

moral philosophy, the nature of friendship and the education of children, to farting, the construction of birds' nests, and the behaviour of his cat ('How do I know that she is not playing with me, rather than I with her?'). It is not just his self-revelation and the spontaneity of his style that are shocking in their freshness, but his subject matter too. As I write, it is 413 years to the month since his death, on 13 September 1592 – yet open the *Essays* at random and you turn up reflections on all our most pressing modern concerns: education, binge drinking, religious fanaticism, relations between the sexes, even cosmetic surgery ('Who has not heard of that woman of Paris who had herself flayed alive merely to acquire a fresh colour from a new skin').

Montaigne's biographer Donald M. Frame quotes Sainte-Beuve, the nineteenth-century critic, who distilled the essence of boredom into a single line: 'There is nothing on the other side of the hedge'. For Montaigne, there is always something on the other side of the hedge. He never, even in the grip of the fiercest agonies of body or mind, loses his kindness, his independence of mind or his marvellous curiosity. If the house were burning down, this is the book I should snatch from the flames (and somewhere in the *Essays*, I should be certain to find some wise and profane reflections on the saving of worldly goods from house fires).

## Dark Redemption

Michel Tournier, *The Erl King*  
Collins, 1972  
ISBN 0002212129

Jonathan Meades

**A**bel Tiffauges (his family name is that of Gilles de Rais's castle) is a polymorphously perverse, gigantic garagiste in immediately pre-war Paris. He is an ogre (the title of the US translation, which loses the allusion to Goethe's thrillingly morbid poem). He is a literal paedophile: he adores children. Yet he does not molest them. He is equally drawn to birds and animals. At the outbreak of hostilities he is conscripted and tends messenger pigeons in eastern France before he is taken prisoner. Thus begins one of the strangest journeys in modern literature. Tiffauges is a traitor. He works

on Goering's hunting estate where he becomes preoccupied with stags and their taxonomy. He subsequently works at an SS school, a Napola. In the closing hours of the war he redeems himself, mutating into a sort of St Christopher to rescue a Jewish child and dying in snowy mud. Tournier's writing has the absolute precision of a Christian Schad painting. The detail is massive. His imagination is immense. He is self-consciously creating a myth and peopling it with creatures whose properties are extra-human – which is perhaps the only way of fictively treating the immane enormities of the regime which Tiffauges has served.

## The Song Belongs to the Hearers

Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*  
Pocket Books, 1986  
ISBN 0671623249

Ann Stapleton

'It's like I told you last night, son. The earth is mostly just a boneyard. But pretty in the sunlight,' he added.

Augustus McCrae

**I**f all this life boils down to bones and a few sunsets, and we are to know this from the start, it matters greatly where our country lies and who our countrymen might be. For novelist Larry McMurtry, Texas, with its 'isolating space' and its 'brutal light,' its 'aridity' and 'erosion,' is the context for this life, which is to say, the one place in the world that calls love (with all its dark little fortifications and all its gorgeous, sunlit ruins) into being. Even as his grandparents 'stopped at a point in the emptiness and made their start' in ranching, their grandson, in the same spirit of adventure and daring, sat down at a typewriter, fed in a blank sheet of paper, and began to write the West:

In my teens, already a failed cowboy, I realized that – one way or another – my work was going to be with words, not



herds, though, of course, being a word-herder means that one has not entirely escaped the herding imperative. Didn't I just herd a few drifting strays into this paragraph?

Indeed, his bookplates are said to feature a miniature version of the McMurtry cattle brand.

A topnotch antiquarian bookseller who grew up in the once 'bookless' town of Archer City, Texas, McMurtry has established his own version of Hay-on-Wye there, a used bookstore containing hundreds of thousands of volumes, some quite rare, housed in four separate buildings around his hometown; only one has a cash register, and patrons are on the honor system to bring their selections from the other (often unlocked) buildings to the main one for purchasing. In a wonderful bit of irony, McMurtry's book enterprise (the dream of a Texas childhood in which the printed word was of little value, and boys like him who loved it, suspect) is now central to the economic survival of tiny Archer City, population 1848. The man who grew from the 'bookish and suspiciously observant youngster' who might 'in time disgrace the line' of cattle-herding McMurtrys may, in fact, have saved the whole town – in his spare time, that is, when he wasn't busy writing the best Western of all time, a strong contender for the Great American Novel, *Lonesome Dove*.

Though his father and uncles, cattlemen all, could only watch from the roof of his grandfather's ranch house as the last cattle drives passed by, it was McMurtry's loving act of attention, *Lonesome Dove*, that stopped the exodus in its tracks and committed the symbolic last drive to paper, where it can reasonably hope to run on forever. Yet this achievement is a problematic one for him – a student of Western history and a person of conscience, a man of his time: his mind surveys a broader map of the West than just the territory his own people recognize. To McMurtry, a supreme irony seems to be that a book he believes he intended as an indictment of an inglorious past, a negative comment on the violence and destruction that accompanied the settlement of the West, has been seen by most of its readers as a salute to its incomparable splendor, an eight-hundred-plus-page encomium to the Age of Heroes in its passing. In the range wars between the triumphalist view, which sees the settlement of the West as a flawed but amazing achievement, and the revisionist one, which sees it as something of a horror story, McMurtry the liberal thinker sides with the latter. But sometimes the heart's truths lie deeper down, and buried in *In a Narrow Grave*, McMurtry's early book of essays on Texas and the demise of the West, is this admission: 'The death [. . .] moves me – the way of life

that is dying had its value. Its appeal was simple, but genuine, and it called to it and is taking with it people whom one could not but love, just such people as fill the pages of *Lonesome Dove*.

Hard-working former Texas Ranger Captain Woodrow F. Call, chasing down the ever-receding frontier to its furthest redoubt, hopes to catch a glimpse of the waving, green sea of northern grass 'before the bankers and lawyers get it.' His fellow Ranger and long-time partner, the fun-loving philosopher-king Augustus McCrae (a character described by actor Robert Duvall, who played the part in the beloved television mini-series, as 'at least as good as Hamlet'), is persuaded along by his dreams of a reunion with the strong-willed Clara ('I expect it was the major mistake of my life, letting her slip by'). Young Newt Dobbs, Call's unacknowledged son, searches for identity and kinship while trying to earn the respect of his father and the other cowboys ('He was a good boy, as gentle as the gray doves that came to peck for gravel on the flats behind the barn. He would try to do any task that was asked of him, and if he worried overmuch it was that he wasn't good enough at his work to please the Captain'). Joshua Deets, the black scout, peers ahead into the distance for them all, his own loneliness and misgiving ('We way up here and it ain't our country') subsumed by his mission always to guide them safely home. Jake Spoon pursues pleasure in the form of women or gambling or fine clothing, but has just enough residual restlessness in him to spur him ever onward toward some worsening trouble ('Jake just kind of drifts. Any wind can blow him'). Beautiful Lorena Wood, *Lonesome Dove's* sole 'sportin' gal, who has 'never lived in a place where it [is] cool,' has just 'one aim' in life: to get to San Francisco, to see for herself 'how blue the water [is] in the bay, and how the ships [come] in from everywhere.' July Johnson, a solemn young Arkansas sheriff, is brow-beaten into an ill-conceived mission to find and arrest Jake Spoon, whose stray shot accidentally killed Johnson's brother ('bad luck all around'). July's wife Elmira (Ellie), a former saloon girl, then embarks on her own journey to find Dee Boot, the gunfighter in whose coarse company 'she could belong to herself.' Roscoe Brown, the reluctant deputy, is sent after July, to deliver the bad news that his wife has decamped ('Traveling was even worse than Roscoe had supposed it would be, and he had supposed it would be pure hell'). In a kind of collective yearning, all roads lead west-northwest, and the reader follows willingly the crisscross trails left by inspiration or mania or just a weary ordinariness run dry of other options.

The American West was settled one person – one vision – at a time, in obduracy and tenderness, folly and courage, its inevitable



taming brought about as much by failure and obsession and recurrent bad luck as by any vision of a higher good. That McMurtry uses this undeniable-as-an-arrowhead-in-your-hand pointed fact as the basis for his story is what gives *Lonesome Dove* the right to be called an American epic. For the characters' personal wests, 'Wests-in-the-mind's-eye,' as McMurtry calls them, are the peculiar, animating forces that determine destination, whether where these pioneers end up is the place they dreamed of, or simply the spot of ground where they are standing when they can go no further. Many trails cross through the mud here – brand new starts and sudden peterings out that can signify a failure of nerve or a decision to stay, no matter the cost. You can never be wholly certain which is a beginning and which a conclusion, or how it is that one journey ends in the ground, while another, crossing a far hill in glorious light, at least for a time seems to enter the sky. And somehow all these deep and disappearing tracks, taken together, make up a country.

McMurtry knows that the human psyche must always have its point on the horizon for which to aim. The cattle drive is the perfect embodiment of this impulse, and a wonderful metaphor for the strange, maniacal ways in which we focus on attainment and arrival, when the way there, in all its lurches forward and loopings back, is all we really have. For the cowboy, the admirable performance of duty is life itself. But like life, the drive also admits of love and loss and terrible grief, and even in a man like Call, for whom work is everything, the possibility that one day you may pause in the saddle and take a good look around you at the broad horizon and feel a sudden, overwhelming fear that none of it is worth the trouble.

But there is Newt, the good boy, who, over the course of the drive, is changed forever by the passing landscape (even as he and the others change its contours by the force of their lives passing over it) to become that everyday, rare thing: a good man. And there is the incomparable Gus, ever the connoisseur of experience, who tells Newt, 'I can't think of nothing better than riding a fine horse into a new country. It's exactly what I was meant for, and Woodrow too.' Indeed, one of the deep pleasures of this novel is that McMurtry, while refusing to underplay the difficulty of human endeavor in all its clumsiness and partial realization, never shorts the joy of life. Even in desperate straits, Gus declaims, 'It's a fine world, though rich in hardships at times,' and McMurtry means to keep the main clause just where it is.

Crude, funny, and tender, forbearant and fearful, and often achingly young for the responsibilities he bears, the American cowboy

(look quickly now, before he disappears) is perfectly preserved in all his contradictions in *Lonesome Dove*. McMurtry comes from a long line of cattlemen, more at home and most themselves on a horse than anywhere else in the world, and resistant toward anything (often, even domestic life) that requires them to swing back down to earth. He captures the essence of what it is to exist 'a-horseback,' to herd living, breathing creatures with minds of their own, in rhythms both singular and collective, across an open, hazardous space toward an ending (even as time itself herds the cowboy along toward his own). He describes (with an insider's knowledge) the herd mentality of the cowboys themselves: a herd – of men – driving a herd – of beasts. With their (justifiable) fears of drowning, for example, it is as tenuous an enterprise to cross the men over the rivers on the way north as it is to cross the cattle. McMurtry depicts (with much humanity all around) the cowboys' in-town exuberances, yes, but also the poignancy of their shyness toward women, their humble gratefulness for any female presence, their tendency, as in Dish Boggett's unrequited feelings for Lorie, to fall deeply in love and to stay that way, and their loneliness for home: 'Even on a nice clear night the sad singing and the knowledge that there were no ladies was enough to make the men feel low. They ended up talking of their sisters, those that had them, most nights.' Po Campo, the cook, 'a strange man,' 'friendly and kind to everyone,' yet keeping apart, 'walking all day behind the wagon,' at night whiles away the time by whittling 'little wooden [women] about two inches high.' 'Soon each of the cowboys had been given one of the carvings. "To remind you of your sisters," Po said.'

Even as McMurtry has a true gift for helping us see – often in just a few brief sentences – far into the mystery of human relationship, with all its unaccountable choices and mixed results, he is a fine poet of solitude, giving voice to the regions of remoteness, the far ranges of the inaccessible and unshared, in each of us. Many a night, you suppose, he must have treated loneliness to the drink of its choice and whiled away a good long time just listening to its crazy tales: Dish Boggett guarding Lorena, deep in love and so close 'he could have crept up to the tent and heard her breathing,' yet knowing he will 'never be able to eliminate those [last] few yards'; forlorn Pea Eye Parker's stark naked trek, in the aftermath of an Indian attack, across the prickly snow-and-sunburn landscape, his bare feet 'swollen the size of a cow's bladder and cut to shreds'; Lorena Wood, captured by Blue Duck and his depraved henchmen, wondering 'if she could just learn to die'; July Johnson weeping in the Dodge City post office as he tries to compose a letter home, real-



izing that 'all he [has] to report [is] death and failure'; his wife Ellie's knowledge that the indifferent Dee Boot, when he hears of her quest to find him, will only laugh, as he always loved to, 'about the absurd things people [do] for bad reasons.'

The scout Joshua Deets, whose responsibility for the outfit's welfare is second only to Call's, is perhaps the loneliest of all the Hat Creek men. His intelligence and awareness particularly acute, he absorbs all that experience can teach him, but sometimes wishes he could have 'some schooling.' He is respected by the men, who over the years have become his people, but is set slightly apart from them by his dark skin. The hardest of hard men, riding point into the unknown, constantly scanning the dust for trouble's impress, making expert nooses for hangings, and working burial detail, Deets is nevertheless fascinated by the little woman Po gives him, the closest he will ever come to a female presence in his life. In Deets, McMurtry locates the precise point at which friendship stops and turns back and we are left alone again with just the moon to comfort us:

They were friends, though, he and Newt. The boy was young and had all his hopes, while Deets was older and had fewer. Newt sometimes asked so many questions that Deets had to laugh – he was like a cistern, from which questions flowed instead of water. Some Deets answered and some he didn't. He didn't tell Newt all he knew. He didn't tell him that even when life seemed easy, it kept on getting harder. Deets liked his work, liked being part of the outfit and having his name on the sign; yet he often felt sad. His main happiness consisted of sitting with his back against the water trough at night, watching the sky and the changing moon. He had known several men who blew their heads off, and he had pondered it much. It seemed to him it was probably because they could not take enough happiness just from the sky and the moon to carry them over the low feelings that came to all men.

Though one of the severest limitations of the cowboy culture is that it debars women, McMurtry's own ethic is much more inclusive; part of the genius of *Lonesome Dove* is that, far from being another *High Noon* with a male figure standing alone in the street, its women sit as tall in the saddle as the men (sometimes taller). July Johnson's wife Ellie has never entertained a feeling anything like love for him, nor any motherly impulse toward her son Joe. But rather than ask us to judge her (the least complicated thing to do), McMurtry presents her as a relentless obsessive (so many settlers were, in one way or

another), as someone in the grip of a magnificent, in its degraded way, and very hazardous idea, one that will probably destroy her, but someone with a great deal of courage and a blind instinct for life. McMurtry turns you toward her as she slips by into history, but not before she becomes real:

Soon the skies above the river got wider and wider as the river wound out of the trees and cut through the plains. The nights were cool, the mornings warming quickly, so that when Elmira woke the river behind her would be covered with a frosting of mist, and the boat would be lost in the mist completely, until the sun could break through. Several times ducks and geese, taking off in the mist, almost flew into her as she stood at the rear of the boat wrapped in the buffalo robe. When the mist was heavy the splash of birds or the jumping of fish startled her; once she was frightened by the heavy beat of wings as one of the huge gray cranes flew low over the boat. As the mist thinned she would see the cranes standing solemnly in the shallows, ignoring the strings of ducks that swam nearby. Pockets of mist would linger on the water for an hour or more after the sun had risen and the sky turned a clear blue.

This is a radical little passage, insisting, as it does, that here, in the perceptions of a filthy dirty, husband- and child-abandoning, pregnant ex-prostitute, the world exists, fully and vibrantly intact, completely independent of (even the most desperate) circumstance, and within the context of a singular (and perilous) inattention to male expectation. McMurtry gives Ellie a real life, replete with its own sights to see. Indeed, McMurtry's decision to have Ellie board the whiskey boat at all, with only rough buffalo hunters for companions, is to let the dangers of such an action be dwarfed by the presence of her Big Idea. In Ellie, McMurtry gives us a stunted, fixated female Odysseus wrapped in buffalo hide, scratching at countless fleas, and dreaming of a golden time that likely never existed, her dear Penelope a good-timing gun-fighter who always found a reason to let her go. Thus she becomes a bizarre visionary of sorts, by virtue of McMurtry's close attention to the mystery of her presence in a world startling and beautiful in spite of itself. And perhaps *Lonesome Dove*'s readers are capable of entertaining a broader definition of the word 'heroic' than the author, in his aversion to the golden lighting of mythos, may imagine.

And herein lies one of the difficulties inherent in McMurtry's assertion that he's written a (woefully misunderstood) debunking



of Western mythology. If he gives us a West that is brutal and unassuageable, that guts our plans and tramples us flat (no one who reads *Lonesome Dove* can possibly come away with the idea that the West was just a cloud-lit canter over a green hill into a stunning sunset), and if the characters, faced with such daily hardship, cleave to their dreams, such as they are, and refuse to surrender, though their obstinacy may (and often does) cost them their very lives, the result must necessarily be an increased, not a diminished, respect on the part of the reader for such pitiable, stubborn strivers. Ellie, looking backwards from the boat with the birds for company, her back to the men, represents an irreplaceable consciousness in all its fierce hopes and its helplessness to be anything but mortal, gliding across a day that will end. How many such strange souls, in the grip of ideas perhaps too enormous for their power to carry them out, of imaginings that at least to them looked a little bit like happiness, must have perished ungreeted and unknown and unmourned on the way west to the Pacific, like thousands of hatchling turtles, each setting a solitary course across a treacherous stretch of sand toward a sea they somehow had faith would be there when they arrived. The miracle is that some actually made it. And in the context of *Lonesome Dove*, it is, perhaps, worthwhile to consider that if such intrepid lovers of the far horizon had a say in things, it might not be the revisionists they'd choose to tell their stories.

The unforgettable character of Woodrow F. Call is based loosely on that of the Old Man himself, Charles Goodnight, one of the most successful and perhaps best known of all cattlemen, whose long life (1836–1929) spanned the coming and going of the great cattle drives and the so-called taming of the West. And the Indian fight in which a sorely wounded Gus is left behind while Pea Eye attempts to go for help is patterned after a similar incident that led to the death of Goodnight's longtime partner and friend, Oliver Loving. It may be true, as McMurtry has written, that the god (of that time) is 'riding away fast and will soon be out of sight and out of hearing,' perhaps is already, but it is the god McMurtry's people sacrifice to, the god he rails against, the god that (even in his unbelief) he loves. And it is the Old Man, Charles Goodnight (was there ever a more magnificent, sadder true-life name for the embodiment of an era's passing?), whom the Indians sometimes called Buenas Noches, who haunts his dreams.

McMurtry has written that 'On the rims of the West – and perhaps, in America, only there – one can still know for a moment the frontier emotion, the loneliness and the excitement and the

sense of an openness so vast that it still challenges – in Gatsbian phrase – our capacity for wonder.' And yet, as the men of the Hat Creek company ride over the rim of their known world, we can't but see that they are waving goodbye, that they are riding away for good, and even for McMurtry the revisionist there is an undeniable sense of bereavement:

In their youth, as I have said, my uncles sat on the barn and watched the last trail herds moving north – I sat on the self-same barn and saw only a few oil-field pickups and a couple of dairy trucks go by. That life died, and I am lucky to have found so satisfying a replacement as Don Quixote offered. And yet, that first life has not quite died in me – not quite. I missed it only by the width of a generation and, as I was growing up, heard the whistle of its departure. Not long after I entered the pastures of the empty page I realized that the place where all my stories start is the heart faced suddenly with the loss of its country, its customary and legendary range.

'No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader,' wrote Robert Frost, but the converse is equally true, and *Lonesome Dove* is wet with McMurtry's. Surely the reader, who retains his own love for his own lost lands, wherever they may be, cannot be faulted, as he watches a world ride out of sight, for shedding a few tears of his own. And once the story is told, once the song is sung, it ceases to matter much what the author, the singer, might think or feel about it, for the music has passed on into other lives, as it was meant to. As Po Campo says of the sad songs he sings to the cowboys around the evening campfire, 'The songs don't belong to me. [ . . . ] They belong to those who hear them. [ . . . ] If you hear them, they belong to you.' *Lonesome Dove* is not McMurtry's anymore, a fact he understands. History is personal, always; and love, a triumphalist, saying to Call, who'll half understand, in Gus's irritatingly loud voice, 'I god, Woodrow,' 'It ain't dying I'm talking about, it's living.'

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
And after many a summer dies the swan.

Tennyson, *Tithonus*