

# INTRODUCTION

## TEXAS LITERARY OUTLAWS

On the morning of November 22, 1963, Jack Ruby visited the offices of *The Dallas Morning News*. He was not there to register a complaint about the newspaper's coverage of President Kennedy, though certainly Ruby was offended by its full-page advertisement condemning Kennedy as a tool for Communist subversion. Instead, Ruby came in to apologize. He had exchanged terse words the evening before with a young *Morning News* writer—a man who happened to be dating the star stripper at Ruby's nightclub. Her boyfriend, the young *Morning News* writer, would find himself in a unique position as events unfolded in Dallas during 1963. Not only was he intimate with Jack Ruby and the city's underworld, he also moved easily through parties hosted by the Dallas' right-wing elite, many of whom fervently believed that John F. Kennedy's death was the best thing that could happen to their country. As the writer's later novel would show, Kennedy's murder marked the culmination of a long period of madness and hysteria in Texas' second-largest city.

Across town on November 22, another young writer was preparing to join the presidential motorcade. Once a part of Lyndon B. Johnson's staff, he had already published a novel that became hailed as the definitive portrait of LBJ's personality. Before the day was out, the subject of his book would become president of the United States.

Other young Texas writers also revolved in close orbits around the JFK assassination. One had helped plan Kennedy's trip from Washington, D.C., and in the wake of his beloved president's death, he threw away a successful career in politics to begin life anew as a freelance writer. Another writer, living in Dallas, immediately realized that having a president assassinated "in what was essentially our neighborhood" imbued him with a special responsibility. In the years ahead, he would return often to the subject of the Kennedy assassination, concluding, "My chain of fate is Dallas, 1963."

It seems remarkable enough that so many emerging Texas writers happened to be close to the epicenter of the Kennedy assassina-

tion. Yet even more striking is that these four men banded together with two others to form a distinct group—a Texas literary cluster. The events in Dallas 1963 were but one instance in which these chroniclers were at the very center of the action. As Texas moved into the modern era, these six writers closely observed Texas’ defining moments: the transformation from a rural to an urban environment; Lyndon Johnson’s rise to national prominence; the civil rights movement; Tom Landry and the Dallas Cowboys; Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and the Outlaw music scene; the birth of a Texas film industry; Texas Monthly magazine; the flowering of “Texas Chic”; and Ann Richards’ election as governor.

Coming of age in the sixties, in a state largely bereft of a literary tradition, these literary outlaws created their own rules. Several other notable writers with Texas roots also emerged in those years, among them Larry McMurtry, Shelby Hearon, John Rechy, John Graves, James Crumley, William Humphrey, and William Owens. The outlaws became distinctive, however, by forming a single group whose members found their voices in opposition to Texas’ inherent conservatism. They led lives of notorious excess, becoming as well known for their raconteuring as for their literary production. They found affirmation in their work but also endured poverty, alcoholism, divorces, censorship, rejections, arrests, and denunciations. In contrast to the backstabbing often found among literary groups, these writers supported each other, inspired each other, and wrote for each other. They are peers, rivals, and have been sometimes friends of Larry McMurtry, but their relationships with Texas’ most famous writer have always been ambivalent, and McMurtry has been critical of their approach to life and art.

Not all of the writers survived the turmoil of the times. The group’s initial spark, a self-educated intellectual named Billy Lee Brammer, died in 1978 of a methamphetamine overdose. His 1961 novel, *The Gay Place*, inspired in part by Lyndon Johnson, is considered Texas’ first modern urban novel. Often viewed as the writer in the group with the most “pure, sparkling, literary talent,” Brammer worked as an aide to LBJ for several years in the 1950s, hung out with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the sixties, and helped found Texas Monthly in the 1970s. In the throes of drug addiction, his writing dissipated, yet he remained an important influence. As Brammer told his friend Larry L. King, “Writing is just so murderously hard for me in recent years . . . though my skull feels livelier than ever.”

Though not everyone remembers it, Larry L. King was once better known than Larry King, the talk show host on TV. At a time when

literate magazine journalism mattered, King was a star at Harper's, America's most relevant magazine during the peak of the sixties. A college dropout from Texas Tech, King became the only writer in America ever nominated for a National Book Award, a Broadway Tony, and a television Emmy. Yet for much of his career, his commercial prospects remained meager until, as a lark, he agreed to help write a stage play. That became the smash Broadway hit, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. Though *Whorehouse* has come to overshadow his other work, many of King's subsequent plays—*Kingfish* and *The Dead Presidents' Club*, for instance—are superior, and he remains a singular presence in American letters. A brawler from the West Texas oil patch with “a deep and abiding commitment to America and to authentic American values,” King possesses rare humor and insight. He is also among the most fearlessly honest writers this country has produced. His 1972 book, *Confessions of a White Racist*, is a soul-baring account that reveals the devastating depths of white attitudes towards African Americans in twentieth-century America.

Peter Gent is the only writer of the group not born in Texas. A native of Michigan, Gent played five seasons for the Dallas Cowboys during the 1960s, becoming a close friend of teammate Don Meredith. Gent began hanging out with the writers and, influenced by them, later tried his hand at fiction. The result was *North Dallas Forty*, an unflinching look at the dehumanizing corporate culture of professional football. Gent's novel changed forever how many people view the game. He became a literary star, but “didn't always handle fame and fortune as well as friends wished.” Soon, Gent was carrying “several loaded guns and believed that the CIA and the Mafia were neck and neck in the race to bring about his end.” The stresses on the ex-football player's psyche would eventually fracture his relationships with the other Texas writers.

Dan Jenkins, author of *Semi-Tough*, is the most commercially successful writer in the group. He often distanced himself from the others during the long days and nights of “Mad Dog” excesses, yet he shares a deep connection, primarily because of his common history and long friendships. Born in Fort Worth, Jenkins worked alongside Bud Shrake and Gary Cartwright under legendary sportswriter Blackie Sherrod. Eventually graduating to *Sports Illustrated*, Jenkins became the most influential sportswriter of his generation, admired for his brilliant leads, deadpan one-liners, and sardonic commentary. He turned to fiction at the age of forty-three, and there the Jenkins' formula produced a streak of best-sellers that showcase his outrageous humor while largely defying

such literary conventions as plot, character, conflict, and motivation. Jenkins, more than any of the other writers, has drifted rightward in his politics over the years, and this personal transformation has coincided with changes in his fiction.

Gary Cartwright is Texas' own "Gonzo" journalist. A long-time writer for *Texas Monthly*, Cartwright began in the 1950s and 1960s as a police reporter and sportswriter in Dallas-Fort Worth. A renowned prankster, Cartwright lived by the ethos, "Writers figure things out, not by logic but by living. Imagination can take a writer great places, but only if he's already been there." From 1967 to 1982, he endured a poverty-stricken freelance career, writing alternately brilliant and horrible stories and suffering crushing rejections. Eventually, his writing voice came to match his extraordinary personal history, giving him a singular advantage over every other journalist in the state.

Edwin "Bud" Shrake is viewed by his peers and a small circle of critics as one of the most accomplished novelists Texas has produced. Yet his fiction has not sold well, and he's largely made his living over the years as a sportswriter, screenwriter, and biographer. He joined his pal Dan Jenkins at *Sports Illustrated* in the 1960s and 1970s; he turned to Hollywood in the 1980s; and he collaborated with Willie Nelson on the singer's autobiography. In the 1990s, he co-wrote Harvey Penick's *Little Red Book*, which became the best-selling sports book ever. Though nearly unknown as a novelist, Shrake has produced two books that rank among America's finest since World War II. His 1968 "historical" novel, *Blessed McGill*, a deeply humorous and spiritually resonant work, is the first "absurdist western" and one of the most original and powerful novels to emerge from the American Southwest. In 1972 Shrake published *Strange Peaches*—a searing portrait of Dallas in the days leading up to the Kennedy assassination. The sixties gave rise to excellent music, journalism, and film, but relatively few great novels were written of the era. Bud Shrake's *Strange Peaches*, though largely overlooked, is among them.



For much of the twentieth century, Texas was a mostly inhospitable place for literary artists. There were few presses, no major publishers, and only scattered readers. Young writers felt trapped by the state's confines and found it necessary to leave in order to make their way in the larger world. From the 1920s through the 1950s, Texas letters were

dominated by a single voice—J. Frank Dobie, who often seemed more at home around the campfire than in front of a typewriter. Along with his compadres, historian Walter Prescott Webb and naturalist Roy Bedichek, Dobie formed the state's first literary cluster, the Texas Triumvirate. The group's tales of Texas Rangers, buried treasure, bear hunters, coyotes, and Longhorns kept alive a sense of Texas' rural, mythic past. But their work was far removed from the currents of modern American literature.

Shrake, King, Brammer, Cartwright, and Jenkins grew up aware of Dobie and Webb, but the old-timers' emphasis on the past did not resemble the Texas they knew, a land of fast-growing cities and hard-edged political issues. Their own literary influences became Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the Beat Generation. For these emerging hipsters, the choices were clear during years of political and social upheaval. Generations of Jim Crow laws were coming under attack; a conservative state government was challenged by liberal activists; an undeclared war in Vietnam seemed to defy America's basic principles; discredited "objective" reporting was replaced by a New Journalism; and notions of "normalcy" were upended by drugs that provided new ways of perceiving the world.

The literary outlaws chronicled, with daring, wit, and sophistication, the state's culture during a time of rapid social change. In long-lasting, versatile careers, they have produced journalism, fiction, drama, biographies, and screenplays. They helped Texans attain a new awareness of their state. Taken as a whole, their work establishes an authentic Texas vision, one far removed from the fanciful notions promulgated by outsiders and the state's dewy-eyed sentimentalists. Yet much of their work also represents, as one critic observed, "a last ditch stand for what has come to be called male chauvinism."

As full-time writers unconnected to any university, this group showed, for the first time, that professional writers could survive in Texas—though the living was not always easy. They helped develop Austin as the state's artistic hub, and they beat a path to Hollywood for other writers to follow. They changed the state's language and its literary climate. They've recovered from years of drug and alcohol abuse, and their attitudes toward women have largely evolved. Now, as active and engaged writers in their seventies, they continue to provide inspiration. What follows is one version of their story.