

McMurtry passes on but his work will live forever

Larry McMurtry was an owlish looking little man, deliberate, slow moving, not the sort to wrestle rattlesnakes. But he understood those who did. And because he did he took many of us to places we had never been, chief among them the thousand-mile cattle drive from the dust of west Texas to the high plains of Montana. In an 843-page journey in the company of a pair of grizzled old Texas Rangers – Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call — we went north from Lonesome Dove. “Lonesome Dove,” of course, was the centerpiece in the enormous outpouring of work by Larry McMurtry. The book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 and was made into a six-and-a-half-hour TV miniseries. It still gets shown and Robert Duvall’s “Gus” and Tommy Lee Jones’ “Woodrow” remain just as cranky and charming as they were 35 years ago.

McMurtry died a week or so ago. He was 84 years old and was simply worn out. But what he bequeathed to us is a treasure, much as the writing of Carl Sandburg or the music of Johnny Cash is such a treasure. McMurtry was among those rare people who could take us to a distant time and place and make us believe we belong there.

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A MOMENT

Ed Breen



And lest you believe he was consumed by rough-edged creatures of the 19th Century, consider that he was also the creator, the writer of “Terms of Endearment,” in which Texas is only a backdrop for the 20th Century antics of Jack Nicholson and Shirley MacLaine.

Or that he gave us the story, if not the stars, of “The Last Picture Show,” a coming-of-age tale that went where no one save J.D. Salinger had gone before. Think of it: Fifty years ago and in black-and-white. It introduced us to Jeff Bridges and a very young Cybill



The late Larry McMurtry

Shepherd, with help from Ellen Burstyn and Cloris Leachman.

This time Texas is more important, more visible, especially on the featureless horizon surrounding a dusty, not-very-prosperous post-war town in the mid-50s when we choked off our emotions, except when we didn’t.

Mr. McMurtry knew of which he wrote. He was born in 1936 in Archer City, Texas, a one-stoplight north Texas town. And it says much of the man and his work that 84 years later he died in Archer City, Texas. In

between there was much. There were North Texas State and Rice universities. There was some time at Stanford and some raucous days with Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters in the flower-child days. In fact, in later – much later – years, Larry McMurtry became husband to Ken Kesey’s widow.

And no matter where he went there were books, thousands of books. For quite a few years, even a bookstore in Archer City, a store that mushroomed into four ramshackle buildings and housed more than 600,000 volumes

at one point. The bookstore is still there, although much reduced from 20 years ago. His personal collection was split between Archer City and a little fancier house in Tucson, Ariz., and is said to be 28,000 volumes.

Not long before his death he raged against the computer and the technology displacing books from shelves in public libraries across America. Said he of all those things digital:

“But they don’t really do what books do, and why should they usurp the chief function of a public library,

which is to provide readers access to books?”

He raged against many things, as men such as McMurtry tend to do, but he also loved. He loved the land of Texas and the ways of the people who lived there a century or so ago.

The stream of books about the land and people began in 1961 with “Horseman, Pass By.” Others tended to come in groups; hundred and thousands of pages of stories which came forth at a precise and measured rate: Five pages a day, every day. More than 30 novels, dozens of books of essays, an assortment of non-fiction books and at least 30 screenplays made from his own books and the writing of others. It was he who took a New Yorker magazine short story written by Annie Proulx and wove it into the controversial and revealing movie script for “Brokeback Mountain.”

And if you crave more of Gus and Woodrow and the dusty remains of Lonesome Dove, well, he wrote three more about those two old coots in their younger days, “Streets of Laredo,” “Dead Man’s Walk,” and “Comanche Moon.”

It will be a long time before the likes of Larry McMurtry passes this way again.

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