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**Review of *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond* By Larry McMurtry**

University of Texas at Austin

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*Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen: Reflections at Sixty and Beyond.* By Larry McMurtry. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999. Illustrations. 204 pp. \$21.00.

Larry McMurtry's question for Walter Benjamin is "what kind of stories arise in a place where nothing has ever happened . . . ?" All that happens in Archer County are "accidents, injuries, bad choices, good choices, mistakes made with horses, misjudgments of neighbors, and the like."

What McMurtry occasionally realizes, but often forgets, is that he is writing about his personal experience, not about the American West. For him, the most important characteristic of prairie life is "emptiness." What "rodeos, movies, Western art, and pulp fiction all miss is the overwhelming loneliness of the westering experience."

Reflecting on his past, McMurtry "wanted to know (a) what had happened in the county that was worth remembering and (b) if so, did anyone still living remember it?" The answers are "(a) nothing, and (b) no one." Cows were boring, his horse was mean, the land "too hot or too cold" but "first and foremost it was *bald*," and prairie ranching itself had never been a good business.

McMurtry says, however, that he has not escaped from the prairie. The family home on a hill in West Texas has been geographically the "border" of his "imagination." When he describes a place, he sees that home, that land,

"the hill of my youth." On his first trip east, the young writer felt depressed and finally realized he was suffering from "sky deprivation." McMurty states that almost everything he has written is about the dying or dead past. A little over half of *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* is a loose account of McMurty's opinions of writers and his feelings about reading (he is a reader, not a cowboy), his library experiences, the dilettante's way of shelving books, and his adventures as an antiquarian.

The most interesting yet dubious characteristic of these autobiographical notes is the repeated comparison between his book-life and ranch-life. Arranging books is like herding cattle. Searching for rare books is like being a scout on the frontier. Driving a car on the highway is like driving cattle to market back in the days before fences, farming, the railroad, and economies ruined it all.

This is strictly a book of personal opinions. Some, like his comments on literary theory and Western American literature, are uninformed; but the story of his heart attack is moving, and the closing anecdote so delightful it makes us wish for more..

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