



Texas Institute of Letters Memorials 2021

Robert Bonazzi 1942-2020

Texas Institute of Letters member Roberto (Robert, Bob, Baba) Bonazzi was born Dec. 9, 1942 in Jamaica, New York, son of Lorenzo and Francesca (Nasso) Bonazzi, and died Oct. 15, 2020 in Round Rock, Texas after long illness. His family moved to Texas when he was 4. A graduate of the University of Houston in 1966, Roberto had a twin, Lawrence, who died in 2014, and a sister, Mary Frances, who survives him, along with her husband Paul Urie, and a niece and three nephews, including the actor, Michael Urie. His sister's care for Roberto was crucial during his last very difficult year. He is also survived by his beloved black and white cat, Lorenzo.



Roberto was a distinguished poet, editor, and critic and founder of Latitudes Press, which published 60 titles. Executor of the John Howard Griffin (d. 1980) literary estate, and biographer of Griffin, some of his last books included *Reluctant Activist – The Spiritual Life and Art of John Howard Griffin* (TCU Press, 2018), and his own *Maestro of Solitude: Poems & Poetics* (a finalist for the Texas Institute of Letters Poetry Award), and *The Scribbling Cure: Poems & Prose Poems*. He edited at least ten other editions of Griffin work as well as creating his own books. He married Griffin's widow, Elizabeth, in 1983, his third marriage, and was devoted to her until her death in July, 2000. They worked together on many books and artistic projects. He was also an adjunct professor at Tarrant County College after 1997. Later he wrote a column "Poetic Diversity" for the San Antonio Express-News and reviewed books for *World Literature Today*, among other journals. During his many years in Texas he would live in Austin, Mansfield and San Antonio, after his Houston childhood, ending up in Georgetown and Round Rock.

A dear and trusted friend of many Texas writers, Roberto loved solitude, neatness, strong coffee, Italian food, and jazz. He was committed to issues of racial and social justice. He disliked telephones and went years without even having one. He drove an old red BMW and took many long walks. For years after moving to San Antonio, he worked with Wings Press manuscripts, encouraging and assisting many authors. His joyous flair, sleek style, sardonic wit, keen instincts, energetic originality, and the pleasures he took in a simply arranged, but widely expansive literary life, marked everyone who knew him. He is already profoundly missed.

---Naomi Shihab Nye

(Photography by Michael Nye.)

At the loss of a beloved fellow-writer,
que puede uno decir?
The words of condolence will never be
as poetic as was his life and his friendship.
Yes, his work was incisive and significant,
his editorial eye was sharp and empowering,
but it was the human being attached to it
that most impressed us - that chispa in his smile
that laughing fire in his heart.
Yes, his memory will go on...

---Dr. Carmen Tafolla

Uno de los grandes of Texas Letters! A fearless pioneer and tireless promulgator. How many lives did he live? He lives on.
Roberto, presente!

---John Phillip Santos

I don't know anyone else who cared so much and so early about the writers of Mexico, encouraging translation and cross-pollination. He built Latitudes journal and press to foment that kind of exchange. This was one of his most unusual aspects.

---Rosemary Catacalos

He was a friend, generous with his gifts: unforgettable, his fighter's arms, eyes flashing with his leaning smile, his laugh, his painstaking honesty, the stories—and what a life! A purveyor of legacies!

---Ignacio Magaloni

BO-NAZZ-iiiiiiii!
His name ringing like a bell
Metric and rhythmic – like his energy,
accents falling on vowels
ROBERTO BONAZZI
A poem, in and of itself...

---Marian Haddad

To me he projected a caring interest and an openness in sharing his experience, interest and approach. Roberto always stood tall in dignity.

---Bill Nye, New Zealand

I will miss his care over the lines, his intolerance of crap, his naughty humor, his total dedication, his openness to the simple and the well-arranged poem, his irreverence, his gentle humorous brilliant self.

---Natalia Trevino

Jan Reid

1945-2020

(This article originally appeared in *Texas Monthly* and is used by permission from the author.)

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/remembering-jan-reid-a-defining-magazine-journalist-and-voice-in-texas-literature/>

I felt stunned when I learned that Jan Reid had died in the early morning of September 19—not so much by his death, but by how he died. Jan was 75, and his health had been rickety since that horrible night in 1998 when he was shot in Mexico City during a robbery. On several occasions after that, I feared he might not live much longer. But I never thought his cause of death would be a myocardial infarction followed by heart failure. Jan was my close friend for 33 years. And he had more heart than anyone I’ve ever known.



Jan was a magazine journalist and the author of more than a dozen books, both fiction and nonfiction. In later years, he focused on novels, winning awards for *Comanche Sundown* and *Sins of the Younger Sons*, which many of his readers think was his finest book. He’d just finished a boxing novel, *The Song Leader*, when he suffered a major heart attack in early September. It’s expected to be published next year by TCU Press.

Texas Monthly was where Jan first came to prominence as a writer. In the magazine’s early days, founding editor William Broyles published work both by established names like Gary Cartwright and Larry L. King and by young unknowns like Al Reinert and Stephen Harrigan (both of whom eventually became very well-known writers). Jan entered Texas Monthly’s pages as one of the unknowns. He was in his twenties and working as sports editor of the *New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung* when his byline first appeared in Texas Monthly in 1973, the year the magazine began publication. Jan’s name remained on its masthead until his death.

“Jan Reid spoke slowly and quietly,” Harrigan said. “I never heard him raise his voice, either in person or in prose. His works of fiction and journalism and personal reflection are marked by an exquisite steadiness of tone that had its origin in his personality, but was refined by a lifetime of undeviating devotion to his craft. His writing is part of the DNA of Texas Monthly and of the legacy of Texas literature.”

Jan’s primary interests as a writer were history, politics, crime, sports, and what I’ll call revisionist views of Texas and the larger Western landscape. But at the time that Texas Monthly was in its infancy, the Austin live music scene was beginning to coalesce in a significant way. Though Jan had no designs on becoming a music writer, he didn’t shut his eyes or close his ears to what was going on around him. Jan’s *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, which established him as an author before age thirty, dealt with Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, Kinky Friedman, and others who were defining or redefining their musical careers in the Austin of the early seventies. It is widely acknowledged to be the first book to deal with the world of music in the state capital and it has stayed in print almost continuously since it was first published.

Jan opted to move away from music after that. He followed *Improbable Rise with Deerinwater*, a novel; *Vain Glory*, which is about Texas football; *Close Calls*, a collection of his magazine journalism; and *The Bullet Meant for Me*, a powerful memoir of fortitude and courage about Jan's recovery from the shooting in Mexico. I hate to say it, but his near death there was in many ways the defining moment of his life. How he emerged from such a dire circumstance revealed his amazing character.

Jan grew up as an athlete. He played high school football and baseball in his hometown, Wichita Falls. He was also a boxing fan—a passion I shared with him—and in his thirties, he began pounding a heavy bag he'd hung from a tree at his cabin outside San Marcos. After he moved to Austin, he trained in earnest at Richard Lord's Boxing Gym. There he befriended an up-and-coming lightweight pro, Jesus Chavez.

Chavez had been brought to the U.S. from Mexico as an infant by his parents, who were undocumented immigrants. Just as he became a contender for a world title, Chavez was forced to leave the U.S. by federal authorities. Chavez continued his boxing career in Mexico. Jan kept in touch and followed his career closely.

In April 1998, Chavez fought Moises Rodriguez. Jan and three Texas Monthly colleagues—John Spong, David Courtney, Michael Hall—flew to Mexico City to watch the fight, which Chavez won. They celebrated his victory at the Plaza Garibaldi but later were stuck up by a group of men in a Mexico City suburb. During an altercation with the robbers, Jan attempted to throw a hard punch at one of the men.

"I failed to heed my friend Jesus's advice," Jan wrote. "Step up in the pocket, he said, then throw that jab. If I were going to throw a punch at a man with a gun, I damn sure needed to land it. And by inches it fell short." Jan saw the "flash of lightning" from the gun, sensed himself being propelled backward, and then felt "the cruel gouge of a screwdriver, with the force of a train" as searing pain immediately spread through his abdomen and up his spine. The bullet that tore through his gut and lodged against his spine forever altered his life. He suffered from recurring infections, reduced mobility, and terrible pain episodes. But Jan pressed forward and overcame those obstacles.

Jan received incredible support during his rescue and recovery from all kinds of people, including the late trauma surgeon Dr. Red Duke and the infamous boxing promoter Don King. Texas Monthly founder and longtime publisher Michael Levy worked tirelessly to raise money for Jan's medical expenses and otherwise help him recover. "[Jan] was the bravest person I knew," retired Texas Monthly editor Greg Curtis told me shortly after Jan died. "To have lived for so many years after his gunshot wound without complaint or self-pity. Sometimes you would see his face contort with pain, but he would never give in to it and never look for sympathy. He was a kind and gentle soul." Curtis considers Jan's 1976 prison-break story, "Busting Out of Mexico," to be "one of the defining stories in the early days of the magazine."

One person was truly responsible for saving his life and giving him the willpower to keep fighting: his wife, Dorothy Browne. Dorothy, who died of cancer last Christmas Eve, was a familiar figure in Democratic party politics in Texas for half a century or more. She was a dedicated feminist—energetic, intelligent, feisty, and beautiful—and had once been married to novelist Billy Lee Brammer. Jan credited Brammer as being his writing mentor, though Jan didn't meet Dorothy until long after she and Billy Lee were divorced.

Jan and Dorothy had maybe the most passion-filled relationship of any couple I've known. Passion at that level doesn't always make for smooth sailing. Sometimes turbulence popped up. I saw them verbally tear into each other over something as innocuous as the Grateful Dead (Dorothy was pro; Jan, nay). But at the same time, they were dedicated to each other to the hilt. I know Jan adored Dorothy and her daughter from her second marriage, Lila Vance-Wilson. On more than one occasion, Dorothy put her arm around me and whispered, "Thank you, Kip, for taking care of Jan Reid." Jan told me that his desire to see Dorothy again is what got him through the trauma centers in Mexico City. For me, that sums up love, never mind those feuds over the Dead.

Amazingly, Jan became even more productive as a writer after the shooting. He continued to contribute to Texas Monthly and began turning out book after book. He and I edited a collection of the writing of Grover Lewis, the Texas-born influential Rolling Stone writer. Jan wrote a critically heralded biography of former governor Ann Richards. He collaborated with Lou Dubose on books about Karl Rove and Tom DeLay. He put together anthologies of essays on the Rio Grande and on the Red River. Jan revisited music again with books about Doug Sahm and about the making of Layla by Derek and the Dominos ("Bell Bottom Blues" might well have been Jan's favorite song).

So, yes, it took a lot of heart to rebound from what happened in Mexico City to live the kind of life he did afterward. Jan also revealed a big heart in the things he did for other people. I was on the receiving end of his generosity many, many times. He connected me with legendary Dallas Morning News book editor Bob Compton, which resulted in my having a freelance relationship with the paper for three decades. He introduced me to my first literary agent, which resulted in four book contracts with major New York publishers. He helped me get magazine assignments. He opened doors for me to meet and befriend people I never thought I'd know. I owe him big time.

Once Jan and I were driving somewhere together and he said, "You know, you and I are both semi-shitkickers who tried to get away from that world." It's true. We had many commonalities in our respective upbringings, his in Wichita Falls, mine in a small town just north of Oklahoma City. And we both aspired to bigger things. He was a big brother who showed me how to get there.

---W.K. (Kip) Stratton