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Book Review: Conversations With Texas Writers

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Conversations with Texas Writers. Edited by Frances Leonard and Ramona Cearley. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. Introduction and Essays by Joe Holley. Photographs by Ramona Cearley. ix + 422 pp. Project notes, author biographies, bibliographies of authors' works, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

This book contains fifty interviews with "Texas" writers, including one "interview" with a dead writer, the pulp hero Robert E. Howard (author of the Conan books, etc.). It's actually Howard's biographer who's interviewed, which is odd and conveys a significance that's unwarranted. The book is also a bit Austin-centric, as twenty of the authors live in the capital city.

There are many odd things about this book. One of the oddest is that the term "Texas writer" is never meaningfully defined. In the preface the editors take a feeble stab at it: "Our broad definition of 'Texas writers' encompasses authors who were born in Texas, as well as those who have lived in Texas for a few years and have produced works during, or as a result of, their tenure in the state." In other words, it means anybody from New Yorkers who don't live here or write about Texas to political hacks who do. As best I can tell, a Texas writer, according to this book, is someone who has or has at one time had a Texas driver's license. Several of the "Texas writers" in the collection are not from Texas, or do not live in Texas, or have never written about Texas (including various combinations of these), while there are others who live here and have never written about the state.

Another problem is that genre writers are accorded the stature of Flaubert or Dostoyevsky. This is perhaps the inevitable result of posing questions to an author of young-adult fiction or adult crime novels: the very act of treating such authors seriously, as artists, produces what we might call the Fog of Literature. All writers are good on the subject of their own fiction, poetry, drama, whatever; indeed, everybody sounds like Tolstoy when asked about their intentions, their influences, their feelings.

Still, there are some interviews of authors who actually write about Texas and who reveal a deep engagement with the place. One of the best is with Laura Furman, a transplanted New Yorker who's lived in Texas for many years. Though few of the authors interviewed have any notion of a Texas literary tradition, a surprising exception is the science fiction writer Bruce Sterling, who offers a keen awareness of the Texas trio of public intellectuals, J. Frank Dobie, Roy Bedichek, and Walter P. Webb. Sterling cites his own *s/f* novel *Heavy Weather*, for example, saying it has "powerful J. Frank Dobie elements in it."

The biggest gun in the book, of course, is Larry McMurtry, so it is rather astonishing to hear one of the most important writers of Texas and the Great Plains assert that "Texas itself doesn't have anything to do with why I write. It never did." I doubt that anybody who has read *Horseman, Pass By*, or *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (note the subtitle), or his great cattle drive epic *Lonesome Dove* would agree with McMurtry on this score.

Conversations with Texas Writers also contains some mini-essays on various writers, mostly in the hagiographic mode, and at the end of each interview, a snippet of the writer's work. In the case of the poets the results are uniformly bad. All in all, this book is a hodgepodge put together by people with scant literary knowledge.

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