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McMURTRY

A CONVERSATION WITH LARRY McMURTRY

In his novels, essays, and screen plays, Larry McMurry has richly detailed regional cultures and vanishing ways of life in Texas and beyond. His epic novel of the old West, *Lonesome Dove*, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1986.

Larry McMurry was in Houston on April 19, 1997, to accept the Thomas Jefferson Award celebrating the inventive spirit from the American Institute of Architects, Houston Chapter. Mr. McMurry met with Nonya Grenader and Bruce Webb, guest editors of this issue of *Cite*, and Drexel Turner to discuss Texas and Houston. Following are excerpts from that interview.

Cite: Your collection of essays on Texas, *In a Narrow Grave*, was published in 1970. Many of them dealt with changing patterns in Texas. Perhaps you could comment on some of the observations from those essays, with the perspective that 27 years brings. We could begin with your preface: "Before I was out of high school, I realized I was witnessing a dying way of life, the rural, pastoral way of life."

McMurtry: I think the most obvious experience of my generation of Texans, up until that point in the 1950s, had been largely rural and small towns. Texas was still tied to some form of rural economy. Well, of course, the oil business was already strongly interspersed with an agrarian economy by then. Towns like Dallas and Houston began to boom right after the war, and they sucked people out of the small towns. The possibilities here and in Dallas, and to some extent San Antonio, were just greater, so the kids began to leave the small towns and farms. My first three novels were written from a rural perspective. Then I wrote three that were set in Houston, showing the same migration from the other end — showing people who had been essentially country kids trying to become urbanites or at least suburbanites. That process has really been completed. A few people do go back after they've made whatever they make, but I think that the situation really hasn't changed very much. The vitality is in the cities, and there's not much of anything in the small towns.

Cite: What do they go back to do?

McMurtry: Well, they make their money in the cities, and they go back to do gentleman farming or ranching. Very, very few of the ranches left in Texas are working or profitable ranches. They're trophy ranches run by people who have made money and are still making it in other lines of work. The ranch cattle industry really isn't a viable business. It wasn't a viable business even then, in the 1970s. Most farsighted cattlemen saw that and prepared for it one way or another. So, now, when they leave the cities, it's just mostly for nostalgic reasons, I think.

Cite: You wrote, "What I didn't know then was that I was about to leave not merely the land itself, but also the rural point of view, in a sense the myth." Does the myth remain?

McMurtry: It's a pretty strong myth, and I think of most of my books as demythicizing. Particularly, I think of *Lonesome Dove* that way, but that's not the way it's read. It's read as a reinforcement of the myth. People don't see, or ignore, or don't want the critical aspects of that

book, or my whole work for that matter. You could say that my whole work is essentially a critique of that myth — the myth of the cowboy. It will be understood by some people, but by the mass of readers, it isn't so perceived.

I was just reading a review last night of a book by Garry Wills about John Wayne and about some of the contradictions and, in relation to myth, some of the complications and paradoxes of the differences between the man John Wayne and the star John Wayne. The figure that he always plays represents a relation to this myth, and it's really complicated. The myth can be parodied, or it can be sliced up in various ways. But, so far, it has been indestructible.

I wrote a long essay some years ago in *The New Republic* that has not been refuted, about revisionist historians who see the winning of the West as a failure rather than as a success. It was a failure because of the destruction of the environment, the landscape, and the indigenous population. Businesses failed; whole towns, movements, migrations failed, leaving nothing but the land. This point

of view began with Patricia Limrick and her study of ghost towns. Look at how many ghost towns there are, how they were founded with so much optimism; then look at how completely they failed.

My essay pointed out that most of the smartest people who lived through the winning of the West always saw it as a failure. They never saw it as triumphant. They always saw it as a harrowing experience that left many dead, and they weren't romantic about it. Some cowboys were very nostalgic, with a romance that continues to this day. But the most astute people of the 19th century who were involved in the process had some pretty stern things to say about it.

Cite: You observed: "There are places where the passage of the century apparently changes very little, and the Texas border is such a place." Is that still true?

McMurtry: It's true past a certain point anyway, but it's obviously not true of the Valley anymore. When you can fly big-time airplanes into the McAllen airport, which you couldn't do 15 years ago much less 35 years ago, you know it has changed enormously.

We just filmed two mini-series from *Streets of Laredo* and *Dead Man's Walk*. Both were filmed in the triad of Van Horn, Alpine, and Lajitas. Lajitas is still one of the most remote places in America. Cellular phones don't work there; it's fairly hard to get to, and it's hard to get trucks in there. If you want to go you can go across the river in a little boat and eat Mexican food on the Mexican side. But all that stretch of river north from Del Rio is a huge smuggling area. You have to cross a lot of pretty barren country to get there. It's riddled with smugglers, and it hasn't changed a whole lot. There's a little bit of a tourist industry, but that's about the only thing that's changed.

You know, my stories should be set in the Panhandle of Texas or eastern New Mexico. They shouldn't be set down on the border. But the area between Fort Davis and the border — Alpine, Van Horn, and Lajitas — is the only place you can go and turn a camera 360 degrees and not see a telephone pole or any evidence of the 20th century. We looked all over the state. There are a few places left, I'm sure, in the High Plains where you can do it, but they're too far away or unfeasible.

Another 20 years will take care of Marfa, and that whole area. Alpine is already spreading over towards Fort

Davis, and Marfa is going to be a considerable complex of communities based entirely on tourism. Already you can see little subdivisions leaking out from Van Horn toward El Paso, and vice versa. It will always be spacious country, but it's not going to be what it is right now, and it's not going to be what it was at the beginning of the century either.

Cite: You said that the East Texans are molded by the South and West Texans by the West. How?

McMurtry: Well, I perceive maybe five cultural areas within Texas. I was just over in East Texas for a college basketball tournament. It's always been the South. The South is contiguous from a little bit east of Dallas, say Greenville, all the way to the Atlantic coast, as far as I'm concerned. There's not a huge difference in attitude between people in Tyler and Longview and people who live in Mississippi and Georgia. It's pretty much the same culture. I am often irritated because I'm thought to be a Southern writer, but I'm not a Southern writer at all. The part of Texas that I'm from is Midwestern. North central Texas, from Fort Worth up and pretty much over to Amarillo and Lubbock, is very Midwestern. It's not any different from Kansas.

Cite: Dallas has always impressed me as Midwestern. Is it like Kansas?

McMurtry: Dallas is a little bit of a hybrid, but the country around Dallas is very Midwestern and the attitudes of the people are very Midwestern. Houston is less of a Southern city than it was when I came here in 1954. The boom has moved it culturally farther west, in an L.A.-like direction. Then you have Hispanic Texas along the border and in San Antonio, and then the mountain states Texas, west of the Pecos. All those are pretty different cultures to me — South, Midwest, Houston (West Coast), mountain states, and the border.

Cite: Is San Antonio still one of your favorite cities?

McMurtry: No, it's never been one of my favorite cities. I'm critical of San Antonio. I don't know it as it is today. I never go there. San Antonio was a lovely old city; now it's a lovely city to visit, but it's a very closed, old-money, tight city.

What I've always liked about Houston, and this distinguishes Houston from Dallas, is its openness, its welcome. Anybody can get along in Houston with a little energy and a little likability.

This is not true in San Antonio. There, they are very glad to see you come and visit, but they don't really know what to do with you if you live there. I know that San Antonio is growing. I imagine it's gotten a little less that way because it's a much larger city than it was when I wrote the *Narrow Grave* essays. It was a kind of small city, a miniature Denver in a way.

Cite: You make these keen observations about things changing from what they were, then changing again and again. I get the feeling that you feel very sad about that. Do you think we could have done it differently, or is it just the way things happened? I don't know if it's a critical stand.

McMurtry: No, it isn't. I feel that the settling process of the West was pretty inevitable. There was the pressure of people that wanted land. I don't see that much could have changed the way it happened.

I think that, in me, I've seen and felt a clash between the values of the frontier and more civilizing values. I have a ranch house that still sits on the very place that my grandparents homesteaded when it was still frontier. There were five settler families in Archer County. Most of that strip of counties in central Texas, south of Wichita Falls and north of Bandera, was settled very late because of the Comanches. It's only been settled 110 years. So it's possible in one lifetime (mine) to have known my grandparents who came here on a wagon from Missouri in the 1870s and took part in this settling process and raised children that continued the settling process — children that went to the cities and studied. In the first two generations, of course, it was about surviving. It was about staying there and making a living and nailing down a foothold on what really was a frontier, but it wasn't a savage frontier by that time. I've just finished the last of the *Lonesome Dove* series, called *Comanche Moon*. It's about the breaking of the power of the Comanches, the end of the Comanche wars, and the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s.

My grandparents basically waited 100 miles east of where they finally settled because the Comanche area was too scary and too violent. They probably wouldn't have survived because it wasn't safe. They came with a real frontier attitude and ethic, which their children — there were 12 of them — worked out of, but only a little bit. They recognized the

value of education. I think at first they saw it as a practical value more than anything else. I was born in the Depression and I have a little bit of a memory of what the Depression was like and a lot of memory of how the Depression scarred people in that region and all over the country. But I knew right away that I wanted to leave the land for the things of the city, particularly the education and literature.

So, if I'm sad about the older generation, it's only because I was close to them, close enough to my uncles and aunts and grandparents to see how whatever creativity and imaginative capacity they might have had was given no chance to flower because of the hardness of the struggle to survive.

Cite: If you look at the changes that place in the last 30 or 40 years, there's a sadness in your work about the loss of something and some question about what we've got now. You say, for example, "San Antonio was a lovely old place."

McMurtry: Now, it's not. But I don't think that way about Houston. I've never liked Dallas. I've never seen any hope for Dallas. It's larger and richer, but it's not different culturally than it has always been. The only reason that San Antonio has changed is because it's sucked in so many new people that the old oligarchy can't really control it as they did for a long time. Houston really has never been controlled, not in my time, not since 1954. It's always been fairly wide open, filled with graft and corruption, but it's dynamic and energetic. And I don't have any regrets about the development of Houston. It has a lot more nice buildings now than it did.

Cite: But what about the changes in America — how we've traded small-town life for the suburbs?

McMurtry: I think that life in the small town is really more barren than life in the suburbs. At least you have video stores in the suburbs, and you can buy a book here and there. On the other hand, up to a point in life, I think you can get from just the strength of the country, the strength of the landscape, and the beauty of the landscape. But I think that part during your teenage years. I'm glad I grew up in the country. I'd be a little farther ahead in some respects if I'd grown up in the city and had city possibilities at a younger age, as my grandfather is doing now in Austin. But I also got focus and a sense of locatedness from

growing up in the country that set me in good stead. It's a mixture — there are good things about both.

Cite: As for change in Houston, does it surprise you that the Astrodome is now basically obsolete?

McMurtry: It does in a sense. But I haven't kept up, so I pronounce about Texas cities cautiously. I've had four different periods in my life in which I've had some contact with Houston. I first came as a student in 1954; I left and came back at the end of the 1950s as a graduate student; I left and came back again in the mid 1960s as a professor; finally, I left for a long time and came back in the 1980s as a bookseller with my little shop over in the Heights. And I can't say that the vibes of the city have changed very much over all these years. Always, one of the attractions of Houston is its funkiness. There seem to be a lot of overlooked parts of Houston that only people who live here know about or ever think about. But I don't have a sense of Houston having become something I wouldn't like. I always like to come here. I don't like to go to Dallas, and I don't like to go to San Antonio. I don't like to go to Austin either.

Cite: When we wrote you, asking about a favorite Texas place, you replied, "I expect Rice is one of my favorite Texas places." Could you elaborate?

McMurtry: Well, Rice is one of the nicest campuses in the nation. What I like about it is that it's in the center of a really dynamic city, and yet it doesn't dominate the city, nor is it dominated by the city. For example, the University of Texas dominates Austin, and the University of Wisconsin dominates Madison. I don't like a university that can dominate a city, but do like a university that can sort of hold a dignified place in the center of a huge city; I still feel very attracted. I was just over there, and I feel very serene at Rice. I think it is an excellent environment in which to get a good education.

Cite: What attracted you to Rice?

McMurtry: You know, it was the purest of accidents that I went to Rice. My father wanted me to be a vet, and I seemed destined to go to A&M. I didn't much want to, but I had no clear sense of what I wanted to do. But I knew I didn't want to be a cowboy or a cattleman; I knew that very early. And I was passing through the living room, and the television was on. I think that we had just got-

ten the television set; I don't think we had had it a week. I saw a program about Rice that said it was tuition free, and that interested me. I didn't really know what Rice was. It was an institute then, I did know that. So I called and came down here, and I liked the looks of it. I almost didn't get in because I came from a tiny little high school. But I got on the waiting list, and got in at the last minute in August the year I was to enter, which was 1954.

It was sort of ironic. I don't think I could have gotten in even a year later. I had no math, so I was completely lost. I saw that it was hopeless my sophomore year, and I went to North Texas State and graduated from there. I came back to Rice and got an M.A. here when I didn't have to worry about math. I've had a long involvement with Rice. I'm coming back to do the President's Lecture in September in a place I just barely got into and could never have graduated from with a B.A. Yet it still draws me.

Cite: So, you have a great story for an introduction to your President's Lecture.

McMurtry: I do, don't I? I do.

Cite: The course of things did change in the mid 1960s?

McMurtry: Yes, and I was here in Houston when they changed. I was a Rice professor here from 1963 until 1971, although, during the last two years, I was on leave doing some things. Rice itself changed. They saw they had no future as a scientific institute, and when they leveled out the humanities and the sciences, it worked fine. I think it's a much better school now; it's certainly less constricted and less narrow than it was when I first came. On the other hand, I came to Rice in time to have contact with some professors who were here when the school opened, professors like Will Dowden and Alan McKillop who came out of a very solid and substantial academic tradition.

Cite: Is Washington a place that appeals to you as a city? Many people don't seem to set much store by Washington as a place to live.

McMurtry: Well, it's kind of accidental with me. I might have stayed at Rice my whole life, but it didn't turn out that way. I got a chance to go into the rare book business and open a book shop in Washington, which I still have. It's been there 27 years, and I'm going there tomorrow. To me that was a lot better

balance with writing fiction than teaching. It's very different; it takes a completely different kind of energy. It's very relaxing to me. I'm still building a book town up in Archer City now. There are eight or nine towns in the world that are essentially built around books. And that's what I'm doing to my town. I have four buildings, three of them full with 400,000 books. There are no viable businesses in town. It's too close to Wichita Falls. I'm going to turn Archer City into an international book town. I've just begun to advertise, and there are people coming all the time from all sorts of places.

Cite: We were lucky enough to have gone there just a few months ago. It was phenomenal — the space itself with the barrel vault, places to sit and read, and the area with the Texas books — it's really wonderful.

McMurtry: It's going to be a very nice place. It's about two or three years and 200,000 or 300,000 books from being quite what it needs to be. It still needs a lot of shaping. Actually, I have enough books because it's kind of a dying business. I'm being offered a lot of book shops. I've been buying book stocks of businesses and book shops that are going out of business; I've already bought about 20 or 22. So it's kind of an anthology of American book shops as they once were. It's very exciting to me. It's what I really want to do now — build my book town.

Cite: Why aren't you building it in a city? There's not even a motel nearby.

McMurtry: I'll tell you exactly why. Because second-hand books do not generate the kind of money that you need to pay urban rents. That's why all the bookstores in America are dying. There used to be a million bookstores and second-hand bookstores in all the cities of the East and Midwest and West Coast. There's only one of those gigantic bookstores left — in Portland, Oregon — because urban real estate is worth too much. So I went to a town, Archer City, where the buildings cost \$30,000 to \$40,000 apiece, and I can have a million books with almost no overhead. But there's no big city where you can do that. The family in Portland has had its own house for, I guess, 75 or 80 years. They've owned their whole block for a long, long time.

Cite: Your books are so lovingly dis-

played. When I commented on the vast collection, a person standing next to me said, "Well, have you been across the street?"

McMurtry: We have three buildings full, and we are going into another very, very large building. That will probably do it. The other building will hold as much as we've got already — about 700,000 or 800,000 books. And that's enough because it will replenish itself in a sort of tributary fashion by then.

Cite: When you're in Archer City, do you use the bookstore as a resource?

McMurtry: When I'm there, I work in it. I have only three people working there, and when we get 30,000 to 40,000 books at a time, which is what we've been buying, it's a huge job. All these books need to be priced and arranged. I try to buy stock from shops because the books are already priced. Even though some of them aren't priced correctly, at least there's some price in the book. We have so many books that we aren't worried that somebody is going to find a \$10,000 book for a dollar or something like that. If somebody goes in and finds it, they can buy it. They will find some sleepers because I simply don't have time to look at every book myself, and I simply can't hire enough people to live and work there. Only book people would want that kind of job. But that's okay. That's part of the fun of it. I figure I'm about 40,000 books behind in pricing — that is, 40,000 books with no price in them at all. They've been bought from private libraries, and I haven't gotten around to them. I hired someone for the summer to come in and price for three months. It's not hard; it's just that somebody has to take every book off of the shelf and put a number in it.

Cite: It's interesting to think that you could build a town with a bookstore as its industrial base. If you had that and a hotel and a restaurant . . .

McMurtry: Well, there's already one bed and breakfast, and I'm sure there will be others. There is a restaurant that goes in and out of business. I don't own it or have any interest in it, but it does occasionally open up. I think eventually there will be enough dealer traffic from buyers to support a couple of restaurants and a coffee shop, maybe a couple of beds and breakfasts too. It's going to come.

Cite: You have said, "The cattle range had become the oil patch." So, what's next?

McMurtry: Well again, the oil patch is what there is until you get to the cities, and then you get the oil patch plus the computer patch. But oil is still going to be the only viable industry out in my part of Texas because there's nothing else. There are still people who farm, and, I guess, some who make a living at it. But not many people ranch and make a living at that, unless there's some other form of income, or they have oil.

I don't know what comes after the oil patch. Maybe working for a living just goes on and on. It seems to. It was already the oil patch when I was growing up there. The first oil boom in that county was in 1918. That's a while ago — 80 years. When it falls off that's accepted. A lot of my customers at the book shop (and I have customers from all over the world) come to Archer County to invest in oil wells and oil leases. And they see these bookstores, and they stop and are amazed. A lot of them are from New York, California, Chicago, somewhere like that. We don't really depend on foot traffic that much; we depend on dealers. But I have noticed that among our best customers are oil people from far away.

Cite: You commented on your fondness for Rice, and we were curious about other places in Texas that remain wonderful for you, not just in your memory.

McMurtry: Well, you know, there aren't that many. I like Houston. It's the only Texas city I like. I don't mind some of the others but I have no attachment to them. I have a genuine attachment to Houston. I've written four books and two movies set in it. I think it's a wonderful, interesting, diverse, great city, but I don't have any feeling for other Texas cities. After Houston, my feeling would be for Rome or New York City. And I have some feeling for Los Angeles. I have a toehold there; I've had an apartment in L.A. for a long time. I don't at the moment have it, but I go back and forth. I've worked in and around Los Angeles for 40 years. I do go back; I basically like the place.

Cite: Deyan Sudjic wrote a book that was read by a lot of people in architecture and architecture schools called *The 100-Mile City*. He wrote a lot about Houston and Los Angeles. One of his points was that cities were becoming these great, dispersed, amorphous things. He said that Houston seemed to him to be about 20 years behind Los Angeles but moving in the same direction. Do you agree?

McMurtry: I know the writer, but I don't

know his book. But the comparison between Houston and Los Angeles is obvious. They have almost the same surface area. At the time I wrote that *New Republic* essay, they were about 650 square miles apiece. Neither one had a proper center; they had a number of centers. I still feel that way.

You know, when I go to L.A., it reminds me of Houston; Houston reminds me of it — the freeways, the cars, the new architecture. But the natural landscape of Los Angeles, its natural site, is a bit more interesting. It's not a flat coastal swamp or plain. I've lived in the San Fernando Valley, and I've lived in Santa Monica. I never spend continuous time in Los Angeles. I'm there two weeks — that's about as long as I've ever stayed there in the 40 years I've worked in films out there. I think it's an interesting city.

Cite: In the essay "A Look at the Lost Frontier," you drove from Brownsville up through Texas. Have you done that lately?

McMurtry: Well, I haven't done it again in a literal sense. Even that trip was mostly invented, although I did mostly do the drive. But I still made up almost everything in it.

Cite: How did you work your way through *Lonesome Dove*? Did you do a scouting trip?

McMurtry: No, I've never done anything like that deliberately. But I've been all over the West many times, speaking and traveling. It's never been intentional — driving up that way to look at the trail where the cowboys went — but I have been to all those places, so I pretty well know what it looks like.

Cite: Were you in Houston when NASA arrived in the 1960s?

McMurtry: Yes, I was here when NASA arrived. I was a young parent then, raising a child more or less by myself. I was aware of the astronauts; I met them a few times, but I never went out there.

Cite: I wondered about the impact that had on the city's sense of itself — like the baseball team used to be the Colt 45s, then came the Astrodome and the Astros. Houston is constantly reinventing itself without looking back.

McMurtry: Well, that had started when I wrote about the Astrodome, but I didn't really see much of that progression because I was in Washington for the next 15 years.

Cite: When you come here, do you go back to old haunts like Spanish Village or places like that?

McMurtry: No, I really don't. I come here to buy books or to make a speech. A goddaughter of mine and her boyfriend are both at Rice, so I come and visit them for parents' day or something like that. I always have a reason for coming here. Unfortunately, I'm rarely here for more than a day. Like I got here at noon today, and I leave at 6:30 in the morning. I had lunch over on Westheimer. I don't seek out old haunts. Most of the people I knew best — not counting a couple of academic people at Rice who are very much alive and very good friends — are dead, or very, very old and not visitable any more.

Cite: Are you generally happy with the locations used for your movies set in Houston?

McMurtry: I thought that *Terms of Endearment* was a very good movie. I wasn't particularly thrilled by the use of Houston. And I don't remember much about Houston in *The Evening Star*. When you think of a movie about Houston you think it's going to be like Robert Altman's *Brewster McCloud*, which I thought was very good at getting the sense of Houston.

I was just by one of the houses that were used in *Terms of Endearment* this morning, and it's not what you think. It's not what you notice about those films. You don't say, "Gee, this is what Houston is like!" You say, "Gee, this is what these people are like!" It doesn't really use the city in a spectacular way.

I've written two tetralogies — the Houston tetralogy and the *Lonesome Dove* tetralogy. You know they're written catch as catch can, not in sequence or with any real thought. I have a lot more confidence in the Houston books working than I do in the *Lonesome Dove* tetralogy, in which I try never to mention how old a character is or how far it is from one place to the other.

Someone sooner or later is going to do an index or companion to the *Lonesome Dove* volumes to identify the places that are mentioned and try to figure out the ages and names of the characters and things like that. I am very careless about those things. I write very fast, and I never have the right reference book when I need it. I write about a street, and then I forget about it, so I'm sure that, like any serial novels, there are a lot of inconsistencies.

But the locations probably do work in the Houston books because those four books are all set in one city, like *The Alexandria Quartet*, for example. That's a lot easier than writing four books in which your characters are scattered from 100 miles below the Mexican border to the Canadian border. I shudder to think that if I tried to look at the *Lonesome Dove* books, how many inconsistencies and impossibilities geographically I would find, not to mention the ages of the characters and stuff like that. But Houston is easier; I'm pretty close on Houston.

Cite: There is a colorful cross section of Houston places in your books, like McCarty Drive.

McMurtry: Oh, yes. I wonder if that place is still over there. It used to be a great old honky-tonk, a crumbling sort of Spanish honky-tonk.

Cite: Right, it looked like a bird dog.

McMurtry: About two years ago, I got over to the Athens Bar. That's the last time I was over that way.

Cite: To close the interview, you have said, "Prose, I believe, must accord with the land. . . . A viny, tangled prose would never do for a place so open; a place, to use Ross Calvin's phrase, where the sky determines so much."

McMurtry: Yes, Ross Calvin and the story of New Mexico. Yes, I think that's right, and Houston is tricky because it's not the plains. Most of my prose is a plains prose because I really am a creature of the plains. This is a coastal plain, but I've always seen it as an urban forest, so I don't know how my prose works out in relation to Houston. I'm pretty confident of it, though, in relation to the plains. ■