

Come hell or high water.

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# REVIEW

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*of*

# TEXAS BOOKS



*Volume 34/Fall & Winter 2019 /Issue 1*

## Editor's Note: Connecting Texas Readers

On one of the first cool days in Texas in 2011, my mom and I wandered the grounds of the state capitol during the [Texas Book Festival](#), after attending a panel on crime fiction.

One of the tents boasted an author neither of us had heard of, talking about President Garfield, a president I knew little about. We stood to the side, deciding whether or not to opt in.

As [Candice Millard](#) spoke, her enthusiasm moved us from the edge of the tent, to seats beneath it, and by the time she finished speaking about her new book [Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness](#).

Our very own Texas Book Festival is this weekend, October 26 and 27 in Austin, Texas, and the [schedule](#) reads like a who's who of [The New York Times best sellers](#). With cooking demonstrations, story hours, panels, and readings, there truly is something for everyone. Over 250 authors, both bestselling and emerging will meet and mingle with readers young and old, with those who read nonfiction and those who won't touch it; romance readers and non; serious cooks and those who use cookbooks as kitchen decor.

This weekend is magical and sacrosanct in my book. Where else can you go and hear hundreds of world-class writers talk

our own copies.

Those moments of kismet may not be common for book lovers, but we certainly love to recall them. As solitary an act as reading is and can be, readers also crave community. Social media offers readers an easy way to connect. Bookish memes abound. [Bookstagrammers](#) are their own brand of influencer on Instagram, sharing book hauls and reviews. While news outlets report [statistics of fewer and fewer readers](#), book clubs like [Good Morning America's Jenna Bush Hager's](#) and [Reese Witherspoon's](#) have boosted book sales and reached new readers.

In-person book clubs are a boozy extension of literature classes. Penguin Random House recently announced they will host a [first-ever book fair for adults](#), and book festivals around the world bring in hundreds of thousands of readers.

of books? Go on an after-hours lit crawl?

While a family wedding will keep me away this weekend, I hope you will [share with us](#) your favorite Texas Book Festival moments.

For me, it was listening as Millard described President Garfield's last days after being shot when he knew he was dying and requested to see the sea once more. A wealthy man offered up his New Jersey beachfront house, and train tracks were laid to its location. However, the train would not go up the final hill, and bystanders along the way lifted Garfield's train car, carrying him all the way to the property. Tears filled my eyes as I wondered at – as I so often do when I read – a moment so heartbreakingly beautiful.

Jennifer Ravey  
Managing Editor

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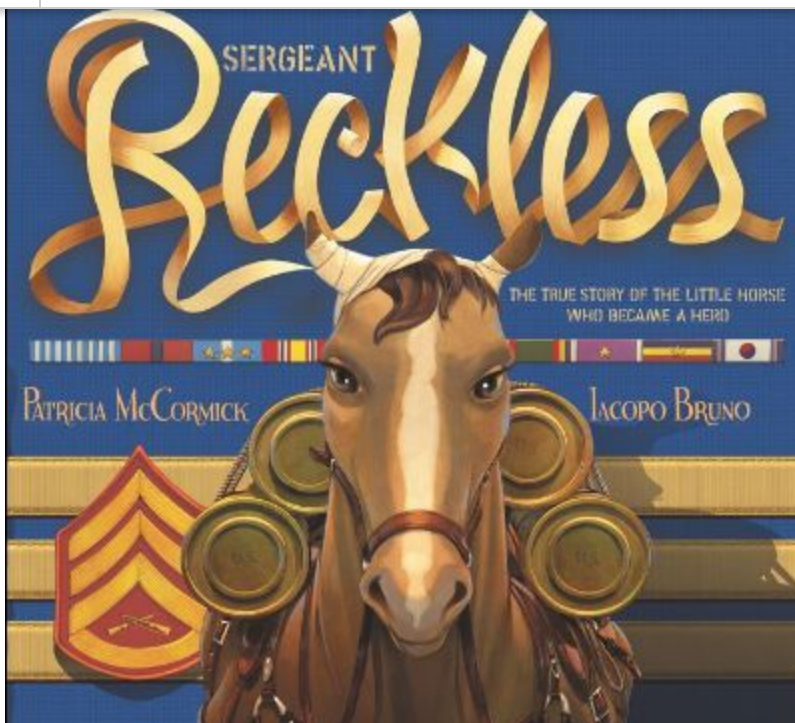
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\*Click on any book cover throughout this issue for its corresponding [Goodreads](#) page.

CHILDREN'S  
BOOKS





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"....and the winner of the 2019 Texas Bluebonnet Award is.... *Sergeant Reckless: The True Story of the Little Horse Who Became a Hero*, written by Patricia McCormick and illustrated by Iacopo Bruno."

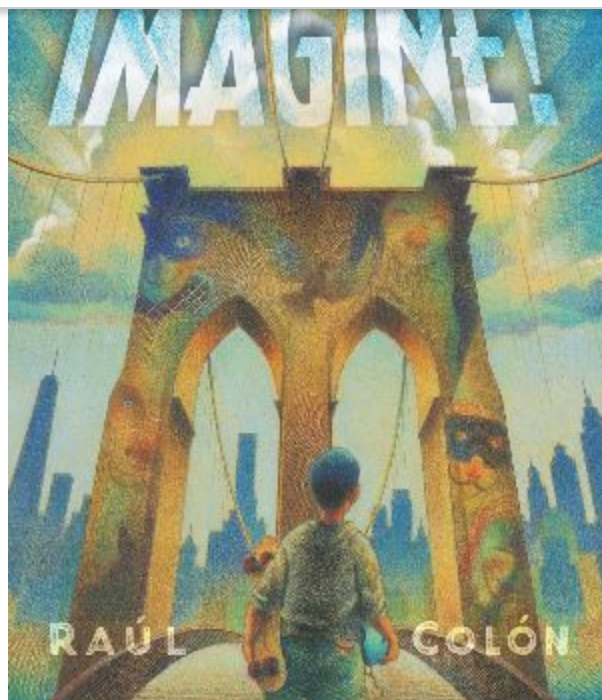
Review by Andrea Karlin

The real winners of this book are the readers and listeners of this inspiring, humorous, and heartwarming, true story of a small, red mare who is left to fend for herself when the racetrack where she lived is abandoned because of the conflict taking place in Korea in the 1950s. The young, starving horse attaches herself to a platoon of U.S. Marines and proves that she can literally and figuratively pull her weight. The men name her Reckless, promote her to the rank of sergeant, award her two Purple Hearts and retire her with full military honors. And they arrange for her to be brought back to the United States for the remainder of her life.

The text and illustrations in this engaging picture book work most harmoniously together. Readers and listeners alike will be cheering for *Sergeant Reckless* and this story of friendship, commitment, and love.

McCormick, P. *Sergeant Reckless: The True Story of the Little Horse Who Became a Hero*. Bruno, I. (Illustrator). Balzer & Bray, 2017. Unnumbered pages. ISBN: 978-0-03-229259-9

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### *Imagine!*

Review by Andrea Karlin

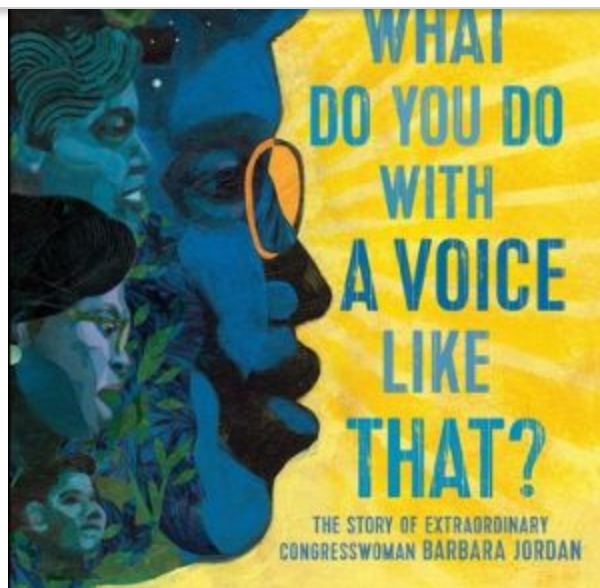
Even those unfamiliar with the Museum of Modern Art in New York City will relate to the excitement of the boy in *Imagine!* as he visits an art museum for the very first time and is overwhelmed by what he sees.

The boy's openness, energy, and sense of wonder in this new world leap off the pages and become contagious as the art he sees comes to life in Mr. Colon's colorful, detailed illustrations. Just imagine!

Perfect for inspiring imagination in children, the book equally resonates with adults who can recall magical museum visits and a fondness for the paintings and artists that Mr. Colon chose to highlight throughout his story.

Colon, R. *Imagine!* Simon & Schuster, 2018. Unnumbered pages. Illustrations. Hardcover. \$17.99. ISBN: 978-1-4814-6273-0.

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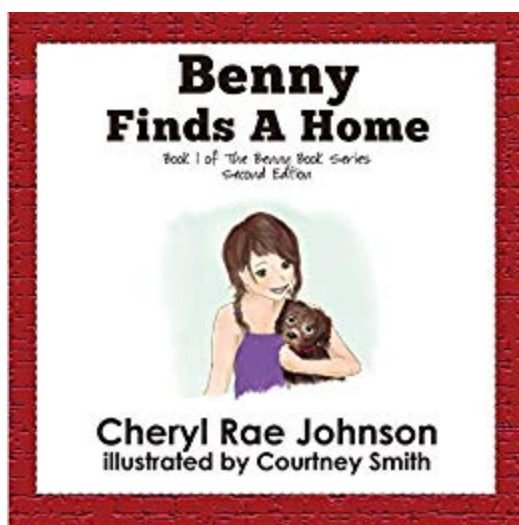
### The Voice of a Generation

Review by Andrea Karlin

What do you do with a voice like that? You become one of the most respected and famous women of your generation—Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Houston, Texas. From the time she was a child, Jordan had an extraordinary voice – literally and figuratively. She defied the odds by graduating from college and law school before becoming involved in politics in the early 1960s.

Jordan saw how her voice made a difference, and she wasn't afraid to use it or fail before she achieved success. After two unsuccessful runs to be a Texas state senator, Jordan finally won. From there, it was on to the United States Congress in 1972, where she distinguished herself as an outstanding legislator. Throughout her life, Jordan faced challenges to her intelligence, dignity and determination, which *What Do You Do With a Voice Like That?* clearly illustrates through words and strong and meaningful illustrations. This book is a winner—as was Barbara Jordan.

Barton, C. *What Do You Do With a Voice Like That? The Story of Extraordinary Congresswoman Barbara Jordan*. Holmes, E. (Illustrator). Beach Lane Books, 2018. Hardcover. Illustrations. Unnumbered pages. ISBN: 978-1-4814-6561-8





Aimed at younger readers but with appeal for the young at heart as well, this second edition of the first installment in the *Benny the Dachshund* children's series touches on life struggles to which many readers can relate. In *Benny Finds a Home*, the puppy Bentley, the last of his litter to be adopted, longs for a “nice family [he] can help” (2).

As Bentley is yearning for love and companionship, a young girl is also struggling with some major changes in her life. Holly's family has recently moved to a new home, and Holly is coping with the stresses of being a new student at school. Holly turns to God, praying to find a friend. Holly's mother suggests that the family adopt a puppy, and the wheels are set in motion to bring Bentley and Holly together.

When Holly and her family arrive to meet Bentley, the puppy feels doubts about whether the family will love him and worries that they will reject him because of his tufts of red fur and small size. Upon seeing Bentley, however, Holly immediately declares him to be “perfect” (21) for the family, and they welcome Bentley into their lives.

Bentley, now affectionately known as “Benny,” becomes a catalyst for Holly to come out of her shell and meet new people. Benny and Holly go for a walk, during which Holly meets some neighborhood children who are also walking their dog. The presence of the pets facilitates conversation, and the children all walk to the park together as new friends. The story closes on an uplifting and inspirational note, as both Holly and Benny express prayers of gratitude for the positive developments in their lives.

Although the story contains Christian overtones, its messages are not cliché or preachy. In addition to highlighting the benefits of pet adoption, *Benny Finds a Home* encompasses an array of universal human experiences: discouragement, loneliness, self-doubt, fear of not belonging, the need for love and companionship, and parents' desire for their children's well-being. While the tone of the story is generally hopeful, the author does not idealize the situation by suggesting that all of the characters' problems are permanently solved. The realistic implication is that life will continue to bring challenges, but sincere spiritual engagement and a sense of gratitude can ameliorate some of those difficulties.

*Benny Finds a Home*, with its relatable themes and pleasing illustrations, is suitable for early intermediate readers to enjoy independently or for adults to read and discuss with younger children.

Johnson, C. *Benny Finds a Home*. Smith, C. (Illustrator). Elf Lake Publishing, 2019. 38 pp. Paperback. Illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-950051-06-9

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**ART**



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## "Pushing the Concept of Latin American Art"

Review by Julia C. Fischer

In 2019, the Davis Museum of Wellesley College exhibited "Art\_Latin\_America" with an accompanying catalogue. The exhibition and resulting book highlighted Latin American art from the collection of the Davis Museum. But more than merely exhibiting some of the Davis Museum's works that were collected over the last twenty-five years, the exhibition had the ultimate aim of finding new and different ways to look at, understand, and appreciate the art of Latin America. Far-reaching in its scope, the exhibition challenges the viewer to make new connections and goes against the conventional curatorial methodology that places too many restrictions on the definition of Latin American art or focuses only on well known artists or topics like surrealism. In addition, the underscores in *Art\_Latin\_America* are deliberate and act as bridges between the three words (*art*, *Latin*, and *America*), allowing room for even more inclusivity.

The prevailing theme of *Art\_Latin\_America* is diversity, a research trend that currently spans all eras of art history. The 150 artworks included in *Art\_Latin\_America* are diverse in every way possible: aesthetically, geographically, as well as artists' experience, background, and gender. Ninety-nine artists are represented within the exhibition, and a third of them are women. The exhibition does not just focus on the most famous artists but includes works that are powerful and representative of Latin American art. Furthermore, Latin American artists residing in the United States are also included. James Oles, the curator of the exhibition, says that this diversity pushes the "concept of Latin American art to its conceptual limits."

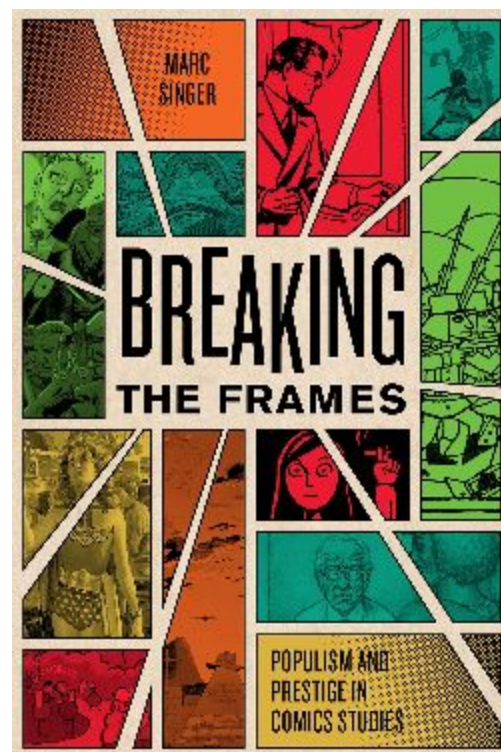
As Oles began curating the exhibition, he noticed eight distinctive and prevailing themes within the Davis Museum's collection of twentieth and twenty-first century works of Latin American art. He subsequently categorized the exhibition into these eight broad and diverse themes: identity and territory; war and loss; protest and propaganda; farmers and workers; rural and urban; saints and rituals; models and mothers; and gesture and geometry. By organizing the exhibition by subject, Oles believes that it "offers better insights into a diverse but limited collection like that of Davis than other common organizing structures such as chronology or geography."

eight chapters that cover these eight themes are written by many of the leading artists, art historians, and curators of Latin American art. Thus, like the exhibition itself, with its wide range of contributors, the exhibition catalogue is also highly diverse, providing the reader with as many different perspectives on the topic of Latin American art as possible.

Overall, *Art\_Latin\_America* provides a new curatorial methodology with an emphasis on diversity. Pushing the boundaries of what Latin American art is, the exhibition and catalogue go against the typical survey and create new insights and connections. Curators and art historians, especially those specializing in Latin American art, will find this book to be an invaluable addition to their collection. For art history professors, this book would be useful for a course specializing in modern and contemporary art or Latin American art. With its diverse range of contributors, artists, artworks, and themes, any art lover will benefit from the innovative *Art\_Latin\_America*.

Oles, J., editor. *Art Latin America: Against the Survey*. University of Texas Press, 2019. Paperback. Essays. Color Illustrations. 2 Foldouts. ISBN 978-1-4773-1909-3

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## Reframing Comics Studies and Criticism

Review by Charles Haidusek

Comics have permeated popular culture to such a degree that in 2019, *Avengers: Endgame*, an American superhero film, grossed over 2.7 billion dollars in theaters. In fact, three of this year's top ten domestic box office performances as of this writing share superhero comics as their provenance. Cultural and literary scholars alike have taken note, and the booming field of comics studies holds a greater allure than ever before.

Dr. Marc Singer addresses this subject with vigor in *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies*. Recognizing conflicting trends in the developing canon and methodologies of comics studies, Singer provides a thorough examination of the current major modes of scholarship and the worrying tendencies in rigor and exceptionalism they espouse.

Throughout the text, Singer methodically addresses a variety of major sources of



treat them as sacrosanct, the frequent insistence on narrowly defined canon skewed in favor of autobiographical works, the disagreement over naming conventions of the field, and a separation of genres within the comics format, before offering suggestions and guidelines on potential critical methodology and inclusion with analyses of widely-regarded works in the medium.

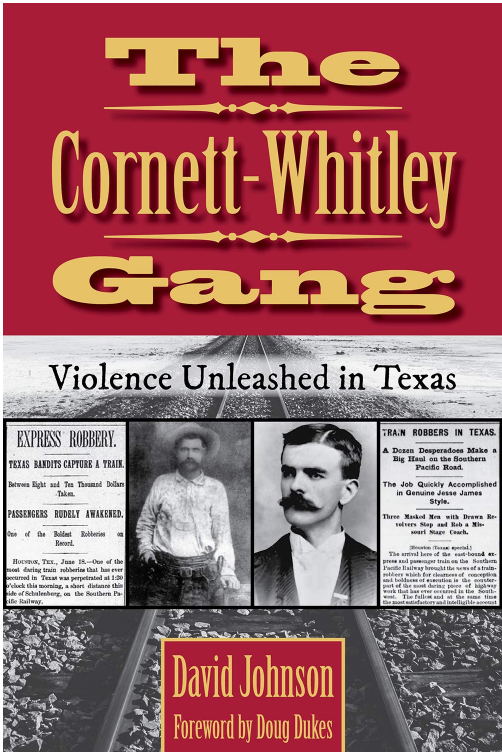
Through it all, Singer maintains an engaging academic tone and preaches a sense of moderation: there is no need for elitism or exclusion, nor for excessive fawning over the source material or resistance to academic rigor. Oppositional methodologies and disciplinary precision can heighten our understanding of source material that is, perhaps, more relevant than ever before, and Marc Singer eloquently makes a case for the bright future of a newly respected and intersectional field in literary criticism and cultural studies.

Singer, M. *Breaking the Frames*. University of Texas Press, 2018. 312 pp. Paperback. \$34.95 ISBN: 978-1-4773-1710-5

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**Wanted: Dead or Alive..Prefer Them Dead**  
Review by Lloyd Daigrepont

Following the Civil War, banks and stagecoaches gave way to railroad trains

In the following months and through late 1888, gang members and associates robbed banks as well as trains, and their penchant for violence eventually resulted in severe injuries and even death for some railroad workers and passengers.

In September, 1888, Texas Rangers led by U. S. Marshall John Rankin boarded a train early and thus prevented a robbery near Harwood; only days later—with the gang on the run—a shootout occurred near Floresville in which Bill Whitley was killed. Brack Cornett momentarily escaped but was killed shortly thereafter. The gang’s brutal reign of crime and terror was at a virtual end.

As David Johnson works through his exceedingly well-researched and detailed narrative, several motifs emerge. One is his nearly complete contempt for the press with its taste for violence, its glorification of the outlaws (including widespread publication of a ballad entitled “The Song of the Train Robbers” by one George Chase), and its

the amount and variety of wealth concentrated in the “express” cars, and the number of passengers to be deprived of cash, jewelry, and timepieces. And then there was the tendency of the press to romanticize the supposed gentleman bandits like Jesse James and Sam Bass. “At the time railroad companies generally served as a symbol of capitalism that forced ranchers and farmers to cede land and right-of-ways to them. In the public mind there was something glamorous about armed men overcoming a powerful locomotive, and robbing an express company was viewed as a crime against a corporation” (23–24).

In *The Cornett–Whitley Gang: Violence Unleashed in Texas*, historian David Johnson exposes the fatuousness of such a view. Johnson concentrates on the late 1880s, when train robbing in Texas reached a disturbingly violent mark, largely through the activities of the so-called Cornett–Whitley Gang and numerous associates. The core of the gang consisted of seven members, Brack Cornett and Bill Whitley being the most notorious. In May of 1887 the gang began criminal activities with an audacious and violent robbery of a Missouri–Pacific train while it was stopped at McNeill Junction, only thirteen miles from San Antonio; in the following month the robbers boarded and robbed a train eastbound out of San Antonio in Flatonia, Texas (Fayette County). These first two incidents, Johnson insists, reveal that “the Cornett–Whitley gang was different from the start. They would break all the rules and add their own savage, brutal twists to train robbing techniques doing as they damned well pleased” (20). At McNeill Junction, for example, they were “trigger happy, firing several promiscuous volleys into the train. The outlaws did not care if anyone was hurt or killed. Nor did the bandits shoot high to frighten the passengers. Rather, the gang fired at a height where someone could easily have been killed” (36).

eagle-eyed hindsight to make [its] determinations” (50). Insight concerning the character of gang members is also a focus as Johnson relates how they repeatedly proved themselves not only greedy and violent but also without loyalty or concern for one another—and, moreover, a nuisance and threat to family members and friends on whom they relied for alibis, food, and shelter. In general, Johnson finds, the banking and railroad industries became more guarded and responsible and more cooperative among themselves. Law enforcement, especially the Texas Rangers, became more organized and efficient, realizing the need for a “brotherhood of the badge” over unseemly competition among various agencies and personalities.

*The Cornett–Whitley Gang* makes for good reading both for the scholar and the more casually interested reader. The volume is soundly researched and organized with more than seventy pages of appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. Numerous contemporary newspaper accounts are included, many of them provocative and amusing to the modern ear (such as *The New York Times* article describing “a cool and daring bank robbery” [143] in Cisco, Texas). And there are photographs and sketches of more than a dozen outlaws, law officers, weapons, and relatives.

All in all, *The Cornett–Whitley Gang* offers readers entertainment, education, insight, and even humor. Following the Cisco robbery, Johnson informs us, The Fort Worth Gazette posted a nebulous reward “probably \$5000 or \$10,000” for the outlaws, while the first National bank in Albany offered an unequivocal \$500 for John Barber and Bill Whitley “dead or alive. Prefer them dead” (148).

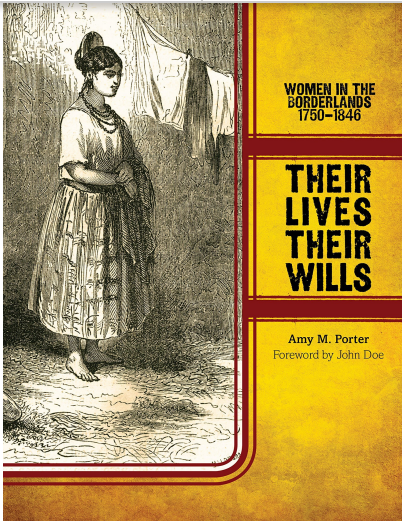
Johnson, D. *The Cornett–Whitley Gang: Violence Unleashed in Texas*. University of North Texas Press, 2019. Hardcover. Photographs and Sketches. 284 pp. ISBN: 978–1–57441–768–5

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women to write wills and protected women’s inheritance and property rights,



An Historical Study of the Lives of Women in the Borderlands

Review by Cristina Ríos

The historiographic research presented in *Their Lives, Their Wills* explores the lives of women in Spanish and Mexican communities in the borderlands from 1750 through 1846. The study is based on the analysis of the last wills and testaments of women from these communities during this particular time. The author’s careful scrutiny of the legal notarized documents opens a window to the roles that women had in these communities, revealing their priorities, financial resources, relationships, and social status.

In the foreword, Nancy E. Baker reminds the reader that Spanish law allowed

time. The study is focused on women’s testaments from five borderland colonial communities: El Paso del Norte, Santa Fe, Saltillo, San Esteban and San Fernando de Béxar, presently San Antonio.

The daily lives of women in these borderland settlements are revealed through the many examples of the statements in their last testaments. Readers may find especially interesting the appendices which include examples of translated wills and the list of the testaments used in the study. Many of the last names of the testators, in the wills included, are last names of Mexican-American families in these regions. This could be a valuable source for genealogy studies.

A wonderful reading for anyone interested in the field of borderlands history, and especially for those concerned with women’s history, *Their Lives, Their Wills* is an excellent addition for university libraries and community libraries.

Porter, A. M. *Their Lives, Their Wills: Women in the Borderlands, 1750-1846*. Texas Tech University Press, 2015. Paperback. Illustrations. Notes. Appendices. 256 pp. Photographs. \$39.95 ISBN: 978-0-896-72932-2

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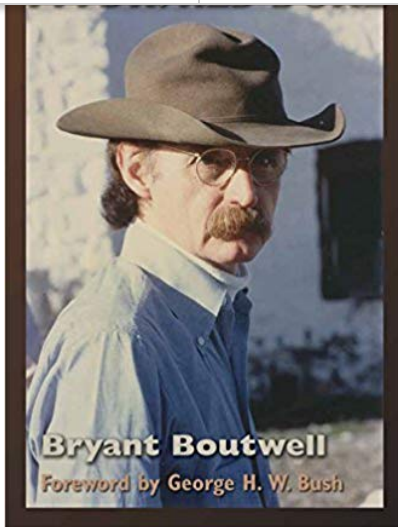
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Surgeon, Celebrity, Texas Hero

By Lloyd Daigrepond

For many readers the title of this book will call to mind a gaunt, bespectacled and mustachioed figure in jeans and boots and sporting a crushed and range-worn Stetson, regaling his television audience with vivid demonstrations, homespun humor, and wisecracking admonitions to take better care of themselves. “Folks have just gotta realize that most all accidents are preventable. They’re living in de-nial, and that ain’t no river in Egypt” (3). In the 1980s and 1990s, *Texas Health Reports*, featuring Dr. Red Duke of the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, became a syndicated news feature of television stations throughout the country. People “liked this cowboy surgeon who was a straight talker and entertaining to watch” (171).





varied life and distinguished career of his subject, an eminent surgeon who became the friendly acquaintance of Texas governors and presidents of the United States, of renowned novelists and actors, and of famed country and western singers like Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash. Raised in Hillsboro, Texas, James Henry Duke experienced an active and relatively fulfilling childhood, though always under pressure from his tyrannical and sometimes cruel father, who expected Red to attend seminary and become a Baptist preacher.

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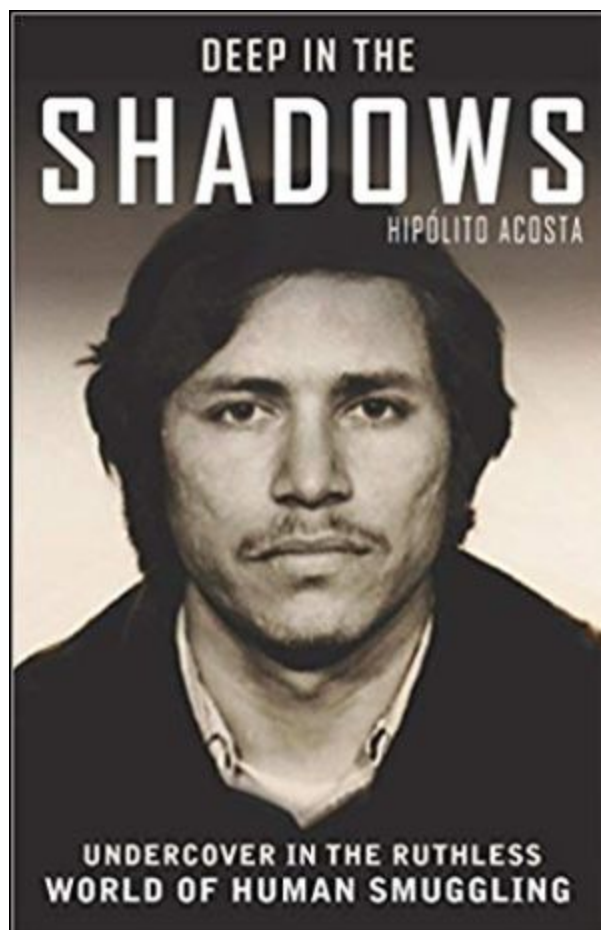


Red graduated from Texas A&M in 1950, enrolled in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth but was called to active duty by the United States Army, serving as a tank commander in Germany during the early years of the Cold War before marrying and completing his seminary degree. Red began a ministry of sorts by working with and teaching loggers in the Canadian outback, but after his work in “Frontier College,” both Red and his young wife agreed that it was time for Red to pursue his growing interest in medicine, and he enrolled in the newly formed Southwestern Medical School of the University of Texas.

As a surgeon in residence in 1963, Dr. Duke was at Parkland Hospital when President Kennedy and Governor John Connally were brought in on gurneys, and it was the young Dr. Duke who treated Connally. After years of developing as a medical school faculty member at Columbia University and at Nangarhar University in Afghanistan, Red accepted a position with the new University of Texas Medical School in Houston’s Texas Medical School. In the 1970s and 1980s Red began to distinguish himself as a trauma surgeon and became the founder and medical director of Life Flight, one of the nation’s first air-rescue emergency programs, flying 28,000 patients in its first ten years. Red’s interest in conservation led to participation in events such as Farm Aid and to his successful commitment to rescuing the desert bighorn sheep from near extinction.

The poignancy of Red Duke’s story as Boutwell tells it consists in the way it approaches tragedy. From his youth Red’s energy and commitment were fueled by an insatiable need to prove himself competent or worthy, a need almost certainly fueled by his father Henry, “a deacon of the Baptist church and pillar of his community [who] could be tyrannical at home—intolerant, demanding, and loud” (350). Red’s good nature never allowed such behavior on his part, but his lifetime devotion to the “Good Turn” (a philosophy of sorts formed during his years in the Boy Scouts) often compromised his personal commitments. Despite raising four children with Betty Cowden, the pair divorced in 1984. A second marriage ended after only five years. Red “turned to his medical family. Eventually—for the last twenty years of his life—he would literally live in the hospital around the clock, making time when he could to see the children and celebrate holidays with the family” (203).

*I’m Dr. Red Duke* is a well-told story full of humor and emotion, based on numerous interviews with acquaintances, family members, and even Red himself. It is also a scholarly effort, well-documented and carefully developed. Boutwell’s *I’m Dr. Red Duke* will appeal to any reader as an entertaining and noteworthy biography of a Texas hero.



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### **Risky Undercover Work: Hipolita Acosta and Human Trafficking**

Review by Katt Blackwell-Starnes

Hipolita Acosta is one of the most decorated officers in the history of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. His latest work, *Deep in the Shadows*, is his third monograph about his work with the service and his most personal work.

*Deep in the Shadows* traces Acosta's lengthy and successful 30-year career with Immigration and Naturalization Services. Acosta begins his work detailing the 1996 work to bring to U.S. soil and arrest two Nicaraguan human traffickers and eliminate one human trafficking ring. His narrative carries the reader through many raids and busts of human traffickers throughout his career, concluding with his retirement as District Director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in Houston, Texas. Throughout the work, two things stand out as the backbone of Acosta's narrative: his desire to bring down the leader of a trafficking ring was never without personal risk, and the personal risks Acosta took had potential for far-reaching repercussions.

Acosta begins with the tracking and arrest of two ringleaders in what first seems a bold move, but a move Acosta gradually reveals to be a consistent trend in his work to close human trafficking rings. Acosta consistently describes work in human trafficking where he does not leap directly into the arrest of a low-level trafficker but uses his undercover skills to embed himself within the ring in order to arrest higher-level members, always seeking the ringleader(s). Acosta details undercover trips into foreign countries to gain the confidence of ringleaders and details his work to gain evidence of smuggling and trust of the ringleaders, which at times included participating in smuggling operations and at other times included securing fake identity documents. Acosta knows he put himself in situations that could have led to serious injury or death, and his narrative also details the



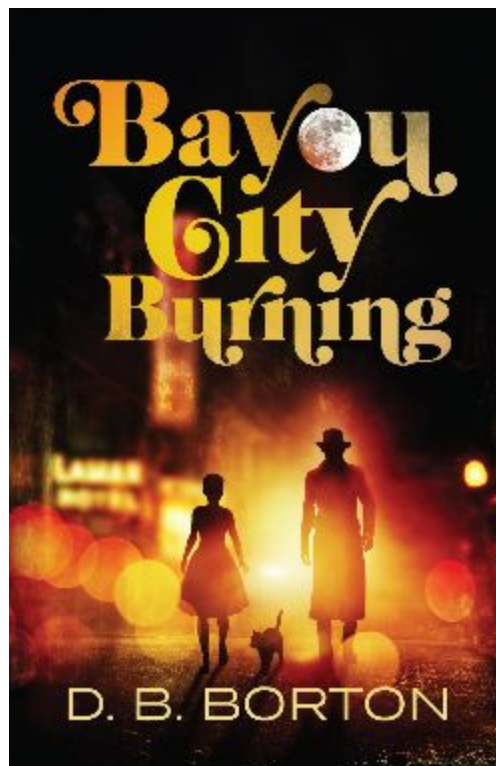
*Deep in the Shadows* is a riveting read for those interested in the undercover operations of Immigration and Naturalization Services and gives the reader a deep appreciation for the unseen work done by government officials working to end human trafficking: arresting local fake document dealers, arresting mid-level members of trafficking rings running waypoints on the trafficking route, and arresting ringleaders in foreign countries.

Acosta, Hipolita. *Deep in the Shadows: Undercover in the Ruthless World of Human Smuggling*. Arte Publico, 2017. 308 pp. Photos. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-55885-844-2

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## FICTION



### **The Heat is On in Houston**

Review by Daniel Bartlett

*Bayou City Burning* by D.B. Borton is an engaging and fun read. Part mystery, part history, and part father-daughter relationship, this novel weaves together several intriguing narrative strands to create an exciting tale.

In 1961 Houston, private investigator Harry Lark is hired by a mysterious out-of-towner to trail two visitors from Washington D.C. Lark discovers that the visitors are looking to build NASA a space center, but soon his client winds up dead and mobsters come after Lark seeking large sums of money. Meanwhile, Dizzy, Harry Lark's twelve-year-old daughter, encounters her own mystery while running a neighborhood lost-and-found out of her garage. She's hired by a young girl to find her missing father who is supposed to

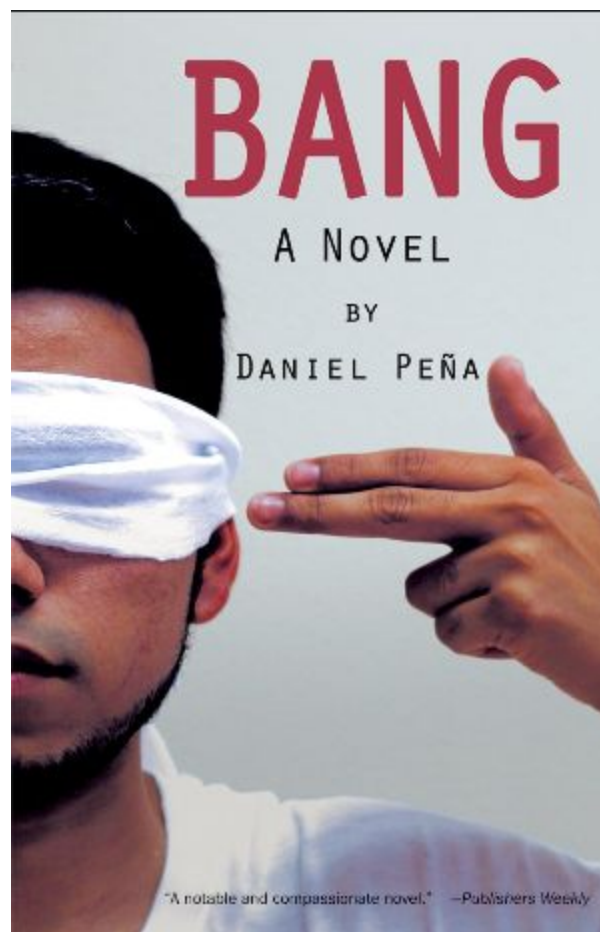
Harry is the tough guy of the hard-boiled Philip Marlowe tradition; Dizzy is the smart girl detective of the Nancy Drew tradition. And while Harry knows all the tricks of the trade of crime-solving, as a father he struggles just remembering to attend his kids' ballgames. Meanwhile Dizzy is a smart, intrepid twelve-year-old who's learning the P.I. ropes but sometimes has to straighten out her father. The novel alternates point of view between Harry and Dizzy, weaving together their separate narrative strands to create a delightfully intertwined story.

On top of the compelling characters and narrative, Borton also vividly develops the setting as an evocative presence. Readers who know Houston and its history will recognize how nicely Borton has depicted the time and place; those who are less familiar with the specifics of the time and place will find themselves fully immersed in it. Civil Rights, the space program, organized crime, and union unrest provide the backdrop for the story, lending weight to the social significance of the events.

Readers will find plenty of humor, suspense, and action here. They'll also discover wonderful insights into family relationships and challenging social changes. Overall, *Bayou City Burning* will leave readers longing for more of Harry and Dizzy and even of Houston.

Borton, D.B. *Bayou City Burning*. Boomerang Books, 2019. 390 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-0-99935-272-4

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### A Debut Novel with a "Bang"

Review by Sharon L. Joffe

University of Houston-Downtown Professor Daniel Peña's *Bang* begins furiously, catapulting the reader into the action, which never ceases. In this brilliant first novel, Pushcart-prize winner Peña lays open the trauma of living on

characters and the story's events are indeed fictitious, Peña tells a realistic narrative: the pain of an aircraft accident and its aftermath, the struggles of an undocumented immigrant to find her family, the unanswered questions about the disappearance of her husband, and the struggles of her sons to survive against all odds.

The story is harrowing. When Cuauhtémoc and Uli, undocumented immigrants who live in Harlingen, Texas, are separated and stranded in Mexico after their small aircraft accidentally goes down, both struggle to stay alive even as they seek a reunion. Uli, whose dream is to continue to run track back in Texas, is trapped in San Miguel, amongst drug dealers and dog-fighters. He befriends a young woman, June, and takes care of her after she sustains debilitating injuries. Her death pains him greatly.

In a parallel narrative, his brother Cuauhtémoc makes choices to protect those whom he loves—fraternal loyalty and the love of family guide his every action. For example, Cuauhtémoc smuggles drugs for Jimmy in order to save his family, and he dares not risk a return to Texas as he fears harsh retaliation. While the brothers struggle to save themselves and to remain alive, their mother, Araceli, returns to Mexico to find them. Fate is unkind to all three of them; there is no happy resolution to their situations, and Peña's unflinching treatment of his characters is admirable.

Peña's prose is stark yet evocative, vivid and senses-heightening. We smell Uli's fear, we consume along with Araceli the pernicious pesticides that create bleeding episodes within her, and we suffer Cuauhtémoc's pain as he struggles with the injuries he sustained during his accident. Peña's descriptions of life in both San Miguel and Harlingen are particularly convincing and shocking. He vividly captures the nightmares that people are forced to live through as they strive to survive in the liminal space along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Peña's book left this reviewer stunned and humbled by the experiences endured by its characters who simply struggle to stay alive against massive odds. This fast-paced, moving novel is an absolute must-read for those want to know more about life on the U.S.-Mexico border and about the lives of those who live on the margins of our society.

Peña, D. *Bang*. Arte Publico, 2017. 200 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-55885-856-5

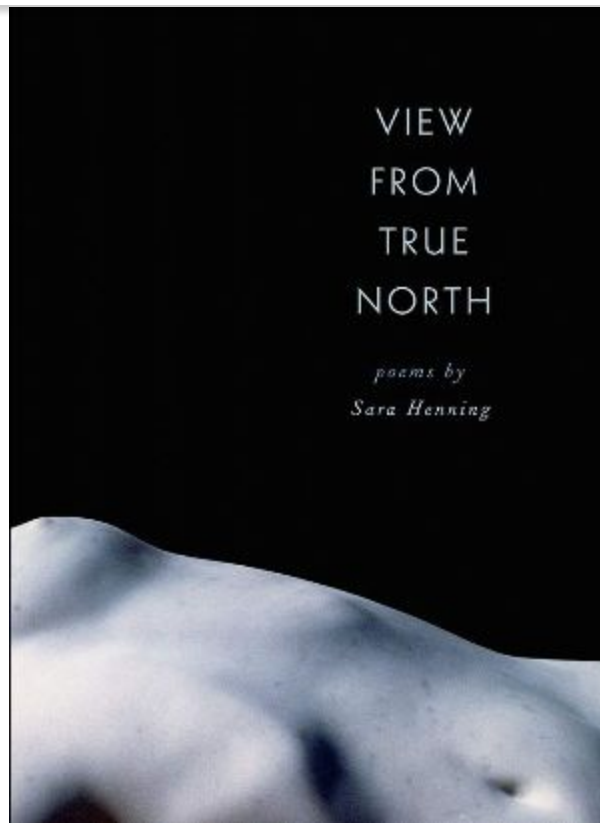
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# POETRY





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### Sara Henning: Processing Her Pain

Review by Shelvin Jackson

Henning's poetry collection, *View from True North*, won the *Crab Orchard Review* open competition award (2017), which celebrates contemporary American writing. This collection combines superior writing with an elegant use of language to passionately purge emotion from childhood and young adult experiences.

The collection focuses on a speaker's grandfather who traumatized the family. The poem "The Truth of Them" captures the essence of the grandfather's behavior:

"Grandmother's doctor asking Is there a chance your husband's been unfaithful? —  
As if faith had ever been the fabric swathing her body to his body.  
As if infection came from a Holiday Inn toilet,  
his lie like semen—swill staining the humid reach of air..."

The grandmother--like the finches Henning employs throughout--will wait on her husband as he sleeps, and like the bird who listens to her mate sing in his sleep, she will wait and hold on to hope.

A later poem, "How to Pray" captures moments from childhood when a sister hears the experiences of her brother through bedroom walls as his father marches into his room each night to perform detestable acts. Afterwards, the poem concludes with the children, who have become adults, unable to address each other after living through these experiences.

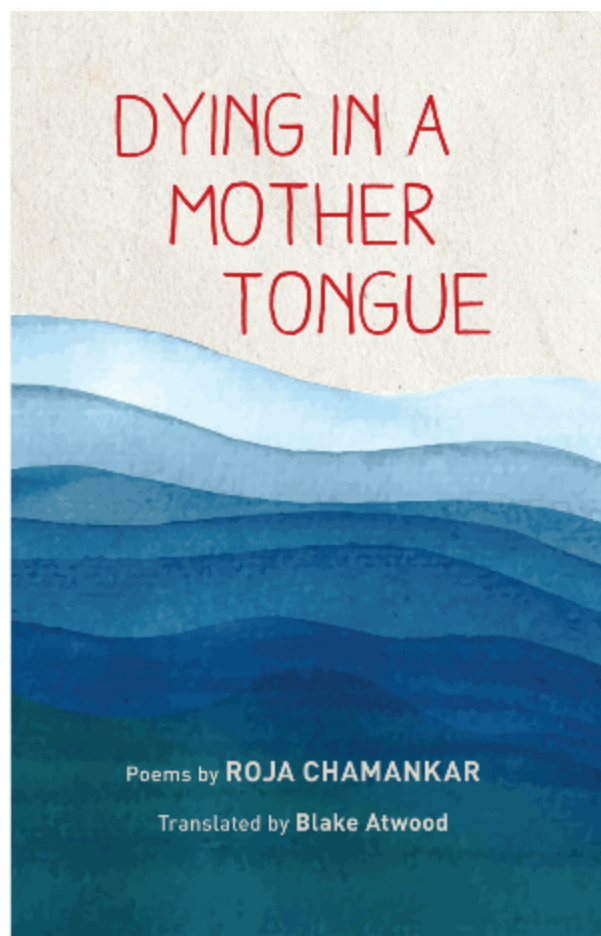
Other poems dive deeper into the speaker's memories, which few human beings would care to share, but Henning writes with a grace and goodness that eases the unfolding of her truth.

Henning bares the darkness of her family history for readers to witness, and in the end, the book highlights the hope that recovery and healing are attainable--that life can resume after tragedy. These poems are relatable to millions who must cope with

*View from True North* is an admirable book. Henning tackles tough subjects, and the collection serves as a gateway to healing. With a rich vernacular and heart-wrenching truth, Henning shows us how one can live with such pain and still thrive.

Henning, S. *View from True North*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2018. 88p. Paperback. ISBN: 978-0-80933-685-2

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### "Sometimes Effortless, At Other Times Nearly Impossible"

Review by Casey Ford

A Texan's review of Roja Chamankar's 2018 poetry collection *Dying in a Mother Tongue* must also be a review of Blake Atwood's arresting translation of the original Persian. What an ultimately humbling experience it must be to undertake the moving of this poet's tight, complex images from one language into another—images that are idiomatic, in a sense, because of their initial dependence on the construction of the original Persian. Atwood himself captures the nature of their collaboration succinctly enough in his introduction to the book, where he discusses the "sometimes effortless and at other times nearly impossible" (xiv) work of completing the translation. He talks openly about the fact that poetry always sustains a loss in translation, but he also believes that the "failures" in the conversion are "invitation[s] to the reader to pause...to engage further" (xiii). Not only does the translation invite engagement, but the images that Chamankar conjures fairly seduce the reader as an intimate confidant into the poet's work, her family, her home, her bed.

The poems drip with blood, sweat, and salt water. Many feel as if they were written to be whispered into the reader's ear; they feel as close and urgent as "the bitter taste of crude oil / travel[ling] up the throat" (60). Others have the post-coital insouciance of a finger traveling up a sleeping lover's spine. Readers should absolutely take an opportunity to



reaches of a body dark and sandy" (47), or a "tree who clings to our / wall with a thousand hands" (7). These are images that transcend idiom or syntax; they transcend the body, sand, and sea from which they emanate. In these poems, a sea and a soul coalesce; desire coalesces with war and war with self-examination. Chamankar, a native of Borazjan, Iran, chooses here not to explore a narrative of oppression but of powerful authenticity. Surely that authenticity is the quality in this collection of poems that would allow one reader from the Southeast Texas Gulf Coast to identify so strongly with a poet of the Persian Gulf, to see her own songs being sung in images from half a world away.

Chamankar, R. *Dying in a Mother Tongue*. Translated by Blake Atwood. *Emerging Voices from the Middle East*, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 2018. Paperback. \$16.00. 60 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4773-1780-8.

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### A Balanced Review

Review by Andrea Bru

*A Balancing Act* is a collection of somber poems that takes the reader on a journey through the speaker's personal life. The book opens with the poem "A Brief History of Poetry" that details the struggle to write poetry in an imperfect world.

The first section of the book begins with a quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald about being "borne ceaselessly into the past." These poems, then, explore the speaker's complex past and his childhood. He uses specific names and details to make the poems more relatable, and he gives hints about his whereabouts, America in the 1960's. Through these intimate poems, he exposes the truth about America, its social issues and racism, by using specific sensory details that bring readers back to help them stand in his position. In addition, the speaker details his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam, and he uses this to explore mortality, which is one of the book's central themes. In the intense moments on the battlefield, poems like "Thirty Years from the TET Offensive" use details like "and those already dead continue dying, charred slivers of wood and stone." He portrays pettiness about death because he has seen so much of it.

The next sections wrap up the book and discuss the aftermath of war and the speaker's struggles with PTSD. He unveils the ugly truth about American greed in "South of Atlanta on I-75, I Find America" and "There's a Lesson for Us on the Perfume River." In these, he gives vivid details about the beauty America holds and then goes against his words by exposing the truth. Many poems also deal with the loss of the speaker's father and their complex relationship.

Finally, in the epilogue "Dia de los Muertos," he dives into what his death should be like, thus wrapping up the death theme. Jim McGarrah, a prolific poet and writer, displays a depth of wisdom one can only acquire through a life full of experience—both tragic and triumphant. He has written ten poetry books and has won the national Eric Hoffer Legacy Nonfiction Award. *A Balancing Act* is a solemn, though truthful, examination of life and mortality in 20th century America.

McGarrah, J. *A Balancing Act*. Lamar University Press, 2018. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-942956-54-9

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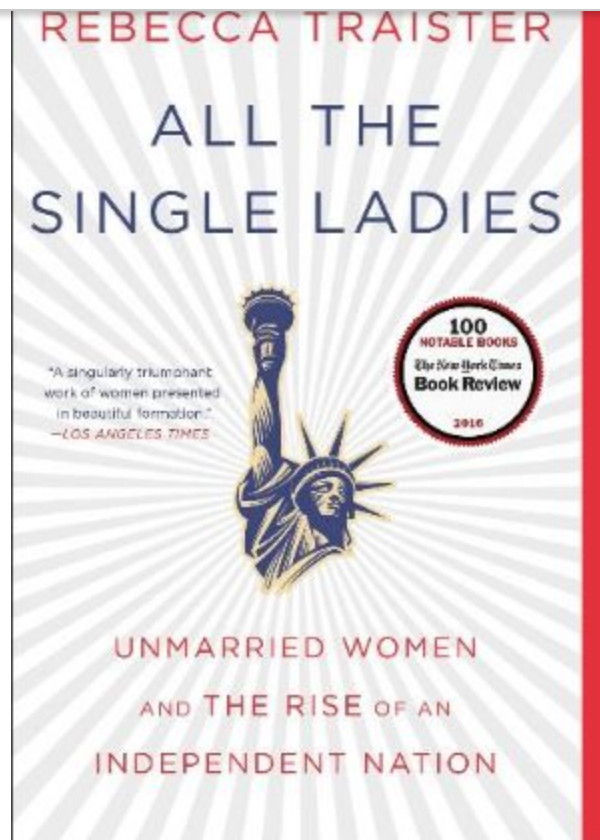


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## FROM THE BACKLIST

{fantastic books you may have missed}





43:15



“They see ahead of them a dozen paths and have but contemptuous pity for the woman of the past who knew but one dull highway.”

—Juliet Wilbor Tompkins, *“Why Women Don’t Marry”*

“If I am to disclose to you what I should prefer if I follow the inclination of my nature, it is this: beggar-woman and single rather than queen and married.”

—Elizabeth I

## They See Ahead of Them a Dozen Paths

Review by Casey Ford

Powerful, single women freak people out, and they always have. Rebecca Traister’s book recommends awe over fear by showing that throughout history, when unfettered women unite around a common purpose, they enact social and political sea change. In ever-escalating numbers, women are deciding either not to marry or to wait until much later in their lives to marry, and Traister looks at how these trends are causing great political and social shifts in the day-to-day business of 21st century America. She also shows that these trends are not shocking or unprecedented; there have always been vocal and active groups of women bucking the system—out of Puritanism, in westward expansion, through the Progressive Era, suffrage, two World Wars, the sexual revolution—to create uncomfortable and requisite disturbances in the atmosphere of the nation.

She leaves no one out. Traister accounts for the voices and situations of people of color, of gender and non-gender, of youth and of age, of wealth and of poverty. Two especially thought-provoking chapters in the book explore the financial realities of single women. Traister acknowledges the difficulty in sorting out the truths or fictions of the glass ceiling, but she discusses the “asterisks” in studies that show women overtaking men in various areas. “These asterisks reveal that while some women are enjoying more

and poverty” (183). She spends time unpacking the idea that women may not be getting married because marriage and motherhood are not as “profitable” as they may once have been, but she also shows that single women with financial difficulty are struggling harder than they ever have before.

Readers will be moved by heartbreaking, self-effacing, triumphant stories of women of history and of today. Hopefully, their stories will also serve to change old patterns of thinking. Yes; singleness requires sacrifice, but so, too, does marriage. So does motherhood. Any true joy requires sacrifice or, at least, the recognition that sorrow is part of it.

One of the less appealing qualities of “singleness lit” is its inclination to condescend, to insinuate that this too, shall pass and that the condition of singleness is something to be either survived or borne with Panglossian anticipation of the spouse that is to come. If the literature is not patronizing, then it tends to be hostile, enjoining independent women to use their spouse-free hours for activism and advocacy. Traister’s book, though, is neither patronizing nor militant; she tells the stories of women throughout history to present with authenticity the power of woman—individually and corporately—choosing and exercising her independence. In seeking this balance, her research compels and empowers “all the single ladies.”

Traister, Rebecca. *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation*. Simon and Schuster, 2016. Paperback. \$17.00. ISBN 978-1-4767-1657-2

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Reviewers

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**Katt Blackwell-Starnes** is an Assistant Professor and Writing Director at Lamar University where she teaches rhetoric, writing, and composition. Her research areas include veterans studies and Virginia Woolf.

**Andrea Bru** attends Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities at Lamar University, where she is a premed student studying biology. She has written two books and continues to write poetry and short fiction. Along with academics and writing, she enjoys learning about sloths and cats and likes to go hiking.

**Lloyd M. Daigrepoint** teaches in the Department of English & Modern Languages at Lamar University. He teaches courses in American literature, and he serves as Co-Editor of *Lamar Journal of the Humanities*. He has published articles in journals such as *Early American Literature*, *American Literary Realism*, and *Southern Studies*.

**Caitlin Duerler** is an instructor of French at Lamar University with research interests in modern literature and art. In addition to teaching, Caitlin is

**Charles Haidusek** is a student at Lamar University. He is an English major.

**Harrabeth A. Haidusek** is an instructor of English at Lamar University. She has taught courses in composition, literature, technical writing, and grammar. As a technical writer and editor, she has worked extensively with major reference and educational publishers in the United States and the United Kingdom.

**Shelvin Jackson** is a senior at Lamar University, majoring in History and minoring in English. Shelvin avidly studies history with an emphasis on biblical truths and mysteries. Shelvin is also a member of the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. Upon completing his undergraduate degree later this year, he plans to pursue his master's degree.

**Sharon Joffe** is an Assistant Professor of English at Lamar University. Sharon has a Master of Science degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, and MA and PhD degrees in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her book, *The Clairmont Family Letters, 1839-1889*, was published by Routledge. Her co-authored book, *Victoria's Lost Pavilion: From 19th-Century Aesthetics to Digital Humanities*, was published by

magazine of the Art Studio, Inc.

**Casey Ford** is a composition instructor at Lamar University with research interests in word and music studies. She is a freelance editor and poet whose work has appeared in *Concho River Review*, *Amarillo Bay*, and *Writing Texas*.

**Julia Fischer** is an assistant professor of art history at Lamar University, where she teaches courses in ancient, Asian, and Renaissance art along with a specialized class in art crime. She received a BA Classics in art history from Loyola University Chicago, an MA in classical archaeology from the University of Missouri–Columbia, and a PhD in art history from The Ohio State University. Dr. Fischer’s primary research focuses on the iconography, reception, and propaganda of Roman Imperial cameos. Her other areas of interest include issues of cultural heritage, Roman topography, the minor arts of antiquity, travel photography in 19th century Japan, and anything Italian. She is the author of two books and the editor of two books. In 2016, Dr. Fischer was named Lamar University's Distinguished Faculty Lecturer.

**Andrea Karlin** earned a Ph.D. in curriculum and reading instruction at the University of New Mexico and is Associate Professor of Education specializing in children's literature at Lamar University.

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