

# Larry McMurtry's latest takes us back to Texasville

*Prolific novelist seems to be working up to a novel of ideas, and his heart may not be in this voyage of self-actualization.*

## DUANE'S DEPRESSED

By Larry McMurtry

Simon & Schuster, 431 pages, \$38.50

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Just over a year ago, Larry McMurtry gave an interview to The New York Times Magazine in which he discussed the depression he experienced following a heart attack and subsequent quadruple bypass surgery: "I faded out of my life. Suddenly I found myself becoming an outline, and then what was within that outline vanished."

In *Duane's Depressed* — the final volume of the trilogy that began with *The Last Picture Show*

and *Texasville* —, McMurtry traces Texas oilman Duane Moore's slow and rather gentle collapse into some form of ... well, let's call it self-actualization.

Never one to depend on ideas when a quirky character or a breezy conversation will do, McMurtry asks the reader to accompany him on a roundabout, dusty journey through Duane's voyage of self-insight. At first Duane refuses to drive in any vehicle, especially his beloved pickup, and then all but abandons his wife Karla. He learns to separate himself from his kids — most of whom are saturated with alcohol or drugs or self-indulgence — and we follow him assessing and

sometimes discarding his friends. We don't really see him angst-ridden or so morose that he loses sense of his own life, perhaps because McMurtry is more comfortable writing dramatic actions and with his "aw, shucks" dialogue than in intricately exploring the tattered fragments of a life unfulfilled.

Duane's most emphatic statement that he wants a new life is his desire to see a psychiatrist, Honor Carmichael. He develops a crush on her, but her sexual and intellectual interests are quite evidently elsewhere. She prescribes for Duane not Prozac, but Proust, of all things. Not much of a reader, Duane manages to make it through the entire *Remembrance of Things Past*. For someone who has only read one other "long book" in his life (mention of which is probably the funniest moment of the book), it's quite a stretch. But somehow a man whose main reading is fishing magazines and who is surrounded by roughnecks and a family that likes to shop manages to read the expansive masterpiece that most of the rest of us never will.

At times the novel is engaging, endearing and quite convincing. Duane's affection for his wife (I don't want to give away too much here) and his establishment of a garden that provides free food to

whomever desires or needs it are both handled with sympathy and a light touch. At other times the writing is flabby and the story just a bit too cute. Throughout the book, and even a few hundred words from the end, I found myself crossing out words that were either superfluous or silly.

*Duane's Depressed* is not as powerful as some of McMurtry's earlier, better-known works, including *Lonesome Dove* and *Terms of Endearment*, but it is markedly better than his most recent offering, *Comanche Moon* (in The New York Times Magazine interview, he admitted publicly to being "bored to death with the 19th-century west"). It is more satisfying after the first 100 or so pages, which read as though McMurtry wrote them on automatic pilot. Although the book borders on the sentimental, it is an empathetic if somewhat two-dimensional portrayal of a man coming to the end of his life and realizing how much there is that he has missed.

McMurtry seems to be warming up for a novel of ideas, rather than the meandering western sagas for which he is best known. I look forward to the attempt.

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Peter O'Brien is the co-author, with Harry Hef, of *Build a Better Book Club*, due out in April.

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