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Book Review: Myself and Strangers: A Memoir of Apprenticeship

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Myself and Strangers: A Memoir of Apprenticeship. By John Graves. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. xiv + 235 pp. \$24.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Over the years John Graves, Texas's most noted environmental writer, has lamented time wasted on trying to produce a major work of fiction, a subject that becomes especially clear in Graves's memoir, *Myself and Strangers*, where he suggests that he should have produced more but was too often distracted. The memoir clarifies the record and demonstrates how Graves's life is all of a piece, with a full commitment

the literary life. Taken from the journals kept mainly after his graduation from Rice in 1942, Marine experiences in WW II, when he lost an eye in Saipan, graduate work at Columbia, and travels to Mexico, Spain, and the Canary Islands before returning to Texas at the end of the 1950s, the book details Graves's apprenticeship as a writer.

Graves splits the material into two types: the raw journal entries as recorded, and contemporary comments by the then eighty-three-year-old "Old John," who often corrects, chides, or compliments the observations and activities of "Young John." To those who followed Graves's career, *Myself and Strangers* provides the backdrop for his life's work. The heart of this memoir is Graves's emphasis on the literary life. It's clear that he dedicated himself to writing and especially to writing "the book." Over and over young John laments that the only way he can cement his life as a real writer is by completing the book. And for much of the time he follows the trails of one of his literary mentors, Ernest Hemingway. Graves travels Spain, goes to the running of the bulls in Pamplona, and even sees the great man, Prince Ernest, who was back in Spain for the first time since the Civil War. Young John spots Papa in a sidewalk café but decides not to go over and introduce himself.

He continues to follow Hemingway's lead, buying a sailboat and heading out to fish. But mainly he reads and reads. And throughout the book we learn of young John's opinions about his reading. On Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River*, he concludes: "There is much acute observation but it gets lost in the shouting. There is real poetry, but the fatigue induced by the rhetoric that precedes it keeps you from rising to it . . ." His reading leads him to Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, where she states, "I write for myself and strangers." That's where Graves takes his title.

This then is the literary apprenticeship, the long, intense journey to becoming a writer. There's a large irony here, since John Graves's reputation as a writer is built upon his connection to his home country, particularly to his

own part of Texas along the Brazos River near Glen Rose. He got there by following the old mythic pattern of Odysseus and the Prodigal Son who can know home only after escaping from it and viewing the wide world. Unlike Wolfe, Graves's long journey led him to conclude that he could go home again.

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