The Fate of the Texas Writer

BY ROD DAVIS

Not long ago I learned that Lars Eighner was in danger of returning to the same fate that, for a time, had made him famous: homelessness. He was in poor health and had spent most of the money from Travels with Lizbeth *and some of his friends were trying to organize a modest fund-raising effort.*

A few weeks later, in a Dallas newspaper gossip column, I read that a Dallas fitness promoter was about to enter a lucrative new book contract, co-authored by one of the new breed of celebrity-chasing writers for *Texas Monthly*. That very same week I was interviewed by a headhunter for a large software company about an editing job and was told that they were looking for someone with more on-line technical experience, and that I was only a "content provider." Somewhere in the course of all this an old terror began to reassert itself in my mind. The writing world, the one I've inhabited all my post-military professional life, seemed to be contorting into something I'm not sure any of us completely understands. It seemed wrong at about a hundred levels, and the wrongness was congealing all around me. When I mentioned Eighner's plight to one of his old friends, an award-winning author supporting himself as a substitute teacher in the Dallas Independent School District, he replied, "This is what happens to us. You can't make a living here being a serious writer."

At the close of a century in which the voices of Texas writers have risen from the thinnest soil to find a place in the richest lairs of the national culture, that's a pretty sorry assessment. But true. The expression of original, first-rate voices is now all but supplanted by the white noise of Prozac publishing. Today, Eighner's books can't even get reviewed in *Texas Monthly*. The labor movement developed a term for the slow, subtle, systematic destruction of an entire industry of workers: "silent violence." Writers like to think we're above that kind of assault. We're not. The ongoing, accelerating suppression of our best efforts, our sharpest minds, our toughest investigators, our most courageous and compassionate spirits, and almost all our minorities, is neither benign, nor accidental. Contemplating my own rush of terror, I realized we must first speak out the existence of this palpable, complex threat, and then we must consciously oppose it.

The real terror is that the juggernaut against us may have gone too far. At the hard level of jobs it may have. That front of the war seems to have been lost. Newspapers and magazines, let alone TV and radio stations, have been cleaning their houses of trouble-makers and boat-rockers with great efficiency. The state of journalism in Texas is a scandal as great as the state of politics—and of course goes unreported. There is scarcely a staff job in the state open to or held by a writer of integrity; or a major one held by a black or brown. Exceptions won't run to the fingers of both hands. We are now guerrillas, exiles, hold-outs, nay-sayers. Who are "we"? We are the opposition. We are everything not permitted. There can be no other position for a writer, within any culture. To examine and objectify and re-create as narrative is to stand apart from the thing considered; opposition is implicit. It can be the loving opposition of a baby to its mother, or the bloody stance taken by slave against master. But, for writers, it must be conscious. Opposition is the key to our future. Otherwise we do not have a future.

Is it any worse here than elsewhere? Does a writer in New York or Washington or Florida or California have it any differently? Probably not. The nationalization and the globalization of the economy has put the same economic pressures on all workers—writers are workers, for wages. Even screenwriters in Hollywood. The forces that shape the writer's mind and spirit are likewise no stranger to our brothers and sisters in Calcutta or Bogotá, Tokyo—or Lagos, where writers are literally, not symbolically, executed these days.

But every writer is drawn to a place; every place produces its own writers, or at least potential writers. Some writers choose the world or the universe as subject. For others, place lies in the foreground. Our place is Texas. What happens in Texas, and what happens in writing about Texas, is our foreground. It is linked to everything everywhere else, but insofar as it flashes out in particularization, what happens here is of direct relevance to what is written about here. As to what constitutes a "Texas writer," I leave that to literary pigeonholers and mutual admiration societies. The simple answer is that a Texas writer either lives in Texas and writes, e.g. Dagoberto Gilb or Sarah Bird, or lives outside Texas and writes about the place from which he or she is absent, e.g. Mary Karr or Larry McMurtry. Or considers him or herself to be a Texas writer. Writers don't run border patrols.

Always, writing in Texas has been a colonial enterprise. Sometimes more so. Except for a brief Golden Age—bookended, roughly, by the founding of *The Texas Observer* in 1954 and the collapse of city magazines and two-newspaper towns in the early 1990s—serious writers living in the state had to publish serious work somewhere beyond our borders. The *Observer* itself often sent its best elsewhere. Later, *Texas Monthly* did the same. The question today is not whether the Texas writing industry has sunk back to its old colonial status, for that question is moot. The New South has come at a price.

The fate of the Texas writer in today's neo-colonial economy is set against a tableau of simulation and deception more dangerous and sophisticated than at any time in the past. Despite excitement about the growth of electronic communications, the outlets, within the state, in which writers can grow, mature, find voices and endure have all but dried up. The robustness and combativeness that characterizes periods of creative energy has been replaced by corporate

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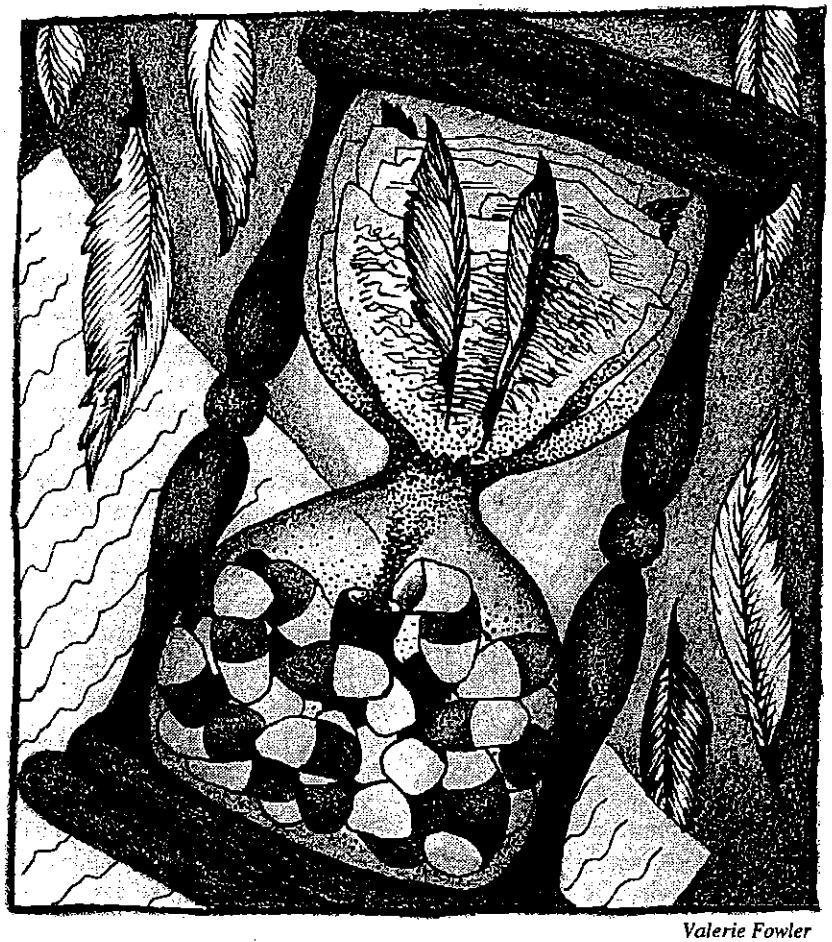
caution and individual cynicism. Most of us are forced into what Martin Amis calls "left-handed writing," the kind one does for pay, at the specific direction of the editors who manage the simulacra.

Real writing, by which I mean free inquiry, seriousness and integrity of intent, devotion to substance as well as style, and a disregard for consequences, is allowed almost nowhere. To be a serious writer in Texas, to place yourself in opposition, by the intention of objectivity to everyone around you, means you set yourself apart. For which you make professional enemies, lose friends. You risk your livelihood with every manuscript. Real writers accept this risk. Employees of the A.H. Belo Corporation, which publishes the *Dallas Morning News* and owns newspapers and broadcast outlets from here to Seattle, to name but one example, do not.

But writers have always needed intermediaries. I don't mean editors. Most editors are meddlers, young massahs or trade careerists. One in a hundred adds, rather than subtracts. Many in Texas aren't even from Texas: *TM*, of all places, has long imported East Coast young massahs for its senior editorial slots—a mark of colonial insecurity, not devotion to cosmopolitan meritocracy. I know a writer who contends that it is writers who should constitute the staffs of magazines, with editors as the freelancers, chosen by writers, rather than the other way around. This would be the natural order of the expressive process, but that would put writers in control, and, in or out of Texas, that's the last thing the corporate culture that has replaced democracy wants.



Valerie Fowler

No, the intermediaries for writers are the sellers of writers' goods: publishers. Publishers tolerate what writers say if it is either good for business or not terribly bad. When publishers can't do either, writers either get fired, or, even more silently, not hired at all, as happened to journalists in San Antonio, Houston and Dallas in the past decade when their publications were closed down and single-paper monopolies took over. "The story of all of us," in the deeply corrupt superpower world of conglomerates like the *Dallas Morning News*, became the story of a few, getting rich for keeping the story of the many so deeply buried. Legion are the tales of writers at Texas newspapers punished for doing their jobs. At the upper levels, the silent violence of the *Dallas Morning News* and *Texas Monthly* controls writing by fist-in-glove paternalism (security for loyalty), on the one hand, or diamonds-and-denim Brahminism (loyalty for insecurities), on the other, but further down the food chain the repressions morph into the more conventional brutalities. It's the difference between being fleeced by a slick savings and loan president or having your legs broken by Pinkertons.

Alternative publications such as this one, or the *Austin Chronicle*, or the *Dallas Examiner* (one of the state's few black-run publications) offer respite, but not volume or power. Ad sales are tough if you want to give voice to all the publics, not just the white, pro-business, anti-labor, middle-class hegemony that permeates the Texas media. Other alternatives, such as the sensationalist *Dallas Observer* and the *Houston Press*, both owned by New Times, of Phoenix, seem to me but to mirror the dailies, not set independent direction. Small and university presses certainly help at the book level, but the volume is low there, too, and most Texans don't even know about them. Writers cannot live off their advances. Freedom of the press, as the saying goes, matters only if you own one. Even a critique such as this is marginal, because the corporations and their new breed of Vichy editors don't care what we say here. Like Lily Tomlin's Phone Company, they don't have to.

Many important Texas writers have observed the development of this media oligopoly—with its tethers deep into government, the political parties, the surrounding business world—unfolding. Yet their objections on this matter have no real venues. They can't even mention, in a Texas publication other than this one, that economic dislocation and consolidation of industries are a function of the monopolistic tendency of finance capitalism—because they

are prohibited from saying "capitalism" in the sense of calling attention to it as a system. It is. The publishing industry in Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, not to say Lubbock and Borger and McAllen are all part of it. The system is not a conspiracy—capitalism by its nature lacks cohesiveness among competitors—but members of the system do have more in common than in opposition. Watch the daily newspapers, for example, battle the phone companies over slop rights before the Legislature, their alliances unmasked when jousting with other corporations, just as they are denied in dealing with workers.

And there are also the more subtle, powerful, alliances of common ideologies. In Dallas, the new *D Magazine* of religious right publisher Wick Allison caters almost exclusively to the elite, white Park Cities neighborhoods where executives of the *Dallas Morning News* make their homes. The once-upstart independent weekly, *The Met*, is now a business partner with the *News*, whose publisher, Burl Osborne, in turn is good friends with the *Monthly's* Mike Levy. And so on, a pattern replicated in city after city, print and broadcast, advertising and telecommunications. These are not conspiracies. They are communities of interest, and their interests are not ours. They are neither the interests of the average Texan whose real struggles, triumphs, concerns and tastes are so betrayed and contorted as to be unrecognizable.

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Three decades ago, it was possible for Larry McMurtry to conclude that all this petty but profitable grab-ass was evidence of a backwater culture. I'll give him grudging credit for that, but today his critique would miss the point. We're not culturally deprived, we're culturally censored. And not by hicks. The previously mentioned media have re-engineered; gone high tech. Lean and mean. Most have deep pockets, thanks to takeovers by conglomerates whose money in turn comes from off-shore manufacturing, price gouging, and the massive layoffs of American workers begun under Ronald Reagan, continued nationally under Massah Bush and still going on here at home under Young Massah Bush and his friends, like *Morning News* publisher Osborne. Well-financed, ruthlessly managed, impervious to labor, consumers, and conscience, the Texas media and allies at the close of the century are nearly ready to eliminate the need for writers altogether. Planned for us is the fate of cowboys, farmers, and small town businesses within driving distance of a Wal-Mart. Not possible? Look what happened at pre-programmed radio stations.

With so much at stake, the media aren't much interested in self-criticism, and writers are afraid to bite the hands that feed them. I can already guess the potential freelance work this essay will cost me. I don't care anymore. In my two decades here as an adult, and as an editor or writer, I have worked in just about every possible writer-compatible staff job: four magazines (three now defunct), one TV station, a wire service (purists to a fault, bless 'em), a PR agency, a state agency, two universities, and this publication.

I have freelanced, hustled new projects, even tried to re-start a small worker-operated Chicano sewing factory in West Texas (killed by Dallas sweatshop labor). I have turned to nonprint formats, such as film and documentaries. I have cannibalized savings, borrowed against life insurance, used up advances. I have wondered what it is I am trying to get at, why the voice inside looks for its own way of finding itself. I am familiar with the hells of fear and anxiety. I have had it better than many of my peers: I have yet to be homeless. And I love to write.

I have watched mediocre talent, art director glitz and yuppie fogeyism become entrenched in publishing because the best and brightest have always said fuck it and left. Righteously so, but also less commonly done, by my count—does any reporter, editor or writer in Texas ever get fired or quit a job because of principle anymore? The results are the results of bureaucratization everywhere. Lately, I have been thinking of moving away. A strategic retreat. My own Runaway Scrape, Long March. But this, too, is the fruit of colonialism. Even when prudent, exile is reactive, and fraught with peril.

Every writer who has decided to leave in order to get a clear mind or to be published has paid a price. Has seen why the fight to keep Texas writing alive within a Texas publishing context is critical. Has seen that going away can dilute the voice of whatever it is that we need to say, each in our own way. Something happens to Texas writers out of state; it happens just sending work out of state for publication. What happens is the heart-breaking re-shaping of consciousness to adjust to the expectations and stereotypes of the empire-at-large.

Case in point: in the mid-'80s, a number of Texas writers, including me, were asked by *Esquire* to write a major piece about Austin. None of the stories ever appeared—not because they weren't any good, but because they "weren't what we're looking for," which was editor Lee Eisenberg's way of saying he had a stereotype of Austin that was different from what Texas writers kept sending him. You may remember that problem with reporting from Vietnam.

All "minority" writers—blacks, browns, women, Southerners—know this. Flannery O'Connor was but one of the great troublesome voices of the South who complained of being pigeonholed by Northern editors who didn't understand her voice and tried to make her change it into something they wanted. Texas writers similarly know what happens to their work in Manhattan offices. Northern editors are really looking for ventriloquists. Minstrel shows. Monkeys on a chain. Thus we have Professional Texans; their names are well-known among us.

The issue at stake in re-directing our fate is therefore not just an esthetic quest for expression of general truths or individual visions, but a call to see into the stultifying nature of the process by which the truth and visions are expressed. This is not an abstract issue. It is about real control of real power, of real ideas and real minds in real bodies. Of some import. We are not a backwater. We are the nation's second-most populous state. We are full of problems—health care, poverty, racism, education, colonias, etc.—but our citizens are as sophisticated as those anywhere else. And as thick-headed. We do not want for content: Texas-based stories fall out of the sky like cinders after a bomb blast.

Why, then, are our writers in the economic position Frances Fitzgerald famously described as "cheap intellectual labor?" Because the economic elites of Texas—the eight-hundred-pound gorilla to whom the "invisible hand" really belongs—make the backwater an enduring presence. Rio Grande Valley agri-conglomerates, High Plains industrial ranches, Houston banks and hospitals, Dallas/Fort Worth multinational corporate headquarters, Amarillo chambers of commerce, Austin lobbyists, elected bagmen—the real Web of Texas—have pressed their arch-conservative ideological tableau into every sanctuary of white- and blue-collar life.

Interlocked with these other elites like tongues in a French kiss, the media, in turn interlocked via cross-ownership made easier by the Clinton administration and GOP Congress, have little to gain by calling attention to the Big Lie that fires the whole smarmy barbecue. So they don't. And they don't like writers who do, and writers who don't aren't writers. They are poodle-noodles and sales reps. They are agents of the national security state, Texas division.

PLANNED FOR US IS THE FATE OF COWBOYS, FARMERS, AND SMALL TOWN BUSINESSES WITHIN DRIVING DISTANCE OF A WAL-MART.

If what I believe is true, that of each thing comes its counterpart, then the fate of the Texas writer may yet evolve a measure of greatness proportional to the pogrom. I believe in dialectics, in balance, in yin and yang, in payback. What seemed so close at hand after Brammer and McMurtry, and then the first explosions of Gary Cartwright (now trimmed back to half-time), Bill Broyles, et al. when *TM* was truly something, pushing past the vastly overrated humdrum of local color minstrels like Dobie and Graves, might come back. It might break forth again simply because there is too much here to tell and too much talent to tell it and even Prozac journalism cannot stop it.

It must also survive the future. Computers and digital technology are the next wave of "public prints." In some ways this opens the dialogue between writer and reader as never before; but the same forces which corralled and then impoverished writers in print will do the same thing in the electronic word, only more efficiently. Indeed, despite its anarchistic origins, the Internet has been absorbed into the white noise marketplace almost without a trace of its original form. The development of software and computers has always been corporate in nature and conservative in ideology.

Waxahachie-based Jayne Loader, co-producer of *The Atomic Cafe* and whose iconoclastic Web site, "Public Shelter," has been widely praised as one of the best things on the Information Tollway, was rebuffed by virtually every major software developer when she attempted to distribute her own new, award-winning CD-ROM. Other clues: Disney's takeover of ABC, booting out people like Jim Hightower; Microsoft's merger with NBC (to what ends we can but guess); Michael Kinsley (also for Microsoft) honchoing on-line news. "What they're really looking for," a respected Dallas on-line producer said of the Big Software Company I had talked to, "are really straight management types to run the place and keep a lid on things. I've seen a lot of this lately. It's disturbing." The decentralization brought by the computer, and seemingly ideal for writers, is, when mediated through corporate ownership, also an extremely effective means of dividing and conquering. Content providers and other home workers can't really confront the power of the managers and accountants. There aren't any brawls in the digital office, because there is no office. There aren't many blacks or browns, either. Why should there be? The only place minorities have edged into the Texas media at all is in broadcast, because ratings depend on image, and if you're selling products to black or brown folk you got to put up some nonwhite reporters. Newspapers do this to an extent, to fend off discrimination suits. Magazines are virtually lily-white across the board. In print, nobody sees the faces of your staff, and cyberspace is similarly "color blind." But in a world informed by *The Bell Curve*, color blind means color absent. In the cyber-future, black and brown writers and reporters stand to lose even more ground. Euphoria over the "freedom" of the on-line future needs to be tempered with considerable distrust of the gatekeepers and the gates they keep. There he goes again—typical writer, always complaining, always the malcontent.

One, two, many malcontents! Who else but the dissatisfied to break the silence of the violence, to say the fix is in, so that when it isn't, we can be believed. The fate of the Texas writer is to prevail. At some level, I still think we have to. We all have a role in our fate. Our fate is made as we go along. That's why it's fate, not immutable law. What can be done? Mao said, never fight a battle you can't win, because you lose. I say: Win. I say: Write. I say that is our fate.

This isn't about personalities. It isn't about awards. But when I confront questions of endurance I come to one name: Cormac McCarthy. I don't know him or have much idea of his politics or values other than what is expressed in his work, and that's the way I like it. He doesn't do gossip columns, doesn't write about breast implant chic, probably doesn't even know what Netscape or Java are. He is sealed off in El Paso, rewriting an entire timeline and landscape; or, as the aboriginals of Australia would have it, singing it into existence. I think he is the best of us, and an enigma. Sometimes I envy him, sometimes I don't. I like it that he probably doesn't have to think about any of this, that he's beyond it. I wish more of us could end up that way. □

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