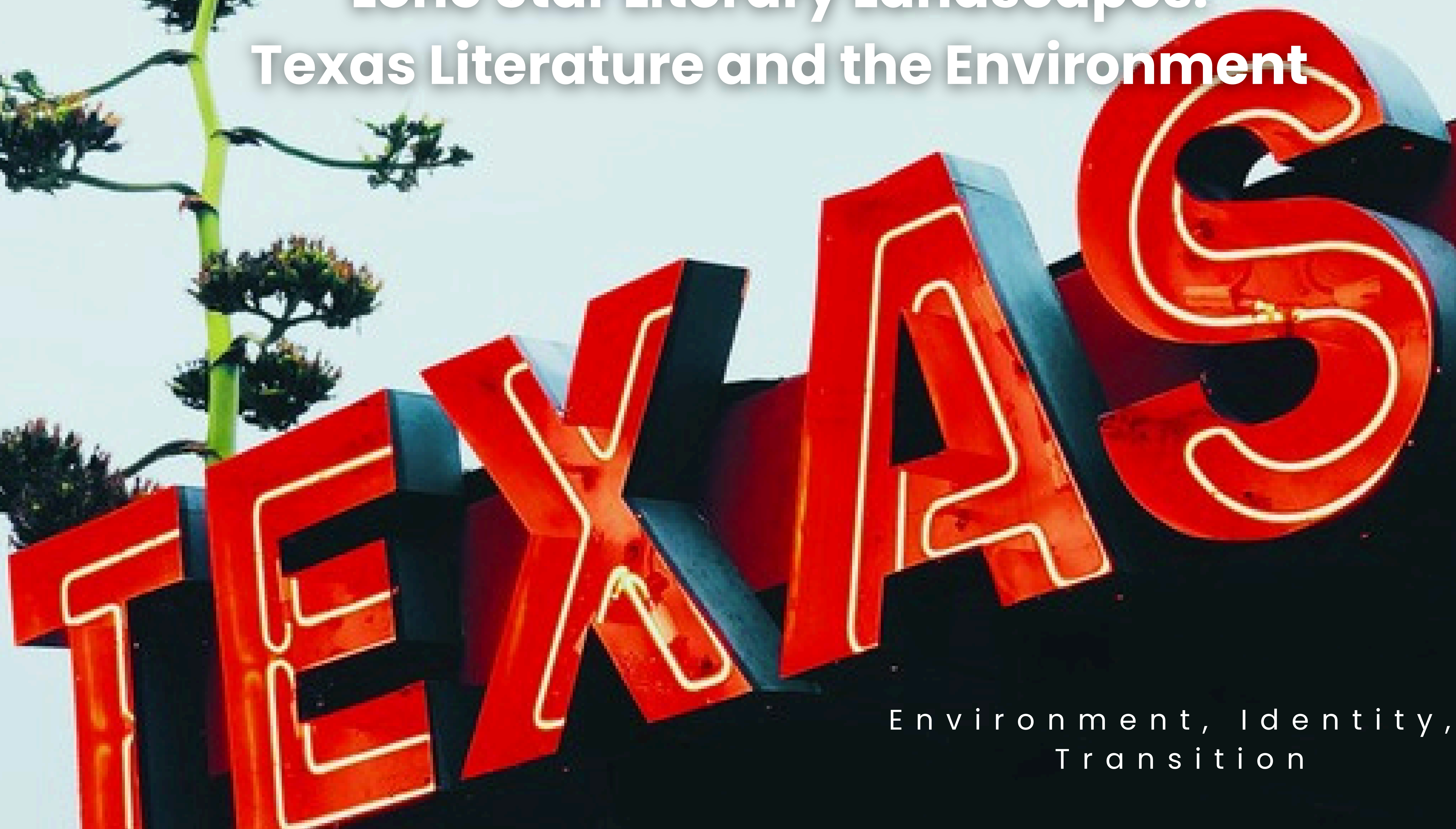
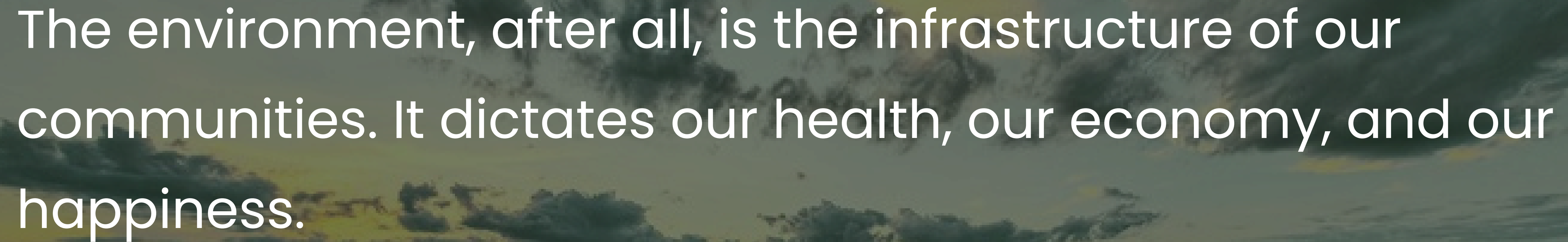
Lone Star Literary Landscapes: Texas Literature and the Environment



Environment, Identity, Transition

The land in Texas seems to stretch endlessly, and yet, each hill, each valley, each field has its own voice and its own story to tell.

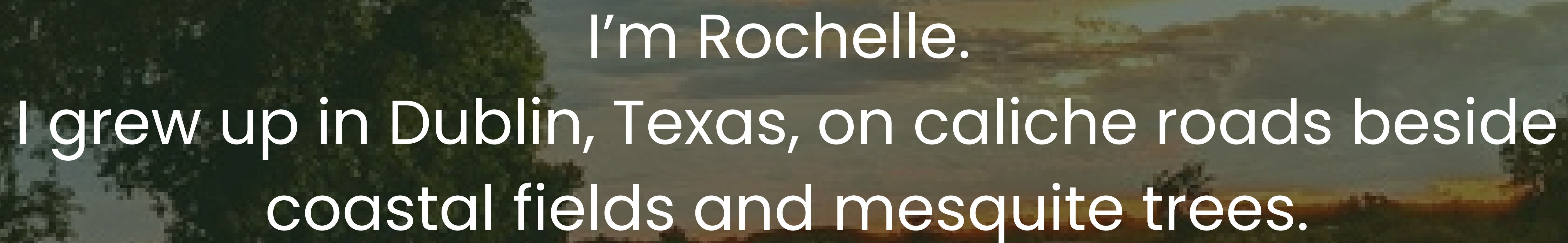


The environment, after all, is the infrastructure of our communities. It dictates our health, our economy, and our happiness.

Almost every person, from childhood, has been touched by the untamed beauty of Texas—the rivers, the bluebonnets, the endless sky. It is something that stays with you forever.

--Lady Bird Johnson

Introductions



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(@texas.1997)

Texas

Texas is a vast land of wide plains, tall forests, and big skies. But it is also a place that is being rapidly settled, subdivided, and developed.

Texas

Texas came into the union in 1845 with a huge expanse of public lands spread across 225 million acres. However, by the current day, Texas has lost all but roughly 3 percent of its public property. --*The Texas Landscape Project*

Texas Literature

Texas Literature

I reached some plains so vast, that I did not find their limit anywhere I went, although I traveled over them for more than 300 leagues... with no more land marks than if we had been swallowed up by the sea... there was not a stone, nor bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a shrub, nor anything to go by. --Francisco Vazquez de Coronado, 1541

The plain gives man new and novel sensations of elation, of vastness, of romance, of awe, and often nauseating loneliness. --Walter Prescott Webb, 1931

Texas is a state mind. Texas is an obsession. Above all, Texas is a nation in every sense of the word.
--John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*

Themes

Themes

- Nature, the individual, and human impact
- Duty, stewardship, and harmony
- Nature, science, and technology
- Nature and spirituality
- Nature as a place of sanctuary
- Nature, explorers, the wild, and the other
- Fragmentation, alienation, degradation
- Creation, destruction, and renewal

The Canon of Texas Literature

Cabeza de Vaca, *La Relación* (1542)

J. Frank Dobie, *A Vaquero of the Brush Country* (1929)

Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939)

Horton Foote, *The Trip to Bountiful* (1953)

Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958)

Elmer Kelton, *The Time It Never Rained* (1973)

Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove* (1985)

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1985)

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991)

The Canon of Texas Literature

The Canon of Texas
Environmental Literature

Roy Bedichek, *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist* (1947)
John Graves, *Goodbye to a River* (1960)
William Owens, *This Stubborn Soil* (1966)
Elmer Kelton, *The Time It Never Rained* (1973)
Rick Bass, *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness* (1997)
Stephen Harrigan, *The Gates of the Alamo* (2000) & *Big Wonderful Thing: A History of Texas* (2019)
David Todd & Jonathan Ogren, *The Texas Landscape Project*

The Canon of Texas Environmental Literature

Themes

Landscape as Character, Storyteller, and Identity

Environmental Romanticism & Stewardship

Emotional & Cultural Resonance

Themes

Landscape as Character,
Storyteller, and Identity

What does it mean when we say that Texas
is a character in a story?

If Texas is a character, how would we describe that character?

Texas plays an active role in the development of a story. The story couldn’t just happen anywhere. Texas plays a significant role in the plot, the characters’ behavior, and the story’s conflicts.

Texas, as a location, is dynamic, changing, and evolving. This is perhaps because of the passage of time or the characters’ changing perspectives.

Being in Texas can significantly shape a character’s personality, choices, and behaviors.

Texas can be as vivid and memorable as any character in the story, creating an immersive experience.

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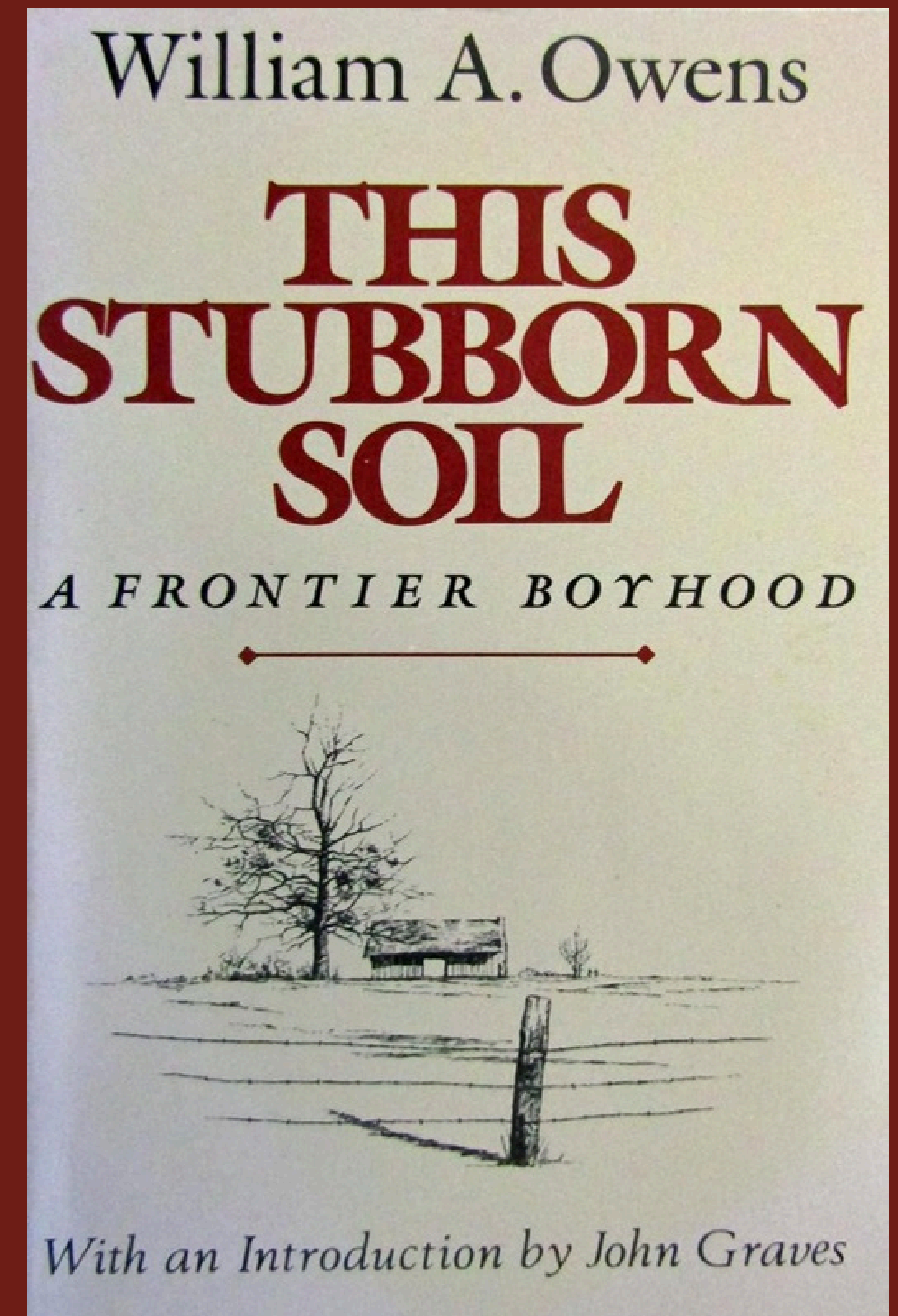
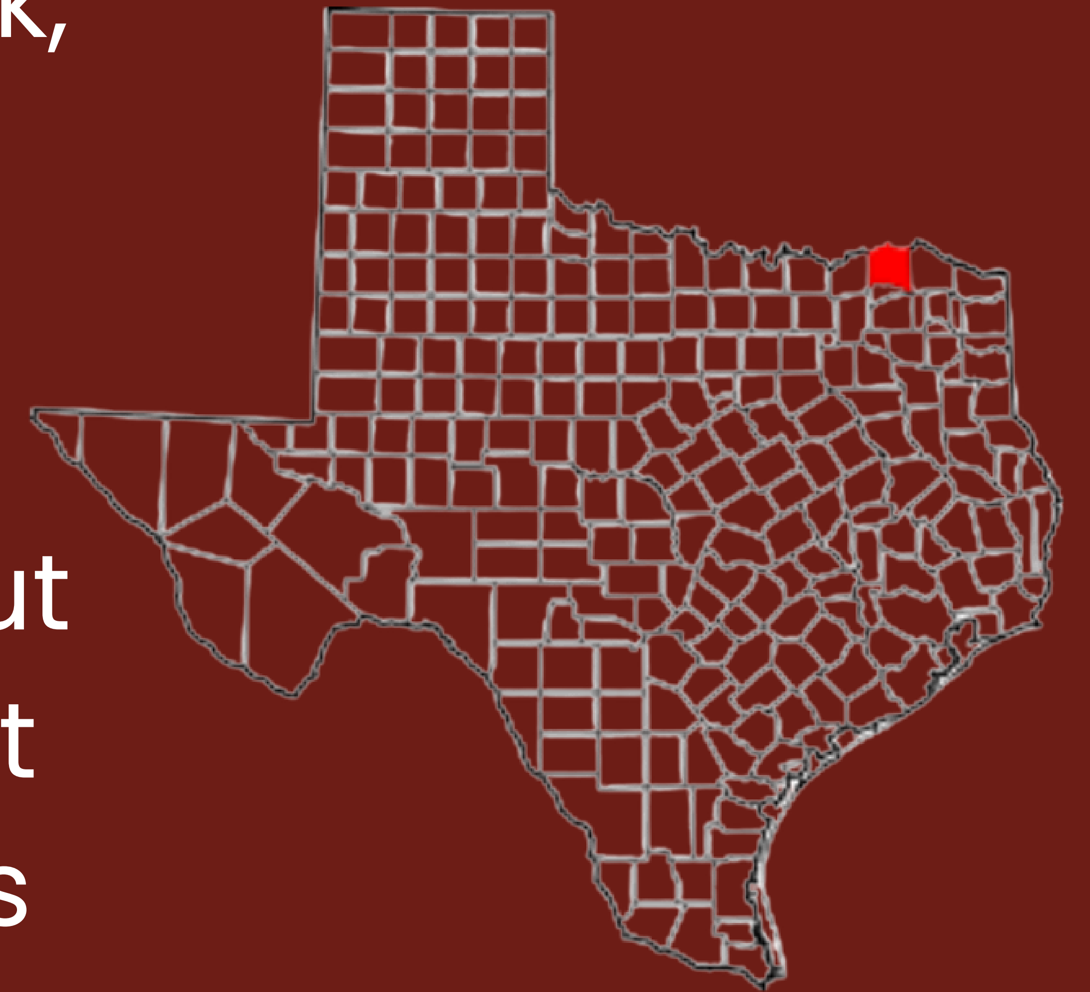
William A. Owens, *This Stubborn Soil* (1966)

Owens was born in 1905 and, in his memoir, recounts his struggle to overcome poverty in Pin Hook, Texas. He recalls in vivid detail how his mother labored to keep her family together and how he sought an education. Owen's accounts offer readers valuable insights into life in rural Texas in the early 20th century.



Passage from pages 2-3...

If one was born in Paris or London or New York, or even in Dallas, [...] he has, when writing about himself, only to mention the city and the reader pictures place, buildings, people and he can go ahead to the particulars about himself and his family. But since I was born at Pin Hook, Texas, a place whose character has not been known to the world generally, I must begin by writing all I know or ever heard about it.



For as long as I can remember, Pin Hook has been a local force, like a strong character in a play [...]. It was a lonely land [the settlers] had come to.

From time unknown, Indians had passed through it, leaving woodland trails, leaving camping sites where the white man's plow turned up arrowheads and bits of broken pottery. [...]

Pin Hook came into being, named by persons unknown, with a name given in derision or despair to countless other places by settlers who had found the reality less than the dream.

It was a land tortured by weather. There were wet springs when days of pouring rain put creeks out of banks and washed away cotton and corn. At times, before the water could drain off, dust storms blew down from the western plains, clouding the sky and making mouths gritty.

Summers were long, hot, and dry--worst in the dog days of August, when creeks ran low and crummy and the earth cracked in the sun. The people learned to be grateful for the first cool days of fall, and to bundle up in hard winters when blue northerns swept down across Kansas and Oklahoma. They shivered in their shacks and said there was “nothing between them and the North Pole but a bobbed-wire fence.” (2-3)

Passage from page 31...

Crops were not as good as they should have been. Corn grew big stalks, little ears. Cotton went to leaf. Boll weevils hid under thick leaves and bored into the squares so that they fell off before they bloomed. There would be enough corn to get by on for meal and feed and seed, but none to sell. By the end of August, my mother knew there would be a little cotton, a little money, but not enough to go on through the winter--not enough even to buy shoes and clothes to start the winter. It was all right for me to go without shoes. I had never had a pair and, still too young for school, I could stay indoors when the weather was cold.

Monroe and Dewey would have to have shoes. They were too big to go to school barefooted.

There was talk of going to the prairie to pick cotton, and my mother began to think she should try it. As she said, she could leave us with my grandmother for the month of good picking and come back with enough money to carry us all through the winter. My grandmother did not think so. She thought a woman out by herself would have a hard time getting a job picking to make more than her room and board. My mother argued that any money she made was better than none. (32)

Passage from page 51...

With no house to move to, no more crop to gather, nothing for winter but the money from one bale of cotton, my mother left us at Aunt Vick's and went from place to place looking for work. She had left the blackland when cotton picking was at its best, and would not go back. Better to own a little piece of sandy land than rent a hundred acres of blackland. Better to hold us together till we could get back into our own house. She would have taken us to the field at Pin Hook, but the crop was light and people wanted to save money picking their own.

Then she heard from Samantha Green that it was a good cotton year in the Red River bottoms and that anybody could get all the picking he wanted. Manth, as everybody called her, and my mother went horseback down to the Rucker farm at Slate Shoals, between Big Pine Creek and the River. There should be plenty of picking, but no place to stay. The best the farmer could do for them was set up a pair of tents, side-by-side at the edge of the cotton fields. They told him to set them up and come back to get their families. (51)

Passage from page 52...

Then we were in the wagons, ours in front, Manth's following, and on the road north from Pin Hook. My mother and grandmother sat on the springseat, my mother driving, my grandmother holding her black parasol. We crossed Little Pine Creek. At Big Pine Creek we left the sandy land and drove on the hard-packed red waxy of the bottomland. Then we were on the Rucker farm, not near the big house and barns but in the field [...].

The tents, white canvas stained along the bottoms by red mud, had been hung from the center poles, but the pegs had to be reset, the guy ropes tightened. Every minute lost now was time lost from picking. Working like men, the women drove pegs and tied ropes. The older boys went for wood and water. Beds would take up the space inside the tents. Cooking had to be done outside, over an open fire, out under the trees. [...]

The next morning, we were in the field before sunup [...]. My grandmother, who had said the night before that we all had to go to their field, walked ahead of us, tall and straight in a gray work dress, her face hid by a slat bonnet. (52)

We took rows [...] and went to work. I had my floursack, but I also had to watch the baby, who was left on a pallet at the end of the row. I could pick the stalks around the pallet.

The weather was good, the picking better than anything we had ever seen, even on the blackland. Cotton boils hung open and white among the thick green leaves, and the lint weighed heavy. By the first weighing, when the sacks were dragged to scales hung from a wagon tongue, we knew we could count on more than five hundred pounds a day, at fifty cents a hundred. (53)

We were making money, and saving most of what we made. The tent was furnished free. So was the water from the well. We could pick up sticks for the fire in the strip of brushy woods along a creek. Day after day our food was bread and beans, flour gravy and black molasses. Twice a day the fire had to be build up for cooking. In the middle of the day we ate on our sacks and drank from the water keg at the weighing wagon. Every night at the last weighing the man counted up what he owed us and paid in cash. (53)

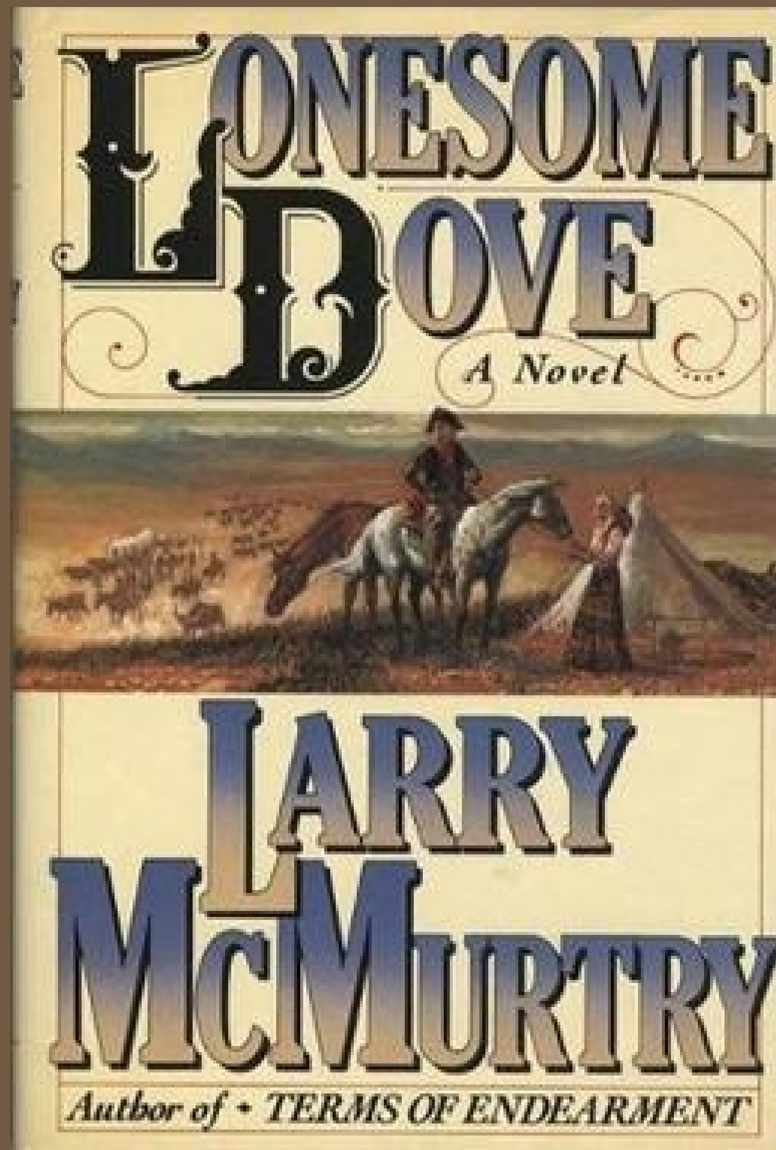
Questions to Consider...

How does Owens describe the Texas landscape? What details make the setting feel vivid or alive?

In what ways does the land itself challenge or shape the characters’ decisions and development?

How does Texas represent freedom, danger, or promise throughout the memoir?

Are there moments when the land feels like a friend—or a foe?



Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove* (1985)

Former Texas Rangers Augustus McCrae and Woodrow F. Call embark on a cattle drive in 1876 from Lonesome Dove, Texas, to Montana. Throughout the journey, McCrae, Call, and their crew are challenged by brutal, wild landscapes, harsh weather, and Indian attacks that test the bonds of friendship and loyalty.

The epic novel explores themes of friendship, duty, the changing West, and the consequences of violence and loss.

Larry McMurtry's beloved bookshop in Archer City, that he started in 1987 in an old Ford dealership building, has reopened as the home of the McMurtry Literary Center.

The Larry McMurtry Literary Center and Booked Up, Inc., are located in Archer City, Texas, just two hours west of Denton.
Open Saturdays and Sundays

Passage from page 13...

Evening took a long time getting to Lonesome Dove, but when it came, it was a comfort. For most of the hours of the day--and most of the months of the year--the sun had the town trapped deep in the dust, far out in the chaparral flats, a heaven for snakes and horned toads, roadrunners and stinging lizards, but a hell for pigs and Tennesseans.

There was not even a respectable shade tree within twenty or thirty miles; in fact, the actual location of the nearest decent shade was a matter of vigorous debate in the offices--if you wanted to call a roofless bard and a couple of patched-up corrals offices--of the Hat Creek Cattle Company, half of which Augustus owned. (13)

Passage from page 225...

Newt had heard much talk of dust, but had paid little attention to it until they actually started the cattle. Then he couldn't help noticing it, for there was nothing else to notice. The grass was sparse, and every hoff sent up its little spurt of dust. Before they had gone a mile he himself was white with it, and for moments actually felt lost, it was so thick. He understood why Dish and the other boys were so anxious to draw assignments near the front of the herd.

If the dust was going to be that bad all the way, he might as well be riding to Montana with his eyes shut. He would see nothing but his own horse and the few cattle that happened to be within ten yards of him. A grizzly bear could walk in and eat him and his horse both and they wouldn't be missed until breakfast the next day. (225)

Passage from page 277...

The day soon grew hot, and the cattle, tired from their all-night walk, were sluggish and difficult to move. Call had to put half the crew on the drags to keep them going. Still, he was determined to get across the Nueces, for Deets had said he expected it to storm again that night.

There was no avoiding the brush entirely, but Deets had found a route that took them slightly downriver, around the worst of the thickets.

As they got close to the river they began to encounter swarms of mosquitoes, which attacked horses and men alike, settling on them so thickly that they could be wiped off like stains. All the men covered their faces as best they could, and the few who had gloves put them on.

The horses were soon flinching, stamping and swishing their tails, their withers covered with mosquitoes. The cattle were restive too, mosquitoes around their eyes and in their nostrils. (277)

Passage from page 282...

It was just as Newt turned to watch the last of the cattle cross that a scream cut the air, so terrible that it almost made him faint. Before he could even look toward the scream Pea Eye went racing past him, with the Captain just behind him. They both had coiled ropes in their hands as they raced their horses back into the water--Newt wondered what they meant to do with the ropes. Then his eyes found Sean, who was screaming again and again, in a way that made Newt want to cover his ears. He saw that Sean was barely clinging to his horse, and that a lot of brown things were wiggling around him and over him.

At first, with the screaming going on, Newt couldn't figure out what the brown things were--they seemed like giant worms. The giant worms were snakes--water moccasins. Even as the realization struck him, Mr. Gus and Deets went into the river behind Pea Eye and the Captain. How they all got there so fast he couldn't say, for the screams had started just as Mounse and the steer reached the top of the bank, so close that Newt could see the droplets of water on the steer's horns.

Then the screams stopped abruptly as Sean slipped under the water--his voice was replaced almost at once by the frenzied neighing of the horse, which began to thrash in the water and soon turned back toward the far bank. As he gained a footing and rose out of the water he shook three snakes from his body, one slithering off his neck. (282)

Passage from page 341...

North of San Antonio the country finally began to open up, to the relief of everyone. Two weeks of mesquite had tried everyone's patience. Gradually the mesquite thinned and the country became less heavily wooded.

The grass was better and the cattle easier to handle. They grazed their way north so slowly most days that Newt felt it would take forever just to get out of Texas, much less make it to Montana.

Same Questions to Consider...

How does McMurtry describe the Texas landscape? What details make the setting feel vivid or alive?

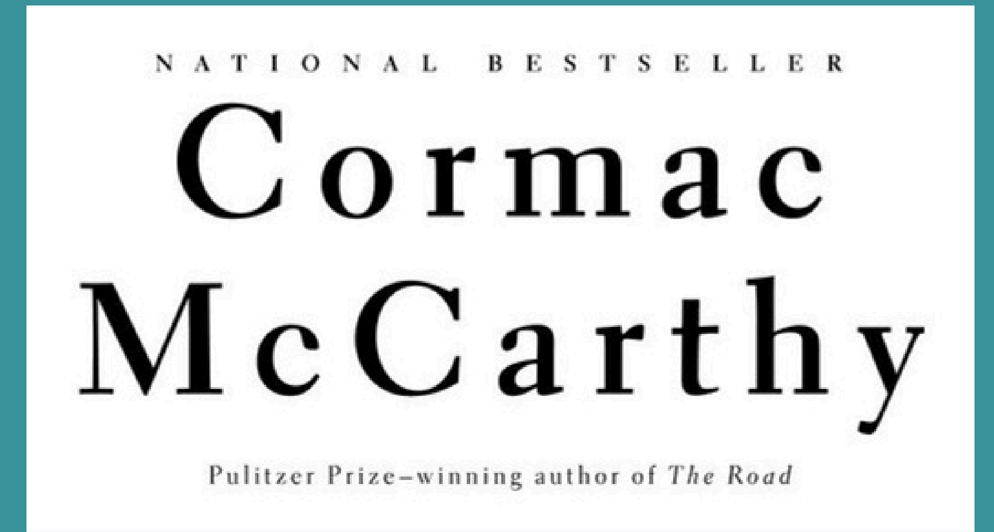
In what ways does the land itself challenge or shape the characters' decisions and development?

How does Texas represent freedom, danger, or promise throughout the novel?

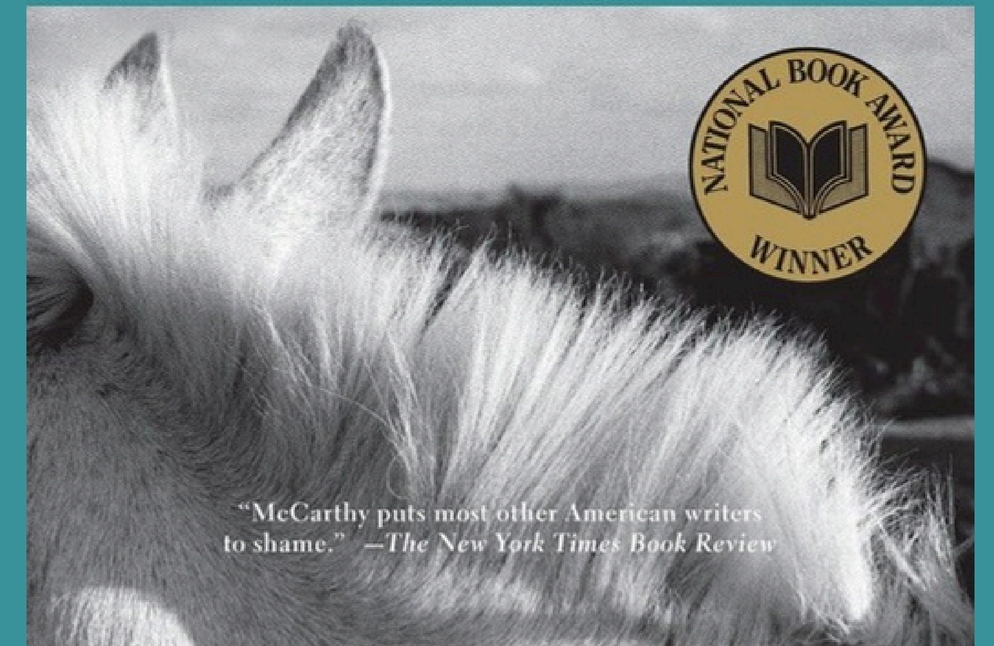
Are there moments when the land feels like a friend—or a foe?

All the Pretty Horses, a novel by Cormac McCarthy, tells the story of John Grady Cole, a 16-year-old who leaves his Texas ranch in 1949 to seek adventure in Mexico.

The novel explores themes of loss of innocence, the passage of time, and the harsh realities of the world.



ALL THE
PRETTY HORSES



Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses (1992)

"In four days riding he crossed the Pecos at Iraan Texas and rode up out of the river breaks where the pumpjacks in the Yates Field ranged against the skyline rose and dipped like mechanical birds. Like great primitive birds welded up out of iron by hearsay in a land perhaps where such birds once had been...

The desert he rode was red and red the dust he raised, the small dust that powdered the legs of the horse he rode, the horse he led. In the evening a wind came up and reddened all the sky before him. There were few cattle in that country because it was barren country indeed yet he came at evening upon a solitary bull rolling in the dust against the bloodred sunset like an animal in sacrificial torment.

The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun. He touched the horse with his heels and rode on. He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come..."

Environmental Romanticism
& Stewardship

Texas literature often emphasizes romanticism and stewardship, blending emotional connection with a sense of responsibility toward the land.

Romanticism means seeing nature as beautiful, powerful, and deeply meaningful. Writers often describe the Texas landscape with awe and affection, showing how nature can inspire wonder, reflection, and even healing. They focus on the emotional bond between people and the natural world.

Stewardship means taking care of the land—protecting it, respecting it, and recognizing our role in preserving it for future generations. Texas writers often encourage readers to be mindful of how human actions affect the environment and to live in ways that support its health and survival.

Texas literature often explores the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment. Texas literature reminds us how our lives are woven together with the land, animals, rivers, and skies that surround us.

At the same time, Texas writers often address themes of conservation and loss. They are concerned about how development, pollution, and neglect have harmed parts of the natural world, and they urge readers to care more deeply before more is lost.

When we think about conservation and loss, though, we must also think about abundance and scarcity. We experience both an abundance and a scarcity of land, of resources, and of people. Often, we have too much and not enough.

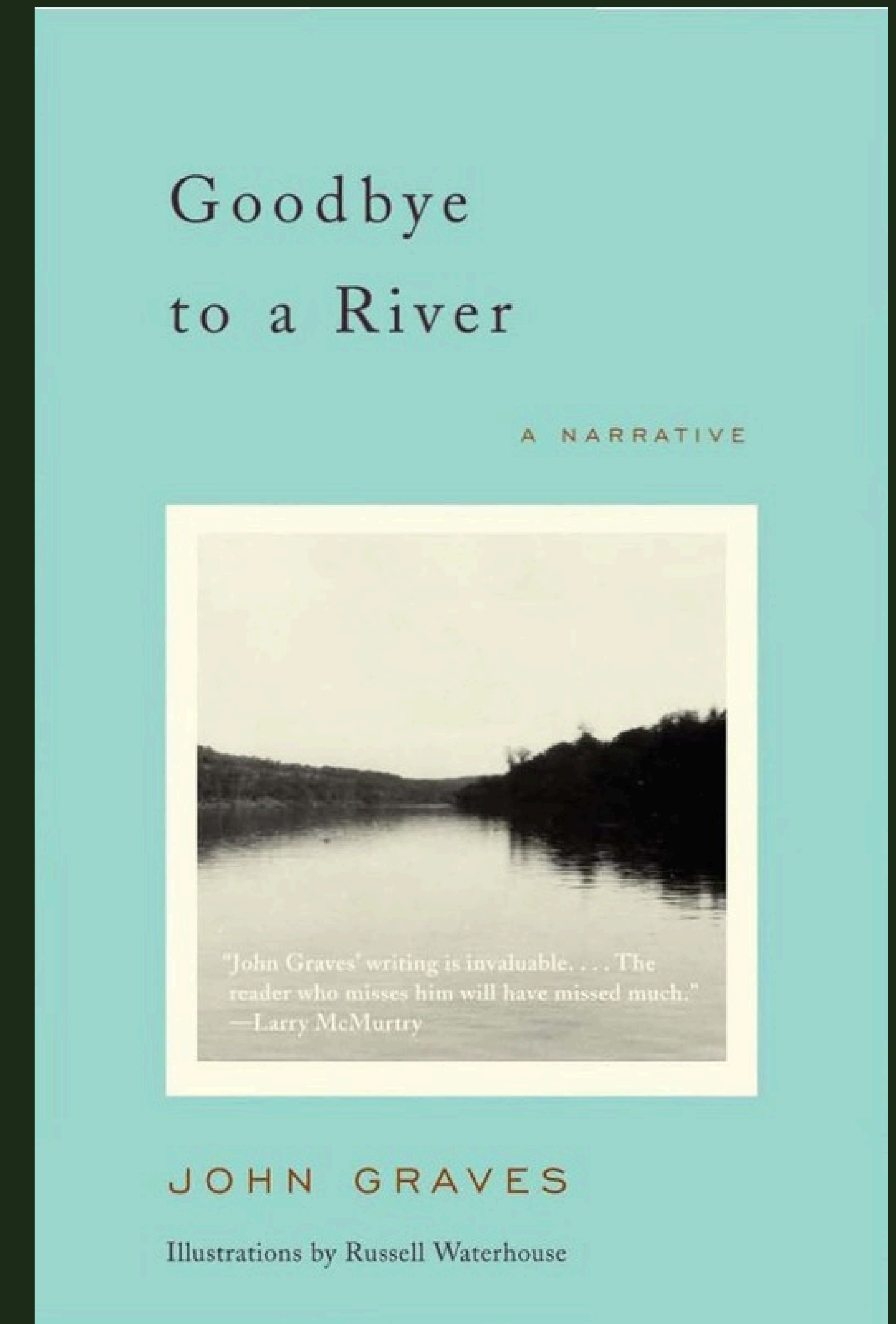
The prairie in which I now found myself presented the appearance of a perfect flower garden, with scarcely a square foot of green to be seen. The most variegated carpet of flowers I ever beheld lay unrolled before me; red, yellow, blue, every color was there; millions of the most magnificent prairie roses, tuberoses, asters, dahlias, and fifty other kinds of flowers.

--Charles Webber, 1852

Crossing this stream [the Trinity River in 1835], we entered, on rising the western bank, the first large prairie we ever saw, stretching further to the west than the eye could reach. It is hard to describe the emotions of the soul on looking for the first time across a vast prairie. The feeling is somewhat akin to that experienced on the first visit to the beach. Land and water there bore some resemblance.

---Z. N. Morrell, 1872

John Graves was a Texas-born writer known for his thoughtful nature writing and his deep connection to the landscapes and history of Texas. Graves recounts a canoe trip down the Brazos River in 1957. Graves is concerned about the changes that might occur if the state were to erect several dams along the river.



John Graves, Goodbye to a River: A Narrative (1960)

The book reflects and celebrates the Brazos and its rugged beauty. The Brazos River becomes a powerful metaphor, representing endurance, change, and the steady passage of time.

The river tells a story not just of water, but of the people, places, and events that have shaped the region.

Graves emphasizes how the river has shaped the landscape (both physically and historically) and plays a central role in Texas' development.

There is also a clear contrast between civilization and nature, as the book examines the ongoing tension between human progress and the quiet, enduring presence of the natural world.

Finally, Graves expresses a deep reverence for the past and seems to yearn for a simpler time when the rush of modern development did not mar the landscape.

Passage from pages 4-5...

The Brazos does not come from haunts of coot and hern, or even from mountains. It comes from West Texas, and in part from an equally stark stretch of New Mexico, and it runs for something over 800 miles down to the Gulf. On the high plains it is a gypsum-salty intermittent creek; down toward the coast it is a rolling Southern river, with levees and cotton fields and ancient hardwood bottoms.

It slices across Texas history as it does across the map of the state; the Republic’s first capitol stood by it, near the coast, and settlement flowed northwestward up its long trough as the water flowed down. [...]

A piece, then … A hundred and fifty or 200 miles of the river toward its center on the fringe of West Texas, where it loops and coils snakishly from the Possum Kingdom dam down between the rough low mountains of the Palo Pinto country, into sandy peanut and post-oak land, and through the cedar-dark limestone hills above a new lake called Whitney.

Not many highways cross that stretch. For scores of years no boom has brought people to its banks; booms elsewhere have sucked them thence. Old respect for the river’s occasional violence makes farmers and ranchers build on high ground away from the stream itself, which runs primitive and neglected.

When you paddle and pole along it, the things you see are much the same things the Comanches and the Kiowas used to see, riding lean ponies down it a hundred years ago to raid the new settlements in its valley.

John Graves, Goodbye to a River: A Narrative (pp. 4-5)

Passage from page 118...

Behind the wide blue roll of cloud the Canadian air moved down frigid but crisp and clear, and in the mornings by the fire, when I would set my coffee cup aside nearly empty and pick it up again a few minutes later, the sugary dregs would have become mush ice. Yelping flights of geese, convinced now of winter's imminence, V-cut the blue sky. At the caprice of the little man at Possum Kingdom, or of his bosses, the river dropped a stubborn habit of leaping ashore at shallow and difficult places.

In John Hittson Bend dropping-splotches painted the high red-and-gold sandstone cliffs white below ledges. Eagle’s nests? Falcons? I should check, some spring, and get my head ripped open by a defensive parent… One day the big cold wind blew from morning until late afternoon, and under its bleak sweep there were only I and the pup and the canoe and the river and frost-dead leaves whipping across the air, and from time to time a great blue heron gliding away from a perch before us with a cry of protestant rancor.

A dozen dead foxes lay heaped on the bank at one place, victims of the new squeak-squawk callers that lure them at night within reach of spotlights and shotguns; the hound people, ritualists, hate that innovation… In a sand-bottomed canyon once, a stallion and two mares and a big colt, alert under the season's spur, came pounding down the beach at the strange thing that was the boat, then threw sand high stopping and pounded away as the strange thing broke in two and I began to lead it through a shallows.

Change. Autumn. Maybe--certainly--there was a melancholy in it, but it was a good melancholy. I've never been partial to the places where the four seasons are one. If the sun shines all year long at La Jolla, and the water stays warm enough for swimming over rocks that wave moss like green long hair, that is pleasant, but not much else. Sunshine and warm water seem to me to have full meaning only when they come after winter's bite; green is not so green if it doesn't follow the months of brown and gray.

And the scheduled inevitable death of green carries its own exhilaration; in that change is the promise of all the rebirths to come, and the deaths, too. In it is the only real unchangingness, solidity, and in the alternation of bite and caress, of fat and lean, of song and silence, is the reward and punishment that life has always been good, maybe because it promises reward, maybe because after much honey the puckering acid of acorns tastes right. Without the year's changes, for me, there is little morality.

Looming over the outer edge of a bend called Poke Stalk is a line of high bluffs, an escarpment where the mountain country falls abruptly away to farming land. I camped beneath them that night near a place where, in an October years before, Hale and I had stopped and had eaten fat blue-bills out of season, shot by kids upstream who had run off with their guilty consciences and left the ducks on the water when they saw us paddling down. Skinning them out that night, we broiled the breasts over drift-mesquite coals and burned the evidence,

feeling guilty, too, but having eaten well…
The wind died at sunset. The night, its wisp of a moon not yet out, was clear, with stars, and so still that I found myself resenting the fire's hoarse whisper and snapping against a boulder that bounced its heat into the little tent. Screen owls, rare in that country since the big drouth, were quavering tentatively to one another near where I'd seen a deserted flagstone house across the river. Masses of tangled dead timber overhung the tiny flat I was camping on;

six inches from one of the rear tent stakes the earth fell away into an eroded pit eight feet deep, eaten out by the river in flood.

A truck's working-groan to the east, where Two Eighty-One climbed the scarp... Southward, a freight train threaded the T.&P., and sounded faintly the Cadillac honk of its Diesel, importunate, lacking the lonesomeness of the old steam wails we had once listened to from there. The day's wind and bright light and paddling had washed me with clean fatigue, and my muscles felt good, in tone.

A week it [canoeing down this section of the Brazos River] had taken, seventy unhurried miles, longer than it had used to, but I was older now. The skin of my hands from work and from the alternate wetting and drying and the cold had chapped hornily, and at the knuckles of my thumbs and forefingers had broken in bloody stinging cracks. Cuts and little sore knots where sandbur tips had embedded themselves finished the disfigurement… (118-121)

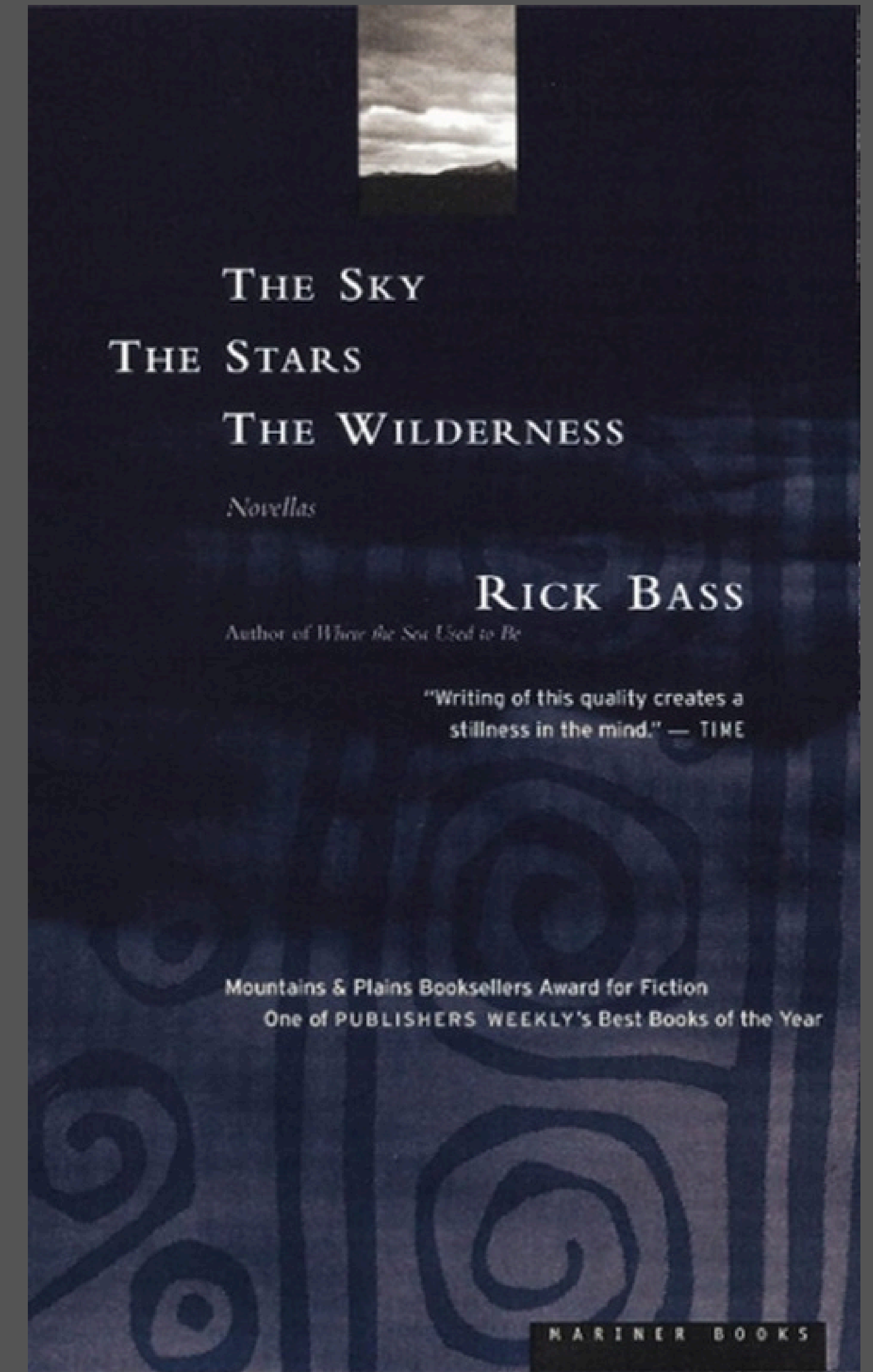
Questions to Consider…

Have you ever felt a strong emotional connection to a place in nature, as Graves does with the Brazos River? What made that place meaningful to you?

Graves takes his canoe trip because he fears the river will soon be changed forever. Have you visited a place knowing it might be your last time there? How did that awareness affect your experience?

Rick Bass was born in Fort Worth and raised in Houston. He is both a writer and an environmental activist.

His work emphasizes the interconnectedness of life, highlighting the deep relationships between all living things, and challenging the illusion that humans can control nature.



Rick Bass: The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness: Novellas

He explores the impact of intervention and how, even well-intentioned efforts to protect or manage our environments, inevitably alter their natural state.

Bass often reflects on the cyclic nature of life, emphasizing that existence flows through continuous cycles of birth, death, and renewal.

He argues that humans made the boundaries between civilization and wilderness, innocence and guilt, and life and death.

Ultimately, he believes that all elements of existence belong to a unified system, part of a continuous and evolving natural order.

Passage from page 101…

I knew it was necessary to protect our land, to keep it wild, and to keep the ravages of domesticity out, but the paradox of it bothered me even then: trying to put borders on a thing, in order to protect it. I wish it were all wild. I wish the wild could come and go as it pleased. I don’t know why these pure wild things always seem to attract the artifacts of man, which always damage or at least dilute those clean things.

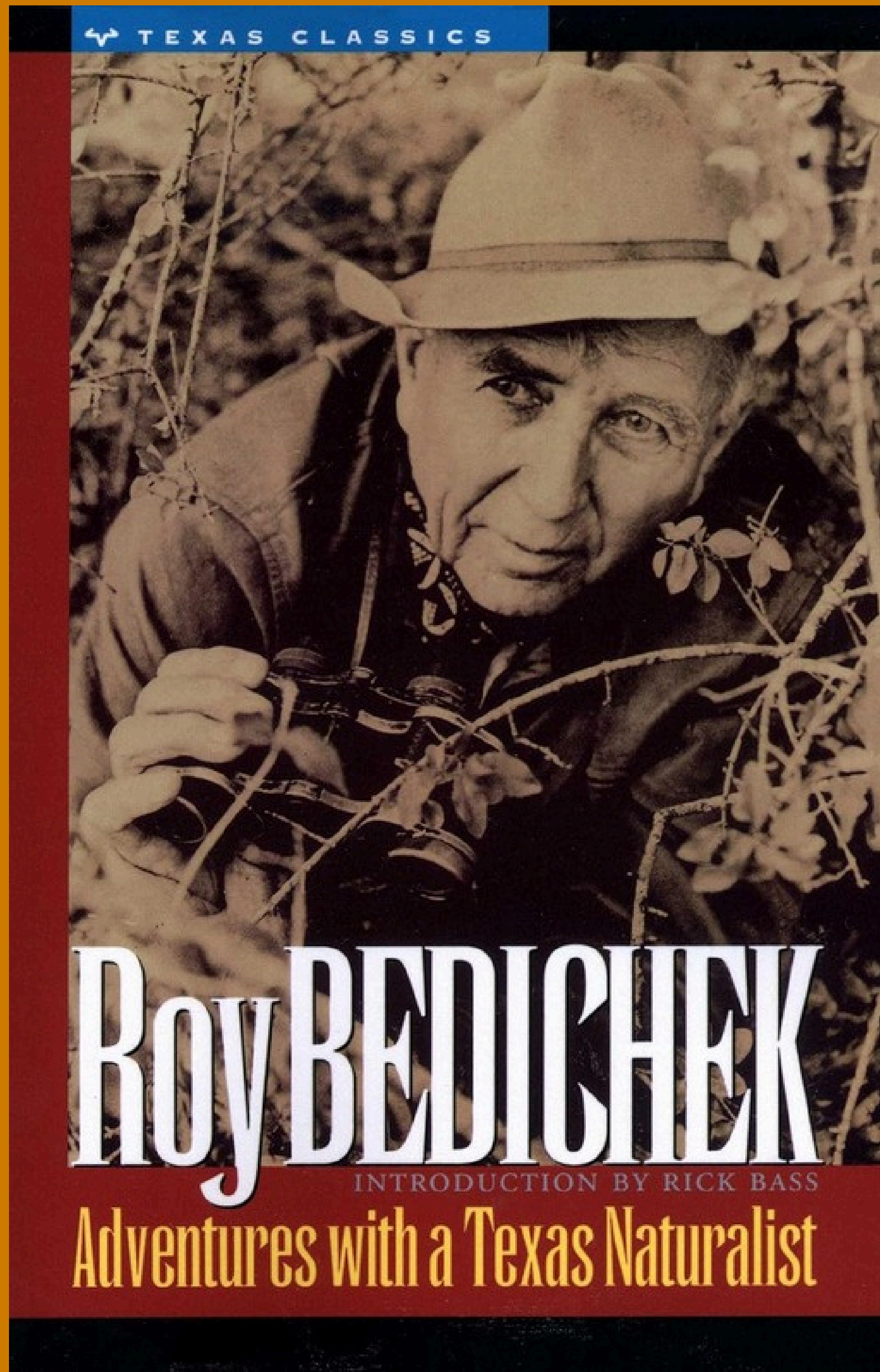
When they didn’t have fence-stretchers, they would loop one end of the wire around the saddle horn and stretch it by one of them clicking the horse slowly backward (more power in the huge hind legs of those little ponies) while the other man hammered in the staples to pin the singing wire snug against the new-driven post, the green cedar accepting almost gratefully the sharp steel points of the staples.

The wind then passed across the new-stretched wires, making a slightly different sound now, still inaudible to us but surely audible to the angels, and to the cardinal on her nest, to the coyotes and skunks, the lions, the beetles, the kit foxes…

We try and map the boundaries, and to string fence—we try to set up a border between life and death, between man and nature, and complicity versus innocence. But the truth is, there is no complicity, there is no innocence; and there is no death, there is only life. We're all interrelated: we're all one organism—hawk and rabbit, daughter and mother. After the kill, the zone-tail would hop over to his betrothed (warm blood trickling from the rabbit's nose) and begin tearing at the fur.

Tufts of the fur would be carried away on the river breeze like cottonwood fluff in the fall. The hawk would then begin pulling the bright-colored entrails out: would seize them in its beak and begin hopping backward, as if unraveling its prey.

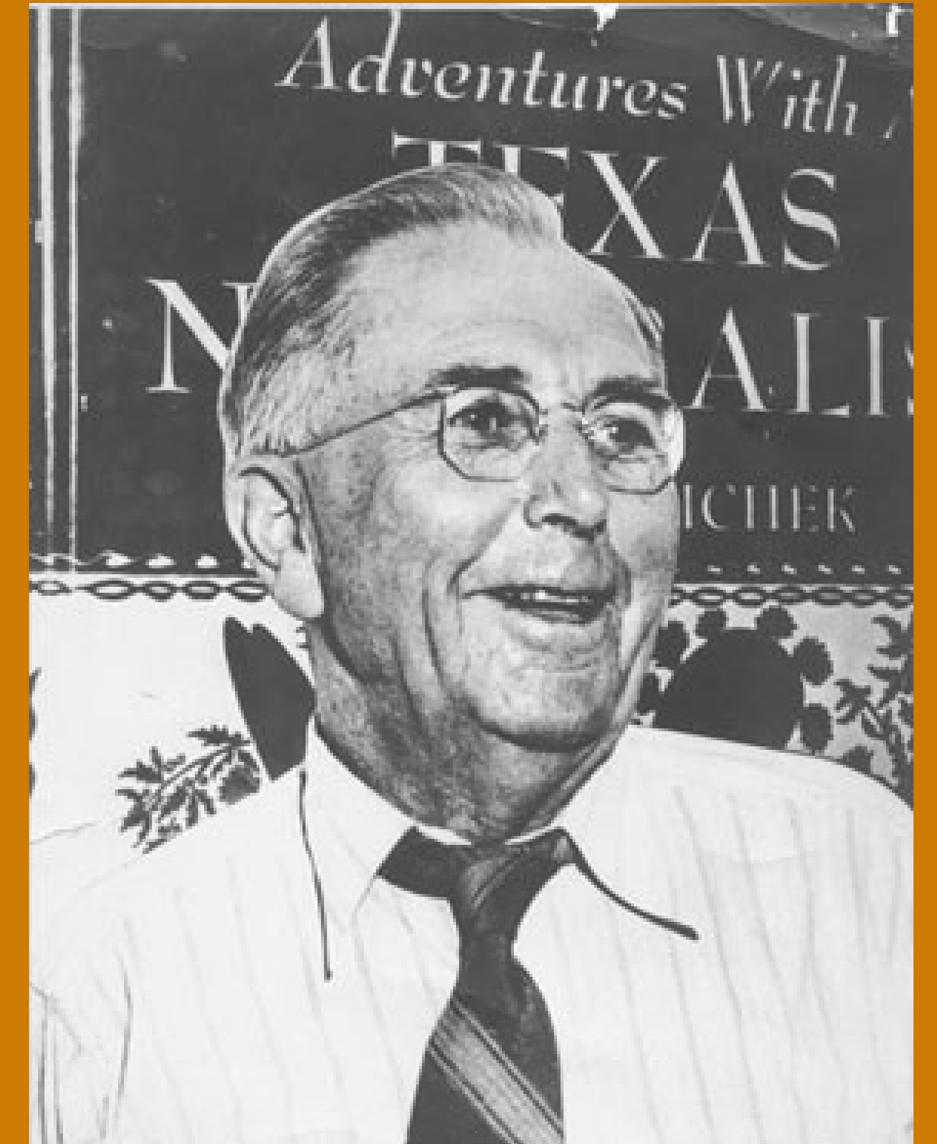
Rick Bass: *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness: Novellas* (pp. 101, 120-121).



Roy Bedichek (1878–1959) was a naturalist and folklorist. “In 1946, at the age of sixty-eight, he spent nearly a year in seclusion at Friday Mountain Ranch, writing *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist*. A classic of American nature writing, Bedichek's book—like Thoreau's *Walden*—mixes natural history with moral and philosophical speculation…

Roy Bedichek: Adventures with a Texas Naturalist

...The prose is crisp, unpretentious, and engaging. Bedichek views the world and the cosmos from his particular vantage point on the Edwards Plateau. In 1947, Dobie described the book as perhaps "the wisest and most civilized book that Texas has yet produced."



from *Humanities Texas*, “Roy Bedichek.”

Roy Bedichek: Adventures with a Texas Naturalist

Passage from page xiii…

As we left the Leon going west out of Belton for our next camp on the Lampasas River, we were traversing the Edwards Plateau, a rugged area whose wet-weather creeks ran in “riffles” over polished boulders, or stayed awhile in blue “holes,” or plunged recklessly from ledge to ledge of clean limestone shelving. I was accustomed to dirt “tanks” and to Deer Creek, Elm Creek, and the Cow Bayou, all sluggish and slimy, often clogged with debris, tributaries of the Brazos, whose drowsy current, after it leaves the hill country, always reminds me of dirty dishwater.

So the hills and trees, clear streams with splashing waterfalls, bluffs which to a prairie lad seemed mountainous, all presented a fresher world, and certainly nearer a boy's idea of heaven than the summer's dust and winter's mud of my native blackland. This great plateau comprises about one eighth of the area of the entire state; and, although I have lived most of my life around its edges, my heart has been in the highlands. Hence I chose the Edwards Plateau for my year of stocktaking. A friend offered me sanctuary in a great rock house on a small ranch of his in Bear Creek Valley, which is an identation of the escarpment dividing the plateau from the prairies eastward.

It is several miles from a highway, situated, as the plains editor said of his home town, “in the center of the surrounding country”--a goat-and-deer country, rich in browsing, and, viewed extensively on a clear day, near and far, mottled with the contrasting greens of cedar and of several species of oak--billowy rise after rise growing ever more purplish and smoky in the distance until they finally blur vaguely into an indefinite horizon.

The house was built near a century ago as a school for boys, L-shaped, fronts south, is two stories with limestone walls three feet thick, giving it more the appearance of a fortress than of a school or residence (xiv).

Passage from page 4…

Natural life in North America has been more profoundly affected by fencing than by any other of man's devices, ancient or modern, for it is the fence which has enabled him to multiply at will those species which minister to his wants, while suppressing plants and animals which do not. From the walling about of a desert water hold by Arab or Hebrew nomad to the throwing of a prefabricated net of barbed and other wire over the great plains and prairies of North America, […]

…the fence has fenced off or fenced in certain natural life from one resource or another that it must have to survive, and has given priority to other forms favored by the fence maker (4-5).

Passage from page 5...

Texas is certainly the most fence-conscious state in the Union, and I am one of the most fence-conscious individuals in it. A fence-war burst upon my childhood with a shock I can still feel. At sundown I saw stretching for miles across the gently rolling and virgin prairie a lately completed barbed-wire fence, four shining strands of galvanized Gliden held up by cedar posts peeled and weathered to the shade of old ivory and set solidly eight feet apart.

It was the first real fence I had ever seen, and I had watched the workmen building it, wide-eyed with wonder. But at that, it was an interest mingled with fear instilled by half-hearted murmurs against fencing up the country. Men sitting around the general store on Saturday afternoons didn't like it one bit.
One day at sundown I took a long look at the wonderful fence and went to bed thinking about it. Next morning at sun-up I rushed out to have another look. During the night a frightful transformation had occured. Each tightly stretched strand had been cut between each pair of posts, [...]

[...], and the wire had curled up about them, giving the line as it led away into the sun a frizzled appearance, as of a vicious animal maddened so that every particular hair stood up on end. I was speechless. I couldn’t for the moment call anyone to come and see what had happened.

As a result of this fence-cutting, an old, smoldering feud flamed up in the community. There were duels with pistols, and there were mysterious riders at night, moving along in such close formation that you could hear stirrups popping against each other as a group approached in the darkness.

Law and order, however, finally prevailed; the fence was rebuilt. Then there was a period of big pastures. The prairies were still virgin. There were endless swells of greenery in spring stretching away to the horizon in every direction, parched in summer, brown and sere in autumn and winter. There was still riding-room, space to follow a pack of greyhounds chasing jack rabbits. But every time a dog ran afoul of one of those cursed fences and split his noble back from neck to tail, my hatred flamed up against them. I sympathized with the fence cutters, no matter how much I heard them condemned by my elders (5-6).

Thoughts to consider

Bedichek’s childhood memory of seeing his first barbed-wire fence captures a personal and cultural shift from open, shared land to enclosed private property.

The fence-cutting incident he recounts reveals that resistance to enclosure was once violent and deeply divisive, exposing the community’s discomfort with rapid change.

Thoughts to consider

These experiences illustrate a clash between older, more communal ways of life and the new, privatized order driven by technology and expansion.

Thoughts to consider

These experiences illustrate a clash between older, more communal ways of life and the new, privatized order driven by technology and expansion.

Bedichek's descriptions reveal a growing awareness that fences, once practical, have become symbols of domination, raising cultural anxiety about what's being fenced out.

Thoughts to consider

His reflections suggest that preservation becomes fragile under the relentless pressure of industrial and technological development.

Cactus Book Shop

If you're interested in finding more places dedicated to Texas literature, history, and landscapes, check out the Cactus Book Shop. Located in San Angelo, the shop offers an extensive, ever-changing collection—from Texas county histories and genealogy resources to Texas Rangers, the Revolution, frontier life, and regional fiction—spanning decades of expertise and passion for preserving Texas history.

Jenny Browne is a professor at Trinity University in San Antonio and served as the Texas Poet Laureate in 2017.

Her poetry focuses on themes of place, movement, and the search for belonging. These reflections invite readers to consider how deeply our surroundings shape who we are.

Jenny Browne

The poems, often set in the American Southwest and Texas, include vivid imagery of limestone caverns, blind catfish, border fires, and mountain cedar—landmarks and natural elements familiar to many Texans.

A strong sense of tension runs through her work, capturing the emotional tug-of-war between feeling deeply rooted in a place and the desire to break free. Her writing speaks to the experience of wanting to leave, yet realizing that escape may not be possible—or even truly desired.

where blind catfish cruise
limestone caverns

from deeper we drink
while a man sweets tea

with his knife stirring
all the way day

border fires
making breathing a geography
mountain cedar floating pollen fevers

Texas, Being by Jenny Browne

bones in the road
sun bleached

possum grin just missing
the curb where she

like all the modern girls
paused to consider

her inventory of elsewhere
because we can

drive ten hours and some
how still be here

Texas, Being by Jenny Browne

Questions to Consider...

The poem blends images of natural life—catfish, mountain cedar—with ordinary moments and places. What does this suggest about how we experience nature in everyday life?

What role does the environment play in shaping the emotional tone of the poem? Does it feel comforting, threatening, complex, or something else?

Anne McCrady

Anne McCrady, a poet, speaker, and activist based in Tyler, Texas, reflects deeply on themes of place and change. Through nostalgic reflection, her poem, “Greathouse Road,” explores childhood memories and the gradual loss of rural traditions brought about by modernization.

Rooted in personal experience, the poem follows a young boy riding home with his grandfather after a long day of farm work, capturing a tender moment of intergenerational connection.

As the landscape shifts, McCrady highlights the encroachment of subdivisions and trailer parks, using them as symbols of urban expansion and the transformation of once-familiar rural spaces.

Before subdivisions and trailer parks
sprang up like volunteer wheat,
this stretch of highway was his favorite
part about riding with his grandfather
back to the house after long days
of moving cows, gathering peaches
and fixing the fence along Onion Creek.
Hugging the metal curve
of the old Chevy truck door,
his skinny chin propped on his forearm
as the draft of the open window
turned his hair into a tousled halo,
he had spent the drive staring
into his grandfather's fields
of maize, the rusty seedtops
flicking past as he listened

Greathouse Road by Anne McCrady

to the old man tell stories
of cotton gins and jenny mules
and low-water bridge crossings.
Jostled by the ruts and gullies
of a road meant for tractors,
he slipped into the sleep
of little boys not used to farm work,
slumped against the shoulder
of the only man he knew
who could tell for sure
the heft of dirt ready for planting,
the sky-color of coming rain
and the taste of grain ready
to be pulled from stalks
too proud to bend to progress.

Greathouse Road by Anne McCrady

Barbara “Barney” Nelson

Barbara “Barney” Nelson, a professor at Sul Ross State University as well as an accomplished author, photographer, and journalist, challenges traditional notions of beauty and worth in her work. She encourages readers to recognize the value in landscapes that are often dismissed as empty, barren, or unproductive.

Writing with conservationists in mind, she emphasizes the desert as a vital ecosystem worthy of protection, offering a cautionary message about the dangers of unchecked human expansion.

Nelson uses poetic and evocative language to capture the emotional and sensory essence of place rather than merely describing its physical features.

On the Chihuahuan Desert grass is short, bunched and dust colored. Passers through sometimes can't see it. Visibility improves at sundown when the late evening light bathes the land in fuzzy gold. Except for the grass, this desert is like all deserts: hot, dry and mute. Here, green is not garish like 50s neon, but grayed, faded and brittle. Desert colors are not aggressive. They don't compete. Don't shout. They steal your heart with a whisper.

The ground is rocky, rainfall sporadic. Water source is tiny. The grass deserts' three greatest assets. If any one of these factors were changed, this country will fill with something else: farms, industry, cities, golf courses. Wide 50-mile flats are broken by mountains, but not mountain ranges; even mountains in this country prefer to live scattered.

That One-Eyed Hereford Muley by Barbara “Barney” Nelson

Emotional & Cultural Resonance

Texas literature frequently explores themes of identity, language, and belonging, particularly in a region where diverse cultures and histories intersect across shifting borders. Many writers highlight hyphenated identities, such as Mexican-American, Tejano, or Afro-Latina. These writers often reflect the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation.

Language plays a central role, as authors frequently use code-switching between English, Spanish, and Indigenous languages to capture lived experiences and assert cultural authenticity.

The U.S.–Mexico border is not just a geographic boundary but a symbolic space of conflict, movement, and cultural fusion. Stories of migration, displacement, and resistance reveal how the borderlands are zones of both hardship and creativity.

Writers also confront the legacies of colonization, land loss, and cultural erasure, especially in Indigenous and Chicanx narratives, where themes of survival and historical trauma are closely tied to the present.

Margo Tamez is a poet, herstorian, deaf and hard-of-hearing since childhood, and an Indigenous justice advocate working alongside the Lightning Big River Big Water Ndé Dene People.

She is a tribally enrolled member of the Lipan Apache Band of Texas, part of the greater Dene Nation, which is currently divided by the settler-imposed borders of Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

Margo Tamez

Margo Tamez’s poem “This place on earth” reflects on memory, Indigenous survival, and the deep connection between storytelling, identity, and land.

Drawing on her mother’s oral traditions, Tamez shows how poetry and history are intertwined and passed down through everyday moments like cooking and conversation.

The poem honors the wisdom of her mother, a survivor who encoded stories of resilience, escape, and spiritual strength.

As Tamez navigates her own experiences of dislocation from her childhood in Texas to eventual exile in Canada, she slowly reconnects with her ancestral roots and village.

Tamez affirms that cultural memory endures through Indigenous languages, sacred references to rivers, and critiques of colonial renaming and resource extraction.

Tamez shows how the land itself holds stories of trauma and endurance.

Tamez asserts that Indigenous people and their histories remain despite centuries of violence and displacement.

Tamez reminds us that poetry and storytelling are vital acts of resistance and remembrance.

“won’t be paved under by plunder”
and this is how my mother was the first oral
historian I knew, and she taught me poetry and history
are first cousins from the same clan.

Storying kónitsáá* when I was a girl sitting at the kitchen table,
she flapping tortillas on the flat cast iron,
I was the child eager to hear stories of old village gossip,
legends, spats, conflicts, and forgiveness by the river.

Margo Tamez, “This place on earth”

kónitsáá:
(KOH-nih-tsah-ah) "it is big“

“The river is our life,” I heard more often over the decades, she
voicing reliance and confidence in ways I struggled to know.
She was the oldest living survivor of warriors, and the Elders sang
the lightning down to her hands when she was five,
encoding her with escape routes and surviving wars.
My next-gen body only remembered dislocations, internal checkpoints,
disconnections,
and a gulag wall. When I left Texas, I gradually rekindled her embers
of storytelling and oral history, and far away from Texas I needed her.

storying of our village and other Ndé* villages in kónitsáá, and I have a
feeling her stories are like Indigenous long poems. She
wanted me to get this on my own. Over years she nudged me to write, to read.
Fought battles against principals and superintendents.
Labored

for books, pencils, paper, dictionaries, and new chances.
I visited the village many times growing up, though couldn't imagine
what life was before big wars against Ndé, and big wars against

Ndé:
(N-day) "The people"

kónitsáá:
(KOH-nih-tsah-ah) "it is big"

villages in other places on earth. When I got much older, she told me I was

getting closer to learning about her birthplace, a place the men of the first
war clad in armored, metal skins renamed El Calaboz in their language.
The dungeon.
Once, during a pause in a story, I watched the blue pulse in a thin vein at her

wrist quickening, and she said, “the Ndé gokíyąą”* will remain like flows in

gokíyąą:
(Koi-goo) Phonetic spelling of *Koigu*, translated as “The People”

rivered remembering, rivered secreting, and rivered archiving everything
we hold inside the pomegranate of our being. When I was a young girl
chasing grasshoppers down at soil level, five-foot-high Johnson grass

and Indian gum plants nested in the backyard of our rental HUD row house
on Glendora Street, in San Antonio on the fringe of Fort Sam Houston. Far away
from the village, the pollen intellect of my being woke me to daily passages

of a Southern Pacific train chugging down the track a few yards from our

back stoop. When I was older, I learned the train hauled extractions from South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley up to the Dakotas and Canada, though when younger, this happened while I hid in weeds, with grasshoppers. Much older, I moved to Canada, after the extractions left death scapes, and my

storying about the wall resulted in nonvoluntary exile.

It was true her
stories brought me home to Ndé kónitsáá gokíyąą, and poetry and history
are first cousins from the same clan, and this
place on earth won’t be plundered because we remain.

Margo Tamez, “This place on earth”

Ndé kónitsáá gokíyąą
N-day KOH-nih-tsah-ah Koi-goo

ire'ne lara silva

ire'ne lara silva is a Chicana feminist poet and writer from Austin, Texas. Her parents were migrant farmworkers.

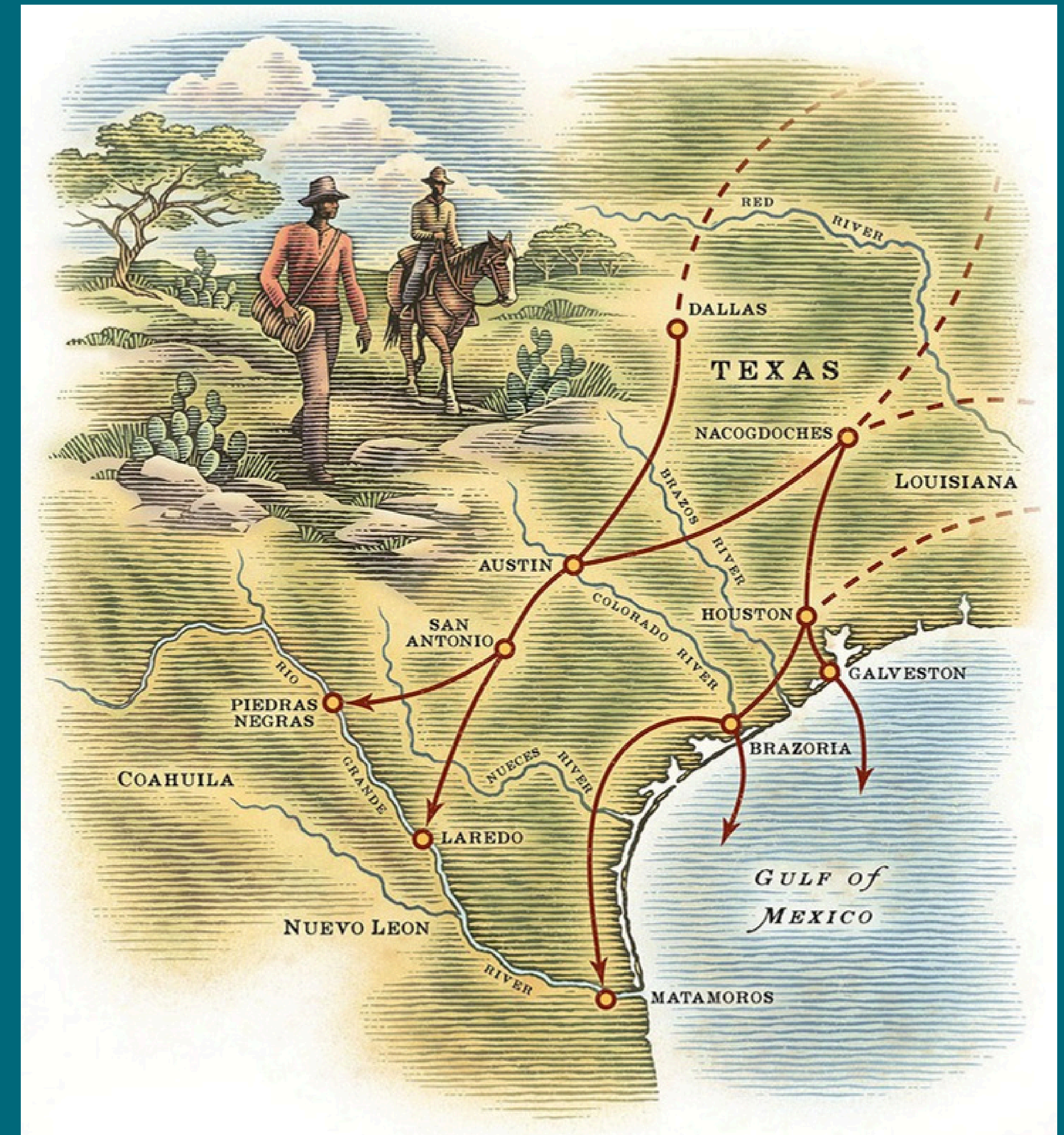
A central theme of her work is Indigenous survival and perseverance despite colonization.

ire'ne lara silva's poem "To the South" reflects on the little-known history of the Southern route of the Underground Railroad, where enslaved people escaped not only to the North and Canada, but also to Mexico, which had abolished slavery in 1829.

Inspired by historical accounts, the poem imagines the journey through Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, where Tejanos and other residents offered shelter, food, and silent support to those fleeing bondage.

"To the South" contrasts the brutality of slavery with the humanity and solidarity of those who helped, often unrecognized in official histories. Through vivid sensory images of rag dolls, warm tortillas, and kind voices, silva brings to life acts of quiet resistance and compassion.

Silva's poem pays tribute to the unrecorded helpers, the hidden homes, and the enduring spirit of freedom.



Historian Thomas Mareite has studied possible routes that fugitives escaping slavery took across Texas in the decades before the Civil War. Illustration by Erwin Sherman.

From "The Little Known History of Texas' Underground Railroad" by Maya Payne Smart in *Texas Highways*, Feb 2021

Researchers estimate that five thousand to ten thousand people escaped from bondage into Mexico... There's some evidence that tejanos, or Mexicans in Texas, acted as "conductors" on the southern [Underground Railroad] route by helping people get to Mexico. --Becky Little

I imagine a light. A solitary light.
No voices. Only a beckoning hand.
I imagine children waking up wide-eyed
to see strangers asleep beside them
on the floor, a little girl holding tight
to a rag doll just like theirs.

ire'ne lara silva, "To the South"

1850--Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi,
South Carolina, and Virginia--
reported more than 300,000 people enslaved
in their states. Freedom was not the North.
Freedom was Canada. Freedom was Mexico.
Northern states were not freedom while the
Fugitive Slave Acts were law.

I imagine kind voices speaking Spanish
and even then, the Native-touched Tex-Mex
of the region. Offering water, coffee, a hot
tortilla off the comal. I imagine them

communicating with hand signals. I
imagine a plate of pinto beans, nopales,
rabbit in mole, arroz con pollo,
carne guisada tasted for the first time.
I imagine a sudden smile and a belly
sighing in relief at the ceasing of its hunger.

Mexico abolished slavery in 1829 and then
refused to sign any agreements that would
allow for the return of those who'd found
freedom on Mexican soil. So the Underground
Railroad developed a southern route. Through

Texas, through the Rio Grande Valley. Yes,
even through Texas, a land that so tenaciously
clung to its desire to enslave that it seceded
from two countries to do so--
Mexico in 1836 and the U.S. in 1861.

I imagine many homes with a light at
the window. Many kinds of faces. Many plates
of food. Many blankets. Many guides in the night
helping those who needed help through the
darkness, through the wild, across rivers, away
from unjust laws, away from enslavement, away.

I imagine it as it has always been and rarely recorded.

ire'ne lara silva, “To the South”