Review of *Literary Life: A Second Memoir* by Larry McMurtry

Tom Pilkington
*Tarleton State University*

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Literary Life is the second entry of Larry McMurtry’s projected trilogy of memoirs. The first, Books (2008), recalls his lifelong avocation as book scout, dealer, and eventually bookstore owner. The yet-to-be-published third, Hollywood, will relate his experiences as a screenwriter. Literary Life takes as its subject McMurtry’s career as prolific writer and Pulitzer Prize–winning author of Lonesome Dove (1985).

Let it be said right off the bat that this slim volume is a mess, a lazy, sloppy collection of random memories that lacks anything resembling a coherent structure. Though it begins at the beginning—with the young McMurtry reading boys’ adventure stories in his dusty West Texas hometown of Archer City—chronology as the book’s organizing principle is only loosely adhered to. At one point, for example, recounting his years at Rice University in Houston as a student and later teacher, he suddenly mentions the death of John Updike (which occurred in 2009) and recalls meeting Updike and carrying on a brief correspondence with him. Such jarring leaps are not uncommon throughout.

Despite some of the book’s deficiencies, Literary Life is a highly entertaining read. McMurtry’s observations and ideas are always interesting, and his low-key, conversational style is an agreeable medium through which to impart these literary recollections. As a memoirist the author is perhaps unduly reticent. He reveals little about himself that isn’t already widely known. His account of his “path to authorship,” for instance, “a long, stutter-step affair,” is very selective, to say the least.

He makes up for this reserve by sketching some vivid scenes and character portraits. His chapter on a creative writing conference at Hollins College in Virginia is funny and spot on. Another section of the book concerns his two-year stint as president of PEN American Center in New York and offers a shrewd assessment of the members of that singular group.
As a well-known writer for half a century, McMurtry has had an opportunity to hobnob with many literary and creative folk, supplying impressionistic sketches of some of them here: Ken Kesey, editor Michael Korda, John Graves, Wallace Stegner, movie director Peter Bogdanovich, and others. One of his most heartfelt chapters is about his friend Susan Sontag, who died in 2004.

McMurtry seems grateful for his good fortune as a writer, and I commend him for that. One must question his veracity, however, when he says the reason he continues to churn out books in his midseventies is “money—need of—which is seldom far from my mind.” McMurtry has literally made millions from his novels and screenplays, and I can’t believe he’s blown it all on rare books and high living. Poor-mouthing is a bit much.

TOM PILKINGTON
Department of English
Tarleton State University
Stephenville, Texas