

# McMURTRY'S HOUSTON

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Others have written about Houston, but none more intimately than Larry McMurry. Five of his novels are set, at least in part, in Houston and several of his essays also include observations about the city. *Moving On* (1970), *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* (1972), and *Terms of Endearment* (1975) belong to Houston of 30 years ago: before the boom and the bust of the 1980's, before today's impressive skyline, and before the influx of newcomers altered the city's demography. *Some Can Whistle* (1989) and *The Evening Star* (1992) return to a much transformed place, a fact McMurry does not fail to note.

In the Houston novels, the city transcends mere setting and becomes a character itself — unmistakably female. Danny Deck, the narrator of *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*, reflects: "Houston . . . had been my mistress, but after a thousand nights together, just the two of us, we were calling it off. It was a warm, moist, mushy, smelly night, the way her best nights were. The things others hated about her were the things I loved: her heat, her dampness, her sumpy smells."

McMurry's affair with this swampy demoiselle began during his undergraduate period at Rice (1954–55) and was rekindled when he returned as a graduate student (1958–60), living just off campus in a garage apartment at 1718 1/2 Rice Boulevard. Later as a member of the Rice English faculty (1963–72), he lived at 2219 Quenby in Southampton, where, as recorded by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Ken Kesey and his crew full of merry pranksters first touched down in Houston. The Rice neighborhood figures prominently in McMurry's portrait of Houston, but the writer's eye for local color roves considerably to River Oaks, the Heights, the East End, and Denver Harbor. The names of actual streets, bars, restaurants, and shopping centers frequently appear undisguised; even when altered and amplified to fit the demands of storytelling, the places themselves are still usually identifiable.

McMurry favors inner city neighborhoods to suburbs, although his first collection of essays, *In A Narrow Grave* (1968), came close to being titled *The Cowboy in the Suburb*, because "[it was] essentially that movement, from country to subdivision, homeplace to metropolis, that gives life in present-day Texas its passion. Or if not its passion, its strong, peculiar mixture of passions, part spurious and part genuine, part ridiculous and

part tragic." His bias was expressed by one of his most memorable characters, the Boston-born-and-bred widow Aurora Greenway, who was "opposed to the whole concept of suburbs, though it appeared that suburbs were where most people lived . . . In her youth . . . there were towns, villages and country . . . none of this muddle of stoplights, convenience stores and small ugly houses in between."

Aurora's inventor is particularly adept at describing aspects of Houston the Chamber of Commerce would rather forget. In the 1968 essay, "A Handful of Roses," he writes, "If one were to choose a single aspect of Houston, and from that infer or characterize the city, I would choose its bars." Some of the most vivid and hilarious scenes in the Houston novels occur in blue collar bars and honky tonks catering to east Texas hillbillies come-to-town, called "citibillies" by McMurry. They favored places like the New Frolic, J-Bar Korral, Tired-Out Lounge, and Breaking Point Lounge: "seldom fancy but reliably dim and cool . . . equipped with jukeboxes, shuffleboards, jars of pig's feet and talkative drunks." Telephone Road, teeming with ice houses and beer joints, is the location of Gulf Air Lounge, featured in *Moving On*. Here a customer expresses his disapproval of a bean-deficient bowl of chili with a barrage of gunfire. At present, the few remaining bars on Telephone Road are either Korean cocktail lounges or Latino cantinas, but the glory days of redneck watering holes remain preserved in McMurry's picaresque prose.

In "A Handful of Roses," McMurry observes, "one can view the most extraordinary example of Mexican saloon and warehouse architecture north of the border" on McCarty Drive. He may have had in mind a place called Harbor Lights, a large honky tonk frequented by stevedores, truck drivers, and sailors. It is tamer now — a "sports bar." McCarty Drive was also the location of J-Bar Korral, a dance hall where Royce Dunlap, husband of Aurora's maid Rosie, drives his potato chip delivery truck through a flimsy plywood wall and onto the dance floor in a fit of jealousy. Not far away on Clinton Drive is the Athens Bar and Grill, the presumptive model for the Acropolis, which Aurora Greenway visits in *The Evening Star*. Other East side venues make appearances in *Terms of Endearment*. Royce and Rosie Dunlap live in Denver Harbor on Lyons Avenue. At one point, Rosie seeks employment as a car-



hop at a drive-in on Lyons (Pioneer Drive-In No. 16), and, for a while, Royce cohabits with a waitress girlfriend in a tiny apartment on Harrisburg next to "a mountain of some 20,000 worn-out tires."

In *Some Can Whistle*, Danny Deck's daughter works at a place called Mr. Burger on Dismuke Street near Lawndale Avenue. Returning from Los Angeles in search of her, Deck first wanders into Houston Heights, where he stops for a meal at a taco stand on Twentieth Street. McMurry owned an antiquarian book store, Booked-Up, at 711 Studewood in the Heights during the 1980s.

Not far from the Heights on Washington Avenue, Aurora samples the culinary delights of the Pig Stand No. 7, a coffee shop and erstwhile drive-in specializing in pork sandwiches, fried onion rings (which it claims to have invented), and other delicacies not on the American Heart Association's recommended diet. In *The Evening Star*, Aurora's old friend and former suitor General Hector Scott quietly dies at the Pig Stand after sampling "a bite or two of her mince pie." The movie was filmed on location with waitresses filling in as extras; booth 6 is now commemorated with a plaque as "Aurora's booth." The Pig Stand also features a collection of more than 2,000 miniature pigs.

Rice University and its surrounding neighborhoods appear in all five Houston novels. In *Moving On*, Rice graduate student Jim Carpenter and his wife Patsy live in a garage apartment behind a South Boulevard mansion. His fellow student and friend Flap Horton lives with his wife Emma in similar quarters on less fashionable West Main in Montrose. In *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers* Danny Deck has memorable encounters with a disapproving librarian at Fondren Library. Some of McMurry's most lyrical passages about Houston are conveyed through Deck as he walks through the campus and its environs.

In *Moving On*, the Hortons and the Carpenters join other graduate students at a Mexican restaurant on Alameda Road, which closely resembles Spanish Village, an affordable, Christmas-tree-light illuminated shrine of classic Tex-Mex food and unwatered margaritas. The group sits on a covered, open-air porch at heavy, chipped-tile-top concrete tables. Today the porch is enclosed and air conditioned, but the tables remain just as McMurry described them.

Aurora and her friend, Trevor, visit The Last Concert, a "small Mexican

bar . . . on an obscure street in North Houston." They dance the samba, cha cha, and rumba in this "after hours" refuge until six in the morning. Three decades later, The Last Concert plays on at 1403 Nance Street in the Warehouse District on the northern edge of downtown, and its patrons are still obliged to knock on the door, speakeasy style, for admission.

Danny Deck pays a visit to the Angel Bar on Elysian Street just north of downtown in *All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers*. The bar's neighborhood is not a place for the faint hearted. "Loud jukeboxes blared in the bars. Loud talk rang on street corners. Many knives were carried. At night guns went off and women were pounced on." In a "Handful of Roses," McMurry, discussing Houston bars, laments that: "my own sentimental favorite, the Angel Bar on Elysian Street, is now alas defunct; and I have never been able to find out if it went broke or all the patrons killed themselves off."

"Love, Death and the Astrodome" was written in 1965 when the dome's charms were thought to be semi-eternal. Rereading this essay in light of recent developments, one appreciates all the more McMurry's deflationary wonderment at the spectacle of "the huge white dome poked soothingly above the summer heat haze like the working end of a gigantic roll-on deodorant." Exiting the dome after seven lifeless innings between the Astros and the Mets, McMurry reflects: "Though it is a very pleasant place to watch a sports event, it is much more the product of a love of money and ostentation than of a love of sport. It caters quite successfully to what is least imaginative in the national character."

As for the character of the city itself, McMurry had higher hopes. Despite its past and present as an "opportunist's delight," he speculated in "A Handful of Roses" that there was yet the chance that Houston might mend her ways and acquire a modicum of respectability: "She may, with her money and her sexy trees, attract the sort of imagination that could bring her to a rich maturity and make her a mother city. Even now she is being fecundated by a diversity of peoples, and her children might be interesting to know. They will be natural urbanites, most of them, members of the first generation of Texans to belong in fact and in spirit to a fertile city, not to the Old Man of the country or the Old Maid of the town." ■