

## **Best Texas Books** by Clay Reynolds

“And the Winners Are...” (*TBR* 27.2&3) takes off on a *Dallas Morning News* column published by TCU Press publisher Judy Alter in which she lists three separate “Best Ten Books” by Texans who are supposed to know. The three lists Judy put forth, one by James W. Lee, a venerated colleague of hers and consulting editor for TCU Press, one by Don Graham, J. Frank Dobie Professor at the University of Texas and also a frequently published author of TCU Press’s, and her own slate all naturally recall the late A. C. Greene’s landmark volume of 100 of the best Texas books, and its sequel, of course. *TBR* editors Mark Busby, Dick Heaberlin, and Twister Marquiss then weighed in with their own catalogues to create an observable study in coincidence and disparity, obviously designed to show, as most freshmen writers would put it, that there are “similarities and differences” in these opinions.

I’m always amused by such lists wherever they appear, and whether or not they have anything to do with Texas. (It’s more than clear that the Texas Book Festival, which is touted in the same article, has less and less to do with Texas every year. It’s sort of interesting that a discussion about what “defines” Texas literature was held without consulting with some of the state’s more prolific writers; indeed, some of those writers’ works were rejected by the TBF for inclusion in the event.) Whenever this kind of thing is published, naturally, there’s usually a lot of hot discussion among the five or six people who might give a damn. But very likely, more sizzle than steak is the result of all these sorts of endeavors. Talking about NASCAR is probably more fun and, in some ways, more productive.

I think that for most writers, though, the immediate reaction to such a list is to check to see if their own work is on it; when they discover that it’s not (and it almost never is), they tend to dismiss such compendia out of hand as being biased or narrowly focused. (If their work *is* on it, they then worry why they weren’t closer to the top—unless the lists are alphabetical.) Of course, they don’t admit their snit, but I do believe it’s a fairly common reaction. Most are like me and never expect to see their work on any such collection (I didn’t make either of A.C. Greene’s lists, either); but then, there’s always a sort of nettling annoyance

generated when one sees the inclusion of a title or two one thinks is seriously flawed or grossly inferior or is only there to provide a sense of well-roundedness based on some politically correct rubric or other.

In actuality, I think all lists that were published in *TBR* are pretty good. I agree with almost all the selections as being worthy of counting, particularly some of the older ones. I was glad to see that *The Gay Place* got at least one mention, and I probably would have substituted *Jacob's Well* for *Gates of the Alamo* (which, though very good, is seriously flawed, historically) if Steve Harrigan *has* to be represented, as for some reason, he always seems to be. (I like Steve and admire his work a great deal, but I don't think he'd made my top ten, even top twenty for that particular novel.) I might have used a different book by Bud Shrake, and there are several other choices that left me scratching my head, wondering if the point of inclusion was to indicate that the list-maker had actually read them and for some reason wanted to brag about it.

I do find myself increasingly objecting to the inclusion of Cormac McCarthy on any Texas-based lists, since he's only an accidental Texan, really, having lived only briefly in El Paso and presently residing in Santa Fe, or so I hear. I have shirts that have spent more time in Texas than has Mr. McCarthy; the shirt I'm presently wearing is a case in point. (I think, but don't know, that George W. Bush has spent more time in Texas, especially in the last six years, than has Cormac McCarthy.) *Blood Meridian*, which I regard as a landmark piece of *Western* American fiction, I understand, was mostly composed even before he arrived in El Paso, and most of the book—some eighty percent or more, takes place elsewhere from Texas and involves no Texans at all, unless one counts Comanches, who didn't really regard themselves as being especially Texan. I do think that Mr. McCarthy's Texas celebrity is more than marginally overstated, as only one of his more recent novels, *No Country for Old Men*, seems to have much to do with Texas in any direct sense, and that's pretty tenuous in a way, as it could just as easily have taken place in New Mexico or Arizona or Southern California. All you really need is hard-scrabble desert, border towns, drugs and money, a small town sheriff and a trailer park. Those really aren't necessarily Texan by definition; they're fairly common throughout the Southwest.

Don Graham's lists (and he's done this several times before) always catch my interest, for I sometimes observe that often they have to do with who he likes or doesn't like personally, or merely at the moment. His inclusion of James Carlos Blakes' somewhat derivative title surprised me, though. I know and like Jim Blake, and I liked that novel a great deal, found it more accessible than McCarthy's work, which it imitates to some extent. But it wouldn't any top list I can think of. He might make my list for *The Pistoleer*, which really is a fine, highly innovative book, but less for its regional setting and characters than for its unique style. It's also out of print and has been since about a week after it was published, which is often the fate of Texas' best writers, or at least their best books, and I suspect that few of the listers have read it. But the main point is that Jim is really a Floridian who, like McCarthy, more or less accidentally found himself in El Paso. There are some writers in El Paso who have claimed that his novels have less to do with Texas than do some neighborhoods in New York. They may be right.

Much of the rest of those named by these compendia, for me, comes under the "it depends" category. If I were assembling books to use as a reading list for a course in Texas literature (which I have often done) I would probably cherry-pick all of them and could assemble a viable syllabus. But which I would include, which exclude, would depend on whether it was an undergraduate or graduate class and on whether it was a long semester or summer course. If I were picking books I'd want to see re-edited and published in some kind of commemorative series, again, I would probably be able to find ten worthy titles here without trouble; but there are some omissions and substitutions I would want to see. I'd probably exclude *Lonesome Dove*, in spite of the Pulitzer Prize, mini-series, and sensation it caused, but would more than likely go with *Horseman*, *Pass By* or *The Last Picture Show*, or maybe even *Terms of Endearment*, all of which are superior fictions and far more "Texas" in most ways I can think of. It's well to remember that most of *Lonesome Dove* takes place elsewhere, too.

I'd be tempted to seek out a crime novelist, too, maybe David Lindsay, a truly underrated writer, or more likely the late Richard Condon, who has more claim on Texas residency than does McCarthy, since he wrote *Prizzi's Honor* and its sequel while living in Dallas, lived here for more than a decade before his death.

Unfortunately, they both write “popular fiction,” and we can’t have that on any genuine list, even though that’s the ambition of almost every name on it, especially Elmer Kelton’s. I might put William Brinkley on the list, too, since he’s a native Texan whose work had international cachet and is probably known, via motion pictures, than almost any of the titles on these lists. The same thing could be said of Terry Southern, maybe of Tommy Thompson and even Lon Tinkle; I suspect more people (at least as children) have read *Thirteen Days to Glory* than will ever read *Gates of the Alamo*. And there are a couple of totally unsung Texas writers (Winston Estes, i.e., or Charles Ferguson) who might actually make the grade, if their books were in print and anyone remembered them.

I’d also want to see some better distaff representation than is evidenced here. One always feels the strain when one reads the female authors’ names on Texas lists, I think. There are and have been great women writers in the state, I think, but most of them didn’t enjoy a lot of high profile or sustained success, and it’s always interesting to see who makes the cut. One wonders about such writers as Elizabeth Fackler, for example, or Helen Hoover Saintmeyer, the latter of whom is one of the few Texans who ever notched the *New York Times* Best-Seller list. But there’s Dorothy Scarborough, Jane Gilmore Rushing, and Annette Sanford, who never wrote best sellers but merely wrote and write well. Actually, Texas’ best known female writer is probably Edna Ferber, who wasn’t a Texan, however much you stretch the definition, but whose novel is probably known to more Texans and non-Texans than any other book on the lists.

I’m also fascinated by everyone’s confusion about what, precisely, to do with Katherine Anne Porter, who probably would resent being included on anybody’s list. The books chosen to represent her vary widely over time and from list to list, and I sometimes suspect that no one ever really reads much more than a short story or two by her before adding her to the parade. She’s sort of Texas’ answer to Willa Cather, but without overall and lasting quality, I think. Short fiction is a hard thing to build a reputation on, and that’s where her strength lies.

I’m perplexed that Rick Bass is absent here, not that I’m especially a huge Bass fan, but he always sweeps awards in the state when he deigns to enter, and I think that his speaking fees put him in the top ten of authors who at least sometimes *claim* Texas association. What’s ironic about that, to me, is that there

are a number of writers who have moved to Texas and lived here and write about it nearly as long or longer than Bass has lived in Montana and been writing about it. But they don't make the lists, either. There are many others whose Texas connections are tenuous, at best, as well as some who are native to the state and write exclusively about it and have achieved international fame (Naomi Nye, i.e.). But they almost never make such lists, and if they do, there is always an implied asterisk of some sort. Naomi, for example, is mostly a poet. But then, so is Walt McDonald, and he's on one of the lists.

I'm also astonished that Kinky Friedman isn't on anyone's list, particularly given his ability to win book awards hands down and be featured at the Texas Book Festival year after year. Sort of makes one wonder who's in charge of all this listing and whether they actually read the writers they name.

Naturally, this could go round and round forever, and it's fun grist for the literary mill, I reckon. (Why a "top ten?" Why not a "top forty?" A.C.'s "top 100," may be excessive, but what's magic about the numbers ten or whatever? Why not a top twelve or top fifteen, the nominal number for a college course reading list?) What it ultimately comes down to, of course, is a matter of taste and, in some cases, durability, and in other cases, popularity. What would be interesting is to randomly telephone a few dozen people who may be identified as "avid readers" and ask them if any Texans were on their bookshelves and who they might be. That, truly, might be more meaningful in the sense of recommending a list of folks the rest of us ought to be paying attention to.

Still, I must confess, if I were making a ten name list based on what I might take with me if I were going to be held up in an undisclosed location for a while, I probably would include most all of these writers, if not these specific works. Actually, with only two exceptions, I've read all of them (There's my "brag.") and actually have reviewed many of them. If I were recommending a list for similar purpose, say for the vice president, it would depend on how much he had personally invested in Texas lore and legend and how much innate interest might be generated by the reading. If I were doing it for the president, I'd pick nothing but short books with simpler plots. Regardless, I'd put at least one of my own titles on it, of course. A sale, after all, is a sale. So I'd probably pick one that was in print.

Such lists are fun, and I'm sure all the list-makers had fun with it. But as a colleague of mine put it a few weeks ago, "You Texans think more of your own writing than any region in the country other than New York. The difference is not so much that you admire it. It's that you worry about how much others admire it, or that they might not." Or to put it another way, "I'm 'bout tired of hearing about it, Fairdinkum."