

NEW ANTHOLOGY RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT HOUSTON'S IDENTITY

Literary Houston (David Theis, editor, 2010, 544 pages, TCU Press, hardback \$32.50, paperback \$24.95)

by Hank Hancock

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO THE BROADLY APPEALING collection *Literary Houston*, editor David Theis can't help but recite the timeworn conventions about Houston's literary heritage, starting with the bugaboo (just nine words in) of New York City and our comparative lack of esteem. His collection does a great deal to dispel this hand-wringing about proving the city's cultural worth by assembling a set of laudable themes and perspectives we can securely identify as Houston's own. At the same time, as useful as this collection will be for many readers—it is both a sort of textbook that college instructors might adopt, as well as a casual survey for occasional sampling—it raises pertinent questions about what we should expect of Houston's literary heritage.

The 64 contributions chosen and arranged by Theis are alone evidence of a distinctive literary tradition. The book—like Houston—is a sprawling, untidy volume, whose planning is not always clear, with choices that seem puzzling at first but are more sensible in thoughtful retrospect. Nevertheless, it provides a clear introduction to writers the city regularly celebrates, as well as honoring those whose legacies have faded somewhat. Theis readily acknowledges

that with his choices he entered contested territory, one with fiercely defended interests and established ideas about what constitutes “literary” and “Houston.” No surprise if certain readers are dissatisfied with one or more of his selections or disappointed not to find their pet Houston tract included in the table of contents. Luckily for us, Theis has included an excellent appendix of titles “That Got Away” (sometimes owing

to rights restrictions). Also, plenty of the contributions themselves cite additional titles and the names of authors significant to Houston.

Theis divides the book into sections, some of which cannot secure their borders. The first three are Biography and Memoir, Visitors, and The City Itself, each of them containing some works that could fit elsewhere or should. The next, Events, adds to the historical selections in the previous sections—works of interpretation as well as original documentation—with essays about the Battle of San Jacinto (fought mere months

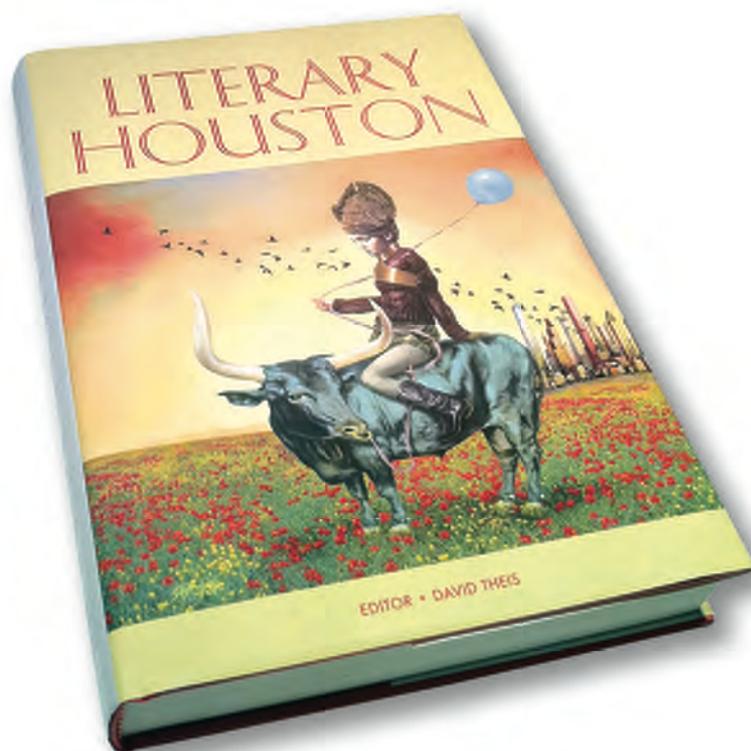
before the Allen brothers landed), the turbulent founding of the Houston Symphony, the Astrodome (not exactly an event, but all right), the defection of Chinese ballet sensation Li Cunxin, the Enron debacle, the disintegration of the space shuttle Columbia, and the influx of evacuees from Katrina. The final two

sections—less than a third of the book—comprise creative writing by mainly contemporary poets and fiction writers, often drawing from the tremendous store of talent at the University of Houston's Creative Writing Program. *Literary Houston* relies so much on journalism and history, however, it might lead us to conclude that nonfiction is Houston's sturdiest literary genre.

Newspaper columnists and journalists dominate much of the nonfiction, a fact that shouldn't be surprising, given that we have for several decades now benefited from award-winning coverage in the *Houston Press* and *Texas Monthly*, and that the local dailies have at various times employed such luminaries as O. Henry, Walter Cronkite, Donald Barthelme, and Sig Byrd—all included here.

Indeed, very little in this book surpasses Sig Byrd's electrifying beatnik street patois: “Evenings, Gafftop still slaves as an eccentric dancer at the Club de Lisa, in the Bloody Fifth Ward, where the cats say he is very lagoon in the shake-dance number.”

A significant share of the essays concern themselves with Houston's architecture, planning, neighborhoods, and development, recognizing that Houston's story has always been about unchecked speculation and its effects on the lives of its citizens. Historian Stephen L. Hardin describes the “ills of desultory development” when Houston was the capital of the Republic. In the rush to build, the Republic's founders failed to erect enough chimneys and installed too few stoves, so statesmen huddled in dirt-floor shacks where they withstood not only withering summer heat and freezing, damp cold (the open prairies 170 years ago must have made Houston winters a quite different experi-



ence from today), but also pestilence, disease, and streets full of mud, tree stumps, and animal carcasses. (Philip Lopate, on the other hand, later contends that Houston “has one of the mildest and pleasantest climates of any North American metropolis.” I’m sure neither is lying.)

Albert J. Guerard, born in Houston in 1914, left the city ten years later (by train!) only to return in 1972 to test his memories against the evidence on the ground. The result is a record of the wastes made of the neighborhoods of Downtown, what we now call Midtown, and “the Binz” where museums now congregate. In his essay, he describes experiencing vertigo—not only because of his own changed perspective (and occasional false memory), but also at the sight of the many paved-over lots and new freeways, and the utterly changed social texture of street corners and sidewalks near his old home, now split up into a fourplex and inhabited by black families. It is tempting to try to trace some of the place names he employs (Google maps can help somewhat), but 1972 is already eons ago, and the places have already changed again.

Guerard’s father, Albert L. Guerard, came to Houston in 1913 to teach at the new Rice Institute (whose buildings he endearingly characterizes in his own essay in terms of their pastiche of nonlocal traditions), and already he describes the city as “sprawled indefinitely over the prairie.” (He is one of several over the following century to mention the immensity of the Houston sky.) Guerard senior then describes Houston’s transformational decade just prior to World War I, including the completion of the Ship Channel, the development of the newly discovered oil fields, the rise of industrialists Jesse Jones and Will Clayton, and the convergence of 17 railroads. (Several later writers will deem their own decades to be transformational, and because we’re talking about Houston, they were mostly right.)

Ada Louise Huxtable’s nearly canonical “Deep in the Heart of Nowhere” provides a take on Houston from a “car’s-eye view” in 1975, midway through another transformational decade. Her criticism is eloquent and precise: “Houston is all process and no plan. Gertrude Stein said of Oakland that there was no there, there. One might say of Houston that one is always on the way, always arriving.”

However, we probably learn more about “the real Houston each resident seeks out individually for want of a discernible mass focus” in Philip Lopate’s “Houston Hide-and-Seek” from 1989. Lopate got out of the car and over several years sought out the city in its zydeco joints and art spaces, constructing “an interior city from the handful of locations that are charged with personal meaning.” Lopate inveighs against 60-mile-an-hour architecture, the triumph of the car over walkable spaces, the evacuation of Downtown, and Houston’s foolish anti-urban sensibility, but he has the advantage of an interior perspective. Terrence Doody elaborates on this interior perspective further in “Immanent Domains,” explaining what is perhaps a signal strategy in Houston’s cultural geography: that

we make meaning from the inside out “as we appropriate [places] by acts of the imagination and refine their purpose.”

Since Houston takes so much effort to find a way into, we can better appreciate the contributions of our literary visitors—H. L. Menken and Simone de Beauvoir are caustic examples, with Jan Morris and Stanley Crouch rather more friendly—who were necessarily at a disadvantage, but still managed to shine some light on Houston’s fraught cultural relationship with the rest of the country and the world.

Much of the nonfiction in *Literary Houston* concerns itself with a century-long effort to consolidate Houston’s cultural prestige, summoning up the central role oil money has played here. This weighs the usefulness of extravagant oil wealth in side-by-side profiles of two very different women. First, Joanne Herring (played by Julia Roberts in *Charlie Wilson’s War*) was instrumental in motivating support through her social circles for US intervention into Russian-occupied Afghanistan. Her contemporary and opposite number was Dominique (Schlumberger) de Menil, to whom more than a few of Houston’s cultural institutions owe their founding or survival. She and her husband were able to bring together Houston oil barons, ecumenical religious leaders, and black radicals, as described in Norman Mailer’s rather nauseating (and still somehow fascinating—that’s Mailer for you) report of his baiting of a militant Negro professor on the occasion of the 1969 moon landing of Apollo 11.

The de Menils fought against Houston’s provinciality in the 1950s by advocating modern art and bringing in artist friends and curators from New York and Europe to class up the joint. Two decades later, curator Jim Harithas (according to a piece by Lisa

Gray) took the opposite tack toward the very same goal, demanding that the city support its own artists and prove itself equal to the most productive art centers of the world. What matters here is that Houston’s supposed provinciality has remained a constant, a fixed idea, a problematic motif in our self-conception (among others revealed in the collection).

Houston’s patrons of the arts have long aimed to make art and architecture into the basis for Houston’s “salable” national and international reputation. For this very reason, the book casts a critical eye on its own project: to tout against claims to the contrary that there is such a thing as a literary tradition in Houston.

As regards the creative works, what makes a work of fiction a “Houston story” or a “Great Houston Novel,” of which Thisis claims there is none so far? Is it a simple matter of setting? If so, Mary Gaitskill, in an otherwise fascinating story featuring her trademark elliptical observations, wraps the place up with the ready-made and not entirely satisfactory observation, “Houston in the summer was terribly hot and humid.” Other works point out our car culture and our funky bayous. Poets Rich Levy and Robert Phillips lay claim to an authentic Houston by way of portraits of the city’s drunks and bus riders. Or does the writer need to make Houston the subject per se? Lorenzo Thomas’ excellent and intimate poem “Liquid City” meditates on sorrows and ambitions that are especially recognizable here. This might easily have included dozens more “Houston poems,” which nearly every faculty member and student at the UH writing program sits down to write at some point in his or her tenure, temporary though it may be.

According to this collection, *Literary Houston* can point to a set of long-standing and still vibrant themes unique to our city, and we can continue looking for and publishing those works without anyone insisting that “this is a Houston story.” Antonya Nelson’s “Eminent Domain,” one of the best examples, makes Houston recognizable in a picture of patronage and poverty hidden and exposed, of self-infatuation and charity and survival.

The considerable charm of *Literary Houston* lies in the dozens of unexpected convergences between writers in different eras or about different subjects and in different literary modes. Besides the subjects already mentioned, we regularly encounter these great Houston themes: space and outer space, the information age, the tremendous sky, oil power and state power, artists flourishing amid benign neglect, the fecundity of the natural environment, the shameful history of white supremacy and the corollary racial prejudice and mistrust, music made cheap and on the fly, Totally Nude Live Girls, casual violence, self-deception, and deceptive self-presentation. These multiple perspectives—from a century ago, three decades ago, or last year; from the native, the visitor, or the transplant—together produce a rich, complete, contradictory, and thus truer portrait of Houston than any one story or received idea, including the one that says that Houston lacks or is still in search of its own literary traditions.

