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Review of *West of the American Dream: An Encounter with Texas* By Paul Christensen

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West of the American Dream: An Encounter with Texas. By Paul Christensen. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001. xv + 340 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

In 1974, fresh from his doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania, poet and critic Paul Christensen set out for his first teaching job, in College Station, Texas, at Texas A&M. Eastern by education and temperament, and as yet unsteeped in Texas culture, Texas literature, or Texas landscape, Christensen was somewhat uncertain about what to expect in his new setting. Almost thirty years later, however (and still at Texas A&M), Christensen now looks back on the years and on his own experiences in *West of the American Dream*, a rich, wide-ranging, evocative work combining his critical eye for the overall movement and direction of the region's literature with his own personal reminiscences about his place in that literature and his life in its rhythms and movements.

Christensen begins his study with a long description of his move to Texas, his trepidation about employment at Texas A&M, and his slow acculturation to Texas and Southwestern culture. In the middle chapters, he mixes a scholarly approach to Texas and Southwestern culture and literature with anecdotal accounts of students, friends, and fellow writers who embody the various qualities he identifies with. Christensen devotes a good portion of the middle of the book to Texas writers, about whom he writes extensively and fondly. He describes his encounters, personally and imaginatively, with figures such as Naomi Shihab Nye, William Barney, Vassar Miller (one of several writers about whom Christensen devotes an entire chapter), Walt McDonald, and Susan Bright. The particular value of the contemporary poet, in Christensen's eye, is the way in which he or she has wrestled with what Christensen sees as the rather intractable subject matter of the Plains and the Southwest and emerged with a new and effective expression of that material.

In the chapter "How to Read a Poem," Christensen's accounts of experiences with Texas poets reflect his own ideas about how poems operate, how they can reflect region, and how they imaginatively create the Southwest as a place in the mind. Toward the end of the book, he devotes individual chapters to three deceased Texas-based writers whom he considers to be particularly memorable—poets Vassar Miller and Ricardo Sanchez ("Zero Mostel of the Hispanic down under") and playwright Charles Gordone. Two of these writers, Sanchez and Gordone, were Christensen's personal friends. In each writer's work he locates some of the same curious exploration of the regional ethos that permeates his own encounters.

A little bit scholarship, a little bit regional commentary, a little bit memoir, *West of the American Dream* is as good as anything recent I know of at planting the reader squarely in the history, major themes, and mind-set of the American Southwest and its literature. Because Christensen has dwelled in the region for a quarter century now, and has himself been an active and valuable contributor to the region's cultural life, he is ideally situated to have written such a volume. Rich, genial, and fascinating in execution, the book takes us on a learned journey into the psychic landscape of the Southwest, from which we emerge better informed and wiser.

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