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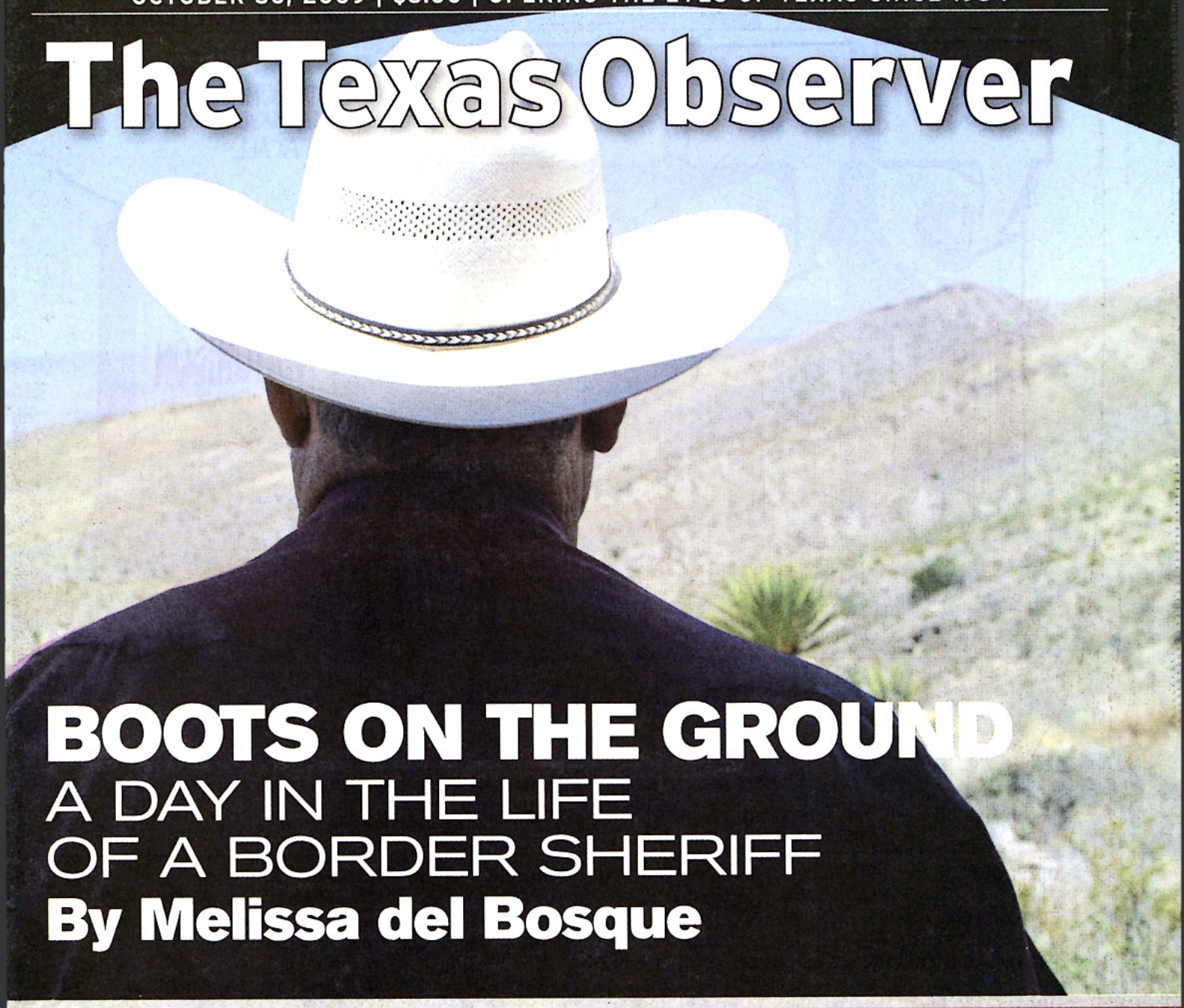
The Texas Observer



BOOTS ON THE GROUND
A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A BORDER SHERIFF
By Melissa del Bosque

FALL BOOKS ISSUE
IN CONJUNCTION WITH
THE TEXAS BOOK FESTIVAL

Featuring

Excerpt from *Molly Ivins: A Rebel Life*

Interview with *Amigoland* author Oscar Casares

Reviews of 11 books included in the Festival

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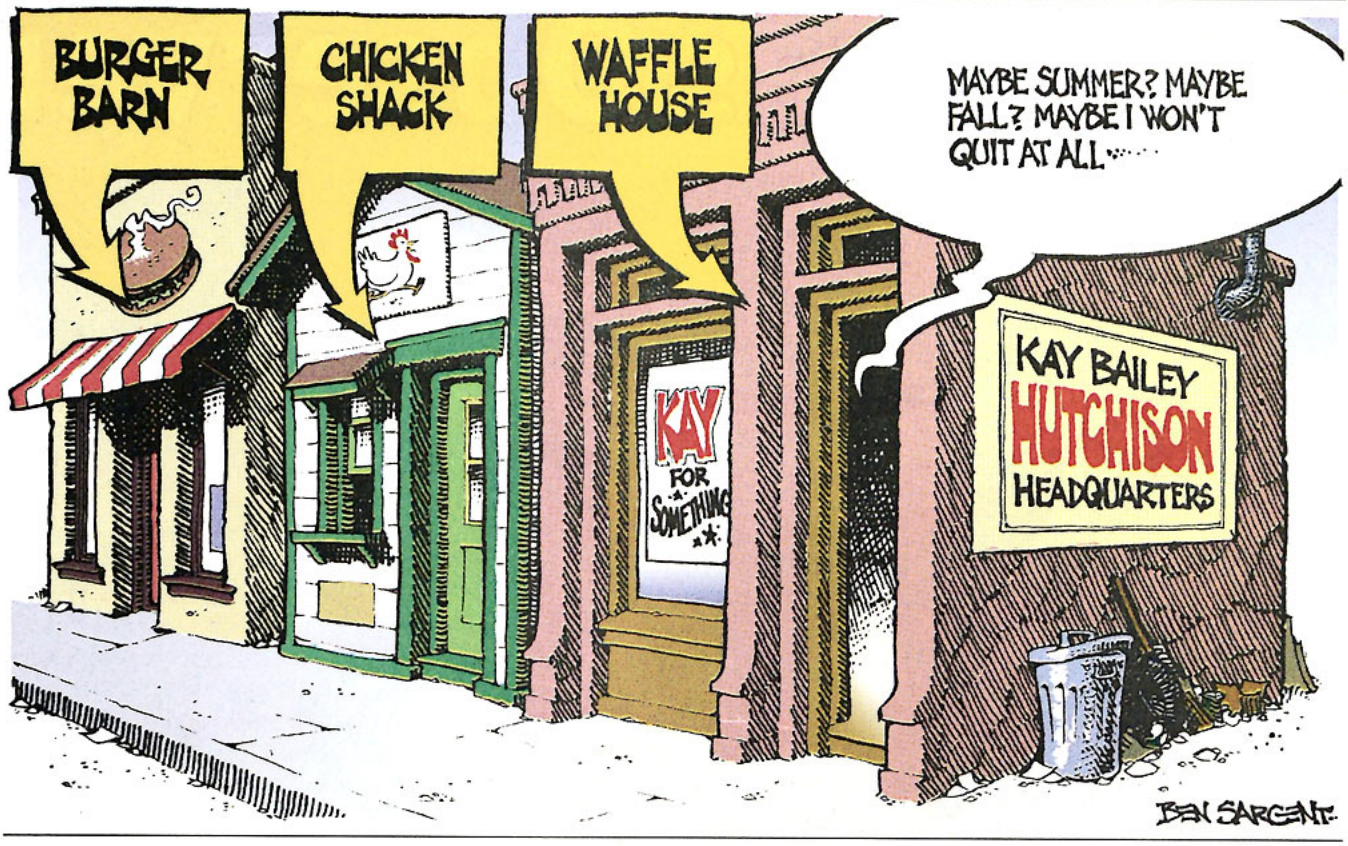

The Texas Observer

OCTOBER 30, 2009

Cover photo by Eugenio Del Bosque

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FIGHTING FOR THEIR RIGHTS

This story about a prison riot ("The Pecos Insurrection," Oct. 2) highlights the most important issue in the immigration debate. Regardless of which side you take on immigration issues, what often gets lost in the argument is that these immigration detainees are human beings. As a country we need to respect that. If compassion and respect for human rights are values we preach, why do we turn our backs when these are absent in our own country? Breaking the law by entering illegally is a problem. No one denies that, but in detaining these individuals, we also take responsibility for them. As this story illustrates, we are miserably failing in that regard.

A. Devan
Posted at texasobserver.org

The criminals are running the institution to the detriment of the "inmates." The roles need to be reversed, and the neckties should be behind the bars.

Bob Higgins
Posted at texasobserver.org

The government has a choice in the matters of these folks who are ill; it's called prosecutorial discretion. They don't have to spend taxpayer money to provide medical care. They can release these nonviolent folks to seek care on the outside. It's criminal to hold them in a place that cannot meet their medical needs.

Nancy Kuznetsov
Posted at texasobserver.org

This is the biggest pile of B.S. I have read in a while. I live [in Reeves County] but don't work at the prison. I think your article was very liberal and slanted. I'll just keep the name of your rag so that I never waste my time reading any more articles from you again.

Kelly Davis
Posted at texasobserver.org

DUTCH CARE?

Recently I was in Amsterdam, and their citizens were eager to discuss our health care reform headlines ("Public Options," Oct. 2). Everyone praised their own health care system and its low cost (private sector!). They were outraged that Americans might choose a public option, citing specific examples from Britain and Canada. The key is for all people to have health insurance and for the government to highly regulate prices.

Camille Renshaw
Posted at texasobserver.org

Most of the people I know without health insurance will be penalized by the Senate plan. They do not have health insurance because they can't afford it. Now they will be fined because they can't afford it. How did this become the Democratic position? In my case (currently underemployed by someone who doesn't offer health insurance), perhaps the proposed subsidies will make health insurance affordable. Now about that supposedly "private" (actually heavily regulated) Dutch health care: No Republican or private insurance company in the United States would accept it or call it anything but socialism.

Gary Denton
Posted at texasobserver.org

A QUESTION OF INNOCENCE

A person has one life to live. To be locked up in prison falsely accused of committing a crime is probably one of the most horrific things I can think of ("I Was Just a Junkie," Oct. 2). Now, in my mind, the three appeals court judges are just as guilty as arson investigators Torres and Selvera of keeping an innocent man in prison.

Rob Greitens
Posted at texasobserver.org

I work with a law enforcement agency. I see people who are coerced into saying and doing things by officers. I try to discourage my law enforcement co-workers from using such tactics. Some will never cease; too bad, we all will suffer when this happens!

Joe Roy
Posted at texasobserver.org

Burning Justice

What has been lost in the heat of the Willingham scandal is the original and central issue: the veracity of the forensic arson evidence.

For decades, fire investigators walked into charred buildings in search of the same clues, the same subtle traces, that they thought indicated arson: the furniture and windows buckled by extreme heat, the burn patterns on the floor scorched by gasoline. Their methods weren't scientific. Investigators relied on a set of assumptions—inherited knowledge passed from one generation to another—about how buildings burn. They used those pieces of evidence to send thousands of defendants to prison. And much of it was wrong.

In the past 15 years, the science of detecting arson has undergone a revolution. Research has shown definitively that many of the assumptions fire investigators once employed to distinguish an intentionally set fire from an accidental one were false.

Yet those disproved forensics sent Cameron Todd Willingham to the Texas death chamber on Feb. 17, 2004. His final claims of innocence—that he hadn't started the 1991 house fire that killed his three daughters—were dutifully recorded before potassium chloride pumped through his veins and stopped his heart.

More than five years later, Willingham's execution lies at the center of the biggest political scandal in Texas since Tom DeLay was roaming the halls of power. Nine of the nation's top fire scientists have looked at the evidence against Willingham and concluded it was based on flawed and outdated assumptions, a collection of "old wives tales," as one put it. These experts say the fire was likely accidental. If there was no arson, then there was no crime, and Willingham was innocent.

The story became even more explosive in late September when Gov. Rick Perry—in the middle of a tough re-election campaign—replaced three members of the Texas Forensic Science Commission, which was investigating the Willingham case, just days before an important hearing. Perry's new appointees promptly canceled the meeting. John Bradley, the Williamson County prosecutor Perry placed in charge of the commission, has not committed to restarting or completing the Willingham probe.

Suddenly there was the whiff of a cover-up, and the makings of a national scandal. Critics accuse Perry of trying to subvert an investigation that might prove he oversaw the execution of an innocent man (he was told of the faulty forensics before the execution). Meanwhile, anti-death penalty activists—sensing that Texas (of all places) might become the first state to admit putting an innocent man to death—latched on to the Willingham case and began rapidly firing off email blasts and organizing protests.

Perry was all too happy to play along and frame the story as a debate over the death penalty. He told reporters recently that Willingham was a "monster" and that the analysis of the nation's leading fire experts was nothing more than "propaganda by the anti-death penalty people."

What has been lost in the heat of political scandal is the original and central issue: the veracity of the forensic arson evidence.

For a time, it appeared the Forensic Science Commission's investigation into the Willingham case might improve the way fire investigators in Texas do their work. The Legislature created the commission in 2005 after scandals at crime labs around the state. The commission was charged with investigating innocence claims based on flawed forensics, and bringing to light any faulty practices that may have sent innocent people to prison. It's one of the first such governmental bodies in the nation. For once, Texas was a criminal-justice innovator.

Arson cases seemed the perfect place to start. Like the cases of Willingham and Ernest Ray Willis, who like Willingham was wrongly convicted of setting a fatal fire— a 1986 blaze in West Texas—based on the same kind of flawed interpretation of burn patterns. (Willis, however, was luckier; he was exonerated in 2004 after 17 years on death row.)

Craig Beyler, a nationally respected fire expert hired by the commission to study Willingham and Willis, concluded in a recent report that he saw no evidence of arson in either case.

Nearly 800 people are serving prison sentences in Texas for arson-related crimes. Quite a few are probably innocent. This year, the *Observer* has investigated some of the state's older arson convictions in its series, "Burn Patterns," and so far found three men who were likely wrongly convicted and remain in prison. (You can read all three stories at texasobserver.org.)

It's probably still happening. In some areas of the state, poorly trained fire investigators are no doubt still using some of the old, disproved forensics to accuse and convict innocent people of arson.

Sadly, there's no helping Willingham now. His case has been closed irrevocably. But the Forensic Science Commission's work might have (and hopefully might yet) help many people. The commission's report could serve as a kind of official list of flawed and outdated arson evidence that could be applied to past and future cases.

And now it's all in doubt. That may be the greatest injustice yet.

—Dave Mann

illustration by Andy Perez

'What Are You So Mad At?'

TEA PARTIERS GO GRASSROOTS

Drew Ryun surveys the Dallas hotel conference room. He can feel the dissatisfaction—anger, even—radiating from the 40 or so newly minted conservative activists seated in front of him.

"You are all here because you are upset about something," says Ryun, executive director of American Majority, whose mission is training a national network of activists committed to limited government. "You want to know what you can do to turn the tide in this country."

There are a few murmurs and a boisterous, "Yes!"

"We all share common values as conservatives. We all want to hold our elected officials accountable," he says, pacing the front of the room. "But here's a test: Who here can name every member of your school board?"

Silence.

Ryun is practicing the ancient art of political organizing, a tradition once thought lost in the age of television campaigning. With the Christian Right and the Obama Left having reinvented personal politicking for the 21st century, the old wizardry is making a comeback. After the tea parties are over and the Fox News van has skipped town, American Majority is training activists to win elections at the grassroots.

At this Thursday-night meeting in late September, Ryun uses the audience's ignorance as a teachable moment. He has demonstrated that angry chants and loud shouts do not an effective activist make. Like an Army drill sergeant, he's tearing down these wannabes and building them up as political warriors with a full complement of weaponry.

"OK. So what are you so pissed about? The people that make decisions are the ones that actually get elected to office," Ryun says. "If you don't know who the people are that are making the decisions that most directly affect you, what are you so mad at?"

Ryun helped his twin brother Ned launch American Majority in January 2008. They are the sons of former Kansas Republican Congressman Jim Ryun, whom the *National Review* ranked as the most conservative member of Congress in 2006. Ned, president of American Majority, worked as a writer in President George W. Bush's administration. Drew previously ran the grassroots operation of the Republican National Committee.

Nevertheless, the group claims to be nonpartisan—a requirement to keep its nonprofit status. The Ryuns say their efforts are ideological, not partisan; they consider most elected Republicans either insufficiently conservative or, worse, falsely conservative.

American Majority has a field office in Dallas. Since it opened in late May, the group has held 12 training sessions (half for activists, half for candidates), with six more on this year's calendar. Ryan says American Majority's goal for 2010 is a thousand new activists and 100 candidates running in Texas.

The training session makes it clear that the members of this audience are not the "crazy uncles" you see on TV. They're the kind of folks who will work the call centers, walk blocks, and, potentially, translate the Tea Party movement into a political force.

—Josh Berthume

Justice Deferred

WILL TEXAS TACKLE WRONGFUL CONVICTIONS?

Anyone who believes the criminal justice system in Texas is functioning properly should be locked in a room and forced to listen to Cory Session talk about his half-brother.

His name was Tim Cole. He was a Texas Tech University student falsely convicted in 1986 of rape. Tainted police lineup procedures led the victim to misidentify Cole as her attacker. He spent 13 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. He didn't live to see his name cleared. In 1999, Cole died in prison of complications from asthma.

On Oct. 13, some of the leading criminal justice experts in the state—including lawyers, judges, and policymakers—gathered for the first meeting of the Tim Cole Advisory Panel on Wrongful Convictions. It was ostensibly an organizational meeting. But the first order of business was Session. Sitting next to other members of Cole's family at a long conference table, Session described Cole as a college student trying to live the American dream. "This was my brother," Session said through tears. "This was my mother's son. He never met my children. He never married."

Session suggested that flags on all state government buildings be lowered to half-staff on Dec. 2—the date Cole died in prison—to acknowledge everyone who's been wrongly convicted.

"Tim died in prison while being oppressed," Session said. "Let's not let it happen again. ... If it can happen to Tim, it can happen to anyone."

Last year, after DNA testing proved his innocence, Cole became the first person exonerated posthumously in Texas. His story made national news and prodded the Legislature to enact two bills in Cole's name (one increased compensation for the wrongly convicted; the other created the panel). The panel is to deliver recommendations to the Legislature in January 2011.

Much of the first meeting revolved around reforms that didn't pass the Legislature this year, including a bill to fix police lineup procedures. Had the bill been law in 1985, it might have saved Tim Cole.

Many panelists agreed broadly on the causes of wrongful convictions. There isn't much left to study on the topic, and some panelists argued the committee should focus its energy on a political strategy to pass the reforms.

"We don't need to study it anymore," said Barry Macha, the Wichita County district attorney and the panel's representative from the Texas District & County Attorneys Association. "We know what the problems are. We know what the solutions are. We just need to pass it."

Macha said DAs support many of the reform bills, including those addressing lineups, videotaped confessions, and better access to the courthouse for wrongly convicted prisoners.

Others at the table disagreed. Rep. Pete Gallego, the Alpine Democrat who chairs the criminal justice committee in the state House, said the compromise versions of the reform bills this past session were weak. "It's easy to support weak stuff," he said. Gallego argued that the panel should debate the details and make specific recommendations.

The open question is whether the inquiry named after Tim Cole can lead the way to reform. Or will it be another blue ribbon panel that produces another well-intended report that ends up in a drawer?

—Dave Mann

In Her Father's House

CHRISTI CRADDICK REJOINS THE LOBBY

Nine months after the Texas House stripped Midland Republican Tom Craddick of his speakership, Craddick's daughter dusted off her Austin lobbying shingle.

In September, Christi Craddick reported to the Texas Ethics Commission that Scythian Ltd., a Midland-based company, will pay her up to $25,000 to lobby in the last quarter of 2009. Midland businessman Jafar Salehi organized Scythian in 1998. It's not clear what business the company is in. Scythian appears to have started out in the energy industry before selling those assets to competitor Endeavor Energy Resources LP in 2006. Christi Craddick and Salehi, who has no previous record of hiring Austin lobbyists, did not return calls seeking comment. Scythian spokesman Tom Clifton said only that the company is involved in ranching, with olive oil and vineyard interests.

If Christi Craddick is promoting these bucolic pursuits, she didn't tell the Ethics Commission. She reported on her recently filed lobby-registration form that she would lobby on such matters as "Energy," "Oil & Gas," and "Utilities." Craddick passed over a subject-matter box labeled "Agriculture."

Salehi—whose company bears the name of an ancient people from present-day Iran—contributed $2,500 last year to then-embattled Speaker Craddick (Salehi later gave $1,000 to Republican gubernatorial candidate, U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison). Rep. Craddick's legislative office said he wouldn't comment on his daughter's return to the lobby.

Christi Craddick abandoned her lobbying career after Republicans won a majority in the Texas House in 2002. At the time, she figured into a couple of ethics scandals that imperiled her father's bid for House speaker. One involved statements by the then-executive director of the state Employees Retirement System that Rep. Craddick quietly helped pass a 1997 law that allows unmarried adult children of state employees (read: Christi Craddick) to indefinitely receive state health insurance. Rep. Craddick repeatedly has said he had nothing to do with the matter.

Another controversy involved Christi Craddick's former client, Cap Rock Electric Cooperative Inc. A 1999 law made the Midland-based cooperative the only electric utility in Texas that could convert into a for-profit power company while preserving its local monopoly. Cap Rock documents credited Christi and Tom Craddick with helping pass the sweetheart legislation. In November 2002, Rep. Craddick took the unusual step of writing every incoming House member to reassure them about Cap Rock. His letter praised Christi for quitting the lobby "to dispel any appearance of a lack of integrity in my speakership."

From 1995 until she departed in 2002, Christi Craddick billed

28 clients a total of up to $665,000 (Texas lobbyists report incomes in ranges). During some of these years, Rep. Craddick chaired the House Ways and Means Committee, prompting recurring media questions about whether his daughter's clients received special treatment. Christi Craddick may have fed such speculation when she named her consulting firm Direct Contacts Inc.

Quitting the lobby did not hurt Christi Craddick's bottom line. With her father installed as House speaker, she took over operations of Rep. Craddick's campaign account, as well as Stars Over Texas—a political action committee formed to defend Speaker Craddick's leadership position. These two political committees have paid Christi Craddick $924,087 since 2002. (Although Stars paid Christi Craddick $17,500 in the first half of 2009, this once-powerful PAC recently reported that it had not raised a dollar so far this year—leaving less than $60,000 in the bank.)

In the wake of Tom Craddick's legislative demotion, it remains to be seen if the market will remain bullish for Christi Craddick's brand of direct contacts.

—Andrew Wheat

Open Question

WILL THE PUBLIC OWN TEXAS BEACHES?

On Nov. 3, voters–or at least the small number that make it to the polls–will choose whether to enshrine Texas' populist open beaches law in the state Constitution.

Proposition 9, one of 11 proposed constitutional amendments on the ballot, would guarantee the public's right to access and use Texas beaches from Sabine Pass to South Padre Island. Many developers, beachside homeowners, and private property rights activists have never liked the 50-year-old Texas Open Beaches Act, periodically challenging it at the Legislature and in court. A libertarian legal organization is the latest to bring suit against the General Land Office in an effort to gut the law.

Proponents of Prop 9 say the measure would elevate the public's right to the beaches and make such assaults harder. "This is the next logical step to protect what we have," says A.R. "Babe" Schwartz, a former state senator from Galveston who co-authored the Open Beaches Act. "It is an absolute protection; it's a brick wall."

—Forrest Wilder

Site Unseen

EL PASO'S INDEPENDENT VOICE GOES ON VACATION

I got a sinking feeling on Oct. 18 when I read that El Paso's online *Newspaper Tree* is taking a hiatus. "NPT staff, me and [reporter] David Crowder, took vacation time starting a few weeks ago," wrote editor Sito Negron. "Unfortunately, that vacation has turned into an indefinite furlough."

Newspaper Tree won a loyal following with original analysis, reportage on local public corruption, and a willingness to allow different perspectives. If you wanted to know what was really going on in El Paso—with local debates over revisiting drug policy, for instance, or harassment of gay couples in public—you went to *NPT*. Then you read the comments on the articles and op-eds. Readers were unusually thoughtful and engaged—and often contributed to understanding the stories better.

The *NPT* raised its level last year when it hired veteran investigative reporter David Crowder, who had worked for three decades at the *El Paso Times*. But the economy took its toll on the news journal's owner, El Paso Media Group. The group has stopped funding *Newspaper Tree*. But Negron says he's confident the site will be back. "What we've been doing has been very well received in the community," he says, "and since we made the announcement we were going on hiatus, we've been contacted with some interesting options to keep NPT going."

Negron says *NPT* has never made money. Going nonprofit might be the most viable option now, Negron says. Perhaps *NPT* can be supported by the community. It's the tactic being taken by many newspapers and magazines these days. (The *Observer* has been nonprofit since 1994.)

Negron, 42, has been in journalism for at least two decades "and just about done it all," he says. Now he has two kids to feed and no salary. But he waxes optimistic. He's seen the need for tough local reporting and an open airing of community debates reflected in the response to *Newspaper Tree*.

"Journalism is super-healthy," he says. "We used to bitch about the corporate media, and then there was an explosion of alternative weeklies, and there's magazines like *The Texas Observer* and *Mother Jones*," he says, along with sites like *NPT*. "There are multiple threads of journalism now."

Multiple threads, but unfortunately none of them is spun out of gold.

—Melissa del Bosque

YOU DON'T SAY:

"It's simply political fiction that stimulus dollars were necessary to balance our budget." –Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, *Austin American-Statesman* op-ed, Oct. 21.

"In order to balance the budget this biennium ... we used $14 billion in federal stimulus money." –State Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, quoted in *Fort Worth Business Press*, Oct. 19.

JUSTICE *for the* DISPOSSESSED

"I've been called a controversial judge, so I suppose I am," William Wayne Justice told me during a courthouse interview in Austin 10 years ago. A year earlier, he had moved from Tyler, where President Lyndon Johnson had appointed him to the federal bench in 1968. In the Eastern District of Texas, Justice handed down rulings that made the state a more humane place and made him a pariah in conservative East Texas.

As the interview drifted toward casual conversation, the judge said most stories about the hostility he and wife Sue confronted in East Texas were probably true, if sometimes exaggerated. What I recall about that conversation was his absence of rancor. Crosses burned in his yard, bitter editorials, hate mail, crank phone calls, death threats, Tyler merchants who made it clear the Justices could take their business down the road: Nothing, it appeared, had engendered any bitterness in this soft-spoken, sincere man. He did say that he and Sue were happy living their later years in Austin, close to their daughter, Ellen.

After Justice died at 89 in Austin on Oct. 13, I remembered what he said about his 1978 *Plyler v. Doe* decision, which found it illegal to deny public education to the children of undocumented immigrants. If the Tyler Independent School District hadn't appealed the decision, Justice's ruling would have been limited to the Eastern District of Texas. When the Supreme Court upheld the ruling 5-4 in 1982, it became the law of the land. Today, closing the schoolhouse door to a child is a violation of that child's 14th Amendment right to "equal protection of the laws."

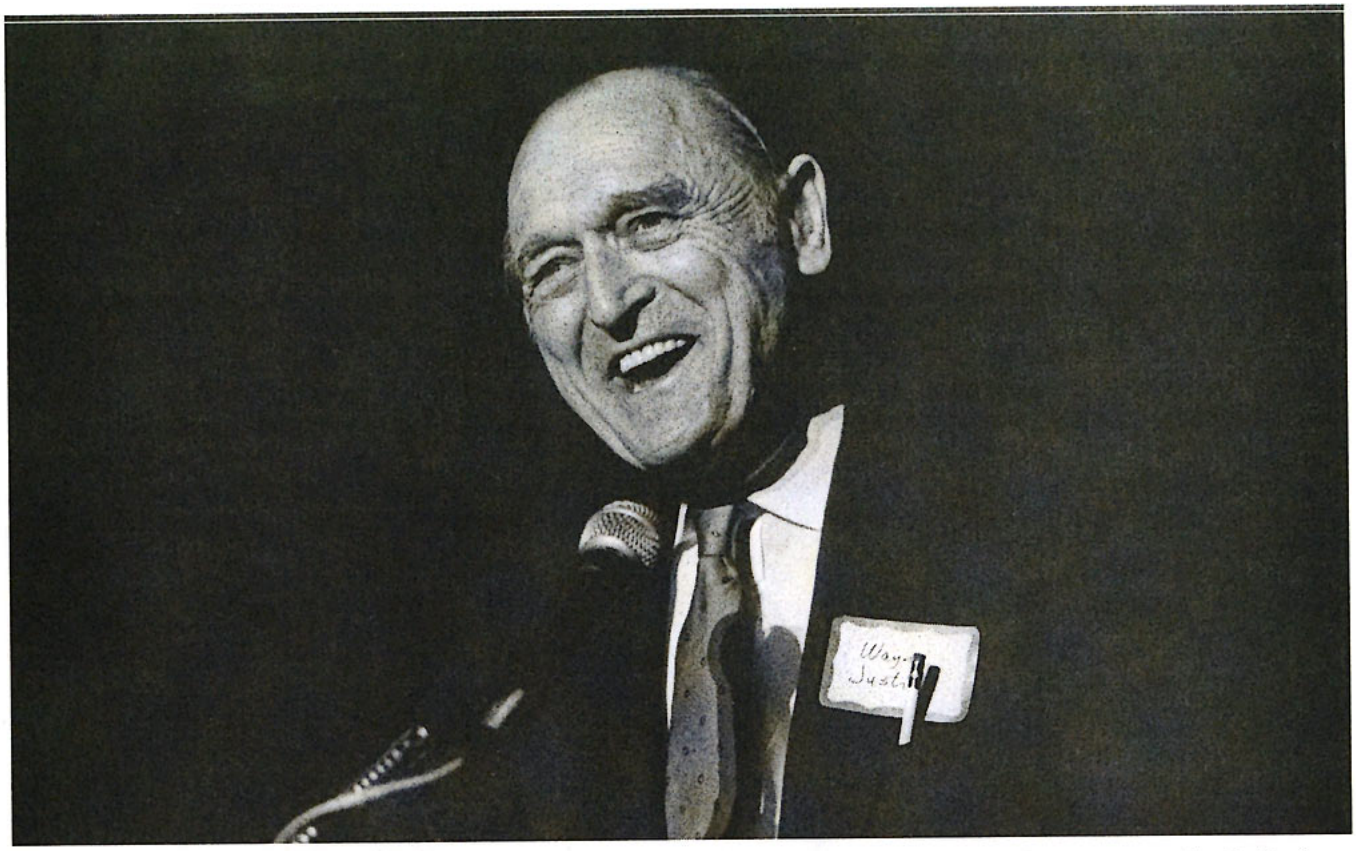
The ruling would affect millions of children, the judge said. He said he would like to be remembered for that decision. It is hard to imagine a more fitting tribute to his career on the federal bench.

Civil rights lawyer Larry Daves filed the suit on behalf of José and Lidia López (and several other plaintiffs), who had been told it would cost their children $1,000 a year to attend public schools in Tyler. José López worked in a foundry, and the tuition was beyond what the undocumented worker from Mexico could afford.

As a young law school graduate, Daves had moved to East Texas specifically to practice law in Justice's courtroom. (Daves now practices law in Colorado.) Daves told me his *Plyler* plaintiffs lived in constant fear of deportation. As the trial date in Tyler approached, they grew more reluctant to appear in court. Daves asked the judge to issue a restraining order to bar immigration officers from detaining and deporting the plaintiffs. Justice told him he couldn't order a government agency not to enforce the law. He could, however, discourage media attention, which the plaintiffs feared would result in their deportation.

On the day the trial began, Daves huddled in the dark with his clients in the courthouse parking lot at 5:30 in the morning, preparing for a 6 a.m. hearing that went largely unnoticed.

Justice's constitutional affinity for the dispossessed inspired many of the 95 clerks who worked with him. They became an extended family, and many now work in public-interest law. Human rights lawyer Jennifer Harbury clerked for Justice after graduating from law school and working for Texas Rural Legal



Judge William Wayne Justice: "a judge in Tyler who was willing to follow the law." *photo by Alan Pogue*

Aid in Hereford. Years later, she was working in legal aid in Florida when Justice called to say he was attending a judicial conference in Palm Beach. He wanted to spend the day with her. When she showed up in the hotel lobby on Saturday morning, she said, "Judge Justice asked me to drive him out to see where the Haitian sugarcane workers were living." They drove to a migrant labor camp in Belle Glade, skipping an elaborate luncheon and festivities that afternoon. "He spent most of the day talking with Haitian workers," Harbury said.

In court, Justice discouraged marshals from putting defendants in prison jumpsuits. Defendants were innocent until proven guilty, he told me, and jailhouse garb sent the wrong signal to jurors. Even at bench trials, which have no jury, Justice preferred dress clothes for defendants to preserve their personal dignity.

As his career wound to a conclusion in Austin, Justice was assigned more sentencing hearings than he preferred. Yet even as he presided via video link when he was unable to drive to court in Del Rio, he saw that coats, ties, and other dress clothes were provided to those who stood before him to receive their sentences. At "the lowest point in a person's life," Justice told me, he wanted to provide some small protection against humiliation.

A high regard for the rights of every individual and devotion to the law and the U.S. Constitution defined William Wayne Justice. With his 1980 ruling in *Ruiz v. Estelle* that the Texas prison system was unconstitutional, he reformed one of the nation's most brutal corrections systems. Justice compelled Texas schools to comply with the *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling 16 years after the Supreme Court handed it down in 1954. His decisions desegregated public housing, city councils, and commissioners courts across East Texas.

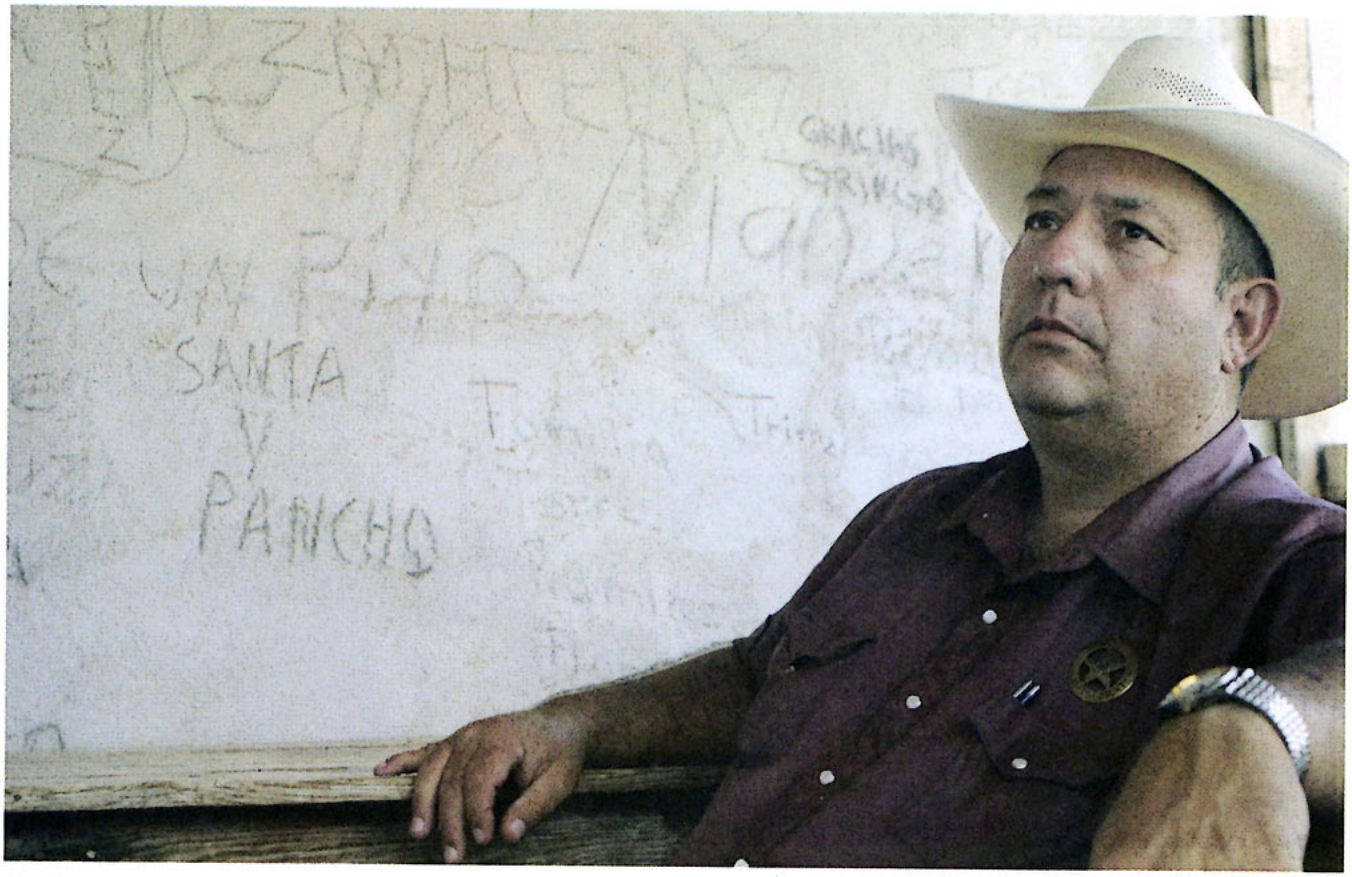
Civil rights lawyer Dave Richards, who made a career of recruiting plaintiffs to appear in Justice's Tyler courtroom, once described for me a scene that unfolded as a black plaintiff from Nacogdoches challenged a system that ensured only white candidates could be elected to the county commissioners court.

"My plaintiffs were poor black men," said Richards, an *Observer* contributing writer. "The defendants were white men with bulging necks hanging over their collars and big hats sitting on the chairs behind them. And every time I made a point, the black men said 'Amen, amen,' and nodded. I looked over there and saw those commissioners, and I knew they must have thought the world as they knew it was coming to an end. They were in a courtroom surrounded by black people. ... And they were looking up onto the bench at Judge William Wayne Justice."

When I asked the judge about the case, he recalled that the courtroom was divided down the middle by race. He wryly dismissed my suggestion that he became a magnet for civil rights lawyers looking for a friendly court.

"I think the word got out," he said, "that there was a judge in Tyler who was willing to follow the law." ■

Former Observer editor Lou Dubose is editor of The Washington Spectator *and author of several books, including* Bill of Wrongs: The Executive Branch's Assault on America's Fundamental Rights, *co-authored with Molly Ivins.*



Sheriff Arvin West

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A BORDER SHERIFF

By Melissa del Bosque

Photos by Eugenio del Bosque

SIERRA BLANCA—"Y'all got here just in time. We're going to look for a body. Are you up for it? It's gonna get rough out there, but I can have you back by lunch."

It's 7 a.m. I've already driven two hours from El Paso with my husband, whom I've convinced to shoot photographs for my story. If it hadn't been for the Border Patrol checkpoint just outside of this dusty, half-abandoned town on Interstate 10, we might have missed it altogether. Smack in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert, two hours east of El Paso, we've arrived at the office of Arvin West, sheriff of Hudspeth County.

"Sure, I'm up for it," I say. My husband nods gamely.

West leads us out to his white SUV. He doesn't fit my celluloid idea of a Texas sheriff. He wears a white Stetson and Wrangler jeans, but is short, with a paunch. Instead of cowboy boots, he wears brown suede Wallaby boots. His wife buys them at a mall in El Paso.

"I used to wear these in high school," he says, "and hell, they're

Hudspeth County law enforcement rendezvous with Border Patrol agents.

comfortable. I'm getting too old for cowboy boots." West is 43. Half-Mexican, he jokes about growing up a "GMC," or "Gringo-Mexican combo," when Texas shops still displayed signs that said, "No dogs, no Mexicans."

We set off south for the Rio Grande. The river has made West more than just a small-town sheriff. With 3,300 residents, his county straddles 98 miles of the Rio Grande. At 4,572 square miles, Hudspeth is twice the size of Delaware.

"At least 98 percent of what I deal with is drug trafficking," he says. "If you took away the border, my county would be like Mayberry. We'd be spending our time taking cats off the roof."

Since Sept. 11, 2001, border counties like Hudspeth have played an outsized role in the contentious debates over border security and immigration reform. West and the Texas Border Sheriff's Coalition, which formed in 2005 and which he chairs, have helped shape those debates. The border sheriffs' congressional testimony has provided great fodder to many an anti-immigration politician. Their firsthand accounts of battling narcos and nabbing suspected terrorists have made them darlings of cable news. Members of Congress call on them frequently to guide tours for political delegations and media, elaborating on border dangers and the dire need for more equipment, money and, as the sheriffs often put it, "boots on the ground."

In January 2006, Hudspeth County hit the headlines when West's deputies faced off with what he describes as "members of the Mexican army" protecting three Cadillac Escalades filled with bales of marijuana.

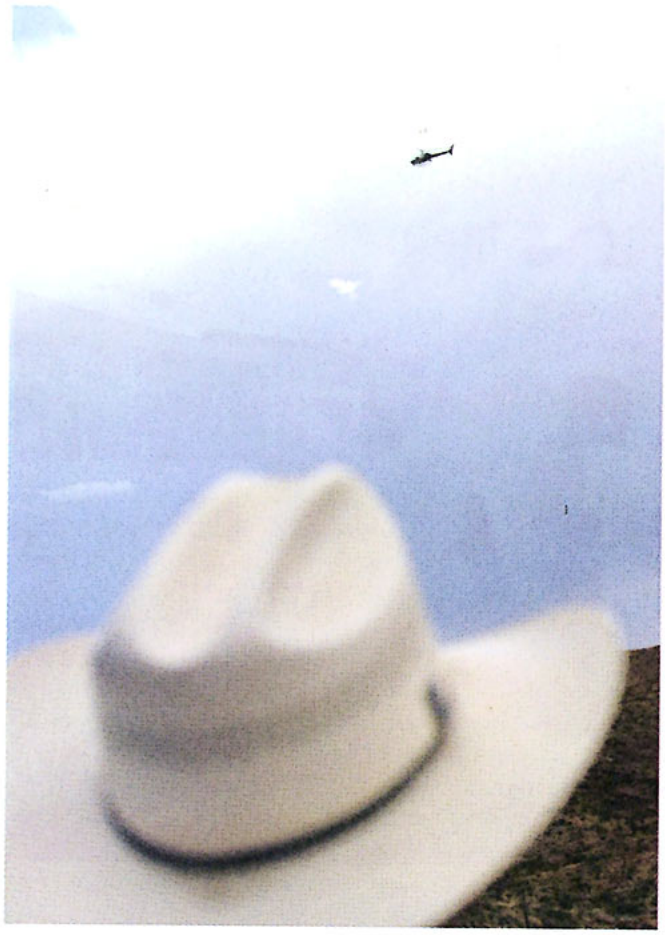
No shots were fired. The alleged drug dealers and soldiers fled back to Mexico. After West held a press conference the next morning at the county courthouse, the story went viral. The right-wing blogosphere, and radio and cable shows picked up the "Mexican military invasion" and galloped with it.

West breaks off from the Mexican army story as he rolls, slowly, toward some cattle blocking the dirt road. They get the hint and begin to mosey across as West radios his deputies: "Watch those heifers when you get up to the draw. They're real gentle and don't want to move off the road."

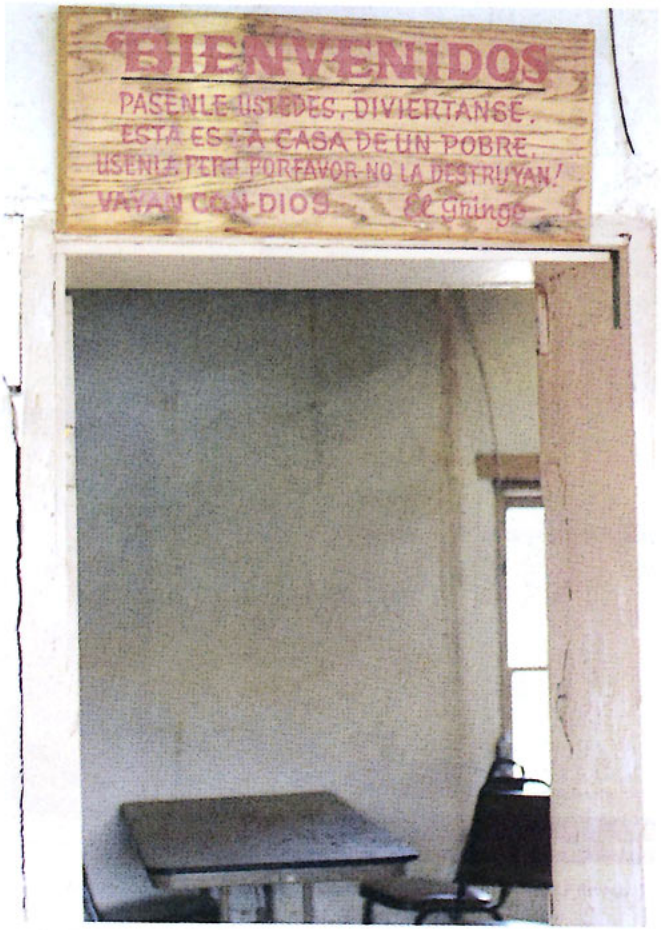
Back to the Mexican military: During his deputies' showdown with the narcos, West had been on a plane back from Houston. A few days later, the Mexican consul from El Paso arrived in Hudspeth County. The consul wouldn't discuss the matter with a local sheriff, according to West. "The federal government doesn't need to answer to local government," West says, mimicking the consul with a hoity-toity Spanish accent.

"Well, I told him the next time one of your immigrants is sick or dying, you can call the federal government then."

West never made good on that threat. Today, his people are looking for a Mexican man in his late 50s. He is a chronic alcoholic in poor health, the men traveling with him had told the Border Patrol after their apprehension. They said the man finished the remnants of a tequila bottle for breakfast and drank several beers before crossing the Rio Grande. By the time the group reached Hudspeth County, the man was doubled over and vomiting. "Go ahead and I'll catch up," he told them.



The Operation Border Star chopper.



A cabin used by Mexican immigrants on their way north.

That was two weeks earlier. This is West's third trip into the desert to look for the body. "Nobody could make it out there this long," he says, "especially someone in as bad of shape as he was."

It's the second time he's requested help from a state helicopter in the search. The helicopter is part of Operation Border Star, the latest of four high-profile border security programs launched by Gov. Rick Perry since 2005, the year the sheriff's coalition got going. The programs have so far cost the state $170 million. The intent, as the governor has often said, is to combat violent crime, drug smuggling and terrorism. One result is that the sheriffs now have helicopters parked full-time, ready to go, in Alpine and El Paso.

The search for the body has already cost his department $12,000, West says. The money would come out of his coalition money. Since 2006, the Texas Border Sheriff's Coalition has received $16.1 million in state and federal funds, while the 16 border sheriffs and their counties have received another $12.6 million in Operation Border Star money. Perry first announced a $6 million grant to the coalition in November 2005, running up to his reelection campaign. The sheriffs traveled to Washington to stand by him in 2006 as he discussed border security before a phalanx of media. Many of the sheriffs, including West, endorsed Perry. (West is backing him again in 2010.)

Hudspeth's share of the coalition pot has allowed West to hire six more deputies since 2005, at $28,000 a year, and pay them overtime. Hudspeth County now has 17 deputies. The department also has four new ATVs for searches like this one, and six new Ford F-150 trucks.

What, I ask West, would immigration hard-liners back in D.C. and Austin think of his spending more than $12,000 of taxpayers' money searching for a chronic alcoholic immigrant?

The sheriff seems startled, almost repulsed, by the question. "Of course we need to find him," he says. His daughter calls every day from New Mexico, he says, begging them to find her father. "That's somebody's father, somebody's brother. He's a human being. What if it was you calling on the phone every day begging us to find him? Wouldn't you want us to do everything that we could to find your loved one?"

"Congress knows about as much about the border as that mesquite bush," Sheriff West says, pointing to a straggly green bush about to be munched by a heifer.

West, like several other border sheriffs, has seen a lot of Washington since the coalition started, just in time for the immigration-reform dust up of 2006. West has testified before Congress three times and been to Washington 13 times in the last four years for meetings with other coalition sheriffs. He's found a loyal ally in Congressman John Culberson, a Republican

who represents west Harris County, one of the richest districts in the nation. Culberson has visited the border several times and met with West. Culberson is a full-out hawk on border security. Last March 11, he called for a "fast-reaction military force that can move up and down the border on the U.S. side" to fight the "undeclared war."

> "If you took away the border, my county would be like Mayberry. We'd be spending our time taking cats off the roof."

At least once, the congressman has used intelligence from West to send the anti-immigration movement into a frenzy. In November 2005, Culberson recounted to Fox News' *Hannity and Colmes* the tale of an Iraqi "Al-Qaeda terrorist" he said had been taken into custody by Sheriff West and locked up in a Brewster County jail. The terrorist was later whisked away by the FBI, Culberson said, telling Sean Hannity that he had obtained his information from West and Brewster County Sheriff Ronnie Dodson.

West's story, filtered through Culberson, captured Hannity's fancy:

Hannity: I want to make sure I get this in. This is important. You're saying within the last six weeks that we know for a fact that al-Qaida terrorists have crossed our border and are in the United States? Can you say this for a fact, with a certainty?

Culberson: Yes. Yes. Yes, sir. And I encourage you to contact the Hudspeth County sheriff, Arvin West, Sean. I want to put him in touch. ... You need to put this man on the air, and let him tell you straight up. He will testify from his own experience what he goes through.

Hannity and Colmes never did follow up with West. So I ask him about the story. It grows more baroque as he explains. It seems that West's friend, the sheriff of the little Mexican town of Porvenir just across the river, had apprehended a fellow who was tracking the migratory patterns of birds and animals, and writing down the information in Arabic in a diary.

"I'm not saying the guy was a terrorist," West tells me as we bump through the desert, "but it seemed kind of strange that a guy of Arabic origin was keeping track of migratory animals in Southwest Texas." He pauses. "Consequently or coincidentally, this was right before the bird flu broke out."

What became of the diarist? The Mexican authorities called Border Patrol, West says, and Border Patrol called the FBI, but the man had "vanished from the face of the Earth."

I ask if I can look at the diary. West says he misplaced it. He made copies and gave them to the feds, he says, but never heard another word from the FBI.

The sheriff offers a sampling from memory of the contents: "I hate the gringos," for one, and "kill the gringos," for another.

Later, after our ride, I send an e-mail to the Department of Homeland Security to inquire about West's story. Border Patrol Officer Mark Qualia, spokesperson for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, calls the account a "West Texas tale."

"You're in Texas so you'll understand when I say it was a West Texas tale," he writes in the e-mail. "It was a story spun by the sheriff at the time."

Later on the phone I ask Qualia whether any known terrorists have crossed the southern border and been detained. Qualia says you have to be careful when you say terrorist. "The title and definition is difficult to qualify," he tells me. "I will say that people have been arrested with links to terrorist groups or who have been on a terrorist watch list, without a doubt."

Five of West's deputies are parked up ahead, next to a windmill. They have a trailer loaded with six ATVs. As we pull up, I am asking West about his most controversial purchase: a Mustang GT, bought in 2006 with homeland security money. It was, he tells me, "for high-speed chases on Interstate 10."

Is that what border security money was designed for? "Fine, then," he says. "Don't give us any funding, just have the federal government reimburse us for what we've spent. I'd bet it'd be a lot more than we've received."

I ask how much he's spent on immigration and drug-trafficking cases. "That's a double-edged question," he says.

Consider the potential costs involved with the man we are looking for, he says. "We are keeping our fingers crossed that he died from natural causes, because if we find a bullet in him, then that means there is foul play. Then we have to step back in and find out who murdered this guy. Once that happens, we have to chill the body and contact the Mexican consulate to find the family. If they can't find the family, it'll take county money to bury the body."

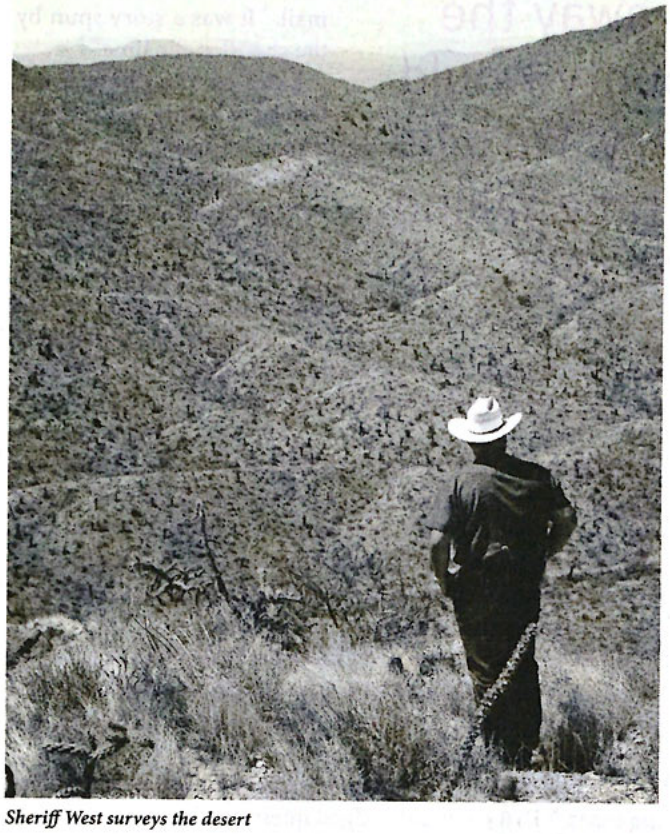
West shakes his head and climbs out of the SUV. "Just reimburse us for what we have to expend," he says, "or do it yourself."

Waiting next to the windmill are his deputies: three young Latinos in their 30s, a Latino man in his 40s sporting a beige polo shirt reading "Hudspeth County Regulators," and a middle-aged Anglo with a belly and a mustache.

Two older, stone-faced Anglo men in Stetson hats stand silent and apart. West is quietly summoned to their patch of desert. After a few minutes, he returns. "No pictures, and they don't want to be interviewed," he says apologetically. One, he says, is from the Texas Rangers; the other is an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent.

That makes eight law-enforcement officials hunting for one dead body—not counting the chopper. Then again, the Chihuahuan landscape makes the odds of finding a body about as good as winning a lottery. It resembles an ocean drained of water, dotted with flames of orange flowers from fingerlike ocotillo cacti.

West's deputies have come prepared. They produce an ice chest full of sodas, Gatorade and water. They offer brown paper



Sheriff West surveys the desert

"Congress knows about as much about the border as that mesquite bush."

bags filled with tinfoil-wrapped burritos. West says they've been made by some of the female inmates in his county jail. "It's no good," he says, making a mock-sour face as he opens a chicken mole burrito. "I'm going to fire the cook."

After eating, West climbs behind the wheel of an ATV called a "mule," which looks like the Humvee version of a golf cart. The two federal agents take the other Humvee cart, while West's deputies mount four-wheel ATVs. We head toward the last place the Mexicans saw their companion, a hunting cabin next to a creek.

The sheriff drives the mule with abandon. He rolls over 6-foot ocotillos like they were toothpicks. Then he charges down a steep incline toward a riverbed. I notice his deputies and the two federal agents lagging behind, waiting to see if West makes it.

"Maybe I should get out here and walk," I say.

"Are you chickening out on me, too?" the sheriff asks, gesturing dismissively toward the deputies.

I decide to walk. West gives a cattle-herding whoop and floors the gas. The ATV does its best to scramble up the other side of the riverbed, then slides backward with a groan and bottoms out in the sand. "Dang," the sheriff mutters, his face red from exertion. "Grab some shovels. We're going to have to fill in the riverbed."

After about 45 minutes, the deputies have filled the riverbed with enough sand to get West's ATV up the other side. Meantime, one of the deputies has found an easy crossing further down the riverbed. He rolls up on his ATV on the other side.

No one says anything. West floors the gas pedal and charges up the bank. The rest of the deputies and the federal agents follow, heaving their ATVs up the incline.

The deputies race around and ahead of one another on their ATVs, cracking jokes. The two federal agents follow behind, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder in the front seat of their ATV. "Aw, looks like they're on a date," West says loudly.

About an hour later, we arrive at the hunting cabin, a tin-roofed shack near an old windmill. Two green-and-white Border Patrol trucks are already there. Two Latino officers in their early 20s wait outside. They are new to this border, their "yes sirs" and "no sirs" in stark contrast to the sheriff's deputies, who break out the cooler again and down the remaining burritos.

The Border Patrol is a sore point with West and other border sheriffs. After neglecting the agency for years, Congress has poured more than $26 billion into its operations since the mid-1990s. The agency's 2009 budget for hiring, training, and equipping new agents was $442 million. The number of agents is supposed to double from 2000 levels, to 20,000 by the end of this year. Most of the new agents on West's terrain are young and from cities like Dallas or Phoenix. Sierra Blanca is the sticks, considered a hardship post. Most agents can't wait to see it in their rearview mirrors.

To West's way of thinking, the patrol spends too much time looking for footprints in the sand near the interstate, and too little on the river. "What I need for them to do is get their butts down on the river and hold that line," he'd told me earlier that day. "When that line is breached, we'll be happy to back you up and pick up what's breached that line.

"They'll tell you they make a calculated pass by the river," West said, "but then once they're gone it's like a Cheech and Chong movie."

Finishing their Gatorades, the deputies fan out into the desert to look for the missing man. The sheriff goes inside the cabin. He points to a wooden sign with red painted letters in Spanish, saying: "Welcome, come in and enjoy yourselves. This is the house of a poor man. You can use it but don't destroy it! Vaya con dios, El Gringo."

The white walls are covered with hundreds of names and dates, written in charcoal and pencil, going back to 1907. One woman had carefully written her family's names across the wall: "Rosy Peres, su hijo Evedi y su esposo Favio." An old tin chest sits on the floor, containing cooking oil, soup cans, sardines and other dry goods. In another room are some old camp beds.

"You've got to have a heart for these people," West says. "Why can't we take the approach of the Bracero Program [which ran from the 1940s to the 1960s], where they can work here for so many years, and if they decide to assimilate and become American citizens, then allow them that opportunity." He sits back in an old wooden chair. "You are allowed to come and participate in the luxuries we have as American citizens, but

if you violate our laws, then you are out of here. It's as simple as that."

If many Americans think "Texas-Mexico border" and envision a war zone, it's thanks in no small part to the stories spread by border sheriffs like West and Zapata County's Sheriff Sigifredo Gonzalez. Gonzalez, who organized the first meeting of the sheriff's coalition in 2005, has been a higher-profile media figure than West. In November 2005, shortly before the "Al-Qaeda terrorist" story started to spread, Gonzalez took NBC reporter Rita Cosby (wearing a bulletproof vest) down to the Rio Grande at night. He was armed with a pistol and an AR-15. Along for the fun was Congressman Ted Poe, a Republican from Temple.

Gonzalez memorably told Cosby and her viewers that just on the other side of the river, drug lords were grinding up men and feeding the meat to dogs.

"I think most people are really unaware of the war zone here in the Texas-Mexican border, especially in this location," Poe said. "More than likely the next terrorist attacker will come across the southern border."

With that, Cosby segued into a live interview with Duncan Hunter, a former Republican congressman from California, who talked about his proposal to build a 2,000-mile, triple-layered border fence from San Diego to Brownsville. It was "the answer," he said, to the nightmare in Zapata County that Gonzalez had just spelled out.

"That's what we had between Tijuana and San Diego," Hunter said. "Ten years ago, that was a no-man's land. We had the robbing, raping, murdering. We had gangs that roamed that area between America and Mexico. And we had that scraggly barbed-wire fence, like the one you showed near Nuevo Laredo."

In August 2006, Gonzalez told Fox News' Sean Hannity that al-Qaeda members were learning Spanish in Mexico to blend in with undocumented immigrants and swim across the Rio Grande. Hannity drew that unsubstantiated fact out to its logical extension:

> ***Hannity:*** *Now, I just am speculating. You're the law-enforcement expert here. But if they're coming from al-Qaida-linked countries, or countries where we know al-Qaida is operating, if they're going through this enormous effort to learn Spanish, to blend into the community, and then being smuggled across, we've got to assume and believe that we're fairly certain that they're here to create terror cells in the United States and commit acts of terrorism. Wouldn't that be right?*
>
> ***Gonzalez:*** *Well, that's correct. A lot of the things that we're seeing along the border are these people are being smuggled into the country with armed guards, bodyguards. Several persons have reported these people coming into the country with three or four individuals that are armed, bringing them into the country. A person looking for employment in the United States would not need to hire a* coyote *of that higher caliber to bring them into the country.*

Gonzalez now heads the Southwest Border Sheriff's Coalition, which includes sheriffs from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. I catch up with him in late September at the

coalition's conference in Yuma, Arizona, where he is serving as emcee. Asked about the claims he's made over the years regarding terrorists, Gonzalez says it came from "intelligence" he received as a law-enforcement officer. When I ask whether it is possible to see any, he says it can't be shared with non-law enforcement.

Lupe Treviño, sheriff of Hidalgo County, is among the coalition members who say that the inflammatory rhetoric has brought the coalition and the border region nothing but a lot of headlines and bad publicity. "One of the things you have to be careful about is, if you are going to give your perspective and you want somebody to take you serious, you need to have your evidence, your statistics, to show that you aren't making this up and it is really happening," he says.

Treviño has also testified before Congress, offering a different take than Gonzalez or West on the border's vulnerabilities. He says most members of Congress assume he lives in a "battle zone." Few realize that his county, the second-most populous on the Texas border, was ranked as the state's fourth-safest last year.

Frustrated with misrepresentation of border realities, Treviño created an hour-long PowerPoint presentation called "Border Violence: Rhetoric vs. Reality." He makes his case at luncheons and to any audience that will listen.

"As an American, of course I am concerned about terrorism, but do you think my deputies have time to post themselves on the river to look for Osama bin Laden?" he says. His department receives a call for assistance every four minutes on average, Treviño adds. Besides, "I'm not going to drop my homicides and my robbery investigations so that I can help Border Patrol keep terrorists out of the country."

It is getting late in the desert. "Let's go," West says, exiting the cabin. He hops into his ATV and motions for us to join him. "I want to show you Mexico," he says, hitting the gas. We crest a small butte, and the sun is hanging low. Suddenly the ATV makes a *whump* and then a thumping noise. Flat tire. "Dang," the sheriff says, pulling out a can of fix-a-flat he's already used twice today. He shoots the white foam into the deflated tire. No luck. West kicks the dust with his Wallaby boot and radios for help.

Nobody answers. The sound of the Border Star chopper echoes off the mountainsides. "Maybe I can get them to give you a ride back to my office," West says. After he negotiates with the pilot for a while, the chopper heads east. "The Border Patrol agents are lost, and they are trying to find them," he says, annoyed. "There's also a storm, and they've got to get back."

Eventually one of the young deputies rides up on his ATV. They haven't found the body. The sky is growing dark with ominous clouds, and the wind is whipping up. Without saying much, the officers get back on their vehicles and head into a rainstorm.

Back at the windmill, the rain has stopped. The deputies load the ATVs back on the trailer. It's nearly dark, but the men linger, elbows propped on truck beds, talking about sports and the weather. The stony-faced Ranger and the ICE agent dip into cans of chewing tobacco and spit into the dust.

"You boys have to go home sometime, or your wives are going to divorce you," West says, guffawing. But he is in no hurry, either. His wife phoned earlier to remind him about a school function he'd promised to attend that evening.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asks me in a hopeful tone. I can't think of any.

Two weeks later, I get an e-mail from the sheriff. The subject is "Body in Mountain." West wrote:

"I just wanted to let you know we found the body. He was about two miles north east of the little house. We had to walk about a mile and a half to get him, but we made it for a bunch of old guys. The family can feel better knowing this information I guess. Take care and God Bless. Tu amigo, Sheriff West." ■

HIGHTOWER

Obama Must Get Going on Jobs

Just before taking office, Barack Obama called on the millions of people involved in his campaign to stay active: "I don't want them to just sit around and wait for me to do something," he said. "I want them to be pushing their agendas."

Well, since he asked for it, let's shove this agenda forward: Jobs. Middle-class jobs. Jobs with a future and a satisfying purpose. Lots and lots of those jobs.

Obama has talked often about jobs, but he's put little presidential heft into creating them. Indeed, even as unemployment soars to 10 percent and the number of underemployed Americans almost doubles that percentage, the administration lacks the sense of urgency that ordinary families feel.

Debbie Kransky, 51, who lives in Milwaukee, has been out of work since February despite constantly being on the hunt. Her unemployment benefits have run out, and her life savings have been depleted. As she told *The New York Times*, "I've got October rent. After that, I don't know. I've never lived month to month my entire life. I'm just so scared, I can't even put it in words."

There are millions of Debbies, yet Obama doesn't seem to be in touch with the aching anxiety and growing anger of these people. They saw the unprecedented, multi-trillion-dollar federal bailout to save Wall Street banksters. Now they hear the recession is "over." Yet there are six unemployed people for every job opening. Obama, however, recently brushed off this reality, saying: "As you know, jobs tend to be a lagging indicator; they come last."

Hello—jobs are not an "indicator," they're the sustainer of families, the lifeblood of our middle-class society. Franklin Roosevelt made jobs first, not last. And so should Obama. Soon. In fact, now would not be too soon.

For more information on Jim Hightower's work—and to subscribe to his award-winning monthly newsletter, The Hightower Lowdown*—visit www.jimhightower.com.*

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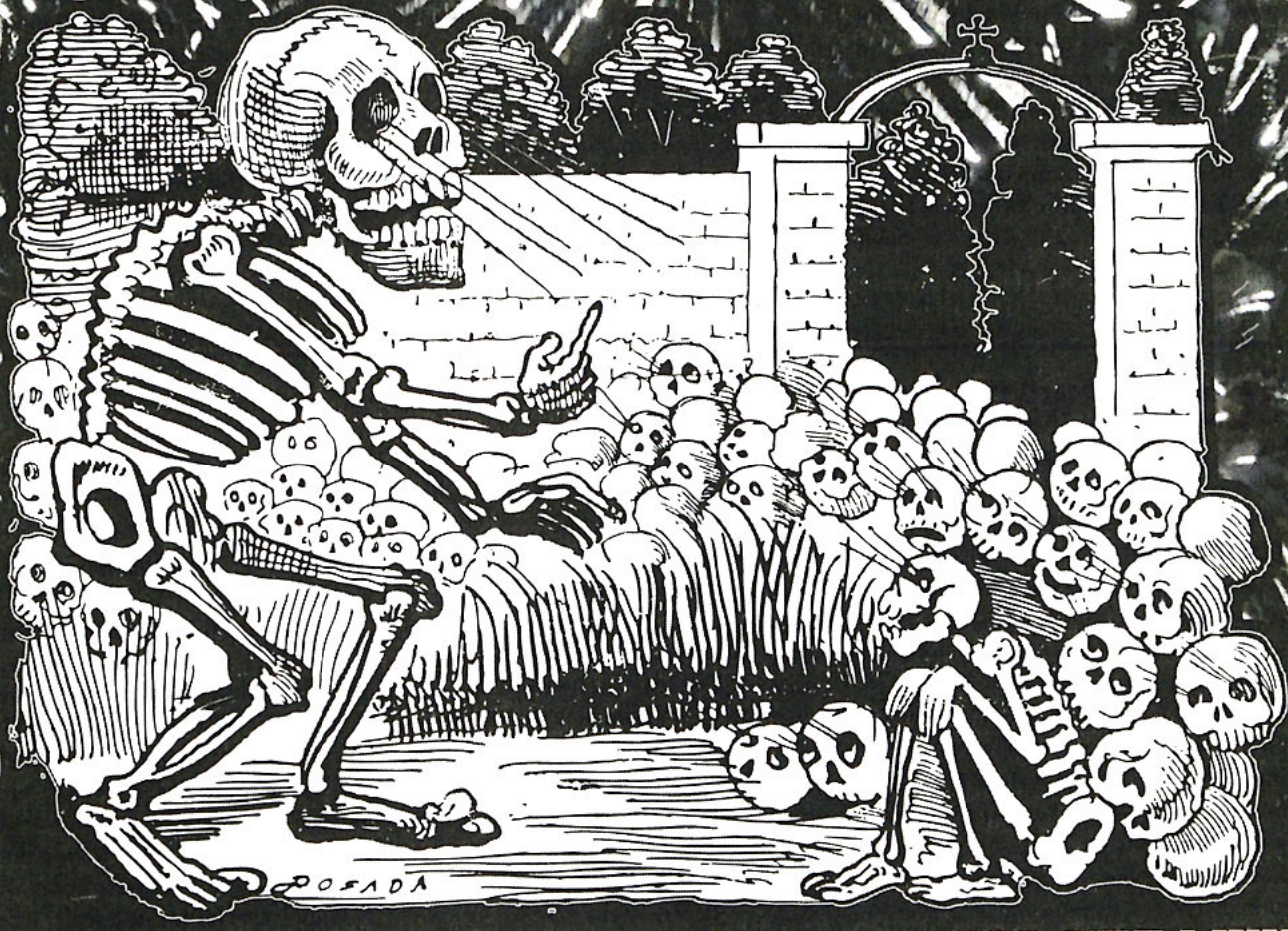

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Reading is a solitary, all-consuming exercise. I recently learned this the hard way while reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* during a trip to a cold and rainy New York City. In reality, I was rattling down an underground tunnel in a packed subway train, but my mind was lost in a world so barren and romantic it must have been inspired by Texas. As I trudged across an ash-strewn apocalyptic landscape with the novel's two noble subjects, someone in the real world stole my umbrella, which I had placed on the floor beside me. I stepped outside, and the cold whipping rain snapped me back into the present.

It's a pleasure, then, to come back to a warmer, dryer Austin poised to celebrate the annual Texas Book Festival. The festival gives us the chance to realize that, yes, there is a community of readers, even if most of the year we're not on the same page.

In a similar spirit, we're debuting our first annual book festival issue, dedicated to Texas authors and books featured this year. We've aimed for a broad spectrum of subjects—from food to the birth of the American idea—but at least one theme emerges. The iconic Texan may still be a cowboy, and a few still roam the plains, but the future belongs to young Hispanics living in cities. Their world is laid bare in the nonfiction chronicle *Just Like Us*, as well as young adult fiction like *Border Crossing*. In a similar vein, we talk with Oscar Casares, whose latest book features an older Mexican-American who travels across the border in search of the myths that define him. The books reviewed here are not meant to take us away from the real world; in fact, they are here to help us define who we are.

—*Michael May*

EXCERPT

South Toward Home

EXCERPT FROM *MOLLY IVINS: A REBEL LIFE* BY BILL MINUTAGLIO AND W. MICHAEL SMITH

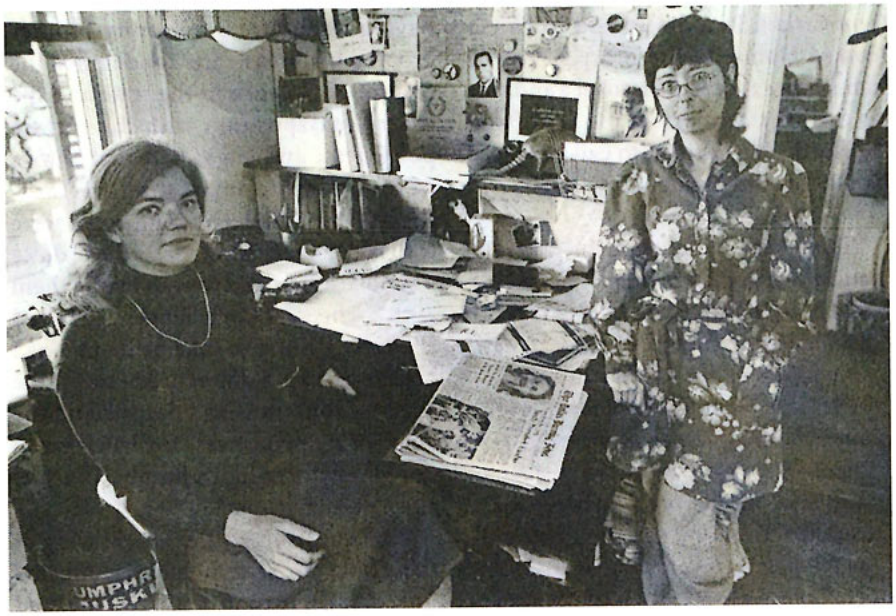
In their new biography of Molly Ivins, Bill Minutaglio and W. Michael Smith chronicle the personal and journalistic arc of Texas' late, lamented tormentor of the right. The excerpt below recounts Ivins' decision in 1970 to leave her first post-graduate reporting job at the Minneapolis Tribune *for a co-editorship at the* Observer. *Ivins' romance with political activist Jack Cann had soured, and she was losing patience with the* Tribune's *"objective" journalism. When we pick up the story, Ivins has already created a ruckus at the paper by writing inflammatory memos to her editors and criticizing their decisions.*

The weather was changing, winter was finally fading. Molly had recently attended the memorial service for veteran socialist leader V. R. Dunne, where Farrell Dobbs, the national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, had spoken. She was writing more pissed-off memos to colleagues at the paper ("thanks for another piece of shit on your editorial page"). Nothing, really, as far as she was concerned, was going to change at the *Minneapolis Tribune*. She was also convinced that her relationship with Jack Cann was irreparable. She was writing to her friends and talking about the difficulties and worries of living with men, and also about not being politically radical enough. Her soul-searching extended to the core notions of what journalism was all about; she increasingly mulled the worth of objectivity. Living with an activist, being confronted by his accusations, had clearly affected her thinking not just about personal relationships but also about her image as a journalist trained to be neutral and objective in the extreme. She knew she wanted to leave Minnesota, and she knew that some people still viewed her through the prism of her upbringing. She had been offered a pointed analysis of her life:

> *[Y]ou have some of the biggest, fattest establishment labels going—some little WASP prep school, some lawyer father, some Smith College, some junior year abroad, some Columbia Journalism School master's degree, some Minneapolis paper. You have tried ... to convince people that you were not a part of those worlds, that you were different, the ghetto kid who was hanging around those honkies just for a big yuk-yuk and also to hone your fine mind on all the books in the library, but you were never one of them, no no.*

She decided to write one more internal Fuck You memo, this one asking editors what constituted a "conflict of interest" at the paper-asking if it was a conflict to have "a Boycott Grapes sticker on a car, a McCarthy for President sticker on a car, a Peace & Freedom Party sticker? Is it a conflict of interest to work for a political candidate in any way? What about writing freelance articles for politically oriented publications? Say 'New Republic?'" The issue was personal, of course. She was telling friends she had been in love with Jack Cann, perhaps the city's most consistent activist-and she was covering the protests and issues he knew better than most people in the city. She had been at his trial, helping his legal defense. She had canvassed the neighborhoods with him.

That spring in Texas, Terry O'Rourke ran into Ronnie Dugger, longtime founder-editor-publisher of *The Texas Observer*. Dugger told O'Rourke that he was fielding applications for editors. O'Rourke mentioned Ivins. She had continued to read the *Observer* and she told friends that the publication consistently painted a portrait of a heinous state. She was a



Molly Ivins and co-editor Kaye Northcott in the Observer *offices.* *photo by Alan Pogue*

long-distance admirer of Dugger, who fought for years to keep the publication afloat, and she had once told Jack Cann that Dugger was one of her heroes. She quickly applied and sent a résumé and some clips to Texas (including a story she had done about once attending the same summer camp as LBJ's daughter). Her application included some of the stories she had done at the *Tribune* on the student upheavals in Minneapolis. Dugger thought they were very well reported and had a "boldness and fairness" but "no showing at all of a sense of humor in them."

He and the *Observer* staff, always in dire financial shape, decided to bring her to Austin for an interview. She arrived at Dugger's house with a six-pack of beer. Dugger, associate editor Kaye Northcott, and business manager Cliff Olofson were impressed. She was funny and she seemed really alive, chortling about Texas, about growing up in Houston. Northcott thought that she was damned tall. Northcott had roots in the Midwest but was raised in Houston, so she knew about the River Oaks neighborhood and about private schools like St. John's. She was impressed that Ivins didn't seem to carry any airs, but she also sensed that Ivins wasn't overly broadcasting her pedigree. "I knew her family lived in River Oaks," says Northcott. "She'd rather that people didn't know that."

Dugger eventually narrowed his choice down to five or six candidates, with Ivins and Billy Porterfield (her old colleague at the *Houston Chronicle*) as the finalists. Dugger liked Porterfield's literary inclinations but wondered if Porterfield was averse to politics in some way. Dugger began to look more closely at Ivins and eventually offered Northcott and Ivins positions as co-editors. They decided to pay themselves the same amount of money that state legislators got-about $8,000 a year.

Ivins made a collect call from Texas and told Wallace Allen, her editor in Minnesota, that she was resigning. When she got back to Minnesota, a friend handed her a hand-drawn award: The "Chutzpah Of The Month Award- presented, with deepest feelings of admiration to Mary T. Ivins for calling Wally collect to resign."

After she resigned, she began writing what can only be described as The Mother of All Fuck Off Stories—a piece that would appear in the local alternative paper in Minneapolis. It was a raised middle finger of colossal proportions, directed at the man who had hired her and to whom she had sent the polite letter of resignation. Some of her friends revered the piece but said that she had recklessly quoted *Tribune* staffers and put them in danger of getting fired. The story ran across eight pages in the August 1970 issue of the Twin Citian, and it both shredded her editors and neatly outlined her philosophy that objectivity was virtually useless. The defining piece, one of the best tools for understanding her entire career, was written against the backdrop of several personal matters: being best friends with men trying desperately to avoid the draft, living with a man who was one of the city's most intense activists, thinking about leaving the country as part of the Peace Corps, thinking of traveling to Russia, writing for The Militant, chiding friends who were working for conservative politicians, telling people she was insecure about her physical appearance and her sexuality. It was the culmination, perhaps, of other things, too: Hank Holland's death, her father's vice grip and buried racism, her mother's socialite naggings.

"I worked for the *Minneapolis Tribune* for three years. No, the paper is not hell-just a stone wall drag. ... The Trib doesn't permit its reporters time, money, freedom or space and so we continue to crank out schlock. The horror stories are endless-every reporter has dozens."

As for objectivity: "I don't believe in the stuff myself-I've seen the truth murdered too many times in the name of objectivity-but I'm open to the argument that what we really need is a better definition of objectivity."

And: "to look around the newsroom is to see living tragedy in terms of wasted talent" and "the Channels of Communication are silted up with the corpses of stories that never got covered and ideas that were never pursued.

Some reporters quit and others quit trying." Some reporters "point to letters attacking us as communists and letters attacking us as Birchers and claim they must be doing something right. On any given controversy, they print what A said and then what B said and think they've produced an adequate piece of journalism."

Tribune staffers would talk about the article for months. Editors issued an internal response. In Tribune Staff Memo No. 77, Wally Allen laid out his feelings: "If objectivity means dull writing, failure to show what an event really means, destruction of color and humanity,

then I'm against it. If it means a retreat into the past, a new emphasis on trivia, timidity in reporting on social issues, I'm against it."

The division of duties at *The Texas Observer* quickly took shape and Northcott and Ivins- both in their twenties, both on the same political wavelength-easily accepted their titles. Some people in Austin said quietly that Dugger had settled on the co-editor format because he was worried whether one woman could do the job. Northcott was a good reporter and writer; Ivins was a funnier writer and could clearly drink with many different people, which might not have been Northcott's strong suit- especially in the hallways of the pink-granite capitol, with its miles of wood and swinging-dick legislators yodeling about all the women they had picked up the night before in Austin.

Her first piece in the *Observer* appeared at almost the same time as her cluster-fuck attack on the *Tribune* in the *Twin Citian*. In a direct nod to North Toward Home, Willie Morris's epistle on his process of self-discovery and riding the lines connecting the South and the North, she decided to call her piece "South Toward Home":

> *"Going back to Texas? Ivins, you're out of your goddamn mind." And they told me again all the things that make Minnesota a better place to live. The schools are better, the health care is better, the mental institutions more humane, the prisons more enlightened, and the courts more just. And also, Minnesota has bars.And Minnesota's newspapers are superior and its politicians are progressive and its climate no lousier and its laws more sane. And its racism is thin-blooded and polite. I can't help it. I love the state of Texas. It's a harmless perversion.*

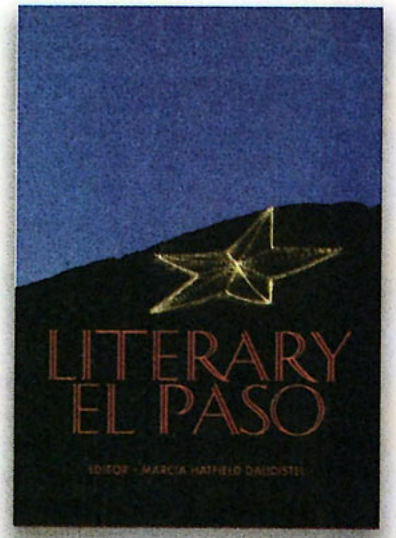
She gleefully talked about visiting her brother at UT-Austin two years earlier, getting drunk at his fraternity, and having to endure a fraternity brother groping her breast. She condemned the culture of violence in the state and the crazed juxtaposition with the surface politeness, and suggested that things were just more interesting in Texas because the evil deeds and people were easily on parade. "Down here the baddies wear black hats and we can loathe them with a cheerful conscience. ... Hatred is hardly a thing to take pride in, but I believe there is a difference between the anger of bitterness and despair and the anger of righteousness. The latter, when not wholly lacking in humor, is a just and cleansing thing."

And she said that the liberal wing of things was prone to infighting, afflicted by group depression, bad drinking, and the sanctimonious game of I'm-more-radical-than-thou. With her forum-and her willingness to write about Texas politicians in a funnier, more caustic and unfiltered way than anyone else had ever done-she would actually become a grounding focal point for the liberal movement in the city and the state. ■

Morning mist rises from the Pecos River in Val Verde County, Texas. This photo appears in *Big River, Rio Grande*, a book that displays the grandeur of the river while also profiling the individuals struggling to save it. Photos by Laurence Parent, text by David Baxter, University of Texas Press.

Views of the Frontier

BY DAVID CLEAVES



Literary El Paso
Edited by Marcia Hatfield Daudistel
TCU Press
442 pages, $29.50

El Paso is as far from Texas as you can get while still being in it, a fact that holds a certain appeal to anyone with a love-hate relationship with the Lone Star State. In *Literary El Paso*, the newest anthology in the Literary Cities series from TCU Press, there's plenty to love and linger over, and some to skim on the long drive west.

Literary El Paso includes 63 writers with strong local ties, and the selections focus on life in the "Sun City." The chronology and subject matter range widely, from settling the area at the end of the Pleistocene Era through a 19th-century packed with bandits, outlaws, and Mexican revolutionaries to the Chicano movement that gave El Paso an internationally respected literary voice.

Many authors will be familiar to *Observer* readers, having appeared in these pages over the years: David Dorado Romo, Dagoberto Gilb, Christine Granados, Robert Burlingame, Pat LittleDog and Elroy Bode, among others. Some writers in the book may come as surprises. The anthology defines "literary" in the broadest sense and includes journalism and academic writing, on their own and sometimes as introductions to poems, stories and novel excerpts. A few previously unpublished pieces appear, including a selection from John Rechy's forthcoming memoir, *About My Life and the Kept Woman*.

PANCHO VILLA MAKES REGULAR CAMEOS THROUGHOUT THE ANTHOLOGY, A CONTRIBUTOR TO THE HOMICIDES AND HEADACHES.

Eschewing chronology, the book's editor, Marcia Hatfield Daudistel, groups her selections around three themes: History, the Border and Nature. This organization lets Tom Lea open Part I with the beginning of his novel, *The Wonderful Country*, and appear again in Part III, where, in "Old Mount Franklin," we see the El Paso icon as a "gaunt hardrock mountain, standing against the sky like a piece of the world's uncovered carcass." Daudistel's thematic organization encourages browsing across subject matter and time, almost as if *Literary El Paso* were three books.

The historical writing in Part I is mostly straight reportage, with a few short stories, poems and excerpts from novels. Some selections here—including a dry essay on the Tiguas and a matter-of-fact history of the local Holocaust museum—seem like a stretch for a literary anthology even as they round out the picture of El Paso's diverse community.

El Paso has a cinematic history, and the expected friars, bandits, outlaws, prostitutes, Mexican revolutionaries, cowboys, lawmen and civilizing church ladies all play their parts, with star turns by Billy the Kid, John Wesley Hardin, and Dallas Stoudenmire. This was the first—but not last—period in the history of El Paso-Juárez when, as Bryan Woolley writes, "Homicides were as common as headaches."

Pancho Villa makes regular cameos throughout the anthology, a contributor to the homicides and headaches and an inspiration for the first big militarization of the border by Gen. Pershing at Fort Bliss. In Amado Muro's "Sunday in Little Chihuahua," an old woman who sells strawberries reminisces about her young days fighting for Villa: "How gladly I'd give up my strawberry stand to hitch up my skirts and fight for Pancho Villa again." The general's best moment comes in the touching and hilarious portrayal of the grandmother in Sergio Troncoso's story, "The Abuelita." Watching Ronald Reagan on the television news, the old lady lashes out simultaneously at the president and her beleaguered husband José. "*Ese maldito viejo*," she says of Reagan:

> Parece que está loco. *Why doesn't that crazy man go fight himself? What does he have against these poor people? This man talks too much and does nothing. He reminds me of you, José. I remember el General Villa riding into Chihuahua City with his revolutionary troops when I was a little girl. Villa would hang men like this Ree-gaan on the spot. El General hated politicians and bankers.*

Troncoso's story is one of many that draw on the rich cultural history of El Paso and Juárez while sketching the lives of their modern inhabitants.

If one goal of a good anthology is to inspire further reading, *Literary El Paso* succeeds in adding half a dozen writers

to my list, most of them from Part II, the Border section. It showcases the stories, poetry and fiction of the many excellent Chicano writers to come out of El Paso. The list is long: poets Tomás Rivera and Ricardo Sánchez, novelists Rechy, Rick DeMarinis, Sergio Troncoso and Ana Castillo, and many more.

DeMarinis's "Hell's Cartoonist" is a harsh and hilarious examination of what its narrator calls the "unfiltered kinetics of doomed life," which include jolly Midwestern tourists photographing amputees in Juárez contrasted with the minor betrayals of the narrator's UFO-obsessed German wife. All of which inspires the narrator's summation: "UFO's aren't the mystery. We are." Troncoso and Castillo tell unforgettable stories: bitter, funny and full of love.

Sharing one rare setting—the same desert mountains, high schools, bridges, streets, shops, two countries, one river—the stories and poems in *Literary El Paso* at times share a similar voice—open, honest, often irreverent. The grateful reader can feel like Elroy Bode, when he first moved to El Paso in the 1950s and began discovering the city and its people:

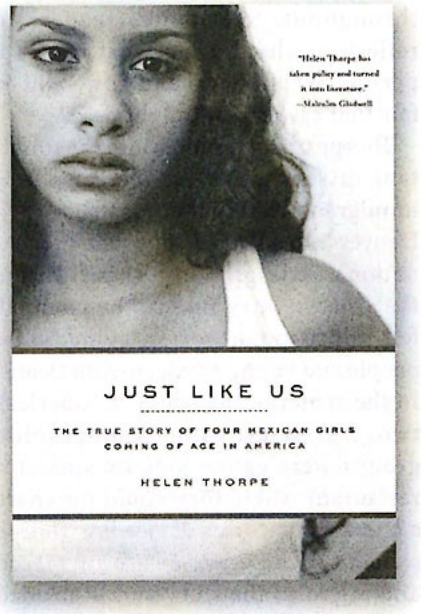
> *So I kept walking—roaming through the streets of Sunset Heights, past the red-brick homes that for decades had been facing west toward the desert, south toward Juárez and Mexico. It was as if they were still faintly hushed from the dramas of the past, and now, though solemn and decorous in the early-night darkness, their burnt-red bricks carried within them the fever of memory, the warm crimson trace of history. Prospect, Upson, Mundy: they were strange streets to me, but as I walked them those first October nights I knew I wanted to know them, wanted to stare past their lighted porches and learn of their hidden lives.* ■

David Cleaves lives in Austin and studied at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. His writing has appeared in the Greensboro Review, *the* Library Chronicle *and* Shakespeare Yearbook.

REVIEW

Documented Immigrants

BY EMILY DEPRANG



Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America
By Helen Thorpe
Scribner Hardcover
384 pages, $26.99

Early this August, I took a Greyhound bus from Tucson to Houston and back. It was a 24-hour trip that impressed my middle-class family and friends as rugged and somewhat risky. I was proud of myself for doing it, proud, too, that I made friends with my seatmates and enjoyed chatty forays into their worlds for the hours our travels intersected.

My favorite seatmate was Juan, a lanky Mexican-American in his 20s with a shy smile that belied a wicked sense of humor. He was returning from a three-day wedding in Mexico (a short one, he assured me) in the village where his wife lived with her family, waiting on the tectonic pace of Citizenship and Immigration Services to advance her application for citizenship. She and Juan, who has his Green Card, had met, wooed and married in America, borne two daughters and built a happy life together. Their contentment was overshadowed by her undocumented status, and they eventually decided to undertake the arduous, expensive citizenship process. His wife had to return to Mexico to wait for permission to re-enter legally. "She can't stand being away from the girls," Juan said. "It drives her crazy." Juan admitted they were the lucky ones, though. Juan works as a foreman for a premium scaffolding crew and could support his children and his wife's trip and application. He spared me stories of other families separated with no hope of reunion, but they hung in the air between us.

Late in the night, the bus crawled to a halt, kicking up dust and gravel, and the lights came on, waking everyone. Wordlessly, the bus rustled to life and passengers began rummaging for purses and wallets. The doors hissed open, and a Border Patrol officer mounted the steps and creaked along the aisle, asking passengers if they were American citizens. When he approached us, I looked up at him with my pale face and green eyes and said, "Yes," a defiant little frown on my privileged face. I didn't offer any documentation. His eyes flicked to Juan, who proffered his Green Card. The officer studied it with a flashlight, front and back, scrutinized Juan, looked again at the card and returned it. The bus was silent until the officer left, and it was silent for a long time after.

Just Like Us: The True Story of Four Mexican Girls Coming of Age in America is a masterwork of narrative nonfiction that speaks to many of the stories untold in the silence of that Greyhound bus.

In this first book, author Helen Thorpe details four young Mexican women—one American citizen, one who has her Green Card, and two who are undocumented—from their senior prom through graduation from college. Merely to record the emotional, financial, legal and logistical

THEIR BOY PROBLEMS, SECRET PASSWORDS, AND SHIFTING ALLIANCES SHARE SPACE ON THE PAGE, AS THEY DO IN THE GIRLS' MINDS.

travails of her subjects' quest for an education would have been an impressive contribution to the immigration debate, but Thorpe incorporates grass-roots histrionics and congressional fumbling that threaten to arrest the girls' progress (or parents).

Thorpe brings her subjects to life with insightful, often tender characterizations (she introduces her pivotal figure, Marisela, as having "the gravitational pull of a large star"). She lets the girls' own personal dramas drive the narrative, from unruly prom hair to how to pay for college. Their boy problems, secret passwords and shifting alliances share space on the page, as they do in the girls' minds, with deported parents, abandoned siblings, legislative turbidity and the ever-present question: What will happen when we graduate? The reader cannot help but care about these straight-A students, born into circumstances they didn't choose, saddled with nearly incomprehensible challenges and committed to whatever progress they can make with what is not denied them.

Thorpe met the four girls in early March of 2004. A "friend of a friend" introduced her to Elissa (the names have been changed), the group's star athlete who gives pep talks to her companions about homework and punctuality. When Thorpe arrived at the Old Country Buffet in suburban Denver to meet Elissa, all four friends were waiting. She met Marisela, "the dramatic one," with a penchant for chameleonic hair color and body glitter, and Yadira, the reserved one who "took up such a small emotional footprint that, were it not for her striking coltish figure, it might be possible to forget she was present at all." Completing the group was Clara, the sensitive one, who dressed boyishly and cried easily. If Marisela was the first to experiment with everything, then Clara was the last. "Looking them over," Thorpe observes, "I could not discern who had documents and who did not, although I knew the group was bifurcated along lines of legal status." It's a brief aside but is the kind of thoughtful pause in the narrative that Thorpe allows throughout. She invites readers to reflect, as she did, on what makes a person "seem" illegal and how valid or fair that assessment might be.

Thorpe orients readers into the simultaneous booms of retirees and new immigrants during the '90s that turned Denver into a Petri dish for the nascent national immigration "crisis." "Inside the Old Country Buffet, the clientele fell into two categories: aging white people and young Mexican-Americans. In the center of the country, America's two fastest-growing demographic groups were eating side by side at a restaurant where they could purchase a cheap lunch." This device is a Thorpe specialty; she stays aware of macro and micro in the story and is attuned to the moments that let one represent the other. The technique allows readers to follow the girls' joys and failures in an evolving political environment that fills them alternately with hope and fear. Tying the two together, as Thorpe does repeatedly, is not mere stylistic cleverness but an important part of why the book works.

When an author uses any device regularly, there are bound to be less successful attempts. Thorpe's employment of the environment usually feels like a stretch. At the end of Chapter 4, Thorpe writes, "... politics was always on the horizon whenever I spent time with Marisela and Yadira. The ongoing debate over illegal immigration occupied a hulking presence in the emotional geography of the two illegal girls, much in the way that the Rocky Mountains dominated the physical landscape." Oh, that she had stopped there. One sentence later, she elaborates, "As locals used the snow-capped mountains to orient themselves in space, the two illegal girls used the fiery political debate to orient themselves with respect to the idea of America."

Don't let this and a few other clunky constructions dissuade you from *Just Like Us*. It is a feat of journalistic empathy, an epic journey through the realities of undocumented life and its scope reaches from the most-powerful to the most-powerless in the drama of Mexican-American immigration. Every American—documented or not—deserves to meet Marisela, Yadira, Elissa and Clara. They defy classification, label and stereotype. The four, and through them the millions they represent, are complex, complete individuals, worthy of love, health, education, consideration, human rights and—the reader can hardly help but conclude—citizenship. ■

Emily DePrang is a contributing writer for the Observer.

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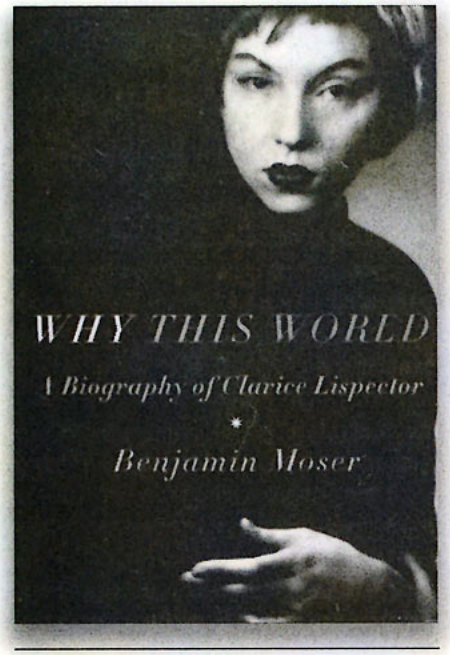
Becoming Brazilian

BY RYLAND BARTON



Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector
By Benjamin Moser
Oxford University Press USA
496 pages, $29.95

The Brazilian author Clarice Lispector is not well known in the United States, but in her native land she is considered part of a Latin American vanguard that includes Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda and Jorge Borges. Lispector's prose—with its open form, lyricism, and mystical metaphors—transcended narrative and meaning and suggested the presence of magical narratives in everyday life. In *Why This World*, Benjamin Moser sets out to explain how Lispector became the emblem of Brazil's mid-20th-century cultural revolution through her peculiar prose, mysterious personality and legendary physical beauty.

Moser attributes Lispector's fame largely to the very thing she tried to squelch: her desperate origins. Her parents, Ukrainian Jews, were driven from their home in 1919 by the pogroms that terrorized Eastern Europe. Lispector, born during her family's escape, would have no memory of Europe, arriving in Brazil before she was 2 years old. But Moser argues that, nonetheless, her background gave her writing a distinctly European flavor that made her stand out among her contemporaries. Lispector's first book, *Near to the Wild Heart*, became a sensation because of what Moser calls the "strange voice and foreign climate" of her language. Clarice tells the story of Joana, who, through a series of episodic flashes, relates her intense emotional state and conflicted outlook on marriage, life and society.

> *"There will be no space inside me for me to know that time, men, dimensions, exist, there will be no space inside me to so much as notice that I will be creating instant by instant, no instant by instant: always molten, because then I shall live, only then shall I live more fully than childhood ..."*

Lispector's writing was different from that of any Brazilian author, comparisons were made to to Joyce, Woolf and Dostoevsky. However, Lispector's lush stream-of-consciousness style would later become, as Moser says, "naturalized as that of a great Brazilian writer."

Moser notes that her unusual prose incited a fascination with Lispector's personality and origins. He cites Brazilian poet Lêdo Ivo, who said, "There will probably never be a tangible and acceptable explanation for the language and style of Clarice Lispector. The foreignness of her prose is one of the most overwhelming facts of our literary history, and, even, of the history of our language."

Lispector, on the other hand, resented being labeled a foreigner, even if it was said in praise. Moser writes that "there was no characteristic Clarice Lispector might have wanted to lose more than the place of her birth." Lispector even took speech lessons to correct a slight accent inherited from her parents. When readers attempted to draw autobiographical information from Lispector's novels, she would respond with linguistic puzzles: "The I who appears in this book is not I. It is not autobiographical, you all know nothing of me. I never have told you and I never shall tell you who I am. I am all of yourselves."

If Lispector resented the speculation about her early escape from Europe, it's also clear that she also loved to draw from her past in elaborate paradoxes, such as this one from her novel *Àgua viva*: "this is not a story because I don't know any stories like this, but all I know how to do is go along saying and doing: it is the story of instants that flee like fugitive tracks seen from the window of a train."

Moser claims that what makes Lispector's literature so enigmatic is a "fundamentally different conception of art." But Clarice distanced herself from

the academic critique of her work. When her books were applauded for their poststructuralist elements, she said, "I don't even have any idea what that is."

Moser spends a considerable amount of time describing the aura around Lispector's beauty. Merely meeting Lispector evidently tongue-tied men, who were unable to put their finger on what made her unique. The translator Gregory Rabassa recalled being "flabbergasted to meet that rare person who looked like Marlene Dietrich and wrote like Virginia Woolf." Men would throw themselves at her feet, as Lispector recalled, "There was an American poet who threatened to commit suicide because I wasn't interested."

Sadly, this mystique made it difficult for Lispector to age gracefully. In 1966, at age 45, Lispector badly burned her right arm when she fell asleep smoking. After the accident, she became embarrassed to be seen in public. Moser describes Lispector's later life as a series of struggles with lost beauty, drug addiction and loneliness.

As Lispector became increasingly reclusive, her work became more mystical and more popular. She appeared at the First World Congress of Sorcery in Colombia in 1974, and though her presence was treated as a spectacle, it solidified her own mythology. Her cult following would continue to grow after her death in 1977.

Today, Lispector's likeness is issued on postage stamps in Brazil. She is a hero to so many Brazilians precisely because her work, and her identity, is open to interpretation. As Moser says, "Clarice Lispector has been described as just about everything: a woman and a man, a native and foreigner, a Jew and a Christian, a child and an adult, an animal and a person, a lesbian and a housewife, a witch and a saint. Because she described so much of her intimate experience she could credibly be everything for everyone, venerated by those who found in her expressive genius a mirror of their own souls. As she said, 'I am all of yourselves.'" ■

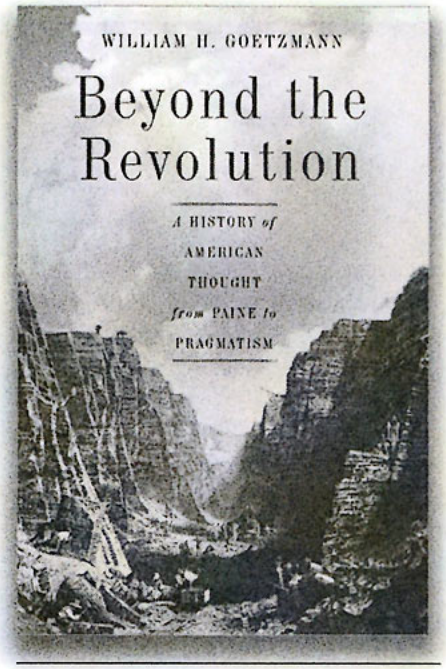
Ryland Barton is an Observer *intern and a graduate student at the University of Texas School of Journalism.*

REVIEW

American Ideas

BY TOM PALAIMA

In April, William H. Goetzmann, a Pulitzer-prize winning historian at The University of Texas at Austin, told the *Austin American-Statesman* that as a boy his family had rented an apartment in St. Paul, Minnesota where John Dillinger had once lived. The enamel surface of the bathtub had spots eaten away by the acid that Dillinger's gang had used to erase their own fingerprints. Touching the tub gave Goetzmann a feeling for history, a knack for seeing human beings for what they were when they were. Goetzmann likes to take his readers into that kind of American past and "get them used to living there."



Beyond the Revolution: A History of American Thought from Paine to Pragmatism
By William H. Goetzman
Basic Books
480 pages, $35

This is a real trick to try in *Beyond the Revolution*, an intellectual history of the creation and evolution of the idea of "America" from the Revolutionary War to the end of the 19th century. The subject cries out for commentary from today's perspective on what has happened to original ideas, and where positions taken up during old controversies have led. A less accomplished historian and storyteller would not have pulled it off. But Goetzmann does, using the skillful misdirection of a professional magician.

In *Beyond the Revolution,* Goetzmann gets us deeply absorbed in the lives of intellectual figures, famous and obscure, who contributed to what each of us believes, thinks or feels America is—and we all have different ideas depending on region, social class, education, religion and our lives' roads taken and not taken. Meanwhile, almost magically, Goetzmann makes us see why the concept of America had to be constructed in the first place. He examines what it has meant to Founding Fathers; to practitioners of public education in the crucial 50 years after the Declaration of Independence; and to scientific explorers from the 1820s through 1850s. He considers its meaning for black intellectuals in the immediately antebellum South; to "scribbling women" in the 1800s whose "domestic novels" made women the center of attention and put men in the place where women wanted them; and to thinkers, writers and statesmen from Tom Paine to William James and John Dewey.

For all these Americans in the first 125 years of our country, America was defined by what it wasn't. It wasn't Europe. It wasn't a decadent aristocracy. It wasn't social or political conformity. Most of all, as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it, while "France was a land, England a people, America always had about it the 'quality of an idea." It was an idea Americans could believe in because we never were forced to settle on a single definition.

Goetzmann may strike some readers as high-mindedly off-putting in his

AS F. SCOTT FITZGERALD PUT IT, WHILE "FRANCE WAS A LAND, ENGLAND A PEOPLE, AMERICA ALWAYS HAD ABOUT IT THE QUALITY OF AN IDEA."

introduction, where he rejects the notion that American intellectuals from 1776 to 1899 were "mere custodians of knowledge," and describes them, borrowing from Henry James, as "hard core creators of culture" who "feel 'cultural anxiety' or a compulsion constantly to redefine the context of reality in which they find themselves." He even borders on the jingoistic with claims that America was the world's first truly cosmopolitan civilization and allusions to Whitman's description of our country as a "'nation of nations' ... with the 'course of universal being' flowing through it."

But right from page one we meet figures like Paine in their own times and on their own terms. When Paine declared, "The Birthday of a new world is at hand" and, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," we feel how personally important this was to him, as a former "half-starved corset maker" whose first wife had died "amid London's squalor." We see him as a "stout, ugly, habitually unshaven, dirty man with 'twisted eyes'" who came to America "in 1774 bearing a crumpled letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin." He brought with him his life's wounds, his wits, and not much else. No wonder he viewed the American "melting pot" as an "asylum for mankind." It surely was for him and other "lovers of civilization and religious liberty" who escaped the "monster" civilization of Europe and England.

The sense Goetzmann gives his readers of that monster reaching across the Atlantic to the New World is like acid on enamel or skin. Goetzmann learned as a child about history by imagining what it must have been like, the pain and horror of gangsters pouring acid over the tips of their fingers. Likewise, Goetzmann's vivid descriptions make us feel what living must have been like in periods that we usually just read about. Never have I really felt the tyranny of the Stamp Act, the atrocity of the Boston Massacre, what forcible quartering of Hessian mercenary troops entailed, or the corruption that pervaded the British Parliament and "the Crown's men on the spot" in the colonies. America during the revolution was saying no to these forms of oppression.

Goetzmann's lifetime immersion in American history enables him to convey the feelings of the moment with just the right quotations from contemporary sources.

If you cannot imagine at a distance of 23 decades what it was like to be an exploited colonist, try this from *London Magazine* in 1776: "[T]he American is apparelled from head to foot in our manufactures. He scarcely drinks, sits, moves, labours or recreates himself without contributing to the emolument of the mother country." American intellectuals educated in Greek and Roman classics compared the "venality and immorality" in Britain's ruling class with the Roman empire heading towards its fall. Thus, Goetzmann reminds us that Patrick Henry opposed the Stamp Act by declaring, "Caesar had his Brutus—Charles the First, his Cromwell—and George the Third may profit by their example."

In discussing how black slaves experienced America in the South, Goetzmann quotes poignantly from a letter written by a former black slave to his Tennessee hillbilly mistress before the Civil War. It gets across the inhumanity of slavery better than the word "inhumanity" itself: "You say you have offers to buy me, and that you shall sell me if I do not send you $1,000, and in the same breath you say, 'You know we raised you as we did our own children.' Woman did you raise your own children for the market?"

Once the always subtly changing set of ideas of America had been created, it needed to be transmitted, reinforced and revalidated again and again and again. Education, Goetzmann stresses, played a big role. Nineteen colleges came into being between 1782 and 1802. Public education bills were passed in six of the original colonies before 1800. Land grants for pioneer schools, which would eventually equal millions of acres, were established by the Northwest Ordinance. By the late 1850s, our country had about 250 colleges, aimed at "convert[ing] men into republican machines" (Benjamin Rush), "rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens" (Jefferson).

Meanwhile Noah Webster "sought to safeguard the purity of American English by writing a dictionary and speller." British English, in Webster's opinion, had been corrupted beyond repair by foreign words and "foppish court usage." In our very language, America was defined by what it was not.

Goetzmann gets carried away in a few places when he violates his own dictum to stay in the past he is re-creating. In his discussion of the problem, seen clearly by writers from James Fenimore Cooper to Henry James, of "establishing an American literary tradition and of raising it to a level of high achievement," Goetzmann argues that American writers had done so "within approximately sixty-five years," by 1855. By then Cooper's Leatherstocking was a New World cultural hero—we essentially had our Odysseus—and three writers (Cooper, Poe and Irving) "commanded world attention." Goetzmann goes on to claim: "Greece, Rome, France, Germany, Italy, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, even Britain itself took far longer to reach such maturity." Actually, the first democracy, classical Athens, by the end of its seventh decade had invented the genres of tragedy and comedy.

We do not need pissing contests between historical cultures of the sort Goetzmann invites to take the measure of what American intellectuals accomplished in defining, at different times and places in our first 125 years, what America means. We now have Goetzmann's life of learning distilled into what may be the capstone of his career to help us understand who we were ■

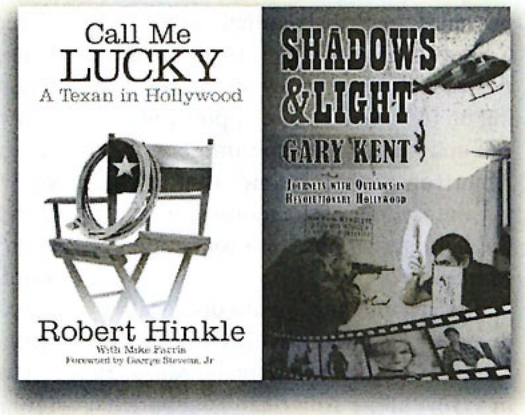
Tom Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches ancient history and war and violence studies.

Hollywood, Texas

BY JOSH ROSENBLATT

Call Me Lucky: A Texan in Hollywood
By Robert Hinkle and Mike Ferris
University of Oklahoma
273 pages, $24.95

Shadows & Light: Journeys With Outlaws in Revolutionary Hollywood
By Gary Kent
Dalton Publishing
400 pages, $21.95



Robert Hinkle's career started in earnest in the spring of 1955, when the self-described "two-bit" actor from Brownfield, Texas, got a phone call from the Famous Artists Agency asking him to sit down with George Stevens, the director of *Shane*, *A Place in the Sun*, and *Gunga Din*. Up to that point, Hinkle was one of thousands of extras and B-movie stuntmen wandering the back lots of Hollywood looking for jobs on cheaply made Westerns and war pictures. His first break came in 1952 when he doubled for the star of a low-budget rodeo movie called *Bronco Buster*, a role that gave a kid raised "dang near spitting distance from Lubbock" a taste of life in the movies. With his wife by his side and armed with little more than "guts and BS," Hinkle headed off to Hollywood and brought some of Texas with him.

The early years were spent as "Cowboy A" or "Cowboy Number 3" on TV shows and in Republic Studio B pictures. Then came the phone call. Stevens was directing an adaptation of Edna Ferber's cattle-and-oil epic *Giant* and wanted to see Hinkle. Hinkle was sure Stevens wanted him to star as Jett Rink. He put on his cowboy "uniform" and drove to Warner Brothers.

Hinkle didn't end up playing Rink. James Dean did. Stevens wasn't interested in Hinkle's acting ability at all; he wanted Hinkle's voice. Aiming to make his film as Texan as he could, the director had decided his star, Rock Hudson, needed to speak with a real Texas accent. The only real Texan anyone could think of was Hinkle.

In his memoir, *Call Me Lucky: A Texan in Hollywood,* Hinkle brings us back to Hollywood in the 1950s, when a true Texan was apparently an exotic creature. Hinkle was smart enough to harness that exoticism and combine it with his natural-born abilities as a storyteller. He helped sell Hollywood on the idea of the larger-than-life Texan, and convinced the right people that only he could help Hudson, Dean and Elizabeth Taylor find their inner swagger. It's a gift for self-aggrandizement that hasn't gone away, as *Call Me Lucky* is nothing if not a tale of bluster and outsized romanticism. It's also a tale that will sound familiar to anyone who knows there's nothing Texans love more than talking about the thousand and one things they assume set Texas apart from the rest of the world.

Nowhere did Hinkle's skills as an anthropological guide come in more handy than with Dean, a Method actor who wasn't just interested in dressing or talking like a Texan but wanted to *become* a Texan 24 hours a day for as long as *Giant* was shooting (Stanislavsky meets Sam Houston). Hinkle came to see Dean as the Eliza Doolittle to his Henry Higgins, a study in cultural transformation. Hinkle taught the young star how to speak, how to dress, how to hunt rabbit, how to ride a horse, how to mosey, even how to play country songs on the guitar.

Does this "dialect coach" occasionally let his own B.S. get the better of him? Did Hinkle really supply the famous line Jett used on Leslie to drive Bick into a rage ("You always did look pretty. You pretty nigh good enough to eat.")? Did he suggest the hand gesture Dean would use to refuse Bick's offer to buy him out in one of the most powerful scenes in the movie? Who can say? But there's no doubting the impact Hinkle had on Dean and the movie. *Giant* practically oozes Texas.

Call Me Lucky lies in sharp contrast to another new book about a man who moved to Hollywood with hopes of cinematic glory, but who ended up a stuntman and a B-movie actor before finding his place in the movie business. Gary Kent's *Shadows and Light*, for all its Hinkle-like fascination with oddball characters, movie stars and Hollywood thrills, couldn't be further in tone from the light-hearted, slap-on-the-back, good-ol'-boy folk-isms of *Call Me Lucky*.

HINKLE HELPED SELL HOLLYWOOD ON THE IDEA OF THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE TEXAN, AND CONVINCED THE RIGHT PEOPLE THAT ONLY HE COULD HELP HUDSON, DEAN AND ELIZABETH TAYLOR FIND THEIR INNER SWAGGER.

Shadows and Light. Good and evil. Art and commerce. Life and death. These aren't opposing terms in Kent's worldview; they're the dichotomies born of existence. If Hinkle was a Hollywood child of the 50s, then Kent was his counterpart in the 60s. Just as full of bluster and B.S., Kent was more interested in the political, social, and metaphysical aspects of moviemaking than the man who taught James Dean how to rope a calf. For Kent, the complicated parts are where the meaning is, so he dives into them, passionately and with an attention to detail that would make Henry James dizzy.

Take Kent's poetic tribute to film crews, which resides somewhere between the lyrics of an Irish drinking song and the Thanksgiving prayer of a modern spiritualist: "The crew, the crew, those hearty sons-a-bitches! ... They create shadow and light, call up ghosts, and pierce the veil of eternity. They carry within their trunks ... the stuff necessary for the weaving of dreams." These aren't the words of a man who stumbled into film for the hell of it. For Kent, movies—especially movies made in the 60s and 70s—were agents of artistic and social change and players in a proper revolution. He, along with buddies and contemporaries Jack Nicholson, Monte Hellman, Warren Oates, Brian De Palma, John Cassavetes, Richard Rush, and others, weren't just out to make entertainment; they were part of what they considered to be a new wave of "outlaw" American cinema, fiercely independent, light on its feet, and intent on breaking barriers and taboos. Kent had been "weaned on artistic milk and honey from the legitimate theater [in Houston]. I had sashayed in to Hollywood hoping to find work that would challenge old assumptions, scratch some skin, and excite change." Like so many filmmakers of his time, Kent took a look around Hollywood in the early '60s, found it embarrassingly out of touch with the spirit of the day, and took it on himself to rattle cages.

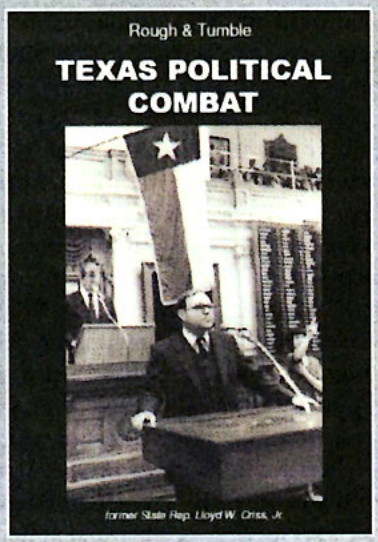
That spirit of confrontation and moral daring serves as the backdrop for Kent's coming-of-age stories as a stuntman and bit player in mid-century Hollywood. He never lets us forget the context in which he and other early independent filmmakers were working: the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, women's liberation, the summer of love, and the Manson family murders. When Cassavetes got his acting friends together to shoot *Shadows*, a movie of their own, free from the approbation and control of the industry, they weren't just breaking down barriers in Hollywood. They were pointing to an entirely different way of living and creating art, where old notions of authority and tradition were vanishing. They were, according to Kent, catching movies up with the times. ■

Josh Rosenblatt is a freelance arts writer and critic living in Austin.

PREVIEW

The Mixmaster, Fort Worth. This is where I-30 and I-35W meet, but if you look closely you can see the historic junction below the highway, where several major railway lines have met since 1881. From *Historic Texas from the Air*, by David Buisseret, Richard Francaviglia and Gerald Saxon. Aerial photographs by Jack W. Graves, Jr., published by University of Texas Press.

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT
ROUGH & TUMBLE
TEXAS POLITICAL COMBAT



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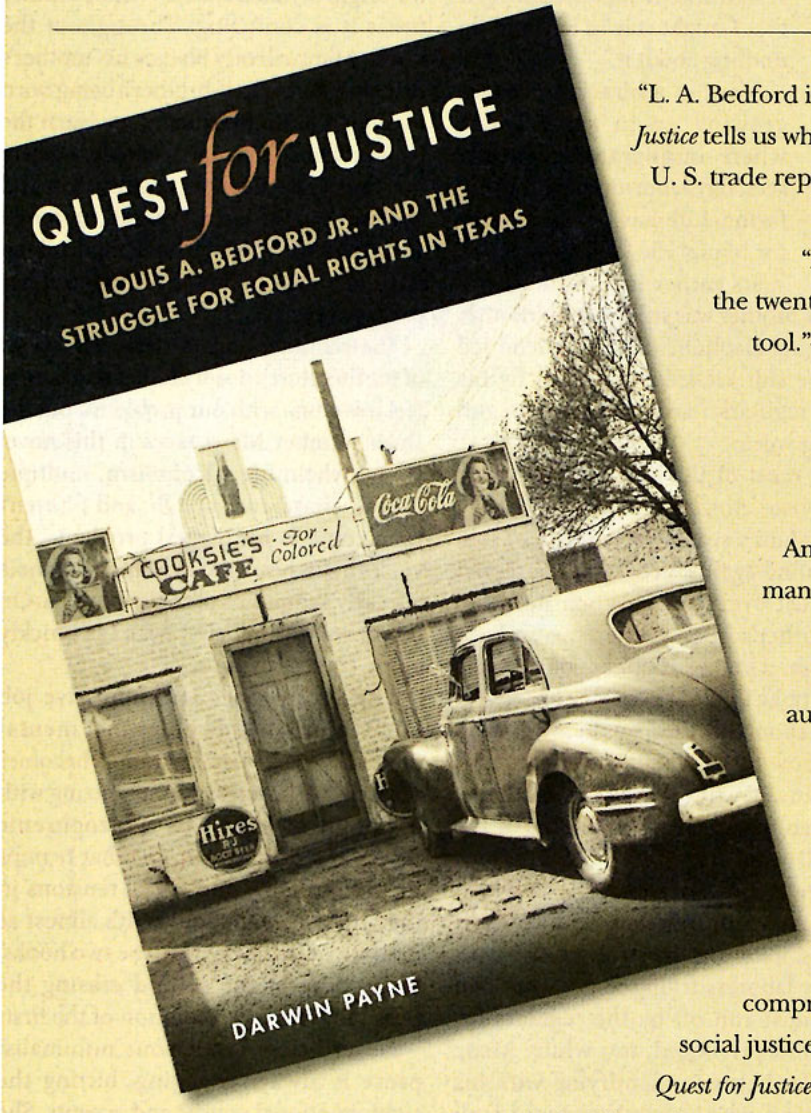
Quest for Justice

Louis A. Bedford Jr. and the Struggle for Equal Rights in Texas

DARWIN PAYNE

With a Foreword by W. Marvin Dulaney and an Afterword by Amilcar Shabazz



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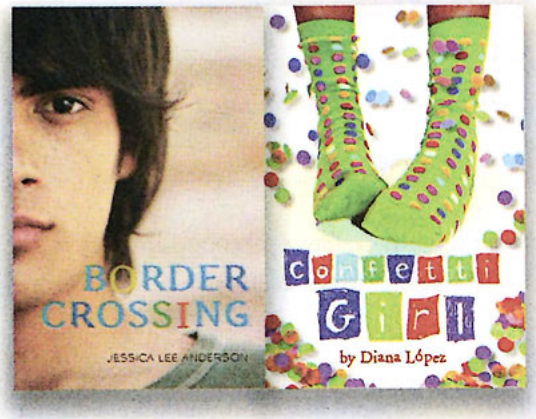
Border Teens

BY MARY HELEN SPECHT



Border Crossing
By Jessica Lee Anderson
Milkweed Editions
150 pages, $17

Confetti Girl
By Diana Lopez
Little, Brown
208 pages, $15.99

The larger publishing industry is crumbling, but "young adult" fiction appears to be holding steady, even growing. As someone who as a child read novels with "adult" content years before I was supposed to, and who as an adult can frequently be found browsing the young adult section of my public library, I turn to the genre, time and time again, for the immediacy one finds in YA fiction. Books marketed to teenagers are rarely told through the altering prism of experience and nostalgia, which makes sense considering how young people go through life—with a limited sense of proportion and perspective. At that age, everything seems intense and life-altering.

Precisely this sort of raw exigency, artfully done, drew me into Jessica Lee Anderson's second novel, *Border Crossing*. (Her first, *Trudy*, won the Milkweed Prize for Children's Literature). From the opening paragraph, it becomes clear this tale will be a dark one when 15-year-old Manz wakes to a flashing red taillight that at first looks like fire and thinks, "It wasn't the thought of flames that scared me. It was the thought that I might stay in bed and do nothing about it."

Manz is a biracial teenager growing up in rural Texas, where immigrants regularly seek day labor on neighboring farms. Life has not been easy for Manz. His father was killed years earlier in a car accident; his half-brother was stillborn; his mother is a raging alcoholic; his best friend Jed gets the shit kicked out of him by his father regularly; and Manz has begun hearing voices.

Like most of the best fiction, YA or otherwise, *Border Crossing* is really about Manz's search for a sense of self, his chafing against cruelty encountered at almost every turn. When he hears his mother's boss at the convenience store run a young Hispanic boy off the property, he thinks: "Everyone knew how Jay felt about the Mexicans in town. Who knew how he felt about me? I was both Mexican and white. I lived in the middle, on Allen Street, near the border of the Great Divide."

There is a wonderful scene in which Manz and Jed, unbeknownst to their parents, loiter on the street corner with the day laborers trying to get work and are almost run off by the regulars for being too privileged, too white. Manz struggles between identifying with his best friend, who angrily threatens to call Border Patrol, and with the immigrants, who remind him of his father.

Manz and Jed are hired to build a fence on a nearby guest ranch. There, Manz meets a pretty girl, "Egyptian Eyes," who serves him sweet tea and whose family eventually tells him about "Operation Wetback," which relocated illegal aliens after World War II and which Manz becomes convinced still secretly exists.

The way Anderson withholds information often builds a nice suspense—like how we don't find out until page 36 the origin of Manz's name—while at other times it is confusing. Throughout the novel, Manz silently blames his mother's drinking for his half-brother's being born without a brain.Eventually, we learn the baby suffered from anencephaly, a defect not caused by alcohol consumption and "nobody's fault." Is this "reveal" supposed to let the mother off the hook for drinking large amounts of liquor throughout her pregnancy?

The technique leads to a larger issue. Part of the literature's beauty is that it makes us feel less alone with our problems, but the sheer number Manz faces in this novel is overwhelming: alcoholism, multiple deaths, abuse, racism. Oh, and I haven't even come to his biggest problem—the voices in his head and escalating paranoia are early symptoms of schizophrenia. On top of everything else, Manz is quickly going crazy.

The author does an impressive job portraying this frightening mental illness. Even as Manz's paranoia becomes obvious, we never stop empathizing with his point of view. His schizophrenia serves as a *deus ex machina* that trumps the other family and social tensions in the book up to that point. It's almost as if this novel were trying to be two books, the ending of the second erasing the possibility for any resolution of the first.

Nevertheless, Anderson's minimalist prose is always engaging, hitting the right emotional pauses and accents. She has a good ear for adolescent dialogue and doesn't make her characters inane or silly. The short chapters and fast-paced scenes keep the pages turning, but it is her descriptions that make this fictional world almost crystalline in its bleak beauty: "Around the building, we saw a massacre of mesquite trees piled high and wide."

LIFE HAS NOT BEEN EASY FOR MANZ. HIS FATHER WAS KILLED YEARS EARLIER IN A CAR ACCIDENT; HIS HALF-BROTHER WAS STILLBORN; HIS MOTHER IS A RAGING ALCOHOLIC; HIS BEST FRIEND JED GETS THE SHIT KICKED OUT OF HIM BY HIS FATHER REGULARLY; AND MANZ HAS BEGUN HEARING VOICES.

Like *Border Crossing*, native Texan Diana Lopez's first young adult novel, *Confetti Girl*, is set in a largely Hispanic part of the state. The first-person narrator, Lina Flores, also recently has lost a parent. This is where the similarities end. *Confetti Girl* is as light and airy and, well, confetti-like as *Border Crossing* is dark and edgy. The tone is clear from the first sentence: "Some people collect coins or stamps, but I collect socks."

Lina lives with her English teacher father in a house with no television. Her best friend, Vanessa, lives across the street with a mother who, since her divorce, has become obsessed with making *cascarones*, confetti-filled eggshells one cracks over another's head as a joke. It doesn't take long to suspect a *Parent Trap*-like setup is in the works.

The narrative is energized by typical issues of young adulthood: sports wins and defeats, crushes on boys, jealousies and failing grades. All the while, the underlying issue is the death of Lina's mother. Lopez weaves this theme of grief through the book in a subtle, often lovely way: "My tears plot into the ocean. I've tasted tears before. They're salty, just like the water below, and I wonder if the ocean is made of tears from the people and all the animals that have lost their mothers."

A pleasant read overall, the novel still has cringeworthy moments, from hokey puns ("Holey socks aren't for angels.") to characterizations that verge on affectation, such as the father who quotes literature at what seems like every possible moment. For Lina's science project, she learns that whooping cranes mate for life. Her caricature-of-a-father immediately channels Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 "... so they understand. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom."

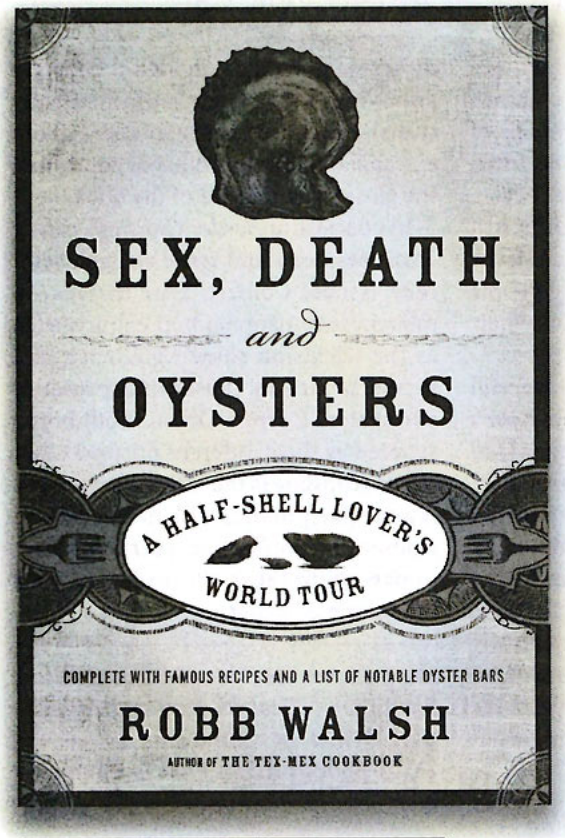
The book is sprinkled with Spanish *dichos*—a great idea, though it becomes annoying when each is immediately translated, preventing readers from extrapolating from context or consulting the glossary at the end of the book.

In contrast to *Border Crossing's* classic Texas aesthetic and tense struggle with race issues, *Confetti Girl* thrives on references to national pop culture, such as the television show *Ugly Betty*, and seems secure in the Latino presence permeating Corpus Christi. Both books succeed at their different purposes, but *Border Crossing* is the novel whose prose is more likely to stick with the reader and whose story you'll almost certainly want to pass on to those YA readers in your life, young or old. ■

Mary Helen Specht will be moderating the session "Elizabeth Berg and Amanda Eyre Ward in Conversation" at the Texas Book Festival. Find her online at maryhelenspecht.com.

The Oyster Is His World

BY RICHARD HOLLAND



Sex, Death & Oysters: A Half-Shell Lover's World Tour, With Recipes and Notable Oyster Bars
By Robb Walsh
Counterpoint Press
269 pages, $25

THE QUALITY OF TEXAS OYSTERS IS LOST ON MUCH OF THE COUNTRY. WALSH IS ROBUSTLY ATTACKED FOR BEING AN OYSTER WRITER FROM HOUSTON WHEN HE VISITS NEW ENGLAND AND THE WEST COAST.

For almost 20 years, Houstonians have learned to depend on Robb Walsh's articulate enthusiasm for food, particularly Texas food. We're not talking fancy—Walsh writes about roadside barbecue, venerable Tex-Mex, sandwiches wrapped in greasy paper, the beautiful varieties of hot sauce and chile peppers. As the food writer for the *Houston Press*, Walsh surveys the wild array of Cajun, Asian, African, and Caribbean cafes that seem to pop up every other week.

Walsh is a natural storyteller when it comes to unearthing Texas delicacies, but his new book, devoted to his obsession with the many varieties of growing, harvesting and consuming of oysters, is more personal than his other work and takes him way outside Harris County. He begins his study of the bi-valve riding on a diesel-powered oyster boat in Galveston Bay, on a winter day when the water temperature is 60 degrees. He calls it perfect oyster weather. The boat belongs to Walsh's friend, Misho Ivic, and is named the *Trpanj* after his home village in Croatia. As the diesel engine roars, the *Trpanj's* dredge scrapes the bay's bottom. Detritus and smaller oysters are thrown back into the water.

Walsh eats an oyster just brought up (briny, a little metallic and surprisingly sweet) and addresses the bad reputation of Gulf oysters in general and Galveston Bay oysters in particular.

"East Coast and West Coast oystermen say that the waters of the Gulf of Mexico are filthy. And maybe they are. But oysters live in brackish water in freshwater estuaries, not in the Gulf of Mexico. And the scientists I interviewed said that Galveston Bay was in pretty good shape."

Conscientious fishermen like Ivic have no interest in selling tainted oysters, and adhere to a fishing-zone system enforced by coastal game wardens. Reefs close to the shore are off limits because of wastewater and runoff from lawns and cow pastures. Do not, Walsh says, be alarmed by the muddy brown color of the water—fisherman say it is full of plankton and other goodies that make oysters and crabs thrive.

What makes the eater of raw oysters sick is the bacterium *vibio cholorae*, which grows in warm polluted water. If you have ever eaten a "bad oyster," you know the symptoms that feel like food poisoning, only worse—it can even lead to cholera. Raw oysters are a seasonal food, especially in hot climates and anyone tempted to eat Galveston or Gulf oysters in August will not do so after reading Walsh.

The quality of Texas oysters is lost on much of the country. Walsh is robustly attacked for being an oyster writer from Houston when he visits New England and the West Coast, particularly San Francisco. There he meets an egomaniac oyster entrepreneur named Billy Martinelli, who greets Walsh by saying, "Gulf oysters are criminal." Walsh manages to change the subject and in a few days accompanies Martinelli to an oyster picnic on Hog Island in Tomales Bay, on the coast west of Sonoma County.

Like this idyllic Northern California scene, much of *Sex, Death, and Oysters* is a travelogue punctuated with shellfish. Walsh goes to New Orleans, before and after Katrina, to visit famous eateries like the Acme Oyster House and Felix's Oyster Bar in the French Quarter and Casamento's on Magazine Street. On a

trip with his wife and daughters, Walsh makes it onto the Acme's wall of fame by eating 180 oysters in two hours. The only aftereffect he reports is an audible sloshing noise as he walks up Iberville Street.

Before the hurricane, Louisiana had by far the most productive oyster beds in the country. Katrina destroyed more than 50 percent of the oyster beds in the estuaries and most of the piers and oyster boats in places like Plaquemines Parish and Grand Isle. Walsh meets Cajun and Croatian oystermen on Grand Isle, who all pointed out that after major storms there is a frenzy of reproduction among oyster seedlings (this is part of the sex in the title). After three years or so, production is back up. It remains to be seen whether that happens in Galveston Bay after Hurricane Ike.

Not everyone loves oysters, a fact that's reflected in Walsh's trip to England, where he visits Colchester, in Essex County, northeast of London. Planning the English leg of his international oyster survey, Walsh had trouble finding out anything about the Colchester Oyster Festival, an annual event since 1618. When he arrives, he discovers why—no one in the town actually eats oysters from the beds that fed the ancient Romans. He learns that the famous oyster banquet, presided over by Colchester's mayor, is an anachronistically formal event. The 200 or so guests are seated according to social rank inside a room that looks "like a cross between a ballroom at the Waldorf Astoria and the inside of a cathedral." Walsh manages to get a cheap media seat. When he notices that more than half the guests don't touch the delicious Colchester oysters, he grabs a couple of plates and some bread and butter. He joins two elderly nurses drinking tea at a first aid table. "When they noticed the oysters, they were horrified. One said she had never seen an oyster before, never mind eaten one. She looked at mine and declared them disgusting."

After some successful oystering in London, Walsh describes Christmas in Paris with his wife, Kelly, on their honeymoon in 2005. They had planned this trip after their wedding six months earlier, Walsh knowing the holidays are the height of the oyster season in Paris—but what bride could refuse a wedding trip to the city of lights? The only hitch is that Kelly is now pregnant, has raging morning sickness, and an opened-up oyster makes her gorge rise. The trip also coincides with a serious snowstorm that becomes a blizzard. The intrepid shellfish journalist fulfills his mission in one famous oyster restaurant (Le Dome) and one hidden little place (Brasserie Flo), and finds Kelly the best puff pastry dessert in the city, demonstrating that he does have some common sense.

Back home, Robb and Kelly start serving big quantities of oysters at their Super Bowl parties. He gives instructions on how to shuck them without destroying your hands. We learn that some of his travels have paid off. Walsh reports that during the winter months, when it is too cold for Canadian oysters, Rodney's Oyster House in Toronto, run by his friend Rodney Clark, runs a special on Galveston Bay oysters. Rodney's is among the 25 eating places Walsh recommends, and the book is full of recipes for dishes like oyster and artichoke soup.

Sex, Death, and Oysters was a labor of love, written while Walsh was working on other projects, including his fine study of our native hybrid food, *The Tex Mex Cookbook*. He understands the reluctance of some eaters to ingest the mysterious *fruits de mer* that can kill you, and in explaining the attraction Walsh fully reveals himself to be a sensualist as well as a gourmand:

> *Eating raw oysters is at once perverse and spiritual. A freshly shucked oyster enters your mouth while it is still alive and dies while giving you pleasure. As I savored the wonderfully slick texture, delicate briny flavor, and marine aroma, it was easy to see how oysters came to be associated with the tenderest portion of the female anatomy.* ■

Dick Holland teaches in the Liberal Arts Honors Program at the University of Texas at Austin. His Spring 2010 class is titled "The Texas State of Mind."

POETRY | Jan Seale

Book Learning

How can we ever know
what the words do
when we close a book?
Perhaps p. 38 swamps 37,
the end of chapter 10
sniffs the epigraph of 11,
thick paragraphs on 142
insist on street-dancing.

The dialog on 213 may go
for treatment of hiccups.
Could it be
that charts switch facts,
photos pick fights
with their captions?

Things could get serious;
"Index" offends "Contents,"
Margins surge type,
titles intermarry.

If only bookmarks would
share voyeur rights,
if words would quit acting
like fridge lights after
mayo is retrieved.

Until then, we may never know
what the words really say

Jan Seal *lives in McAllen. Her latest book, which came out in 2005, is* The Wonder Is: New and Selected Poems.

Don't Fence Me In

BY KIRK FORRESTER

DAVIS' BIOGRAPHY CELEBRATES A LIBERATED LIFE; STILLMAN'S BOOK IS A PLEA TO SAVE THOUSANDS OF OTHERS.

The invention of barbed wire in 1874 marked the end of the open range in America's West, and the 20th century ushered in settlers who sought security rather than adventure. The Wild West became tamer, more homogenized. Still, pockets of insurrection, physical and philosophical, remain in the West, defying conventionality and containment. Two recent books—one about an iconoclast, another about an icon—celebrate the value and tenacity of the free-range way of life.

A working subtitle for Steven Davis' biography of J. Frank Dobie could have been "My Way." Dobie, the first Texas-based writer to gain national attention, lived life on his own terms and often demanded lots of elbow room.

Born in 1888 in the Brush Country of South Texas, Dobie spent his childhood working on the family ranch, learning how to ride horses and herd cattle. He loved the gritty authenticity of cowboy life, but he also wanted to pursue his education. He left the ranch and headed to college in New York, where he fell in love with literature, particularly the Romantic poets, with whom he shared a reverence for the land. In 1914 he returned to Texas as an English professor at the University of Texas at Austin. There he cultivated a reputation as a cowboy professor, donning khakis and boots instead of natty tweeds, outfitting his office with cowhides and defiantly refusing to pursue a Ph.D., which he feared would "sap his vitality."

Though Dobie was passionate about scholarship, he felt ill-suited to the ivory tower and railed against what he saw as a rigid bureaucracy. Unable to shake the pull of the Texas backcountry, he felt like a misfit and a failure. "While I am in one world, it is forever my fate to hear the music of the other," he wrote to his wife. "In the university, I am a wild man; in the wild, I am a scholar and a poet." This tension would result in Dobie's greatest accomplishment—making regionalism a valid area of study by introducing Southwestern folklore into the canon.

Dobie was introduced to folklore sitting around the campfire on his family ranch, listening to vaqueros tell stories. These were folktales of life on the range, passed down orally by generations of storytellers gathered around campfires and kitchen tables throughout the Southwest. Dobie saw these narratives as a way to marry his passion for literature with his love of the land. The cowboy had become his muse, their stories his medium.

Davis writes admiringly of Dobie's pioneering work in folklore, but his biography is no valentine. Calling Dobie's literary legacy "uneven," Davis suggests that Dobie's books, written in anecdotal style, are "best read in bits and pieces, in between chores." (Given the amount of time the biographer spent on this project, you can imagine how clean his house must be.)

Davis is more intrigued with the man than with the material; the real story here is Dobie's philosophical evolution from a fierce, provincial nativist to a fiery progressive.

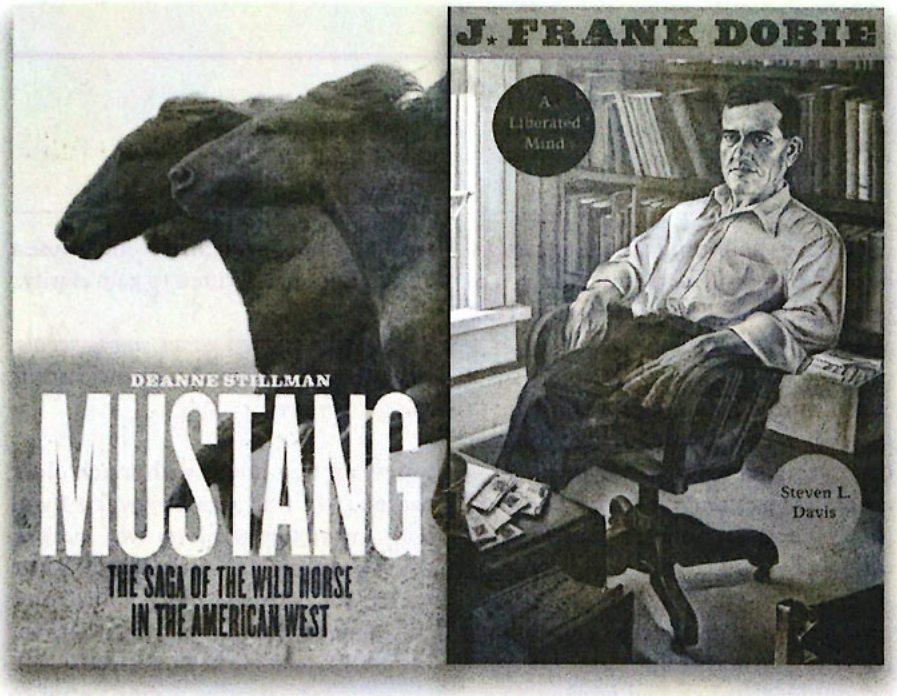
As a young man, Dobie embraced rugged individualism and brandished a fierce regional pride. Surprisingly, his brief stint at Columbia University in 1913 heightened his defenses. As immigrants and minorities gained an increasing foothold in the country and industrialization grew, Dobie felt his way of life was besieged.

His thinking started to change in his late 40s, when he became friends with a group of Austin liberals who met at Barton Springs, swim trunks and all, to hash out ideas—Austin's version of a literary salon. Dobie was invited in 1943 to be a visiting professor at Cambridge University. There, writes Davis, he was "ripe for evolution" and "threw off the shackles of Texas provincialism ... no longer whooping and hollering on behalf of Texas. Instead, he came to serve as the state's chief critic." By the time Dobie reached his 50s, he had concluded that the greatest threat to individual freedom was not government, but right-wing business interests.

An early prototype for figures like Norman Mailer and Kinky Friedman, Dobie was compelled to join public discourse. Using his syndicated newspaper column as a megaphone, he argued against McCarthyism, political cronyism, the UT Board of Regents, and censorship at the university. He fought for integration, the labor movement and women's rights. The university fired him, newspapers dropped his column, and the FBI investigated his Communist sympathies. Dobie reveled in the firestorm, which strengthened his resolve. Years later, Lyndon Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Davis, a curator at the Southwestern Writers Collection at Texas State University in San Marcos, where Dobie's archives reside, writes with authority and ease. At times, however, the prose feels flat and the reader wishes for more wit and verve, particularly given such prime material.

Dobie died on Sept. 18, 1964, leaving a staggering volume of work—nine books, over 800 articles, 1,300 columns—as well as a vibrant community of Southwestern writers. As Davis writes, Dobie's greatest



Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West
By Deanne Stillman
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
368 pages, $25

J. Frank Dobie: A Liberated Mind
By Steven L. Davis
University of Texas Press
264 pages, $24.95

achievement was his "refusal to accept himself as a finished person."

If Davis' biography celebrates a liberated life, then Deanne Stillman's book is a plea to save thousands of others. In *Mustang*, Stillman traces the origins of America's most beloved icons and makes the case for their urgent liberation.

It is difficult to get through the first chapter of *Mustang*, in which Stillman recounts the horse's terrifying trip to North America on the ships of the Spanish conquistadors. If the ships became too heavy, sailors would throw horses overboard to lighten the vessel and catch air in the sails. For the sake of a drifting ship, countless horses were frightened from their quarters, forced to walk the gangplank, and left to drown in the ocean. (A particularly windless part of the sea gained the notorious title "horse latitudes.") Stillman's opening scene sets a sobering mood for the book—a riveting, thoroughly researched odyssey of the horse and its place in American history. It also introduces what Stillman calls the great paradox of the horse: "It possesses a wild spirit but serves as the greatest helpmate this country has known." The horse serves man, sometimes even in death.

Scientists have traced the horse's origins to North America, but various epochs left it nearly extinct from the continent. In the 16th century, Spaniards brought horses home, employing their strength to wipe out empires. After conquering the Aztec, Cortes attributed the victory "to God and to the horse."

By the 1700s, mustangs proliferated in the American West, and it was not uncommon to see bands of 3,000 or more roaming the Great Plains. Some maps of Texas distinguished regions by their horse populations; one was labeled "simply Wild Horses," and another as "Vast herds of Wild Horses."

More than any other group, Native Americans were transformed by the arrival of the horse, which they considered a brother, a partner and a kindred spirit. With the horse's help, tribes could cover more ground, kill more buffalo and increase their leverage with traders. In one of the most famous horse trades in history, Lewis and Clark traded trinkets and an American flag for horses from the Shoshone Indians, saving a stalled expedition. The era of the cowboy and his cattle drives made mustangs synonymous with the Wild West. Hollywood would later solidify—and sensationalize—the horse's reputation in westerns.

Stillman's account of the horse and its prized place in American history stands in contrast to its diminished, even damaged, reputation today. Because the wild horse has no natural predator, man must grapple with its population control. The ranching lobby—ever conscious of its grazing rights—presents the horse as feral, violent and destructive. Mustangs are left at the mercy of elected officials and the Bureau of Land Management. The horses are in constant danger of sudden roundups, after which the lucky ones are sent to sanctuaries and the unlucky ones sold to become pet food. Other horses have been murdered out of bloodlust, sport or senseless rage. In the wake of a 1998 massacre outside of Reno that killed 34 wild horses, Stillman wrote: "Almost five hundred years after Cortes traveled to the New World, we are still throwing them overboard, into the horse latitudes, trying to lighten our load."

Stillman's arguments are persuasive. At times, she lets her imagination fill in gaps when history is silent, an unsettling practice that projects what the horse saw, smelled and sensed onto the page. In small doses, this enriches the reading experience, but ultimately feels uncomfortable, wedged between historical facts. Overall, Stillman proves a thoughtful guide whose passion for the mustang is inspiring and infectious.

In one of her more heartbreaking accounts, a captured mustang dies in captivity for no other reason than a broken spirit, its moans haunting the Great Plains. You don't have to be an equestrian or history buff to realize these magnificent animals deserve all the open space we can give them. ■

A former editor at Random House, Kirk Forrester is a freelance writer based in Austin.

Inside Amigoland

BY ANIS SHIVANI

Oscar Casares's short story collection Brownsville *(Back Bay, 2003) was an instant hit with critics and readers, establishing Casares as a writer to watch. His follow-up,* Amigoland *(Little Brown, 2009),w was released in August and met with similar critical acclaim. In the novel, Don Fidencio, a ninety-one-year-old in the eponymous nursing home, has suffered a stroke, and shuns other residents. With incredible determination, Don Fidencio—with the help of his younger brother Don Celestino and his girlfriend Socorro—pursues the kernel of memory that haunts him: the legend of the abduction of his grandfather as a child, by Indians who abandoned him on the American side of the border. Together the three embark on an unauthorized trip to Linares, Mexico, where the family originated. In Casares's compassionate fictional world, time, place, and memory can be forgiving—with a bit of luck. Casares spoke with Anis Shivani by phone from his office at the University of Texas at Austin. To hear a recording of the full interview, visit texasobserver.org.*

OBSERVER: Brownsville *seems so powerful now, because although ethnicity is part of it, it's stripped of a political agenda.*

CASARES: When you live on the border, where Mexican-Americans are 95 to 96 percent of the population, questions of ethnicity and race aren't what they are in other parts of the country. The questions become more about class, for instance.

So you didn't feel the need to explain things, which often turns into exoticism?

No, you're coming into my world. I'm going to do my job to acclimate you to this new environment, but you have to do your part. If you're observant and curious, you don't ask too many questions but just observe and note the differences. By not talking about ethnicity, the stories get beyond that issue and suddenly you're looking at these people as people and not as an ethnic group.

When you were younger, did you want to write against the politically-charged protest literature of the Chicano Movement writers of the 1960s and 1970s, like Raymond Barrio, Ricardo Sánchez and Richard Vásquez?

I was already in my thirties before I started writing. It wasn't until I moved from the border that I started hearing terms like Mexican-American and Chicano and Hispanic and all these labels that each came with its own baggage. *Brownsville* gave me a safe place to get away from talking about the differences and more about the similarities.

What was the genesis of Amigoland*? Did it take a while to understand your characters?*

It took me a long time to understand my characters. I must have written three or four hundred pages before I had a sense of who they were. The genesis of the novel has to do with the family legend I heard growing up. The story my uncle used to tell was that my great-great-grandfather was living in Northern Mexico, and Indians had attacked this festival he was attending as a child. They took several other children, and the Mexican army was behind them, and when they got to the border, which had just become the United States, they kept going north and they dropped one child, and that child was our great-great-grandfather. My father claimed it never happened, my uncle was making it up. As I got deeper I realized I wanted to write more about this competing mythology of where we came from. I knew this was going to be told by these two older men, and slowly they took shape and became who they are now. I made a tough decision to lose a lot of what I had written to gain clarity.

Brownsville *is often about young people, while* Amigoland *is about people at the end of their lives.*

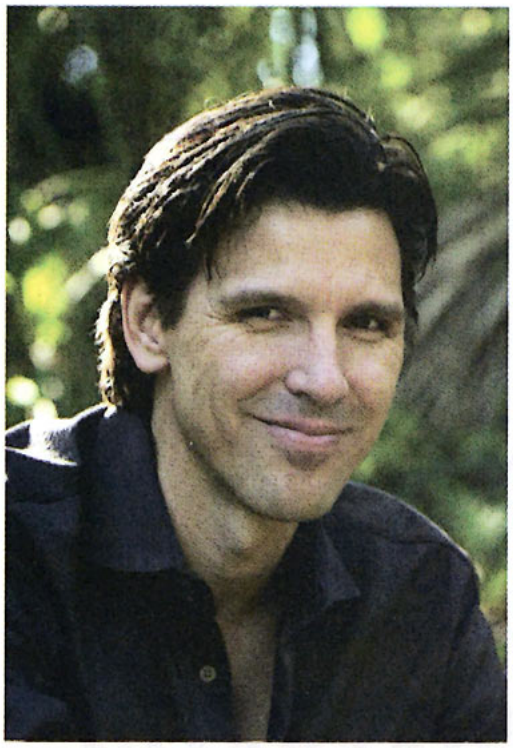
I grew up in a house with much older parents. My Dad was fifty when I was born, my mother was forty-two. In 2004, when my father was ninety-two, he broke his hip and ended up in a nursing home and I found myself helping out whenever I could. My real life had intersected with my fictional narrative. I didn't want to compromise the story by making it overly sentimental and it took longer because of that.

Don Fidencio has forgotten much, but remembers the most important thing.

A lot of times memory loss happens with incidents closer to the present and the memories that stay with us are the ones that happen to us in formative years. Don Fidencio has a close bond with the grandfather, who is more like a father figure.

In both your books the border is blurred.

I teach a class on the border and we write personal essays. The border is not static. There's tension because of the wall and the drug war, but in the stories and the novel the notion that you suddenly cross the border into another world and leave everything behind doesn't exist. People have a wedding in Brownsville and the reception in Matamoros because it's less expensive. Socorro, the girlfriend of Don Celestino, comes back and forth practically every day. That was what I knew growing up. I was down there recently and it was the first time I needed a passport to get back. It's changed dramatically—the number of border patrol agents, and the various checkpoints that didn't exist. It feels like a military state.



Oscar Casares *photo by Marsha Miller*

So for younger people it might be a sharper line.

I wrote a story for *Texas Monthly* about the high school soccer team. Before the school bus leaves Brownsville they bring on the sniffing dogs. Then the bus stops at the checkpoint and the inspector walks through. I played sports when I was a kid and I don't remember drug dogs coming on.

The stereotypical journey of the Mexican is from the south to the north. Amigoland *reverses it and the main characters head south.*

They do it illegally. They don't have any papers, only Socorro, a Mexican citizen…

An illegal border crossing in the other direction…

It does put that whole notion on its head. Don Fidencio in his mind owns the mythology, so the question of the crossing matters less to him.

You question the illegality of human beings, how they became abstractions, not people.

I WANTED TO WRITE MORE ABOUT THIS COMPETING MYTHOLOGY OF WHERE WE CAME FROM.

In *Brownsville* I tried not to let it influence the writing but just to get the story down. Then the climate changed greatly. The southern border intensified. The immigration marches took place. As with my father, it became one of the challenges. To write about it honestly but not let it influence too much of the writing.

Don Fidencio gives obnoxious names to people at the nursing home. Why can't he empathize, as he does with his ancient relative in Mexico?

His mild stroke has impaired his memory so the names, though cruel, are a way of coping. As for the empathy at the end of the novel, there's also a self-serving agenda to make more out of this trip, which seems on very shaky ground.

Once you have finished the book, it seems impossible to conceive of a different ending for Don Fidencio once he reaches Linares. Did you ever think of one?

Today I was cleaning up my office. I had put up all these Post-It notes to have some visual sense of how the novel was evolving. The notes seemed utterly foreign to me. Again, struggling with my father's condition, as much as I wanted that not to influence me… Don Celestino is struggling with intimacy all along and the trip forces things to the surface, so that was what I wanted to produce for Don Celestino and Soccoro. With Don Fidencio I didn't quite know where this was going to end but I knew whatever would happen, it would be on his own terms.

Don Fidencio has a greater need to be liberated…

As the novel opens he has nothing—

No control…

None whatsoever. Though Don Celestino's world is shutting down, he's still not at the edge of what Don Fidencio is experiencing. At the beginning it looks pretty bleak for him.

And he's stubborn. The machismo is also present in Brownsville. *In Don Fidencio's case it's endearing.*

This is based on the older men I grew up around, the pride they took in their work, how they took care of their families. In spite of all their flaws this was part of their character, the freedom they had—sometimes too much freedom that got them in trouble.

Symbols often carry the stories in Brownsville. *The monkey's head, the hammer, the bowling bowl. In* Amigoland *the slow passage of time creates the same visceral connection to reality.*

Those objects don't mean anything at the beginning. The monkey's head is weird, but it only means something when you understand the character. The novel covers a much larger span of time, uses multiple points of view, but I challenged myself not to have anything extraneous.

Did you experience Linares as you were writing the book?

I did it on the front end, I spoke to the state archivist of León, found quite a bit of documentation to back up the story, but I wasn't writing a historical novel or travelogue and everything had to have a reason for being. ■

Anis Shivani is a fiction writer, poet, and critic in Houston. His short fiction collection, Anatolia and Other Stories, *is being published in October 2009 by Black Lawrence Press/Dzanc Books.*

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