

STORYTELLERS AND COWBOYS: TWO DYING BREEDS

McMurtry, Larry. Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen.

New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

McMurtry's intriguing memoir is divided into four sections, the longest of which is entitled "Place--and the Memories of Place." This is a most appropriate title for a section of a book that features the Dairy Queen in Archer City, Texas, on its dust-cover. The bright red roof of the restaurant contrasts with the bleakness of the West Texas landscape. The photograph reminds us that most of McMurtry's fiction is set in the Cross Timbers region of Texas, where his home town of Archer City is located.

In the Dairy Queen at Archer City during the hot, dry summer of 1980, McMurtry drank lime Dr. Peppers and read a collection of essays by the German critic Walter Benjamin. Specifically, he was interested in the ideas Benjamin expresses in "The Storyteller," an essay in Illuminations, a collection of essays translated by Hannah Arendt. Benjamin predicts that the art of storytelling will come to an end. He states that the process of decline and impending death of the art began with WWI. Those soldiers who survived the battlefields of France had become silent. This reviewer recalls that his uncle, a WWI veteran who was wounded in France, never spoke about his war experiences.

At the Dairy Queen that summer McMurtry noticed that people representing a cross section of West Texas society stopped by either for cheeseburgers or cold drinks or just to sit for awhile in air-conditioned comfort. As he talked to the oil field workers, cowboys, housewives, and courthouse employees who

came in, he deduced that their interests were in a current event of local note instead of in a story from the past. He noticed also that the current event passed from their minds within the passage of a few days or even hours.

Benjamin's prediction regarding the death of storytelling became more and more significant to McMurtry as he began to reflect on the silence of certain people from his boyhood: the taciturn old German farmer, prosperous and hearty, who committed suicide without leaving behind any story about his despair; the silent "skunk woman," so-called because her first husband sold her to a trapper for a bundle of skins. The woman managed to accomplish the little shopping that she did without speaking. McMurtry recalls that his own grandmother had become one of the silent ones before he was born. Although she lived in the McMurtry household when Larry was a youngster, he cannot remember the woman ever speaking directly to him.

In the section called "Book Scouting" McMurtry demonstrates how his early and continuing fascination for books is a key element in his memory. He provides amazing detail about his first experiences as a book collector, beginning with an account of his visit to a bookstore in Wichita Falls when he was a high school athlete competing in a track tournament in that city.

As a freshman at Rice University, McMurtry was able to browse in several Houston book stores. Except for passing references to Houston bookstores, he provides little detail about his freshman studies at Rice or about his time there as a graduate student and creative writing teacher. He gives even less attention to his years at North Texas State College as an undergraduate and his year at Texas Christian as a teacher of

composition, much to the disappointment of this reviewer, who studied at both these schools in the same decade as McMurtry did.

The section called "Reading" proves indisputably, if proof was ever needed, that McMurtry is familiar with the contents of certain books he has bought and sold and then re-bought over the years. He finds himself returning to Cervantes, Balzac, George Eliot, Flaubert, and Tolstoy. He provides detailed information about the libraries of certain literary figures such as Evelyn Waugh and Virginia Woolf. Apparently, if we are what we eat, then McMurtry believes the writer is who he or she reads.

In "The End of the Cowboy--the End of Fiction," McMurtry reflects on "the melancholy of those who practice dying crafts." His has been a lifelong quest to try to learn what life on the frontier meant to those, like his grandparents, who were subject to the vagaries of a harsh nature as well as to the threat of attacks by the Sioux or the Comanches. He marvels at the resilience of his grandparents and their neighbors who worked hard without the pleasure of financial reward for all their labor. Like his grandfather before him, McMurtry's father worked hard on his ranch in the Cross Timbers region, never achieving financial success. McMurtry sees his father as a man born too late, a man who longed in vain for the return of the open range.

McMurtry's father longed to participate in a trail drive, an ambition which prompted McMurtry to construct his novel Lonesome Dove around such an event. Before he completed the novel, he became bored with the characters as well as with the

characters in the rest of his fiction whether in print or on film. In a recent note to the reviewer, McMurtry remarks about how his memory of his own fiction is poor:

"The Last Picture Show is so far back in my life--30 years for the film and 35 for the book, that I can scarcely remember it." The change in McMurtry's personality since his bypass surgery of a few years ago leads him to predict that he will write no more fiction.

If his prediction is accurate, fans of McMurtry's prose can still look forward to another memoir, since he refers to his association with various women as equal in importance to his association with books. Both influences have shaped his memory. McMurtry omits any comments on the wives, partners, and other women who have been important in his life except to say that they are subjects for another book. Perhaps he is already in the process of composing another memoir that will detail the significance of his relationships with certain women.

McMurtry's memoir leads readers to reflect on themselves as readers and on those who were instrumental in encouraging them to explore the pages of a book. It reminds them that the smell and the feel and the look of the book are all an integral part of the reading experience. It also encourages readers to reflect on the people and places that have helped shape them.

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