



LARRY McMURTRY

THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LONESOME DOVE*

IN A NARROW GRAVE

ESSAYS ON TEXAS



"Takes apart Texas with all the skill and sadness of a master surgeon performing a postmortem on his mother." —A. C. Garza

In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas

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Writing with characteristic grace and wit, Larry McMurtry tackles the full spectrum of his favorite themes -- from sex, literature, and cowboys to rodeos, small-town folk, and big-city slickers.

First published in 1968, *In a Narrow Grave* is the classic statement of what it means to come from Texas. In these essays, McMurtry opens a window into the past and present of America's largest state. In his own words:

"Before I was out of high school, I realized I was witnessing the dying of a way of life -- the rural, pastoral way of life. In the Southwest the best energies were no longer to be found on the homeplace, or in the small towns; the cities required these energies and the cities bought them...."

"I recognized, too, that the no-longer-open but still spacious range on which my ranching family had made its livelihood...would not produce a livelihood for me or for my siblings and their kind....The myth of the cowboy grew purer every year because there were so few actual cowboys left to contradict it...."

"I had actually been living in cities for fourteen years when I pulled together these essays; intellectually I had been a city boy, but imaginatively, I was still trudging up the dusty path that led out of the country...."

In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas Details

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Ron says

McMurtry, in this collection of essays about Texas, says he prefers fiction to nonfiction, for various reasons, but I for one find these ambivalent ruminations on his home state more enjoyable than some of his fiction. The insights come fast and furious in this short book, by comparison with a slow-moving novel like "Moving On," written about this same time, where a few ideas are stretched thin across several hundred pages.

Published in 1968, the content of "Narrow Grave" will seem dated to some readers. Written in the shadow of the assassination in Dallas and while another Texan was in the White House, the essays capture Texas in a period of rough transition from its rural past to its globalized present (the rise and fall of Enron would certainly have been featured in a current version of this book).

Much of it is timeless, however. It includes one of my favorite McMurtry essays, "Take My Saddle From the Wall: A Valediction," in which he provides a history of the McMurtry family, who settled in the 1880s on 320 acres west of Wichita Falls and in the following generation relocated to the Panhandle to live mostly as cowboys and ranchers. In this essay, McMurtry separates the mythic cowboy from the actual one and describes how cowboys are probably the biggest believers in the myths about them. It's full of ironies, colorful personalities, and wonderful details.

Altogether, the book attempts to present an unsentimental portrait of a state that also tends to get carried away by its own myths. The result is often a jaundiced view and gets to sounding like the worst Paul Theroux travel writing, where it seems like the writer has a personal grudge against the place he's describing. A car trip from Brownsville to the Panhandle is great fun for the wealth of local color captured along the way, but McMurtry focuses on every unhappy and unfortunate detail as if to warn the reader away from ever doing the same. The description of a fiddlers contest in East Texas is downright unkind.

It's easy to see, however, that it's a lover's quarrel McMurtry has with Texas. I gladly recommend this entertaining book to readers curious about the Lone Star State and the man who wrote "The Last Picture Show" and "Lonesome Dove"

Dax says

McMurtry is somewhat of a paradox. He is perhaps more critical of Texas than any other writer, but he also confesses to his love for the state. He recognizes this irony, and has come to terms with it. Written in 1968 before he became a nationally recognized success, McMurtry takes his home state to task in this collection. He shares his thoughts and experiences on his first three novels and, in my favorite piece, shares the history of the McMurtry clan over the last three generations. That piece is often hilarious, occasionally sad, and as is typical in a McMurtry story, filled to the brim with poetic writing and rich imagery. Even his nonfiction can be called spellbinding.

There's something comforting about sitting down with a McMurtry book. "In a Narrow Grave" caught my eye as I walked through my library, and I decided it has been too long since I read McMurtry. A nice reminder for me of how much I treasure his writing.

Aaron Arnold says

Naturally the infamously unsentimental author of the "Ever a Bridegroom" essay on the deplorable state of Texas literature would be loath to contain his opinions to that single 1981 broadside. Published in 1968, this essay collection, which is really a single meandering intellectual journey occasionally interrupted by chapter breaks, moves from film to literature to travel to family history, but its subject is always McMurtry and his thoughts on Texas, both as a real place and as a subject. And, as Texas contains multitudes, so does this book, as it contains his thoughts on everything from cowboy movies, like the adaptation of his novel *Horseman, Pass By* into the film *Hud*, to cowboy cities like his own beloved Houston, at the time in its rapid transitional phase from collecting the dregs of the frontier to the home of the Astrodome. What makes his writing different from the countless others who have unleashed their thoughtless gushing, positive or negative, about Texas is that he's always aware that while sentimentality might be a great thing to feel, unless it's presented honestly it will always seem cheap.

For example, his decidedly equivocal thoughts on the great Texas literary trinity of Dobie, Webb, and Bedichek might have seemed sacrilegious at the time, when the three were getting schools, buildings, and professorial chairs named after them. However, the better part of a half-century later, his assessments seem pretty accurate, particularly in how difficult it can be for literary forces like Dobie to capture their spoken voices in the written word:

"From what one has heard he was a great raconteur. Unfortunately, great raconteurs who are also writers are all too often sloppy when they go to write down the stories they tell so well. At heart they are usually impatient with the written word and feel that it is a weak substitute for the human voice. In their hands it usually is. The labor of typing out a story that could be told effortlessly and pleasantly, in appreciative company, often wreaks havoc with their prose."

This is indeed a real problem for anyone wanting to capture in words the true energy of human interaction, although interestingly, McMurtry's own fiction usually features characters who are not known for their loquacity. When someone remarks on what a pleasant day it is out in the Hill Country, the conversation is easy and natural, but often when that same sentiment is put on the page it can seem contrived and artificial. This is most obvious when it comes to that "everything's bigger in Texas" style of idle braggartry, which McMurtry takes a blessedly dim view of. The contrast between how we see our state and what outsiders see is amusingly highlighted in the first essay, where the locals of a tiny Texas town are star-struck by the arrival of Paul Newman filming *Hud*. Even though McMurtry is from that country and culture (more specifically Wichita Falls, which stars in a moving essay on his own family history at the end), he has no illusions that the townsfolk are any kind of "salt of the earth" types.

I particularly enjoyed his roadtrip from Houston down to Brownsville and up to the Panhandle, but I was unavoidably reminded of Charles Portis' similar "An Auto Odyssey through Darkest Baja", which is quite a bit funnier, although not set in Texas (in fact McMurtry's lack of humor other than a somewhat jaded dryness will probably strike many as more condescending than anything else). Portis, who was from Arkansas, would probably be quite amused by the description of the fiddling competition in east Texas, which contains many of the same characters that Arkansas does. Beginning in Houston, the story makes a nice contrast to the essay on the Astrodome, which has a good discussion of why that ugly, sprawling, charmless city is still McMurtry's favorite town in the state. And while as an Austinite I don't appreciate his jabs at our pseudo-intellectual culture, the man has a right to his opinion (and at least he's not as scathing towards us as he is to

the desperately insecure city of Dallas).

For all his strengths as an essayist, it's clear why he's felt that his main calling is as a novelist. I really enjoyed these pieces, but he finds the most appropriate analogy himself:

"To put it in imagery more appropriate to my immediate subject: nonfiction is a pleasant way to walk, but the novel puts one horseback, and what cowboy, symbolic or real, would walk when he could ride?"

Ryan says

I read this because I was told it informed McMurtry's early writing. It is largely about the cowboy's migration from the plains to the cities, the lives they formerly led compared to the ones they're forced to live now (in 1968, anyway), and how the plains are currently surveyed by "paper riders" like McMurtry himself.

At best, it's uneven - even McMurtry admits his limited capacity to write non-fiction. Such an admission is enough for me to not recommend the book to most readers - and then I'd offer only an unenthusiastic recommendation to McMurtry's loyal fans.

McMurtry's fiction is nothing short of outstanding. His characterizations, use of setting, dialogue and structure is uniformly confident, and out of 30 novels, there are few I haven't immensely enjoyed. His non-fiction, however, is stilted and thick. I'm tempted to attribute McMurtry's condescending tone or pedantic displays herein to his then-fairly fresh success as a young novelist.

I found only one essay, "Eros in Archer County," truly worth reading. Other essays on Houston and McMurtry's family are fine enough, though only interesting because of McMurtry's stature as an author.

Rick Wiedeman says

In McMurtry's 1960s essay collection, I got a peek at the Texas of my parents' time. Most of what he said rang true for me. He got a little sideways on East Texas, but that's natural. He's from West Texas, and East and West Texas are as different as Southern and Northern California.

As someone born in the time he writes about, I saw the tail end of what McMurtry focuses on -- the end of cowboy culture as it transitioned to suburban culture. My ancestors on both sides of the family (German and Scots) quit ranching and farming in the early 20th century, as did McMurtry's. They all went to the suburbs, or to small towns that, by the 1970s, were imitating suburbs.

(There's a reason both suburbs and small towns are conservative. They're settled by the same people.)

I never intended to be a Texas writer, but after reading McMurtry's take on his home state, I get why it happens. There's a culture here that shapes how you see the world, even if (like me) you've lived in eight other states. Joyce wrote about Dublin while living in Paris. McMurtry wrote about Texas while living in DC. You just can't get away from it.

In a Narrow Grave offers insight to Texas, both from a certain window of time during the LBJ

administration, and universally. I recommend it.

Joy says

In the whole, I really liked this book of McMurtry's essays. I enjoyed it in the beginning and I enjoyed it in the end. The middle, especially where he expounded on his opinion of the cities of Houston, Dallas and Austin impressed me less. I suppose I took exception to his rather arrogant dismissal of any worth found in the cities. McMurtry is a great story-teller, even when writing non-fiction about his travels and his times. This book of essays shone with his keen eye for people... the general public in his travels in the beginning of the book and his family in particular at the end. It's absolutely worth the read.

Dona says

"We have never really captured San Antonio, we Texans—somehow the Spanish have managed to hold it. We have attacked with freeways and motels, shopping centers, and now that H-bomb of boosterism, HemisFair; but happily the victory still eludes us. San Antonio has kept an ambiance that all the rest of our cities lack."

Nikki says

It's pretty uneven, but sometimes beautiful and oftentimes funny. I really enjoyed reading McMurtry's takes on the various cities of Texas--Houston gets no mercy--and of course it's fascinating to read about a culture in decline. It made me feel more connected with my home state's history, even if the cowboy past we're so proud of even today is long gone.

It also spoke to something that's been in the media a lot lately: the decline of men. This book was written 40 years ago, but the way the cowboys struggled to adjust to the loss of connection to their land and the lifestyle they'd always thought would be there sounds a lot like what is happening to men today who are faltering now that the recession and cultural shifts have once again changed the definition of masculinity.

I would definitely recommend this book to any Texan.

Joe Stinnett says

First and last essays the best.

Kate says

Ronni gave me this & warned me about some of Larry's frank sexist & racist perceptions. It was written in 1968. That aside, I really dug it. I probably would have never picked it up if it hadn't been handed to me but

it came at a good time. His takes on Texas cities, particularly Houston & San Antonio, provided useful and amusing knowledge of the modern history of Texas. The essay on the building of the Astrodome would be appreciated by any Houstonian. I found that he and I had come to a lot of the same conclusions about our fair state and its people...which leads me to believe that they are true! I skipped over much of the literary talk about the who's who (or the who WAS who) of the Texas writers scene as his take on literature then seems pretty limited. The essay about driving all over Texas made me want to do the same...and much of the scenery he describes is exactly the same today.

Jim says

"A border is always a temptation."

I love that line. I also love many of McMurtry's observations and sentences, though not as much as his fiction, especially Lonesome Dove, but several of the essays contained within are entertaining, and, although dated, knowledgeable and opinionated, I suppose there are many in Texas, especially in Houston and Dallas, who might not be so enthralled with their literary son, and some of his obsessions, but he does enjoy pulling out his pen and popping some bubbles. I enjoyed best his sojourns through the state. A few discussions may be best left away from younger eyes (and I was a bit startled that, though likely true, they were not blue-lined by an editor). I think those in San Antonio will love him best.

Will says

Damn good book about Texas in all its (created) glory and (glorious) contradictions. Few are ever able to write objectively about this state, it is a place prone to hyperbole both by those on the outside as much as in, but McMurtry writes honestly from his mid-1960s vantage point about things and places that have not changed as much as folks would like to believe they have (his descriptions of the Dallas and Houston as boomtowns is still 100% fitting, and his portrait of Austin as a city of the awkward tension between politicians and a certain breed of low-rent intellectual is fascinating and rarely spoken of these days). Overall, the tone is not elegiac but nonetheless sad as McMurtry speaks throughout of the Great Migration of rural Texans into sub/urban spaces, a process that was all but complete by the 60s, and the death of the great open expanses of Texas that has forever defined the mentality of everyone and everything within the borders of the state.

Highly recommended to any and all readers looking for a fuller understanding of where Texas has been, where it is, and where it will always go (upward, bigger, better, more expensive, etc).

Tom says

This version is a reprint of McMurtry's original book of essays on Texas. Texas has grown up a lot since 1968, and that makes McMurtry's essays seem dated, even after an updated introduction. Only the last essay - Take My Saddle From The Wall: A Valediction - really held my interest, as I was wanting to read more about Uncle Johnny and the McMurtry brothers, now long gone, but who opened up the territory. Less interesting is McMurtry's old bones to pick with Austin, Houston and Dallas -- he seems to like San

Antonio.

Derrick Jeter says

Originally penned in 1968, these essays have aged well and carry the patina of fine antique silver—even if some of the details have now flaked off. McMurtry writes from the vantage point of having grown up with a dying breed: the last generation of cowboys who saw trail driver push cattle from Texas to railroad towns in the north. The generation McMurtry writes about—the passing of the gods, he calls it—includes his father and uncles, who became part of the transition from open ranges and trail drives to fenced in sections and trucking beef to market. Though much of West Texas remains as it was in the past, McMurtry's book is a poignant look at a changing Texas from raw frontier state to urbane city state and the passing of horsemen who used to ride wild and free.

Brian Davis says

Wither the exception of the Essay on Southwestern Literature, I kept thinking “For the man who would one day write Lonesome Dove, he sure doesn’t think much of Texas”. Much of this is before my time, as well, and Texas has changed a lot since the writing of this - particularly the examination of Dallas, Houston and Austin.

The last chapter won me over, though. The portrait of his family’s cowboy heritage, particularly of his Uncle a Johnny was beautiful.
