A John Graves Reader by John Graves (review)

Bob Frye

Western American Literature, Volume 33, Number 2, Summer 1998, pp. 218-219 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1998.0064*

ignorant. Doesn't it seem more likely that science is a necessary but insufficient condition for the making of our public policies?

As an antidote to the partisan and tired harangues in some of these essays, read the pieces by Terry Tempest Williams, Stephen Trimble, William Kittredge, and Teresa Jordan. They are softer and do not seek your conversion or your solemn agreement. Instead they offer landscapes based on individual perspectives and experiences had out west, or—in Kittredge's case—the caves and battlefields of France.

In sum, I enjoyed this book of essays. I think it would work well in the type of course that holds as its premise Stegner's belief: "A place is nothing in itself. It has no meaning, it can hardly be said to exist except in terms of human perception, use, and response." There are many visions of the greater West, and this book helps us go there.

A John Graves Reader. By John Graves.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. 338 pages, $34.95/$15.95.

Reviewed by **Bob Frye**
Texas Christian University

Sir Francis Bacon long ago wrote that some books are to be tasted, some to be swallowed, and a very few to be savored. *A John Graves Reader* is a book to be savored. The genuinely modest but unerringly honest author, John Graves, is a gifted storyteller, an excellent nature writer, a rigorously careful historian of rivers and humankind who, nevertheless, realizes the insights which thoughtful, well-crafted fiction may provide.

"The hard thing is to get *slowed down*," John Graves writes in *Goodbye to a River* (1960)—the "finest piece of Texas writing ever done," as A. C. Greene calls it. With Loren Eiseley–like quiet humility, Annie Dillard–like particularity, and occasional Faulknerian power, Graves ponders, puzzles out, observes, describes, narrates, and vividly, powerfully dramatizes.

Graves' anthology has six sections. The first one, "Looking Back," is an autobiographical overview. The second, "Land," includes a chapter on the Old Fart from *Hard Scrabble*; "Cowboy . . . ," which is an uncommonly thoughtful piece on how the "cowboy way of being" (74) actually had "cultural durability" (77) through World War II; "A Loser," from *Limestone Ledge*, which is about a farm auction, "a melancholy event . . . aromatic with defeat" (99); and another excerpt from *Hard Scrabble* lauding an older way of life on demanding soil, with "natural and rural basics" which may provide "at least a start toward comprehending adult social and professional life" (107). The third section is "Texas Past," with two powerfully poignant, award-winning short stories, followed by section four, "Side Roads," which includes chapter ten from Graves' best-known work, *Goodbye to a River*. In section five, "Some Friends," Graves sketches four human friends and a canine, Blue, before ending his anthology in section six, entitled

"Elsewhere," with three short pieces of published fiction (two won O. Henry Awards), an unpublished short story, and long-awaited excerpts from his completed but unpublished autobiographical novel, "A Speckled Horse."

While alluding to authors from T. S. Eliot to Juan Ramón Jiménez, the Graves voice remains self-effacing, modest, still learning. For example, *Hard Scrabble*, no triumphal-return-to-the-land book, reveals Graves' conclusion that land and all it entails, copious and cruel and marvelous nature itself, humbles us so that "the main idea in truth tends to have been not so much triumph as comprehension" (108)—the major theme of all of Graves' writing, I believe. In his excerpt from *Goodbye to a River* about becoming a bird watcher, he explains his desire for comprehension—"really knowing. . . . I mean *knowing*" (155), honestly, painfully knowing: having, as a boy, his Tom Mix myth of the cowboy exploded by his seeing a drunk, vomiting cowboy in North Fort Worth; watching John Fly (whom the narrator calls "Horse") die in a New Mexico hospital; experiencing the joy yet poignancy of a fishing excursion with his daughter; hearing the last words of a young Alabama Marine on Saipan in June 1944; losing his dog Blue and realizing that "the space he leaves empty is big" (234). Graves thus conveys a sense of the sorrow and joy and difficulty and delight of being human.

The theme of friendship, in all its "painful ambiguity," as Wallace Stegner puts it in *Crossing to Safety*, pervades these selections: friendship with childhood buddies, with special dogs, and with artists, expatriates, and political exiles. Young-boy-and-old-man friendships permeate especially his fiction, and dogs show up most everywhere. The range of his writings here represented affords opportunity for examining his oft-praised style with its litotes, anaphora, superbly crafted sentences, and, most especially, his artful use of polysyndeton: cowboys revealing "dexterity and joy and pride" as well as "ill-knit bones and hernias and mashed prostates and such" (82). Moreover, the excerpts from his unpublished novel show what he calls his "miserably protracted apprenticeship" (291) and enable his readers to see his distinctive voice developing.

In 1983 Texas Christian University presented Graves with an honorary Doctor of Letters. The citation reads:

> Farmer and Phi Beta Kappa, decorated Marine and cogent conservationist, river historian and raconteur extraordinary, John Graves is, above all, a gifted writer who sees life steadily and sees it whole. Viewing nature with mystical fascination leavened with bracing candor, he reminds us of our roots, enlarges our sense of place, and urges us toward being entire, whole. And John Graves shows us the way.

A John Graves Reader reaffirms those words I wrote back then, for in Graves' anthology we find illustrated his own definition of art: "truth powerfully rendered" (90). Savor John Graves' literary art—slowly.