Review of *State of Minds: Texas Culture and Its Discontents* by Don Graham

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Don Graham sets out in State of Minds to address two threats he sees to the literary landscape of Texas: one, the perception that Texas culture, if it exists at all, is inconsequential and “lowbrow”; and, two, that college students even within Texas are becoming illiterate in regards to their state’s rich heritage of creative fiction and nonfiction writing and film. The book succeeds on both counts, reminding readers familiar with the canon of how much fun it is to enter the world of Texas’s written and film literature and how much one can learn from it about the timeless challenges of being human.

Graham’s at times humorous writing—much of which first appeared in the pages of
Texas Monthly—also entices those new to the canon to pick up books or to see films they have yet to enjoy. His introduction and the nineteen essays that follow survey books and films dealing with teenagers coming of age in small-town 1950s Texas, the spare and uncompromising biblical prose of Cormac McCarthy, the story of white Dallas native John Howard Griffin posing as a black man journeying through the pre-Civil Rights South, Walter P. Webb’s perhaps overly exuberant 1935 celebration of the law-enforcing Texas Rangers, and even a recent biography of Lyndon Johnson that tells mythic tales of the first Texan president’s pride in his reputedly outsized sex organ.

Graham is a University of Texas English professor who teaches “Life and Literature of the Southwest,” an undergraduate course developed in 1930 by one of the pioneers of Texas letters, J. Frank Dobie. Graham was first drawn to Texas literature as a youth in Lucas, Texas, letting his mind wander West through the cowboy stories of Zane Grey. But he reveals that despite the association of Texas with the West and its romantic possibilities of personal regeneration, some of the best Texas writing deals with challenges not unique to the frontier.

For example, farming, with all its hardships and occasional heartaches, is the topic of two books that Graham reveres: William A. Owens’s post-World War II autobiography This Stubborn Soil (1966), which tells of the author’s growing up on a cotton farm in northeast Texas, struggling to gain an education, and George Sessions Perry’s novel Hold Autumn in Your Hand (1941). Graham summarizes well this moving account of a farmer’s attempts to stay with East Texas cotton farming and resist the lure of more lucrative, but potentially stultifying, factory work available in the big city, Houston. This story resonates today in rural towns all across the Great Plains that face dwindling populations as residents retreat to the urban centers for work.

Several other essays explore the novels and film adaptations of one of the most prolific novelists of Texas, Larry McMurtry. Graham clearly has deep admiration for McMurtry and especially his first novel, Horseman, Pass By (1961). Graham likens this American coming-of-age story to J. D. Salinger’s benchmark of that genre, Catcher in the Rye (1951). Another essay includes interviews Graham had with the director, actors, and other key players in the 1970s film adaptation of McMurtry’s The Last Picture Show (1966). Here we are treated to behind-the-scenes anecdotes, such as how the actors drank Dr. Pepper in the movie instead of Coke because Coca-Cola did not want to be associated with the film’s salacious themes of teenage sexuality. Other essays look behind the scene at the filming of John Wayne’s 1950s Texas blockbuster, The Alamo, and the 1980s soap opera favorite, Dallas.

Graham is not smitten with all that he reviews; he offers critical evaluations especially of “confessional” writers like Mary Karr (The Liar’s Club, 1995) and nonnative authors like Annie Proulx, whose appetite for Texas clichés and contrived dialect rubs Graham the wrong way. Likewise, he is dismissive of revered Texas author Elmer Kelton, whose prose he describes as displaying “staid rectitude.” Clearly Graham’s is not the only word on Texas letters, but it is an important one that delights and informs anyone interested in what makes Texas literature both exceptional and universal.

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