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_ 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.

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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 Lasa, 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-
since Houston takes so much effort to find a way into, we can better appreciate the contributions of our literary visitors—I. 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. Theis 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 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 fruity 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. Theis 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.