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Review of *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship* By Mark Busby

Clay Reynolds
Denton, Texas

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Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship. By Mark Busby. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1995. Works cited, index. xiii + 244 pp. \$22.50.

In this thorough look at McMurtry's canon through 1995, Mark Busby asserts that the novelist deliberately escaped from his southwestern roots and Texas's mythic past, then made a spiritual and triumphant return to them. But Busby insists that the novelist's return to western themes and stories represents not a "coming home" but rather a continuing ambivalence that is worked out to some degree in every work he has completed, regardless of setting.

Beginning with McMurtry's youth in Archer City, Busby explores McMurtry's attempts to break out of the "minor regional novelist" mold. Busby begins with McMurtry's earliest writings, then searches for consistencies throughout the writer's published works, seeking to establish parallels between McMurtry's personal philosophy and his writings.

In the past McMurtry has, in effect, "disowned" his earliest novels, particularly *Horseman, Pass By*, which he has called "juvenile pratings." But what becomes apparent in Busby's reading of the full body of McMurtry's work is that the novelist continually returns to the same archetypes, each time enlarging and expanding them, pushing them sometimes

to absurd or comic limits in order to define his version of the Texas heroic myth.

Busby asserts that each of these manifestations represents a maturation of the novelist's vision. In that sense, Busby points out, McMurtry is attempting in his prose to rediscover both his own past and that of his region. He recreates legends and mythic stories, not to make them grand or memorable, but to pare them down to size, to humanize them through hyperbole and farce, thus better to reveal the truth, if there is one, about the region's mythic value.

The result is an ambivalent relationship between writer and region, something that lacks a clear focus or thesis. But for the critic, Busby notes, the problem is to determine whether the result is genuinely literary.

Wisely, Busby does not answer that question, at least not entirely. Rather, he presents a series of cogent and well written analyses of ideas, themes, and internal analogues, tracing the development of such elements throughout McMurtry's canon. Busby argues that such connections as he defines between character and event are obvious. His evidence is often biographical rather than critical, yet his argument is persuasive if not entirely convincing.

A major plus in Busby's book is that he allows McMurtry and his critics to speak for themselves. Stepping into the background, he draws on what's been said by McMurtry and his critics to present a telling argument for McMurtry's significance as a *major* regional novelist. His conclusion is that the "Archer City" writer may be as close as Texas will ever come to producing a significant literary figure who actually writes about his own region.

CLAY REYNOLDS
Denton, Texas