

His Writing Brings the Past to Life

by Garner Roberts

Profile of Stephen Harrigan

Remember the Alamo?

We don't, of course, because we weren't in the presidio San Antonio de Bexar during the early morning hours of Sunday, March 6, 1836, when Gen. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna and at least 1,500 of his Mexican soldiers surrounded the garrison, stormed over its walls, and killed David Crockett, James Bowie, William Travis and about 250 other Texian defenders.

But in his novel *The Gates of the Alamo*, Stephen Harrigan writes as if he was there. His compelling historical novel brings this legendary moment in Texas history to life with memorable characters from both sides of the conflict. Fascinated by the story of the Alamo since he was a boy, Harrigan weaves a tale of romance, adventure and war. He helps sort truth from myth in what the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* called "the first great American novel of the 21st century" and what Amazon.com said at one time was the best-selling book in Texas.

"I wanted to bring the past to life," he said. "Everybody thought they knew the story of the Alamo, but I wanted to surprise the reader. It had never been done the way I thought I could do it. Taking the myth and making it real hadn't been done before. If I could just get the reader to open the book, I could surprise him."

When *The Gates of the Alamo* was released by Knopf in February 2000 with a first printing of 100,000 copies, he told the *Austin American-Statesman*, "My fondest hope is that a reader will get to the end of the book and think, 'Yes, that's what it must have been like.'"

Harrigan spent eight years researching and writing his Alamo novel, his sixth book. And he remembers the reaction of many people. "When I would tell people I was writing a book about the Alamo, they would tend to roll their eyes. 'Hasn't that story been done to death?' But, in fact, as I started doing the research, I realized, 'No, it hasn't.' The mythological story is very, very familiar, but the real story is not," he told the *New York Times*.

"People only thought it had been done to death," he added. "But I felt there was a fresh and new story to tell. And the more research I did, the more I was convinced of that."

Harrigan's research actually started in 1955 when as a seven-year-old boy he first visited the Alamo on a family vacation from his home in Abilene and watched the Disney movie *Davy Crockett King of the Wild Frontier* starring Fess Parker.

"I was entranced by it," he said. "It was a strange movie, particularly the end. For me, it was the first time that the hero of a movie died. I was unprepared for that emotional shock, that sense of reality. It had a profound effect on boys my age."

"Davy Crockett was a primal character. He wore buckskin, he was self-reliant, and he could find his way through the forest," he continued. "It had a terrific impact on our imagination."

Harrigan was born in Oklahoma City in 1948 and moved to Abilene in 1953 when his widowed mother married an Abilene oilman. He attended Catholic schools there and in Corpus Christi, where he moved in 1958. He graduated from high school at Corpus Christi Academy and received a B.A. degree from the University of Texas in 1971.

In high school he developed an interest in writing that had its beginning in elementary school. "I started to understand that there were people who made their living as writers," he said. "I discovered that books were written by real people. And I knew that I wanted to write a novel about the Alamo."

But for Harrigan opportunities to write were limited, and he realized schools were not going to make him a writer. Finally, he said, "desire outstripped the laziness, and I started writing."

In Austin he supplemented his free-lance writing and poetry as a yardman, received a prestigious Dobie-Paisano fellowship in 1977 and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1979, and published his first novel Aransas in 1980. The Knopf book set in the Gulf Coast town of Port Aransas tells the story of Jeff Dowling, a somewhat jaded 30-year-old who returns home to train two porpoises for a tourist attraction. *Publishers Weekly* called it "a remarkable first novel."

In 1980 he also landed a job with *Texas Monthly* and served as its senior editor in 1983-91 before leaving to devote more time to his newest career as a screenwriter. Simon & Schuster had published his second novel Jacob's Well in 1984, and he had published magazine articles in *The Atlantic*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *Travel Holiday*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Audubon*, *Life* and *Outside*.

His talents as a writer for the printed page proved to be equally successful on the screen, and he wrote scripts for television movies on HBO (*The Last of His Tribe*), CBS (*Beyond the Prairie: The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder*), ABC, TNT and Fox (*The O.J. Simpson Story*).

Jacob's Well, a story of three people searching for meaning in life as they dive in a well near Wimberley, and his 1992 meditative book Water and Light both reflect his love and understanding of the natural world and scuba diving, another hobby acquired at the Corpus Christi YMCA at the age of 14.

His other two books are collections of essays titled A Natural State (1988) and Comanche Midnight (1995).

Aransas was a "notable book selection" of the *New York Times*, and Jacob's Well was selected as one of the best books of 1984 by the *Washington Post* and *Dallas Morning News*. He also has received the Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, the Spur Award for best western novel of the year, and the Headliner's Award for the year's best magazine article.

Harrigan is a former president of the Texas Institute of Letters, and in 2001 he was selected as one of five writers to read at "Salute to America's Authors" during inaugural ceremonies for President George W. Bush. Married and the father of three daughters, he teaches one class each semester at the Michener Center for Writers at University of Texas.

And he continues to visit the Alamo. "I've been visiting the Alamo all my life," he told the *Austin American-Statesman*, "not just habitually, but obsessively. I can't count how many times I've been there. Most of the time, it's been for no particular reason at all, but just to look at it.... "

"It's very hard to convince myself that it didn't look like it does today," he continued. "It's a haunted house. It's one of the great ghost stories of American history."

In his forward to Thomas Ricks Lindley's 2003 book *Alamo Traces*, he calls himself a "garden-variety Alamohead." Harrigan says he's not a member of the small, select group of Alamo scholars, and adds, "If there is such a thing as a dispassionate Alamo scholar, I've never met one."

The research alone for a novel on such a large-scale event makes the undertaking a major one, and the task becomes especially daunting when the subject is as well-known as the Alamo, the most visited historical site in Texas. Piecing together the stories of each character, the main plot and newly emerging facts of the battle means even limited success is to be admired.

Harrigan learned and studied the Spanish language, talked to historians and Alamo scholars, visited libraries and archives, and read dusty books, journals, maps, diaries and letters written in Spanish and English. "You need to portray the world convincingly in great detail," he told the *Austin Chronicle*. "How many buttons on a waistcoat? How do you load a Kentucky rifle? How much does the Brown Bess musket weigh?"

In addition to details such as these, his research separated truth from myth. For instance, early in his novel he debunks Travis' mythical line in the dirt. "Were you there when Colonel Travis drew that line in the dirt with his sword?" Harrigan's main character is asked years later. "Travis never did draw any line," he answered.

"A novelist's work, like a journalist's, must begin with facts," Harrigan told *Contemporary Authors*.

In the author's note in *Gates*, he wrote, "I have not been whimsical with the facts...My own preference is for historical novels that are historically trustworthy, and when I began *The Gates of the Alamo* I made a pledge of absolute fidelity to the truth of the events."

He writes several hours a day in an office (others have called it "a cabin") behind his house in Austin. "I am usually at my computer by nine in the morning," he explained. "I try to write more or less all day, usually dividing the day between two projects such as a novel and a screenplay. I go to the gym about four in the afternoon, come home and have dinner, and then often work for a couple more hours at night."

"Writing is an individual and solitary occupation," he added.

He described two challenges: (1) to find time to write and (2) to find your own voice, your own fresh perceptions, and write as authentically as you can about human experience.

Harrigan describes himself as a story-teller and adds, "Telling a story is all about conflict and clarity. The best advice was to make sure the main character's motives are clear and there is a discernable goal that he or she is after." He says screenplays are "almost entirely about action," and novels are "about writing dialogue or scene description."

His favorite books include the Hardy boys series, Kenneth Roberts' Northwest Passage, Herman Melville's Moby Dick ("my favorite novel of all time"), and others by Ernest Hemmingway, Leo Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert, Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner and Patrick O'Brian.

He prefers to write novels and adds, "You'll never get very far as a writer if you aren't a passionate reader and if you don't develop a fascination for the world around you.... "

"Creative endeavor requires you to inspire yourself," he continued. "You're the one who has to get up in the morning and write. I don't believe in anything like a muse. I've been writing long enough that I have a certain professional pride in what I do and an audience that expects a certain standard. It's holding myself to that standard and just wanting to be active that keep me doing it."

He's currently finishing a novel about astronauts and people who work at NASA. "The working title is NASA Road One, which is the name of the street in Clear Lake City that is NASA's address," he said. It's expected in 2005.

Although not a native Texan, he's adapted very well. "When we call ourselves Texans, we had better mean it," he wrote in the introduction of Contemporary Texas: A Photographic Portrait (1986). He called Texas "a place that is not just a state of mind, not just the object of a droll and diluted allegiance, but actual earth and sky against which men and women test themselves...It is a place that holds us to account. Few of us anymore have that primal response to Texas. We do not understand the land as our ancestors did. It does not reside at the core of our self-awareness, but simply serves as the ground upon which we conduct our lives."

After moving to Texas at age five, he confessed in "What Texas Means to Me" in Don Graham's 2003 anthology Lone Star Literature, "I surprised myself by being happy there."

He added, "I have never made a conscious decision that Texas was where I was to be. Texas always seemed right for the moment, and the moments grew longer and longer, and here I remained...I still felt a mild longing to live someplace that was more exotic or more ordinary, someplace that was not Texas. One of these days I might do that. Just not today."

Right now, he's having too much fun writing stories for us about Texas. Aren't we lucky!