San Antonio Review

Berard Reviews "Lonesome Dove"

Peter Berard

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Texas writer Larry McMurtry showed little love for Austin during his life.¹ Nonetheless, we all recognize his literary achievements and, thus, share this long-pending review by San Antonio Review Book Review Editor Peter Berard of McMurtry's most popular novel, [Lonesome Dove](#), in memorial of his death March 25, 2021.

William O. Pate II

March 26, 2021

Austin

<p><u>Lonesome Dove</u> Larry McMurtry 1985</p>
<p>Rating: Five Stars</p>	

I remember when I was a little kid driving back and forth on errands with my parents that there was a lot more graffiti on the granite rocks along the highways than there seems to be now. Maybe penalties got stiffer or the culture as a whole just moved on from that particular form of self-expression, who knows? I do remember very clearly the words “**LONESOME DOVE**” being written out in big capital letters on one rock. Presumably, the graffitist was moved by this book, or possibly the TV miniseries adapted from it.

This is probably the most enjoyable book I’ve read all year. I took my time with it — it weighs in at a little over 850 pages. It never felt long, though. McMurtry manages this epic story and numerous characters on their various arcs deftly and with a light touch.

Notionally, the point of the story is going from point A to point B: a group of cowboys taking a herd from south Texas to Montana. Of course, it's about various other things — love, death, growing old (McMurtry was around fifty when he was writing this).

At the center of the story are two retired Texas Rangers, Call and Gus. Call is all duty, a commander of men; Gus is a talker, philosophizer, lover of whiskey and women. They run a podunk livery stable in the titular town of Lonesome Dove, Texas, until their old ranging partner Jake shows up out of the blue and convinces Call to set up the first cattle ranch in Montana. Call, feeling his age and looking for a new challenge, decides to do it, and rounds up a crew and some horses and cattle and starts the big trek north. Gus goes with him in part to see a former lover in Nebraska but also out of curiosity and loyalty to Call. Jake doesn't even really want to go — he's a feckless gambler and womanizer. He convinces Lonesome Dove's sole sex worker, Lorena, to follow the cowboys for a while then dumps her to an awful fate and sets out on a bad path.

It'd take a long time to run down all of the major happenings in this long book. There are confrontations with old foes of Call and Gus's, most notably Comanche renegade Blue Duck. There's a lot about dealing with the elements, with everything from unbridged rivers to snakes and bears and storms threatening the men. Some Arkansas lawmen are after Jake for a crime he committed there, and they have their own set of misadventures and tragedies.

In the end, everyone wants something they can't have. It drove them all out West to begin with, but relocation only multiplied their problems. For many of them, a better life is potentially in their grasp, but personal damage keeps them from grasping it. This is especially true of Call, the stoical man of duty, unable to reckon with his few moments of humanity and with it his relationship to his unacknowledged son. Gus can't stay with any loving relationship because he's compelled to seek novelty and adventure. Other characters either have similar damage or are led around by those who do. Women, in McMurtry's world, are sometimes a little more sensible than the men, but even they throw themselves after people who don't love them and pursue dreams they can't reach.

Race in *Lonesome Dove* is an interesting question for more than the usual questions of representation. The Texas Rangers were a force openly dedicated to waging race war when Call and Gus were in it. McMurtry doesn't make a big thing of that, but one of the reasons they leave Texas is that by the 1870s, they had succeeded too well — things are too settled, they want to go somewhere wild again.² They don't hate Native

Americans and Mexicans, as Call would no doubt put it, they were “just doing a job.” Gus openly philosophizes about how things were better off in Texas when the Comanche were around to keep people on their toes. Call’s too stoical to openly agree but his actions, leading the men away from Texas, speak for themselves. The remaining Native Americans are sometimes dangerous, but mostly out of hunger and desperation. The really vicious one, Blue Duck, is notable at least in part because he runs with a mixed crew of Native and white renegades — the “pure” Native Americans aren’t like him, the implication being. A few black and Latino people are part of the crew and McMurtry depicts them as resourceful and respected, if anything a little bit on the “Magical Negro/Mexican” side of things — richly-depicted inner lives mostly belong to white people in this book. “Richly-depicted” also reliably means “miserable,” so maybe Deets missed a bullet — that time, at least.

McMurtry says he set out to disenchant the West, and feels he failed — especially the popularity of the miniseries (even inspiring highway graffiti artists all the way in Massachusetts!) conspired against him in this. However miserable you can make the West seem in a novel, it’s hard for the beautiful natural vistas and sense of adventure not to come across in a visual medium. I loved the book but can say that McMurtry succeeded as far as I was concerned — I very much appreciated my civilized comforts, warm bed, and lack of snakes when I was reading “Lonesome Dove.” More than that, it successfully evokes the ways in which dreams deceive — when you get to the end of them, you find that you only had you wanted fleetingly, along the way, and are left hauling the corpse of your best friend across three thousand miles of wilderness. That’s just an example, like. All in all, a great book and highly recommended to anyone who likes a long, toothsome genre read.

Peter Berard is a writer, historian and organizer in Watertown, Mass. He serves as San Antonio Review’s book review editor.

Footnotes

- 1.

Likely because his first wife left him — I hear for a poet — in the town. McMurtry wrote in *The Atlantic* about Austin:

"If I were to choose one example of the Texas penchant for ludicrously overestimating local achievement, my example would certainly be the city of Austin. The Texas intellectual community treats Austin not merely with fond regard but almost with reverence; this, in my view, is the intellectual equivalent of thumbsucking. My own feeling about Austin is that it is a dismal, third-rate university town . . . I don't believe it can claim a single first-rate artistic talent, in any art . . . [I]t is a soft-minded city that thrives not because of its intellectual standards, but because of the absence of them."

See [Daugherty, Tracy. *Leaving the Gay Place: Billy Lee Brammer and the Great Society*. United States, University of Texas Press.](#)

2. **Editor's Note:** *The Injustice Never Leaves You* shows that the Texas Rangers were still very much engaged in a race war during the 1920s. See [Martinez, Monica Muñoz. *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas*. United States, Harvard University Press, 2018. —WOPII](#)