

REVIEW OF

TEXAS

BOOKS

2023

# Review of Texas Books 2023

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## Foreword Texas, We Read On

Spring greetings from the shiny new editorial team at *Review of Texas Books*! Since the departure of our former editor, the singular and much-missed Jennifer H. Ravey, we have been planning, curating, and designing this issue and forthcoming ones. We thank you for your continued patronage of the *Review* and hope you will share it with all the readers in your life. We have decided to continue as an annual digital publication issued in early spring; we will carry forward our tradition of offering a handful of reviews “from the backlist” but will primarily print reviews of books published in the previous year.

In 2023, dear Texans, we read on through unprecedented headlines of war, strikes, felony indictments and convictions of high-level government leaders, Twitter’s rebranding, failing banks, and The Eras Tour. We read about shifting geohistorical landscapes in John S. Wilson’s *Mapping Texas* and shifting political landscapes of Reconstruction in Robert J. Dillard’s *Two Counties in Crisis*. We read of racially coded Ranger justice in the biographies of John B. Denton, by Mike Cochran, and Leander McNelly, by Tom Clavin. We heard Latino voices speak of the terrors of cartel violence and immigration in *A Night of Screams*, a horror anthology edited by Richard Z. Santos.

We read on, through another year of aggressive book banning activity in our state, of subjects academic, polemic, and poetic, while legislative and judicial bodies grappled over Texas H.B. 900 – not only its onerous implications for libraries and students in our state, but also its imperilment of the specific, protected freedoms of all writers and readers. January of this year brought triumph for book activists and for First Amendment rights as a federal court ruled the ironically-named READER law and its anti-book machinations unconstitutional.

And so, in 2024, a reader in Texas may marvel – even as books are martyred in pyres all around us – that champions of free speech are acting, the constitution is still working, words are still winning, and our state remains a wildly literary land. In such a complicated and spectacular place, we depend more than ever upon the advocacy and awe of art, and Texas continues to produce some of the greatest writers and writing in the world. We celebrate some of it here, and we look forward to another enriching year of reading and global citizenship with you.

Casey L. Ford and Adam Nemmers, Editors  
Lily Yoder, Editorial Assistant

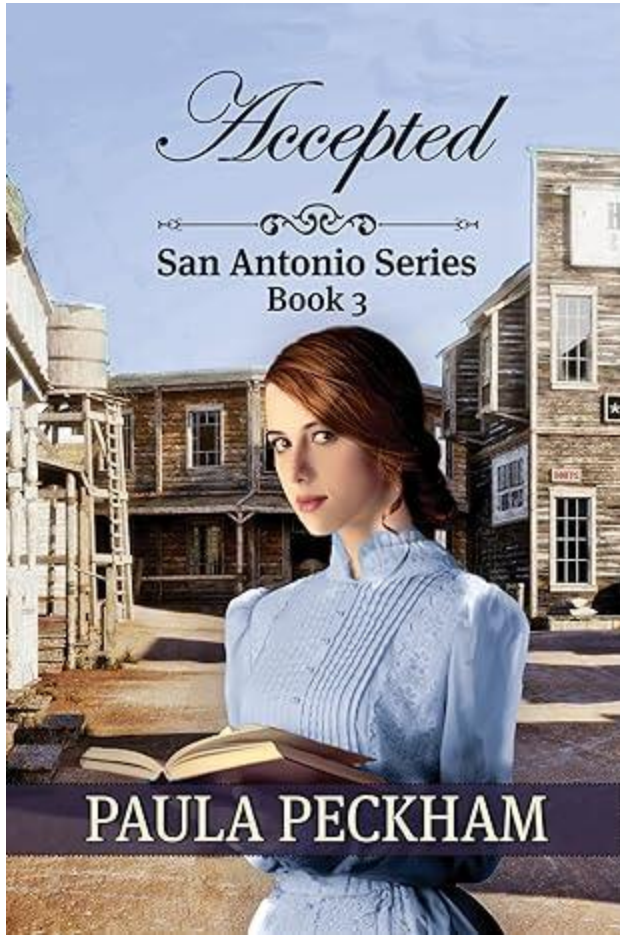
Paula Peckham. *Accepted*. Plymouth, Elk Lake Publishing, Inc., 2023. pp. 316. Paper: ISBN-13 9798891340206, US \$14.99.

### **Civil War Historical Fiction Makes a Compelling Read**

Cheryl Johnson

Set against the backdrop of San Antonio, Texas, during the Civil War, heroin Quenby Martin has just arrived with her family from the mission field in Africa. Quen is too smart and outspoken to be satisfied with being an average homemaker. She is quite sure “in case in point” that the world around her wants her help and vast knowledge whether they know it yet or not. Quen soon realizes, however, the town is awash with secrets that may be beyond her experience, including that of the most respected widow in town who has taken Quen under her wing. But Quen has her own secrets and challenges she must overcome. Will she adjust to a life outside of the mission field where she was raised and needed? Will she become the young woman her parents expect her to be and make them proud? Can she resist a certain young farmer she finds herself attracted to? Can she succeed in helping slaves escape through the Underground Railroad without getting caught, or worse, captured by the bounty hunter set on having her? And most importantly, will her faith remain shaken, or can she find the redemption and acceptance she desperately needs? The answers to these questions keep the reader turning the pages as one unexpected event follows another. From flavored butter to hairbreadth escapes, Paula Peckham demonstrates her story telling abilities through the depth of her characters whom readers will find engaging and compelling. This is an unexpected read for any fan of historical fiction and especially those who love Texas fiction.

**Reviewer Bio:** Cheryl Rae Johnson joined the Lamar University English faculty in Beaumont, Texas, in 2003, where she teaches writing and literature. She is the author of the Benny the Dachshund children’s book series, based on the antics of her youngest daughter’s miniature dachshund. Both of these books are Accelerated Reading books. She has also published a novella, “Nobody Knows Me Like You.”



Karen Lynne Klink. *At What Cost, Silence?: The Texian Trilogy, Book 1*. Phoenix, She Writes Press, 2023. Pp. 352. Paper: ISBN-13 978-1647426033, US\$17.95.

## **At What Cost, Silence?**

Philip Zozzaro

The Villere family is a medium sized clan living in East Texas. The family's patriarch, Paien, makes a fairly profitable living farming tobacco. He is married to the exquisite Madeleine and has five children. The Villere farm utilizes slave labor, yet Paien's relationship with the African American men and women is atypical from the usual slaveholder/slave dynamic. Paien treats people like Marcus and Betta Holland with a modicum of respect. He expects his children to do the same.

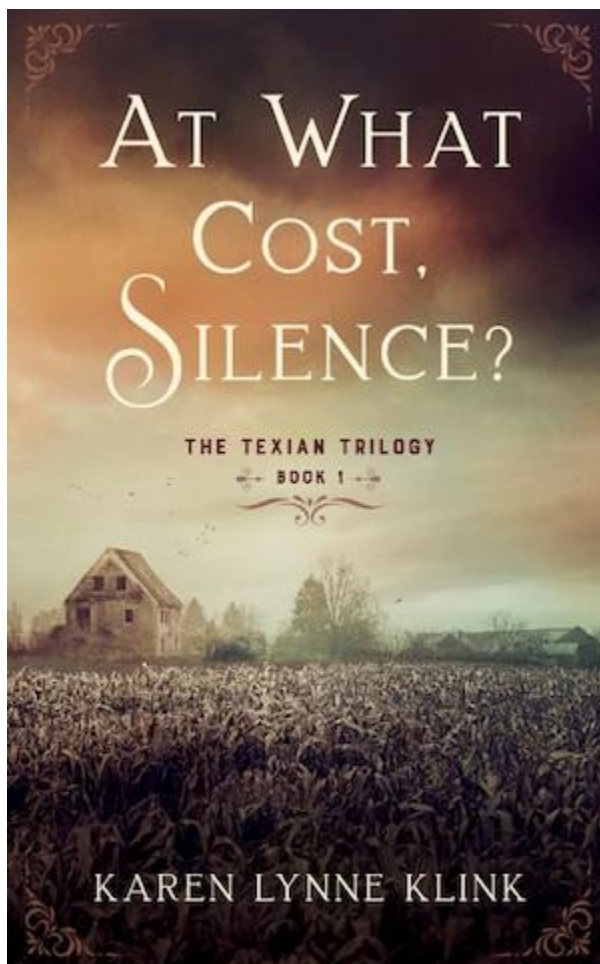
Adrien Villere is the second oldest child of Paien (the first child from Paien and Madeleine's union). Adrien longs for Paien's approval but is usually left at home while Paien takes his oldest son Lucien to work the fields. Lucien looks down on Adrien and openly mocks him. Adrien's closest relationships are with his mother and his sister Bernadette. His closest friend is Isaac Holland, the sole child of Marcus and Betta. Adrien sees Isaac as a brother, but the world they inhabit would never allow such a bond.

The year is 1849, Texas is still a relatively new addition to the increasingly fragile union of the United States. The increasing calls for abolition of the wicked institution of slavery are just one aspect of life that threaten the Villere family's status quo. Paien has been keeping a secret or two from his family that if revealed could divide them. As Adrien and Bernadette come of age, they will both cope with love, loss, and the looming possibility of war.

*At What Cost, Silence?: The Texian Trilogy, Book 1* is the brilliant debut from author Karen Lynne Klink. The dramatic turns that affect the Villere family household over the course

of more than a decade form the essence of the narrative while each chapter is seen through various characters' perspectives. The accounts of Adrien and Bernadette are often the most poignant as the progression from youth to early adulthood comes with both triumphs and heartache. By the conclusion of this wonderful novel, the reader will find themselves ready to dig into the continuation of this saga. A literary triumph from start to finish.

**Reviewer Bio:** Philip Zozzaro is a married father of three from New York. He is an avid multi-genre reader and has been reviewing books since 2015. He has reviewed books for *The San Francisco Book Review*, *Booklist Magazine*, *U.S. Book Review*, and other publications.



Darwin Payne. *Behind the Scenes: Covering the JFK Assassination*. Denton, UNT Press, 2023. pp. 306. Paper: ISBN-13 9781574419115, US \$29.95.

### **In-Depth Coverage**

Sarah Tusa

Payne's memoir as a journalist covering the assassination of the late President John of Kennedy reads largely as a political history of Dallas and the role of news media to inform and influence political affiliations and behavior. Beginning with a summary of visits by United States presidents from Theodore Roosevelt's in 1909 to JFK's campaign visit in September 1960, Payne makes note of the political atmosphere of Dallas as observed in the reception of specific presidents and presidential candidates among its citizens over time.

As an example of the role of news media in shaping political attitudes, Payne recalls a startling incident whereby a group of young women followers of then Republican Congressman Bruce Algers attacked Lady Bird Johnson outside the Adolphus Hotel, which incident stands in stark contrast with the enthusiastic reception of Theodore Roosevelt's visit in an earlier decade. Regarding the attack on Lady Bird Johnson, Payne not only ponders, "Where were the Democrats?" (36), but also goes on to note: "Despite the negative publicity and its own criticism of the event, our politically moderate Times Herald endorsed Nixon as president; those were the orders from upstairs" (38). Beside indicating the bias of the newspaper in question, the incident appears to suggest a shift toward a more Republican-oriented Dallas. Payne appears to point to the growing conservatism in Dallas by the early 1960s with his observation that John Birch Society was especially strong in Dallas" (50).

In light of the perceived fervor of the conservative Republicans, Payne reports that anticipation of Kennedy's campaign visit in September 1963 was wrought with the "fear that



riotous right-wing extremists would spoil President Kennedy's visit created the most angst-filled weeks in the city's history" (67-68). Indeed, Payne observes presidential aide Ken O'Donnell stand up suddenly during the motorcade and announce that the president had been shot. When it is revealed that President Kennedy had been shot, Payne initially assumes that "surely ultrarightists had been the shooters, there was little question about that. Dallas's newly aroused extremists had taken their hatred of President Kennedy to an unbelievable level" (90).

Despite the Payne's justifiable suspicion of the 'ultrarightists,' in the immediate moments after the assassination, he discredits the popular belief that Oswald did not act alone, and instead cites the "most lengthy and substantive history of the assassination" (257) produced by Vincent Bugliosi, who "devoted two chapters to address and correct these mistaken beliefs" (ibid.) Both historians and journalism students will find a treasure trove of socio-political information and insights into the inner workings of the news media.

**Reviewer Bio:** Sarah Tusa retired from her position as Associate Professor in the Mary & John Gray Library in June 2020. In her 30 years at Lamar University, Sarah published primarily in academic journals related to serials management and also served briefly as Co-managing Editor of *Review of Texas Books*.



Tom Clavin. *Follow Me to Hell: McNelly's Rangers and the Rise of Frontier Justice*. New York, Macmillan Publishers, 2023. pp. 364. Paper: ISBN 9781250214553, US\$29.99.

### **A Sort of Militia: The Texas Rangers in the Time of Leander McNelly**

Lloyd Daigrepoint

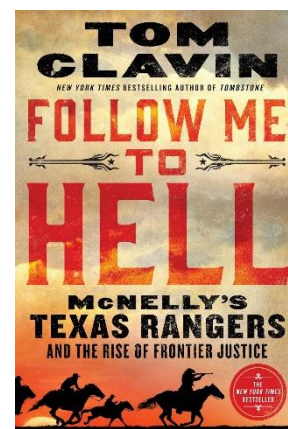
Although the author takes his time getting to the subject indicated in his title, readers will find in its opening chapters a stimulating yet concise history of early Texas—its struggle for independence and survival and its growing reliance upon a police presence especially suited to the nature of Texas—its rough and challenging terrain and its equally rough and challenging settlers. These “Texians” faced violent opposition from Native Americans as well as representatives of the Mexican government and unruly outlaws and thieves. Although the word ranger went in and out of use during the administrations of leaders like Stephen F. Austin and Sam Houston, it was agreed that Texas was in need of “a sort of militia always ready for future provocations” (5). A host of colorful figures—John Coffee Hays, William “Bigfoot” Wallace, and others dramatically demonstrated the immense value of such protectors to the emerging republic. There were rangers at the Alamo, and the rangers of Texas were among the world’s first military units to employ Samuel Colt’s revolvers in combat. Ranger captain and future politician Sul Ross gained fame for his “recapture” of Cynthia Parker during a skirmish at Pease River. During the administration of Governor Richard Coke, the Frontier Protection Act was approved by the Texas Legislature; the Fronter Battalion, as it came to be called, became not only “the latest version of the Texas Rangers” but as well an assurance of “continuity from the contingent of lawmen created in 1874 to the Texas Rangers of today” (206). A new generation of Texas Rangers began to find duty within this saving renewal of the old Texas “militia,” among them Leander McNelly. A son of Irish immigrants—undersized and tubercular and destined to die at

thirty-three years of age, McNelly seemed marked, as The Houston Daily Telegraph reported, by “inflexible determination and untiring activity” (210). He first distinguished himself as a very young cavalry officer during the Civil War, when he exhibited his proficiency at using ruses—having scouts cross the same bridge repeatedly during the night to give the illusion of a superior force approaching and causing the Union officer to surrender. To the ruse he added courageous risk and defiance and even ruthlessness to end the Taylor-Sutton feud in DeWitt county, using pitiless deputies as agents of justice; according to John Wesley Hardin, fear of McNelly was the main cause for the outlaw’s departure from Texas. In the Nueces Strip—a no-man’s land between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River—he battled rustlers who were almost certainly sponsored by the Mexican government, and like Captain Ranald McKenzie even risked the charge of invasion of a sovereign country by confronting rustlers on their home ground. Ordered by the Secretary of the Navy to desist he replied as follows:

Near Cuevas, Mexico, Nov. 20 1875. I shall remain in Mexico with my rangers and cross back at my discretion. Give my compliments to the Secretary of War and tell him and his United States soldiers to go to hell. Signed, Lee H. McNelly, commanding. (287)

Like Audie Murphy—another undersized Texas hero of Irish descent—McNelly characterized the need to confront violent opposition as “hell,” yet like Murphy he never failed to lead his men rather than merely command. In *Follow Me to Hell* Clavin uses McNelly to illustrate the full development of frontier justice as determined and upheld by the Texas Rangers.

**Reviewer Bio:** Lloyd Daigrepoint is a retired Professor of English. He taught at Lamar University from 1981 through the Fall semester 2020.



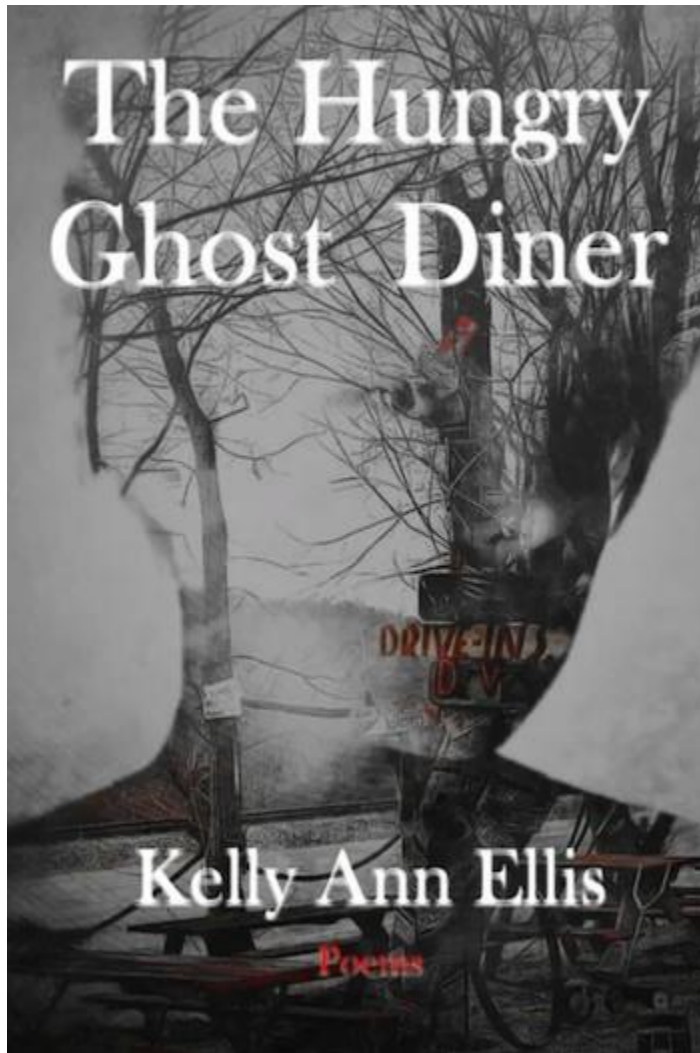
Kelly Ann Ellis. *The Hungry Ghost Diner*. Beaumont, TX: Lamar University Literary Press, 2023. pp. 117. Paper: ISBN-13: 9781942956990, US \$17.00

## **Hungry Ghost Diner Satiates**

*Nicki Michalski*

*The Hungry Ghost Diner* by Kelly Ann Ellis is a wide-ranging exploration of one woman's mind, life, and experiences in poetic form. Ellis mines the common elements of small-town life while combining them with snippets of ancient mythology and contemporary religion. References to Leda, Zeus, and Pandora lie next to an ode to Amy Winehouse and a memory of the speaker proselytizing as a Jehovah's Witness. She describes relationships both familial and romantic from the perspective of someone who has moved past the flirtations and fixations of youth and into the tempered expectations and realities of middle age. The poetry in this book leads the reader to consider their own experiences and how they are reflective of, or contrast with, those of the author. This volume of poetry is focused on the interpretation and exploration of the human experience. While Ellis's book does not focus on, or even significantly discuss, "mature topics," I would not consider it kid-friendly. It is very targeted toward the midlife experience and thus will not likely resonate with younger people. However, if they are interested in the malaise that can strike one in the midst of day-to-day life, often redundant, and common life that people generally don't commemorate in literature or poetry, they will find this book provides insight about this state of being. The book does what poetry is supposed to do. It causes the reader to stop, ponder, and weigh the intentions of the author while debating if they agree or have had similar experiences of their own. In addition, this collection does elicit a sense of Texas through direct references to places like the Trinity River and Kemah as well as the less specific feeling of being in a small, dusty, isolated town. Ellis's work allows you to explore these concepts and places from the comfort of your own reading nook.

**Reviewer Bio:** Dr. Michalski is an associate professor and interim department chair of the Department of Communication and Media at Lamar University. She teaches a variety of classes focusing on theory, performance, and popular culture topics.



Mike Cochran, *John B. Denton: The Bigger-than-Life Story of the Fighting Parson and Texas Ranger*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2021. pp. 243. Cloth: ISBN-13 9781574418408, US \$29.95.

### **John B. Denton: Life and Legend (From the Backlist)**

Lloyd Daigrepoint

As its subtitle suggests, Mike Cochran's study of John B. Denton is more than biography. In addition to fact and historical data, it offers an explanation of the legendary fiber encasing the story of the man for whom Denton County as well as its county seat has been named. Denton's life was in itself short yet representative of the lives of settlers in Texas in the early 1800s—mainly Anglo-European and Protestant, something of a contrast to the Spanish and French creoles who ruled Texas during its colonial period. Following the Louisiana Purchase, these settlers pushed westward, down the Appalachians into territories such as West Virginia and Arkansas, and thence into Texas.

John B. Denton became a tireless and passionate circuit riding minister in Texas as well as Arkansas, known for his “considerable powers of oratory” (9) despite his complete lack of education. Eventually he married, purchased a headright of 640 acres in North Texas, and fathered six children. Under the tutelage of his young wife Mary, he learned to read and write. His family and his intellectual interests (which were expansive) pulled him in the direction of pragmatic concerns, though he maintained his interest in Scripture and the ministry. Eventually he began to “read law” in the office of established attorneys in Clarksville, and he became interested in politics.

In 1841 the public-minded Denton was drawn into a mission that would end his life. The family of Ambrose Ripley—a man known to Denton—were massacred in their homestead by

marauding Comanche natives. A Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers was formed, and Denton became one of about seventy volunteers. The “Tarrant Expedition”—named for General Edward Tarrant—was largely unsuccessful—hardly able to find the marauders after three attempts. On the fourth, they encountered Native American encampments near the western fork of the Trinity River at a place referred to as Village Creek. Initially successful, the Rangers finally met a larger force in nearby encampments; they were ambushed, largely because of the daring and aggressiveness of Denton, who was the first and only member of the expedition to die. Realizing the true strength of their enemy, the rangers retreated, burying their fallen comrade near a creek about an hour’s ride from the site of the ambush.

In 1846, as thirty-two new counties were created for the annexation into American statehood, Texas stood in need of heroic names, and Denton’s was enthusiastically put forth by now-influential former participants of the Tarrant Expedition: “John B. Denton’s life story was entwined with the story of the Battle of Village Creek and his posthumous popularity helped keep the battle alive in public memory” (97). Never mind that the expedition had failed to avenge the Ripley massacre and that the natives encountered were not Comanches. The “Larger-Than-Life Story of the Fighting Parson and Texas Ranger” had become a political necessity and a popular sentiment. Although numerous recoveries of Denton’s remains were claimed (most famously by well-known rancher John Chisum, son of one of Denton’s fellow rangers) none to this day have been fully confirmed; in November, 1901, a great ceremony and burial took place on the lawn of the Denton County courthouse in which the Rev. William H. Allen, author of the first biographical volume on Denton, referred to him as a “martyr to Texas civilization” (127).

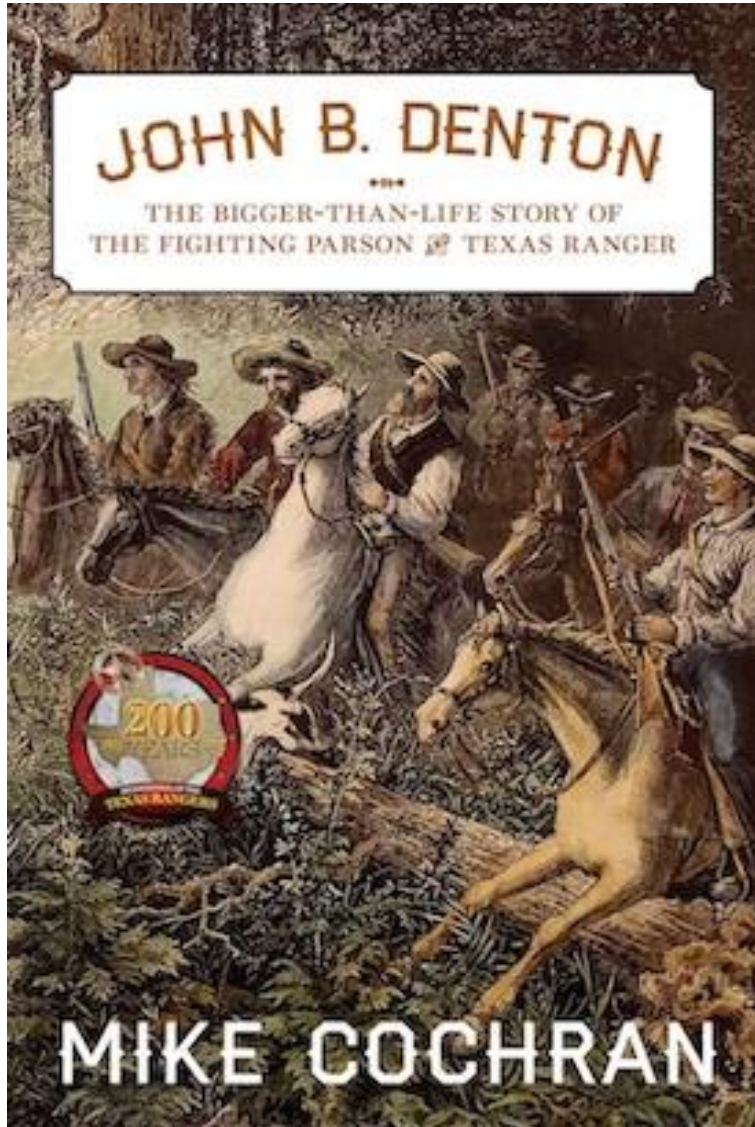
Aside from these more or less political motives, the public appetite for sensational heroism and sentimental reminiscence contributed to the “larger-than-life” image of John B.

Denton as journalists and writers of so-called dime westerns began to exploit the image of the man of God turned Indian fighter. Most notorious of these was Alfred W. Arrington, who like Denton was a self-educated Methodist minister and lawyer as well as a gifted speaker. Unlike Denton, however, Arrington was morally dissolute, a womanizer and “debauchee from his fourteenth year” (150). He had no qualms about portraying a hero named Denton, using the names Paul and James in place of John. He melodramatically manufactured a Dickensian childhood of extreme poverty and abuse, as well as numerous heroic adventures such as the sudden courtroom appearance of the husband of Mary Denton to rescue her with brilliant eloquence from the charge of murdering a man who would have degraded her. Arrington also published a very popular poem entitled “An Apostrophe to Water,” supposedly penned by Denton as the climax of a temperance lecture. So wide was the influence of such compositions that when Denton’s son Dr. Ashley Newton Denton died in 1901, the State Medical Association of Texas in an honorary tribute extolled Ashley as the son of “Paul Denton.”

Cochran’s volume is exceedingly well-researched and documented, and it culls its findings from numerous and diverse sources. In a way, an important aspect of his study is its careful clearing away of the lingering falsehoods and misapprehensions concerning the life of John B. Denton—many of them made by well-meaning and competent scholars. He hardly confirms Denton’s status as “martyr,” keenly respectful of Native American culture and its place in Texas history. Ultimately, he upholds Denton’s significance—not as martyr but as a “real man of his time, who earned the respect of his contemporaries” (172), a symbolic representation of the hardworking and morally committed settlers whose character and ambitions helped to define Texas as it moved from territory into statehood.



**Reviewer Bio:** Lloyd Daigrepoint is a retired professor of English. He taught at Lamar University from 1981-2020. He was co-editor of *Lamar Journal of the Humanities* and supervising editor of *Review of Texas Books*. He published articles on American literature in journals such as *American Literary Realism*, *Western American Literature*, and *Early American Literature*.



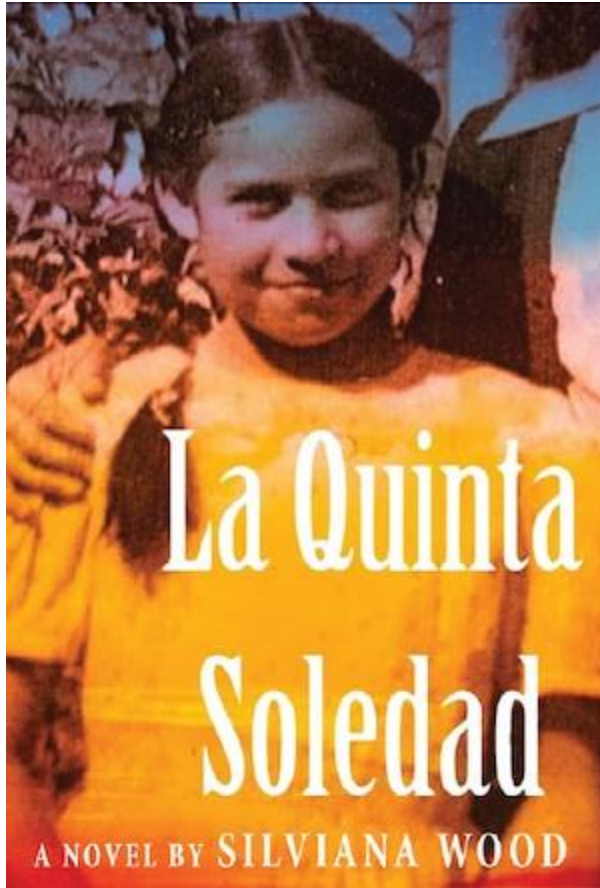
Silviana Wood. *La Quinta Soledad*. San Antonio, Aztlan Libre Press, 2022. pp. 618. Paper: ISBN-13 978-0-9905779-4-2, US \$28.95.

### **The Wife of Bath, Retold: A Chicana Point-of-View (From the Backlist)**

Rafael Castillo

Silviana Wood's 617-page debut novel *La Quinta Soledad* is a winding narrative full of lightning and thunder told in free-wheeling hybrid *calo* (Chicano dialect) by an aging, working-class Chicana named Quinta. The narrative voice is interspersed with a linguistic treasure trove of English-Spanish neologisms, playful double-entendres, and a dash of Yiddish. She narrates the story of her abuela, Nana Conchita, and the origin of their family name, Soledad. Reading the novel is like eavesdropping into the family drama and the lives of her four sisters, ruled by the strong hand of their Nana, who loves to chastise them all for their *sinverguenzada* (shamelessness). In short, Quinta is the delightful impish trickster character that gives readers a history of their plight, capturing every historical etching and minutia of suffering, working-class Chicanx endured the last 50 years, even if tapered by the voice of her Nana, the archetypal abuelita figure familiar in extended family households. No matter what happens in this delightful long tale, Nana tries her magisterial best to tame Quinta's libido. Aligned with her name, Quinta's character is a symbolic allusion to the cultural myths of Aztlan, the cultural landscape of the Aztecs, and her story is a memoir and love letter to Chicana culture.

**Reviewer Bio:** Rafael C. Castillo is the author of *Distant Journeys* (Bilingual Review Press), *Aurora* (Berkeley Press/Floricanto), and *Dostoevsky on Guadalupe Street* (2023; Peter Lang International). His stories, essays, reviews, epistolary notes, and ruminations have appeared in *The New Mexico Humanities Review*, *CCH Humanities Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Palo Alto Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, *New York Times Book Review*, and Hearst publications, including the *Washington Post* syndicate. His stories and articles have been anthologized in *Lone Star Literature* (Norton), *Southwest Tales* (Maize Press), *New Growth II*, and *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford University Press).



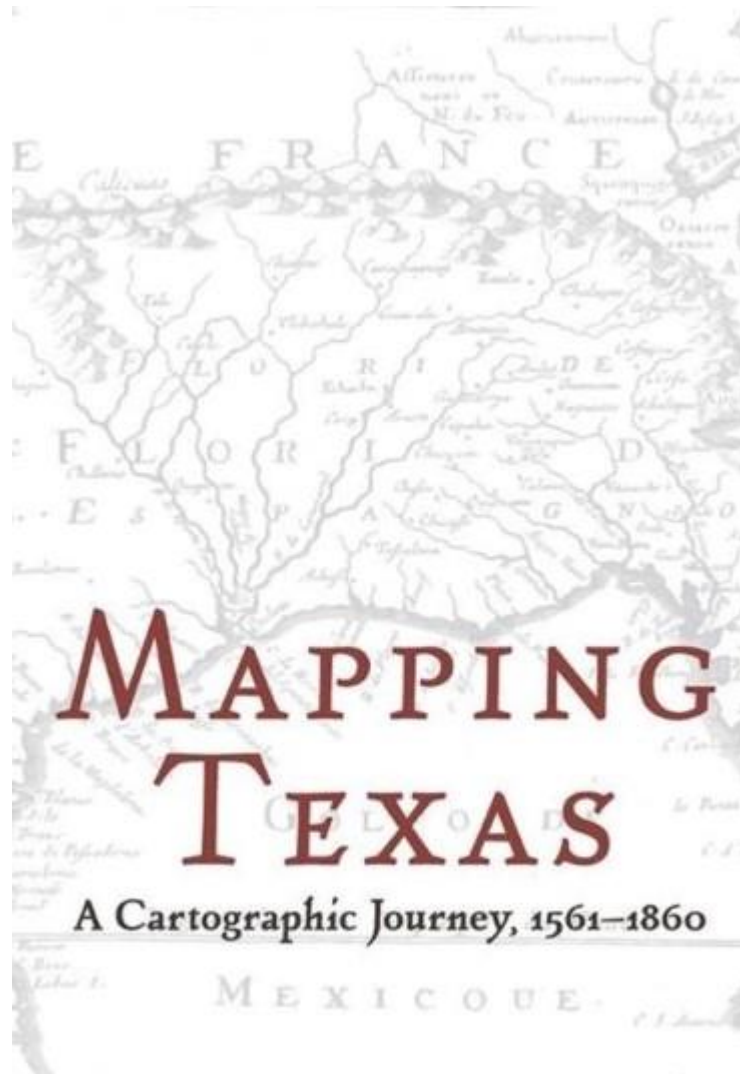
John S. Wilson, ed. *Mapping Texas: A Cartographic Journey, 1561-1860*. Waco, Baylor University Press, 2019. pp. 132. Hardcover: ISBN 9781481311816, US \$29.99.

## **Charting Texas History**

Andy Coughlan

Everyone has access to a map, nowadays, with a simple click on an app. A cross-country drive is accompanied by a soothing voice telling us every turn, guided by pinpoint satellite navigation. But once, a map was more than a way to get from A to B. It was a geopolitical guide, a source of survival, of rebellion. It was also a work of art. *Mapping Texas: A Cartographic Journey, 1561-1860*, compiled from The Texas Collection at Baylor University, is the perfect addition for lovers of history, geography, or art. There is a brief introduction, and the maps are presented in sections that are loosely themed, but editor John S. Wilson writes that the book “is not intended to be an academic, scholarly, or exhaustive work on Texas maps.” That may not be the intention, but the book can certainly lead one down a rabbit hole of study if one chooses (and one most likely will choose). It is interesting to see how accurate the early maps are considering the lack of technology, although there are some interesting distortions. Of course, Texas was not always named such. In Fig. 1.04, the region falls under the area called Floride. In Fig. 1.05 we see it is part of Louisiana territory. It is not until 1783’s “Map or the European Settlements in Mexico or New Spain and the West Indies” that we find a designation for Texas. It is not until 1816 that we find maps that clearly correspond to what we recognize today. The fifth section of *Mapping Texas*, by Sierra M. Wilson, is devoted to the map as art, specifically the illustrations or cartouches, embellishments that indicate the artist or printer. The style varies according to the fashions of the day in the country of origin. *Mapping Texas: A Cartographic Journey, 1561-1860* is a relatively slim volume at 121 pages, but the 46 beautiful reproductions will draw the curious reader back to its pages time after time.

**Reviewer Bio:** Andy Coughlan is a journalism professor at Lamar University, award-winning arts writer, and exhibiting artist. A native of Brighton, England, he has lived in Southeast Texas for 40 years.



Richard Z. Santos. *A Night of Screams: Latino Horror Stories*. Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2023. pp. 221. Paperback: ISBN-13 9781558859616, US \$24.95.

### **Fear Knows No Borders in Santos' *Night of Screams***

Cesar Delgado

From the dark hallways of Bellevue and beyond, courtesy of Sydney Macias, emerges a captivating anthology titled *A Night of Screams: Latino Horror Stories*. This collection palpitates with an unearthly energy, inviting readers into a world where the horror of Hurricane Maria is recounted by the dead, the incessant struggle for Latine/Hispanic representation in media is achieved only through butchery and the lingering wailings of the Llorona persist. *A Night of Screams* celebrates the essence of Latino horror—or rather acknowledges the horrors of being Latino.

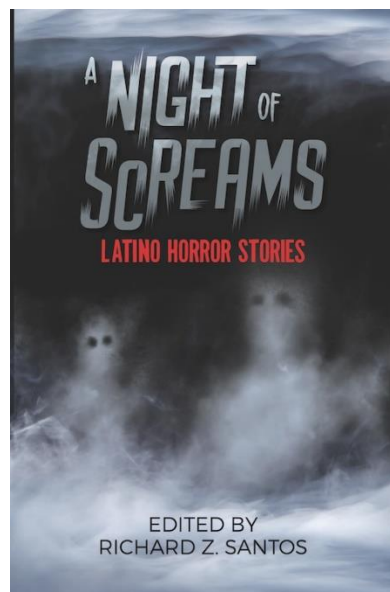
Monique Quintana opens the anthology with an adaptation of the well-known urban legend of the Rainbow Ballroom in “Dark Lord of the Rainbow.” Quintana’s piece opens with a girl’s fascination with the dark and macabre. Specifically, it is her obsession with the Hooved Man that places her in the passenger seat of his Chevy Malibu. In a nutshell, Quintana warns of the danger of being seduced by a devil. As for the reader, this short story sets the tone and pace for a literary road trip that takes us through different landscapes and scary destinations.

As we speed our way down editor Richard Santos’s highway through hell, we find ourselves in Southside California with Luisito. “Indian Blood” chronicles the life of young Luis as he struggles to provide for his aging abuelita. After a bad day at work, Luisito makes a deal with a devil and finds himself struggling with powers beyond his comprehension. Compared to other installments, Marcos Damian Leon paints a poignant picture that reminds the reader that sometimes danger lurks close to home.

After making our way through chilling shorts and a selection of poems, the final piece in this collection is an excerpt of Ivelisse Rodriguez’s *Before We Became a New People*. Rodriguez ends *A Night of Screams* with the howling nightmare of colonialism inflicted on our gente, specifically, our boricua siblings. To accomplish this, she invokes the assistance of our ancestors and an orisha in a writing that will shock her readers.

Crafted by a diverse group of Latino authors, this anthology explores the multifaceted realm of horror. It skillfully avoids becoming redundant, using a diverse cast of voices to create an engaging experience. It excels in portraying a rich tapestry of Latino horror, transcending the genre to offer profound insights into identity and folklore. In a time where cultural understanding is being attacked by wicked forces, *A Night of Screams* stands as a much needed and timely exploration of the genre that transcends borders, beckoning readers to appreciate the horror of our shared experiences and to accept that “the things of nightmares” are not too scary after all.

**Reviewer Bio:** César Delgado lives in the Port Arthur-Beaumont area in Texas, where he earned his B.A. in English from Lamar University’s Reaud Honors College. Having presented at the Popular Culture Association of the South conference as an undergraduate, his areas of interest continue to be Latino entertainment, culture, and literature. He is currently a writing and Texas History teacher with Port Arthur Independent School District.



Thomas Zigal. *Outcry Witness*. Fort Worth, TCU Press, 2019. pp. 320. Paper: ISBN-13 9780875657189, US \$28.95.

**The Price of Truth: A Review of Thomas Zigal's *Outcry Witness* (From the Backlist)**

Karen Bartlett

*Outcry Witness* by Thomas Sigal is an engaging read, not what one might expect for a novel that explores the ways the Catholic Church handled, at times through denial, sexual abuse committed by their own clergy. The novel, set in New Orleans, begins in 2001, as protagonist Peter Moore's book about the murder of a Catholic clergyman is about to be published. The murder took place in 1980, but 20 years later, the old bishop is worried about how Moore's book will affect his nomination to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

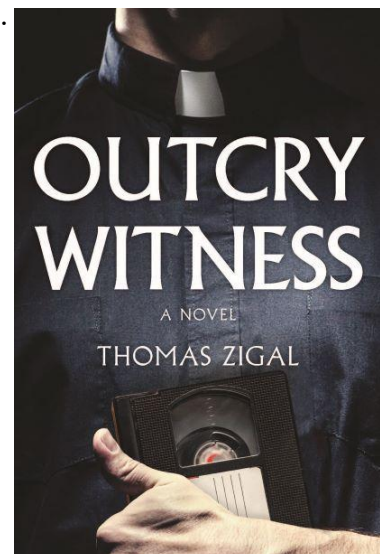
The novel shifts to the events of the 1980 murder, giving readers a firsthand view of the scandal that threatened irreparable damage to the Catholic Church. Father Martin Landry, associate priest of Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church, is found brutally murdered. Father Ted McMurray, pastor of the church and Peter Moore's uncle, calls Peter to help him cover up evidence of a sex/drug party, complete with sex toys and a set of video tapes that covers years of egregious acts committed by Landry against young boys. What is particularly harrowing for Peter is that he is the communications director for the church, and his job has been to publish public comments on the workings of the church. Yet, when Ted asks Peter to tamper with the crime scene, Peter is caught between his profession and his conscience. And though Peter is loyal to his uncle, this one act sets in motion events that begin to haunt Peter and cause him to question where his loyalty lies. He and Ted vow to uncover what happened to Father Landry, but Ted often reminds Peter that the church cannot be compromised. Peter grapples with the growing evidence that points to the complicity and willful ignorance of those in power to allow people like Landry to escape the consequences of their actions.



One of Peter's main concerns is to prove the innocence of Kwame Williams, a young homeless Black man imprisoned for the murder of Landry, though Peter and his uncle know Kwame is innocent. To help find the truth of what happened to Landry and to help Kwame, Peter enlists the help of Vince Scalco, a PI who is eating and drinking himself to death over the loss of his own son. Together they uncover the web of danger that surrounds the life of Martin Landry, and Scalco helps Peter comb through video after video from Landry's personal collection to identify victims. While the videos disclose the degeneracy of Landry's abuse, the details given are not gratuitous; instead, they help to underscore Peter's compassion for the victims and his drive for justice.

Zigal masterfully imbues the feel of New Orleans in the book. From flooding parking lots in the city, to downtown offices in the French Quarter, to fish camps on Vermillion Bay, the tragic beauty of the city works as a backdrop for characters who are experiencing the worst of life. The persevering spirit of the city mirrors the sense of justice that Peter Moore pursues. The novel ends with Zigal returning to the meeting between the Bishop and Peter Moore, which offers a frame for the story, and Zigal fills in what happened to all those affected, even haunted, by the depraved actions of Martin Landry. Yet, even without the frame, the story of Landry's murder and Peter's search for justice makes *Outcry Witness* an engaging story.

**Reviewer Bio:** When not teaching writing, KT Bartlett writes crime fiction. Her story "It's The Least I Can Do" appeared in *Thrill Ride Magazine*, December 2023.



Jeffrey R. De Lio, *Selling the Humanities: Essays*. Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2023. pp. 222. Paper: ISBN-13 9781680033182, \$29.95

### **Can the Humanities Survive an Increasingly Neoliberal World?**

Hannah Franklin

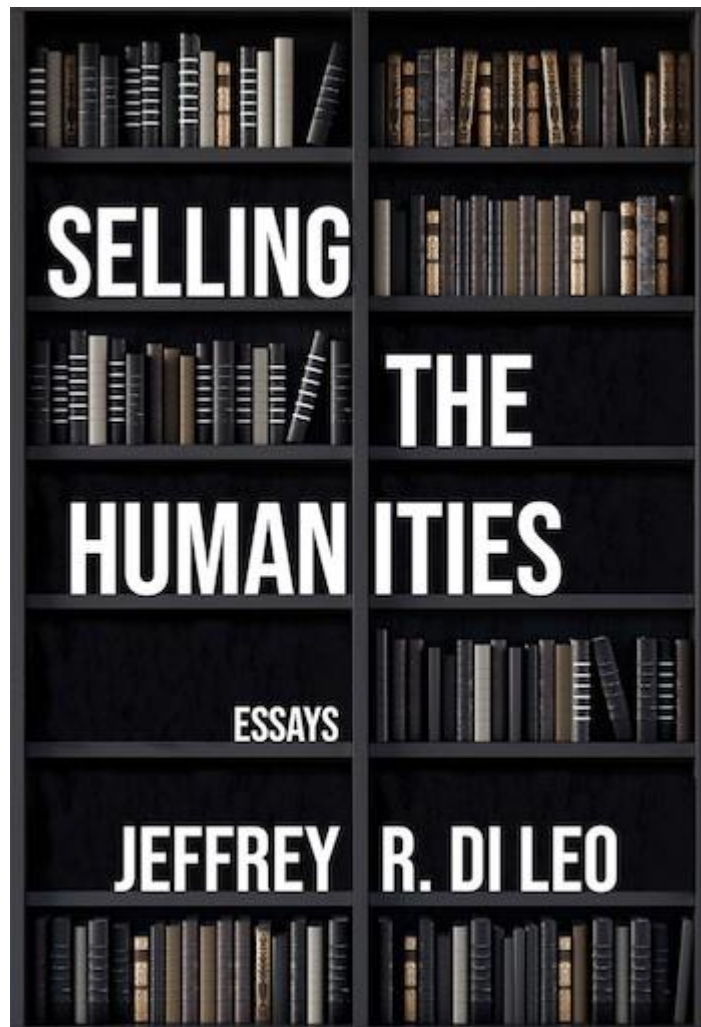
At a time when our society is becoming increasingly focused on profit, economic growth, and materialism, causing people to consider fields in the humanities impractical, Jeffrey R. Di Leo's book, *Selling the Humanities: Essays*, attempts to tackle the issue of whether or not there is a place for the humanities in our current neoliberal society. At the same time, Di Leo also confronts the issue of whether it is possible to prove the value of the humanities, while still retaining the humanizing qualities that define this field. This book is a collection of twenty-four essays in which Di Leo analyzes a diverse assortment of critical issues within several areas of the humanities: literature, philosophy, critical theory, and music. Throughout his essays, Di Leo addresses a broad range of topics within academia, as well as outside of it. For example, some of the topics that he addresses are the increase in self-publishing, the increasingly fast-paced nature of the publishing industry, the influence of Amazon on the publishing industry, how philosophy can be applied to "real-world," everyday problems, and how students are increasingly focused on studying "practical" degrees that will ultimately lead to increased chances of lucrative job placement.

Although it can seem fragmentary, Di Leo's use of the essay format allows him to address this complicated issue that has many different layers. Throughout his book, Di Leo utilizes his experience as a Professor of Philosophy and English, a Ph.D. student, an editor of an academic journal, along with his experience publishing his own academic writing, to provide a well-balanced view of the humanities from the perspective of writer, editor, professor, and student. He continues incorporating this balanced viewpoint by referencing other professionals

within the humanities who have attempted to address this ongoing issue, critiquing their works and creating a place for his own unique perspective on this problem.

Di Leo's book is recommended for college students who are studying or who are interested in studying the humanities, professionals within the field, as well as anyone who is interested in the humanities.

**Reviewer Bio:** Hannah Franklin is a Library Specialist in the Research, Engagement, and Learning department of the Mary and John Gray Library at Lamar University. She has a B.A. in English and an M.A. in English both from Lamar University. She's currently a graduate student at Texas Woman's University earning a Master's degree in Library Science.



Laurence Musgrove. *A Stranger's Heart*. Beaumont, Lamar University Literary Press, 2023. pp. 116. Paper: ISBN-13 9781962148016, US \$20.

**“To Keep Everything Tender:” A Review of *A Stranger's Heart***

Casey Ford

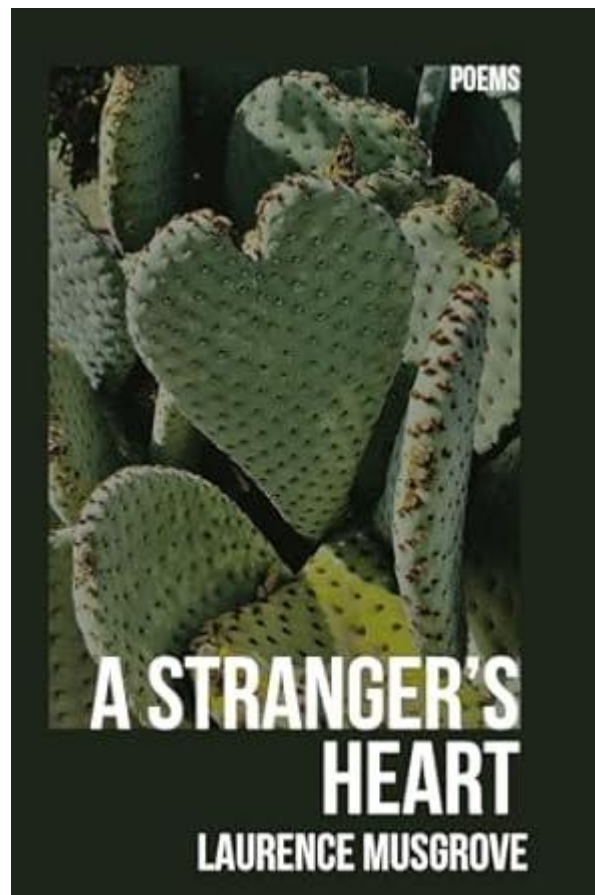
San Angelo poet Laurence Musgrove, one of Texas' favorite poetry teachers and most generous editors, has made for us an expansive and luminous gift of his most recent collection, *A Stranger's Heart*. Texas Poet Laureate Jan Seale calls this collection intoxicating and honest, always “circling back to hope.” Though Musgrove has published many other poems and collections, the poems in *A Stranger's Heart* seem the work of a whole life, reaching back to childhood and spanning much of the biography of “a man / Who fell into the line of men who / Knew who needed words and when.” It has different life stories in it, too – one of a teacher, a dog lover, one of a writer, of a soul who knows “stars shine because they are crying light.”

Musgrove's “Complexion” is dense with muddy river water and the failure-feelings of whiteness we might experience as part of our living in this big border state. With an epigraph by John Prine, there are elements of it that sing like a folk song, but at the important chord changes, there are lightning bolts of silence in bleeding colors and a “long list of regrets.” That devastating poem is made all the more powerful by the compassionate one that follows it: the speaker in “Metta Guided Meditation” projects a wish for themselves outward to the reader, that we notice “the air is happy to deliver the music,” that we hear the songs in our children's eyes, that we be free. Meditations and sutras illuminate apt moments in the collection, appearing just as they are needed.

Another moving aspect of the collection is its ars poetica throughline. Musgrove himself emanates empathy for students, readers, animals, and other poets, and so do these poems. He remarks (perhaps obliquely) on our habits of art, the ways poets get “low on the crowded

sidewalk / “To pick up the trash others let go.” He says, “We’re all in the mistake-making business... / Like deciding to trust a stranger’s heart.” The stranger might be him, or it might be myself or the speaker in the poem I want to write, which I am trying to hold together “The best I can / With ink and gravity.” Musgrove humbly acknowledges the challenges of reading poetry, how it takes “some extra / Gas in the tank,” and he thanks us for reading even when it’s difficult, because “It’s so hard to start over, to keep everything tender.”

**Reviewer Bio:** Casey L. Ford is the director of the Writing Center at Lamar University, where she also teaches composition and creative writing. Two of her most treasured books are Carolyn Forché’s *Against Forgetting* and Ned Rorem’s *Music and People*. Casey recently completed her MFA at Fairfield University, and her poems have been published in *Delta Poetry Review*, *Ocotillo Review*, *Amarillo Review*, *Concho River Review*, and *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, the latter of which honored her with a Pushcart Prize nomination.



Lareida Buckley. *Stories from the Sheriff's Daughter*. Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2023. pp. 224. Paper, ISBN: 978-0875658346 \$24.95.

## **Stories from the Sheriff's Daughter**

Stacey Knight

Lareida Buckley gives us a first-view account of a rural small-town Texas girl growing up under the watchful eye of her mother and her father, the sheriff of the town. The author cleverly portrays a vivid coming of age story describing what it was like growing up as the Sheriff's daughter through Dolly, the main character of the story.

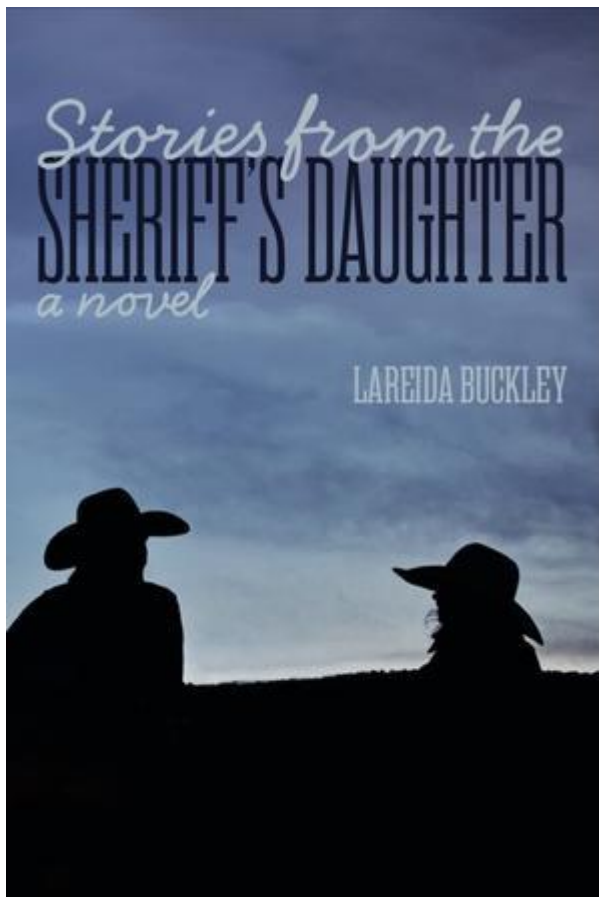
Dolly, her two brothers Walter and Bill, and her parents live directly next to the jail during her middle childhood through young adult years as her father served multiple terms as sheriff of the town. Throughout the book Dolly tells her candid stories of encounters she has with prisoners in the jail and her somewhat naïve insights on why they ended up in the trouble—as well as what eventually becomes of the “criminals” after their release. She also explains her mother's duties as jail cook, custodian, and dispatcher for the Sheriff's Department and her mother's yearning for a different home and a more protective, peaceful environment in which to raise her children.

Dolly spends much of her childhood daydreaming about what it would be like to travel and has fantasies about the wonderful life of a roustabout. Always yearning for a life away from her small rural community and having dreams of traveling the world, Dolly goes on a backpacking trip in Europe during college and unfortunately loses her beloved father while she is away. Throughout the book, it is evident that Dolly adores her father and admires his actions when dealing with the prisoners, leaving her very proud of the way he served the small

community. She returns and remains there, taking a position as a social worker and resigning herself to the fact that this is where she should have been all along.

Buckley's tender, earthly, and comical first-hand account from Dolly gives us a glimpse of small-town Texas life and the trials and tribulations of growing up there.

**Reviewer Bio:** Stacey Knight is an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Lamar University. As a descendant of Austin's "Old Three Hundred" and an avid reader, she applauds and supports the efforts of Texas authors and those narrating Texas history.



Robert Dillard. *Two Counties in Crisis: Measuring Political Change in Reconstruction Texas*. Denton, TX: UNT Press, 2023. pp. 241. Paper: ISBN-13 9781574419078, US \$34.95

**Two Counties in Crisis or One State in Transition? A Review of *Two Counties in Crisis: Measuring Political Change in Reconstruction Texas***

J. P. Nelson

Robert J. Dillard's *Two Counties in Crisis* is a fascinating exploration of the politics of Texas during the Reconstruction era that followed the U.S. Civil War. The main title does not reflect the breadth of the historical analysis within the book. Within its pages, Dr. Dillard does an exemplary job of educating readers on key developments in the governance of Texas during Reconstruction. Alongside the discussion of broader historical trends, the book used detailed analyses of two demographically distinct Texas counties to illustrate the dynamics at play closer to the level of the individual citizen.

Dillard's analysis of statewide trends incorporated academic work on political culture (and culture in a broader sense) to explain the development of a more uniform state political culture in the wake of the U.S. Civil War. The book's historiographical analysis is compelling as well, and raises important points about the interpretation of Texas history. While the central focus of the work is on the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction, Dillard makes the work relevant to present-day political observers. The epilogue highlights how some aspects of Texas political culture have changed in the intervening years. The detail of its discussion of Texas history alone makes the book worth reading; the broadly accessible incorporation of social scientific research into its arguments makes the work a "must-read" for scholars of Texas history and politics. University and college libraries should definitely purchase *Two Counties in Crisis*. It is exactly the kind of book that researchers and students of Texas politics should read to deepen their knowledge of the state's political history, and the basis of some of its past political division. The



broader citizenry would benefit from reading such a book (and history buffs among them would likely enjoy it). For these reasons, the book is a less essential purchase for community libraries than those associated with colleges, but it can be a valuable addition to their shelves nonetheless.

**Reviewer Bio:** James P. Nelson is an undergraduate alumnus of Lamar University, and received his doctorate in political science from The Florida State University. His research and teaching focus on American public policy and the governance of U.S. states and localities.

