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Book Review: Texas Literary Outlaws: Six Writers in the Sixties and Beyond

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Texas Literary Outlaws: Six Writers in the Sixties and Beyond. By Steven L. Davis. Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2004. xi + 511 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Texas literature, like that of other Great Plains states, was largely rural in setting and perspective. The period from the 1920s through the 1950s has been dubbed, by one Texas critic, the "Age of Dobie," in reference to J. Frank Dobie, once the most famous litterateur in the state. Dobie wrote about ranching, lost mines and buried treasure, and the Southwestern folk tradition, and was much admired and much imitated by other Texas writers. That began to change in the early 1960s.

In *Texas Literary Outlaws*, Steven L. Davis, assistant curator of the Southwestern Writers Collection at Texas State University-San Marcos, has written an entertaining account of the first generation of Texas writers from urban backgrounds. Using the collection's archives as well as personal interviews, Davis weaves a many-stranded tapestry of literary developments in the state beginning specifically in 1961 with the publication of Billy Lee Brammer's *The Gay Place*, considered by many one the best political novels written by an American.

Writers who followed Brammer include Dan Jenkins, well-known sportswriter and author of comic novels such as *Semi-Tough* (1972); Edwin "Bud" Shrake, like Jenkins a regular at *Sports Illustrated* for many years as well as a novelist; Gary Cartwright, sportswriter and still a contributor to *Texas Monthly*; Larry L. King, best known for his popular play *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*; and Peter Gent, author of the novel *North Dallas Forty* (1973). Born in Michigan, Gent is the only non-Texan in the group, though he played wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys for several years and wrote a good deal of fiction set in the state.

What is remarkable about this coterie is its members' self-conscious cohesiveness. Though they frequently moved around, Austin and Dallas were their headquarters in the 1960s

and 1970s. They partied together, ingested huge quantities of controlled substances, and generally raised hell. They even had their own legally chartered organization, Mad Dog, Inc., with a business card and a motto ("Doing Indefinable Services to Mankind"). The "outlaws," as Davis calls them, "became distinctive by forming a single group whose members found their voices in opposition to Texas' inherent conservatism. They led lives of notorious excess. . . ."

Time has not been kind to the outlaws. Brammer died of a drug overdose in 1978. King was treated for alcoholism. Gent eventually went back to Michigan considerably the worse for wear. Shrake and Cartwright have had serious medical problems in recent years. The reader may have noted that the name missing from this roll call is Texas's best-known writer of the last four decades: Larry McMurtry. McMurtry knew all of the Mad Dogs and very occasionally attended their parties. He was, however, a much more disciplined writer than they and preferred a sedate lifestyle. His restraint seems to have paid off in a literary accomplishment that far outstrips that of his flashier colleagues.

Steven Davis's book is an absorbing read for someone versed in Texas letters. Others may find it hard keeping all the names and titles straight.

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