Old Southwest Humor from the St. Louis Reveille, 1844–1850 ed. by Fritz Oehlschlaeger (review)

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everything from incest ("Sahara") to homicidal violence ("Johnny Winkler")—proof of a deeper and more pervasive evil than at first suspected.

If all this seems too pessimistic, one will be cheered by the fact that Braun, at her best, can transform her fascination with the dark side of experience into small comic masterpieces. Braun has been compared to Flannery O'Connor, and surely the association is apt, though O'Connor's use of the Gothic is more pronounced. Braun 's satirical targets are often the same as O'Connor's: hypocrisy and religious fanaticism in "Johnny Winkler" and "The Pumpkin-Eaters," pride and willful ignorance in "'Bridge Out'." The latter, in fact, reads like an inspired parody of O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." The surprise that awaits Braun's newlyweds at the end of the road isn't the Misfit, but it is just as deadly and just as self-ordained.

Although not all the stories here are gems, there are rewards for the reader—Braun's sensitive portrait of the elderly in "Glass Floats," her celebration of adolescent mischief in "The Silvercreek Cemetery Society"— even when the conflict turns out to be nothing more than a false alarm, or else is too subtle or too trivial to sustain the mounting tension. Overall, the stories in *The Pumpkin-Eaters* are grim but also quite funny at times; strange, if not resonantly eerie. There is even a very bizarre UFO tale, which will make anyone think twice before romanticizing about a home on the wide open prairie.

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Old Southwest Humor from the St. Louis Reveille, *1844-1850.* Edited with an introduction by Fritz Oehlschlaeger. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990. 282 pages, $27.00.)

During its short life, the *St. Louis Reveille* was a major outlet for the strain of frontier writing that we now call Southwest humor. Oehlschlaeger's volume presents previously uncollected pieces by the paper's principle contributors—Charles Keene, Matthew and Joseph Field, Solomon Smith, John Robb, et al. The anthology is loosely organized according to Cohen and Dillingham's anatomy of Southwest humor, with chapters focusing on hoaxes and predicaments, the river, eccentric characters, satire, "ring-tailed roarers" (half animal, half human figures) and tall tales, frontier theater, sketches from the Mexican War, and dialect letters. In his introduction, Oehlschlaeger suggests that the *Reveille* writers gave Southwest humor a unique inflection. The *Reveille* humor, he notes, is less grotesque and crude, more satirical, and less occupied with social class than the work of the best-known Southwest humorists like George Washington Harris and Henry Clay Lewis. Oehlschlaeger also provides brief biographical sketches of the writers, many of whom engaged in frontier journal-

ism as part of a much broader effort to bring "arts" to the frontier. Carefully edited, *Old Southwest Humor from the* St. Louis Reveille represents a valuable contribution to an area that has long fascinated both literary scholars and historians.

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Un-Due West. By Roland Sodowsky. (San Antonio: Corona Publishing, 1990. 151 pages, $8.95.)

A cover blurb compares *Un-Due West* to the work of Garrison Keillor, but a better comparison would be to the work of J. Frank Dobie. J. Frank Dobie on locoweed, that is. A collection of fabricated folklore set in the mythical Texas town of Lindisfarne, *Un-Due West* attempts to poke fun at the folklore and myth of the cowboy, but the result is more precious than funny.

The fourteen chapters that comprise the bulk of *Un-Due West* offer convoluted folk-histories of everything from the cowboy boot (brought to Texas by New Englanders who dropped the nuts they gathered into their boots' high, open tops) to the art of "knobity" (poetic finger signals flashed at on-coming motorists without removing one's hands from the steering wheel). These fictional folk-histories are connected by five running chapters detailing the longest and least-bloody gunfight in history. The author also includes a glossary of Lindisfarne lingo. "Spurgellants," for example, are defined as, "Contrite cowboys who punish themselves with their spurs."

Though the contrite cowboys of Lindisfarne punish themselves, they are too sensitive to use spurs on their beloved horses, whom they sometimes carry rather than ride. Lindisfarne cowboys also eat quiche, give their cows names like "Persephone" and "Anastasia," and refuse to castrate calves. These precious Lindisfarne cowboys are eloquent, too, as exemplified by the cowboy who says of riding fence, "It's like reading an ever burgeoning epic, viewing a vast Van Gough, and listening to a Copland symphony at the same time." There is some humor to be had from endowing the stereotypical cowboy with drawing room sensibilities and manners, but there is not enough humor in this to sustain an entire book. The truth is that most of the jokes in *Un-Due West* are ridden too hard. For example, the author deadens the mildly funny phrase "Texas Occident" by repeating it about 151 times, and he also overdoes the joke of giving cowboys combination Hispanic/Anglo names. While one Cesar Hamaker or Randall Sanchez may be funny, the joke gets old after twenty or so similarly named cowboys have been introduced.

Readers who laugh at the whimsical and the far-fetched will get a kick out of