

Texas Pages

News about Texas writers, events, book reviews and more.

About This Blog



Michael Merschel: Michael Merschel edits books coverage for The Dallas Morning News.
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Two memorable Texans: Elmer Kelton and Charles Linck



9:26 AM Tue, Aug 25, 2009 | Permalink | Yahoo! Buzz
Michael Merschel / Editor Bio E-mail News tips

After **Elmer Kelton died**, one of the first people to write me was regular books page contributor **Clay Reynolds**. He offers this about Kelton and another, less famous Texas literary figure, Charles Linck.

This week has seen the death of two men whose names will probably mean very little to most anyone who reads this; but I felt the need to post something about it. One was Elmer Kelton. I doubt that most people have heard of Elmer Kelton, let alone read one of his novels, but Elmer was what is sometimes termed, "the real deal."

Starting out as a pulp writer of westerns in magazines such as *Ranch Romances* in the forties and fifties, Elmer earned a journalism degree from UT and worked as a reporter for newspapers and livestock trade magazines in West Texas while he continued to write and submit fiction. By the end of his life, this week, he had written dozens of novels (more than five dozen), stories, and had won seven Spur Awards, among other honors. Probably his best regarded novel is *The Time It Never Rained*, a painful story of one man's stubborn adherence to individualism in a time of severe drought; other novels, *The Good Old Boys* and *The Day the Cowboys Quit* were both filmed for television feature films, and others, such as *The Man who Rode Midnight* remain under option.

For my money, his best novel is *The Wolf and the Buffalo*, a tandem story of a Comanche warrior and a Buffalo Soldier set during the Red River Wars of the 1870s that is vastly superior to any similar historical epic set in the same period I've ever read.

Although Elmer eschewed excessive violence, sex, and vulgar language in his prose style, his novels were never sentimental, never falsely colored with revisionist political correctness or squeamishness about historical facts. He was a fervent enemy of what he called "grandfather bashing," or the blaming of the present generation for the sins of the past. He was fond of saying that what set his novels apart from other western fiction was that in the typical western the hero was tall, brave, and handsome. He said his typical hero was about five-eight and nervous.

Always a gentleman, always supportive of any writer who sought his company as mentor or merely as friend, Elmer stood much taller than his own modest stature, and his works have been read and re-read and celebrated by three generations of Texas and western literature fans. Once a star of the old "Double-D" series from Doubleday publishing, Elmer weathered the decline of Western fiction and continued publishing novels up until this year. Whereas the tendency among "artistic" readers and academic critics is to disdain the popular, it might be noted that unlike so many writers who claim their artistry as part of some celebrated literary movement, Elmer has an annual literary festival named after him and a bronze bust of his likeness will be installed in the public library in San Angelo. I doubt that most writers today can ever hope for such posterity.

The second death was quieter and, perhaps, less sensational. This was Charles Linck. Charles Linck was, for years, a professor of literature at East Texas

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State University. Retired for many years, Charles kept up his interest in contemporary writing, particularly work produced by Texas writers, throughout his life. He owned and operated a small, hand-operated press from which he issued beautifully designed chapbooks of poetry and small essay volumes on homemade paper, generally commemorating works he felt had special but unheralded artistic merit.

An avid book collector, Charles' Commerce, Texas home, which he shared for many years with his wife, the distinguished author and editor and critic, Ernestine P. Sewell, was stacked floor to ceiling with volumes he had gathered over the years. Charles, whose trademarks were his oversized Panama hat and bolo ties, was known for his willingness to travel halfway across the country merely to meet an author he admired and to promote writers whose work he felt was being undervalued.

Over the course of his life, this soft-spoken bibliophile touched the lives of thousands of students, opening up their minds to works by George Sessions Perry and Billy Lee Brammar, Vassar Miller and, at the time, a young and nearly unknown writer, Donald Barthelme, who Charles thought had special promise, as well as many others whose work was denigratingly labeled "regional" by the literary elite.

The passing of these two men will not receive the attention that may other deaths of the past few weeks and months has attracted. But the world is a bit diminished by their absence, because it was so much enlarged by their presence. Sometimes, it might be worthwhile to pay attention to the voices we are prone to dismiss casually because they seem so familiar. Sometimes, they may be the only ones with something to say.

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