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COMANCHE MOON

By Larry McMurtry

752 pp. Simon & Schuster

During the three decades since Larry McMurtry wore a sweatshirt reading MINOR REGIONAL NOVELIST, he has penned a literature almost as large and picturesque as the Texas he writes about.

The latest, and purportedly last, volume in the *Lonesome Dove* saga paints a colorful panorama which fills the gap between the green days of young Texas Rangers Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call from the 1995 *Dead Man's Walk* and their sunset years of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Lonesome Dove*.

Comanche Moon finds the affable McCrae and taciturn Call at the height of their powers, and they need to be. Led by quirky Captain Inish Scull, a Harvard scholar who "saw no reason to be teaching military history when he could go out in the field and make it," the Rangers still face the fierce Comanche chief of *Dead Man's Walk*, Buffalo Hump.

In the decade extending from the late 1850s to late 1860s, a period of relentless white settlement interrupted by the four-year hiatus of the Civil War, Buffalo Hump reads the handwriting on the buttes. The buffalo vanish, the whites multiply, noble warriors move to reservations. But Buffalo Hump believes a great Comanche does not go gently. Rather, "since the white men were there in his land, his country, he meant to live off *their* animals." He has little patience with chiefs who talk of treaties nor hot-headed warriors who fight without respecting the old ways, like his pernicious son, Blue Duck, whom he expels from the tribe. As a final hurrah, Buffalo Hump mounts a sweeping campaign of slaughter from Austin to the gulf, the Great Raid of 1856.

Blue Duck survives to become the murdering renegade of *Lonesome Dove*, but in *Comanche Moon* his lust for atrocity is anticipated by the Mayan bandit, Ahumado, the Black Vaquero, who lurks south of the Rio Grande and alternates his mode of torturing captives from skinning them alive to tossing them in a pit of rattlers and scorpions to setting them atop thin sharpened tree trunks and watching them slowly descend.

Balancing these external dangers to McCrae and Call is the internal anguish of unfulfilled love. They face contrasting situations with similar results. Gus had proposed to his lifelong obsession Clara Forsythe on the day he met her, "but she had hesitated then and was still hesitating," years later. "Though Gus moved her in ways no other man ever had or, she feared, ever would, something in her still refused." Clara simply can't foresee happiness with the wanderlusting charmer. She marries a dull Nebraskan and slips away.

Unlike Gus, Call seems incapable of passion for anything but his rifle. The lovely, devoted prostitute Maggie Tilton worships Call, and bears his son. Yet, the man she loves is more than walking distance from his own emotions, and turns away.

Mr. McMurtry creates a sprawling, picaresque novel which, like the history of the West itself, leaves several loose ends. Some characters' fates we can only surmise. Others await resolution in *Lonesome Dove*.

As usual, Mr. McMurtry's characters feel authentic rather than sentimentalized. His rangers are heroic because of their vulnerabilities, not despite them. They'll track killers for days without water, drinking their urine on the arid plains, but they'll hang themselves rather than live with a wife "outraged" by Comanches. Except Scull, who declaims Xenophon in Greek, and Gus, who'd been a college man before it wore off, few rangers have vocabularies that range beyond 40 words. His women love abundantly, but they are also pragmatists or prostitutes. His Comanche are respected, not romanticized. When their greatest leader rides off to die, he faces the end "most grateful for...the knowledge that in the years of his youth and manhood he had drawn the lifeblood of so many enemies."

Mr. McMurtry has often created titles hinting of twilight: *The Evening Star*, *The Last Picture Show*, *Leaving Cheyenne*. Here the wistfulness lies in a West he savors even as it disappears. Not only the Comanche but McCrae and Call know their time is passing, for pacifying the frontier is a job whose ultimate goal is to make yourself unnecessary. In the heroic time of *Comanche Moon*, men tame the West; just a few years later, the 1880s of *Lonesome Dove*, women would tame those men.