

## 8 CRITICS DISCUSS

H. L. Davis

(1896-1960)

“He not only has a great deal that is shrewd and pungent to say, but he says it to vast effect and in language full of brilliant colors and lovely rhythms.”

H. L. Mencken

“The most important writer of the modern West.”

Thomas Ferril

“One of the few twentieth-century writers who have opened the West for literary settlement and given us back our essential cultural unity. In this effort, H. L. Davis was an original.”

Paul T. Bryant

“I like H. L. Davis’ story ‘Open Winter’ as well as any ever written about the West.”

Wallace Stegner

“Davis is a sure craftsman deeply concerned with precision, with the exact phrase to trace the path of wind through the tall grass or the adroit summation of character in a sentence.”

Edwin R. Bingham

“[Davis] is a great person, his rhythms, his vision, his manner like no one else’s. The people moving like wistful ghosts, with such vivid gestures, through so intensely real a countryside: It gives one the oddest feeling of the grass being permanent and humanity only a poignant episode: perception the more startling for being implicit and not expressed.”

Robinson Jeffers

“As a chronicler of life in our corner of this American land, H. L. Davis was colorful (how he would have snorted at being called that), ornery (he’d have loved that), opinionated (that went without saying) and splendid in several other civically purifying ways. The Northwest misses him more than it knows.”

Ivan Doig

“Davis created a few tales that match the best work of such short story writers as Fitzgerald, John Steinbeck, and Willa Cather....In the experimental rhythms of his poetry, in a half-dozen or so stories, and in his sketches and travel essays, Davis created pieces full of wit, humor, and craft. His best work still has bite and appeal, still stands as art of a high quality, indeed. But it was in the novel that he achieved his finest work. *Honey in the Horn* and *Wings of Morning* are novels that repay revisiting because they rely on the Western landscape and characters for telling archetypal stories rich in folklore, symbol, humor, and language. *Harp of a Thousand Strings* [1941], a much underrated novel, stands in texture and complexity as an international tale that mixes the best of Mark Twain and of Henry James, an unlikely couple....

He believed that Western writing must always be lodged in place, but that writers who could not make their work rise above local color to the universal were no writers at all. Davis strove in his own work to imbue the specific with the universal and archetypal, rather than simply the immediate and the ephemeral. In the Preface to *Kettle of Fire*, Davis encouraged Western writers to avoid romantic and stylized views of their past. He warned that Western writers particularly needed to be wary of both the ‘colorful’ and the ‘sordid’....Later in *Kettle of Fire*, Davis says, ‘Landscape counts in the first place, but people count more.’ Linking Western history with human history made Davis the kind of regional writer that William Faulkner was for the South and Nathaniel Hawthorne was for New England....Though Davis is not a transcendentalist, he sees Nature as possessing symbols that allow man transcendent perceptions about himself and his world.”

Robert Bain

Introduction, *H. L. Davis: Collected Essays and Short Stories*  
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Michael Hollister (2015)