

Larry McMurtry: An Accidental Feminist? By Diana Finlay Hendricks

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Novelist, essayist and screenwriter Larry McMurtry has written more than forty-six books and countless articles, screenplays, and other published works. Most are set in Texas and all are steeped in Texas values, with back road treks into traditions, mores, behaviors, and even taboos. Though he has valiantly attempted to dispel the myth of the great old west, the popularity of his books has betrayed that effort, with his greatest acclaim arguably the Pulitzer Prize awarded for *Lonesome Dove*, his historical saga about a cattle drive from the Texas-Mexico border to the frontier of Montana.

In April of 2012, McMurtry reviewed M. G. Lord's book, *The Accidental Feminist: How Elizabeth Taylor Raised Our Consciousness And We Were Too Distracted By Her Beauty to Notice*, for *The New York Review of Books*. About Taylor, McMurtry wrote, "Husband management may be a feminist skill..." and "Though not so good at marriage, she was a wonderful friend."^[1] He refers to Taylor's strong roles in several movies, "M.G. Lord trots us through this mélange, briskly stopping to pry loose nuggets of feminism when she notices them," but is quick to add that "the lines she speaks and sentiments she dramatizes belong not to her but to the writers, mostly, or sometimes directors. The credit for whatever streaks of feminism turn up in the films goes to them."

As is often the case with McMurtry's reviews, this article takes on the voice of Larry McMurtry, the author, and drifted far away from the actual book to be reviewed. By the end of the article, we know little about Lord's book, beyond the title, which caught my eye as a descriptive thesis statement for a study of Larry McMurtry and the women in his world. Yet the title of the book stuck in my head, along with McMurtry's quick overall comment about the credit for her streaks of feminism in various characters belonging to the writers.

That said, the phrase, "accidental feminist" could be used to describe several of McMurtry's characters through his half-century of published works, and this paper will attempt to study these women as well as McMurtry himself as what could be described as an "accidental feminist."

The purpose of this paper is to examine the women in McMurtry's life, through a study of the fictional characters, critical writing, and real life relationships of Pulitzer Prize winning author Larry McMurtry. Would his focus on strong women characters and interest in opinionated, forceful and dominant female characters prove him to be a mid-twentieth century pioneer in American feminist literature?

Fictional Characters will focus on a handful of the standout female characters in McMurtry's novels, describing their strengths and dimension;

Non-Fictional Characters will describe McMurtry's treatment of some of America's *real* legends through essays, reviews, memoirs and biographies, though with dry humor, his son, James McMurtry maintains "all of Larry's characters are fictional;"

Real Life Relationships will focus on a select few women who have had great influence on Larry McMurtry's life; and,

What Others Say will offer a sampling of literary review, comments from subject matter experts on McMurtry.

McMurtry's fictional characters are the foundation for this study. After multiple failed attempts to organize this section and remain within the space limitations of the assignment, I decided to limit the character study to these ten novels. Some are stand-alone novels and others are parts of a series. I am including the publication dates chronologically, because, culturally, *the time* in which he created these characters is an important factor in the feminism movement.^[2]

1961: *Horseman, Pass By*: Halmea

1963: *Leaving Cheyenne*: Molly Taylor

1966: *The Last Picture Show*: Lois and Jacy Farrow

1970: *Moving On*: Patsy Carpenter, Eleanor Guthrie, Emma Horton

1972: *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*: Sally, Emma Horton, Jill Peel

1975: *Terms of Endearment*: Aurora Greenway, Emma Horton

1983: *The Desert Rose*: Harmony

1985: *Lonesome Dove*: Lorena Wood, Clara Forsythe

1990: *Buffalo Girls*: Martha "Calamity" Jane

1997: *Comanche Moon*: Maggie Tilton, Clara Forsythe

The most logical way to discuss these twelve characters is by categorizing the women in the stand-alone novels and single novels from a series, and then combine the character development of the series women, to illustrate several of the characters as they continue from book to book. [3]

Beginning with *Horseman, Pass By*, we see little of Lonnie's grandmother, as she is whisked away to the hospital early in the book and remains out of sight/out of mind for the remainder of the book. The strong female in this book, comes with two unique traits for 1961: Halmea, the African American maid, serves as the caregiver and nurturer of the family, and though she is sexually assaulted by Hud, and Lonnie even confesses to sexual yearnings toward her, she brings a survivalist balance to the early 1960s – of being committed to the family for whom she works on a personal level, yet strong enough to leave and completely break ties with that family when that is clearly her only option. This character was completely rewritten for the screenplay (Black Halmea became white Alma, portrayed by Patricia Neal), and one thought is that it is simply because the topic was too volatile for the movie at that time.

Molly Taylor in *Leaving Cheyenne* is one of my favorites of all of McMurtry's characters. Molly is both a strong and independent woman, and proves her frontier survival skills as she comes of age in the 20th century.

Is it plausible? Could it happen? Yes. Marshall Sprague writes in "Texas Triptych," in *The New York Times*, "If all this sounds like a tale about some misplaced Kentucky hillbillies, please stand corrected. The people in Mr. McMurtry's Texas triptych are acutely intelligent. The book's comedy is rare, the tragedy heart-rending--and, over all, there is an atmosphere of serenity and wisdom. Gid, Johnny and Molly were unconventional, but they knew about life and love and seized both without hesitation or regrets." Sprague also says, "(I)t occurred to me that if Chaucer were a Texan writing today, and only 27 years old, this is how he would have written and this is how he would have felt."

Of all the female characters in *The Last Picture Show* - and there are several who deserve a nod - mother and daughter Lois and Jacy Farrow are the standout characters in this book. The realistic, albeit tenacious mother-daughter relationship, their sexuality, and the small town, class-conscious fervor come together to build these characters into females who will do what they have to do to survive at the level to which they aspire. We see McMurtry grow out of post-frontier pioneerism and into fact-based modern reality in this, his third novel. I believe his self-confidence catapulted in *Leaving Cheyenne*, as he created a believable voice for a woman in Molly Taylor. His women characters in *Last Picture Show* are arguably the strongest of the characters, perhaps with the exception of Sam The Lion. Lois, a survivalist ice queen who scares her husband into exceeding financial expectations to provide well for the family, and Jacy, the beautiful, popular, flirtatious, and yes, bitchy ice princess - heir to the throne her mother has devoted a lifetime to prepare for her.[4]

Moving On, *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*, and *Terms of Endearment* are part of the Houston collection. While McMurtry danced around characters of his age and generation in *The Last Picture Show*, the Houston series sets the bar at a new high level in his writing career, when McMurtry writes of women who would be his own contemporaries, as they all come of age during the dawning of the sexual revolution, the women's movement and drug culture.

The epic journey of *Moving On* begins with Patsy Carpenter, a wealthy young woman who doesn't need to work for a living and is not yet compelled to follow the natural progression of have babies yet. Patsy is one of McMurtry's most multifaceted characters to date, as he stretches his writing skills to new heights.

In June of 1970, in a *New York Times* book review focusing on "Books of the Times," John Leonard writes, "Is Patsy Carpenter worth 794 pages? Patsy is young, pretty, recently married, financially secure and psychologically adrift on a sea of qualms in the American Southwest, circa now. She reads a lot, she cries a lot, she worries a lot about her sex life. ...It is, however, a novel of monumental honesty, about people as real as your sister, consisting of insights as undeniable as this morning's weather. Attention must be paid."

Indeed, as McMurtry himself says, "*Moving On* was not the Great American Novel but for a time I thought it was." (*Literary Life*, 77).

And what of lusty, earthy Emma Horton and her eccentric, narcissistic mother, Aurora Greenway? McMurtry fans come to know them like old college pals or backfence neighbors. McMurtry labels the Houston series his "Exodus cycle," and deems *Terms of Endearment* the best of the lot. (*Literary Life*, 73).

He adds, "Although I think the last sixty pages of *Terms of Endearment* are among the very best pages I have written, it was while I was writing them that I began to sour on my own work. The minute I finished that book, I fell into a literary gloom that lasted from 1975 until 1983, when the miracle of *The Desert Rose* snapped me out of it" (*Literary Life*, 84).

One of the factors he blames on that literary gloom was the loss of Emma Horton. "...for ten years, I had been writing about Emma Horton, a character I had come to love, but now Emma was dead. Characters who have long been with you become your friends. When I put a final period on Emma and her family I lost presences that had been in my life for a long time. In some way, I had leaned on them, but that was over. They were gone." (*Literary Life*, 84).

I tend to agree with Celia Morris in her essay, "Requiem for a Texas Lady," in *Range Wars*, when she says, "...I decided on the basis of the fiction written by its native sons, that the old Texas myth about women finding happiness in the home has not panned out. The two women one would judge most

nearly content had broken through the strictures of propriety altogether. One of them, Molly in *Leaving Cheyenne*, had a lifelong affair with two men who were best friends; the other, Eleanor Guthrie in *Moving On...* ran her own ranch and indulged in an affair with a notorious rodeo rider” *Range Wars*, 103).

Morris also beats me to the punch in her conversation about Clara and Lorena in *Lonesome Dove*, when she wishes that “a woman would take the figure of Clara and write a book from her angle of vision: Rangers, cattle drives and the frontier West as the tough minded, self-reliant Clara might see it” (*Range Wars*, 107).

Remembering that this essay in *Range Wars* was published in 1989, and McMurtry’s *Comanche Moon*, often looked upon as the best of the other books in the Dove Quartet in 1997, it is important to recall that McMurtry does reach back deeply to develop the characters through the years into much stronger dimensions.

Harmony, in *The Desert Rose: A Novel*, is among the most colorful of McMurtry’s characters, even if she is fading a bit with age and the harsh desert wind. An aging Las Vegas showgirl by night, raising peacocks by day, Harmony faces her bleak future and accepts who she has become with a soft cheerfulness and unflinching optimism. Her angry, beautiful daughter Pepper stands in the footlights, as heir apparent to the stage, and rightfully earns a book of her own. Critics have argued that this is among McMurtry’s least acclaimed works, but McMurtry holds a place in his heart for this book, as having pulled him out of a writing slump, renewed his enthusiasm for writing, and most importantly, brought him back to finish the epic trail driving novel that had sat on the back burner for so long (Busby, 24).

Calamity Jane (Martha Jane Canary), another unique fictionalization of a character, is the main character of *Buffalo Girls*.^[5] McMurtry admits that the basis for this novel was “lifted” from a book of letters (maybe) from Calamity Jane to a teenaged girl, published by a small feminist press in the 1970s. McMurtry found the book in his vast library and created a fictional account of Jane’s life, based on the letters. (Literary Life, 159). Along the way, he created a new compassion for this notorious character from American frontier history. ^[6]

III. Non-Fictional Characters

A broad-based study of the nonfictional women about whom McMurtry writes touches upon the following published works:

1968 – *In A Narrow Grave*: “Eros in Archer County”

1989: *Range Wars*: “Ever a Bridegroom”

2001: *Sacagawea’s Nickname* (*New York Review Of Books*)

2002: “Almost Forgotten Women” (*New York Review Of Books*)

2003: “Lady Sings the Blues” (*New York Review Of Books*)

In A Narrow Grave was McMurtry’s first collection of nonfiction essays. Most of the chapters were repurposed from other publications and writings, but arguably, the three most powerful essays were created especially for this, his fourth book. McMurtry explains in the preface that the essays on sex in Archer County, southwestern literature and the McMurtry family are the three written specifically for *Narrow Grave*. In “Eros in Archer County,” McMurtry writes, “Years ago, someone pointed out that Texas is hell on women and horses. He was wrong about horses, for horses are considered to be valuable, and are treated well. He was absolutely right about women, though; the country was simply hell on them, and remained so until fairly recently (93). He writes in depth about the evolution of women and their roles on the frontier, specifically in Texas, as the state, and the genre grows more sophisticated.

In “Eros,” he writes, “The discrepancy between what the cowboy expected of women and what they needed of him accounts for a lot of long rides into the sunset, as the drifting cowboy drifts away, not so much from what he might want as from what he is not sure how to get. Women shook his confidence because it was a confidence based on knowing how to behave in a man’s word and even the West isn’t entirely a man’s world anymore” (97).

Range Wars: Heated Debates, Sober Reflections and Other Assessments of Texas Writings, published in 1989, two decades after *In A Narrow Grave* questioned Southwestern Literature. In addition to McMurtry’s deeper consideration about Texas literature in “Always a Bridegroom,” (originally presented as a lecture at the Fort Worth Art Museum and first published in the *Texas Observer*), editors Craig Clifford and Tom Pilkington bring together several interesting voices about feminism in the genre. Among the often-cited pieces in this collection is A.C. Greene’s “Fifty Best Texas Books,” originally published in *Texas Monthly* in 1981.^[7] It bears mention that of the fifty books listed in this definitive collection, only six are written by women. McMurtry wrote two of Greene’s “Fifty”: *Horseman Pass By* and *Leaving Cheyenne*. This brings even more value to McMurtry’s portrayal of the strong, significant, female character voice as developed in all of his novels. There were - and still remain - few women writers of the caliber to merit listing with the likes of J. Frank Dobie, Lon Tinkle, John Graves, Tom Lea, Roy Bedichek, Walter Prescott Webb, and the good old boys of Texas literature. *We will return to the Range Wars collection to examine Celia Morris’ “Requiem for a Texas Lady” in a later chapter of this project.*

In his collection, *Sacagawea’s Nickname: Essays on the American West*, McMurtry spotlights several remarkable western women, historical figures as well as historians. In a review of *Sacagawea*, for Colorado Central Magazine, western historian Bill Hays writes that McMurtry is clearly a fan of Patricia Nelson Limerick, the University of Colorado professor and director of The Center for the New West, and describes her as a “representative of revisionist

historians of the West, or as McMurtry describes her: ‘...perhaps by instinct, a counterstater, even on occasion, a counter puncher....’”

In a conversation about the mythical west, and women’s roles, McMurtry includes an essay about Limerick in *Sacagawea*, in which he writes, “It has been Ms. Limerick’s task — and that of her revisionist colleagues — to continually restore the contexts which the romanticizers just as continually dissolve. She is, I’m afraid, the Historian as Sisyphus, endlessly rolling the rock of realism up Pike’s Peak, only to watch it roll right back down into the pines of romance. Hers — theirs — is a noble but thankless task; rain though they may on the rodeo-parade model of western history, it’s still that parade that people line up to see: there’ll be an Indian or two, if any can be located, and a couple of faux Conestoga wagons, maybe a stagecoach, with a tottery old-timer riding shotgun, then a riding club, with a number of bankers and businessmen nervously clutching their saddle horns, and, finally, several Cadillac convertibles with pretty girls in them. There you have the beloved story...” (86).

McMurtry continued in his often-backhanded admiration for women writers in another *New York Review of Books* essay entitled “Almost Forgotten Women.” In the review he praises Theodora Bosanquet and her biography of Paul Valery. In a relatively short article, McMurtry highlights Bosanquet’s career with a sprinkling of awe and admiration, as he shares her comments about her enviable work with great literarians including Edith Wharton, Ezra Pound, and others, the least of not being her mentor, Henry James.[8]

In yet another essay for the *New York Review of Books*, he writes about Gail Collins, the editorial editor of The New York Times, who wrote what he deemed a “long, ambitious history of America’s Women” in *American’s Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines*. McMurtry wholeheartedly agrees with her introduction and reprints it in his review:

The history of American women is all about leaving home – crossing oceans and continents, or getting jobs and living on their own. Some of our national heroines were defined by the fact that they never nested – they were peripatetic crusaders like Susan B. Anthony. Clara Barton, Sojourner Truth, Dorothea Dix. The center of our story is the tension between the yearning to create a home and the urge to get out of it. [9]

McMurtry is highly complimentary of Collins’ book, and unlike many of his “reviews” in the *New York Review of Books*, this focuses much more on Collins’ writing than on his thoughts on the subject – or perhaps the book he would have written differently. He reviews this with sensitivity and homage, and concludes with the opinion that, “Today the situation is far from perfect, but it would hard to read this book and not conclude that, for women, things have improved...” adding, “And Hilary Rodham Clinton has a real chance to win the presidency. She wears slacks too – but unlike those female aviators of World War II, no one is rushing to arrest her.”

IV. Real Life Relationships

The study of the real life relationships in Larry McMurtry’s life leans heavily on his memoirs and secondary sources. While his series of memoirs provides some insight into the women in his life, little is written about his recent relationships. With that, this chapter is limited to snapshots of the real women who had impact on his life, and therefore deserve a mention, albeit brief:

Louisa Francis McMurtry – LJM’s grandmother, frontier pioneer. In *Walter Benjamin At The Dairy Queen*, [10] McMurtry describes his grandparents as “- potent word – pioneers. They came to an unsettled place, a prairie emptiness, a place where no past was – no Anglo-Saxon past at least...” (21). He also mentions that Louisa Francis McMurtry was “through with talk, at least conditionally. Now and then I heard my grandmother talking to my father – her favorite of twelve children – but although she lived with us until her death (when I was eight) I cannot recall her ever addressing a single syllable to me.” He adds, “Louisa Francis had raised twelve children on a stark frontier with a husband who was at times erratic (that is, drunk); but the time I came along her interest in children was understandably slight, and that’s putting it mildly. (*Walter Benjamin*, 20).

Hazel Ruth McIver McMurtry – LJM’s mother. Defined in several of McMurtry’s recollections by a story in which she, as a young bride living with her husband in his parents’ home, was slapped across the face in 1935, by Louisa Francis for what he recalls was “some domestic trifle,” but he goes on to say that was a slap that echoed through his parents’ marriage until that marriage collapsed some forty-four years later. Though his father nearly immediately built a little three-room house fifty-yards south of his parents’ home, Larry writes, “The damage was done. My parents, like the Tolstoys, were thus sadly undone at the very outset of a long marriage.” (*Walter Benjamin*, 48)

Sue and Judy – LJM’s sisters; McMurtry was seven years old when Sue (Deen) was born, a year after the family moved into Archer City from the ranch, and twelve when Judy was born. Despite wide age gaps as children, the McMurtry siblings (including youngest brother Charlie) maintained close relationship in adulthood. Judy ran a title company in Archer City until her retirement; and Sue Deen has been the day-to-day proprietor of the bookstore enterprises in Archer City for several decades.

Jo Scott McMurtry – LJM’s first wife; mother of his son, James. Jo and Larry met in Denton, when she was a student at Texas Woman’s University and Larry at the University of North Texas. In *Books*, McMurtry writes:

In 1959, I married Jo Ballard Scott of Florence, South Carolina. Jo spent our marriage reading Proust and Gibbon. Proust she read in French in the Pleiade edition. That was fine with me. I was happy to have a wife who read Proust and Gibbon, rather than, say *Ladies’ Home Journal*. [11]

Today, Jo is a retired university professor, specializing in Shakespearian Studies, and has published several books on Victorian fiction and Shakespeare’s England. (*Books*, 49)

Marsha Carter – LJM’s one-time significant romantic relationship and business partner. Carter and McMurtry were in a significant relationship early in their friendship, when Larry and James moved to the Washington, D. C area. The law in that region required a two-year residency in the state prior to divorce being finalized. Jo already lived there. By the time the divorce was final, Marsha and Larry’s romantic relationship had lost its passion, but they continued to be close friends, highly successful and longtime partners in the book-selling business for more than thirty-six years. [12]

Diana Ossana – LJM’s companion and writing partner. Acquaintances since the mid 1980s in Tucson, Arizona, Ossana stepped in as a companion as McMurtry was suffering from depression and recovering his heart attack and quadruple bypass. She officially became his writing partner in 1992, on the *Pretty Boy Floyd* project. According to biographer Mark Busby, in 1993, McMurtry’s longtime agent, Irving “Swiftly” Lazar died, leading to a new agent new contract with Simon and Schuster that included Ossana (Busby, 29).

In *Literary Life*, McMurtry also writes of that post-bypass era, when either he or his “ghosts or some combination of the two produced more than twenty more books, most of them novels but some of them nonfiction. He adds:

All this plus the post-surgical screenwriting, I did with my writing partner, Diana Ossana. Before we knew it we had done twelve scripts, and were soon to have the luck of a lifetime when we obtained the rights to Annie Proulx’s great short story, “Brokeback Mountain,” which won us each a screenwriting Oscar (149).

Ossana has been instrumental in most of McMurtry’s recent work, credited with much of the heavy lifting in bringing the work to life. His recent triptych of memoirs (*Books, A Literary Life, and Hollywood*) is no exception, as he writes in *Hollywood, A Third Memoir*:

At seventy-three, with Diana’s help, I’m still pecking them out. Most of what I’ve done is journeyman work, or at least it was until she came along... Diana should tell her own version when she’s ready. My purpose here is to write about Hollywood: the town and the culture rather than any given film. So over to Diana, and lots of luck (118).

Faye Kesey McMurtry - LJM’s lifelong friend and wife. The least has been written about Faye Kesey McMurtry. Her marriage to Larry McMurtry on April 29, 2011, (the same day as the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate) in Archer City, Texas was written about in newspapers and magazines from San Francisco to New York. McMurtry had met Faye when he and her late husband, Ken Kesey were classmates in the prestigious Stegner graduate writing program at Stanford University in the late 1950s. Faye had been Ken Kesey’s high school sweetheart and they eloped in 1956, and remained married until his death in 2001. The wedding in the bookstore in Archer City was her first “formal” wedding. As they exchanged vows, she promised to keep his books organized in his preferred style, and he said he loved many women, but vowed to love her as long as he can and to the best of his ability.

McMurtry’s philosophy about women could be best described in the conclusion of *Roads*, where he writes:

Some years ago I had a sobering realization about women which was that there are just too many nice ones. One simply can’t fall in love with, sleep with, or marry all the nice women. One of the saddening facts of life is that there is always going to be a delightful woman somewhere who for whatever accident of timing or attraction simply slips by and recedes to return only in dreams (*Roads*, 204).

V. What Others Say

This two dimensional chapter highlights what others say about McMurtry and his writing as it relates to female characters, as well as what they say about women and feminism in general, as it relates to the culture, the times, and that which historian Don Graham calls “Lone Star Literature.” Again, in the interest of space, I whittled this review of literature down to a sampling of seven voices over a twenty-five year span of publication:

1986 - Molly Ivins: “Texas Women: True Grit and All The Rest” (*Lone Star Literature*)

1989 - Celia Morris: “Requiem for a Texas Lady,” (*Range Wars*)

1991 - Halley Stillwell: “The Bride” (*Lone Star Literature*)

1999 - Betty Sue Flowers: “Why Texas Is The Way It Is” (*Lone Star Literature*)

2001 - Caroline Fraser “Pretty In The Sunlight” (*New York Review Of Books*)

2011 - Don Lechman: Larry McMurtry (A Master’s Thesis)

2011 – Ruth Pennebaker “Unearthing Aurora” (*Texas Observer*)

Don Graham’s *Lone Star Literature: A Texas Anthology* should be required reading for any aspiring Texas culturist. He brings together some of the best

twentieth century Texas writers in one belt-busting volume. McMurtry writes in the foreword, “Graham is probably as familiar with Texas literature in all its protean forms as anyone now writing... Grumpy indeed would be the reader who didn’t find much to enjoy.”(14)

Molly Ivins made a career of sucker-punching contemporary Texas heroes while building upon the mythology of the Lone Star State. In “Texas Women: True Grit and All the Rest,” she writes, “They used to say that Texas was hell on women and horses – I don’t know why they stopped” (*Lone Star Literature*, 698).

Ivins goes into a definitive description of the strains of Texas culture, noting that they are all “rotten for women.” Among them, she lists the Southern belle nonsense of our Confederate heritage; the sultry machismo of our Latin heritage; the perennial “good-ol’-boyism” and their “virgin/whore” attitudes toward women (either your “Good-Hearted Woman” or “Your Cheating Heart”) with an emphasis on honky-tonk angels; and the jock idolatry that hoists the woman-as-pretty-cheerleader role (*LSL*, 699).

And “last but not least,” Ivins describes the legacy of the frontier – “not the frontier that Texas women lived on, but the one John Wayne lived on.” She writes that anyone who knows the real history of the frontier knows it is a saga of the strength of women. They worked as hard as men, they fought as hard as men, they suffered as much as men.” But she goes on to write of the cowboy movies and how myth built the strong Texas men as protecting the little ladies or “the gals” from the ever-present dangers of the West (700).

Molly concludes this must-read chapter on Texas feminism with the reality that “when its all over, if we stick together and work, we’ll come out better than the sister who’s buried in a grave near Marble Falls under a stone that says, Rudolph Richter, 1822-1915, and Wife” (703).

McMurtry has done much of the heavy lifting in that effort - allowing his women characters to take the lead in many of the aforementioned novels, and offering them the heroic voice, if not always the voice of logic or reason, in his body of work.

Betty Sue Flowers, longtime director of the LBJ Library and Museum at the University of Texas, writes another of the essays in *Lone Star Literature*, “Why Texas Is The Way It Is.” She writes of the power of our Texas myth – or the four myths that have shaped us into the West: the hero myth, religious myth, enlightenment myth and economic myth. Among them, she credits the hero myth as that which has shaped this state and its writers most particularly (*LSL*, 694).

As we prop this theory up against the backbone of McMurtry’s writing, we see that the heroes do stand taller in Texas literature than in the novels of other states. McMurtry allows his women characters to share in that rugged individualism, risk taking and wildcatting – if not only on the frontier or in the burgeoning oil industry, then in the urban landscape of *nouveau riche* Houston.

Authentic West Texas pioneer Halley Crawford Stillwell contributes an essay entitled “The Bride” to Graham’s anthology, an excerpt from her *I’ll Gather My Geese* memoir. As she writes of her own experiences in 1918, when she chose to marry Roy Stillwell against her parents’ advice, she eloped with the frontier rancher. But Stillwell had proven her spirit of adventure and fearlessness long before the elopement. Upon earning her teaching certificate, she was offered a job and moved from the more civilized Alpine down to the badlands of Presidio, just across the river from where Pancho Villa was assembling his troops. A brave move for a single Anglo woman of any age, she writes:

My father thought this place was too dangerous for a young lady. He didn’t want me to go, and stressed this point often.

“Daughter, I think you’re going on a wild goose chase,” he said.

I finally replied somewhat flippantly, “Then I’ll gather my geese,” ... and armed with a six shooter, her father’s favorite and most dependable weapon, packed up her new teaching certificate and headed for the badlands of Presidio to teach school. (*LSL*, 108).

An educator, rancher, pioneer, frontier woman, Stillwell could have been a character in any of McMurtry’s novels –set from the 1800s through the 21st century. I would be curious to follow this question and find out if their paths ever crossed. Further study of his novels and influences might reveal a Stillwell influence in some of his character development. [14]

McMurtry is not without criticism for his portrayal of women. Celia Morris writes in her “Requiem For a Texas Lady” essay in *Range Wars*, “If you knew Texas only through its best known writing, you would be hard-pressed to believe that competent adult, self-defining women exist here – women, that is, who do not define themselves by their relationship to man” (91).

She points to McMurtry as an exception, describing his work as illustrating that “he sees women – and even on occasion, finds one to admire,” but still criticizes him as tending to think stereotypically about them in terms of what they do or feel in relation to a man.” (92). She quotes McMurtry in his “Ever A Bridegroom” essay when he says of John Graves, “If nature continues to stimulate him it maybe because it too is elusive, feminine, never completely knowable.” (93). And perhaps it is this un-knowable factor that has made women so elusive in many American novels.

Caroline Fraser reviewed McMurtry’s *Paradise* for the *New York Review of Books* in 2001. This in-depth article offers a thumbnail biography of McMurtry, as *Paradise* affords a few unique glimpses into his personal life that had been heretofore untold. When *Last Picture Show*, his third book, was released, Larry’s mother confessed that she read the first hundred pages and then hid it on a closet shelf, picking up the phone and calling her son to ask, “Larry, honey, is this what we’re sending you to Rice for? Those awful words! And those awful...”

Fraser researches and reveals much about McMurtry's relationships in this article: relationships between his parents, with his parents, with his childhood friends and neighbors, and beyond. She shares *Picture Show* as the watershed moment in McMurtry's career – catapulting him from a minor regional novelist, to that of a Great American Novelist. His books sold well, and Fraser tracks the path he took to get to the Pulitzer and beyond, with a fact-filled article that touches upon his challenges, struggles, and relationships along the way.

In his master's thesis, Don Lechman writes, “Many contemporary feminists still contend that writers, particularly male writers, do not do justice to women” (1). He argues that McMurtry is the one contemporary male author active the past forty years, who does not fit this mold, adding that (at the time of this writing), while males are the lead characters in fourteen of McMurtry's novels and women, primary leads in eight works of fiction, “it is usually the women who prompt the males into action, dominate their psyches and propel plots and character motivations” (4).

Lechman concludes his thesis with, “(McMurtry's) sympathetic approach to their plight and his penchant and preference for making them equal or superior to any man have helped to make those characters and his fiction memorable and rewarding” (47).

A champion for the written word over the film version of any story, Ruth Pennebaker writes in “Unearthing Aurora” for the *Texas Observer*:

“*Terms of Endearment* is a book?” a well-read friend asked recently. “I didn't know that. I thought it was just a movie.”

“Hell yes it's a book, I said, and told her she should read it immediately.”

Pennebaker went on quote the back of her well-worn, yellowed paperback. “Aurora Greenway is the kind of woman who makes the world orbit around her.” That sums it up pretty well... Aurora is imperious, domineering, charming, indomitable. A small horde of suitors hover around her, dazzled by her beauty, spirit and wit. She rejects their advances, corrects their grammar and pounces on inept literary allusions... If she sounds like a monster – well she is. She is also aging and grappling with her own unwieldy emotions... In her most private times, she loses hope. She's worshiped and coveted by men who will never understand her.”

Pennebaker berates the McMurtry fan who has only seen the 1983 movie, winner of the Best Picture Academy Award. The film's strongest character, an astronaut played by Jack Nicholson, wasn't even a character in the book. He turns Aurora into what Pennebaker describes in the *Observer* as “a skinny, sniveling housewife who needed to get laid.”

“Do I sound angry?” Pennebaker asks the *Observer* reader. “You bet. I've been pissed off for 27 years. Aurora Greenway's been lost for almost three decades now. Do me – and yourself- a favor. Read the book and find her.”

VI. Conclusion

Sigmund Freud has been credited with saying, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” Perhaps I should take a giant step back from the academic study of what, who and why McMurtry was writing, and look at *all* of his characters, not just the females.

Would I write of McMurtry as an *Accidental Racist* because he developed the most terrifying, villainous, tortuous Native American in *Blue Duck* and Mexican bandit in *Ahumado*? Could I argue that McMurtry was an *Accidental Regionalist* because all of his writing has a strong foothold in the Lone Star State – and much of it is geographically and ethnocentric? Would I consider McMurtry an *Accidental Chauvinist* because of the strong characters he created in *Woodrow Call*, *Gus McCrea*, *Sam The Lion*, *Gideon Fry* and even *Jake Spoon*? Or would I consider him an *Accidental Gay Rights Activist*, because of his efforts in the screenplay *Annie Proulx' short story, “Brokeback Mountain?”* [15]

To pigeonhole McMurtry into that of a feminist, accidental or not, based on the strength of his characters, is to undercut the credit due a great American writer, who knows how to develop characters for characters' sake.

Yes. Halmea, Molly and Lois, Jacy and Patsy and Aurora, and Clara and Maggie and Lorena and Jill and all the rest are surely strong female characters. They would never have survived in their worlds – or through even a chapter or two of McMurtry's books - were it not for that frontier strength and survivalism – and yes, that southern/Texas ambivalence toward their lots in life.

So yes, McMurtry effectively gave women their due in his writing and in his life. But to attempt to force a label on him as someone who sought to embrace a political movement or social ideology through his development of female characters or his critical writing of women would be selling McMurtry short.

So yes. Whether Freud uttered this phrase or someone else just offered him the credit, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.” [16] Sometimes a strong character is just a strong character. Sometimes that character stays with us and becomes a part of our world, just as real as a favorite uncle or a distant cousin. A pioneer in American feminist literature? Perhaps not, but it is clear that McMurtry put no limitations on the roles of women in 20-21st century American literature.

More than an *accidental* anything, Larry McMurtry has proven himself as a purposeful creator of characters – male and female, good and bad, cameo and epic, who are so strong and deep and dimensional that it is clear that there is nothing accidental about them at all.

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Annotated Endnotes

[1] McMurtry, Larry. "A Life For the Star." *The New York Review of Books* (April, 2012) LJM introduces this review with an attempt to determine exactly what feminism is, with English author, journalist and literary critic Rebecca West's famous doormat quote: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist when I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." McMurtry goes on to define Elizabeth Taylor as a feminist, with some preclusions. "I doubt myself, that Elizabeth Taylor gave a fig about feminism; but that's not to say she was socially irresponsible... By the mid-1980s, she was passionately involved in the fight against AIDS... contributing both money and time" (26). In writing about a post-Oscar party in 1993, he wrote, "(I was) simply transfixed by the beauty of Elizabeth Taylor's eyes. Those eyes had a glory all their own; violet eyes with amber lights. Hard to think clearly about the yeses and no's of feminism when you're looking into the best eyes in Hollywood, though M.G. Lord did make her investigations lively." (26).

[2] McMurtry, Larry. *Walter Benjamin At The Dairy Queen*. NY. Simon and Schuster: Touchstone, 1999. LJM, in describing his library, both at home and in his bookshops, writes, "Shelving by chronology (Susan Sontag's method) doesn't always work for me. The modest Everyman edition of the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* refuses to sit comfortably next to Leonard Baskin's tall *Beowulf*, and exactly the same problem - incompatibility of size - crops up if one shelves alphabetically. Susan Sontag, on a visit when all my books were in the old ranch house, found that she couldn't live even one night with the sloppiness of my shelving, She imposed a hasty chronologizing which held for some years, and still holds in the main." (167).

[3] Organizational notes: The first two novels, both independent stories, *Horseman Pass By* and *Leaving Cheyenne*, along with *The Last Picture Show*, *The Desert Rose* and *Buffalo Girls*, will each stand alone in this study. Even though McMurtry has written sequels for *Picture Show* and *Desert Rose*, space constraints do not allow for more in-depth studies of these characters beyond their introductory debut.

McMurtry introduces characters and the reader meets them again in later books, but in the case of *Lonesome Dove* quartet, the reader meets the characters late in life. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on *Lonesome Dove* (written in 1985 and set in the mid- to late-1870s), and *Comanche Moon* (written twelve years later, in 1997, and set twenty or so years before *Lonesome Dove*).

Emma Horton appears in all three of the Houston books featured in this paper; and her mother, one of McMurtry's most memorable characters, Aurora Greenway first appears in *Moving On*, before becoming the centerpiece of *Terms of Endearment*.

[4] McMurtry, Larry. *The Last Picture Show*, NY. Simon and Schuster: Touchstone (1968). Notes: This is only a seminar paper. 15-25 pages, as per the assignment. But as research will do, this took me down several rabbit holes and brought more Amazon boxes to my doorstep. Among the tangents was Ceil Cleveland's *What Ever Happened to Jacy Farrow?* (University of North Texas Press, 1997). According to the author, a childhood friend of McMurtry's, the character of Jacy was based on Ceil. While this may seem a shallow if not improbably basis for an entire book, it is well written and rich with the reality that was growing up in Archer City - or Thalia - in the 1950 and 60s. Oh - and what did ever happen to Jacy - or Ceil Cleveland? A former English and writing professor at New York University, she also served as vice president for communications at Queens College and the University of Stony Brook. She has been writing fulltime for more than twenty years, and is married to Jerry Footlick, also a professional writer, and a former editor of *Newsweek*, and they now live in North Carolina.

[5] McMurtry, Larry. *Buffalo Girls*. NY. Simon and Schuster: Touchstone (1990) **An odd note:** McMurtry's *Buffalo Girls* should not be confused with another story with the same title about the exploitation of two eight year old Thai girls who engage in boxing competition. Or perhaps the two stories could be related after all, as exploitation for survival tends to be a universal and ageless profession.

[6] **Notes on fictional characters:** So much more to write in this chapter- the dynamics between Aurora and Emma; more on Jill Peel and Patsy Carpenter, and Eleanor Guthrie, and yes, a book could be devoted to the women of *Lonesome Dove*. This was the last chapter I completed. I started with a concept title, began researching this paper, outlined the project, and stumbled onto the conclusion, which I wrote first. Then I went back and fleshed out the meat of the project, leaving the familiar faces of the fictional characters to last. With each paragraph, I found myself eying the page count at the

bottom of the document, not wanting to overstay my welcome. So forgive the brevity and know that there is much more to be written if space were available.

[7] Clifford, Craig and Pilkington, Tom, ed. *Range Wars* (1989) **Notes:** It is worth noting that of A. C. Greene's "Fifty Best Texas Books," McMurtry gets to double-dip with two on the coveted list, (*Horseman Pass By* and *Leaving Cheyenne*) and only six out of the total fifty are written by females. (1). Note: Clifford includes a chapter entitled "Horseman, Hang On," a combination critical focus and myth-buster of an essay, in which he quotes Greene as saying "The myth won't let Texas inspect itself with reality. It is impossible to write a novel about Texas using only so-called ordinary people. 'Texas' character must be included" (46).

[8] McMurtry, Larry. "Almost Forgotten Women." *The New York Review of Books* (November 2002) (downloaded 11/16/13). The introductory paragraph of this essay illustrates the conversational way that McMurtry has of writing to ensure that the reader stays on her toes. The following is an example of his wry backhanded praise: "At a book sale in the fifties, I ought a little orange book about Paul Valery, whose author was Theodora Bosanquet. I had never heard of Miss Bosanquet... or of Valery, but I had by some quirk, heard of the Hogarth Press, publisher of my little treasure. I knew that the Hogarth Press belonged to Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and I assumed that any book *that* famous team published must be mighty smart. In this I was wrong. The Hogarth Press published its full share of duds, but Theodora Bosanquet's *Paul Valery* wasn't one of them. It seemed to me a very writerly book..."

[9] McMurtry, Larry. "Lady Sings The Blues." *The New York Review of Books* (November 2003) (downloaded 11/16/13). While McMurtry praises Collins' book, he also sees frontier-sized gaps in the history. He says, "Though plenty of diaries and letters having to do with the westering movement are now in print, westering interests Ms. Collins less than the South. She does almost nothing with Native American women, or the Hispanic women of California and the Southwest, although in both instances there were interesting lives to be examined. Most white women captured by Indians suffered horribly, but there were a few examples of what might be called successful captivities. Ms. Collins briefly mentions one of those, that of Olive Oatman, who with her sister, was captured by Apaches but sold to the Mojaves, with whom she happily raised a family; the same was true of the famous Texas captive Cynthia Ann Parker, once returned to "civilization," soon wasted away. A little consideration of why "savage" life worked for some few women would not have been amiss."

McMurtry added, "As I read America's Women, I kept a running tally of women mentioned by name – in the case of slaves perhaps only one name – and the total came to roughly 475, about one woman to a page, Of course the superstars – Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sojourner Truth, the major suffragettes, Eleanor Roosevelt – get more extended treatment as do a few exceptional characters such as Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to obtain a medical degree from an American medical school. It seems to me that if Ms. Collins had chosen to slow her narrative a bit, and go into even grittier details, the result might have been fewer rather than more readers. For the story of America's women is not, by and large a pleasant one. It's principally a story of abuse, heavy drudgery, inequality violence, suffering, and early death' and the distance traveled, in terms of equality, was purchased at a very heavy cost."

[10] McMurtry, Larry. *Walter Benjamin At The Dairy Queen*. NY. Simon and Schuster: Touchstone, 1999. Note: In further comparison to the Tolstoys, McMurtry writes: "In the Tolstoys' case, it was the too-frank diaries that the young count insisted his sheltered bride read; in my parents' it was a slap in the kitchen, occasioned by some trifling argument over who would cook my father's breakfast." (48).

[11] McMurtry, Larry. *Books: A Memoir*. NY: Simon and Schuster: Touchstone (2008) Notes: Regarding Jo, Larry goes on to say, Jo came to the end of those great works about the time we came to the end of our marriage, though we weren't divorced or even widely separated for several more years." (49)

[12] McMurtry, James – Interview. November 2013. Much more could be written about James' insight into Larry, women, feminism, and relationships, as garnered in this interview, but space is limited here. More will be forthcoming should this develop into a larger project.

[14] Stillwell, Halley. "The Bride." *Lone Star Literature: A Texas Anthology*. Don Graham, ed. NY: W. W. Norton & Company. 2003. Halley Stillwell was a real live Texas hero, who I had the pleasure of befriending (and in fact, my youngest daughter is named for her.)

[15] Hendricks, Mark – (11/15/13), San Marcos, Texas As I researched and wrote and stacked books and printouts of archival materials, book reviews and critical essays by and about Larry McMurtry around my office, by the end of this project, they had spilled over into the living room and the dining table.

I found myself challenged by trying to "prove" something that was just beyond my grasp. Along the way, my husband, Mark Hendricks, tripped over, picked up, and waded through stacks of articles, books, notepads and copies of archival records.

A fan of both Larry McMurtry and the Southwestern Writers Collection, he finally broached the subject of this seminar paper, late in the semester. "How is it coming?" he asked, on a rare Friday night late in the semester, when I was not holed away in the office digging through archival materials working to prove this "accidental feminist" thesis.

As my greatest champion, editor and sounding board, Mark is celebrating retirement from a successful quarter-century career as the spokesperson for Texas State University. That career has afforded him a way of cutting through the pomp and circumstance of theory, supposition and illusion that often weighs heavily in the writings of academicians, and dig for the newsworthy facts of the story.

Mark asked, "Is this a good time to talk about Larry McMurtry and your thesis of his accidental feminism?" I said, "Sure. I have to finish this paper at some point and am sort of stuck." After a moment of silence, he sighed and said, "Maybe he wasn't."

And thus began a long into-the-night conversation about strong characters and great American writers who have an inborn knack for developing strong, believable characters. And who deserve more than catchy labels. What? Yes. Perhaps McMurtry deserves a much larger scope of credit than I set forth to offer him. And I thank Mark for leading me to this light at the end of the tunnel.

[16] Cherry, Kendra "10 Facts About Sigmund Freud," (16 November 2013) <http://psychology.about.com/od/sigmundfreud/tp/facts-about-freud.htm>
"While the famous quote is often repeated and attributed to Freud, there is no evidence that he ever actually said it. Freud was a lifelong cigar smoker, smoking up to twenty a day according to his biographer Ernst Jones. As the story goes, someone once asked Freud what the cigar he so often smoked symbolized. The response is meant to suggest that even the famous psychoanalyst believed that not everything held an underlying, symbolic meaning. In reality, the quote is most likely the invention of a journalist that was later mistakenly identified as a quote by Freud.

For more information about this project, presentations and speaking engagements, please contact [Diana Hendricks](#).

I. Introduction

II. **Fictional Characters** will focus on a handful of the standout female characters in McMurtry's novels, describing their strengths and dimension;

III. **Non-Fictional Characters** will describe McMurtry's treatment of some of America's *real* legends through essays, reviews, memoirs and biographies, though with dry humor, his son, James McMurtry maintains "all of Larry's characters are fictional;"

IV. **Real Life Relationships** will focus on a select few women who have had great influence on Larry McMurtry's life;

V. **What Others Say** will offer a sampling of literary review, comments from subject matter experts on McMurtry and on feminism, and an overview of the thesis statement from a broader view.

VI. Conclusion

VII. Sources/Endnotes



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By Diana Finlay Hendricks. With more than a dozen autobiographies and collaborations — and a world-class definitive non-authorized biography — already on the shelves, why another Willie Nelson book? Because, as the title explains, "It's a long story." It's A Long Story: My Life is easily worth the \$30 investment if for no other reason than that it should be read twice. It will take a solid read through and then a revisit to catch the authentic voice and nuances of the book. On first read, the cynical reader may be quick to criticize David Ritz as a hired gun "autobiographer," having pseudo-gho View Diana Hendricks' profile on LinkedIn, the world's largest professional community. Diana has 6 jobs listed on their profile. See the complete profile on LinkedIn and discover Diana's connections and jobs at similar companies. Edited by Craig Clifford and Craig D. Hillis Chapter: James McMurtry: Too Long in the Wasteland Diana Finlay Hendricks. Many books and essays have addressed the broad sweep of Texas music its multicultural aspects, its wide array and blending of musical genres, its historical transformations, and its love/hate relationship with Nashville and other established music business centers. David Hendricks San Antonio Express-News This team can write. In fact, Zeke and Ned is astonishing...a literary achievement of high order for McMurtry and Ossana. Read more. If you are a fan of McMurtry then you will be a friend of Zeke and Ned. This world is inhabited by the normal McMurtry curious eccentric cast of common characters, aptly named. If you have read Boone's Lick you know of them. The storyline although fine, was there more to showcase this fine troupe, and the places they lived, roamed and pondered at.

Diana Finlay Hendricks, a Central Texas--based writer, journalist, and photographer, has earned statewide awards for reporting, photography, and print journalism. She recently contributed the James McMurtry chapter to *Pickers and Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters of Texas*. [Show more](#). [Show less](#). No ratings or reviews yet. Be the first to write a review. Best-selling in Other Children & Young Adults. See all. Larry McMurtry is best known for having written *The Last Picture Show*; *The Last Picture Show* is best known for its fetching and very effective nostalgia: a commodity not in short supply in *All My Friends [are Going to be Strangers]*, though it is used, here, more as a means to characterization than as a form of muted sociology.Â Mr. McMurtry's talent for characterization and the evocation of placeâ€”together with his ability to blend them convincingly, so that they seem almost to interdependâ€”makes Danny's near-indefinable yearnings for a past which seems close enough to grab at wholly understandable. The randomness of events and of people's actions fits perfectly the randomness provoked by the unfamiliar, so that whatever is odd seems also accidental and completely unstaged.