



PROJECT MUSE®

Literary Austin (review)

Steven L. Davis

Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 111, Number 4, April 2008, pp. 468-469 (Review)

Published by Texas State Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2008.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/408454/summary>

of the state, longtime friends or students, teachers of environmental or Texas literature, or admirers.

Following Busby's introduction to Graves, transcripts of a symposium and an interview with Graves at Texas State University in 2002 give the reader a personal sense of both man and work, providing a background for what others have to say about Graves. The next section contains essays written especially for this volume by friends of Graves, some of them fellow writers, each a tribute to man and author. The last and longest section is a collection of nine critical essays looking at style, theme, and technique in the works of John Graves. These range from editor Dixon's essay situating *Goodbye to a River* within the tradition of environmental literature extending back to Thoreau to Cory Lock's consideration of Graves's long relationship with *Texas Monthly* and the incongruity of the "fast-paced, progressive, urban" magazine publishing the "reflective, traditional, and rural" essays Graves contributed (p. 207).

As a former English teacher, I was especially drawn to Dickie Maurice Heaberlin's witty "Of Dachshunds and Dashes" which compares John Graves and E. B. White. Heaberlin finds similarities in the paths they followed in life (writing for top Eastern magazines including *The New Yorker*, and then leaving the city for farms) and in their selection of topics (rural landscapes and their animals, especially the beloved dachshunds each owned), and unifies the essay by discussing both writers as "dash-hounds," frequently employing the dash in their writing. According to the author, each man was a "maverick, seeking to and succeeding in writing clear, highly textured prose" who announced his independence from tradition, in part through the extensive use of dashes (p. 167). Heaberlin includes appendices of examples of each man's prose and the way he used the dash.

Busby and Dixon obviously intend the work to be a tribute to John Graves, but the result is an honest appraisal of a life's work. Contributors do not ignore the precarious position Graves has as an environmentalist who is not political, the problem of gender in Graves's work, and the thorny relationships Graves had with editors, especially those at *The Texas Monthly*. The volume also includes comprehensive bibliographies of the works of Graves and of articles about him, making this an invaluable resource for any Graves scholar.

If you are an admirer of John Graves, this volume will be a pleasure; if you aren't familiar with him, you will discover he is someone you want to get to know. For as Busby writes, while Graves is a regional Texas writer, "his work reveals his strong sense of the integral relationship between the particular and the universal" (p. 2).

East Tennessee State University

JEAN SHEPHERD HAMM

Literary Austin. Edited by Don Graham. (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2007. Pp. 478. Selected bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-87565-342-6. \$29.50, cloth.)

The emergence of a literary culture in twentieth-century Texas has given us more than bestselling novelists. It has also provided "eyewitness literature" that helps document our social history. Such writing is the focus of *Literary Austin*, a new

anthology published by TCU Press, which has previously issued *Literary Fort Worth* and plans future volumes on Dallas, El Paso, and West Texas.

Literary Austin is edited by Don Graham, who is the J. Frank Dobie Regents Professor at the University of Austin and knows the state's literature better than anyone. In *Literary Austin*, Graham seeks to define the city through its "three dominant features": government, education, and natural beauty (p. xiii). The selections are arranged in a roughly chronological order, and along the way, readers become immersed in such Austin institutions as the Scholz Garten, Whole Foods, and Barton Springs, the natural swimming hole that "soothes the soul of man and becomes the soul of the city eternal" (p. 29).

Yet it is the University of Texas that comes to cast the largest shadow over the book. Numerous writers are given ample space in which to recall their favorite professors, their favorite classes, and key moments at which they became introduced to ideas. Numerous other selections are contributed by Graham's colleagues in the university's English and Creative Writing departments. Meanwhile, works by essential writers not affiliated with UT go missing. Especially disappointing is the lack of an excerpt from Sarah Bird's anti-fraternity satire *Alamo House: Women without Men, Men without Brains*.

The emphasis on UT diminishes Austin's other attributes, particularly its role as the state capital. Aside from stories on Ann Richards and Bill Minutaglio's dazzling portrait of George W. Bush, there is little of politics in this book. Also diminished is Austin's heralded music scene, which receives less attention here than does mass murderer Charles Whitman—who somehow qualifies for three stories.

Anthologies are by their nature subjective, yet one can't escape the feeling that *Literary Austin's* focus is too narrow. The book contains numerous hagiographic portraits of Austin's literary triumvirate of Dobie-Bedichek-Webb, but no attention is given to East Austin or to the city's ethnic minorities. Works of such writers are not always available for checkout at the university library, but they aren't that hard to find, either. Resistencia Bookstore, across the river from UT, is an Austin institution run by celebrated (and here neglected) Chicano poet Raúl Salinas, who himself is the author of *East of the Freeway*, a book of poems about Austin.

Still, Graham has a good eye for compelling writing, and he's uncovered many fine, surprising selections, including Frederic Prokosch's account of his Austin childhood during the 1910s and Julius Whittier's memoir recounting his experience as one of UT's first African-American football players.

The book's most satisfying accomplishment is the distinctive narrative theme Graham develops—no easy task in an anthology. Through his selections, Graham charts the city's transformation from a laid-back oasis into a sprawling, traffic-choked megalopolis.

The catharsis comes in Robert Draper's "Adios to Austin," which recalls the days when "Everyone was broke and everything was beautiful" (p. 354). But gradually, Austin became "a place where one could earn a fortune" (p. 356). Despite its vaunted quirkiness, the city could not withstand the invasion of Silicon Valley economics and Republican Party politics. Draper sums up the damage: "Those who maintain there's nothing in the world like Austin either don't live there today, or do and don't go out much" (p. 358).