

The Future of Texas Literature By Robert Flynn

Around the turn of the century, 21st Century, I was one of the writers asked by the Dallas Morning News for my opinion of the future of Texas Literature. This is what I wrote.

The future of Texas literature is exciting and dangerous as chaotic times are. Exciting because there will be more Texas writers, books, publishers. Exciting because someone in Chillicothe can write a book that can be read by anyone who reads English anywhere in the world. Dangerous because electronic books make it possible for anyone who has computer skills, or the money to hire someone who does, can write and/or publish a book. Dangerous because in the plethora of books, some books may not find voice at the essential moment to salvage the writer's dream or enlighten the judicious public.

Fiction, poetry and nonfiction will find new forms to examine and explain the incredible resurrection of antebellum Southern ideas:

A "mudsill" people of inferior quality, a wage-slave and debt-slave class to do the dirty and dangerous jobs to free the elegant elite to lead the nation to refinement and prosperity.

The sovereignty of states to reject federal laws they oppose, the sovereignty of political parties to reject compromise as an instrument of government, the sovereignty of individuals to possess whatever deadly weapons they desire.

The sovereignty of the federal government to examine the private lives of citizens and to decide which have equal rights to health care, personal security, matrimony, and to sexual activity by mutually consenting adults.

No one has ever said this about my prediction of the future of Texas literature so I will say it myself: I nailed it.

Several years ago when I was working on the book *When I was Just Your Age*, I interviewed some Kickapoos from the traditional Kickapoo tribe that better than any other Indian tribe has resisted assimilation. They lived in the Great Lakes area, but as palefaces pushed other tribes closer they kept moving and eventually crossed Texas and into Mexico. They have dual US and Mexico citizenship and a reservation in Mexico.

They maintained their tribal language, tribal customs, tribal religion. If you're old enough and drove over the bridge between Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras you probably saw them living in their traditional wickiups under the bridge. About 1985, they received a small reservation in Texas. And this most traditional Indian nation promptly opened a casino. Following a newer Indian tradition.

I met with them before they received their reservation when the males who were old enough and young enough returned to the Great Lakes area as migrant workers. The children who attended school in both Mexico and the US, spoke English and Spanish. Their parents mostly spoke only Spanish and Kickapoo and the elders, they were called the grandmothers and grandfathers, spoke only Kickapoo. To speak to the elders, my words had to be translated into Spanish and then into Kickapoo.

I asked the young people, "How do you learn what it means to be a Kickapoo? How do you know how to be a Kickapoo man or Kickapoo woman when your heart is broken, when you face huge challenges, when you are humiliated or defeated, when you are betrayed. They said they knew because of the stories the grandmothers and grandfathers told them. I asked them to tell me the stories the grandmothers and grandfathers told them but they said no. If I knew the stories, I would be Kickapoo too.

The Kickapoos ask the same questions we do--who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? What does it mean to be a son, a husband, a father, a friend, a man in America? What does it mean to be a daughter, a wife, a mother, a friend, a woman in America? Their stories gave them the answers. Stories and poems give us an organized way of looking at our world and our lives. Stories and poems tell us where we came from.

Stories tell us how to behave.

For many of us, our story begins in Genesis. We are made in the image of God. But also of the dust of the field.

A favorite aunt died and our older daughter wanted to go to the funeral. I was apprehensive. She had never been to a funeral before and she interrupted church services by tugging at my sleeve and asking questions. "Why was the ox in the ditch? Was the ox okay when they got it out? Why do shepherds wash their flocks by night?"

I warned her that the funeral would be emotional and she would see things she had never seen in church before. People sitting in the front pews. Songs coming from behind flowers. People hugging each other. I told her she could not ask questions during the service but could do so afterwards.

The organ was still playing when she spied her aunt in the coffin before the altar. She tugged at my sleeve and asked, "Is she dead yet?"

I assured her that the aunt was dead and told her to be quiet. She was restrained until the minister got to the "from dust thou art made and to dust thou shalt return" part. She tugged at my sleeve again to ask "Is she dust yet?"

In 1989, I spoke to some college faculties in Vietnam. I told the Vietnamese that story about the Kickapoos. Then I recounted a couple of Vietnamese legends and quoted from a familiar Vietnamese poem: "The road is difficult, not because of the mountains and rivers but because our spirit contemplates the mountains and rivers." And all the papers you have to grade when you get out of here.

I told the Vietnamese professors that Vietnamese stories helped me understand how they saw themselves and their country, what they thought being Vietnamese meant. It made me a bit Vietnamese. Just as reading Mexican or Russian novels made me a bit Mexican or Russian. I gave them copies of my stories so they could know what being an American meant to me.

Two of them told me my stories were Vietnamese stories because they were about nature, common people and work. To them, American stories were about Wall Street, Hollywood and Washington, D.C. Greedy bankers, unethical judges, immoral actors, crooked politicians. In their view, those were the stories we constructed to understand who we are and how we are to behave as Americans.

My Flynn family were Irish immigrants. Fifteen of the men and their families came to Texas to build the Fort Worth and Denver Railroad. An old man told me that the conditions were so rough on the tracks with fighting, stabbing and shooting that they all moved to Connecticut except my grandfather, his wife and two sons, a brother and a nephew who stayed with the railroad. My father was born at the end of the track that came to be named Chillicothe, Texas the smallest of the four Chillicothes in America. But the best known.

Near Chillicothe Grandfather bought a piece of land. A few years later, 1896, he was murdered. Grandmother hung on to that piece of land and she doomed her children to do the same.

Every day both going and coming from the two room country school I attended, I had to cross over the railroad tracks my grandfather helped to lay. And in both directions the tracks ran as far as the eye could see. A few miles to the east and we would have been in an oil field. A few miles west and we would have been on land good for nothing but running cows and chasing jackrabbits. My grandfather had been tricked into buying the only land in twenty miles that would grow cotton.

It was in the cotton field that I first learned the power of the English language. My brother, sister and I were not enough to chop all the cotton fields so Dad had to hire hoe hands to help us. One Sunday in church, the pastor asked where my father was. I said he went to Oklahoma to get some hoers.

Right there in church I had an epiphany. It came to me like a flash of light that if the wrong word like hoer had the power to focus everyone's attention on me, just think what using the right word like hoe hand could accomplish.

That was when I first got the notion of being a writer. I knew it wasn't going to be easy. A writer was somebody who was dead. And if he was any good he had been dead a long time. If he was real good, people killed him. They killed him with hemlock. Hemlock was the Greek word for Freshman Composition.

Real writers wrote about such things as I had never heard of. Damsels. Splendor falling on castle walls. For splendor we had to go to the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show. I had never seen a moat or a moor. I had never known a knight or a knave.

What did I have to write about? I had spend my whole life in Wilbarger County except for attending school in Chillicothe that was in Hardeman County. We also went to church in Chillicothe. In church you could be told that you were an evil person, reeking of your sins or you could stay home and feel good about yourself.

We were Baptists. We couldn't feel good about ourselves even when we missed church so we went to church to hang out with people as evil as we were.

There are different kinds of Baptists if you didn't know that. There are more than thirty distinct Baptist denominations in America, and that was last Sunday. Where there are two Baptists there is a Baptist church. Where there are three Baptists there are two Baptist churches. We multiply by dividing.

Conservative Baptists believe only Conservative Baptists have souls.

Moderate Baptist believes all Baptists have souls.

Liberal Baptists believes even Methodists have souls.*

We were liberal Baptists. We believed that Methodists had souls. It was a conscience they lacked.

They taught children to say good, gooder, goodest. Bad, badder, Baptist.

I went to the Methodist Church once. The sons of bitches were singing our songs.

Chillicothe Baptists had grave cleaning day. The cemetery was surrounded by a wheat field and the weeds in the cemetery were higher than the wheat. Sometimes young people went to the cemetery. Methodists ignored the high weeds but Baptists cleared the ground around the Baptist graves because there is nothing that makes a Baptist madder than someone making love over his dead body.

Young people who went to the cemetery when no one had died were from Oklahoma. We had to go to Childress to reach a conclusion. For temptation we had to go to Wichita Falls. To sin we had to cross Red River. Oklahoma had professional bad women. Texas had amateurs.

For football games out of town the team and the coach rode on one bus. Chillicothe was too small to have a band but we had a pep squad and they and their sponsor rode on a second bus. In cities, smart students rode long buses. Dumb students rode short buses. In Chillicothe everyone rode short buses.

If we won a game, which didn't happen very often, boys and girls could sit together for the ride back home. I sat with a girl the entire trip back to Chillicothe in excruciating silence. Excoriating myself for lacking the courage to put my arm over her shoulder. Abrading myself for lacking the brains to excrete one charming sentence.

I sat the way I sat with my first computer. Afraid to touch anything for fear the whole works might explode. Afraid that a whole new world would open before me in which I might be lost forever.

I never spoke to her. She did speak to me. After we got off the bus. She thanked me for being nice. "Nice" does not get you dates. I don't know why my conscience was guilty. The rest of me wasn't.

That was the world I grew up in--a world of wonder where people were shaped by the land and the weather, and when they died they were dust. Where words mattered. Where Methodists had souls. Where you could feel

guilty for doing nothing. Where a sixteen-year-old girl could be the scariest thing I had ever seen.

But it was also a world where redemption could be found in a bullet. Where boys killed cats and men killed each other for a god whose name is Swagger. Or Epaulets. Or Oil.

The stories did not train me for the world I live in. And they're not the world my grandson lives in. Or others his age. Theirs is a world where experience happens faster than education. A world where a hero's' only means of self-expression is violence. Or the destruction or marring of something that others value. Where men, women and children die for some one else's good cause.

A few years ago I talked to "at Risk" students who had the ability to go to college but had no incentive to finish high school. They saw no way reading and writing was a part of their life. I asked how they learned who they were supposed to be. I asked how they learned how to act when a friend betrayed their trust, when someone broke their heart, when they failed themselves, when their dreams died.

"Rambo," they said. They learned what it meant to be a man, to be a woman, to be an American, to be a human being by watching Rambo. I reminded them that Shelley wrote that you become what you behold.

Who? they asked. They had not made acquaintance with Shelley but they seemed pleased by what he said. The image of a neighborhood of Rambos did not please me.

We have to help them find the stories and poems that tell them how to be a man, how to be a woman, how to be an American, how to be a citizen of a global village.

We have to help them write their own poems and stories.

That's about teaching creative writing. Let me say a few words about your dual role of writing. I don't know what your definition of a writer is. I was pleased the first time I read that a writer was someone who wrote. I wrote. I didn't publish but I could think of myself as a writer. When no one else did.

The definition of a writer that has meaning to me is: A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than for other people.

A definition we have largely lost is “fast” as in fasten. Placed, tied, or attached in a way that is not easily moved. I regret the loss of it because it’s a Western expression that means the rope is tied hard, fastened to the saddle horn so there is no easy way to let go of whatever is on the other end of it. Some cowboys are known to have roped bears from horseback with dramatic and educational but not always edifying results.

The other method is to dally, to wrap the rope around the saddle horn so you can let it go if you dropped your rope on something bigger than you can handle. “Dally” is the corruption of a Spanish expression that means “let it go.”

I regret its loss because it was a great metaphor for writers. Some dally at writing, tempted away by others who are going on a picnic, or to a new film has just been released, or the belief that a two-hour power nap will increase your creative vocabulary.

Texas writers are tied fast to writing. Sometimes it doesn’t pay well. More often it doesn’t pay at all.

But we try to get our rope around an idea that sometimes looks like a whale, and sometimes like a cloud, and sometimes like a windmill, sometimes like a dung heap. We don’t cut loose even when we have tied on to an idea that takes ten or fifteen years to hog-tie and still kicks loose.

We don’t cut loose when we are up to our ass in adverbs. When we’ve tied on to manuscripts that have no beginning and no end but nine hundred pages of middle.

Sometimes we beg for rejection. Just send the manuscript back so I can let hope turn to dust. But we don’t cut loose. Not even when the most common question we hear when we meet other writers and would-be-readers is, “Under what pseudonym do you write.”

We don't cut loose although sometimes we have to deal with people who know nothing about books or writing. Like administrators. "You haven't published a book since last year."

Or Professors of Business and Economics. "Why don't you write a best seller?" "Because I write classics." My definition of a classic is any book that sells less than 500 copies. Any book that sells more than 500 copies is a cheap thriller doomed to the dung heap that is Amazon's Best Seller List.

Traditionally, Texas was tie-fast country and ropers tied fast to whatever they got their string on, even in their dreams. And yes, sometimes they were mauled by editors and critics and other bears. But they didn't cut loose.

I believe TACWT writers continue that tradition. You who are bound to write: I salute you.