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Book Review: Adventures with a Texas Humanist

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Adventures with a Texas Humanist. By James Ward Lee. Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2004. xxvii + 284 pp. Index. \$24.95.

An Alabaman by birth, James Ward Lee is well positioned to understand a basic fallacy about Texas's image as a "western" state. Despite popular notions of cowboys, cactus, and wide-open spaces, Lee reminds us that Texas was

essentially “southern” for much of its history. Up until the 1950s, cotton far exceeded cattle as a measure of the Texas economy. The literary arts followed in those economic footsteps. While “western” writers such as Larry McMurtry and J. Frank Dobie are now seen as emblematic of the state, Lee argues that “the literary heart and soul of Texas used to be located [in the cotton belt] east of the Brazos.”

Lee’s essay on “The Old South in Texas Literature” appears in this welcome gathering of work from the noted literary critic, folklorist, and humorist. If *Adventures with a Texas Humanist* has a familiar ring, that’s because James Ward Lee “stole” the title, as he admits with a nearly audible chortle, from Roy Bedichek’s classic work, *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist* (1947).

Lee is a master of “the million dollar idea,” as he calls it. In his most ambitious work here, he conceptualizes the development of Texas literature by tracing how western literature invariably moves from mythic to romantic to realistic to ironic. Thus, the literature of the first half of the twentieth century—“the Age of Dobie”—romanticizes Texas, while beginning in the 1960s—“the Age of McMurtry”—irony came to rule. Lee’s ideas are compelling, but his casual essays in support of them—while charming in some respects—can be meandering and unfocused.

Lee is something of an armchair critic, content to rely upon whatever books or sources lie close at hand. Other literary scholars in Texas, such as Don Graham, surpass Lee by bolstering their own “million dollar ideas” with research in archival repositories. But Lee doesn’t seem to mind. If Don Graham discovers something new about J. Frank Dobie, then Lee is perfectly content to quote from Graham’s research in his own subsequent essay. Which he does here. And one can easily imagine Jim Lee calling up Don Graham to tell him, with a masterful cackle, “I’m writing an essay on Dobie and am stealing all kinds of good stuff from you.”

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