

INTRODUCTION



H. L. Davis

(1894-1960)

Harold Lenoir Davis is the most true-to-real-life novelist of the frontier West and wrote the first notable literary novel set in the Pacific Northwest. *Honey in the Horn* (1935) is an episodic account of the last pioneers in Oregon (1906-08) when Davis observed them at the same age as Huckleberry Finn. The novel won a Harper Prize and a Pulitzer Prize and continues to be the most read of his works. Davis depicts human beings on the frontier with a Realism that debunks the stereotypes and sentimentality of Bret Harte and the romanticism of popular culture, especially the myth of the cowboy hero. Though Realistic above all, H. L. Davis is also a poetic Nature writer with a panoramic vision. He is more interested in characters and Nature than in plot, his style is rich in metaphor and he is occasionally humorous enough to prompt comparisons to Mark Twain.

Davis published poetry from 1919 through the 1920s in *Poetry*, edited by Harriet Monroe, the leading Modernist poetry magazine. He won a poetry prize and attracted the attention of H. L. Mencken at *The American Mercury*, the most influential editor of the period. Mencken published some of his poems and encouraged him to write prose. Davis and Mencken had the same first initials and were both irreverent critics of the mainstream culture, iconoclastic and tending to cynicism. Davis was also praised by Carl Sandburg and Robert Penn Warren.

BIOGRAPHY

H. L. Davis was born at the south end of the Willamette Valley on the damp western side of the Cascade Mountains where *Honey in the Horn* begins. His father was an itinerant schoolteacher and Davis grew up mainly on the dry east side of the Cascades, in Antelope--a tiny hamlet out in the sagebrush, and in The Dalles on the Columbia River, a steamboat port like the hometown of Mark Twain, where he graduated from high school. At age 9 he worked as a typesetter and at age 17 he was a deputy sheriff. He was also a cowboy, shepherd, teamster, surveyor, railroad timekeeper, newspaper editor and singer of cowboy songs on a radio station in Seattle. After achieving success as a poet, at age 33 Davis and the novelist James Stevens published an attack on the local literary establishment, *Status Rerum: A Manifesto upon the Present Condition of Northwest Literature, Containing Several Near-libelous Utterances upon Persons in the Public Eye* (1927):

“The Northwest...has produced a vast quantity of bilge, so vast, indeed, that the few books which are entitled to respect are totally lost in the general and seemingly interminable avalanche of tripe....Every written work, however contemptible and

however trivial it may be, is conceived and wrought to court the approbation of some tribunal. If the tribunal be contemptible, then equally contemptible will be the work which courts it. And the tribunals are contemptible.”

Like political correctness later in the 20th century, the genteel moralism of his day enforced conformity and exalted mediocrity. Davis would be even more an outsider today than he was then. His perspective is rural not urban, individualistic not collectivist, libertarian not liberal, realistic not Utopian. He describes densely overcrowded old forests as unhealthy, unlike the environmentalists of today who idealize them as sanctuaries until they are consumed by wildfires. He describes women as more oppressed by Nature than by Patriarchy, as using men to great advantage and as much prone to domestic violence as men. Not only is Davis a “dead white male,” he is very politically incorrect—delightfully so.

Honey in the Horn (1935)

In 1932 Davis won a Guggenheim Fellowship to Mexico, where he wrote *Honey in the Horn*. The novel is most offensive to current sensibilities in its failure to idealize Indians. Above all, Davis wanted to tell the truth. He grew up among Indians and worked with Indians. He depicts them as diverse from group to group, with cultures that express their relationships to Nature in various particular landscapes. The Indians he depicts in his novel are not the noble Nez Perce nor the gallant Salish, these Indians are like the whites in being outsiders like himself, on the margins of their societies--the underdogs, itinerants, outcasts and desert scrabblers--except for the Coast Indians who are lazy and fat because fish and game are so abundant there. Contrary to current liberal propaganda, Indians were not “confined” to reservations in 1906-08. Most were registered there but they were free to roam all over the state. Online critics of the novel have objected to his authentic depiction of Native Americans by stereotyping Indians, lumping all tribes and individuals into one category and idealizing them without knowing them or even observing them individually as Davis did. One critic notes that the novel could not have been published today--due to politically correct prejudice--let alone win a Pulitzer Prize.

The main character in the novel Clay Calvert is a young orphan raised in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. He gets involved by accident in a jail break and spends most of the novel evading the law by staying on the move while relating off and on to a strong pioneer girl named Luce. In an introductory note, Davis conveys his intention to write an objective chronicle of the pioneers, like a literary sociologist with a sense of humor and an eye for eccentrics: “I had originally hoped to include in the book a representative of every calling that existed in the State of Oregon during the homesteading period--1906-08.” This egalitarian spirit, combined with a nearly cynical view of human nature, has a leveling effect on tone and characterization throughout the novel. Davis refuses to romanticize or engage in what Huck Finn calls “sentimentering.” Calvert is not a hero, he is one of many individuals and small groups trying to survive in a wilderness. He encounters other people as a frontiersman on the run, on horseback with his rifle, self-reliant and wary. His life depends on his ability to read people and the land. By the end, Davis has made his novel a summation of the westward movement in America.

Of his four other novels, the best and most similar to *Honey in the Horn* is *Wings of Morning* (1952). *Distant Music* (1957) is a family saga about several generations of pioneers. Davis published short stories in leading magazines including *Colliers* and *Saturday Evening Post* and some are reprinted in *Kettle of Fire* and *Team Bells Woke Me*. See also *H. L. Davis: Collected Essays and Short Stories* (U Idaho 1986).

Michael Hollister (2015)

