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The Texas Observer



CHILD X-ING

Del Rio's controversial crackdown on border-crossing students

by Melissa del Bosque



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IN MEMORIAM
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AFGHAN QUANDARIES

Sixty-odd years ago, I spent two years in Afghanistan, with one of the best seats in the house. I love the place, but I know as well as anyone that Afghanistan is not a vital interest of the United States ("An Afghan Thanksgiving," Nov. 27). It isn't even a nation-state. But Afghanistan is not the issue, and it alarms me a bit that the *Observer*, which has been in my affections almost as long as Afghanistan, seems to think so. Pulling out precipitously would raise issues as various and as important as the fate of tottery Pakistan, the future of India, global nuclear weapons, our problems in Iraq and Iran, and our reputation in the eyes of much of the world.

John Howison
By E-mail

CHOKING ON COAL

One thing people out of state can do to stop the explosive growth of coal-fired power plants in Texas ("Coal Star State," Nov. 13) is to submit comments to the Environmental Protection Agency regarding their recent rulings, and their review of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which issues all of the coal plant permits. We are commending EPA for taking action against TCEQ's lax regulating policy but are requesting that they go further and place at least a temporary moratorium on new coal plants until their permits can come under compliance with the Clean Air Act.

Ryan Rittenhouse, Public Citizen
Posted at texasobserver.org

In the 1980s Sen. Phil Gramm pushed to have the Formosa Plastics Co. set up near Port Lavaca with promises of jobs for the area, much the same way that boosters currently promote the coal-fired power plants. What he did not reveal was that Formosa would be responsible for pollution for generations to come. I watched in horror as the politicians brought that plant to Texas' best fishing area near Lavaca Bay, and then followed the story from front-page news of jobs to back-page articles on pollution violation after violation! Coal is the same. But like the story of the frog, place the community in cool water and then turn up the heat, and we will sit in it until we boil to death!

Lillie Courtney
Posted at texasobserver.org

HORROR IN KILLEEN

An excellent article on the horrible massacre at Fort Hood ("Live from Fort Hood," Nov. 27). You wrote this unlike any other reporter I have read or heard. It really painted a picture in my head of what that day must have been like for you and those in the middle of the story. And thanks for the point you made about him saying, "I'm blessed." It is beyond confusing what must have been going through (Maj. Nidal) Hassan's head. But I admit I care much more about the family members of the murdered and injured and the hell they must be going through.

C.J. Wheeler
Posted at texasobserver.org

I can't believe this fluff has been published by the paper of Jim Hightower and Molly Ivins. What a sophomoric, shallow article, totally bereft of any political or social context. There have been some deeply thoughtful articles published on this sorry event. This isn't one of them.

R. Swan
Posted at texasobserver.org

CREATURE OF THE NIGHT

My people, the Kwakiutl, are aware of the Bigfoot sightings ("Where the Wild Things Are," Nov. 13), and we perform potlatch regarding this creature. There are two different names we call it: the Bukwas or the Tsuanaqua. When we perform this dance, we also call it the Wild Man of the Woods. This is the taming of the Wild Man. They start by performing with the screeching cry of the Wild Man. This man is dressed up with a cedar bark headband, and he is wearing some cedar branches. His face is painted in charcoal. The rhythm of the song is coming from the people banging on a large log.

Buster Wilson
Posted at texasobserver.org

Tyrant's Foe 2.0

The first *Texas Observer* was published almost exactly 55 years ago, on Dec. 13, 1954. It was a sad thing to look at. All that broke up the long ragged columns of type on the front page was a grainy shot of Mrs. Bob Hughes, "20-year-old Port Arthur housewife," striking a winsome pose from the picket line of the long-running Port Arthur strike. There was also a pair of sharply reported stories about the strike, which the state attorney general had called part of "a Communist plot to take over Gulf oil ports." On the back page—page 8—sat a big ugly ad for *Tomorrow's Victory*, a book meant to inspire and organize liberal Democrats after their man, Ralph Yarborough, lost the '54 governor's race. Proceeds from the book sales went to the Democratic Deficit Committee.

In between, there were typos galore and left-out lines and production values roughly equivalent to those of a college newspaper of the day. But there was also a compelling back-and-forth about the kind of journalism this new magazine should pursue. The ultimate goal of the band of liberals who founded the *Observer*—a fairer, more just, more equitable Texas—was clear enough. But how best to use journalism to pursue it?

Paul Holcomb, editor of *The State Observer*—one of the publications combined to create the new *Texas Observer*—recommended that this new beast follow his example and "tell the truth about both friend and foe. In dealing with men and measures I try to avoid showing personal enmity, and treat any man or measure as honestly and fairly as my nature will permit," Holcomb wrote. "But I make no pretense of being an 'objective writer,' simply because I do not believe that there is any such animal in existence—at least not among mortal men."

Another paper that folded into the new *Texas Observer* was the short-lived *East Texas Democrat*. Produced by activists in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, this was an unabashedly partisan rag, battling against what its editor called "the Republicans in false face who stole the Democratic Party machinery. The *Democrat* was [our] means of facing these hypocrites, ball of thumb pressed to nose, with waving fingers spread and radiating to the front."

"You can't always be right, but you can always be honest."

The folks who came together to found the *Texas Observer* clearly had some clashing ideas about advocacy journalism. Should the *Observer* be a house organ for finger-waving, left-wing Texas Democrats? Or should it take a progressive but non-partisan approach, skewering bad actors on the left and right alike?

Ronnie Dugger, the brash 24-year-old editor hired to run this new hybrid *Texas Observer*, settled the issue pretty decisively. On the original front page, he called the thing "An Independent Liberal Weekly Newspaper" and stuck a motto on the top right that began: "We will serve no group or party."

We haven't published weekly in quite some time, but the other part of Dugger's original description—"independent liberal"—has stuck like glue. There have been times, especially over the past 15 years, when we have undoubtedly investigated, editorially flogged and parodied more Republicans than Democrats. But then again, Republicans have had almost all the power in Texas during these years. As Democrats regain power statewide, we'll be flogging more of them, too. We don't give a damn about their party; we care about whether elected officials are representing the best interests of the people.

We see our approach, more than anything, as modeled after the *Observer* slogan that came along after that first issue: "Tyrant's foe; the people's friend." It's one big reason why we remain absolutists about editorial independence. You can't be the people's friend when you're catering to the powerful. Dugger laid it down pretty good in that first issue:

> *The editor runs the paper. Editorial policy is in his hands. Ultimate control of the paper is in the hands of the trustees, acting through their directors. If the editor ceases to represent the sentiments of the trustees, or if they decide he's not doing a good job, they fire him; if they instruct him to do something he cannot, he quits.*

Fifty-five years later, the editor still keeps one foot near the door, ready to shove off if he's asked to do "something he cannot." And once again, we're reinventing ourselves. As we look forward to another five decades of telling the truth about this strange state, we're giving *The Texas Observer* a serious makeover. The next magazine you see will look dramatically different. Our online daily site, texasobserver.org, is being rebuilt from scratch as a reader-centered, interactive portal for progressive Texans.

The new *Observer* will look splashier. The content will be sprier. But the fundamentals won't change. Our ideals have been amazingly consistent since Dec. 13, 1954, and they're every bit as relevant—and rebellious—as they sounded on that day. Back then, Dugger quoted one of the editors whose papers he was combining into the *Observer*: "You can't always be right, but you can always be honest." We're still down with that, too. —*Bob Moser*

NOTE: The *Observer* takes a publication holiday after this issue. We'll be back, in print, on Jan. 8. Meanwhile, look for fresh content at texasobserver.org.



illustration by Alex Eben Meyer

Laredo's Last Chapter

A LITERARY CITY LOSES ITS ONLY BOOKSTORE

It seems especially ironic for a city that's spawned as much literary imagery as Laredo—it inspired Larry McMurtry's *Streets of Laredo*, amont others—to lose its only bookstore.

The B. Dalton bookstore at the Mall del Norte is slated for extinction at the end of January. (The city's independent bookstore, Bookmark Books, closed in 2000.)

"There's just something comforting about having a bookstore," says Xochitl Mora, public information officer for the city of Laredo. "A city needs a bookstore."

It's not as if Laredo, with a population of roughly 230,000, is a stagnating backwater. The border city is fast-growing, youthful and vibrant. Its Mexican sister city, Nuevo Laredo, is growing even faster, with 350,000 residents. People from Nuevo Laredo cross the international bridge to buy Spanish-language books at B. Dalton, Mora says.

The bookstore's looming closure has even imperiled the citywide book club. Mora helps spearhead the initiative—called One City, One Book—to get Laredoans reading. Mora orders the books, sometimes 500 or more, for members to buy at B. Dalton.

Not long ago, Mora brought Pulitzer-winning journalist Sonia Nazario to present her book, *Enrique's Journey*, to the club. "It had a lot of meaning for the author to be here because part of the book took place in Nuevo Laredo, our sister city," Mora says.

Laredo's B. Dalton store, though profitable, is a victim of larger economic trends like online shopping. The money-losing B. Dalton chain, a division of Barnes & Noble Inc., is closing nationwide. Since 2000, Barnes & Noble has been closing B. Dalton franchises as their leases expired.

What are literary Laredoans to do? Mora says that she and other communications professionals have formed a group called "Laredo Reads." They are putting together a publicity campaign to attract a bookstore. "We'll find a way," she says.

—Melissa del Bosque

Meltdown?

SAN ANTONIO'S NUCLEAR PLANS IN JEOPARDY

The nuclear industry may be experiencing its own Alamo in San Antonio.

The city's involvement in what could be the first new nuclear power plant in the U.S. in almost three decades is in question after months of scandal concerning cost overruns and allegations of secrecy at City Public Services, the city-owned utility. Anti-nuclear activists are urging San Antonio to walk away from the plan to build two 1,350-megawatt reactors at the South Texas Project, a nuclear power plant near Bay City co-owned by NRG Energy Inc., City Public Services, and Austin Energy.

"Everyone is watching," said former Bush EPA head Christine Todd Whitman when she passed through the Alamo City in July, according to the *San Antonio Business Journal*. "What happens here will set the pace for nuclear energy elsewhere. It will be very important."

In 2006, NRG, the company heading up the project, put the cost at $5.2 billion and offered equity stakes to San Antonio and Austin. The San Antonio utility, with backing from the political and business establishment, took a 40 percent share. Nuclear power, they reasoned, would be the cheapest and easiest way to fuel the growing city. Austin bowed out. Green-energy boosters pointed to delays and cost increases involved in the original South Texas Project in the 1970s and '80s.

Those concerns turned out to be prophetic: The price tag for the proposed plant has more than tripled, to $17 billion.

The real meltdown in San Antonio came in November, two days before a key City Council vote to commit $400 million to the project, then predicted to cost $13 billion. Word leaked that CPS management knew the Toshiba Corp. subsidiary constructing the reactors wanted $4 billion more for the plant, a fact that hadn't been mentioned to the City Council. CPS executives rushed off to Japan to negotiate the price. Mayor Julián Castro called on the two longest-running CPS board members to resign and suggested the deal would be scrapped if costs didn't come down. (Five city

council members are pushing for a no-confidence vote on the two board members.)

Opponents view San Antonio's experience as a broader indictment of the so-called "nuclear renaissance."

"The nuclear industry was born in secrecy and grew up in deceit, and nothing much has changed," said Eric Lane, San Antonio businessman and chairman of the Consumer's Energy Coaltion. "We just had another example of that here."

In Lane's view, one shared by some utility experts, NRG needs San Antonio more than the city needs NRG.

"They have us to fall back on when the cost overruns occur. That's what makes San Antonio so attractive. NRG can declare bankruptcy and go home tomorrow. CPS can't; it's a public entity. We could be responsible for 100 percent" of the costs.

—Forrest Wilder

Revisionist History Dept

McCARTHY 101

It takes serious revisionist thinking to believe that history has "vindicated" Joseph McCarthy, but that's what some members of the State Board of Education contend. If they get their way, that's how Texas schools will portray the late red-baiting U.S. Senator in social studies classes.

The 15-member board is rewriting the social studies curriculum. It's a year-long process, and nothing will be final until next spring. So far, the seven Christian conservatives on the board have made clear they want to slip right-wing ideology into the standards, including re-imagining McCarthy.

The process began last spring, not long after the board finished its notorious fight over whether to teach kids the "weaknesses" of evolution. The board brought in experts to review the social studies curriculum and write draft versions of new standards, which will guide textbooks and lesson plans for Texas public schools. Board members can nominate any expert they like, and the ones appointed by the Christian conservative faction recommended removing references to African-American and Latino figures like Cesar Chavez and Thurgood Marshall from some social-studies standards. One expert observed during a board meeting last spring that the curriculum contained an "overrepresentation of minorities." According to the Christian conservative experts, Christianity was underrepresented. They recommended that the curriculum emphasize that the United States was founded as a Christian nation.

In the end, the right-wing experts were outvoted by social studies teachers and mainstream academics on the curriculum-review teams. The teams finished the latest draft in October, and groups like the Texas Freedom Network were pleased with the results. Chavez and Marshall remained.

But the fight is just beginning. At its meeting in mid-November, the board voted to forbid their appointed experts from having any more input. That leaves the fate of social studies curriculum in the hands of the board. Its members have two chances to vote on curriculum changes, first at a board meeting Jan. 13 to Jan. 15, and again in mid-March.

Don McLeroy, the conservative board member from Bryan who last spring was deposed as chair, has provided a hint of what lies ahead. In late October, McLeroy sent his colleagues a note in which he wrote, "Read the latest on McCarthy—he was basically vindicated." Other conservative members have agreed that recent research exonerates McCarthy, whose alarmist rhetoric in the 1950s led to a witch hunt for supposed Communists and Soviet spies.

The revisionists are referring to documents from Russian archives and American intelligence files showing there were, in fact, Soviet spies in America during the Cold War. Some conservatives have used these revelations to claim that McCarthy was right all along. Several prominent historians have tried to dispel that thinking, including Harvey Klehr, the Emory University historian who helped unearth older Soviet documents. He has said the presence of Soviet spies doesn't validate the wild claims made by McCarthy, whom he has called a demagogue.

But testimonials from historians might not dissuade conservatives on the board. "The arguments don't matter," said Dan Quinn with the Texas Freedom Network. "The unfortunate thing is that the state board has become a body in which politics trumps education. If they have the votes, they do what they want, and it makes no difference what any expert or educator has to say about it."

—Dave Mann

Concealed Care

THE PLIGHT OF GALVESTON'S UNINSURED

If you're uninsured in Galveston County, finding charity health care services is like searching for the Holy Grail: You want to believe it exists, but you can't find it.

A report by the nonprofit Cancer Coalition of Galveston County, "Clearing the Fog," documents the hurdles the uninsured face finding health care. While area providers report millions in charity care, they sometimes claim not to have such programs when needy people ask. They also don't have clearly written guidelines for charitable or reduced-cost health care.

During 2007 and 2008, coalition members repeatedly visited and phoned area providers, including the University of Texas Medical Branch, Mainland Medical Center, and Galveston County's 4C's clinics. The health providers told surveyors that charity programs didn't exist, though UTMB alone claims to spend $120 million a year on charity care. Surveyors reported that UTMB employees said it was impossible to obtain written material about free care or financial assistance.

This is not the first time that declining services for the uninsured have been documented in Galveston County (see "Storm Over UTMB," March 20). Since the release of the report in November, hospital executives have questioned the veracity of the coalition's findings.

Ben G. Raimer, UTMB's senior vice president for health policy and legislative affairs, told the *Houston Chronicle* that he was "fairly certain that signs were posted" in UTMB clinics before Hurricane Ike struck last year. He added that policies have been

online since 1993, along with "exhaustive information about our indigent care and charity care."

Soon after Raimer's disclaimer, UTMB posted signs in Spanish and English in its hospital and clinics about discounted or free services. The medical branch also announced that it would audit its policies on charitable care.

—Melissa del Bosque

Disaster Squared

HURRICANE RECOVERY BECOMES A MORASS

First Gulf Coast residents survived two hurricanes. Now they must endure the convoluted bureaucracy that's dispensing the recovery money.

Take Chambers and Galveston counties. They neighbor each other on the Gulf Coast and were both slammed last year by Hurricane Ike. That's where the similarities end. Chambers County is rural, marshy, and sparsely populated. Galveston is denser, more urban, and houses a population 10 times greater than its neighbor to the northeast. The hurricane's damage to people and property in Galveston was much greater than in Chambers. Almost half of the 26,000 homes severely damaged by Ike and Hurricane Dolly are in Galveston County.

Yet Galveston County may not receive its fair share of hurricane recovery money. That's because of the upside-down funding formula devised by the Texas Department of Rural Affairs, the agency Gov. Rick Perry assigned to oversee the recovery.

In doling out $3 billion of congressionally approved disaster aid, the agency is relying on a model, designed by a private contractor, that's based not on actual damage to homes, businesses, and public infrastructure, but instead on weather data from the storm—wind, rain and storm surge—to calculate how much money each county receives. "You're essentially weighing damage to an empty field in the same way as damage to a block and a neighborhood," says Madison Sloan, an attorney with Texas Appleseed, an advocacy group for low-income Texans. No other state does it this way.

In the initial calculations, Chambers County was slated to receive $113 million more than Galveston. That was so ludicrous that state officials were forced to recalibrate. The numbers are still in flux, but critics fear that the Houston-Galveston region may get shorted by $300 million.

Because of the weather model, critics contend, rural areas and inland East Texas communities that suffered relatively little damage could receive a disproportionate share of recovery funds at the expense of hard-hit urban and suburban areas. With fewer homes and businesses to rebuild, what would rural counties spend recovery money on? The lion's share will probably go to infrastructure and economic development projects, some of which may have only a tenuous link to natural disasters, housing advocates say. Joe Higgs of Gulf Coast Interfaith calls it a "spread the wealth" approach.

"Nothing wrong with that if it's a stimulus program or it's a general 'renewal Texas' program, but the money wasn't given" for that purpose, Higgs says. "It was given to help people recover from the devastating events of hurricanes Dolly and Ike."

The complaints are finally being heard. In November, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development rejected Texas' spending plan for the second round of disaster funds—about $1.7 billion (the first round, $1.3 billion, was mostly distributed earlier this year). HUD told the state to provide more detail on how funds would be allocated to local governments and give the public a chance to weigh in.

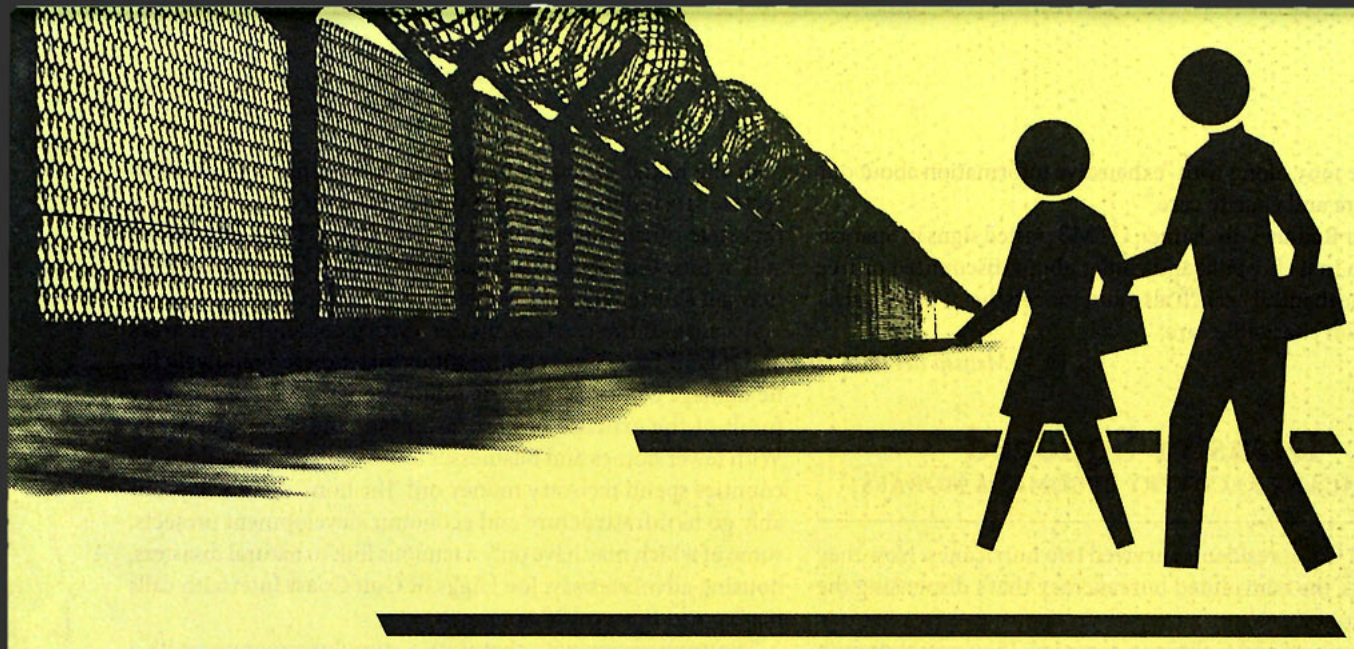
As flawed as Texas' hurricane recovery may be, it does have a political upside for Perry, critics say. The Texas Department of Rural Affairs has devised a system that's generous to rural East Texas, an important part of Perry's political base. It's putting spending money into the hands of local politicians, something that may come in handy in an election year. By passing spending decisions to a state agency and local officials, the program "insulates the governor from making any politically sensitive decision," says John Henneberger, co-director of the Low Income Housing Information Service. "He can simply point to the locals and say we gave them the money, blame them. ... This is all about dodging responsibility."

—Forrest Wilder

YOU DON'T SAY:

"We serve people without discrimination. That's right in the mission statement of the Salvation Army."

—Salvation Army spokesman Patrick Patey, quoted in *The Dallas Morning News* defending the group's plan to check immigration status of families who sign their kids up to receive Christmas gifts.

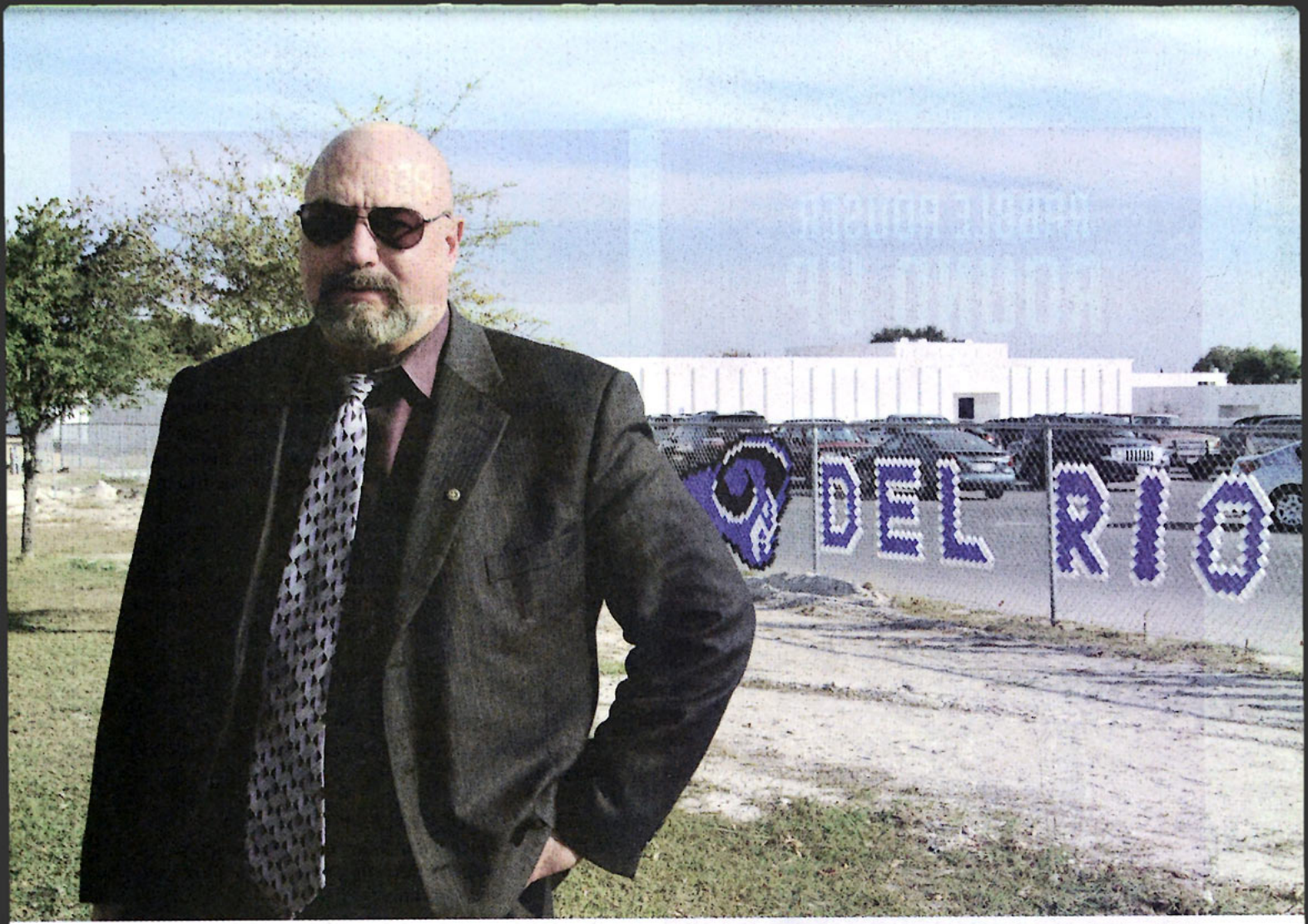


CHILD X-ING

Del Rio's controversial crackdown on border-crossing students

by Melissa del Bosque

At first it looked like business as usual in the early morning hours of Wednesday, Sept. 9. The line of cars on the Del Rio International Toll Bridge stretched back toward Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, as people waited to cross northward. Headlights glimmered in the dawn as U.S. immigration officers waved folks through – all except for vehicles with children, which were directed to exit to the right of the bridge.



"Do I look mean?" Del Rio Superintendent Kelt Cooper has stirred up old racial tensions. *photo by Laura Burke*

There, Del Rio school district employees handed out fliers citing Texas educational and penal codes. "Upon conducting a check at the Port of Entry your child was observed crossing into the United State from Mexico to attend school. … Your child will be withdrawn from the school immediately," the notices read in part. "Please come to the Office of Pupil Services … to provide proof of residence in the United States."

About 200 notices were issued that morning. The orders had come from Del Rio's new school superintendent, Kelt Cooper, who has made it a priority to root out Mexican residents attending school in his district. Port Director Mike Perez, who has worked at the bridge since 1979, says that previous school administrators occasionally came to the bridge with clipboards jotting down students' names. But "it hadn't been done for a few years," he says. "The flier is new. I've never seen that done before."

The *Del Rio News-Herald* headlined its story "District Cracks Down on 'Illegal' Students." Cooper told the paper that a census taken two day earlier had provoked the crackdown. U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents—at Cooper's request—had counted the number of school-age children crossing on Monday, Sept. 7. On Monday mornings, families typically return to Del Rio after spending the weekend with relatives in Ciudad Acuña. Perez says that agents counted about 500 children.

Cooper said the situation was "out of control." "When we have vans with Coahuila license plates dropping kids off at elementary schools and a report that says hundreds of kids are coming across," Cooper told a *News-Herald* reporter, "we have a problem. With these kinds of numbers, it was out of control. … (I)t was right in our face." What wasn't explained in the story was that all 500 children that crossed that Monday were either U.S. citizens, Legal Permanent Residents or had valid student visas to attend private schools in Del Rio.

CNN and Fox News picked up on the local story and ran with it. In short order, Cooper became a national hero to anti-immigration activists. But local civil rights organizations began looking into potential rights violations. "There was no due process," says Courtney Schusheim, an attorney with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid in Del Rio. "If you came across the bridge, you were automatically withdrawn from school."

The law is clear when it comes to a student's immigration status. In its 1982 decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school officials cannot ask about a student's citizenship status. But according to Texas state law—which Cooper says he was following—children must reside in the district where they attend public schools.

All but 20 of the approximately 200 students issued warnings on Sept. 9 eventually returned to Del Rio schools. Texas

RABBLE ROUSER ROUND UP & FAT CAT SCHMOOZEFEST



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This year: a Valentine's Day bash!
February 14th, 2010, in Austin

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OBSERVER

RioGrande Legal Aid assisted at least 15 families who didn't meet the new residency requirements imposed by Cooper. Some missed school for up to four weeks. But the crackdown, and Cooper's blunt comments to the press about his actions, dredged up lingering racial division in Del Rio, where Mexican Americans have fought for equal education rights for more than century.

Mexican Americans in Del Rio say that whatever the legalities, Cooper's actions had a chilling effect that could hinder their efforts to enroll more children in school. "It's not in our interest to keep children who are U.S. citizens from getting a proper education," says Alpha Hernandez, another attorney with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. "Every year some children don't get registered. I've seen children 7- or 8- years-old that have never attended school. We are already suffering from high unemployment and low educational achievement."

Cooper sees the issue as clear-cut. It was never a question of immigration status, he says, but of residency. "If 200 children crossing at 6:30 on a Wednesday morning is not cause enough to be suspicious, then I don't know what is," he says. "No, I guess they all have sick aunts because that's what a lot of them said.

"We have a duty to be reasonable about this, but to what degree we want to be reasonable can be argued."

While Cooper's response appears to be unprecedented in Texas, the broader issue is nothing new. For decades, superintendents along the U.S.-Mexico border have struggled to ensure that Mexican students don't attend schools on the taxpayers' dime. With families spanning both sides of the border, determining who has the right to attend U.S. schools can be complex.

David Hinojosa, a lawyer with the Mexican American Legal & Educational Defense Fund, says he cannot recall similar checkpoints in the state. "I think it's outrageous," he says. "If he's so concerned about residency, why doesn't he go to the eastern or western boundaries of his county to see if any students are crossing into his school district?"

Kelt Cooper's crackdown stirred up a passel of bad memories for Mexican Americans in Del Rio. Since the turn of the last century, they have fought—sometimes with fists, but more often through the legal system—to educate their children.

The nation's first important school desegregation case for Mexican Americans was decided there in 1928. The Anglo ranchers who ran the city had barred Mexican-American students from attending a then-newly constructed school in Del Rio. "The parents got together and said, 'This is not right. We pay taxes. We helped build the school, so our children should be able to attend,'" says Eloy Padilla, an assistant city attorney. A district court agreed. The Court of Civil Appeals of Texas, in *Independent School District v. Salvatierra,* overturned the ruling.

The case galvanized Del Rio's Mexican-American community, which set its sights on improving its own schools. "I don't think the superintendent is aware of how sensitive this town is," Padilla says. "There are still some very raw nerves among a lot of us. Any semblance of prejudice or discrimination, we are going to rise up and fight back. This town has been known to do that for more than 60 years. We've never been known to sit back quietly."

On the surface, Del Rio looks placid. With a current population of roughly 48,000, it sits three miles north of the Rio Grande and retains a small-town quaintness despite the busy Laughlin Air Force Base on its outskirts. Farmers steer tractors down the main thoroughfare. People still greet one another by first names.

But 40 years ago, Del Rio was sharply divided along racial lines. The San Felipe barrio, south of the railroad tracks and closer to Mexico, was populated almost exclusively by Mexican Americans. Anglos lived north of the tracks.

A slow and sometimes painful integration over the decades has blurred the old prejudices. Alpha Guzman, a 55-year-old Del Rio native, says that when she asks her 17-year-old grandson about the ethnicity of his friends, he shrugs and says, "I don't know." She also recalls the time he asked about their ancestry. "I told him, 'We are Mexican.' He said, 'Oh granny, that sounds ugly.'"

Guzman tells me this as she sits outside the Casa de la Cultura in San Felipe on a balmy November evening. The center is at the historical heart of the old Mexican-American neighborhood. About 50 yards away runs the picturesque San Felipe Creek, once another barrier between Hispanics and Anglos. Elderly residents of San Felipe still tell tales of their youth, when a *vato* from the barrio couldn't cross the creek bridge without suffering taunts and dodging rocks thrown by the *gringos* on the north side.

For Guzman and her peers, Cooper's actions looked like another volley in a battle they've been fighting their whole lives. Guzman graduated high school in 1972, another infamous year in local history. During her senior year, the San Felipe and Del Rio school districts were consolidated, ending official segregation. Things grew so heated that year, she recalls, that police had to be stationed in the hallways to break up fistfights. Separate proms had to be organized.

"The kids from San Felipe wanted to hear Mexican music," Guzman says. "The Anglos wanted heavy metal music. We couldn't agree, so we each got our own prom."

Fifteen years later, she recalls, the class of '72 still couldn't come together. For their 15th reunion, "we met at a bar in Mexico," says Guzman. "And some of the Anglo students came in with a boom box and put in a heavy metal tape. One of our guys went out to his car and came back with his own cassette of Mexican music and put it in their boom box."

The owner ripped out the cassette. Anglo alumni stood up, Guzman recalls, and one said, "'This reunion is over' and then they walked out of the bar." There were no more reunions after that. "I heard that they meet in Las Vegas now," Guzman says, "and hold their own reunion there."

Inside the cultural center, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid has called a meeting to try to clear up the confusion about the school district's residency requirements. At least 65 people, mostly parents and grandparents, cram into a small

meeting room on folding metal chairs. In an adjacent kitchen, women prepare refried beans for *chalupas* and stir fruit punch that will be served after the meeting. Children strum *Cielito Lindo* in a guitar class next door.

Two months after the now-infamous flier incident, some parents are still unsure what residency documents their children need. Others still wonder why they were asked to provide additional documentation when other families were not.

Maria Consuela Campa raises her hand with a question for Pedro Cruz, the legal aid lawyer giving a PowerPoint presentation. Her sister lives in Del Rio, she says, and has power of attorney over her son—a document formerly accepted by the district as proof that a U.S. relative has legal responsibility for the child. Now, she says, the district is demanding that her sister take legal guardianship to keep her son in school.

"We had to go to a lawyer, and it cost $800 to give temporary guardianship to my sister," she says. "I don't understand why some students can have a power of attorney but I need legal guardianship."

Until this year, power of attorney was all the district required. It's a legal document that can be drawn up by a notary. After the bridge incident, parents were told they had to provide more costly custody orders, which require them to go to court and give up guardianship of their children.

After the meeting, Campa explains that she lives in Ciudad Acuña, but her sister lives in Del Rio. Her 14-year-old son is a U.S. citizen. He attended private school in Del Rio, but last year he begged to go to a public high school. "We went through all of this because he wants to be with his friends and he loves American football," she says. "The guardianship will expire in a year-and-a-half. I am wondering if we'll have to hire another lawyer and pay $800 all over again."

Outside the center, Padilla, the assistant city attorney, hands me a manila folder filled with education case law—seven court rulings on Mexican Americans' challenges to educational barriers in Del Rio dating back to 1928. In the 1990s, when he served as the education lawyer for Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Padilla represented many families with residency issues. He sees the school district's actions this fall as the latest attempt to prevent Mexican-American kids from obtaining an education. If the district wanted to tackle a perceived problem with non-resident students, he says, the proper route would be to contact families of students whose residency looked sketchy—not to conduct a roundup that was bound to reopen community wounds.

"It really needs to be handled on a case-by-case basis," he says. "You don't just make blanket statements and blast it out there in the newspaper and scare the whole community."

Folks in Del Rio were surprised to hear that Cooper had agreed to speak with me on the day after the community meeting. "He turned down an interview with Univision, you know," says Mike Perez, the port director.

When I arrive, Cooper is sitting at his computer dashing off an e-mail. At 6 feet, 4 inches and 280 pounds, with a shaved head and goatee, he can be intimidating, even behind a desk. "Do I look mean?" he asks. "I guess that's the advantage of being a former rugby player."

Cooper, 49, scoffs at the notion that he's an outsider who doesn't understand the border culture. He grew up in El Paso and Las Cruces, he points out, and for two years served as the school superintendent in Tornillo, 38 miles east of El Paso. Cooper then spent five years in Arizona, from 2000 to 2005, as superintendent of the Nogales Unified School District. After that, he worked briefly for the Arizona Department of Education before moving back to Las Cruces to care for his ailing mother and teach at the local university.

In November 2008, he was hired as superintendent in Del Rio.

Cooper has made waves—not only with the residency crackdown, but also when he refused to air President Barack Obama's September address to American schoolchildren. He's won praise for fixing the district's troubled bilingual education program, which the state had threatened to take over. For decades each school in Del Rio had taught bilingual education its own way, and sometimes not at all. The district's 2,000 primarily Spanish-speaking students had received English instruction, on average, about 10 percent of the time.

"I capitalized on the momentum and progress already made by the previous superintendent," Cooper says. "Now we're giving students three hours of English a day so that they have sufficient time to learn a new language."

Cooper extols the virtues of Texas' public schools. "I have a very strong belief that Texas has the best school system in the country," he says, leaning back in his chair. "The Texas Education Agency has employed some of the sharpest people in the state."

Cooper appears to have exported at least one educational principle from Arizona: an overarching concern about Mexican nonresidents attending public schools. His former boss, Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne, has been on a crusade for years to keep nonresidents out of his system. Under his tenure, school employees have been sent to international bridges to videotape children. They've checked children's residency before allowing them to board school buses.

Cooper supported Horne's approach. In 2004, when as superintendent in Nogales, he told the *Arizona Republic* that he had turned away 50 students that year because he said they lived in Mexico. "I think anyone who facilitates picking up kids [from Mexico] knowingly should be prosecuted for defrauding taxpayers," he said. "At the local level, everyone in one way or another subsidizes this illegal activity."

In Del Rio, Cooper says, it costs $4,300 in state and local taxpayer money to educate each student. Using his figures, the 20 children who never returned to school after the fliers were handed out in September saved the district $86,000. Was it worth the trouble?

"Some [superintendents] turn a blind eye because they don't want to be attacked by civil liberty groups," he says. "Some turn a blind eye because they don't have the resources to police it. We have an obligation by definition of the law to establish whether or not some people are eligible to

attend schools free of charge. If we don't do a reasonable job, then we just foist the additional tax burden on local and state taxpayers."

If there's a concern about residency, I ask, why not send a letter home with students rather than set up a checkpoint?

"I could do a lot of different things," Cooper says. "I could also wait until a student breaks an arm or gets H1N1 and we need to isolate him and no one can find his parents."

We walk outside. Del Rio High School sits across the street from the superintendent's office. As we talk, a middle-aged Latina stops her pickup truck in the middle of the street and strides over.

"I just want to thank you for everything you're doing," she tells Cooper, pumping his hand enthusiastically. "What you did at the bridge was the right thing. Americans can't be expected to pay for everything."

Her name is Enriqueta Eaton, she says. Originally from Mexico City, she has lived in Del Rio for 38 years. Back in the '70s, she says, her husband paid $35 a month so her four brothers and sisters from Mexico could attend school in Del Rio.

Eaton marches back to her truck. A line of motorists wait patiently behind her truck as she hoists herself back into the driver's seat. The school district no longer accepts tuition from students outside the district, Cooper says. He's thought about reviving the practice, but says he hasn't received an answer from Austin.

Cooper jokes about the encounter with Eaton. "I thought, 'Oh no, now I'm going to get cussed out in front of reporters,'" he says.

Except for civil liberties groups and a few local attorneys, he says, most people in Del Rio have reacted as Eaton did. He's received dozens of letters from people around the country congratulating him on preventing "illegal immigrants" from taking advantage of U.S. taxpayers. "Some of them want me to run for president," he says, shaking his head. But "this isn't about illegal immigrants. I'm not the U.S. Border Patrol. I guess it's the climate of politics nationally right now."

Cooper blames the local paper for blowing things out of proportion. "This became a big deal because the local newspaper said we were turning away illegals. That's what created the fervor," he says. "I would be surprised if people didn't get their cackles up. It's clearly something that civil liberty groups would have a concern with, because *Plyler v. Doe* was already heard in the U.S. Supreme Court, and that's not something we can thumb our nose at."

Earlier in our interview, I'd asked Cooper what became of the 20 students who never returned after the checkpoint on the international bridge. He shrugged. "I don't know where they went," he said.

Others can't help wondering. Attorney Schusheim says that shortly after the warnings were issued, a 17-year-old student came into Texas RioGrande Legal Aid with his parents. "The parents said they were headed to Minnesota to work and they planned to leave their son with a relative to attend school," she says. "They were being told they needed a court-ordered guardianship."

HIDING WORKER INJURIES FROM OSHA

It's painful enough to be injured on the job, but it adds insult to injury when your employer tries to keep it secret from safety authorities.

The failure of corporations to report work-related injuries is not a rare occurrence, says the Government Accountability Office—it is routine. In a review of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's policies, GAO investigators found that some two-thirds of job injuries are hidden from the agency, though the law requires full reporting on injuries that require more than first aid.

Why flout the law? Because corporate executives know a record of frequent injuries will increase the company's worker compensation costs and will hurt its chances of winning government contracts.

Why do they get away with it? Several reasons. Get this—OSHA relies solely on employers to report worker injuries. Inspectors do not interview employees to determine if their bosses are being honest about job hazards and injury rates.

Second, managers pressure clinics, doctors, and others to limit treatment to first aid, thus requiring no report. This cold ploy includes taking the injured person to several medical providers to find one that will certify first aid is enough. More than half of medical providers surveyed by GAO said they'd been pressured by corporate officials to play down injuries. Finally, workers themselves are intimidated, fearing they'll be punished or fired for getting a reportable injury.

As long as safety officials take a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil approach, corporate bosses have no incentive besides their own sense of decency to make America's workplaces safe—and, as the GAO report makes clear, putting our trust in executive decency doesn't seem to be working out.

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

After the process was explained to them, the family told Schusheim they would come back for assistance. "They were very afraid they'd lose their work opportunity," she says, if they were delayed by legal proceedings.

waited a few days, but the family never returned. She called a relative of the family. "They've moved on," he said.

Axochitzin Abrego, a 15-year-old student at Del Rio High, says she knows another student who never came back. "First her brother disappeared, and no one spoke about it," she says. "I asked her where her brother was, but she wouldn't tell me. The next week, she was gone, too.

"It gives you a weird feeling," Abrego says, "because they're just gone, and no one talks about it." ■

Rogue Vogue

BY ROBERT LELEUX

Fellow Texans, only now do I feel safe in confiding that since last year's elections, I have lived in a state of unrelenting torment, unable to rest, anxious for the fate of Sarah Palin. I've arisen from fitful sleeps, fretting: *What if Sarah proves a flash in the pan, a passing right-wing fancy, a momentary media darling like Joe the Plumber or poor pocky Steve Forbes?* If she does, I worried, what might happen to Texas? For I hold that Palin's fading star would prove a disaster of Enron proportions for our great state.

I'm not the first person to point out to *Observer* readers that for the past 15-odd years, Texas Republicans have developed a national reputation for idiocy that has made interstate travel a trifle uncomfortable. For Texas liberals, the discomfort has been more than unfair. It has, in fact, been salt to the wound. After all, as I've insisted to insufferable Yankees from Westport to West Hollywood, *we* had to put up with W. longer than anybody. Sure, *they* knew the disappointments of Gore's and Kerry's losses, but where were they on that benighted election night in 1994, when W. unseated Gov. Ann Richards? Probably somewhere useless like Montauk, smugly writing checks to the Green Party and floating the genius idea of a Ralph Nader presidential run.



photo by mistydawnphoto

I'd trade a passel of John Kerrys or Naders-as-politicians for one Ann Richards, and so would anybody with a lick of sense. For years she and Molly Ivins were the only terrific comebacks I had for know-it-all Yankees talking trash about Texas. But now I've got something even better. I've got Sarah. (And while we're on the subject, wouldn't you give years off your life to hear what Ann or Molly might say about Palin? I know I would. God, I hate cancer.)

Remember the way Molly used to say that the Texas state seal ought to read, "Thank God for Mississippi?" No matter how bleak things might appear in the Lone Star State, there's always good money to be made by betting they're that much worse in Mississippi. I think Gov. Rick Perry's campaign slogan ought to be, "Thank God for Sarah Palin." No matter what kind of bat-shit drivel Perry might sputter out, Steadfast Sarah's already on record with something even stupider: *What's that you say? Perry threw a tea party and threatened to secede? Wake me up when he says he can see Russia from his window. ... Perry told the ladies of Midland that President Obama's hell-bent on turning America into a socialist country? Call me back when he implies that the redesign of the nickel is part of a secret Democratic plot to secularize the nation.*

See what I mean? There's really no comparison. Palin has managed to set the bar of eloquence so staggeringly low, she's achieved the impossible—she's made Perry and W. look urbane and debonair. Honestly y'all, compared with Palin, Perry is David Niven. No wonder Perry wants her to campaign for him. If I were he, I'd stick to her like white on rice.

For the past year or so, I've begun to perceive a trend among big-state Republicans. It's almost as though there's some kind of inverse relationship between a state's landmass and its elected Republicans' IQs. In a national lineup of conservative dunderheads, the dimness of Texas' right wing is trumped only by Alaska's. Finally, we've scored a little wiggle room.

That's why I got so antsy last fall when Obama trounced McCain. Of course, Obama's election was best for the nation, but would it be bad for Texas? I feared it was the last I'd see of Sarah and that sweet family of hers—a clan that makes the Reagans look codependent. As we all now know, I needn't have worried. Sarah resigned as governor to join the lecture circuit. *Going Rogue*'s a mondo best-seller, and Levi Johnston's dropping trou for *Playgirl*. All in time for Thanksgiving—a day I would have spent thinking of Sarah anyway for the sake of her sublime press conference last year in front of a turkey-slaughter machine. Type "sarah + turkey" into YouTube if you're feeling a little blue. It was her first press conference since the election. She'd just pardoned a turkey. Then there she was, laughing and jawing and winking and grinning while a deranged-looking, blood-soaked man behind her stuffed live poultry into a little plastic guillotine. Usually you have to travel deep into East Texas to find a Republican willing to do something that fabulous on television.

This Thanksgiving, even without such showstopping moments, it was impossible not to think of Sarah. She was everywhere—*Oprah*, newsstands, bookstores, you name it. I know *I* was thankful. If she could only win the presidency, we Texans could hold our heads high throughout the Northeast. Even Europe! Maybe we could persuade her to declare war on some Middle Eastern nation, and we could even go to France again. ■

East Texas native Robert Leleux, author of The Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy, *lives and writes in New York City, where he is working on an oral history of Sissy Farenthold.*

WINTER BOOKS
In Praise of Humble Gifts

By Michael May

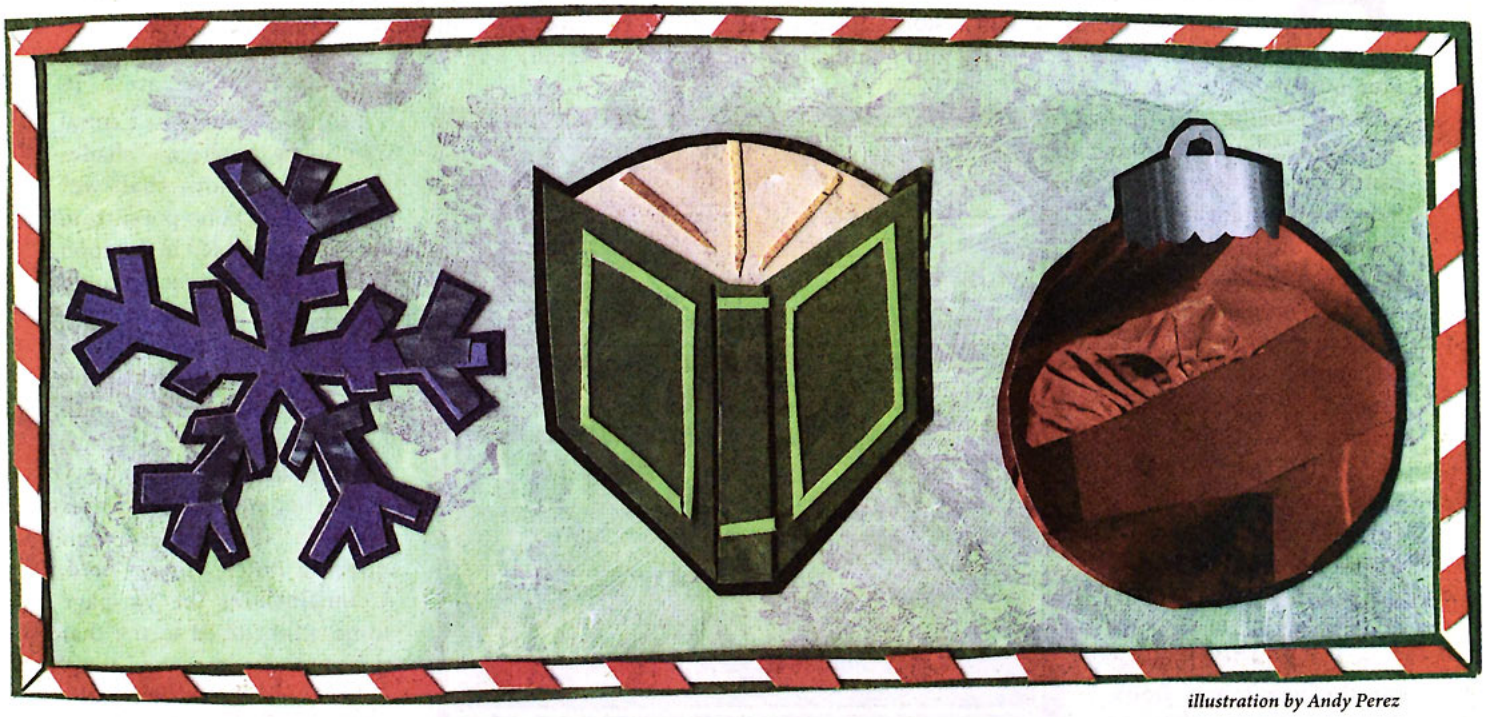


illustration by Andy Perez

Christmas will be forever preserved in my memory as a pure celebration of consumerism—an unadulterated binge of gifts, gifts and stockings full of even more gifts. Until it was taken away, Christmas was probably my favorite day of the year.

I'm Jewish, but my grandparents in Los Angeles celebrated Christmas. They did it in a strictly secular way—a nice Jewish Christmas. The holiday was all about Santa at the mall and wide-eyed visits to the toy store. I remember a pile of presents sitting on the living room floor, their shapes and sizes presenting such a tantalizing mystery that I would lie awake on Christmas Eve puzzling over the bounty hidden within. Morning would eventually arrive and quickly unravel in a blur of ribbons and gilded paper and complicated toys, like Nerf rockets, Star Wars light sabers and model trains. I took the glut for granted, until I was 5 and my parents decided to raise me more Jewish. That was the end of Christmas, and the beginning of Chanukah gifts like warm socks ... and books.

I never would have expected it then, but it's the memories of those books that remain years later. They're not as bright and exhilarating as a brand-new water rocket streaming into the blue. But they're deeper. The feeling of unwrapping a Hardy Boys mystery, cracking it open and noticing the first crease form along it's blue spine. Meeting "Boo" Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Surviving the long road with Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings.* And sharing the secret that childhood can be painful with Ponyboy Curtis in *The Outsiders* and Gene Forrester in *A Separate Peace.*

At first, I mourned the loss of a big blowout Christmas and the bounty of battery-required gizmos that whizzed and beeped. But I grew up and learned to appreciate the delayed gratification of books, these almost mystical objects that stoked my imagination.

And there's a lesson here, now that Americans of all stripes are being forced to downsize their holidays this year. There's no need to trade in the Christmas tree for a menorah and gift wrapped socks, but still, this is a time for humble gifts, and there's none better than the right book. And, in this issue, a few Texas books to consider. Joe Lansdale's latest yarn, *Vanilla Ride,* for your loved ones who enjoy a thriller with a brain. Or *Lit,* Mary Karr's third memoir, another poetic reflection on life's obstacles from the author of *The Liar's Club.* A book may not be the most dazzling gift, and it might take a while to sink in. But when it does, it won't be forgotten. ■

Southern Bound

BY STEPHANIE ELIZONDO GRIEST

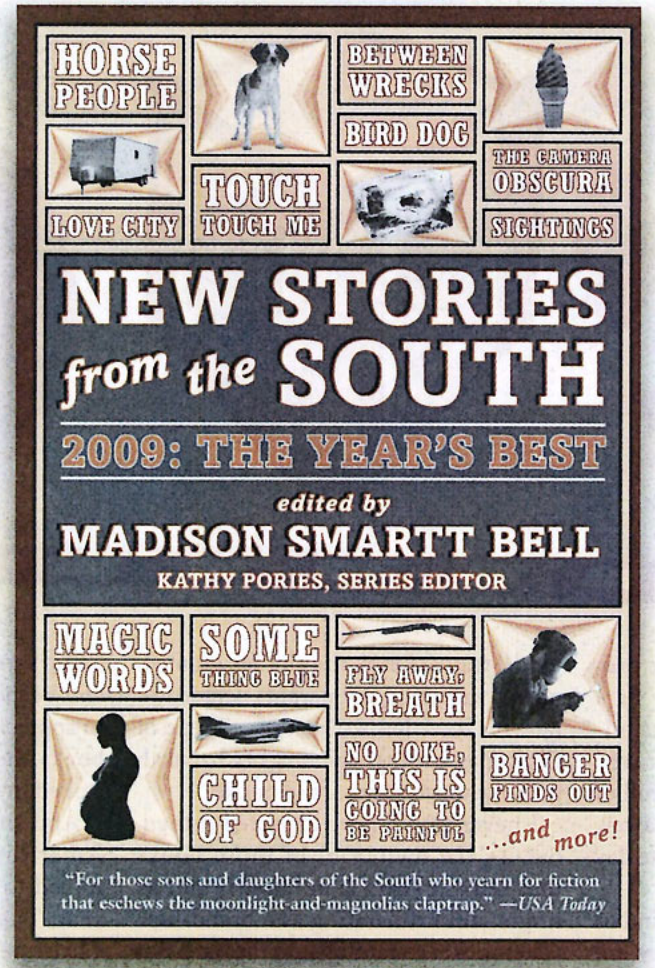
Anthology editing must be one of literature's most thankless jobs. You are challenged by writers, readers and critics on every front: whom you included, whom you omitted, the book's order, its theme, the intro you cobbled together to justify your reasoning. God help you if you make a bold claim in the title, like Best American Political/Travel/Sports / Nature / Spiritual Writing. No one will ever be happy.

So I looked on the latest volume of *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best* with collegial empathy. Its editor, Tennessean novelist Madison Smartt Bell, is worthy of such a post. Among other accolades, he won the 1996 Anisfield-Wolf Award for the year's best book dealing with race, *All Souls' Rising*. He completes his task admirably here, compiling 21 short stories from south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Nearly all are enjoyable. A few are genius.

Yet I have a mighty rant on this book, starting with a passage from Bell's introduction that is spotlighted on the book jacket. Observing how deeply the South has changed this millennium, he writes: "To the traditional black and white recipe (ever a tricky and volatile mixture) have been added new shades and strains, from Asia and Central and South America and just about everywhere else on the shrinking globe."

Sure enough, Rahul Mehta's lovely contribution, "Quarantine," lets us tag along as a gay Indian-American takes his boyfriend home to West Virginia. The story's antagonist is Bapuji, a cantankerous grandfather who lives in the family basement, unaware of his grandson's sexuality. The truth spills when the three take a road trip to a Hare Krishna commune. Tempers flare, a car crash is narrowly avoided and someone dies within arm's reach of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

This is not a tale Flannery O'Connor could have told. It is a "new story" in every way, worthy of inclusion in this anthology.



New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 2009
Edited by Madison Smartt Bell
Algonquin Books
357 pages, $14.95

Let's read about those Central and South American "shades and strains" now, shall we? The South's Latino population more than doubled in the 2000 Census and is projected to do so again by 2010. Tons of material, in other words. I plowed through the volume for stories about the Colombians in South Carolina, say, or the Mexicans in Georgia.

No, not here. Two stories mention "illegal aliens," but none so much as says *hola*. Upon finishing the 350-page tome, it occurred to me that none of the writers was Latino, either. I searched through the tables of contents of the series' previous 23 volumes, and guess what? No Latino writer has *ever* been published in *New Stories from the South*. Not Sandra Cisneros, not Dagoberto Gilb, not Oscar Casares, not Denise Chavez. *Nadie.*

I can't get over this omission. But I'll admit that this collection *does* contain some good storytelling. Let's start with the language. Where else but the South can you find characters with names like Guilfoyle, Plummy and Earl Fitts? Or people derided as "coonasses" and "Boomer rats"? Where else is somebody's mama described as "a low-down, walk-all-over-me-and-I'll-show-you-how-good-I-can-make-the-soles-of-your-feet-feel kind of woman"?

New Stories from the South opens with

a chorus of youthful voices, the strongest of which is an 18-year-old named Destiny, who appears in Katherine Karlin's "Muscle Memory." "If Destiny had three wishes to make, the third would be that she could learn to weld," the story begins. Her father was an accomplished welder who provided for his family until he drowned a couple of years ago. Destiny doesn't need to say how, because we instinctively know: Hurricane Katrina. Later we learn that when his body was found beneath a bridge by St. Claude Avenue, his skin was "filleted and peeling in thick wrinkled layers like a soggy roll of toilet paper."

Destiny and her mother are battling to survive in post-apocalyptic New Orleans—a city where houses are still collapsing years after the flood. Her mother copes by hording canned goods, including stewed tomatoes in the toilet tank. "When I wake up at night it gives me comfort, looking at these cans," she explains, caressing a tin of pears.

Destiny, meanwhile, tries to learn welding from an old-school musician in a shipyard. As payment, he makes her study musical legends like Screamin' Jay Hawkins and Fats Domino. "You young people shouldn't forget. You're the only ones who can remember," he says.

The problem? "Listening to that musty music did not make her feel connected. It made her feel alone. Destiny wanted to hear what other people were hearing. Living people."

From there, the anthology dips into middle age, where the problem appears to be miserable marriages. In Charlotte Holmes' "Coast," a painter contemplates ditching his wife of eight years for a Rilke-reading, German-speaking Pole. "Sometimes I wonder if the human tendency is to freeze in place at whatever age we are when we meet," he muses. Perhaps if he'd met his wife later in life, "we might act like the adults that other people see functioning in the world, instead of the college freshmen we seem to become when we're together."

Ghosts make a few cameos. In Stephanie Powell Watts' "Family Museum of the Ancient Postcards," the young narrator is asked if she can see her aunt's long-dead daddy. "Some of the dead you feel like warmth, their presence a consolation, or so I've heard. ... But I knew from the cold rage coming off of Aunt Ginny that her daddy's presence was no comfort to anybody." When she asks her aunt why she can't just tell the ghost to leave, the response is ominous: "Are you used to things being easy?"

Where else is somebody's mama described as "a low-down, walk-all-over-me-and-I'll-show-you-how-good-I-can-make-the-soles-of-your-feet-feel kind of woman"?

Perhaps the anthology's most striking point of view is that of a feral dog leading a pack of hungry mongrels in Pinckney Benedict's "The World, The Flesh, and the Devil." Who knew a dog could be as poetic as this: "It was a life of riot, of constant noise and hunger, of wolfing down any bit of flesh that came his way, no matter how hard, how bitter, how rotten, of running through the dark, constant running, and falling down to sleep only when the others fell down around him, curling himself over and against the closest dogs, his nose to his neighbor's tail for warmth, the neighbor's nose likewise digging into him."

New Stories winds down with thoughtful pieces about reaching life's end. "Well, if this is dying, I've seen living that was worse," quips the grande dame of Wendell Berry's "Fly Away, Breath." The volume could well have concluded here, but instead slays your heart with a triumphant final piece by Juyanne James called "The Elderberries," about a black family that ushers their community out of Katrina's murderous wake: "They moved in a cluster, just as they had lived their lives; but here, on this day when the flood waters were rising, they waded out in obvious bunches, as though they would willingly be taken up by the swirling enemy in these small, tightly-drawn entities, but they would not allow even one of them to be caught alone and taken up and dragged away by the stale and impertinent water."

This kind of prose is what makes *New Stories from the South* so hard for me to critique. The stories are largely beautiful. I just pine for those "shades and strains" who keep getting dissed by this series year after year. Like all those Honduran evacuees I interviewed in Houston two weeks after Katrina. They had fled their home country after it was pulverized by Hurricane Mitch, only to nearly drown in Louisiana seven years later. When we met, they were planning their escape from incoming Hurricane Rita. None possessed more than the shirts on their backs, yet they kept offering their lunches to me.

Where can I go to read about Southern brothers like these? ■

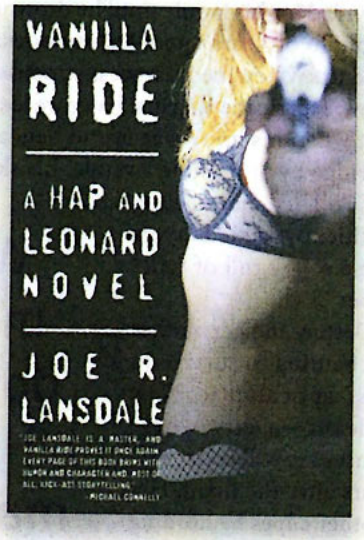
Stephanie Elizondo Griest is the author of three books, most recently Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines. *Visit her website at aroundtheblock.com.*



Piney Wood Pulp

BY STAYTON BONNER

Vanilla Ride
By Joe R. Lansdale
Knopf
256 pages, $24.95



Like most of Nacogdoches-based Joe R. Lansdale's work, *Vanilla Ride* is set in East Texas. More Flannery O'Connor than Elmer Kelton, East Texas is not the landscape most people envision when thinking of the Lone Star State. Its tightly looped Bible Belt contains dense pine forests, humid swamps and dry counties. Add the region's troubled racial history—its cotton fields held slaves during the 19th century—and its poor economic health, and you get a setting rife with potential drama, imagined and real.

Although he's written horror, science fiction and Westerns, Lansdale's most successful series is the Hap and Leonard books, set in the dark heart of the noir detective genre. As Mark Twain employed the detective trope to study 19th century U.S. racial mores in *Puddn'head Wilson*, the Hap and Leonard books explore questions of race, sexuality and religion in modern red-state America. Hap is a white heterosexual good old boy. Leonard is a black homosexual Vietnam vet. The former is introspective and diplomatic. The latter busts heads and sorts details later. The two are best friends, but conflict is in store for the outrageous duo just around the next pine tree.

The plot of *Vanilla Ride*, the series' seventh installment, is thin, loose and largely inconsequential—the real draw is Lansdale's dialogue and social insight. The book begins with the duo rescuing a friend's daughter from drug dealers.

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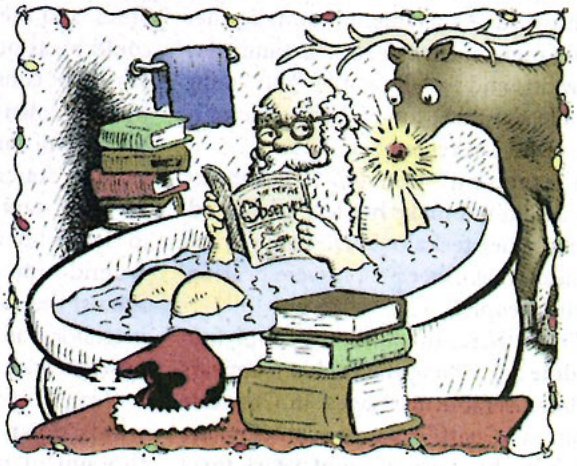
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When the latter turn out to be members of the Dixie Mafia, the organization sends a succession of assassins in retaliation. The deadliest turns out to be a beautiful blonde named Vanilla Ride.

Lansdale captures a region fallen on hard times. Ushered in by the Spindletop well outside of Beaumont in 1901, the East Texas oil field production has decreased in recent decades, leaving fewer high-paying jobs. Chronicling the fictitious town of No Enterprise, likely a thinly veiled reference to Rusk County's Mount Enterprise, Lansdale describes a dying small town whose younger generation has long since departed for better opportunities. As East Texas is the wettest part of the state, he utilizes its rain and storm clouds to establish ominous moods and foreshadow violence:

> *As we arrived in No Enterprise it started to rain heavy and the sky took on a hazy green look like nature had vomited into the heavens. The wind hit the truck hard enough to move it. Looking at the town through wet swaths made by the wipers, it was even more depressing, a weak hope thrown together with brick and glass. Someone thought the railroad would come through there many years ago, and it didn't. What was left now was nothing more than a hope and dream.*

Hap and Leonard eke out a living doing freelance detective work. Told with Hap's wry outlook, *Vanilla Ride*'s first-person narrative gives a running commentary on the story. Lansdale's action sequences are of the sort found in '80s movies billed with single names—Schwarzenegger, Stallone—yet they remain interesting for their humor. In the midst of a chase sequence, Hap pauses to take note of a house's yard decorations. This snippet underscores Hap's progressive leanings, which are continually counterbalanced by Leonard's Republican positions:

> *I turned quick, bumped over a curb, went through a lawn, bashed a couple of yard gnomes and a pink flamingo, which might be considered a public service ... and took out a yard swing, a birdbath, and a Vote-for-Some-Republican sign. I gave myself an extra two points for that.*

Lansdale often references current events in the storyline. After Hap and Leonard kill a couple of carloads of Dixie Mafia members in a chase sequence, they are outfitted in pink jumpsuits and confined to a pink cell reminiscent of Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio's color tactics. Musing on the pink strategy, Hap decides it doesn't work:

> *Some redneck decides to shoot his wife over the fact she burned his squirrel potpie, I could hardly believe he'd be considering before the deed: Well, damn. I better hold up on this killing. I stick a broom handle up Bessie's nose, set her on fire and shoot her eye out, I'll have to wear pink and sit in a pink room, and them's girl colors. What if the fellas see me?*

Between the B-movie set pieces, *Vanilla Ride*'s characters drink coffee and philosophize in Tarantino-esque soliloquies. The dialogue is blunt, funny and decidedly un-PC. Lansdale flips stereotypes on their heads and then spins them sideways. A gay black cowboy and existential good old boy, Leonard and Hap are literary originals. They give unusual depth to a plot that otherwise might invite caricatures, and they allow Lansdale to explore contentious social issues. In one scene, Leonard tells Hap that Leonard's boyfriend has dumped him in an attempt to become straight, placate his family and become a better Christian. Lansdale uses the exchange to muse on an intolerance more insidious than his cartoonish Dixie Mafia assassins:

> *"John's brother hates him because he's gay. He tells him he doesn't have to be gay. He's telling him God doesn't want him gay. ... I've tried to tell him that even if there is a God, the New Testament is the one to go by, and it's not tough on us queers. It's just the old mean version of God that gives us a hard time."*
> *"God must have finally got laid between the Old and the New Testament," I said. "'Cause between those two books, he sure mellowed out."*
> *"Who'd he lay, male or female?"*

When not ruminating on religion, Lansdale wears his fanboy heart on his karate outfit sleeve. In addition to writing, he teaches his own brand of martial arts from a Nacogdoches dojo. It shows in his books. Some fight descriptions are so over the top, they'd make Chuck Norris wince. In sync with the cartoonish violence, comic book talk often arises in *Vanilla Ride*. Hap and Leonard discuss which is cooler, Marvel Comics or DC. Pursued by bad guys on a return trip to East Texas from Arizona, they stop in Cross Plains to visit *Conan the Barbarian* author Robert E. Howard's house.

The book's weakest link is its sophomoric, crude humor. Jokes involving bodily functions and needlessly foul language constitute too much of the protagonists' banter. Perhaps this is symptomatic of Lansdale's larger preoccupation with society's marginalized. His characters are outsiders living in a region that suffers from cultural schizophrenia. Not quite Southern and not quite Texan, East Texas is a difficult land to capture. Like Michael Dougan, whose graphic novel *East Texas: Tales From Behind the Pine Curtain* is a largely unknown gem, Lansdale gets it right. While skewering the area for its ignorance, racism and close-minded religion, he also appreciates its hardworking ethic and lack of pretense. His protagonists might buy their shoes at Payless and live in trailer parks, but they share a friendship strong enough to risk their lives for each other.

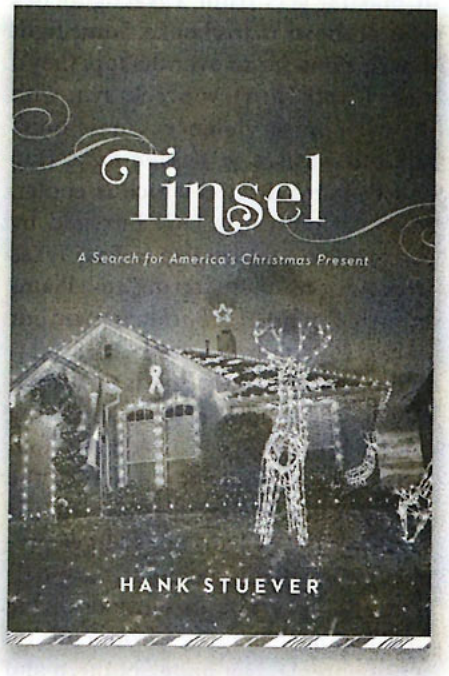
A swampy melting pot of race, East Texas is more egalitarian than the popular media cares to portray. The area has its share of rednecks, thugs and holier-than-thou mean old ladies. But most people lean more toward libertarianism. They want to do their own thing and be left alone. Lansdale symbolizes the region's individualism with Hap and Leonard. Basic decency means more than race or sexuality. Laughter is the common bond. ■

Stayton Bonner is a writer in Austin.

EXCERPT

Shop Class

BY HANK STUEVER



In Tinsel, Washington Post *Style-section writer Hank Stuever immerses himself in the Dallas suburb of Frisco, with some of the Americans who help make Christmas a half-trillion-dollar shopping event.* Tinsel *follows three Frisconians through the all-consuming shopping event season: Tammie Parnell, who has made a career out of decorating the homes of affluent neighbors; Jeff and Bridgette Trykoski, whose light display can be seen from outer space; and Caroll Cavazos, a single mother and devout Christian looking for the soul of the holiday. In this excerpt, Steuver describes an annual holiday shopping event in downtown Frisco.*

Several thousand people show up for Frisco's official Merry Main Street at Frisco Square on Saturday night, December 2, in spite of a cold snap. They have occasional looks of genuine glee on their faces, alternating with puzzled inertia, as if unsure of the point or what to do next.[...]

The kids all stagger out of the Kids' Holiday Store with a look of exhaustion, having waited an hour or more to get in to pick over whatever's left of the merchandise and make their way through checkout and gift wrap.

Parents everywhere are pushing double-wide strollers through the crowd, while others are in a constant state of documenting their children's evening with digital video recorders, desperate to make the footage become lasting Christmas memories. Parents ask their kid every few seconds if they're having a good time and get them to pose and tell the camera: *Smile, Tyler. Smile, Kayleigh. Smile, Isabelle. Smile, Jayden, Aidan, Jaycen, Keelan.*

The longest line by far—a two-hour wait—is for the Merry Main Street Kids' Holiday Store. Held in the largest of Frisco Square's vacant storefronts, the Kids' Holiday Store lets children wander through tables of merchandise (most of which is donated overstock from Target and a now-bankrupt sporting goods shop) where they buy gifts for their parents and siblings, at a cost of 50 cents to $5. There are basketballs, soccer balls, Legos, beer cozies, bottle openers with sports logos, boxes of golf balls, unread thriller novels, perfumes, shave balms, cheap jewelry, baseball caps, throw blankets. Polly Pocket dolls, nail polish, musical coasters, and tiny flower vases, among other stuff a mother or father does not need or want for Christmas, except on the heartbreakingly sweet level of the child's effort to gift them. (It's retail's earliest lesson: 'tis better to give than receive, and 'tis best to shop.)

The children are dropped off at one end of the line by their parents and then escorted through the store by one of Santa's college interns, out of sight from Mom or Dad. The kids "pay" at the "register" and then proceed to "gift wrapping," where another helper packs away their merchandise, to keep it a secret when they emerge from the other end, where the parents wait to retrieve them. "We got you a candle," announces one little girl to her mother, which leads her older sister to break out in tears. "Why did you tell her?! I hate you!" she screams, throwing the bag with the candle to the floor.

The kids all stagger out of the Kids' Holiday Store with a look of exhaustion, having waited an hour or more to get in to pick over whatever's left of the merchandise and make their way through checkout and gift wrap. Here you have the entire story of retail Christmas in America, in make-believe microcosm: "Everything sucked," one boy says to his father. "You won't like what I got you." ■

The Rich are Revolting

BY LOU DUBOSE

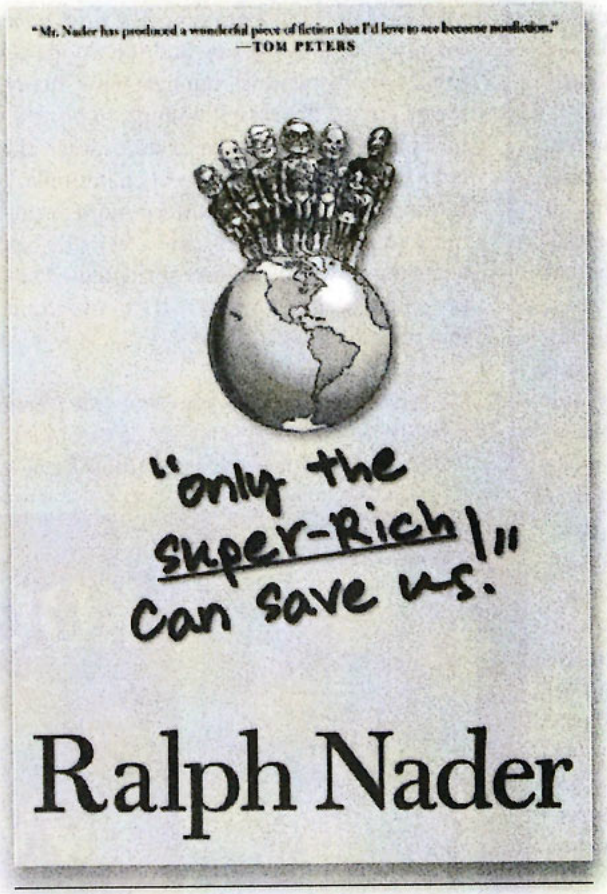
What's not to like about a novel in which Bernard Rapoport's father is the subject of an anti-communist smear and Bernard spends his time with Yoko Ono on a mountaintop in Maui? Well, there is length. Ralph Nader's work of political science fiction comes in at 733 pages. Nader's literary ambition extends beyond his page-count and on to the Sisyphean challenge he creates for a group of America's richest philanthropists: to turn the United States into an egalitarian and democratic society.

It is a project to which Rapoport—a longtime supporter of this publication and countless other forces for good—has devoted at least 60 years. To make it happen within the year in which Nader's plot unfolds requires a lot of writing. And a lot of characters. Dickens created 989 characters. He did so over 19 works of fiction. This is Nader's first novel, and within it the reader will find *Washington Post* columnists David Roader and A.E. Eon, Senate Majority Leader Tilmann Frisk, CBS news anchor Rob Shiffer, radio bloviator Bush Bimbaugh, right-wing talk show host Pawn Vanity, and anti-government lobbyist Brovar Dortwist (you get the picture).

There's also Woody Harrelson; Public Citizen's Joan Claybrook; Charlie Cray from the Center for Corporate Policy; the political consultant who created Paul Wellstone's first ads; and a trial lawyer I met at a Portland, Oregon, fundraiser 10 years ago. Everybody but Bono is in this book.

The protagonists are identified by their actual names: Warren Buffett; Barry Diller; Bill Cosby; Yoko Ono; Bill Gates; George Soros; Paul Newman; Ted Turner; and Ross Perot.

Texas is overrepresented, with Perot, Rapoport and Houston trial lawyer Joe Jamail among the 17 billionaires Buffett summons to Maui, where they are challenged to pool their wealth to transform the United States.



Only The Super-Rich Can Save Us
By Ralph Nader
Seven Stories Press
733 pages, $27.90

These men and Yoko (Carly Fiorina must have been too much of a stretch) are already involved in public-policy philanthropy. Corporate political hegemony imposes limits on what they can achieve on their own. Together they can effect change on a grand scale. That's the central conceit of *Only the Rich*.

Nader's fiction isn't divorced from reality. Gates has invested hundreds of millions in education. Soros' Open Societies Institute focuses his philanthropy on entire nations. The late Paul Newman created a food product line and a foundation to give away the proceeds (along with some of Newman's personal wealth). The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Foundation has disposed of millions. (Note to the reader: Bernard and Audre Rapoport are close friends of this reviewer.)

What Nader proposes—bring together a critical mass of money and intelligence to radically transform the political and economic climate—has already happened. In 1971, two months before he was appointed to the Supreme Court, corporate lawyer Lewis F. Powell Jr. prepared an eight-page memo for members of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, describing the left's "broad attack" on "the American system of free enterprise" and outlining a response that required corporate executives to write checks and build institutions.

Gunpowder and chemical magnate John M. Olin, Colorado brewery heir Joseph Coors, and other wealthy conservatives wrote checks, endowed foundations, and funded the think tanks that prepared the ground for Ronald Reagan's transformational presidency.

Among the "disquieting voices" destroying the free enterprise system, Powell singled out one young activist: "Perhaps the single most effective

antagonist of American business is Ralph Nader, who—thanks largely to the media—has become a legend in his own time and an idol of most Americans."

Powell's memo doesn't find its way into *Only the Rich*, yet Nader is obviously making a pitch to today's enlightened superrich to repair the damage that corporate capitalists have done.

Not even 733 pages allows for character development when an author has so many characters *to* develop. Nader's characters are somewhat wooden and work best when they deliver a speech Nader might have given. For example: Progressive Corp. CEO Peter Lewis's scathing exposition of insurance industry practices that discourage consumer safety. Or Warren Beatty's argument for tax-restoration legislation in California—delivered to an impassive Arnold Schwarzenegger shortly before Beatty files to run against him.

In his introduction, Nader admits that his novel is not a novel, but "a fictional vision that could become a new reality." It has its novelistic moments, as when right-wing opposition researchers discover that Bernard Rapoport's father David was a Communist, a fact Bernard has publicly celebrated for decades. The book even has moments of humor, including one corporate operative's pathological obsession with Yoko Ono. Humor is not a quality usually associated with Nader. (This reviewer also suffers from chronic Yoko Ono fantasies, but they are far healthier that what's described in Nader's fiction.)

Nader's "fictional vision" is also a call to action—as was Powell's memo 40 years ago. It is an argument for a living wage, universal health care, publicly funded elections, shareholder say for executive pay, reform of the federal tax code, unobstructed access to the courts, cleaner energy, and adequate funding for public education.

You know, an agenda that would be passed into law in a fictitious world in which we elected a Democratic president and Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. ■

Former Observer *Editor Lou Dubose is the nation's leading authority on former Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a fact that most people find rather sad.*

POETRY | MICHELLE MENTING

WHAT WE SALVAGED
from the barn after the fire, the smoke, the wreckage,
was nothing we'd hoped to save: crisp halters,
blackened bridle bits, charred maple oat-bins,
lead lines of nylon melted to shoe-lace width,
and still smoking wooden slats once lofted for hay,
now damned to the floor, now stewed with dirt,
damp straw and manure. Somewhere in the back
was the worst of it all, most of them intact
but contorted, as if they'd huddled in the corner
for comfort. Or worse. What if they pushed
their bodies against the barn door, prayed,
in their way, that the latch would burst, the gate
would open, and their new home floor forever
would be meadows of May, their roof the 2AM sky?

We heard nothing that night. The dogs paced,
for sure, but it was spring and the woods always call
in that pitch only dogs can hear. How many times
have I envied the ears of hounds, to be able to listen
for bobcat rustling a quarter mile away? That night
before bed, we brewed bags of chamomile, put bagels
in the toaster so we could sleep more evenly, dream
more sound. Now every time a teakettle begins
to steam—whinnies before shrieking—I smash
my palms against my ears. I try to overcome
that pitch of smoke.

MICHELLE MENTING *grew up in the Northwoods of Wisconsin and now lives in Lincoln, Nebraska. Her work has appeared in* Diagram, The Pedestal Magazine, *and* Superstition Review.





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Words by Charles Bowden
Photographs by
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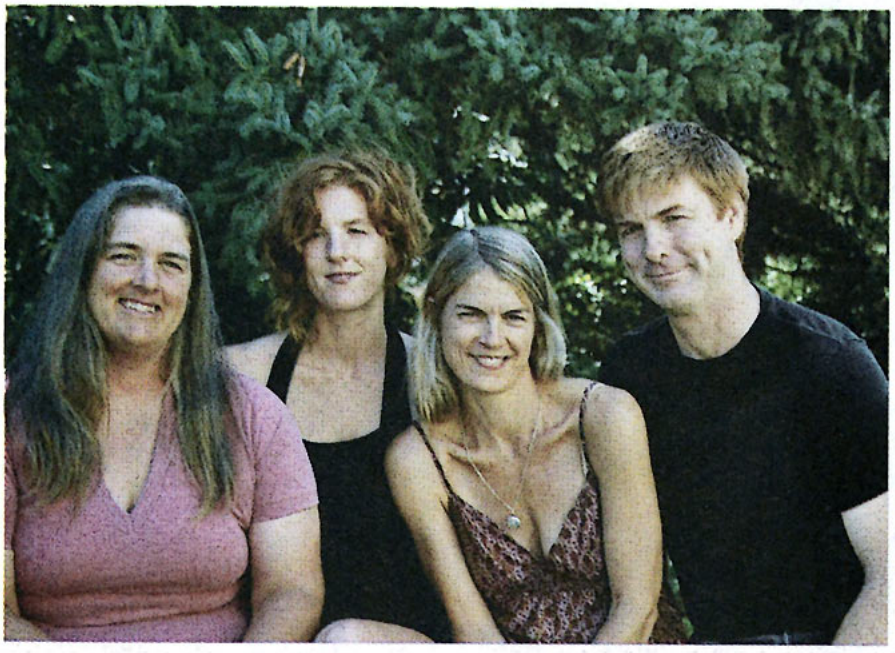
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Memory Bias

BY DIANA WELCH

The Kids Are All Right
By Diana, Liz, Amanda and Dan Welch
Harmony Press
352 pages
$24.99



(l-r) Amanda, Diana, Liz and Dan Welch *photo courtesy of Diana Welch*

I recently learned the hard way that memory is an unreliable narrator. That's what happens when you try to write a memoir as a group. My sister Liz and I decided to tell the story of our unusual childhood and realized that we should share the narrative with our siblings, Amanda and Dan. We would rely on our memories and ask them to do the same. We disagreed about important facts, but instead of hiding the disagreements or trying to divine who was right, we decided to celebrate the conflicts in the book. After all, we weren't reporting the story, we were remembering it.

When I was 4, my father died in a car wreck. It was 1982, and though no one else in the family knew it, he was more than $1 million in debt. My mother, an aging soap-opera actress, was diagnosed with cervical cancer a month after his death. She continued to appear on television for three-and-a-half years. Though she lost her uterus, her colon and her bladder, she refused to admit she was dying until the day she lost consciousness in December 1985.

My mom's denial went so deep that she left no plans for me and my siblings to stay together. My sister Amanda, at 19, was already independent enough to live on her own in an apartment in Brooklyn. My 16-year-old sister Liz bided her time living with a family for whom she babysat until she could graduate high school and escape the bad memories that drooped around our hometown. Meanwhile, I was 7 years old and placed with a family that had no idea what to do with me. And 14-year-old Dan, the only boy, was left basically homeless. The man who had told my mother that he'd take Dan arrived at her funeral holding a tennis racket with a note attached to it that read, "To a good game!" He handed the racket to Dan and, without even a stammer, said he hadn't known what he was "getting himself into" before he turned around and left. Dan ended up staying with a family we are calling the Hayeses that had a son in his freshman class. Dan lasted seven months in the home before Mrs. Hayes simply had it with him and kicked him out. As it turned out, not so simply.

In light of the scandals involving James Frey and others who wrote fiction and passed it off as memory, there has been a shadow on memoirs. Perhaps our decision to include more than one perspective was a way to beat the skeptics to the punch—by admitting that our memories are ours alone, we thought we'd immunize ourselves to their gripes. Since we were relying on childhood memories, we thought it only fair that we allow the people we wrote about to tell their version. Upon publication, we asked classmates, friends and neighbors—anyone who knew us—to go to our Web site and tell their version. We called their section of the site "Your Stories" and anxiously waited for those people to read the book and share their memories with us. We

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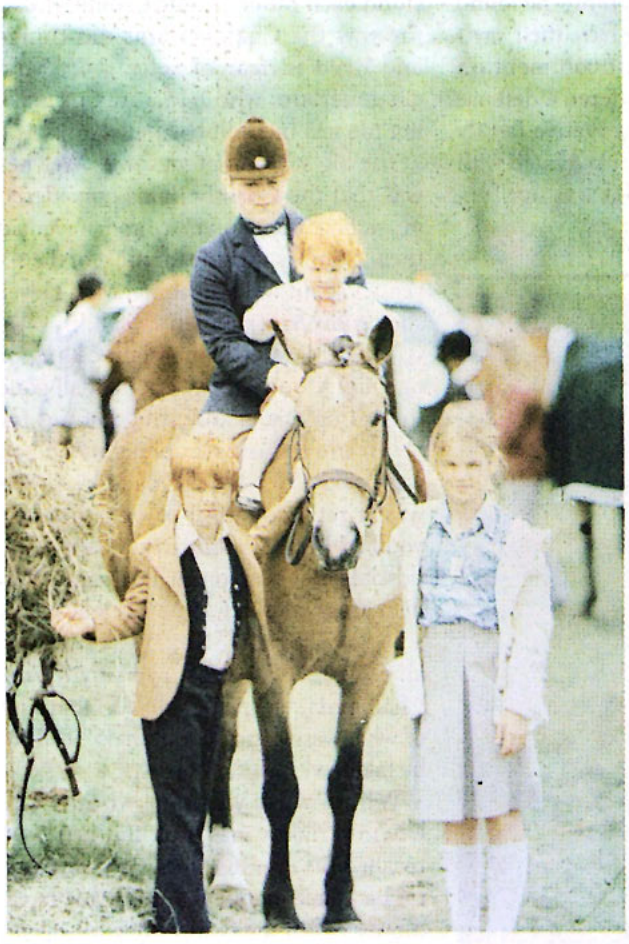
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didn't have to wait long. The first story came from the family, whom we call the Hayes, that tried to take in Dan.

Dan was not kind to the Hayeses in the book. By his own admission, at the time, he was pissed. "Before the Hayeses," he wrote, "I had been free." What he remembered most were the rules: a curfew, a designated homework hour, and no more riding in cars with teenagers, to name a few. To his 14-year-old self, Mrs. Hayes was tantamount to a jailer. A "tyrant" who "scared the crap out of everyone, including her giant husband," Mrs. Hayes was also, according to Dan, "sort of jaundiced" from chain smoking. Of the day he was kicked out, Dan wrote:

> *I was just sick of it, so I was up in my room, blaring "Add it Up," which goes, "Why can't I get just one fuck, maybe it has something to do with luck ..." Mrs. Hayes had complained about the lyrics before—she hated swear words. So every time the word "fuck" came on, I turned the stereo way down, then turned it up again full blast. "Why can't I get just one." I kept doing it over and over, blasting it, and turning it down, blasting it, and turning it down.*



The Welch Family in 1981 *photo courtesy of Diana Welch*

Mrs. Hayes called Dan to the kitchen, where she was on the phone with Amanda, her face "all red and spitting." He couldn't remember what she was saying to Amanda, but Amanda could. "Mrs. Hayes was screaming, 'I'm so sick of his shit! I can't deal with it anymore! It's ruining my family! He's not my problem! He's your problem!'" Amanda wrote. "Once she got all of her evil out, she was like: 'Dan is no longer welcome in this house; he needs to be out. Tonight.' So, I went and got him."

When we received Mrs. Hayes' submission, I was relieved that Dan's bogeyman from the past, not mine, had reached out first. Regardless, it was thrilling. What would this woman whom we described as a "screaming, red-faced bitch" have to say? Midway through her e-mail, I was floored. "You remember me screaming all the time," she wrote. "But I remember me crying all the time." With that one line, she encapsulated everything that excited me about inviting multiple perspectives on my family lore. Her e-mail, nearly three pages long, was thoughtful and honest. "You are right that none of our memories are or can be the same," she said. "There are some things I thought it would be helpful for you to hear and, for sure, I am feeling defensive."

Her description of meeting our mother added depth to a familiar image: that of our mother, pale, with a silk scarf around her head. Not sure where her son was, she had come to the Hayeses' house to see if he was there. He wasn't. "There was pain and panic in her eyes," Mrs. Hayes remembered, regretting not having asked in the sick and worried widow. Months later, after our mother's death, she recalled how her son Brad had told her Dan had nowhere to go, and how she and her husband decided to help out. "We always had a house full of kids, anyway," she wrote. Her own father had died while she was in high school, so she empathized with our plight.

Since we were relying on childhood memories, we thought it only fair that we allow the people we wrote about to tell their version.

Then things took a turn. Dan was more difficult than Mrs. Hayes anticipated, pushing her and flouting the rules of her home, staying out past curfew, going into New York City without her permission. "I know you resented our rules and me but the rules weren't unreasonable and actually very typical," she wrote. "We expected all three of you to go to school, play sports, eat dinner as a family and get homework done. There was always time for TV, playing outside, music and reading. School nights were for staying home and weekends were for going out. Nothing unusual there."

Though Dan and Mrs. Hayes might

disagree, it seems to me that both versions tell the same story. "Memory is a tricky thing," we warned our readers at the beginning of our book. "Our interpretations of other people's actions are locked in a time and place—an eight-year-old who has lost her parents sees the world in a much different way than that same girl twenty-five years later. The same is true for a sixteen or twenty-year-old-girl, or a fourteen-year-old boy." Imagine, then, the difference in perspective for a middle-aged mother of two who invites a recently orphaned teenager into her home and the perspective of that traumatized kid? When I asked Dan how reading Mrs. Hayes' version of events affected him, he said, "I feel unburdened. Now she knows how I feel, and now I know how she feels. And we never have to talk to each other again." Being the only one telling the story weighed on him—he found it freeing to let everyone have their say.

Mrs. Hayes didn't just comment on Dan's experience. She offered a defense of my guardians, a conservative family we called the Chamberlains. I lived with them for six years, and it was not fun. Like a rock in a shoe, I was apparently such a nuisance that they eventually had to shake 13-year-old me out. Thankfully, they sent me to live with Amanda, who at 25 was, in my opinion, a far better mother than Mrs. Chamberlain ever could have been, because we understood each other. I didn't comprehend the way the Chamberlains did things and lived in fear of setting off Mrs. Chamberlain, who had a way of making me feel incredibly small.

The big sticking point for us Welches was that the Chamberlains considered my siblings a bad influence and prevented them from visiting me for most of the six years I spent in their home. Mrs. Hayes shed some light on that, as well.

"I recall Mrs. Chamberlain calling us one night," she wrote. "You had all gone to pick up Diana and bring her out for ice cream. It was a school night and you were asked to have her back by 8. She wasn't returned until 10 or 11 because you brought her to a party. ... Is it really possible that everyone who attempted to help all of you had come straight out of a Dickens novel? As badly as I feel for all of you, I also feel very badly for the Chamberlains. I personally feel that a lot of what was written about them needs to be taken with a grain of salt."

What was written about the Chamberlains was not flattering—I recalled the evening when, to punish me for bad table manners, I was made to eat dinner out of the family's dog bowl, and the afternoon my mouth was scrubbed out with soap for another infraction. I was called ugly, just to be put in my place. And there was Mrs. Chamberlain's seemingly endless refrain: "Who do you think you are?"

But Mrs. Hayes is right—my memories should be taken as everyone's memories should: as my own. Perhaps one of these days I'll get that rush of adrenaline when I see the Chamberlain name in my e-mail inbox, and with one click will open a portal to my past as experienced through another perspective. Until then, my memory will have to serve alone. ■

PREVIEW



Florence, by Julian Wolkenstein. This photo is part of the exhibit *Domestic Animals*, at the Webb Art Gallery in Waxahachie, Texas.

Diana Welch is a former reporter for the Austin Chronicle. The Kids Are All Right *is her first book.*

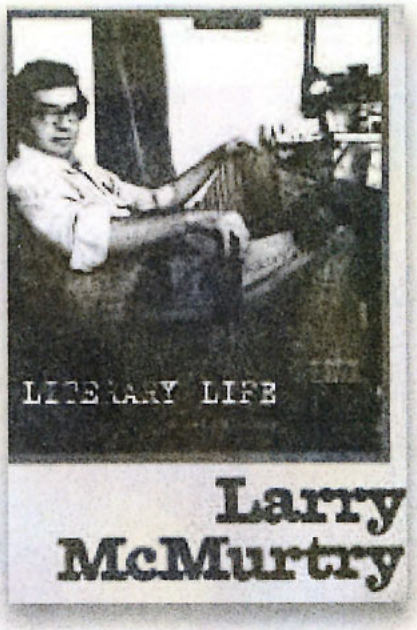
Lucky Star

BY STEVEN G. KELLMAN

By his own account, Larry McMurtry is a lucky hack. Though he is one of only three Texans to have won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (after Allen Drury and Katherine Anne Porter), the best he can say about the 1986 novel that earned him the honor is that "I don't dislike *Lonesome Dove*." He expresses downright disgust over much of the rest of his prose and confesses that he dashed off *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* (1972) in five weeks and *Desert Rose* (1983) in 22 days. McMurtry deems *Duane's Depressed* (1999) his best novel, but he judges himself more successful as a collector than a creator of books: "I consider the formation of my large library, now swelling past thirty thousand volumes and filling three houses, one a very large house at that, to be an achievement equal to if not better than my writings themselves."

That achievement is described in *Books*, the 2008 memoir that recounts McMurtry's experiences as a reader, collector and merchant of bound, printed texts. His ambition to transform his home base, Archer City ("Simply put, it's not a nice town"), into a Lone Star Hay-on-Wye, a reader's Eden, has not been fulfilled, but the stock in his sprawling bookstores there exceeds the county's human and bovine populations combined. McMurtry is fond of literary sequences—he followed Duane Moore, Danny Deck, Woodrow Call, Aurora Greenway and the Berrybender clan through several volumes each. *Literary Life*, a sequel to *Books*, is the second installment in an autobiographical trilogy that McMurtry promises will conclude with *Hollywood*, covering his experiences as screenwriter and adapted novelist. His identities as book collector, novelist, and screenwriter overlap, and *Literary Life* repeats some of what is said in Books.

McMurtry, who grew up in a bookless household, discovered literature as an undergraduate at Rice. He credits professors at North Texas State, where he transferred after dropping out of Rice, with inspiring his literary career. A classmate and rival of Ken Kesey in Wallace Stegner's writing program at Stanford in 1960, he published his first novel, *Horseman, Pass By*, a year later, "when it was relatively easy to publish first novels."



Literary Life: A Second Memoir
By Larry McMurtry
New York, Simon & Schuster
176 pages, $24

Ascribing a larger role to happenstance than talent, he notes that, "Twenty-five years later, by chance, I won a Pulitzer Prize for *Lonesome Dove*." Like *The Last Picture Show* and *Terms of Endearment*, both *Lonesome Dove* and *Horseman, Pass By* (as *Hud*) were fortunate in screen adaptation. McMurtry speculates that the popularity of cinema rather than his own literary achievement ("I was a midlist novelist who had gotten lucky with the movies, that's all.") led to his election in 1989 as president of PEN American Center, where he served two terms, "accomplishing naught." The persistance of McMurtry's modesty verges on self-abuse. "Little of my work in fiction is pedestrian," says the author of 29 novels, "but, on the other hand, none of it is really great."

Despite pungent anecdotes about Grove Lewis' mendacity, George Garrett's philandering and Susan Sontag's vanity, *Literary Life* offers scant support for McMurtry's notion that his nonfiction, especially the 1999 rumination *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen*, will outlive his fiction. He reports that Michael Korda, his editor for more than 40 years, "eschews line editing." Would that both author and editor had toiled more carefully on this manuscript, which is fraught with misstatements, non sequiturs and other infelicities.

Though it affects a casual air, this is a published book, and a reader deserves better than the offhand remark that one of McMurtry's teachers "left for the University of Illinois, where he eventually became chancellor of, I believe, the whole state system." He could have checked and found that presidents, not chancellors, head the system. Noting that Korda keeps horses on his Dutchess County estate, McMurtry writes, "The horses are for his second wife, Margaret, who, like President Obama, has spent some time in Kenya." If she had also spent "some time" in Paris, would he have noted that President Jefferson had as well? McMurtry proclaims, without specifying the measure, that Houston "remains, by a large measure, the most interesting city in Texas." Mentioning a heart attack, he writes, "I became a different person," before abruptly changing the subject. Exploring that difference is where memoirs should begin. ■

Contributing writer Steven G. Kellman teaches at the University of Texas at San Antonio and edited M.E. Ravage's 1917 memoir, An American in the Making.

Den Mother

BY BRYCE MILLIGAN

Poet Angela de Hoyos died on Sept. 24 at her home in San Antonio at the age of 85. De Hoyos was a Chicano poet even before the term existed, publishing award-winning political poems in the 1960s. In the mid-1970s, when the movement was in full bloom, she rose to prominence with the publication of her most famous work, "Arise, Chicano!" She went on to found M&A Press, which published a new generation of Chicano writers from a printing press in her garage.



About four-and-a-half feet tall, Angela de Hoyos was, as Rudolfo Anaya put it, "one of our giants." She was a walking contradiction in many ways. Older than even the oldest of the activists who created the Chicano movement in the 1960s—and older by more than a decade than writers like Anaya and Tomás Rivera—Angela always seemed part of a younger generation. Such was her passion.

That impression came partly from the fact that she surrounded herself with younger writers, especially when her micropress, M&A Editions, was turning out groundbreaking books by young Chicanas like Carmen Tafolla, Evangelina Vigil and Inés Hernández. Angela had enormous respect for other people's talent. If you were a writer in the same room with her, she made you feel like *you* were the best writer in the room.

She was so self-effacing that it could be disorienting. Once she asked me to help oversee a creative-writing thesis for Vermont College. A poet had chosen her to be the designated mentor. "I don't know why she picked me," Angela said. "I'm nobody."

"Right," I said, "just like Emily Dickinson. Perhaps she picked you because you're one of the best-known Chicana poets in the world."

He was referring not to Cub Scouts, but to wolves. Angela was fierce in her advocacy, yet the gentlest of guiding spirits to many young writers.

Angela shook her head dismissively. "I'm not Emily," she said. "I really am nobody."

Angela isn't a household name like Dickinson, but her influence was felt by a generation of Latino writers. The late poet Raúl Salinas famously called Angela the "den mother of the Chicano movement." He was referring not to Cub Scouts, but to wolves. It was a perfect description. Angela was fierce in her advocacy, yet the gentlest of guiding

ARISE, CHICANO!

In your migrant's world of hand-to-mouth days,
your children go smileless to a cold bed;
the bare walls rockaby the same wry song,
a ragged dirge, thin as the air...

I have seen you go down
under the shrewd heel of exploit—
your long suns of brutal sweat
with ignoble pittance crowned.

Trapped in the never-ending fields
where you stoop, dreaming of sweeter dawns,
while the mocking whip of slavehood
confiscates your moment of reverie.

Or beneath the stars—offended
by your rude songs of rebellion—
when, at last, you shroud your dreams
and with them, your hymn of hope.

Thus a bitterness in your life:
wherever you turn for solace
there is an embargo.
How to express your anguish
when not even your burning words
are yours, they are borrowed
from the festering barrios of poverty,
and the sadness in your eyes
only reflects the mute pain of your people.

Arise Chicano!—that divine spark within you
surely says—Wash your wounds
and swathe your agonies.
There is no one to succor you.
You must be your own messiah.

THE FINAL LAUGH

On an empty stomach,
with the pang of mendicant yesterdays,
I greet my reflection
in the dark mirror of dusk.
What do the entrails know
about the necessity of being white
—the advisability of mail-order parents?
Or this wearing in mock defiance
the thin rag of ethnic pride,
saying to shivering flesh and grumbling belly:
Patience, O companions of my dignity?
Perhaps someday I shall accustom myself
to this: my hand held out
in eternal supplication, being content
with the left-overs of a greedy establishment.
Or—who knows?—perhaps tomorrow
I shall burst these shackles
and rising to my natural full height
fling the final parting laugh
O gluttonous omnipotent alien white world.

(This poem received the Diploma Di Benemerenza from the Accademia L. Da Vinci, Rome, in 1972)

The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio will host an evening tribute to Angela de Hoyos on Saturday, January 9, starting at 6:30 p.m. This free event will feature an exhibit of de Hoyos' artwork, books and magazines she wrote or published, an altar de palabras, and an evening of readings and tributes. There will also be a video booth to record memories and stories about de Hoyos. The Center is located at 1300 Guadalupe Street, San Antonio.

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spirits to many young writers. A creator of community, she loved celebrating and commemorating things. When a new book was published or a play debuted at the Guadalupe Theater, she'd throw a party. Around her house (to this day) are cement stepping-stones signed, decorated and hand-printed by writers, playwrights and actors. Not many people think of mixing cement when they host a party. At her funeral, I mentioned the stones, and half the room grinned.

A pithier poet than most, she had a delicious wit as well. When I mentioned that she had named one of the calves on her ranchito for my daughter Brigid, the young poet Sheila Sánchez Hatch told how Angela had named a cow after her, too. I wouldn't be surprised if it was the same cow.

My best memories of Angela seem to be set mostly in the middle of the night. She and her husband Moises kept late hours. When I was editing *Vortex: A Critical Review,* we set the type on Moises' Photocomp machine. It had so many light leaks that it was practically wrapped in duct tape, so working at night made an odd kind of sense. Angela was always there with cookies, a new drawing, a new poem, encouraging words and a keen editorial eye. We often ended those evenings with a midnight cup of Angela's hot chocolate, mixing poetry and science, politics and stories.

Like the rest of humanity, writers with international reputations are a mixed bag of horse's asses, cactus egos and occasional saints. I've rarely known one who came so close to being just plain human. ■

Bryce Milligan is an author and the publisher-editor of Wings Press in San Antonio. He worked closely with de Hoyos for many years.

The Word of God

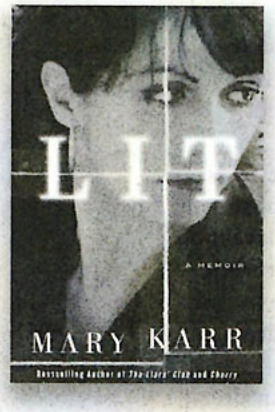
BY SPIKE GILLESPIE

I came to Mary Karr's new memoir, *Lit*, lugging a bumpy suitcase full of emotions and expectations. Could she really have more to tell after two previous best-selling memoirs, or was this just the fulfillment of a book contract? Her topics—single motherhood, drunkenness, sobriety, a mental breakdown and Catholicism—had been covered again and again by a litany of confessionals. I covered four of those topics in my own first memoir, already out 10 years now. As fate happens to have it, I, too, am a single mother, a former drunk, and (recovering) Catholic.

Our similarities make me a tough critic, especially since Karr ran toward the Catholic Church and I fled it. I recoiled at the prospect of reading a tale of finding peace within the walls of an institution that I despise on so many levels.

Toss into this mix an odd combination of jealousy and gratitude. It's no secret that less successful writers aren't terribly good at not envying more successful ones. On the other hand, it was Karr's first book, *The Liar's Club*, that swung the door wide open for memoirs, a literary form that was more than a little mocked before her runaway success. When her story revealed there was a market for memories, there was a scurrying for more, more, more. This is how, as a pup of 32, I received a phone call from an editor at Simon & Schuster inviting me to enter the fray. Without Karr, I never would've been plucked from obscurity like that.

Whatever jealousy I felt dissipated fast after I cracked the cover of *Lit*, a clever reference to both a state of inebriation and the author's life as student, writer and teacher. Karr's story, like most of the best stories, does not offer up a particularly new plot. Very good stories—think *Romeo and Juliet*, itself a retelling—return reshaped again and again, always with the same irresistible, archetypal narrative that captures the human condition and compels us to visit with joy, not complaint, the latest version. It hardly matters that countless books preceding *Lit* have covered similar ground, over which a hapless protagonist stumbles from point A: *sinner* to point Z: *saved*. Along the way emerge gory details of missteps, laundry lists of guilt-inducing, out-of-control behavior, and intricate accounts of sanity lost and regained.



Lit: A Memoir
By Mary Karr
Harper
400 pages, $25.99

Karr's book works so well because of dazzling storytelling. Chalk that up to her Texas roots. Texans rank high in the tale-telling tradition. In 400 pages, Karr gives a sweeping examination of her life—and by proxy, our own—that others couldn't do justice given an encyclopedia's worth of space.

To Karr's credit, she avoids blame in autopsying her failed marriage. Her depiction of two people who fail each other equally makes readers want to take responsibility for their own parts in doomed pairings that once seemed only and ever the other guy's fault.

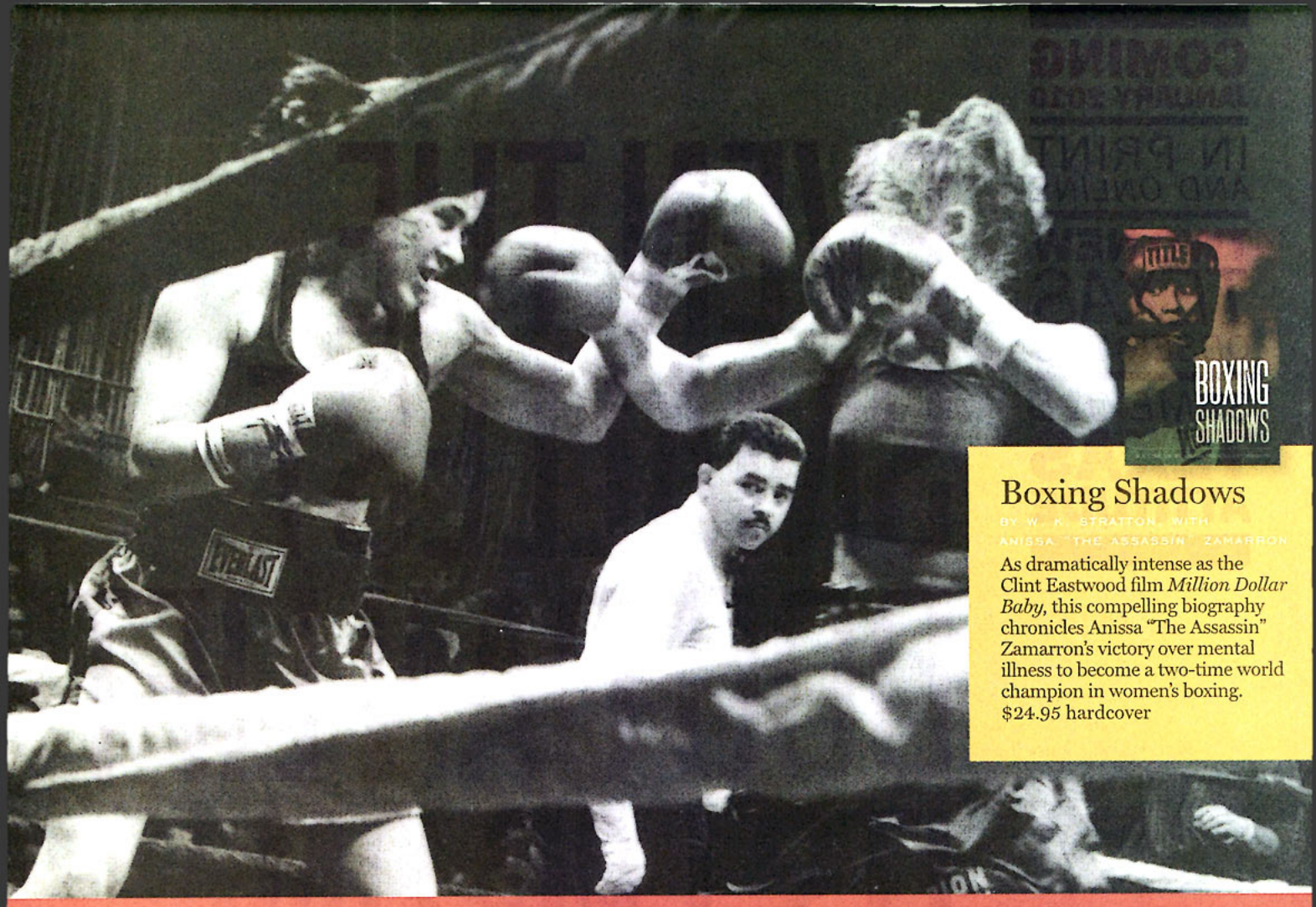
Where she could have easily tread into the waters of proselytizing—the gospel of both Alcoholics Annonymous and the Catholic church—I did not feel much, if any, didactic tone. As someone who cleaned up *sans* AA meetings and who now eschews organized religion, I vigilantly waited for such at every turn of the page. There are moments when, for example, she prays to God for help with the bills and the phone rings offering a message she's scored a huge grant. Moments like that made me hover in the vicinity of *wince*, as if this might just be another version of *The Secret*, telling readers that those who believe in God or a manifesting universe will benefit, while the rest of us are doomed to suffer.

I forgive Karr, like the priest I am not, the sin of sharing the wonders of faith, largely because she does share rather than preach. And I confess, like the parishioner I am not, that the book reminded me I wanted to get back to sitting still a few moments every day—not in prayer, but in centering meditation.

As testament to her writing, even if Karr *had* beseeched us to join her on her chosen path, I think I would've kept reading. Because of all the things she was and is and hopes to be, her power as a true and gifted poet makes this memoir soar. Mary Karr is—beyond sober, Christ-loving and sane—a God among writers. Language is the religion to which I am devout, and the Word according to Karr is rich with fresh metaphor, enrobed in carefully wrought sentences, many of which could stand alone as little jeweled gifts from her heart to ours.

I could not, as I sometimes do with more carefully handled books, regift my copy of *Lit*. Its pages are heavily dog-eared, with notes-to-self to revisit more than a few passages. For some, this book might act as a catalyst to put down the bottle or pick up the Bible. For me, it is a reminder to keep on the path, to work on my writing, to handle words with—please dear God or whoever is in charge—with one-tenth her skill and aplomb. For that, I cannot praise Karr's work enough. Amen. ■

Spike Gillespie is a writer and controversy artist who lives in Austin and blogs at spikeg.com.



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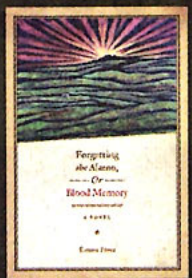
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