mexican novelists is Rolando Hinojosa (he has been published variously as Rolando Hinojosa y Smith, Rolando Hinojosa-S, and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, but his recent works are under the name Rolando Hinojosa). Hinojosa fits into this age of revolution and decadence because he presents a picture of the Rio Grande Valley with the gloves off and because his works are very much modernist and post-modernist in form. The books in Hinojosa's *Klail City Death Trip Series* are mostly sketches of life in "the Valley." His first books bear titles like "*Estampas del Valle y otras obras*" ("Sketches of the Valley and Other Works") or "*Notas, Generaciones, y Brechas*" ("Notes, Generations, and Trails"). These works are indeed sketches, and in order to read the books, it is necessary to interpolate a great deal. Characters appear, sometimes in half a page, only to appear later in connection with some other character or event. Characters who seem unimportant often appear later—or in another book—as major figures. All Hinojosa's books are short, and almost all are disjointed and disconnected. If all his

works were published in one volume, the whole opus would not be more than four hundred pages, if that long. His themes are several: life among the mexicanos as lived under the noses of the Anglos, who own the land and the banks and the main businesses; the porous nature of the border between the United States and Mexico and the refusal of Border mexicanos to respect the nationalism of Mexico and the United States; the plight of the farm laborer; the attempts by educated Texas-Mexicans to make their way in the Anglo world by education and financial success. The main Anglo family in Klail City descends from Colonel Klail (read Captain Richard King of King Ranch fame). The Klails and the Belkens dominate the Valley in the same way the King-Kleberg family did for several generations. The city is Klail City and the county is Belken. The Mexican-American protagonists are Rafe Buenrostro and Jehu Malacara (Buenrostro can be roughly translated as “good face” and Malacara as “bad face”). The two young men are Hinojosa’s age and represent the two sides of his and perhaps everybody’s personality. In half a dozen very short volumes, the ironies of the Valley and the dire lives lived by the poor Mexicans are played out. Hinojosa attempted to write more connected and lengthier fiction in his mystery novels, *Partners in Crime* (1995) and *Ask a Policeman* (1998). In these novels, both imitations of standard mysteries, the lives of the Valley Mexicans are still central issues.

Women writers have also been freed by McMurtry. Shelby Hearon’s series of Texas novels about marriage and divorce, women’s issues, infidelity, and city life present a version of Texas that is modern and often disturbing. Sarah Bird’s *Alamo House* (1986) and *The Boyfriend School* (1990) are blistering satires on Austin life in the same madcap way that her *Virgin of the Rodeo* (1993) satirizes the rodeo world and her *Yokota Officer’s Club* (2000) takes aim at military life. Also strongly present in the McMurtry world are Mary Karr’s dark memoirs of family dysfunc-

tion on the Gulf Coast, *The Liar's Club* (1995) and *Cherry* (2000), and Kim Wozencraft's *Rush* (1990) about the horrors of being a female undercover narc in Beaumont during "the war on drugs."

Two writers worth comment who landed in the middle of the Age of McMurtry and who represented a generation behind McMurtry and Brammer and Shrake are Pat Ellis Taylor and Kathryn Marshall. Taylor has two books of nonfiction, a number of poems and stories, and one novel of interest. Entitled *Afoot in a Field of Men and Other Stories from Dallas* [no apostrophe in original publication] *East Side*, the collection is a series of a dozen sketches about hippie life in Dallas in the seventies. An anonymous reviewer on an Alibris website said of the book, "Amidst low riders and Harley bikers, hard-shell Baptists and cut-rate marijuana, a strong woman holds her strange and decidedly non-nuclear family together. . . ." Another dust-jacket commentator, also anonymous, calls the book a collection about "rednecks, hippies, and small-time con men in the fraying slums of Dallas. . . ." The stories were published separately in various little magazines and were collected under the title listed above by Slough Press in Austin in 1983. And then in 1988, Atlantic Monthly Press republished the book and gave it nationwide circulation. The main character, whose husband is growing a giant marijuana plant in the closet, works as a secretary in Dallas by day and lives the hippie life after hours. The book does a good job capturing the whole era of drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll. One of the memorable pieces is the visit Pat and some of her women friends make to the male strip club La Bare. Note: pat and leo and all the characters are set in small letters, carrying out the hippie, experimental phase, so popular in the sixties and seventies. Ms. Taylor, who now calls herself Pat Little Dog, won a Southwest Book Award for her *Border Healing Woman* about the Big Bend curandera Jewel Babb. She had earlier won an NEA writing fellowship and was a Dobie-Paisano fellow in 1986.

Ten years earlier, Kathryn Marshall, who is somewhat younger than Ms. Little Dog, was also named to the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship and spent a term at the J. Frank Dobie ranch outside Austin. She had already published one novel, *My Sister Gone* (1975) and was to write only one more, *Desert Places* (1977). Like Ms. Little Dog, Kathryn Marshall was firmly fixed in the hippie movement and her novels feature drugs, drink, and sex and reflect the ennui of the young of the era. Unlike McMurtry and some of the older writers who seem to be looking in from outside, Marshall and Little Dog know the territory firsthand. After her two novels and a few stories in a similar vein, Kathryn Marshall took a job first with *American Way*, the airlines magazine, and later with Alabama's Oxmoor Publishing (best known for cookbooks and *Southern Living*). Her last book was a series of interviews, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam* (1987). She gave up writing altogether and became a nurse. While Marshall was at the Dobie ranch, her sister, Caroline, an artist, stayed with her and helped her paint out all the memorable sayings and cartoons of previous Dobie-Paisano fellows, all this to the consternation of Dobieites and Paisanos everywhere. Caroline Marshall later studied screenwriting with Terry Southern at Columbia and wrote a memory of the late Alvarado author for *The Paris Review*. She and Southern penned a screenplay about a Texas sheriff, but it has not been filmed.

Another writer who is on the far side of Texas romantic is James Crumley, whose novels are set mostly in Montana, where he teaches at the University of Montana. Crumley, who was born in South Texas and attended Texas A&I in Kingsville, wrote first about army life with his *One to Count Cadence* (1969), but his private-eye novels set in the Pacific Northwest go beyond the genre and capture the freewheeling times of hippies and dopers. His early work is best: *The Wrong Case* (1975), *The Last Good Kiss* (1978), and *Dancing Bear* (1983). His best work features private

detectives living on the edge—one getting by on peppermint schnapps and cocaine and all running the roads from Montana to Washington to California.

James Lee Burke, a native of Houston, has more than twenty detective novels set in Louisiana and Montana, where he now teaches. Burke has a series set in and around New Orleans and New Iberia, another group set in the Texas Panhandle, and scattered novels set in Montana and environs. Burke is more serious than many genre writers and is often near the mainstream. Burke's world is, like Crumley's, one of legal and ethical borderlands where the heroes are often as ravaged as those found in McMurtry's city novels.

No listing is ever complete and no argument is ever fully rounded, but I hope I have shown some of the effects that McMurtry and his colleagues of the mauve decades of Texas fiction and nonfiction have wrought. With them, the romance of Old Texas is replaced by the irony and existentialism found in the post-World War II world in European and American literature.