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Review of John Graves

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John Graves. By Dorys Crow Grover. Boise State University Western Writers Series, No. 91. Boise, Idaho: Boise State University, 1989. Selected bibliography. 54 pp. \$3.95.

John Graves wrote that human beings do not deserve the bald eagle. Given our record on this planet it might also be said that we do not deserve the grizzly bear, the timber wolf, the snail darter, and the hundreds of other species that we have annihilated or would annihilate. What seems more evident is that they don't deserve us. Dorys Crow Grover has captured the essence of this in her penetrating work on John Graves.

Two symbiotic minds are revealed in this short volume. Three if you count Thoreau, as Grover does, comparing and contrasting the two men throughout the work.

Her writing style is clean and straightforward in a way that enhances the biographical material. This reader came to feel the mystical pleasure one often gets from reading well-written biography—as though the writing of the person being written about is actually (or also) being read. I came away feeling I had read Graves over and over, though in truth I had read nothing but the direct quotes introduced by Grover. My favorite was this:

The Brazos belonged to me that afternoon, all of it. It really did. The autumn-blue sky . . . the yellow-white air, the cedars and oaks green and gold and red, the rocks the size of buildings, the sun on my back, the steady, comfortable stroke of the paddling, mohair goats kowf!-ing at me from shore when they caught my scent . . . and the whistling birds and the unseen animals . . . the big suckers that leaped and splashed . . . People's sounds and a consciousness of them touched me from time to time . . . but it was fall, and they weren't on the river. It was mine.

These lines are equal to and reminiscent of the two sunrise and lazy-day river scenes Twain perfected in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the*

Mississippi, and they had the same effect on me. They took me back to the Henry's Fork of the Snake in Idaho when I was a kid riding icebergs in the early springtime with my brothers. The river was ours in that same way. It was not ours in any sense of "Ownership Syndrome," as Graves would call the Anglo-American fetish of deeds and abstracts and fees simple.

In an attitude that most of us have had to assume at one time or another when we know something we love will be destroyed, Graves writes in stoic irony after his trip is done:

I'd made the trip and it had been a good one, and now they could flood the whole damned country if they liked, chasing off the animals and the birds and drowning out the cottonwoods and live oaks and sloshing away, like evil from the font, whatever was left there.

When I saw the title to this book, *Goodbye to a River*, I also brought with me the remembrances of Glen Canyon, Hell's Canyon, the Calamus, the Teton in Idaho before the building of the ill-fated dam and the flood. Of the myriad of rivers we have lost, those are a few that I have known personally. Thus I came to Grover, and to Graves, with the passions of my own experience. There was no disappointment in this reading and these writers eloquently lay the facts before us. In writing about Graves writing about Texas and the Brazos, Grover writes about all rivers and all life. She quotes Ashley Cheshire on Graves:

Graves has two overriding fears about mankind and the earth beneath him, and they both stem from what he thinks could happen when man gets too far from the land. One is an economic-ecology collapse. The other is a wasting of the spirit.

Or, as Graves would say:

One river, seen right, may well be all rivers that flow to the sea.

We are all Texans and we all have our Brazos river. Some of them are still left for us to enjoy. Others are buried under hundreds of feet of lake water and silt but they still exist in our minds. The next time you visit your Brazos river you might want to fortify the experience with some John Graves writing or get hold of a copy of Dorys Crow Grover's No. 91 in the Western Writer's Series. Reading it is like seeing a river right.

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