

John Graves Stretches Our Imagination by Garner Roberts

John Graves has heard stories about a bird that flew backward. The bird didn't care where he was going. He only wanted to see where he had been.

Graves says he's always been a little bit like that, but he knows that "if you are a backward looker, you need something to look back to. Generally I have looked back more at the historic and natural past than at my wondrous younger self...The patterns of my own life have not usually struck me as a great subject for study or celebration."

The Fort Worth native, an award-winning author, added, "It (my youth) was neither so oppressive as to saddle me ever after with its burdens nor so idyllic that I was not glad enough to set it behind when it was over."

Perhaps his youth isn't a great subject for celebration, but certainly most of the eight decades of his life are. Often called Texas' best writer, Graves penned *Goodbye to a River* and the other two pieces of "the Brazos trilogy" and contributed to other books, magazines and literary collections with a timeless style that incorporates fiction, folklore, autobiography, philosophy and thought-provoking observations.

Rick Bass called Graves "the greatest living Texas writer, and perhaps the best Texas writer ever." Ed Shrake said Graves is "the best writer of pure prose that Texas has ever produced." Skip Hollandsworth called him the Thoreau of Texas, Molly Ivins said Graves is Texas' finest writer, and William Broyles Jr. added, "We don't have nearly enough of his writing. What we have, we cherish."

Fellow naturalist J. Frank Dobie, writing in the *Austin American-Statesman* in 1960 after *Goodbye to a River* was published, said, "While reading his new book, I realized that I've been waiting for it a long time."

Graves was born Aug. 6, 1920, and grew up in Fort Worth near his father's men's clothing store on Camp Bowie Blvd. "There was a sort of small-town feel to life," he remembers. "It was a pretty fair place to be young in, even if nobody ever offered me a choice. People knew other people much better than they do now. People tended to know who you were -- you were 'the Graves boy,' or less favorably 'that Graves boy' -- and if you exhibited your human imperfection within a radius of a half-mile from home you were likely to be held accountable for it."

He roamed the thick woods and hayfields of the bottomlands of this easygoing commercial city that evolved from a frontier outpost on the main cattle trail to Kansas. It was short on what the women called "the finer things," but the people "lived on in their pleasant neighborhoods and talked on lawns in the evenings while mockingbirds sang to the moon."

As Graves became older, he searched for more remote places to wander and hunt and play. That's when he discovered the Brazos River, the longest river in Texas, the object of his affection and later the subject of *Goodbye to a River*.

Another of his passions while growing up was reading. "Fairly early I began to devour just about any reading that was at hand," he remembers, "whether I understood it or not. I went through the melange of best-sellers and classics and leftover 19th century sentimentality that was on the

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shelves at home and stuff dragged down out of the attic of my grandfather's house in Cuero or sought out at the public library downtown.

"It made for a fine stew in the head," he wrote in *Growing Up in Texas*. "I had an early chance to see that good books were sense and language woven together, and that the weaving mattered greatly."

Graves credits several teachers ("the effects of teaching are often delayed"), including George Williams at Rice, with inspiring him to write. "I wouldn't say that he wakened an interest in writing in me," Graves told Patrick Bennett in *Talking with Texas Writers*, "but he made me see that it might be possible. I don't recall in college feeling that I was going to be anything in particular."

He does admit to being "a born English major," and he graduated from Rice ("a bookish place") in 1942 and later earned a master's degree from Columbia University in New York City (he wrote a thesis about William Faulkner). He taught at the University of Texas and TCU, but quit because "I got sick of grading freshman papers."

Graves left Texas to travel in Europe and the U.S. and venture into freelance writing. His first published story in 1947 was titled "Quarry," which he described as a "terribly civilized, typically *New Yorker* story about a young couple who capture a mouse in their apartment and then must decide what to do with it." He told Bennett it was "far too auspicious a beginning. I couldn't duplicate it."

He returned to Texas in the late 1950s for a short visit. His father was ill, so Graves decided to stay for a while -- for good it turned out. "During that time I was sort of renewing old familiarities," he remembers, "and I was hunting and fishing and was running around on the Brazos." He told Joe Holley in the *Texas Humanist*, "Coming back to Texas was the best thing that ever happened to me."

He bought 400 acres of arid land on White Bluff Creek near Glen Rose in Somervell County, called it Hard Scrabble Ranch, built a house for his wife and two daughters and a barn, and became a farmer and rancher. "One city friend of ours says that on getting out of his car here he always experiences 'culture shock'," Graves said of his ranch. He compares it to "a sorry piece of country that at least helps hold the world together."

When he heard talk of plans for five new dams on the Brazos River, he wanted to see it again before it was spoiled. "It was a goodbye trip," he explained of his three-week canoe trip over 170 of the river's 840 miles in November 1957 with a 3x5 notebook, a tent and his dog. He wanted to "consolidate my impressions of the river while the river was still there." Although only one of the proposed dams was ever built, Graves understood the danger of man's incursions into nature long before the environment became a popular political cause.

He pitched the idea for an article about his trip to *Sports Illustrated*, and the magazine liked it enough to give him an advance. But "the thing wasn't sporty enough for them," he says, so "it ended up being published by *Holiday*."

From his notes on the trip and his research into the history of the river and its people, he began to consider expanding the magazine article into a book. Graves first mentioned the idea April 7,

1958, in a letter to his agent John Schaffner. And when Alfred A. Knopf published *Goodbye to a River* in 1960, Graves was no longer a little-known Texan.

Graves followed that with *Hard Scrabble* (Observations on a Patch of Land) in 1974 and *From a Limestone Ledge* (Some Essays and Other Ruminations about Country Life) in 1980. The awards began accumulating, Graves became an important Texas writer, and he later was selected to and served as president of the Texas Institute of Letters. Susan Wood of the *Washington Post* said, "Graves' writing translates Texas as though it were Anywhere." And during the recent presidential campaign, Laura Bush called *Goodbye* one of her three favorite books about Texas.

His most popular short piece is probably "The Last Running," the story of "antique times before wire fences had partitioned the prairies," an aging cowboy, an old Comanche warrior and the last buffalo hunt. Bass says it concludes with "one of the all-time best last sentences in literature ("We had a world, once.")."

Many of his manuscripts, notes, books, articles, lectures, correspondence, photographs and other artifacts are housed in Bill Wittliff's Southwest Writers Collection at Alkek Library at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos.

His books smell of cedar and resound with the hum of insects. They are filled with ruminations on neighbors and Indians and details on the craft of stone masonry and wildlife along the river. "I am unable to be anywhere and not wonder how the past led to the present," he told the *Dallas Times-Herald* in 1979. Hollandsworth says Graves carries on a conversation like a good pitcher runs a baseball game -- "never quite throwing what one expects." Ivins warns against mistaking Graves "for some guy who's wandered in by accident from Jim Bob's Texaco."

Graves agrees he's not been very productive. "I'm not very generative," he explained. "Things generally have to slap me in the face. I have never developed an orderly approach to the business of studying out something to write. It's like a nail sticking out of the wall. You walk past it for six months without seeing it, and all of a sudden it tears your shirt...I have a tremendous amount of irrelevant interests that have nothing to do with writing."

At least for him, he says, writing is not fun. "It's harder than hell to get something down on paper the way I want it."

He also can't describe his style. "It's just a tone of voice that evolves," he said. "I think it comes from childhood reading and things that appeal to you over the years. I always hate to admit it, but I think one very strong influence on me was O. Henry. I read a lot of him when I was a kid." He also talked about Katherine Anne Porter and Larry McMurtry, who also studied under Williams at Rice, and added, "You come to know that such and such a rhythm and word pattern and so on fits the feeling that you are after at a certain point. It becomes sacred, and you don't dare tamper with it. It's got to be a feeling. It can't be a knowledge."

In *Goodbye to a River*, Graves says of one old man, "Not many people like him will still be among us in another few years."

He may as well have been writing about himself. "I wrote what presented itself to be written," he said in the preface to *A John Graves Reader*. He wrote of a giant old cottonwood tree and the time its outstretched limbs stretched someone's neck. And stretched our imagination.