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BOOK REVIEW

'John Graves, Writer' and John Graves' 'My Dogs and Guns'

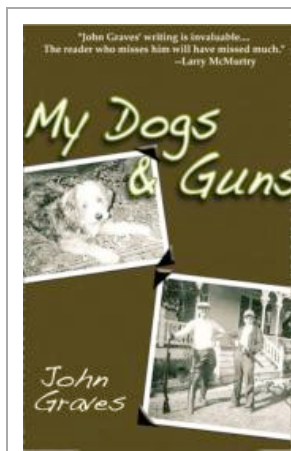
Goodbye to a rifle: John Graves looks back at the dogs and guns he's known; other writers look back at John Graves

By Stayton Bonner  
SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Sunday, July 15, 2007

As chain-store urbanity continues its unstoppable sprawl across Texas, John Graves' career as an eloquent chronicler of rural customs has come to seem, depending on your point of view, either increasingly outmoded or ever more urgent.

As he writes in his new book, "My Dogs & Guns," "Although firearms and working dogs and hunting and so on are increasingly old-fashioned and unpopular subjects in a time when a heavily urban public seeks 'virtual' experience through electronics and is increasingly sentimental about wild creatures including those that have long been viewed as 'game,' I myself remain pretty much an unrepentant anachronism, if a somewhat battered one."



mikes

(enlarge photo)

My Dogs & Guns  
John Graves  
Skyhorse Publishing, \$19.95

On the 50th anniversary of Graves' 1957 canoe trip down the Brazos River, lyrically memorialized in his most famous book, "Goodbye to a River," the octogenarian Texan long known for his infrequent output suddenly finds himself with two releases. The first, "John Graves, Writer," is a collection of interview transcripts, scholarly essays and friends' anecdotal remembrances. The second, "My Dogs & Guns," is a pair of essays that appeared in Texas Monthly and have been slightly expanded here.

While the former pays tribute to Graves' talent for writing about rural life, the latter puts that talent on display, elevating the stereotypical redneck subject matter of dogs and guns to a higher plane than that occupied by Toby Keith and the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. Think of Graves as the anti-Jeff Foxworthy.

Unlike environmental writers such as Henry David Thoreau or Edward Abbey, who indulged in anti-civilization polemics, Graves is a pragmatist, offering observations on how man can live in mutual respect with nature. He never preaches about conservation or rallies behind a cause. Instead, he simply observes the natural world around him, regaling the reader with local folklore and history while musing over how the Indians gave way to ranchers who, in turn, are giving way to absentee city slickers. Because he has dedicated himself to writing about the hardscrabble land southwest of Fort Worth, a decidedly less glamorous locale than, say, Abbey's beloved Arches National Park, Graves' writing hasn't received the nationwide audience it deserves.

Yet as Mark Busby, professor of English at Texas State University and co-editor of "John Graves, Writer," explains in an interview, "The book enters into a national dialogue that has already begun to recognize John more. One of the things that has happened in the past ten years is the explosion of interest in environmental literature, a realm where Graves' work stands out. I think that it hadn't been as well known before because there was this perception that it was local, provincial, regional, that people who lived around Glen Rose might be interested in what he had to say, but that it wouldn't appeal to a larger audience. However, like most good writers, Graves starts from the specific and then leaps off into the broader world."

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**John Graves, Writer**

Edited by Mark Busby and Terrell Dixon  
UT Press, \$34.95

**Mark Busby**

What: Lecture  
When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, July 19  
Where: Barnes & Noble Westlake, 701 S. Capital of Texas Highway (Loop 360)  
Information: 328-3155

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"John Graves, Writer" celebrates Graves' distinctive lyricism but, because it also grapples with his perceived sexism and regionalism, it never devolves into hagiography. While mostly of interest to longtime Graves fans, the book also serves as an excellent introduction for readers interested in environmental issues. In particular, Rick Bass's and Alex Hunt's essays do a fine job of examining how Graves uses storytelling to help the reader relate to the natural world.

After perusing "John Graves, Writer," it's almost a relief to just read Graves' work, free of scholarly analysis. "My Dogs & Guns" may be a mere 96 pages and shoddily put together (the dust-jacket resembles a sixth-grade Photoshop project, and the pages of my copy were bound upside-down), but it's a sterling example of Graves' ability to take the regional to a universal level.

The first essay, "Blue and Some Other Dogs," originally published in 1977, is a touching memoir of Graves' Basque-Australian sheepdog. Describing Blue's clowning efforts to appease a wrathful mother, Graves writes, "At these times he was a travesty of all mashed-down human beings who have had to clown to survive, like certain black barber-shop 'boys,' some of them sixty years old, that I remembered from my youth." When Blue disappears at essay's end — perhaps accidentally killed by fur hunters — the loss is poignantly felt, a testament to Graves' descriptive abilities.

The second essay, "Guns of a Lifetime," originally published in 2006, is ostensibly a description of the firearms Graves has owned over the years, but it's just as much a collection of gun stories that unfold like a fireside listing of family anecdotes, ranging from 19th-century frontier altercations to a 1970s scolding involving the young Owen and Luke Wilson, whose parents were friends of Graves.

Despite the title's emphasis on dogs and guns, Graves' writing always goes back to remembrances of family, friends and local history, a digressive strategy that inevitably leads the reader from the particular to the universal. As Busby states, "It's one of the stated purposes of 'Goodbye to a River' — you have to know where you came from and how that place connects to the larger world to know who you are as a human being. There's a line in there that goes something like, 'One river known well is all the rivers that run to the sea.' "

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