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THE EVENING STAR

By Larry McMurtry

Simon & Schuster. 637 pp. \$23.

The most grim yet lovely of Tennyson's poems, "Tithonus," voices the death-wish of a once heroic Trojan now growing old beside his former lover, the eternally young and beautiful Aurora, goddess of the dawn.

Aurora Greenway, whom we last saw taking on the nurture of her dead daughter Emma Horton's children in *Terms of Endearment*, nearing 70 has become the eponymous evening star of Larry McMurtry's fifteenth novel. Yet, like her namesake goddess, Aurora seems eternally alluring, deathless. A man three decades younger, the latest of her lovers, finds her "one of the most immediately appealing women he had ever met." At a point when Aurora would have been past 110, the misty memory of time spent with her reduces a 24 year-old man to chest-heaving sobs.

Age cannot wither her, but neither does it sweeten her. She subjects her men to endless tart-tongued disapproval. Aurora draws the range of acceptable male behavior so narrowly that her paramours constantly bruise themselves on its walls. Little wonder that, as this bittersweet novel opens, her long-time lover, Gen. Hector Scott, is impotent.

Hector's flagging utility, however, troubles Aurora less than do Emma's three children. Tommy, the surly and alienated eldest, is serving 15 years to life in a Huntsville, Texas prison for shooting a rival dope dealer's girlfriend. Aurora and her devoted friend and maid, Rosie Dunlup, drive from Houston to visit Tommy regularly, but Aurora suspects prison is where Tommy will spend the rest of his days, as he hates society and has no wish to re-enter it. On the night his mother was buried, Tommy said he would never like anything again, and he hasn't.

Warmhearted grandson Teddy's most vivid childhood memory is of his father—Flap, now remarried and teaching in California—spanking him mercilessly, after which everything in his life turned frightening. Teddy lives nearby with Jane. They met as patients in a Galveston psychiatric hospital. Both are brilliant. Both work at the same 7-Eleven, on different shifts so they won't be murdered together and abandon their two-year-old son, Bump. A genius like his parents, Bump can write the Greek alphabet. Unfortunately, he refuses to speak in English. Even he cannot escape Aurora's censure: "You should be talking, young man. . . . Carrying around a block with Greek letters on it is all very well for a one-year-old, but you are no longer a one-year-old. I do think it's time you faced up to your conversational responsibilities."

Melanie, Emma's youngest, is pregnant. She's unsure by whom but suspects it is her boyfriend, Bruce, a parasitic rat who leaves her whenever something flashier comes his way. Among those flashy things is Katie, daughter of Patsy Carpenter, once Emma's

best friend and now a middle-aged fading beauty stalking Aurora's own latest love, Jerry Bruckner.

With Hector tiring, Aurora hedges her bets with secondary suitors, placing her primary wager on Pascal, a vain and erotically misshapen Frenchman. Yet she remains convinced Hector can be straightened out. "Half of our quarrels start because we disagree in the area of memory," she informs him. "I remember things correctly and you remember things incorrectly, and the next thing you know we're quarreling."

Aurora decides they must enter counseling. She chooses Jerry Bruckner because his name sounds Viennese. Sad-eyed but able to make Aurora feel "immediately and completely welcome," the Las Vegas comic turned Houston therapist becomes Aurora's last passionate affair.

This quirky cast propels not a plot so much as a tragicomic pageant. Ranging an emotional spectrum from hilarious comedy to numbing pain, McMurtry displays yet again both his large-souled empathy and gift for bringing people to vibrant life as quickly as anyone writing today.

Reviving the thorny, egocentric Aurora is chief among the many risks McMurtry takes here. Not all of them work. While his best characters combine surprise and recognition colorfully, others, mainly male lovers, look pale by contrast. Several passages in Bump's viewpoint feel jarring, even disingenuous. Delightfully witty, McMurtry can also lapse into arch self-amusement. Certainly, he can ramble. Decades have passed since critic John Leonard charged, "McMurtry simply doesn't know how to turn off his electric typewriter," and today it is harder to turn off a word processor. Parts of this narrative meander like Texas itself.

But if his sprawling prose casts its net so widely that it draws in more than we want, it catches many things wonderful as well. The uncrushable Aurora Greenway proves greatest of its treasures.

Aurora at 70 springs less from the vision of the 1975 *Terms of Endearment* than the Pulitzer Prize 1985 *Lonesome Dove*. As McMurtry ages, so does the focus of his interest. In *Lonesome Dove*, McMurtry doggedly worked against the stereotyped grain not only of Western myth but of aging.

In *The Evening Star* again, McMurtry casts what must be called a loving eye on older characters clinging to a prime others their age might consider long past. As vexed as a teenager by life and love, Aurora tirelessly pursues both. Her pet project is compiling a "memory book" to assemble the details of every day of her life. Her motto is, "You're young as long as you can manage it." Rather than withdrawing from life, she refuses to let it withdraw from her.

What most ennobles Aurora, however, is her unwavering devotion to those she loves. Facing desertion, disaster or death, they are never alone because Aurora brings her

strength to any crisis. We come to see why people look past her crustiness and selfish peccadilloes and love her. She is that rare unsentimental romantic. No matter how often pummeled by loss or heartbreak, she remains undefeated, giving back to life as much as she takes.

With more histrionic eloquence and, if she chooses, barely a shade less charm, we can almost hear Aurora echo the words of another beloved McMurtry character, cowboy Augustus McCrae, who on the verge of death says, "It's a fine world, though rich in hardship at times."