Summer Books Issue

# THE TEXAS Observer

A JOURNAL OF FREE VOICES

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Sam Hurt

## Bob Sherrill on Poppy Bush
## Don Graham on Cormac's Trilogy
## Plus an Excerpt of Gary Webb's *Dark Alliance*

THE TEXAS
# Observer

**VOLUME 90, NO. 14**

A JOURNAL OF FREE VOICES

*We will serve no group or party but will hew hard to the truth as we find it and the right as we see it. We are dedicated to the whole truth, to human values above all interests, to the rights of human-kind as the foundation of democracy: we will take orders from none but our own conscience, and never will we overlook or misrepresent the truth to serve the interests of the powerful or cater to the ignoble in the human spirit.*

*Writers are responsible for their own work, but not for anything they have not themselves written, and in publishing them we do not necessarily imply that we agree with them, because this is a journal of free voices.*

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## DIALOGUE

### ANOTHER GALBRAITH?

Social Security is in crisis I read, and under the terms by which it now operates, I believe the evidence supports the crisis label. But Mr. Galbraith says there is no crisis ("I Don't Want to Talk About It," by James K. Galbraith, April 24). I cannot find the issue in which he wrote the bafflingly glib piece, so I cannot quote him, but his argument lacked evidence. I wish to read a well-argued contrarian view, not something in the William Murchison style of "It Is, Because I Say It Is." And what of the awful finish, urging us all to have another baby? This sort of unwarranted pride in his genes amazes me, and the "another baby" ideal is ruining the world, ever more rapidly. Send this guy back to the library, or, I should say, make him leave the very small corner of the library in which he has come to rest.

I recommend to your readers Bill McKibben's cover story in *Atlantic Monthly,* May 1998, which argues eloquently against the outdated idea of the more children the better. As always, thanks for the wonderful reporting.

*John Ledbetter*
*Via internet*

### NO JOKE

I applaud Michael King's fine reporting in the "The High Cost of Hate Radio" (June 19). Keep up the good work!

I think the article speaks to a few important things: (1) the quality of civic communication has dropped to incredibly low levels; (2) more and more, people see violence as a way to solve problems; (3) the people on the jury *really* dislike the Clintons, Gore, and LBJ Broadcasting Company. (This is only speculation, but: do you think the jury would have responded the same if someone had joked about killing Reagan?)

*Jim Siekmeier*
*San Angelo*

### RADICAL POETRY?

When I used to have something bad to say about somebody, Tula — the black woman who raised me — used to tell me, "Bobby, bite your tongue." Well, my tongue has long been bleeding for having to endure the *Observer* selections of poems. But no more. Naomi Shihab Nye's recent piece ("The President and the Poets / Keeping the Voices Alive," June 5), has forced me into words.

A poet's business, I believe, is to tinker with the language and, therefore, with the way we think and feel. In this way John Bennett or Ezra Pound — I can't remember who — said this "poets become the antennae of the culture." It's a radical occupation. Or should be.

The poems selected for the *Observer* are not meant to challenge the reader or, God forbid, offend her. They are placed there, instead, as ornament, a sop to middle-class ideas of what culture is, something to hang on the wall, like my mother used to hang nice but mediocre watercolors on the wall. The paintings made my mother feel better.

Which is what Nye's article on her trip to Washington also does. She tells us about seeing so-and-so, talking to the First Lady about Chelsea, and asking the President for his autograph. She thereby loses a perfect opportunity to speak about poetry, its purpose in our society, and, likewise, the expectations that we might have of our poets.

Hayden Carruth, in declining his invitation to this same Millennium Evening, said in his public letter to the President:

> *...it would seem the greatest hypocrisy for an honest American poet to be present on such an occasion at the seat of the power which has not only neglected but abused the interests of poets and their readers continually, to say nothing of many other administratively dispensable segments of the population.*

What does Naomi think about this comment? And why didn't she report on his refusal to go to the White House?

*Bobby Byrd*
*El Paso*

*The Editors respond:*
*I was aware of Hayden Carruth's rhetorical boycott of the White House event. That poets, and artists in general, have long been marginalized by "seats of power" is hardly news in our culture, and to perpetuate that marginalizaton by holding oneself apart, essentially uninteresting. Sorry you missed the importance of poetry in my piece: I tried to include them, along with some good-humored (in the spirit of the evening) descriptive details.*
*—Naomi Shihab Nye*

*No editor's taste can (or should) be so catholic as to embrace every sort of writing. But within the admittedly small compass we grant her — all told, some two dozen pages a year, Naomi Shihab Nye has assembled a glittering anthology of attentive, articulate, wide-ranging, and lyrical poems. Amidst the political and social clamor that is the* Observer, *her pages are emotional and intellectual clearings, generous of both heart and Mind. We remain proud to call Naomi Shihab Nye the* Observer*'s poetry editor. —M.K.*


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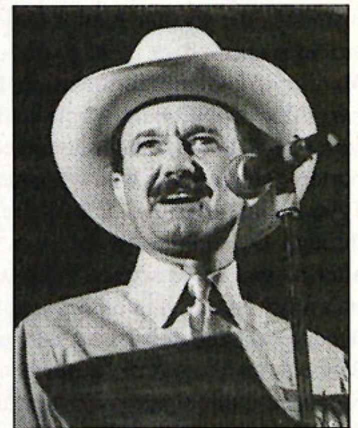

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# Contra Contratemps

*Because it appeared in the* New York Times *it is now sanctioned as fact: while Ronald Reagan was president, the C.I.A. worked with Nicaraguan drug smugglers who imported Colombian cocaine into the United States to raise money to support a mercenary army that came to be called the Contras. Here is how the story began under James Risen's byline in the July 17 issue of the* Times:

*The Central Intelligence Agency continued to work with about two dozen Nicaragua rebels and their supporters during the 1980s, despite allegations that they were trafficking in drugs, according to a classified study by the C.I.A.*

According to the *Times*, the C.I.A. report dismisses the specific claims laid out in an article published in 1996 by the *San Jose Mercury-News*, and furthermore, the "*Mercury-News* subsequently admitted that the series was flawed and reassigned the reporter." The reporter who was reassigned in 1996 is Gary Webb — and Webb has been through this routine in the past. In 1996, after he had spent sixteen months working on a story based on interviews, government documents, and testimony and other evidence from federal drug prosecutions, he produced a three-part series that linked the C.I.A. to cocaine dealers working in Southern California. Within weeks, *Washington Post* reporters Walter Pincus and Roberto Suro wrote that they had conducted their own investigation and that it did not support the conclusion that the CIA-backed Contras — or Nicaraguans in general — played a major role in the emergence of crack cocaine as a narcotic in widespread use across the United States.

Not only was the *Post's* brief investigation far less ambitious than what Webb had undertaken in 1996, there were other problems with the *Post*'s story. Pincus had previously published an account of his own work for the C.I.A. in the 1950s and early 1960s. And he had written a review of former C.I.A. agent Philip Agee's exposé of the agency — in which he suggested that Agee was working with Cuban intelligence in an attempt to destroy the C.I.A. Nor was the *Post*'s rebuttal of Webb's story thoroughly attributed. One of Webb's central claims, for example, rested on the federal courtroom testimony of Nicaraguan drug dealer Danilo Blandón, who admitted under oath that he had sold 200 to 300 kilos of cocaine for a Contra connection in Los Angeles and that all the profits had gone to the Contras. Yet Suro, citing "unnamed law enforcement officials," reported that Blandón had sold far less: "$30,000 to $60,000 worth of cocaine."

It was hardly reporting, but it was enough to start what might be described as a rebuttal frenzy. Within weeks, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times* followed the *Post,* quickly turning out stories that challenged an investigative series that had been a year and a half in the making. "Like good little boys and girls," Molly Ivins wrote in a 1996 column devoted to Webb's reporting, "the *Times*, *The Washington Post*, *et al.*, toddled off to the C.I.A. and asked the agency if it had ever done such a thing. When the C.I.A. said 'no' the papers solemnly printed it — just as though the C.I.A. hadn't previously denied any number of illegal operations in which it was later caught red-handed." The editors of the *Mercury-News*, however, responded by walking away from their story and their reporter.

It's getting harder to dismiss Gary Webb. In his new book, *Dark Alliance* (Seven Stories Press, $24.95), Webb takes full advantage of 548 pages to lay out the Contra-C.I.A.-cocaine story. Not only does Webb name the names and tell the stories of the Reagan administration's use of drug money to finance an illegal war in Nicaragua, he devotes sixty-eight pages to source notes that provide the reader with specific attribution for each claim made in the book. *Dark Alliance* links the Nicaraguan diaspora that followed the fall of Anastasio Somoza in 1979 to the distribution of crack cocaine on the streets of Los Angeles. Many of those who fled Nicaragua in 1979-80 had been involved in illicit businesses under (and with) Nicaragua's dictator Anastasio Somoza; so it was not surprising that they would find their way into organized crime in the United States.

Their arrival in this country coincided with the formation of expatriate groups determined to overthrow the Sandinistas, who had ousted Somoza. And the drug trade (along with car-theft rings, some of which had been working in Somoza's Nicaragua) was a reliable source of the large quantities of cash required to put a mercenary army in the field. All of this coincided with the advent of crack cocaine: a reformulation that made the drug so cheap that it was no longer exclusively the recreational drug of the rich. Had the C.I.A. been halfway faithful to its mandate to gather intelligence that is vital to national security, it would have easily predicted that the fall of Somoza would have domestic consequences in the United States. The agency, however, was preoccupied with its plans to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The prologue of Webb's book, reprinted in this issue, begins in the newsroom of the *Mercury-News.* But Webb's narrative quickly moves on to Nicaragua, Los Angeles, and Washington. Allowed to fully develop the material he gathered in 1994-95, and the reporting he has done since he was dismissed from the *Mercury-News*, Gary Webb has put together a tale as compelling as any work of fiction that will turn up at the beach this summer. And because the C.I.A. report on which the most recent *Times* story was based is classified (James Risen was briefed by the agency), *Dark Alliance* provides the best available account of the C.I.A.'s role in the Contra wars in Nicaragua and the drug trade in the United States. **— L.D.**

# Outlaw Heart

## Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy

**BY DON GRAHAM**

***CITIES OF THE PLAIN.***
**By Cormac McCarthy.**
**Alfred A. Knopf.**
**291 pages $24.00**

Cormac McCarthy has lived in Texas since 1976, and in that time has published, along with *Suttree*, his good-bye-to-Knoxville-and-all-that novel of 1979, four novels set in the old and modern West: *Blood Meridian, All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing,* and, this year, *Cities of the Plain*. The last three comprise the "Border Trilogy," all published in the nineties, and by any estimation based on literary merit, the most considerable accomplishment by a Texas writer — or any writer who has even flown over Texas in these latter years of the Millennium. McCarthy's West is parts of Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico, yet I know plenty of Texas writers who whisper to me, slantwise out of the corner of their mouths, he won't last, he doesn't really live in Texas, he's not a Texas writer, and so on.

A. C. Greene won't even admit him to his puny pantheon, *The 50+ Best Books on Texas*, a new, weird update of Greene's original *Fifty Best Books on Texas,* which was published back in the early 1980s and provoked Larry McMurtry to a famous riposte in the pages of this journal, the much-cited "Ever a Bridegroom." In the new version Green denies *All the Pretty Horses* admittance into his select company, proclaiming it primarily a "novel of Mexico." Greene also boots out Katherine Anne Porter, declaring that *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* is not a Texas work because the title story takes place in Denver (and ignoring the fact that "Noon Wine" is set near Buda, just down the road from Green's home in Salado). Greene's own *A Personal Country* remains in. Inexplicably, Greene adds Stanley Marcus's *Minding the Store* and something called *Johnny Texas*. It may be time to announce a long moratorium on the subject of Texas writing.

McCarthy, however, is the only writer in all of Texas today whose prose is worth rereading. One page of McCarthy is worth the whole shelf of Western titles at Wal-Mart, some of which are produced by admired and celebrated Texas literary "giants." But then McCarthy is an intensely literary writer. He is the heir of Modernist prose, and if you take the view that Modernism — Joyce, say, and in America,

**McCARTHY'S STATUS AS A SOUTHERN WRITER IS CERTIFIED BY THE FACT THAT IN MUCH OF HIS EARLY FICTION THERE IS A PLETHORA OF DEAD MULES, DEAD MULES BEING...THE PRINCIPAL GENRE-SIGNIFIER OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE.**

Faulkner, to cite two of McCarthy's obvious precursors — is an outmoded form of literary production, elitist texts for rarefied special audiences, and on top of that male and Eurocentric as hell, then McCarthy is the last practitioner in America of an ossified high art form. He is certainly one of the few to treat Western materials with the highest intensity of prose of which he is capable, and he is very capable indeed. With very few exceptions, Western fiction is mostly a hail of gunfire and lonely men riding through Marlboro country. There is an entire professional organization, the Western American Literature Association, dedicated to the proposition that what I have just said is not true, but Western writers in America have rarely broken through to national audiences. McCarthy has.

What makes McCarthy's career so remarkable is that it has encompassed two of the great sites of national myth-making: the South and the West. His first four novels all grew out of the Southern literary tradition, which means Faulkner for the long, sinuous sentences and O'Connor for the maxed-out Gothic effects, though Faulkner was no slouch in that regard himself, and he of course was Flannery O'Connor's own precursor, the "Dixie Limited" she called him, roaring down the track. In *Suttree*, a Joycean recreation of Knoxville, McCarthy contributes one of the finest moments in Southern Gothic when he tells the tale of a country youth, Gene Harrogate, who has sex with watermelons. The story of the "melonmounter" who serves prison time on a lesser charge than bestiality because he had a smart lawyer who pointed out that plant amour wasn't the same as animal love, is right up there with Faulkner, O'Connor, and Erskine Caldwell.

McCarthy's status as a Southern writer is certified by the fact that in much of his early fiction there is a plethora of dead mules, dead mules being, as one wag has recently half-seriously opined, the principal genre-signifier of Southern literature. Following this line of thinking, Jerry Leath Mills in an article in The *Southern Literary Journal* last year crowned McCarthy the king of Southern writing, noting fifty-nine dead mules in *Blood Meridian,* a number I'm accepting on faith. Ah, but that novel is set along the border of Texas and Mexico, and it should therefore be seen as the end of the Southern tradition in McCarthy because in the Border Trilogy there are no dead mules at all. In the new novel, *Cities of the Plain*, there is in fact a pointed reference to the signifier's absence, as Billy Parham, looking at an abandoned adobe shack that John Grady Cole is refurbishing for his beloved, says, "The only thing you ain't got here is a dead mule in the floor." In the trilogy there are, however, dead critters of every other stripe and dead Americans and dead Mexicans and a great deal of dead road kill, including a macabre massacre of rabbits by a car speeding through the night in *Cities of the Plain*: "The Oldsmobile had this big ovalshaped grille in the front of it was like a

big scoop and when I got around to the front of the car it was just packed completely full of jackrabbit heads. I mean there was a hundred of em jammed in there and the front of the car the bumper and all was just covered with blood and rabbit guts and them rabbits I reckon they'd sort of turned their heads away just at impact cause they was all lookin out, eyes all crazy lookin. Teeth sideways. Grinnin." But no dead mules.

*All the Pretty Horses*, set in 1949, begins at the point where Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By*, set in 1954, ends. This may be purely coincidental, but in both novels a young male still in his teens has just witnessed the burial of his grandfather and faces an uncertain future. The middle generation of parents is either missing in action (McMurtry) or compromised (McCarthy). Further, the Texas of each novel, Archer City for McMurtry, San Angelo for McCarthy, is caught up in post-war American ideology in which the Old West is giving way to modernization. Lonnie Bannon, McMurtry's youthful protagonist, walks away from the ranch at the end, headed to an uncertain future (actually he will wind up majoring in English and writing a sensitive first novel about an adolescent leaving the ranching tradition, etc.) McMurtry's Lonnie is cast in the ironic mode of a realist novel. He has medium cowboy skills at best and sees the passing of his grandfather as the end of an era. Lonnie has no burning desire to reinscribe that era on the body of his own being. Hud, who has the skills, is a shithead: hence this novel's credentials as anti-western. And a very good novel it is, despite its author's decades-long denigration of his own first born book-length fiction.

John Grady Cole (note the formal sounding name), on the other hand, is the cowboy projected on the mythic level. He knows perfect Castilian Spanish (but speaks English in a West Texas vernacular of ain'ts and he don'ts — McCarthy has a perfect-pitch ear for cowboy talk), he knows horses beyond the saying of it, he is an expert chess player, he's a stud, he's capable of enduring enormous physical pain, he's a natural-born killer when forced to, as he is in the great Saltillo prison sequence, and he's a good-looking sumbuck on top of everything else. He's Brad Pitt if Brad Pitt had a clue. (On the audio tape Pitt, reading from *All the Pretty Horses*, repeatedly mangles "el jefe," pronouncing the "j" instead of "el [h]]efe.") John Grady wants to take over the management of his family's ranch, but his mother, a selfish bitch, won't let him, and in one of many great lines in the novel, a lawyer tells John Grady, "'Some things in this world cant be helped.... And I believe this is probably one of em.'" (Women characters are something of a problem in McCarthy, but I also know many bright, strong women who love his work. So there). Denied the ranch that he could manage so capably, John Grady, with his pal Lacy Rawlins, a teenage Quixote and Sancho Panza, light out for the territory, for Mexico, where young "waddies" go when there's no West left to go to in the U.S.

Valerie Fowler

When they cross the border, they are in an ancient, hierarchical, and mysterious world, one both instinctively and philosophically inimical to American innocence. This is McCarthy's great Jamesian theme, though to my knowledge no one has thought to compare the great outdoor writer with the great indoor writer. The text to contemplate is James's *The American*, in which an innocent American, Christopher Newman (a combination of Columbus and DeCrevecoer's new man, the American), goes to France, falls in love, but fails to win the hand of his beloved. In the end she cannot go against her family's aristocratic definition of itself; in the end her family simply cannot accept the idea of an American, of someone so innocent and at the same time so dangerous. John Grady runs into the same haughty opposition in Mexico. He falls in love with the beautiful high-born daughter of a wealthy *hacendado*, sleeps with her, and eventually loses her because she is unable, unwilling, to defy her father. The novel is filled with eloquent passages on the fundamental differences between Mexico and America, differences that arise from national identity, religious traditions, and conceptions of fate. In this equation Mexico is James's Europe to John Grady's America: experience and history versus innocence and newness.

*All the Pretty Horses* ends with loss — and the suggestion that there is some hope for the future. By the time the novel reaches its close John Grady has lost a boy in his keeping, the girl he loved, his father, and Mexico, the land that he also loves. He has also killed a man and suffered much pain himself. Yet the novel ends on a heightened note of promise, as John Grady literally rides into the sunset: "Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come."

When the next volume of the Border Trilogy came out, readers expected to take up the further adventures of John Grady Cole, but the "all-american cowboy" (as he is called in *Cities of the Plain*) does not appear in *The Crossing*. More densely textured and darker than *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing* follows Billy Parham and his brother Boyd on their repeated journeys into Mexico. Theirs is a tale of loss and suffering

and death as well. The opening sequence, some 120 pages or so, which relates the tale of Billy Parham's escorting a wild she-wolf from New Mexico to Old Mexico, is one of the great animal stories in American literature. *The Crossing* exhibits once more McCarthy's lust for the metaphysical, as one wise oldtimer after another steps forward to explain the meaning of everything to a sometimes uncomprehending Billy Parham (and the reader over his shoulder.)

*The Crossing*'s ending is apocalyptically bleak, leaving the reader to ponder what volume three might take up. Billy Parham, alone and bereft, witnesses from a distance the inauguration of the atomic age, the Trinity Test conducted in New Mexico on 16 July 1945 — as critic Alex Hunt establishes in a recent article published in *Southwestern American Literature*. The "inexplicable darkness" that follows the blinding light is followed in turn by Billy's weeping, then, in the last sentence, a final hopeful note: "after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction." The advent of the nuclear age is the most dramatic annunciation of man's separation from nature, a theme that runs through the trilogy.

*Cities of the Plain,* the concluding volume of the trilogy, satisfies the reader's wish to know what happened to John Grady Cole. The reader is doubly satisfied because the new novel pairs John Grady and Billy Parham, two extremely likable young men who have experienced love, loss, and death. The time is 1952, on a ranch in New Mexico, not far from El Paso. John Grady and Billy are happy to be cowboys, and if they pursued that ascetic life of ritual, work, and stoicism, they could continue to be happy. The novel is laced with memories of cowboy lore, stories of "the old west that once was," trail drives, horse lore, Mexico during the Revolution, all gloriously told. But there is already a sense of doom hanging over the ranch, as the Army plans to claim the land for military purposes.

The impact of World War II on the lives of the boys echoes through the trilogy. John Grady's daddy was on the Bataan death march and then imprisoned by the Japanese. He was never the same afterward. Billy Parham unwittingly saw the explosion of an atomic bomb. Now in the third volume Billy says, "Anyway this country aint the same. Nor anything in it. The war changed everything. I don't think people even know it yet." When questioned as to what he means, he replies, "It just did. It aint the same no more. It never will be."

The "cities of the plain" adumbrates the past, not the present: El Paso and Juárez as Sodom and Gomorrah. The crossings into Mexico are not the wilderness adventures of the first two novels but are instead confined to trips to brothels in Juárez, and in one of these John Grady, who falls in love easily, is smitten at the sight of a sixteen-year-old prostitute named Magdalena. Incurable romantic that he is, he sets out to save her and makes ready a little house in the high, remote

**McCARTHY IS AMONG THE LAST OF AMERICAN NOVELISTS TO BELIEVE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ENTIRE WORLD BASED ENTIRELY ON RHYTHM, IMAGERY, VOICE, NUANCE, PACE, INCANTATION, THE WHOLE PANOPLY OF LANGUAGE LIFTED BEYOND THE DELIVERY OF INFORMATION, WHETHER IT'S NETSCAPE DATA OR THRILLER PLOTS.**

country near the ranch, where he intends to live with his new bride. Billy Parham is highly skeptical of this plan, but can do nothing to stop his headstrong young friend. It is just here that one wishes John Grady's fabled horse sense could be applied to humans, to the fairer sex as that gender was once parsed. Because when somebody tells you that a prostitute has an "illness," this is information one listens to. Not John Grady. In Magdalena's case her sickness is epilepsy, which betokens, I take it, something grander than STD.

John Grady is "in the grip of an irrational passion," the girl's pimp tells Billy. Billy's own response is to try to reason with the passionate young cowboy. He ticks off a list of reasons why John Grady should let her go: "She aint American. She aint a citizen. She dont speak english. She works in a whorehouse. No, hear me out. And last but not least—he sat holding his thumb—there's a son of a bitch owns her outright that I guarangoddamntee you will kill you graveyard dead if you mess with him. Son, aint there no girls on this side of the damn river?"

John Grady's response, "Not like her," determines everything that will follow.

*Cities of the Plain* performs its necessary work in the structure of the trilogy by enough cross-referencing to reward readers of the first two volumes. The duel with knives from *All the Pretty Horses* is reinscribed in a lengthy and deadly ballet interspersed with philosophical speculations by the Mexican pimp who also is in love with Magdalena. John Grady's skill with horses is reprised, as are his memories of his mother, the girl he lost, and the scar he acquired during his first trip to Mexico. Billy Parham's memories of his brother Boyd are fused with the way he feels for John Grady. The novel ends with Billy Parham projected into the next century, an old man wandering in a Southwestern wasteland of superhighways and concrete bridges. The last scene depicts the end of a journey of loss, which is the meaning of life. Or as an old man tells John Grady at one point in the novel, when John Grady asks what the hardest thing in life is: "Maybe it's just that when things are gone they're gone. They aint comin back."

Reviewers sometimes complain about McCarthy's lack of well-constructed plots. They ought not to. If they want well-constructed plots, let them consult the Best Seller Lists, which specialize in plots. McCarthy's art is the art of style; he is among the last of American novelists to believe in the construction of an entire world based entirely on rhythm, imagery, voice, nuance, pace, incantation, the whole panoply of language lifted beyond the delivery of information, whether it's netscape data or thriller plots. To read McCarthy is to inhabit a new spatial dimension of language. If you don't want to "go there," as they say, then don't. If you do, then be prepared to enjoy an artist operating at a very high level of verbal accomplishment. Page after page demands pleasurable rereading and reading aloud. Of what best-seller beach book can this be said. □

*Don Graham is J. Frank Dobie Regents Professor of English at U.T.-Austin. His book* Giant Country *has just been published by TCU Press.*

# Father Of A Bush

## *Following Poppy from Yale to Panama*

**BY ROBERT SHERRILL**

*GEORGE BUSH:*
*The Life of a Lone Star Yankee.*
**By Herbert Parmet.**
**Scribner.**
**576 pages. $32.50.**

Looking back on George Bush's career is like surveying a distant desert landscape through gauze. At first, it seems exceedingly boring, plain, ill-defined. But if you keep looking, some things will come into focus that underscore (to give a twist to Hannah Arendt's famous phrase) the evil of banality. Bush is a banal man, and some of the things he stood for and did were truly evil.

Considering that, I would have welcomed more derision, more sarcasm, more anger than I find in this biography. What's the use of having the advantage of history's perspective if you don't use it to make strong judgments? Herbert Parmet, though an excellent historian of the orthodox sort, ignored or handled too delicately some of the rottenest apples in Bush's barrel.

For instance:

Previously secret documents that were revealed in 1992 by Congressman Henry Gonzalez and the *Los Angeles Times* clearly show that Bush, as vice president and as president, personally went out of his way — in a back-channel relationship of questionable ethics — to help build Iraq's military strength, right up to the moment of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the start of the Gulf War. The documents show that Bush (over objections from the Defense Department) approved transferring to Iraq sensitive technology which apparently went into the production of the weapons of mass destruction that U.N. sleuths have spent the last seven years trying to find.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported: "In the fall of 1989, at a time when Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was only nine months away and Saddam Hussein was desperate for money to buy arms, President Bush signed a top-secret National Security Decision directive ordering closer ties with Baghdad and opening the way for $1 billion in new aid." The newspaper went on to trace Bush's close support of Iraq throughout the 1980s.

Referring to these documents, Ross Perot was able to lace his 1992 campaign with such accurate comments as: "If you don't like guys like Saddam Hussein, don't spend ten years and billions of dollars of American taxpayers' money creating him.... President Bush made Saddam Hussein what he is today."

Parmet virtually passes over this miserable affair.

One reason the reading public enjoys Robert Caro's presidential Viagraphies is that he lets his emotional judgments (right or wrong) get involved in a big way. Unlike the scholarly Parmet, Caro would have hooted again and again at Bush's hypocritical double standards. Bush said the Gulf War was justified because "the world must not and cannot reward aggression." But he made no effort to whip up intervention to stop the Serbs from carrying out murders on a scale not seen since the Nazis. And Bush never missed a chance to call Saddam Hussein, with a million-man army, a bully for invading Kuwait, which had only 20,000 troops. Yet only eight months after making that one of his excuses for fighting Iraq, Bush (backed by 2.3 million soldiers) invaded Panama, which had 4,000 combat troops.

And Bush's invasion was every bit as illegal as Saddam Hussein's. The charter of the Organization of American States, which the U.S. signed, forbids the use of force among member states "on any grounds whatsoever."

Regrettably, Parmet seldom uses Caroish banderillas.

Still, there is in these 500-plus intelligent pages a well-rounded profile of Bush, and Parmet leaves us plenty of room behind the lines to make our own judgments.

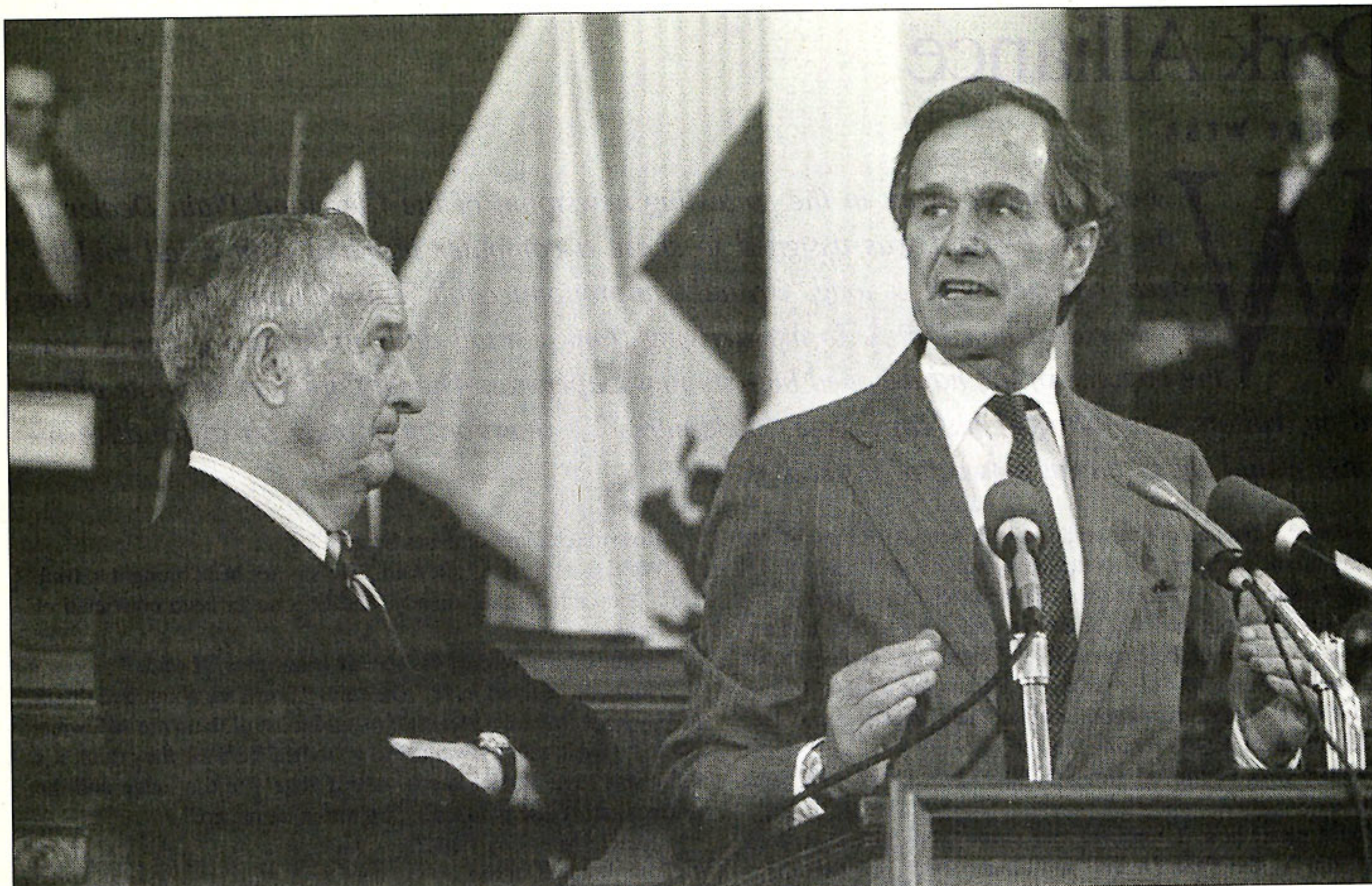
He has a good grasp of Texas politics during the years when Bush was starting out (for this grasp he is indebted partly to the *Observer* files, which he cites several times with suitable respect). We are reminded that Bush was willing to strike up alliances with anyone or any group that could hoist him politically — from the rat pack John Birch Society (Ralph Yarborough said Bush actually became a member of the J.B.S.) to the great traitor of the Texas Democratic Party, Allan Shivers.

As a Texas oil man himself, he had no trouble raising campaign funds, for "he was as attractive to the money men as they were to him." His 1970 race for the Senate against Lloyd Bentsen turned out to be, as the *Wall Street Journal* later put it, "a dress rehearsal for the campaign finance abuses of Watergate, as well as for today's loophole-ridden system."

**BUSH'S 1970 RACE FOR THE SENATE AGAINST LLOYD BENTSEN TURNED OUT TO BE "A DRESS REHEARSAL FOR THE CAMPAIGN FINANCE ABUSES OF WATERGATE, AS WELL AS FOR TODAY'S LOOPHOLE-RIDDEN SYSTEM."**

As C.I.A. director and as Reagan's vice president, Bush took the standard Cold War position of hobnobbing with any and all thugs who could be even vaguely considered anti-communist. Manuel Noriega a drug-runner? Maybe. Manual Noriega a double agent? Probably. But one thing is obvious: Bush had willingly overlooked Noriega's sins for years before deciding, out of the blue, that the Western Hemisphere could only be saved by invading Panama and kidnapping the little dictator (an invasion that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent Panamanians).

About the Noriega-Bush relationship, Parmet is nicely sardonic: "Because of his quests for elective offices, fewer parts of Bush's public career are more sensitive, or as personally distasteful, as the Noriega



▲ *George Bush with Texas Governor Bill Clements, 1980*

Alan Pogue

connection. Even many years later, only by his body language did he acknowledge that he and the venal Panamanian ever breathed the same air."

Considering the effectiveness of the Reagan-Bush administration's lies about the Iran-Contra scandal, Parmet does a fairly decent job of sketching Bush's role in it. Bush claimed to have been "out of the loop" while that illegal arms-for-hostages deal with Iran was arranged, but it was plain that he had watched its development, "step by step," as the *Washington Post* put it.

If Bush had an impressive side to his political character, it was his loyalty. Unfortunately, it was the loyalty of a party hack. He was loyal to Nixon in disgrace, loyal to Reagan even after it became perfectly clear that Reagan was probably the most intellectually corrupt president in our history, and he was whiningly loyal to John Sununu, his oafishly tyrannical chief of staff, though Bush finally had to fire him for spending too much government money (half a million bucks) on his personal travels. And Bush's loyalty to the right wing, which urged the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, gave us probably the most fanatically reactionary justice of this generation. Well, maybe Antonin Scalia is more reactionary.

In his subtitle, Parmet calls Bush "a Lone Star Yankee." The best definition of that comes on page 218, where Parmet recounts one of Bush's meetings with the political adviser Dave Keene, as they were discussing John Connally, whom Bush hated.

**BUSH CLAIMED TO HAVE BEEN "OUT OF THE LOOP" WHILE THAT ILLEGAL ARMS-FOR-HOSTAGES DEAL WITH IRAN WAS ARRANGED, BUT IT WAS PLAIN THAT HE HAD WATCHED ITS DEVELOPMENT, "STEP BY STEP."**

*"You know," Keene told Bush, "the problem with you is that you're pissed because John got the tennis court and you want it."*

*Bush looked at the political consultant and said, "You really don't understand me, do you?"*

*"What do you mean by that?"*

*"None of the clubs that I belong to would accept John Connally," said [Bush].*

Keene had a working-class background. Bush's response confirmed Keene's notions about the Easterners, the Yalies, the country-club set that helped create the modern Republican Party in Texas to frustrate the likes of Connally, whom they considered "tacky," and of whom they were "also scared to death because he was bigger then they were."

If you read this book, you'll wonder: Will George Bush be remembered at all, fifty years from now? Or by then will he have been sucked into the black hole where history has sent such of his predecessors as Chester Alan Arthur? ☐

*Robert Sherrill is a former* Observer *editor and a regular contributor to* The Nation.

# Dark Alliance

BY GARY WEBB

*When I came to work in the sprawling newsroom of the Cleveland Plain Dealer in the early 1980s, I was assigned to share a computer terminal with a tall middle-aged reporter with a long, virtually unpronounceable Polish name. To save time, people called him Tom A. To me, arriving from a small daily in Kentucky, Tom A. was the epitome of the hard-boiled big-city newspaperman. The city officials he wrote about and the editors who mangled his copy were "fuckinjerks." A question prompting an affirmative response would elicit "fuckin-a-tweetie" instead of "yes."*

And when his phone rang he would say, "It's the Big One," before picking up the receiver. No matter how many times I heard that, I always laughed. The Big One was the reporter's holy grail — the tip that led you from the daily morass of press conferences and cop calls on to the trail of the Biggest Story You'd Ever Write, the one that would turn the rest of your career into an anticlimax. I never knew if it was cynicism or optimism that made him say it, but deep inside, I thought he was jinxing himself.

The Big One, I believed, would be like a bullet with your name on it.

You'd never hear it coming. And almost a decade later, long after Tom A., the *Plain Dealer*, and I had parted company, that's precisely how it happened.

I didn't even take the call. It manifested itself as a pink "While You Were Out" message slip left on my desk in July 1995, bearing an unusual and unfamiliar name: Coral Marie Talavera Baca. There was no message, just a number, somewhere in the East Bay.

I called, but there was no answer, so I put the message aside. If I have time, I told myself, I'll try again later. Several days later an identical message slip appeared. Its twin was still sitting on a pile of papers at the edge of my desk. This time Coral Marie Talavera Baca was home.

"I saw the story you did a couple weeks ago," she began. "The one about the drug seizure laws. I thought you did a good job."

"Thanks a lot," I said, and I meant it. She was the first reader who'd called about that story, a front-page piece in the *San Jose Mercury News* about a convicted cocaine trafficker who, without any formal legal training, had beaten the U.S. Justice Department in court three straight times and was on the verge of flushing the government's multibillion-dollar asset forfeiture program right down the toilet.

"You didn't just give the government's side of it," she continued.

I asked what I could do for her.

"My boyfriend is in a situation like that," she said, "and I thought it might make a good follow-up story for you. What the government has done to him is unbelievable."

"Your boyfriend?"

"He's in prison right now on cocaine trafficking charges. He's been in jail for three years."

"How much more time has he got?"

"Well, that's just it," she said. "He's never been brought to trial. He's done three years already, and he's never been convicted of anything."

"He must have waived his speedy trial rights," I said.

"No, none of them have," she said. "There are about five or six guys who were indicted with him, and most of them are still waiting to be tried, too. They want to go to trial because they think it's a bullshit case. Rafael keeps writing letters to the judge and the prosecutor, saying, you know, try me or let me go."

"Rafael's your boyfriend?"

"Yes. Rafael Corñeo."

"He's Colombian?"

"No, Nicaraguan. But he's lived in the Bay Area since he was like 2 or something."

It's interesting, I thought, but not the kind of story likely to excite my editors. Some drug dealers don't like being in jail? Oh. I knew what I would hear if I pitched Coral's story to my editors: We've done that already. And that was what I told her.

She was not dissuaded.

"There's something about Rafael's case that I don't think you would have ever done before," she persisted. "One of the government's witnesses is a guy who used to work with the CIA selling drugs. Tons of it."

"What now?" I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly.

"The CIA. He used to work for them or something. He's a Nicaraguan too. Rafael knows him; he can tell you. He told me the guy had admitted bringing four tons of cocaine into the country."

I put down my pen. She'd sounded so rational. Where did this CIA stuff come from? In 18 years of investigative reporting, I had ended up doubting the credibility of every person who ever called me with a tip about the CIA. I flashed on Eddie Johnson, a conspiracy theorist who would come bopping into the Kentucky Post's newsroom every so often with amazing tales of intrigue and corruption. Interviewing Eddie was one of the rites of passage at the Post. Someone would invariably send him over to the newest reporter on the staff to see how long it took the rookie to figure out he was spinning his wheels.

Suddenly I remembered who I was talking to — a cocaine

dealer's moll.

That explained it.

"Oh, the CIA. Well, you're right. I've never done any stories about the CIA. I don't run across them too often here in Sacramento. See, I mostly cover state government."

▲ *Contra leader Adolfo Calero and Ronald Reagan* Seven Stories Press

"You probably think I'm crazy, right?" "No, no," I assured her. "You know, could be true, who's to say? When it comes to the CIA, stranger things have happened."

There was a short silence, and I could hear her exhale sharply.

"How dare you treat me like I'm an idiot," she said evenly. "You don't even know me. I work for a law firm. I've copied every single piece of paper that's been filed in Rafael's case, and I can document everything I'm telling you. You can ask Rafael, and he can tell you himself. ... He's got a court date in San Francisco coming up in a couple weeks. Why don't I meet you at the courthouse? That way you can sit in on the hearing, and if you're interested we could get lunch or something and talk."

That cinched it. Now the worst that could happen was lunch in San Francisco in mid-July, away from the phones and the editors. And, who knows, there was an off chance she was telling the truth.

Flipping on my computer, I logged into the Dialog database, which contains full-text electronic versions of millions of newspaper and magazine stories, property records, legal filings, you name it. OK. Let's see if Rafael Corñeo even exists.

A message flashed on the screen: "Your search has retrieved 11 documents. Display?" So far so good.

I called up the most recent one, a newspaper story that had appeared a year before in the San Francisco Chronicle. My eyes widened. "4 Indicted in Prison Breakout Plot — Pleasanton Inmates Planned to Leave in Copter, Prosecutors Say."

I quickly scanned the story. Son of a bitch. Four inmates were indicted yesterday in connection with a bold plan to escape from the federal lockup in Pleasanton using plastic explosives and a helicopter that would have taken them to a cargo ship at sea. The group also considered killing a guard if their keepers tried to thwart the escape, prosecutors contend. Rafael Corñeo, 39, of Lafayette, an alleged cocaine kingpin with reputed ties to Nicaraguan drug traffickers and Panamanian money launderers, was among those indicted for conspiracy to escape.

That's some boyfriend she's got there, I mused. The newspaper stories make him sound like Al Capone. And he wants to sit down and have a chat?

When I pushed open the doors to the vast courtroom in the San Francisco federal courthouse a few weeks later, I found a scene from Miami Vice.

To my left, a dark-suited army of federal agents and prosecutors huddled around a long, polished wooden table, looking grim and talking in low voices. On the right, an array of long-haired, expensively attired defense attorneys were whispering to a group of long-haired, angry-looking Hispanics — their clients. The judge had not yet arrived.

I had no idea what Coral Baca looked like, so I scanned the faces in the courtroom, trying to pick out a woman who could be a drug kingpin's girlfriend. She found me first.

"You must be Gary," said a voice behind me.

I turned, and for an instant all I saw was cleavage and jewelry. She looked to be in her mid-20s. Dark hair. Bright red lipstick. Long legs. Short skirt. Dressed to accentuate her positive attributes. I could barely speak.

"You're Coral?"

She tossed her hair and smiled. "Pleased to meet you." She stuck out a hand with a giant diamond on it, and I shook it weakly.

We sat down in the row of seats behind the prosecutors' table, and I glanced at her again. That boyfriend of hers must be going nuts.

She pointed out Corñeo, a short, handsome Latino with a strong jaw and long, wavy hair parted in the middle.

"Can we go out in the hall and talk for a minute?" I asked her.

We sat on a bench just outside the door. I told her I needed to get case numbers so I could ask for the court files. And, by the way, did she bring those documents she'd mentioned?

She reached into her briefcase and brought out a stack an inch thick. "I've got three bankers' boxes full back at home, and you're welcome to see all of it, but this is the stuff I was telling you about concerning the witness."

I flipped through the documents. Most of them were federal law enforcement reports, DEA-6s and FBI 302s, every page bearing big black letters that said, "MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED — PROPERTY OF U.S. GOVERNMENT." At the bottom of the stack was a transcript of some sort. I pulled it out.

"Grand Jury for the Northern District of California, Grand Jury Number 93-5, Grand Jury Inv. No. 9301035. Reporter's Transcript of Proceedings. Testimony of Oscar Danilo Blandón. February 3, 1994."

I whistled. "Federal grand jury transcripts? I'm impressed. Where'd you get these?" "The government turned them over under discovery. Dave Hall did. I heard he really got reamed out by the DEA when they found out about all the stuff he gave us."

I skimmed the 39-page transcript. Whatever else this Blandón fellow may have been, he was pretty much the way Coral had described him. A big-time trafficker who'd dealt dope for many years, he started out dealing for the Contras, a right-wing Nicaraguan guerrilla army, in Los Angeles. He'd used drug money to buy trucks and supplies. At some point after Ronald Reagan got

into power, the CIA had decided his services as a fundraiser were no longer required, and he stayed in the drug business for himself.

What made the story so compelling was that he was appearing before the grand jury as a U.S. government witness. He wasn't under investigation. He wasn't trying to beat a rap. He was there as a witness for the prosecution, which meant that the U.S. Justice Department was vouching for him.

But who was the grand jury investigating? Every time the testimony led in that direction, words — mostly names — were blacked out.

"Who is this family they keep asking him about?"

"Rafael says it's Meneses. Norwin Meneses and his nephews. Have you heard of them?"

"Nope."

"Norwin is one of the biggest traffickers on the West Coast. When Rafael got arrested, that's who the FBI and the IRS wanted to talk to him about. Rafael has known [Norwin and his nephews] for years. Since the '70s, I think. The government is apparently using Blandón to get to Meneses."

Inside, I heard the bailiff calling the court to order, and we returned to the courtroom. During the hearing, I kept trying to recall where I had heard about this Contra-cocaine business before. Had I read it in a book? Seen it on television? Like most Americans, I knew the Contras had been a creation of the C.I.A., the darlings of the Reagan Right, made up largely of the vanquished followers of deposed Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza and his brutal army, the National Guard. But drug trafficking? Surely, I thought, if there had been some concrete evidence, it would have stuck in my mind. Maybe I was confusing it with something else. During a break, I went to the restroom and bumped into Assistant U.S. Attorney Hall. I introduced myself as a reporter. Hall eyed me cautiously.

"Why would the *Mercury News* be interested in this case?" he asked. "You should have been here two years ago. This is old stuff now."

"I'm not really doing a story on this case. I'm looking into one of the witnesses. A man named Blandón. Am I pronouncing the name correctly?"

Hall appeared surprised. "What about him?"

"About his selling cocaine for the Contras." Hall leaned back slightly, folded his arms and gave me a quizzical smile. "Who have you been talking to?"

"Actually, I've been reading. And I was curious to know what you made of his testimony about selling drugs for the Contras in LA. Did you believe him?"

"Well, yeah, but I don't know how you could absolutely confirm it. I mean, I don't know what to tell you," he said with a slight laugh. "The CIA won't tell me anything."

I jotted down his remark. "Oh, you've asked them?"

"Yeah, but I never heard anything back. Not that I expected to. But that's all ancient history. You're really doing a story about that?"

"I don't know if I'm doing a story at all," I said. "At this point, I'm just trying to see if there is one. Do you know where Blandón is these days?"

"Not a clue."

That couldn't be true, I thought. How could he not know? He was one of the witnesses against Rafael Corñeo. "From what I heard," I told him, "he's a pretty significant witness in your case here. He hasn't disappeared, has he? He is going to testify?"

Hall's friendly demeanor changed. "We're not at all certain about that."

When I got back to Sacramento, I called my editor at the main office in San Jose, Dawn Garcia, and filled her in on the day's events. Dawn was a former investigative reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle and had been the *Mercury's* state editor for several years.

"So, what do you think?" she asked, editorese for, "Is there a story here and how long will it take to get it?"

"I don't know. I'd like to spend a little time looking into it at least. Hell, if his testimony is true, it could be a pretty good story. The Contras were selling coke in L.A.? I've never heard that one before."

She mulled it over for a moment before agreeing. "It's not like there's a lot going on in Sacramento right now," she said. That was true enough. The sunbaked state capital was entering its summertime siesta, when triple-digit temperatures sent solons adjourning happily to mountain or seashore locales. With any luck, I was about to join them.

**AFTER RONALD REAGAN GOT INTO POWER, THE CIA DECIDED BLANDON'S SERVICES AS A FUNDRAISER WERE NO LONGER REQUIRED, AND HE STAYED IN THE DRUG BUSINESS FOR HIMSELF.**

"I need to go down to San Diego for a couple days," I said. "Blandón testified that he was arrested down there in '92 for conspiracy, so there's probably a court file somewhere. He may be living down there, for all I know. Probably the quickest way to find out if what he was saying is true is to find him."

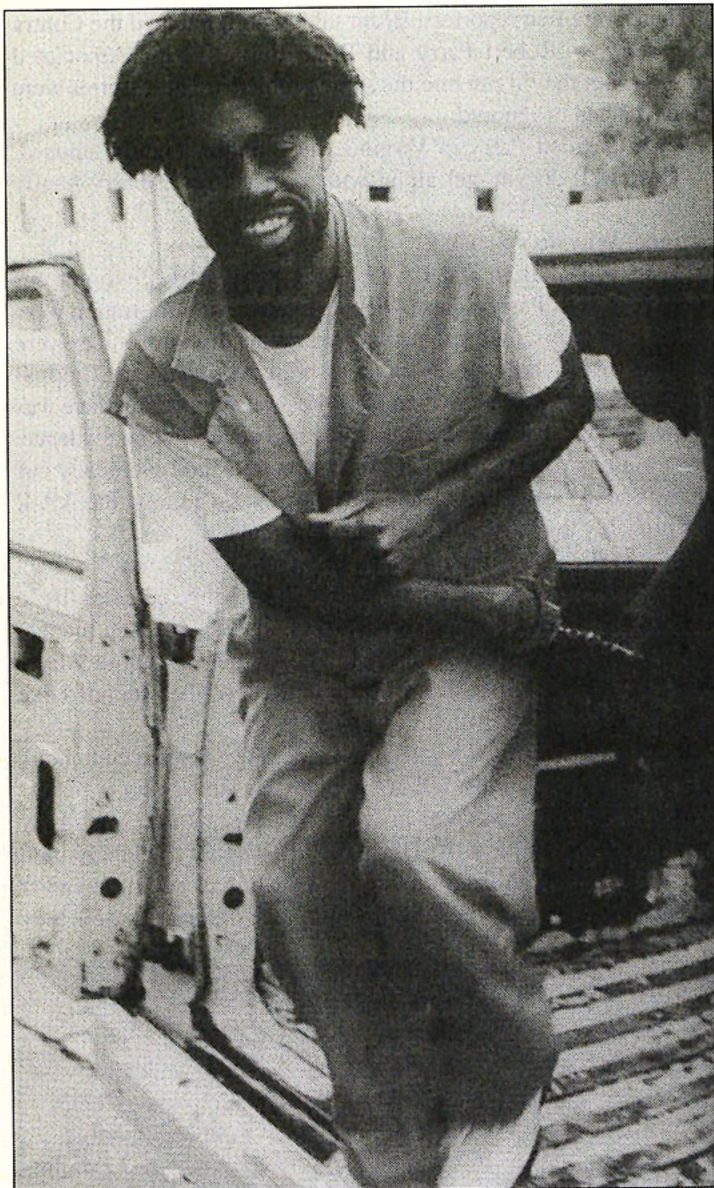
Dawn OK'd the trip, and a few days later I was in balmy San Diego, squinting at microfiche in the clerk's office of the U.S. District Court.

I found Blandón's case file within a few minutes.

He and six others, including his wife Chepita Blandón, had been secretly indicted May 5, 1992, for conspiring to distribute cocaine. He'd been buying wholesale quantities from suppliers and reselling it to other wholesalers. Way up on the food chain. According to the indictment, he'd been a trafficker for 10 years, had clients nationwide and had bragged on tape of selling other LA dealers between two and four tons of cocaine.

He was such a big-timer that the judge had ordered him and his wife held in jail without bail because they posed "a threat to the health and moral fiber of the community."

The file contained a transcript of a detention hearing, held to determine if the couple should be released on bail. Blandón's prosecutor, Assistant U.S. Attorney L.J. O'Neale, brought out his best ammo to persuade the judge to keep the couple locked up until trial. "Mr. Blandón's family was closely associated with the Somoza government that was overthrown in 1979," O'Neale said. "He is a large-scale cocaine trafficker and has been for a long time," O'Neale argued. Given the amount of cocaine he'd sold, O'Neale said, Blandón's minimum mandatory punishment was "off the charts" — life plus a $4 million fine — giving him plenty of incentive to flee the country.



▲ *Ricky Ross* Courtesy Seven Stories Press

Blandón's lawyer, Brad Brunon, confirmed the couple's close ties to Somoza and produced a photo of them at a wedding reception with El Presidente and his spouse. That just showed what fine families they were from, he said. The accusations in Nicaragua against Blandón, Brunon argued, were "politically motivated because of Mr. Blandón's activities with the Contras in the early 1980s."

Damn, here it is again. His own lawyer says he was working for the Contras.

From the docket sheet, I could see that the case had never gone to trial. Everyone had pleaded out, starting with Blandón. Five months after his arrest, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy, and the charges against his wife were dropped. After that, his fugitive co-defendants were quickly arrested and pleaded guilty. But they all received extremely short sentences. One was even put on unsupervised probation.

I didn't get it. If O'Neale had such a rock-solid case against a major drug-trafficking ring, why were they let off so easily? People did more time for burglary. Even Blandón, the ringleader, only got 48 months, and from the docket sheet it appeared that was later cut almost in half.

As I read on, I realized that Blandón was already back on the streets — totally unsupervised. No probation. No parole. Free as a bird. He'd walked out of jail Sept. 19, 1994, on the arm of an INS agent, Robert Tellez. He'd done 28 months for 10 years of cocaine trafficking.

The last page of the file told me why.

It was a motion filed by U.S. Attorney O'Neale, asking the court to unseal Blandón's plea agreement and a couple of internal Justice Department memorandums. "During the course of this case, defendant Oscar Danilo Blandón cooperated with and rendered substantial assistance to the United States," O'Neale wrote. At the government's request, his jail sentence had been secretly cut twice. O'Neale then persuaded the judge to let Blandón out of jail completely, telling the court he was needed as a full-time paid informant for the U.S. Department of Justice. Since he'd be undercover, O'Neale wrote, he couldn't very well have probation agents checking up on him. He was released on unsupervised probation. I walked back to my hotel convinced that I was on the right track. Now there were two separate sources saying — in court — that Blandón was involved with the Contras and had been selling large amounts of cocaine in Los Angeles. And when the government finally had a chance to put him away forever, it had opened up the cell doors and let him walk. I needed to find Blandón. I had a million questions only he could answer.

Back in Sacramento, I did some checking on the targets of the 1994 grand jury investigation — the Meneses family — and again Coral's description proved accurate, perhaps even understated. At the California State Library's government publications section, I scoured the indices that catalog congressional hearings by topic and witness name. Meneses wasn't listed, but there had been a series of hearings back in 1987 and 1988, I saw, dealing with the issue of the Contras and cocaine: a subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Senator. John Kerry of Massachusetts.

For the next six days I sat with rolls of dimes at a microfiche printer in the quiet wood-paneled recesses of the library, reading and copying many of the 1,100 pages of transcripts and exhibits of the Kerry Committee hearings, growing more astounded each day. The committee's investigators had uncovered direct links between drug dealers and the Contras. They'd gotten into BCCI (Bank of Credit and Commerce International) years before anyone knew what that banking scandal even was. They'd found evidence of Manuel Noriega's involvement with drugs — four years before the invasion. Many of the Kerry Committee witnesses, I noted, later became U.S. Justice Department witnesses against Noriega.

Kerry and his staff had taken videotaped depositions from Contra leaders who acknowledged receiving drug profits, with the apparent knowledge of the CIA. The drug dealers had admitted — under oath — giving money to the Contras, and had passed polygraph tests. The pilots had admitted flying weapons down and cocaine and marijuana back, landing in at least one instance at Homestead Air Force Base in Florida. The exhibits included U.S.

Customs reports, FBI reports, internal Justice Department memos. It almost knocked me off my chair.

It was all there in black and white. Blandón's testimony about selling cocaine for the Contras in LA wasn't some improbable fantasy. This could have actually happened.

I called Jack Blum, the Washington, D.C., attorney who'd headed the Kerry investigation, and he confirmed that Meneses had been an early target. But the Justice Department, he said, had stonewalled the committee's requests for information, and he had finally given up trying to obtain the records, moving on to other, more productive areas. "There was a lot of weird stuff going on out on the West Coast, but after our experiences with Justice ...we mainly concentrated on the cocaine coming into the East."

"Why is it that I can barely remember this?" I asked. "I mean, I read the papers every day."

"It wasn't in the papers, for the most part. We laid it all out, and we were trashed," Blum said. "I've got to tell you, there's a real problem with the press in this town. We were totally hit by the leadership of the administration and much of the congressional leadership. They simply turned around and said, 'These people are crazy. Their witnesses are full of shit. They're a bunch of drug dealers, drug addicts; don't listen to them.' And they dumped all over us. It came from every direction and every corner. We were even dumped on by the Iran-Contra Committee. They wouldn't touch this issue with a 10-foot pole."

"There had to have been some reporters who followed this," I protested. "Maybe I'm naive, but this seems like a huge story to me."

Blum barked a laugh. "Well, it's nice to hear someone finally say that, even if it is 10 years later."

There were two reporters, Blum said, who'd pursued the Contra drug story — Robert Parry and Brian Barger of the Associated Press — but they'd run into the same problems. Their stories were either trashed or ignored.

When I called Parry in Virginia, he sounded slightly amused.

"How well do you get along with your editors?" Parry finally asked.

"Fine. Why do you ask?"

"Well, when Brian and I were doing these stories, we got our brains beat out." Parry sighed. "People from the administration were calling our editors, telling them we were crazy, that our sources were no good, that we didn't know what we were writing about. The Justice Department was putting out false press releases saying there was nothing to this, that they'd investigated and could find no evidence. ... We ended up being out there all by ourselves, and eventually our editors backed away completely, and I ended up quitting the AP. It was probably the most difficult time of my career."

He paused. "Maybe things have changed, I don't know."

I was nonplussed. Bob Parry wasn't some fringe reporter. He'd won a Polk Award for uncovering the CIA assassination manual given to the Contras, and was the first reporter to expose Oliver North's illegal activities. But what he'd just described sounded like something out of a bad dream.

A few days later I got a call from Coral. My one chance to hook up with Blandón had just fallen through. "He isn't going to be testifying at Rafael's trial after all," she told me. "Rafael's attorney won his motion to have the DEA and FBI release the uncensored files, and the U.S. attorney decided to drop him as a witness rather than do that. Can you believe it? He was one of the witnesses they

## THE PLAYERS

■ **Adolfo Calero:** Longtime CIA agent, former manager of a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Nicaragua. Selected by the CIA in 1983 to lead its political wing in Nicaragua. Worked closely with Oliver North. Political boss of the pro-Contra FDN. Met with Norwin Meneses several times during the years Meneses was selling drugs for the Contras.

■ **Oscar Danilo "Chanchin" Blandón:** Head of a major cocaine distribution ring in Los Angeles from 1981 to 1991. The first major trafficker to make inroads into South Central Los Angeles in early 1980s, providing street gangs with their first direct connection to the Colombian cocaine cartels. A longtime supplier to Freeway Rick Ross. Worked as part of Meneses' organization, but struck out on his own in 1985. A close friend of Anastasio Somoza, he founded an FDN chapter (pro-Contra) in Los Angeles. Arrested and convicted of cocaine trafficking in 1992; became DEA informant. Now divides his time between San Diego and Managua.

■ **Norwin Meneses:** Believed to have been the Cali cartel's representative in Nicaragua. Drug trafficker since the early 1970s. Lived in United States from 1979 to 1985. Close connections to the Cuban anti-communist movement. Worked for the Contras as a recruiter, arms supplier and benefactor during the entire war. Worked with DEA from 1985 to 1991. Indicted in the States in 1989 on drug charges, but never arrested. Arrested and jailed in Nicaragua in 1991; sentenced to 12 years in prison.

■ **Anastasio Somoza:** A Nicaraguan dictator most famous for his Guardia, a corrupt and deadly organization that served as his police, military and intelligence service. Somoza was overthrown by the Sandinista revolution in 1979. While still in Nicaragua, the Somozas were close social friends of Danilo and Chepita Blandón; the two families were the biggest landlords in Managua and Danilo served in Somoza's government.

■ **Chepita Blandón:** Danilo Blandón's wife. Identified by the DEA as being closely involved in the trafficking activities of her husband. Arrested and jailed in 1992, but charges were dropped when Danilo agreed to become a DEA informant. Was made a naturalized U.S. citizen as a result of his cooperation.

■ **"Freeway" Ricky Ross:** Leader of South Central LA's first major crack distribution ring. In the space of four years, Ross went from selling fractions of an ounce to shipping multi-million-dollar cocaine shipments across America. Convicted of cocaine trafficking in 1996, he is currently serving life without the possibility of parole. □

used to get the indictment against Rafael, and now they're refusing to put him on the stand."

I hung up the phone in a funk.

But pretty soon the San Diego attorney who had been out of town when I was looking for Blandón returned my call. Juanita Brooks had represented Blandón's friend and co-defendant, a Mexican millionaire named Sergio Guerra. Another lawyer in her firm had defended Chepita Blandón. She knew quite a bit about the couple.

"You don't happen to know where he is these days, do you?"

"No, but I can tell you where he'll be in a couple of months. Here in San Diego. Entirely by coincidence, I have a case coming up where he's the chief prosecution witness against my client."

"You're kidding," I said. "What case is this?"

"It's a pretty big one. Have you ever heard of someone named Freeway Ricky Ross?"

Indeed I had. I'd run across him while researching the asset forfeiture series in 1993. "He's one of the biggest crack dealers in LA," I said.

"That's what they say," Brooks replied. "He and my client and a couple others were arrested in a DEA reverse sting last year and Blandón is the confidential informant in the case."

"How did Blandón get involved with crack dealers?"

"I don't have a lot of details because the government has been very protective of him. They've refused to give us any discovery so far," Brooks said. "But from what I understand, Blandón used to be one of Ricky Ross' sources back in the 1980s, and I suppose he played off that friendship."

My mind was racing. Blandón, the Contra fundraiser, had sold cocaine to the biggest crack dealer in South Central LA? That was too much.

"Are you sure about this?"

"I wouldn't want you to quote me on it," she said, "but, yes, I'm pretty sure. You can always call Alan Fenster, Ross' attorney, and ask him. I'm sure he knows."

Fenster was out, so I left a message on his voice mail, telling him I was working on a story about Oscar Danilo Blandón and wanted to interview him. When I got back from lunch, I found a message from Fenster waiting. It said: "Oscar who?"

My heart sank. I'd suspected it was a bum lead, but I'd been keeping my fingers crossed anyway. I should have known; that would have been too perfect. I called Fenster back to thank him for his time, and he asked what kind of a story I was working on. I told him — the Contras and cocaine.

"I'm curious," he said. "What made you think this Oscar person was involved in Ricky's case?"

I told him what Brooks had related, and he gasped.

"He's the informant? Are you serious? No wonder those bastards won't give me his name!" Fenster began swearing a blue streak.

"Forgive me," he said. "But if you only knew what kind of bullshit I've been going through to get that information from those sons of bitches, and then some reporter calls me up from San Jose and he knows all about him, it just makes me ..."

"Your client didn't tell you his name?"

"He didn't know it! He only knew him as Danilo, and then he wasn't even sure that was his real name. You and Ricky need to talk. I'll have him call you." He hung up abruptly.

Ross called a few hours later. I asked him what he knew about Blandón. "A lot," he said. "He was almost like a godfather to me. He's the one who got me going."

"Was he your main source?"

"He was. Everybody I knew, I knew through him. So really, he could be considered as my only source. In a sense, he was."

"When was this?"

"Eighty-one or '82. Right when I was getting going."

Damn, I thought. That was right when Blandón said he started dealing drugs.

"Would you be willing to sit down and talk to me about this?" I asked.

"Hell, yeah. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

At the end of September 1995 I spent a week in San Diego, going through the files of the Ross case, interviewing defense attorneys and prosecutors, listening to undercover DEA tapes. I attended a discovery hearing and watched as Fenster and the other defense lawyers made another futile attempt to find out details about the government's informant, so they could begin preparing their defenses. Assistant U.S. Attorney O'Neale refused to provide a thing. They'd get what they were entitled to, he promised, ten days before trial.

**NOW THERE WERE TWO SEPARATE SOURCES SAYING THAT BLANDON WAS INVOLVED WITH THE CONTRAS AND HAD BEEN SELLING LARGE AMOUNTS OF COCAINE IN LOS ANGELES. AND WHEN THE GOVERNMENT FINALLY HAD A CHANCE TO PUT HIM AWAY FOREVER, IT HAD OPENED UP THE CELL DOORS AND LET HIM WALK.**

"See what I mean?" Fenster asked me on his way out. "It's like the trial in Alice in Wonderland."

I spent hours with Ross at the Metropolitan Correctional Center. He knew nothing of Blandón's past, I discovered. He had no idea who the Contras were or whose side they were on. To him, Danilo was just a nice guy with a lot of cheap dope.

"What would you say if I were to tell you that he was working for the Contras, selling cocaine to help them buy weapons and supplies?" I asked.

Ross goggled. "And they put me in jail? I'd say that was some fucked-up shit there. They say I sold dope all over, but man, I know he done sold ten times more than me. Are you being straight with me?"

I told him I had documents to prove it. Ross just shook his head and looked away. "He's been working for the government the whole damn time," he muttered. □

*Shortly after Gary Webb published his 1996 investigative series on the C.I.A., Contras, and cocaine, his work was attacked by* The Washington Post, The New York Times, *and* The Los Angeles Times. *Webb has expanded his investigative series into a recently published book. Reprinted from the new book* Dark Alliance *by Gary Webb, with permission author and Seven Stories Press.* (Dark Alliance, *$24.95, 548 pages.)*

# Swingin Down the Texas Highway

## One Scotsman's Journey to Turkey

**BY KAREN OLSSON**

***LONE STAR SWING*:**
***On The Trail of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.***
**By Duncan McLean.**
**Norton.**
**306 pages. $14.00.**

It is not uncommon for college students and other freewheeling types to take the traditional Summer Road Trip, gassing up some worn but serviceable station wagon and heading out — somewhere — preferably south or west, where the more bizarre and backward elements of our culture are presumed to remain, relatively intact, available for ready viewing along with the world's largest ball of twine and the most photographed barn in America. Unfortunately, what many highway explorers quickly discover is that the American road is much richer in Cracker Barrel restaurants than picayune mystery, and most road trips don't yield more than thirty minutes worth of good anecdotes, much less a full-length memoir.

Happily the highway (specifically the Texas highway) is richer territory if you are a Scottish fiction writer with a newly-minted drivers' license, a rental car, some grant money, and a passion for Western swing music. In *Lone Star Swing*, Duncan McLean's chronicle of a swing-inspired trip across Texas, even the parking lot at Luby's becomes something new and strange — something called a "car park" — where McLean finds himself on a Sunday morning, waiting for the restaurant to open. At last, "a lady in a pinnie" unlocks the door:

*Immediately the doors of every car in the lot swung open, and several hundred men, women and children climbed out, straightened and patted flat their Sunday best, and marched towards me. Or, to be exact, towards the door right behind me....*

*I found a seat in the gymnasium-sized dining area, and sat sipping and watching families, couples, gangs of teenagers, posses of old folk, all tucking in to vast platefuls of grub: roast beef, mashed tatties, gravy, green beans boiled grey, fried mushrooms, buttered squash, eggplant stew, pinto beans, garlic bread, side salad, hot sauce. Plus soup and rolls to start, and peach cobbler and ice cream to finish. And beakers of iced tea all round. What was it with these folks? Had they not eaten since last Sunday?*

Though the book is ostensibly about western swing, some of its best passages, like this one, offer more general observations on *homo Texanus*, as seen by one bemused (but not derisive) visitor. McLean reads the *Weekly World News*, spends a long night in a cheap motel, eats at a Bombay Bicycle Club restaurant, finds a gun, drives through a Border Patrol checkpoint, attends the Presidio Onion Festival — and, in the meantime, pursues his interest in western swing.

That interest, according to McLean, was kindled five years before the trip, when he bought an old swing record from an Edinburgh junk shop. Musically smitten, he began collecting albums and corresponding with other aficionados, and at last he traveled to Texas to "track down the spirit of Bob Wills," the great bandleader from the Panhandle town of Turkey.

One of the pleasing things about the book is how well McLean conveys his enthusiasm for Texas music of the twenties and thirties and forties, despite the obvious fact that he can't actually play songs for his reader. Clearly, one source of swing's appeal for McLean is its exuberant fusion of styles, of Dixieland jazz and blues and mariachi and traditional ballads; the text of *Lone Star Swing* is a correspondingly celebratory verbal collage of description, quoted lyrics, dialogue and headlines. At times McLean simply launches into catalogues of names — one singer's various aliases, or names of Texas territory bands — which, taken together, invoke the era of radio shows and country dancehalls: Dalhart's Texas Panhandlers, Fred Ozark's Jug Blowers, The Regal Rascals, the Light Crust Doughboys, The Pioneer Playboys, Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers... and so on.

McLean's accounts of his often-bewildered encounters with native Texans are themselves charming in their verbal eclecticism (the Scotsman beginning his sentences with "Eh," his interlocuters speaking Jesus' own English.) But most incantatory are the song lyrics, which McLean quotes liberally. *I just can't believe my old pal would leave me/ Gee, but I'm heartsick and sore.* Or: *If you like our song, you think it's fine, sit right down and drop a line/ To the Texas Playboys from the Lone Star State.* Or: *Tessie, pull down your dressie/ Cause I was only teasing you/ Just because I waved a dollar bill in my hand/ That's no need for you to misunderstand.*

Naturally, nostalgia pervades *Lone Star Swing*. But it isn't the nostalgia-for-bygone-America of your average Summer Road Trip, that which keeps crappy old roadside diners in business. Midway through the book, McLean explains why he so loves the music of fifty years ago:

*Music in America is so well niched these days... that once you know what you like, there's little chance of ever stumbling across some new recordings.... Music doesn't change people's lives in the USA today, it confirms the life you've already chosen, or had chosen for you. The whole of American culture seems to me to be tending towards atomisation. Music has become something to separate people, to build walls between them. I love the old stuff that brought people together, that knocked down the walls.*

A nitpicker could quarrel with these lines — or at the very least, with their sweeping generality — but ultimately they say more about the author than about music history. McLean's affection for Western swing drew him on through backwater towns, into nursing homes and tiny bars and other people's living rooms, and it's a pleasure to follow him there. □

# Holding On

## *From Socrates to Desegregation with Howard Zinn*

**BY CHAR MILLER**

***THE ZINN READER.***
**By Howard Zinn.**
**Seven Stories Press.**
**668 pages. $19.95 (paper).**

It's all Plato's fault. The Athenian "apostle of civil obedience" staged Socrates' famed death (think hemlock) so as to underscore the ultimate sovereignty of the state, Howard Zinn argued in a 1988 review of I.F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates*. When offered an opportunity to escape from prison and the death sentence that had been imposed on him for his needling, disruptive (and very free) speech, Socrates, in "The Crito," a dialogue Plato crafted, responded that he must obey the law, despite the city-state's unjust ruling. "If I complained about this injustice, Athens would rightly say: 'We brought you into the world, we raised you, we educated you, we gave you and every other citizen a share of all the good things we could.'" In exchange for these benefits, Socrates determined that he owed Athens his life, and "so I will go to my death." His compliance, Zinn retorted, set up a Grecian formula for disaster, for every nation-state has since drummed such nonsense into "the heads of its citizens from the time they are old enough to go to school." Thanks to Plato, and his literary mouthpiece Socrates, those who have called western civilization home for the past two millennia have acted with "blind obedience to that disreputable artifice called government."

This is classic Zinn. Find a particularly instructive historic argument, event, or moment, then conflate time to enable that past to speak directly to contemporary conditions. In this case, his concern is not solely with Plato *qua* Plato, but with the ascendance in the 1980s of such neo-conservatives as Allan Bloom, whose embrace of the philosopher's arguments was tied to a denunciation of the radical fervor unleashed during the 1960s, a denunciation that provided an intellectual prop for the Reaganite backlash. Reading the Greeks enables us to get a fix on ourselves, concludes Zinn, for "the ideas of people in Ancient Athens are as familiar as those we read in the daily newspaper."

Valerie Fowler

That this claim is a bit of a stretch is almost beside the point. True, his argument ignores the dramatically different contexts in which Athenian and American politics played out, and thus denies that cultural distinctions matter — an odd posture for an historian. Curious too is his lack of interest in challenging Bloom's appropriation of Plato; many of those unruly radicals whom Bloom had accused of closing the American mind had cut their eye teeth on that text which gives the most unapologetic defense of civil disobedience, Socrates' "The Apology." But such subtleties do not engage Zinn's attention nearly as much as the potent and coercive power of the state — of every state. Identifying its existence and combating its reach — these have been the defining characteristics of his remarkable career as an activist and academic, and they are on full display in this new and thick collection of some of his most compelling writings.

For Zinn, public and private life are conjoined, a narrative assumption that shapes the disparate biographical sketches included in this reader (for a more cohesive and developed biographical material, see Zinn's 1994 memoir, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*). Seeking a source for his early and heightened political consciousness, for instance, Zinn selects a moment when as a gawky teenager he stood beside (actually towered over) his father, and wore an ill-fitting tuxedo. The two were working as waiters at a New Year's Eve party in New York City, and it was while bussing dirty dishes that Zinn *fils* came face-to-face with the manifold layers of class distinctions that played out in that Manhattan ballroom (and beyond). "I hated every moment of it," he remembers, "the way the bosses treated the waiters, who were fed chicken wings just before they marched out to serve roast beef and filet mignon to the guests; everybody in their fancy dress, wearing silly hats, singing 'Auld Lang Syne' ... and me standing there in my waiter's costume, watching my father, his face strained, clear his tables, feeling no joy at the coming of the New Year." The protective love he felt for his parent, the familial bond that intensified, the politicized anger that came to define this memory, make it clear why he has such antipathy for Plato's smug fashioning of a paternal, preeminent state; it is no

wonder that instead Zinn would champion the "admirable obligation one feels to one's neighbors, one's family, one's principles, indeed to other human beings wherever they reside on the planet."

Lending his voice to the cause of those waiters and miners, students and union organizers, civil rights activists and prisoners — those who opposed the bosses and bureaucrats seeking to crush them — became his charge as an historian. It revolutionized his conception of "history," too, by forcing him to probe people and subjects little studied before the advent in the 1960s of what then was touted as the new social history (it since has gotten old). As he explored and then breathed life into a field of study that later would become the title of his most popular book — *The People's History of the United States* (1980) — he found himself at odds with the historian's attempt to remain personally disengaged and narratively objective. As he argued in *The Politics of History* (1970), such disengagement and objectivity is frankly impossible to achieve, and counterproductive in any event; only by shucking self-imposed constraints, and writing from an honest, subjective stance, would scholars produce works of great insight and consequence. Always dominant is the notion of relevance. "It is time we began to earn our keep in this world," is how he opens "The Uses of Scholarship," an essay plucked from *The Politics of History*. "Thanks to a gullible public, we have been honored, flattered, even paid, for producing the largest number of inconsequential studies in the history of civilization." His accusation may seem harsh, Zinn grants, but its justification is manifest when you "read the titles of doctoral dissertations ... and the pages of the leading scholarly journals alongside the lists of war dead, the figures on per capita income in Latin America, the autobiography of Malcolm X." Neutral pedantry is abhorrent: "We publish while others perish."

That is a catchy, if dogmatic phrase: what constitutes "relevance," as suggested in the examples he cites, is narrowly defined, and can lead to its own orthodoxy. Yet grant Zinn this: no one has more effectively fused words with actions, scholarship with political engagement. This fusion is most stunningly revealed in the continuing intensity of his writings about the civil rights movement.

He and his family had moved to Atlanta in 1956, where he taught at Spelman College. While there — he would be fired for insubordination seven years later, and return north to teach at Boston University — he embraced the cause his students embraced, teaching them about the historical roots of civil disobedience and social justice, helping them think through the strategies that would best shatter the segregationist hegemony, marching with them in the streets, and right into jail. His passionate support of the movement led him to write some of the most effective analyses of its actions and prospects, leading in one remarkable year — 1964 — to the publication of *The Southern Mystique* and *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (portions of which are reproduced in this latest volume). These books, and the episodes on which they were based, reveal his commitment to the concept and reality of an active citizenry. To this end, he had introduced his students to Charles Frankel's *The Case for Modern Man*, in which Frankel argues that a citizen is a "free and mighty agent, who while studying the determinants of social change, can become a chief determinant himself."

**FOR ZINN, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE ARE CONJOINED, A NARRATIVE ASSUMPTION THAT SHAPES THE DISPARATE BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES INCLUDED IN THIS READER.**

The proof of this came as Spelman rapidly evolved into a "Finishing School for Pickets": its students helped desegregate Atlanta's public library system and its lunch counters. One episode that Zinn originally had inserted in *The New Abolitionists,* turned on the actions of Lana Taylor, a "fair-skinned, rather delicate looking" student in one of his classes. She and some of her peers had sat down at the counter in a local eatery, when its foul-mouthed manager grabbed her bodily and yelled: "Get the hell out of here, nigger." She refused to budge, and grasped the counter. "He was rough and strong," a fellow protester recalled, but Taylor gamely held on. "I looked down ... at her hands ... brown, strained ... every muscle holding," and suddenly the manager "let go and left," as "though he knew he could not move that girl — ever." Zinn's choice of anecdote says as much about his deft literary instincts as it does about the political message he hoped to convey: individuals' actions matter — hold on!

So he has argued (and modeled) for the last thirty-five years — in books written in opposition to the Vietnam war and in the social commentaries he published in the *Boston Globe* in the mid-1970s; in his testimony at the Pentagon Papers trial and in the legendary and long-running dispute with John Silber, former president of Boston University. Whatever the format or environment, he has asked troubling questions about the intersection of political beliefs and social structures, has disturbed the often hermetically sealed cultures we inhabit yet rarely analyze, and has rattled our easy assumptions about the benign relationship between concentrated economic power and democratic politics. He has been, in short, a pain in the butt.

Wait a second: isn't that a rough translation of what the ancient Athenians had whined when one of their unrepentant contemporaries tartly, and uncomfortably, reminded them that "the unexamined life is not worth living"? Howard Zinn is more Socratic than he lets on. ☐

*Contributing Writer Char Miller teaches history at Trinity University. He has completed a collection of essays on politics and culture, many of which first appeared in the* Observer.

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# Maybe, Baby

## Will the one-child family save the planet?

BY JEFF MANDELL

***MAYBE ONE:***
***A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families.***
**By Bill McKibben.**
**Simon & Schuster.**
**254 pages. $23.00.**

Bill McKibben is the renowned environmentalist you could take home for dinner. He's knowledgeable without being academic, he's gravely concerned without being alarmist, he bridges the objective world of the scientist and the polemical world of the activist, and he presents all of his arguments in easy-to-swallow narratives. His previous books, *The End of Nature*, *The Age of Missing Information*, and *Hope, Human and Wild* each presented a strong case for conservation, and each rested on McKibben's conviction that we live in a crucial era. His newest book, *Maybe One,* begins with exactly that idea: because "We may live in the strangest, most thoroughly different moment since humans took up farming ten thousand years ago and time more or less commenced … [the] next fifty years will be crucial to our planet's future."

This theory of exceptionalism places a great burden on all of us. In *The End of Nature,* McKibben defined our era as the first post-natural one — the first in which the extent of human interference in nature has proceeded beyond nature's capacity to adapt to our meddling. Bound up with this idea is the topic of population. We do not face a population crisis just because of insufficient natural resources, nor do we face grave environmental problems solely because of our burgeoning population, but the issues of environment and population are inextricably linked. In his earlier books, McKibben deftly side-stepped questions of population, and *Only One* purports to be his considered and reasoned discussion of population issues, just as *The End of Nature* was such a discussion of global warming, acid rain, deforestation, and the depletion of irreplaceable resources. Unfortunately, *Only One* is not what it purports to be; rather, it is a hollow volume of specious reasoning and hedged conclusions.

In choosing to write about population, McKibben admittedly takes on a hornet's nest of painful issues. The task of balancing an environmental agenda with topics like immigration quotas, maintaining a stable social security system, family planning, religious freedom and doctrine, and foreign policy is not an enviable one. In taking it on, however, McKibben does a lamentable job.

In part, McKibben's failure stems from his approach. His use of narrative, both personal and historical, has helped make his earlier books engaging, in part by providing a readable framework for a largely scientific argument, but also by allowing McKibben to integrate — and thereby implicate — himself, in his laundry list of ways in which people have harmed Earth. "Our local problem here in the Adirondacks — acid rain — has its cause in Ohio and Kentucky. And now, as the climate warms, our local problem — the death of trees — starts to have its causes everywhere. *Everywhere.* A factory in Japan is as deadly as a burning rain forest in Brazil, a Communist coal mine in Rumania, a capitalist utility in West Virginia. Or as the blue 1981 Honda parked in the driveway twenty feet from where I sit, or as the wood stove warming my back." Passages like this one abound in *The End of Nature*, and they simultaneously localize the problem (it's not all the fault of industrial polluters and developing nations) and undermine the sanctimony that frequently accompanies environmental arguments (it's not just you, faceless and unenlightened, but I, too, contribute to the problems).

**MCKIBBEN DEFINED OUR ERA AS THE FIRST POST-NATURAL ONE — THE FIRST IN WHICH THE EXTENT OF HUMAN INTERFERENCE IN NATURE HAS PROCEEDED BEYOND NATURE'S CAPACITY TO ADAPT.**

In *Only One*, however, McKibben fails to resolve his hodgepodge of stories into a coherent whole. This is most obvious toward the end, where McKibben devotes three whole pages (which is a great deal of space in this thin volume, where no topic save this one gets anything close to as much space as it deserves) to a detailed description of his own vasectomy, both the rationale and the procedure. Elsewhere, McKibben relies upon vignettes of his daughter Sophie to suffice as the end of a discussion, or, more often, as a transition into a new one. The book's close, an elliptical summation of the day McKibben and Sophie spent together, may be pleasant, but its sentimentality does not provide any closure to the argument *Only One* seeks to make.

What exactly that argument might be never becomes clear. McKibben declares in the introduction that he did the research underlying the book "because of Sophie, my four-year-old daughter. I wanted to make sure that growing up without brothers and sisters would not damage her spirit or her mind." This motivation explains why the first quarter of the book relates the history of psychological research on children in single-child families, never mentioning either population or the environment. After a whirlwind, gap-ridden history, McKibben concludes that the only child does not differ from children with siblings in any measurable way. While this is reassuring to parents and children in single-child families, it is not an argument for single-child families; it is merely a rebuttal of one argument against such families.

The entire volume proceeds by this semi-logical process. McKibben eliminates one after another possible objection to or negative consequences of lowering the birth rate. Yet, McKibben relies on faulty reasoning and solitary statistics to carry his arguments.

Take, for example, Social Security. If we lower the birth rate significantly (McKibben recommends a lowering from just under 2 children per woman to 1.5), we will face the prospect of a smaller population of workers paying taxes to fund the retirement of a huge population of retirees. McKibben "solves" this potential problem by suggesting raising the retirement age, increasing the savings habits of Americans, and implementing a "means test" so that only those retirees who need Social Security benefits receive them. Each of these ideas may have its own merits (and McKibben has a statistic to demonstrate the wisdom of each idea), but even collectively they do not comprise a pragmatic solution to the problem of maintaining Social Security given slowed population growth. There are matters of health, history, ideology and politics to contend with: for instance, it's difficult to imagine Congress approving a means test.

*Only One* proceeds this way from issue to issue. McKibben's very brief discussion of immigration at least recognizes the many complicating factors surrounding policy decisions, yet his conclusion (cut immigration levels into the U.S. to 400,000 annually — just under half of our current level) dodges those complications. After mentioning the complications of immigration policy, McKibben justifies his solution historically: 400,000 is slightly less than the annual flow into the U.S. from 1880-1924, the number recommended by Nelson Rockefeller's 1972 commission on immigration, and a number corresponding to a time (the early 1970s) when opinion polls indicated Americans felt immigration levels were high enough. McKibben also reminds the reader that Emma Lazarus' words on the base of the Statue of Liberty were placed there after the statue's dedication, that they are not part of the statue, that they are neither "a motto, nor a guarantee." But then McKibben backs off, aware of his arbitrary judgment from a place of privilege within the U.S.: "I make no claim that it's *fair* — immigrant 400,001 will be just as desperate, just as deserving, as immigrant 399,999. In fact, it's unforgivably harsh. In a world where 2.9 billion people have no toilet, who are any of us to say 'go away' simply because we had the luck to be born in an easy place?" Ultimately, though, McKibben sways back to the arbitrary: "This *is* a moral question, but it's also a math problem." Faced with a profoundly complex and unpleasant issue, McKibben opts out with a soundbite salvo.

The repetition of such situations makes *Only One* read less like a coherent discussion, or even a call for the beginning of a discussion, and more like a college bull session. All topics are fair game, but once a truly difficult question comes up, the best way to deal with it is to skip to another topic. McKibben writes fluidly enough that he can almost pull it off, but the book is just too awkwardly framed. The narrative legerdemain of *The Age of Missing Information* — which begins with the preposterous premise that one can qualitatively compare a day spent alone in nature with each of one hundred and seven days worth of cable TV programming, and then actually develops into an entertaining and rewarding book — is absent in *Only One*. Disappointingly, McKibben has not replaced it with any stronger reasoning.

Valerie Fowler

Instead, he has forced research done for another reason into a book format with mercilessly recycled material from his earlier books, making *Only One* a dry read with a recurrent tinge of *déjà vu* for those who have read McKibben's earlier work. In population, McKibben has found yet another topic through which to promote his idea of the exceptionalism of the present, and he has found a popular subject (popular enough for a cover story in *The Atlantic* and a feature in *The New York Times Magazine*). Somehow, though, McKibben has written an entire book on population without a single mention of economic class, perhaps the largest determining factor in family size. And when he does address religion, McKibben, a Methodist Sunday School teacher, considers only Judeo-Christian belief: he reflects on what the Bible commands us to do (something he was apparently mulling over while awaiting his vasectomy) and mounts a rambling defense of the Pope.

*Only One* is a muddle. In his introduction, McKibben frames his book not in terms of what he set out to do (that gets only a brief paragraph at the close of the section), but in terms of what he's *not* trying to do. The laundry list of qualifiers, of statements intended to ensure that McKibben does not offend or insult, ultimately renders the book moot. McKibben's admitted fear of his topic paralyzes his writing. *Only One* is neither a personal nor an environmental case for single-child families. It is merely a defense of parents of only children, with a whole bunch of other stuff thrown in. □

*Austin writer Jeff Mandell has written for the* Observer *on the Edison Project, the state history museum, and other subjects.*

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## Epithalamium for TV & Poetry

2/1/96, 10:30, PBS. A cummerbund-wrapped channel zapper
*and the screen is white as snow* which is upon closer
examination black-and-white from the heaving overdrama
of the techno-whore to the most precious fried
abstraction of bliss — rewind and start over. Ahem.

99.8% of all American homes have a cyclops in the corner,
*We are gathered here today* because we no longer need to gather
anywhere outside our individually canned livingrooms, networked,
overworked, worked. Our connection. The broadcast unites states,
sprinkles literature liberally into individual
abodes, as the road outside still flickers
a tongue that surrounds us. And when we are swallowed,
what do we become? Objections need their own distribution system.

The next morning a child
Awakes refreshed in Omaha
Packs a pen in every pocket
And walks out into morning

## Marriage — It's a Dirty Little Secret

Elizabeth and I taxied down
to City Hall to get married.
Last year my mother eloped
with Howard to Key West.
I hear through the grapevine
my brother Stu is set to marry
Anne whom I've never met.
My sister Amy married Jerry
at a cult ceremony in Kansas
along with 499 other couples.
My other brother Lewis and Steve
had their picture in the paper
as they waited in line to be the first
gay couple to legally conjoin in NYC.

## Good to Hear From You

—to Gregory Kolovakos

A wise person once said these words
And you expect me to repeat them? Never,
For in that repetition there is is something
Gained in the translation? Always. Never
Say no to anything, and in that way it'll take
Care of itself. When it is the world, you'll
Understand why it feels better when someone else
Does it. A brave new noun sits down and gently
Whispers, "Never you mind," like the P.E. teacher's
Wife in *The Last Picture Show*. Your memorial went

As well as could be expected, Gregory, without
You there. People are still talking. The violinist
Cried, the jackhammer in the street peppered the air.
The floral arrangements under the electric fan shook
like a hurricane.

## Overheard at the Newsstand

There's No Big Message except hope you've had
a good time while reading this

While somewhere the Great Novel is being
shredded
I must stand up and say my piece
Or at least a piece of my piece "Shredded
Piece"

I will never sit in that class again, a stone
Eating away at the heart of existence

Plenty of homeless people want to read my
poems
They are lucky I stand at the newsstand
Cursing the politicians and making faces

Maybe all I'm saying is it's a real job
Being unemployed

**—BOB HOLMAN**

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Bob Holman's poetry CD, "In with the Out Crowd," has recently been released by Mouth Almighty Records. He is the producer/creator of *The United States of Poetry*, a five-part series that aired on PBS. His book, *The Collect Call of the Wild*, is published by Henry Holt, as is *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*, which Holman co-edited. He has appeared on "Nightline," "The Charlie Rose Show," "Good Morning America," and MTV, and has won three Emmys and an International Public Television Award. Known affectionately as King of Performance Poetry and Daddy-o of the Poetry Slam, Holman lives in New York City and currently teaches "Exploding Text" at Bard College.

Holman has worked widely and wildly "to set poetry free, to empower the public language — to make poetry as natural a use for language as ordering a pizza." If you call him on the phone, he answers "Poetry" instead of "Hello."

—Naomi Shihab Nye

# Literary Liberation

## *Latina Poets Break the Sound Barrier*

**BY DAVE OLIPHANT**

***FLORICANTO SÍ:***
***A Collection of Latina Poetry.***
**Edited by Bryce Milligan, Mary Guerrero Milligan, and Angela de Hoyos.**
**Penguin.**
**303 pp. $14.95.**

In 1967, Penguin Books issued an important volume entitled *Latin American Writing Today*, edited by J.M Cohen. Most of the writers included in that collection are now well known to readers of world literature: Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, Octavio Paz, Juan Rulfo, and César Vallejo, among others. Yet only two women were among the writers included in that 1967 selection: Gabriela Mistral and Rosario Castellanos. Like Penguin's other volumes in its series of international writing, the publisher's Latin American edition was intended to break the "sound-barrier of inertia, language, culture, and tradition" by introducing what, at the time, was still a little-known literature outside its home countries. To Penguin's credit, the firm has once again broken the sound barrier by issuing *Floricanto Sí*, a collection of mostly unheralded Latina writers. Their voices deserve to be heard around the globe.

Aside from the fact that this new collection is devoted exclusively to women writers, another important difference is that it contains both Spanish and English originals — Cohen's 1967 edition having been limited to English translation. Not all the women poets in *Floricanto Sí* write in Spanish, but when they do, a translation accompanies the original poem. While a number of the poets are originally from the Caribbean (Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico,) and a few others are from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico, the majority are natives of the United States. Texas is represented by nineteen out of the total of forty-seven Latina writers. Perhaps not surprisingly — since the editors all reside in San Antonio — the Texas contingent is dominated by eleven poets from the Alamo City. But this apparent imbalance is not the result of parochial prejudice, since the San Antonio poets are some of the strongest writers in the collection: Rosemary Catacalos, Enedina Cásarez Vásquez, Sandra Cisneros, Celeste Guzmán, Carmen Tafolla, and Evangelina Vigil-Piñon.

Regardless of the poets' origins, most tend to concern themselves with feminist themes. This can be characterized by Norma E. Cantú's "Decolonizing the Mind," with its urge to "let decolonizing mist into the brain cells / where blood knows no allegiance / except its own capillaries," and to "precision-cut the words that oppress, / that control, words bad and good / that enslave and hinder, / manacles of the colonized mind." Another common motif is the need to contemplate and connect with such figures as Malintzín (or Doña Marina), the "highly intelligent and gifted linguist ... who helped Cortés." (The description comes from the editors' "Notes on Historical and Mythological Characters," which also discuss "La Llorona," the legendary weeping woman who searches for her lost child and is the subject of several poems in *Floricanto Sí*.) Through her association with the conquistador, Malintzín was branded a traitor to her Aztec people, and is still referred to, from that perspective, as "La Malinche." As Beverly Sánchez-Padilla expresses it in her poem on Malintzín:

*An identity problem is obvious.*
*Who was this woman who has been*
*blamed*
*for opening up her Native people's legs*
*for all the Spanish warriors to enter ...*
*500 years of punishment by some,*
*glorification by others.*

Answering later in the poem, she writes that Malintzín was"

*a woman of savvy.*
*Street, slave savvy.*
*Who never liked the*
*bloodletting of Montezuma.*
*Never liked the lack of education for*
*female natives.*
*Compulsory only for the males.*

One of the most revealing poems in the collection is by Endenina Cásarez Vásquez, who writes in "Bad Hair" that when she wanted to ring the bell at church she learned that girls were not allowed to do so, "Or help with communion / Or go near the altar ... Or hold the Baby Jesus for all to kiss," and so she cut off her hair in protest. A number of these Latina poets envision a different world order, one ruled by or presided over by the feminine spirit. "In My Country," as Ana Castillo's title has it, she is:

*not made ashamed*
*for being.... In my world*
*i am a poet*
*who can rejoice in the coming of*
*Halley's comet, the wonders*
*of Machu Picchu, and a sudden kiss.*

Likewise, Chilean Marjorie Agosín's "Titania's Creed" declares that in the world ruled by Titania, "There would be no borders, / only the eyes / of the just."

More unusual is the work of Cuban poet Silvia Curbelo, whose award-winning poem, "If You Need a Reason," relies on a greater use of metaphorical association:

*The way some stories end in the middle*
*of a word,*
*the words themselves,*
*galaxies, statuaries, perspectives,*
*the stone over stone that is life,*
*never mind hunger.*
*The way things move, road,*
*mirror, blind luck. The way*
*nothing moves sometimes,*
*a kiss, a glance,*
*never mind true north.*

A telling simile is at the center of Alma Luz Villanueva's "Warrior in the Sand": "fingering my solitude / as a child runs ahead, singing." In Pat Mora's "La Migra," every word works on several levels, to achieve the poem's dual vision of a culture clash between the Border Patrol and a Mexican woman. Mora imagines the con-

frontation as a dark, bitter version of children's games, such as hide-and-seek, doctor, or a foot-race:

*I can touch you wherever*
*I want but don't complain*
*too much because I've got*
*boots and kick — if I have to,*
*and I have handcuffs.*
*Oh, and a gun.*
*Get ready, get set, run.*

The response of the Mexican woman ends the poem:

*I know this desert,*
*where to rest,*
*where to drink.*
*Oh, I am not alone.*
*You hear us singing*
*and laughing with the wind,*
*Agua dulce brota aquí, aquí, aquí,*
*but since you can't speak Spanish,*
*you do not understand.*
*Get ready.*

Equally effective is Sandra Cisneros' "You Bring Out the Mexican in Me," which celebrates her Mexican heritage, her almost violent love:

*You bring out the colonizer in me.*
*The holocaust of desire in me.*
*The Mexico City '85 earthquake in me.*
*The Popocatepetl/Ixtacihuatl in me ...*
*The lust goddess without guilt.*
*The delicious debauchery. You*
*bring out*
*the primordial exquisiteness in me.*

Above all, the poets in *Floricanto Sí* are intent on redefining the world in feminine terms, and this is in many ways the most attractive and appealing aspect of this collection. For the visions of these poets provide not just an alternative perspective, but a very crucial hope for an improved human consciousness and condition. Rosemary Catacalos touches on this most eloquently in her poem, "At Home in the World," with its rhythms and sentiments reminiscent of Wordsworth:

*The dream is of something possible*
*and regular,*
*the silence of an old man husking*
*pinenuts*
*in a whitewashed courtyard at sunset,*
*the fading*
*light: memory become dream again.*

*The dream is pure necessity. For what*
*are the givens if not that we give*
*everything,*
*whatever it takes?"*

Similarly, in "Morning Geography," dedicated to Naomi Shihab Nye, Catacalos writes:

*I supposed a loud flower could save us,*
*tell us*
*something about sweetness ... Suppose*
*we'd figured out, on those immense*
*and long ago*
*lost summer nights how to get at the*
*sweetness*
*without tearing the proud throat of even*
*one blossom.*

This same concern — for discovering something essential within the apparently weak — is found as well in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's "Beggar on the Córdoba Bridge," where the poet recognizes that from this "old woman" she could learn:

*how to dream*
*in an open field*
*(cotton or onion)*
*and let my hair grow long*
*roots in the mud*
*...*
*I want to keep you, old woman.*
*Weave your crow's feet*
*into my skin, polish*
*the black coins of your eyes —*
*currency of a higher kind.*

Poetry readers are indebted to the Milligans and Angela de Hoyos for bringing together this stimulating and, for the most part, previously unavailable selection of work by an oustanding group of women poets. The editors provide helpful notes about the contributors, translations of Spanish terms and phrases, and notes on historical and mythological characters. This collection serves as a valuable introduction to what Bryce Milligan calls "a new poetic sensibility emerging from a still-evolving mestiza consciousness ... an ancient nebula birthing new stars." □

*David Oliphant is the publisher of Prickly Pear Press, this year celebrating its fifteenth year.*

STANDING AGAINST DRAGONS
THREE SOUTHERN LAWYERS IN AN ERA OF FEAR
Sarah Hart Brown

John Coe of Pensacola, Florida; Cliford Durr of Montgomery, Alabama; and Benjamin Smith of New Orleans—three exceptional lawyers, three southern dissenters. In the two decades after World War II, they resisted both the excessive zeal of the anti-Communist right and southern segregation laws to champion civil liberties, enduring personal and professional backlash for their commitment. In *Standing Against Dragons,* Sarah Hart Brown examines the careers of the three while describing the positions of southern liberals and radicals in the broader stream of American liberalism during the postwar period.

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# Just Life

## *Elroy Bode's Social History of Texas*

**BY RICHARD PHELAN**

***HOME COUNTRY:***
***An Elroy Bode Reader.***
**By Elroy Bode.**
**Texas Western Press.**
**400 pages. $30.00.**

The handsomest book published in Texas in 1998 may well be *Home Country,* by Elroy Bode. John M. Downey, designing both book and jacket for the Texas Western Press, has produced a big, elegant, enormously appealing *object*, something that suits very well the material inside: Bode's best pieces, selected from seven earlier books, many magazines and newspapers (including the *Observer*), and from a writing span of forty years. (See: "Texas Sketches," page 30.)

Bode's work is like no other contemporary's. It consists, with a few notable exceptions, of pieces rarely more than three pages long, often shorter. In them he has recorded, with exactness and care, what he has seen and felt in a broad stretch of Texas that runs from San Antonio to El Paso — with special attention to Kerrville, where he grew up, and to the surrounding Hill Country, where his maternal grandparents were ranchers for fifty years.

What can a writer accomplish in just a page or two? Here are some examples:

- "Melvin Oehler" neglected to live his life. He was a baker in the V.A. hospital kitchens; now he's retired. His children gone, his wife dead, he simply exists, "...a seventy-year-old man with no hobbies and no passions, no problems and no concerns.... He is something that holds a shirt together. He is something beneath a hat."
- "Eight Boys": a cabin full of nine-year-olds at summer camp, stretched on their beds, taking the required afternoon rest and about to fall asleep: "Eight boys with only their little washboard chests rising and falling to give testimony of the tireless motors inside."
- "Darkness and the Canal": a region of nighttime Juárez that tourists would be scared to visit. It turns out to be serene, impoverished, dusty, and kindly, saturated in the kind of urban darkness most of us have never seen: "...small dim bulbs are lit on scattered street corners," and children play under them, "dragging behind them everywhere their long quivering shadows."
- "On The Coast" is his record of a two-day family fishing trip to Port Aransas, when Bode was about nine. He loved it. Headed home, tired, sunburned, sweaty, his clothes full of sand, "I would look at the gas flares of oil wells burning near Ingleside, at the huge sunflowers along the highway. Then, with the wind like the open door of an oven on my face, I would sleep."

Bode's chief concern is to convey the moment, the time and place, just as it was. No plots, no suspense, no chases or crashes. Just life. He writes about people, animals, trees, shadows, weather, in unassuming, immensely readable prose. Finishing one sketch, you find it almost impossible not to go on to the next. And after you have read a whole series — about Kerrville or Juárez or the high country of western New Mexico — the dots connect themselves, and you have as complete a world, and as many characters, as you might get from a novel.

At the heart of Bode's memory, and of his work, is his grandparents' ranch. Ranches today are often tax shelters, owned *in absentia*, used for parties, and operated by paid managers who talk from their pickups by CB radio to their wives in the high-tech ranch house kitchen. The Duderstadt ranch was not like that.

*Home Country* contains twenty-three pages of short pieces about the ranch: the slightly goofy dog Zipper; the bland, conforming sheep; the ranch hand Enselmo and his sorrows; Bode's grandmother at work in the house and yard, and his grandfather in the lots; a three-generation assortment of relatives on a Sunday visit. It is social history. Anyone who remembers the Hill Country in the late 1930s will say yes, that's exactly the way it was. And will be tempted to add, "And the way it was supposed to be."

Certainly ranching then did involve a relationship with the land less mechanical, less chemical — in effect less brutal — than the one farmers and ranchers as a matter of course have now. It was a Hill Country without fire ants, without the deadly tick-borne diseases that have been conveyed to human beings by "exotic" game animals from Africa and India.

"The Ranch: An Ending" records the aging and weakening of George and Maggie Duderstadt, after fifty active years; his death, and her staying on, inactive, perhaps sitting on the porch and watching the sheep.

*She looks intently in their direction and then straight on through to where her thoughts are. And it is no feat to imagine what she is thinking — to say that she is saying to herself as she has often said aloud: I want to see George.*

*George. The name hangs in front of her all the time now, a veil that prevents her from noticing things clearly any more; that keeps her saying over and over: I want to see him; I want to talk to him again. This old place....*

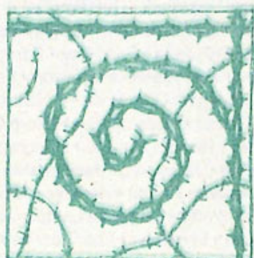
Loyalty, love, stability, steadfastness do not figure in people's lives now quite as noticeably as they did then. It is remarkable that the kid having a great kid's life on the ranch could become the man who recorded the lives and ends of his grandparents with such skill and feeling, and with no sentimentality at all. The first time I read "The Ranch: An Ending," around 1968, I thought, this has been done as well as it's possible to do it, no need for changes here. Reading it again in the present book, I thought the same.

Of the things that interest Bode and attract his attention as a writer, one is the natural world. This is something he has in

common with the eighteenth-century Englishman Gilbert White, whose *Natural History of Selborne* has been through many editions and remains in print. Both men have the knack for dealing with a topic entertainingly in a page or two, and moving on to another. (White did so in letters to other gentlemen-naturalists.) Both pay sharp attention to trees, birds, animals, weather, landscapes. (Bode does equally well by people.) Both make precise records of the natural worlds and the social worlds they know. And both draw lively portraits of themselves through their enthusiasms and opinions.

But Elroy Bode would never dissect a small animal to find out what it eats, or ascertain that owls hoot in the key of B-flat. White analyzes and quantifies. Bode celebrates and ponders. "If there is a morality in life, then the land has had it for me. A tree was as good as any human." He means it. In some of his sketches, a tree (or a day) is his central character, with people assigned supporting roles.

He likes underdogs — the poor people of Juárez, the incurably lonely, the misfit kid in school. When the trim "Mercedes Man" (golf shirt, shorts, beeper) is annoyed in a supermarket by the behavior of "the graceless souls who manage to make such a mess of their bodies and their lives," Bode's vote goes to the graceless. He doesn't care much for the "haughtiness, the sense of aloofness from the crowd that is radiated by a person who Excels and Achieves." He gives "Milady" her due, seeing her in downtown El Paso — clothes, car, manner, all of the best quality. But he thinks of what he has just seen in south El Paso: "women with dark rooms full of children, women bent over washing clothes, women carrying heavy bundles," and he wants to ask Milady, with "her stunning little rear, 'Who are you to be exempt from washboards and hungry bellies?'"


Valerie Fowler

It is not precisely correct to say that Bode makes tolerant fun of conventional religion. He just reports what he sees and hears, and those who wish to smile (or snarl) may do so. In "Camp Meeting," he lists the qualities a visiting preacher must have if he is to prove satisfactory to the ranch-world congregation. The list has nothing to do with religion. Above all, he must not preach past noon: "...it is not possible for any preacher — regardless of his pretty smiling wife and his white shoes and his years along the Amazon — to retain full status among such a group of men if he takes lightly their hour's sacrifice and thereby implies that grace, in the long run, is more important than barbecue."

Reared a Methodist, Bode listened to sermons about sin, but did not see much of it in the life around him. He likes the idea of God — creator of the world he finds so satisfactory — but can do without Jesus. He suspects that the music of the spheres is not church music — rather, "...the sound of galaxies expanding and cells multiplying, of the surf crashing and the winds moving through pines and caves."

He seems to take the kindness of a shade tree, the serenity of hills, the exuberance of a fine day as models, as qualities that human beings should exhibit substantially more often than they do. He offers no answers. And in "I Am Mourning Robert Ingersoll Today," he pays his respects to the brilliant nineteenth-century atheist whose ethics, family life, and conduct were everything a Christian's ought to be, but (if we believe the newspapers) often aren't.

Many of Bode's characters are strangers, glimpsed on streets, in parks, in stores, even in moving cars. He does not know their names. Most of them have no idea that they are in his books. The "Couple In The Park," for example (San Antonio jazz festival: monolithic young husband on the grass, ignoring his pretty wife), are two among scores of people, perhaps not given to reading, who don't know that they could open a book, now or years from now, and pop back into existence as they once were — the clothes they wore, the signals they sent, the relationships they were in the process of wearing out.

Are our school kids assigned anything written by Texans in the twentieth century? My couldn't-be-sketchier research shows they get *My Antonía* , *To Kill a Mockingbird* , *A Farewell to Arms, Of Mice and Men.* Seniors read Mother-Tongue stuff: *Hamlet*, Milton, and (guaranteed to turn a youngster off of reading) *Beowulf.*

How about *Coronado's Children* (buried treasure)? *Leaving Cheyenne* (cowboys, etc.)? How about a batch of Elroy Bode sketches: school bands, teen-agers, animals, ranch life, livestock shows, family reunions, summer camps? Kids might be pleased to discover that their own lives, their own state, are material from which books have been made. They might even read those books with an extra measure of interest. And — why not? — a few students besides the naturally literate might begin to think that reading a book can be more than an assigned hardship.

On trips between El Paso and the Hill Country, often alone, Bode composed prose in his head while driving the long, here-to-horizon stretches of Interstate 10 that lie on each side of Fort Stockton. I doubt that this produced, over years, more than a few pages, but it does show how much he likes writing. It recalls the nearly blind James Thurber, self-sidelined at parties, thinking through his next story or comic essay, until urged by his wife to "stop working." He too liked writing well enough to do it in unlikely places.

Bode has written his books, over forty years, while teaching full time and raising two children. Most of this happened in El Paso, where he still lives and, at age sixty-six, still teaches. For years the *El Paso Herald Post* gave him a monthly page plus jump, and an artist to illustrate his latest sketches. Some of these appear in *Home Country.* He has said several times, and not happily, that his writing life was over. So far, he has been wrong every time.

*Home Country* is not all sketches. There are six longer pieces — "Anais," a memoir about a remarkable woman, is the longest (at twenty-eight pages) and won a 1991 Spur Award for Short Fiction from the Western Writers of America. At greater length, Bode becomes a don't-quit investigative reporter ("The Making of a Legend"); or a writer of feature articles ("Livestock Show") whose comedy grows entirely out of the people and events observed: "Rural men keep their hats on when they

dance, when they sit together at cafe tables, when they drive their pickups and cars to town, when they tend to business in stores — perhaps even when they sleep or couple conjugally in the night. Why?"

"A Trip South" — the South here is not Brownsville or Mexico, but the Old South: Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama — shows how important long familiarity is to Bode. He gets the *people* on this trip as accurately as ever, but the place-based knowledge of "Livestock Show," "Camp Meeting," "Out-Of-Town Game" is missing. He does trim away some of the nostalgia and illusion — the soft-focus haze of Spanish moss, slave-made brick, and Tradition — by wondering what the South would be without its trees: "...to remove that which has provided elegance and beauty, to let the unredeemed flat earth remain, with the people on it, black and white, looking at one another, shack to Tudor home ... to no longer have trees that soften the harshness and camouflage the grimness.... To let the Southland see itself finally in terms of people only and the quality of their lives...."

The work of many big-selling writers is like the food on a plate. It is consumed, gives a momentary pleasure, and is gone. Its authors fade and blend — with Frederick Wakeman, Faith Baldwin, Joseph Hergesheimer, and James Branch Cabell — into nearly perfect oblivion. Bode's work, I think, is more like the plate. Because of its clarity and simplicity, its exact rendering of the Texas he knows, it will be valued, kept, and handed on, for several, perhaps many, generations. □

*Richard Phelan, author of* Texas Wild, *first wrote about Elroy Bode for the* Observer *in December of 1981.*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# Don't Expect an Answer

## *On the Borderland Police Beat*

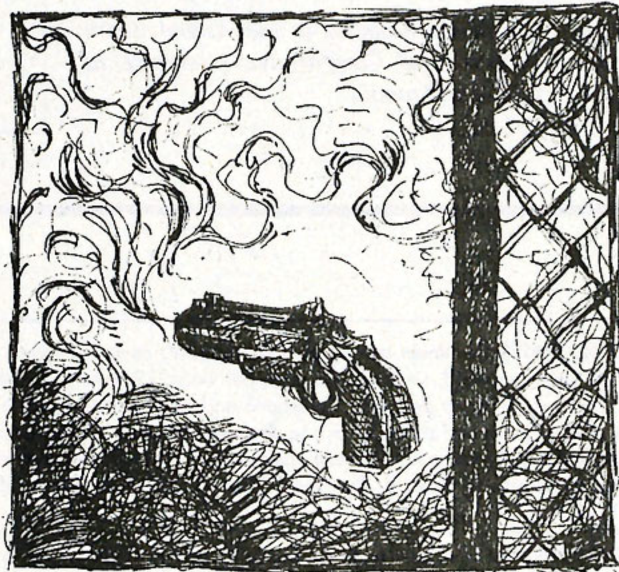
BY STEVEN G. KELLMAN

**ASK A POLICEMAN.**
**By Rolando Hinojosa.**
**Arte Público Press.**
**256 pages. $12.95 (paper).**

During the course of thirteen novels that constitute what he calls the Klail City Death Trip, Rolando Hinojosa has established himself as sole owner and proprietor of fictional Belken County, which, like the author's native Mercedes, is situated in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. If Belken is the Lone Star Yoknapatawpha, Hinojosa is its Faulkner, intent on appropriating the Tex-Mex borderlands as site for his human comedy. The fertile soil of Yoknapatawpha sustains several of the lushest works of American literature, and it might have seemed a waste of good land and flawed personalities for Faulkner to have set a mere murder mystery in his precious Mississippi Delta country. But in 1948, he did. *Intruder in the Dust,* a quirky book in which Gavin Stevens saves Lucas Beauchamp from a lynch knot and solves a mortal crime, is as far from Faulkner's finest work as it is from Raymond Chandler's.

For the fourteenth leg — a lame one — of the Klail City Death Trip, Hinojosa offers up a genre entertainment: "A Rafe Buenrostro Mystery," as the cover, illustrated with a pistol, two bullets and a splash of blood, labels it. *Ask a Policeman* is in fact the second Rafe Buenrostro mystery, a tardy sequel to his 1985 *Partners in Crime,* for which Hinojosa recruited characters from Belken County. In that stolid story of gore and wits, Rafe Buenrostro, a lieutenant in the Belken County Homicide Squad, is misled in his efforts to solve multiple homicides in the Valley by the deceitful Lisandro Gómez Solís, head of law enforcement in the Cuerpo de Policía Estatal, Sección del Orden Público, just across the border in Barrones, Tamaulipas.

In *Ask a Policeman,* which is dedicated to the author's father Manuel Guzmán Hinojosa ("He was the policeman") and his mother Carrie Effie Smith ("She was the policeman's wife,") Rafe Buenrostro is now head of the Belken County Homicide Squad. The new novel begins with a spectacular scheme to spring Lisandro Gómez, lawman turned lawbreaker, from custody in the Belken County Courthouse, where, already convicted of homicide by a Texas court, he faces a federal hearing on drug charges. The opening chapter, in which Gómez is spirited across the border to the family ranch, where he is immediately shot dead by his loving brother, Felipe Segundo Gómez, resembles pulp fiction less than pithless cinema.



Valerie Fowler

In what would be the pre-credit sequence, readers are assaulted with copious carnage and introduced to a few violent miscreants, not only Felipe Segundo but also Juan Carlos and José Antonio Gómez, even nastier pieces of work who may or may not be Felipe's twin sons. Other felonies accrue, but most of the rest of the novel details the methodical efforts by sensible Rafe to get to the bottom of it all. A Korean War veteran who earned a degree in jurisprudence from the University of Texas before returning home to enforce instead of practice law, he is assisted by fellow detectives Ike Cantú, Sam Dorson and Peter Hauer.

*Ask a Policeman* is a police procedural, and most of its story unfolds as the officers perform their tasks — making phone calls, reading lab reports, holding meetings — during a steamy Texas August. Many readers are evidently fond of this genre, but novels that take us to work with policemen are no more inherently dramatic than dental hygienist procedurals. Proceeding to do his job, Chief Inspector Buenrostro interrogates Ramón and Gabriel Quevedo, contract killers respected as *la gente dura,* tough, stoic men who honor actions over words. They are akin to the laconic cops who shadow them; ask a policeman in this novel, and you will not get much of an answer.

Asked why he entered law enforcement, Ike Cantú replies: "A cop is all I ever wanted to be. Ever since I can remember." So much for the enigmas of motivation. Rafe's wife Sammie Jo exists primarily to utter terse banalities like "Oh, Rafe, I'm so sorry," when she — and we — are informed of misfortune. Hinojosa himself sums up Ernesto Zedillo, without naming him, as "the youngest president in Mexico's interesting history," but if you want to know exactly what makes it "interesting," you might do better to ask a policeman, not this author. At some point, understatement becomes indistinguishable from the tactic of a hostile witness. "Just the facts, ma'am" was Jack Webb's signa-

ture request on *Dragnet,* but the poetry of facts, like that of words, depends on inspired selection.

What is most remarkable about *Ask a Policeman* is its hybrid sensibility, its ease in straddling two (nay, three — a couple of killers are imported from French Canada) cultures. Klail and Barrones each have more in common with the other than with many other towns on their own side of the national divide. Lisandro Gómez' successor as head of law enforcement in Barrones is spunky María Luisa Cetina, who attended high school in Klail and is able to explain, in fluent English, how, though it adheres to the Napoleonic Code, Mexican law is as attentive as *la ley norteamericana* to the rights of suspects. Spanish words and phrases mingle freely with English ones throughout the novel. However, in marked contrast to Hinojosa's practice elsewhere in the Klail City Death Trip cycle (where the use of English or Spanish, by characters and narrators, is dictated entirely by the context, not the presumed limitations of the reader), we are offered conversations transcribed entirely in English, by speakers who know only Spanish.

With better insight than grammar, *Partners in Crime* says about Rafe's cousin, Jehu Malacara: "And, as most borderers throughout the world, he had little confidence in central authority." In *Ask a Policeman,* Boyd Hackett, the F.B.I. agent assigned to Klail, is an interloper, less a partner than a pest to the local police. District Attorney Chip Valencia is a fatuous Republican who l^inks his political ambitions to acquiring federal funding to buy unnecessary tanks and heavy weapons for Belken County. "The federal trough is longer than the Rio Grande," notes Sam Dorson. "Trouble is, the trough doesn't wash out into the Gulf." Nor does everything in the plot of *Ask a Policeman* wash, and this novel about borderers does not always inspire confidence in its author. He asks his policemen, in Klail and Barrones, to follow step-by-step the procedures for closing the files on local felonies, while larger questions remain a mystery. □

*Steven G. Kellman is the Ashbel Smith Professor of Comparative Literature at U.T.–San Antonio.*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# Moon over the Border

## *A conquistador and his maiden look for low-wage jobs*

**BY PAT LITTLEDOG**

***THE MOON WILL FOREVER BE A DISTANT LOVE/ LA LUNA SIEMPRE SERA UN DIFICIL AMOR.***
**By Luis Humberto Crosthwaite.**
**Translation by Debbie Nathan and Willivaldo Delgadillo.**
**Cinco Puntos Press.**
**175 pages. $12.95 (paper).**

Who initiates the dialogue of love? According to Luis Crosthwaite, it is the woman, who wishes so strongly for change that one day her conquistador falls out of the sky "like a Spanish coin found in a land where mostly cocoa beans are used for trade...." From that, the Tijuana poet's romantic fable unfolds. His prototypical lovers, Florinda and Balboa (also referred to as "F" and "B"), endure a separation of several hundred miles, their plight resonating with that of lovers from bygone centuries, as all the while they silently ask themselves whether their love will survive.

At the border, like his ancestors in their galleys before him, Balboa sallies forth into foreign territory: he is smuggled into the "Northernish Empire" in the trunk of a car driven by his Uncle Decoroso. Florinda stays behind in the border city, waiting like so many of her female predecessors. As Balboa muses to himself, silent-hero style:

*That's the way History is: going far away from the people you love, having adventures, doubting, experiencing temptations and returning at the end of the trip to praises worthy of heroes. Perhaps it's hard to understand for someone who's not a conquistador or a Spaniard, but it's part of life: the series of events arranged by God on the march of Time.... That's the way we conquistadors are, and Florinda will have to accept it the way I accept her dark skin and brown eyes.*

Crosthwaite is a young author, with playful ideas, still, about how men and women behave. He has stretched out and flattened his characters stereotypically, the woman tortilla-style — Mexican Indian Everywoman — and the man in beaten plates of armor, his heart still in the chivalric age, imagining his beloved as a maiden of that era.

But while the light of her life is out sallying (working maybe as a waiter or bricklayer; she doesn't know because he doesn't call her) Florinda decides to get out of the darkening house of his relatives where he's left her, and takes a job at the local maquiladora, standing at a conveyer belt moving electronic devices. A mantra provides the concentration she needs to avoid injury and still meet her production quota: "soldering iron melt solder, solder solder circuits... thirty per minute. Maybe more."

Valerie Fowler

With her senses dulled by low-wage production, La Televisión images and El Radio rhythms overwhelm Florinda, reshaping whatever ideals she brought with her from the past, mixing motion picture idols in with her Tenochtitlán gods. Then, for a moment, when she wakes up from her reverie, she sees the eyes of one of her fellow workers, a man amongst the women. (And she is the most beautiful! He chooses her, even though she is married — but the conquistador has gone and hasn't called or *anything*....) Simultaneously, somewhere on the other side of the border, Balboa is ogling one fair Mary Ann's lips and legs. And so the dialogue of love begins all over again.

There is no fairy tale ending to this romance, and you don't expect one, given the ironic, satirical, and darkly fanciful notes in Crosthwaite's prose. In fact there is no ending, but rather a kind of glyph that mixes type, Aztec symbols, and a long, stylized farewell to the story's more obscure characters. The author's intent seems to be to let us know that one phase follows another, for lovers as for the moon of his title. The book leaves off before any truly dark phase occurs, and the resulting analysis of traditional male and female stances toward one another remains a partial one.

But this is a young poet, and a first novel. His threading of a lovers' dialogue back and forth across the U.S./Mexico border is an engaging conceit, and he renders it in rollicking poetry, César Vallejo style. Long strings of metaphor stretch from earth to Sirius, and from the bottom of the moats surrounding Tenochtitlán — where many of Cortéz's men sunk with their gold following the conquistador's first defeat — to a bus station on the border of New Spain. Few have expressed the slide of history as well as Crosthwaite, without resorting to more prosaic devices such as ghost tales or hallucinations.

The translators, Debbie Nathan and Willivaldo Delgadillo, demonstrate a rare sensitivity to complicated language rhythms, and what might otherwise have come across as a lightweight take on the differences between the sexes becomes a lingustic event. Imagine a reggae group getting hold of Marty Robbins' "El Paso," or accordions translating Aztec flute songs in an underground Tijuana bar. I, for one, will be awaiting Crosthwaite's next work — maybe because I'm just a sucker for a baroque border song. ☐

*Pat LittleDog's books include* Afoot in A Field of Men *and* Border Healing Woman.

# Notes From Central Texas

## Three Sketches By Elroy Bode

*The following selections are excerpted from* Home Country *by Elroy Bode, published this year by Texas Western Press.*

### AIR FORCE BLUES

It was peacetime, 1955, and as a second lieutenant I wandered around Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio trying to keep from doing something wrong. I wore stiff, starched, awkward khakis, a visored hat, black tie, blunt-toed black shoes. For two years I was obligated, during duty hours, to suspend the essential Me. Encased in my khaki prison, I looked like, and felt like, a goon.

After work I walked about in the big, nearly bare sitting room of the Bachelor Officers Quarters, my footsteps echoing as I paced the smooth wooden floor. I stared at the brown woods of the walls and chairs, the white plaster, and tried to think of what to do with myself. I was clearly not meant to be a military man.

Outside, on the cool second-floor walkway, Major Witherspoon would pass by, laughing, with a nurse. He was friendly, dark-haired, youthful looking — remarkably young, I thought, to have a gold leaf on his open khaki collar. He seemed to be all that I wasn't: a confident bachelor officer accustomed to traveling here and there, dating secretaries and nurses and laughing his hearty, young-major's laugh. He was friendly with other young officers in rooms nearby and played cards with them late at night in his slippers and maroon robe. He did not bolt the base each afternoon as I did and head down the farm-to-market road toward San Antonio — to the lure of the streets and the night, but instead walked casually back from his accounting office to his quarters, enjoying the look of the Spanish-style buildings and the quiet, enclosed quadrangle of grass and roses.

I suppose it was the BOQ refrigerator that gave me, for a while, a passing sense of worldliness. It was my first personal refrigerator, so to speak, and on Saturdays, with a box of soda and a wet rag, I cleaned its insides. Afterwards I went to the PX and bought lunch meat and cheese and put them on the bright metal racks of the gleaming ColdSpot. For a while I felt almost smug: there I was, a college graduate, a lieutenant, carrying out my lone, independent little duties like all the other solitaries of the world. And I could snack whenever I wanted to. I didn't have to go out every night and order the same hamburger-and-coffee at a café. I could be casual and sedentary.... Why, I might end up buying a television set to look at while I ate — who could tell? I might even buy a pipe. Then if friends knocked on my door, I would look the way a young officer ought to look in his quarters after his day of duty — sitting there in his room smoking his pipe and reading *Saturday Review.*

**EACH NIGHT I WAS ON THOSE DARK SAN ANTONIO STREETS, LOOKING, WALKING, LISTENING: AFIRE WITH THE STUNNING NEW IDEA THAT MY LIFE COULD READ LIKE A BOOK....**

But I never even came close to pulling it off. True, I did have the refrigerator. But the lunch meat curled up at the edges and the limes shrunk into rocks and the half-cartons of milk grew sour because, as it turned out, I seldom fixed myself a meal in the room more than once a week — and never again thought of smoking a pipe. Something had happened. During those unprepossessing, goon-like days in khaki I had made an important discovery: the world could be written about. Not a vague Shangri-La "literary" world but the one right outside Randolph Air Force Base: the world of personal experience.

So each night I was on those dark San Antonio streets, looking, walking, listening: afire with the stunning new idea that my life could read like a book and — incredibly — I could do the writing.

### BACK ROADS

Narrow roads wind through the Texas hill country — past winter fields and pastures, past little places that are still on the map but just barely: Cain City, Sisterdale, Waring, Welfare. These are the back roads going by settlements left over from the Old Order: from the pioneer times when German immigrants saw the shoulder-high grasslands among the Central Texas hills and decided to settle along Grape Creek and the Pedernales, built their stone houses as they kept an eye out for the nearby Comanches, and established the farms and ranches that their descendants would continue to work for the next eighty to a hundred years.

But times changed. Some of the old-time ranchers and farmers have finally sold off, moved away — given up the heritage of their forebears — and now millionaires from Houston and Dallas and Minneapolis as well as two-paycheck families (sending their kids to school in nearby Boerne and Fredericksburg; seeking the rural good life) live along the narrow roads among the elegant oaks.

New money, old way of life.... Small holdings with weathered barns and trailer houses sit next to large, well-kept spreads. An old rock-wall fence built in the 1880s still borders a bottomland oat patch; across the road an impressive new limestone wall entrance announces the acres of an oil-tycoon-turned-cattle-baron.

Once in December I drove up and over the cedar-covered hills: into valleys where sheep were scattered like miniature chess pieces across huge fields of lush, green, winter grass; by the mailboxes of the Rausches, the Doebblers, the Kothmanns and the lovely Germanic geometry of their neat fields and orchards.

I eased down toward a low-water bridge (Madonnas and Michael Jacksons come and go, but the Guadalupe River, beneath its border of cypress trees, flows on forever) and I was in Waring, a riverside cluster of toy-like buildings. The schoolhouse — white, with green-trimmed windows and a slanting tin roof — had been long closed except for occasional community gatherings. A flock of guineas paraded along the school grounds; a trio of white turkey gobblers strutted and chuffed across a quiet yard.

I drove through and out of town — past the gas station-store, several turn-of-the-century, embossed-tin houses, the abandoned yellow-walled depot sitting on its grassy railroad right-of-way — and I stopped on the side of the road. I got out and listened to the great afternoon stillness. It was silence I heard, but it could easily have been called Time or History. A breeze came from the south, a hawk circled low overhead. An armadillo came rattling through dry Spanish oak leaves, then waddled along the fenceline to snuffle in dried cow manure.

We were both content.

**COUPLE IN THE PARK**

I was wandering through downtown San Antonio one afternoon and decided to see what Jazz in the Park was all about. It was an easy-going Sunday in September and the people in Travis Park were milling around near the outdoor stage — eating sandwiches, drinking beer, listening to the music. Local bands had been playing since noon and Dave Brubeck was scheduled for eight o'clock.

I got a Coors in a paper cup and watched a pair of Frisbee throwers charm a group of kids. Then, as the Herbie Mann Quartet began setting up on stage, I noticed them: the couple on the blanket.

The woman, in her late thirties, was pretty and fair-skinned — with the kind of soft flesh that bruises easily. She had a neatly lip-sticked mouth, carefully made-up eyes, and I could almost smell the powder and moisturizer. An expensive red-and-white striped dress smoothly outlined the hourglass curves of her body.

She was lying back on her elbows beside her husband — obviously trying to be a good sport on the blanket-island beneath the tall pecan trees. But she just couldn't keep from yawning — graceful little partings of her lips half-covered by pats of red-nailed fingers. From time to time she would lean close to her husband, trying to make comments that he could hear above the music. Occasionally she would slowly, lovingly rub her nose against the hair of his arm. Sometimes she even remembered to move her feet a little with the beat of the music — politely, mechanically.

Her husband — he with the tan walking shorts, the meaty legs crossed at the knee; he with the freckled arms and reddish, clipped beard: did he ever turn in his wife's direction to smile a bit or nod at one of her comments? Did he ever break his sphinx-like stare into the legs of the spectators standing in front of them? You can bet your sweet *fajita* he did not. He remained there, thrust back on his arms — angled away from his wife for an hour or more. He offered her his profile, his crossed legs, his impenetrable isolation. Toothpick in mouth — in beard — he faced outward like Napoleon gazing across Elba.

So there she was: pretty and affectionate and ignored in her peppermint-stripe dress: an upper-middle-class matron linked on a Sunday afternoon outing to her reclining statue of a husband. What to do? How to pass the time?... She twitched her cupid-bow lips in more suppressed yawns. She crossed and recrossed her sweetly calved, moisturized legs. She looked about the crowd with slightly widened eyes.

I watched her husband and wondered: Oboist with the San Antonio symphony? computer programmer? psychologist? clothing store heir? I could not tell and did not really care to know. I just wanted to reach up and break off a tree limb and rap him a couple of times across his freckles to get his attention. I wanted to yell at him through Herbie Mann's widely driving solo: You jackass, that's no way to run a marriage!

But I knew it would do no good. I've been around such marriages before. She would immediately grab his arm and hold him tight while trying to kick at my shins with her glossy-red toes. And even then he would not respond — would not bother to look at either of us: would just keep on staring ahead, toothpick intact, while his wife carefully, solicitously, began to brush the pecan leaves off his beard. ☐

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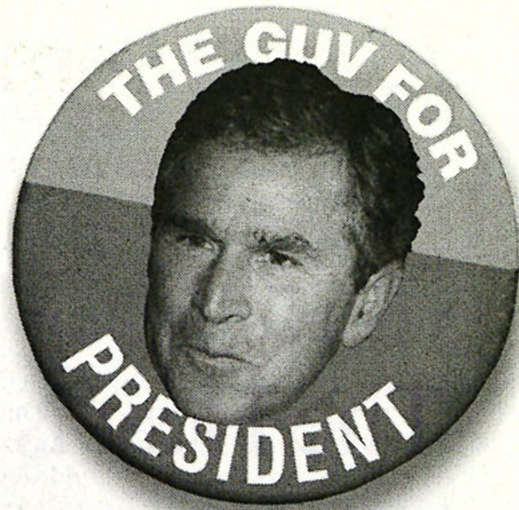



*"Heat," from p. 32*

"You won't put it in your article, will you?"

"Like you said, it's a non-issue."

"What about my windfall from the stadium at Arlington? You're not going to go into that, are you?" the Governor asked. "You know, money really doesn't mean that much to me: after a certain point it's only good for giving away."

Lurker shook his head so vigorously that beadlets of sweat splattered across the armrests of his chair. "I don't want to bore our readers," he said. "Did I mention I've sold my house? I've been looking into properties in the D.C. area."

Before the Governor could respond, Gloria burst into the room. "I'm sorry, Sir, but the Mexicans — they say they're not hungry. And..." she paused to catch her breath, "there is absolutely no iced tea left in Austin!"

The Governor narrowed his eyes and exhaled, then opened the top drawer of his desk and removed a manilla folder. He turned to Lurker. "It looks as if I'm going to have to cut this interview short. I had one of my aides prepare an article beforehand, though, outlining what I should do *if* I decide to run for President. Which I haven't decided, by the way."

"How thoughtful of you!" said Lurker.

"Have your photographer come back tomorrow. Will I be on the cover?"

"Of course, boss," the Journalist replied, lifting his beret in salute, then letting it settle back over his pate as he moved toward the door. Exiting, he could hear the governor's chieftanly growl: *Get me Nestea....* ☐

# The Heat is On

*By late June, Texas' hot weather had become so bereft of momentum that it could no longer properly be called a "wave" or "front" or even "spell": it was, simply, heat. A Texas-sized block of three-digit temperatures. The Beverage Commissioner issued a statewide alert, warning of possible iced tea shortages, and adults everywhere were unusually cranky. Which perhaps explains what went on inside the Governor's office, one day in June, after a coach-load of Mexican officials pulled up outside…*

"Excuse me, Governor," said Gloria, the Assistant, stepping into the office.

"Gloria! Where's that iced tea I asked for?"

"It's the shortage, Sir; we're trying to find you some. But in the meantime, Sir, there are some officials here from Mexico who've asked to see you."

"Oh, crap," said the Governor, cracking open one of the wooden shutters behind his desk. "Is it those anti-nuclear folks again?"

"It's the twelve members of the legislature who've been trying to set up a meeting about the Sierra Blanca waste dump."

"Goldarnit! I don't get these guys. What part of 'No way, José' don't they understand?" said the Governor. "Gloria, did you tell them I haven't decided to run for President?"

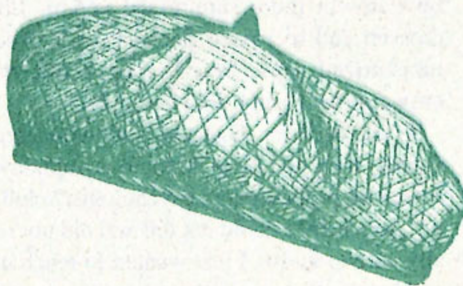
"Yes, but they weren't sure what that has to do with—"

"It takes a lot of time, not deciding. I'm busy. *Este jefe está ocupado.* Can't you find some minor functionary to take them to Güero's or something?"

"I'll try, Sir," said Gloria. She looked down at her clipboard. "Paul Lurker is here from *Oh Texas!* Magazine—should I tell him you're busy, too?"

"No, no," said the Governor. He reached for the photograph of his wife and, removing a Kleenex from the inside pocket of his blazer, dusted it off. "Show him in. Show him right in."

Moments later, the Journalist shuffled humbly before the Governor. Lurker was a plump man who, in walking the several blocks from his office to the Governor's,



Valerie Fowler

had developed a complexion as wet as it was florid, a condition to which certain sartorial flourishes, as well as his natural disposition, had contributed. Over each pant-leg Lurker wore an eggshell-colored, well-cushioned kneepad; in addition, and most curiously on this hottest of days, a large, wool beret flopped over his brow.

"Lurker!" boomed the Governor. "I didn't know you were a volleyball man! But what's with the beret?"

"Actually, it goes with the kneepads," Lurker replied, nudging the beret away from his eyes. "It's to show solidarity with the Lewinsky girl — not that I'm a Democrat or anything — but you know, a lot of us in the journalistic community feel that there's nothing illegal about giving a blow job to the President. Or," he continued, his voice lowering, "to a possible Presidential candidate."

"I don't know what you're implying, Lurker, but I'm a happily married man!" said the Governor, thrusting forward the newly-dusted portrait of Mrs. Governor. "She's a great first lady, just like my Mom was.… Hey, why don't you put that in your article?"

"Sure I will, sure," said Lurker. He fetched a sweat-stained notebook from his rear pocket and began to write.

"You know, I haven't decided yet whether to run for President. I've got plenty on my hands right here in Texas."

"I'll bet you do. I noticed quite a crowd of Spanish-speaking gentlemen on my way in," Lurker said.

"Oh those guys. Sierra blah blah blah blah. I think everyone's pretty tired of that issue, don't you?"

"Definitely. We try never to mention it in the magazine."

*See "Heat," p. 31*