

Algren in Texas

By Bettina Drew

The Texas Stories by Nelson Algren preserves a unique and devastating view of the Lone Star State during the Depression, a melancholy and explosive world of hoboes, migrant workers, ranch hands, penniless Mexicans, carnival roustabouts, and the dangerous and helpless inhabitants of county jails. These firsthand impressions of impoverished lives formed the philosophical and moral foundation for all of Nelson Algren's later work. Though dubbed "the poet of the Chicago slums" and long known as a naturalistic urban writer, the author of *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *A Walk on the Wild Side* actually began his career at the very bottom of the United States in 1932, in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. The journalism degree he'd earned the year before hadn't helped him find a job in Chicago or Minneapolis or anywhere else in the Midwest in those stagnant days before Roosevelt, so when the cold weather came on, he hitchhiked south to continue his search for newspaper work. He drifted down to New Orleans and spent a few months living in cheap rooms selling coffee and beauty products door-to-door; then he rode a long string of boxcars to Texas.

Decades later Algren would remember Texas as "an empty room furnished with the fixtures of another day," but its heat and light and open land offered his first experience of the American West: vast and compelling and a million miles away from the industrialized confines of Chicago. In the Rio Grande Valley huge grapefruit and orange groves were flanked by palms lazily brushing an ever-blue sky; bougainvillea bloomed; bamboo and wild cane hugged the irrigation canals. Once a chaparral wilderness, the Valley had boomed during the twenties, attracting people from all over the country, and it was, in its way, one of the state's most cosmopolitan regions. On the surface. Below it, in the summer of 1932, was desperation. Amid the poor farmers and transient fruit bums harvesting crops for sixty to seventy-five cents a day, Algren saw a simmering, almost casual violence: the every-man-for-himself philosophy reigned. "Don't ever show anyone that money," he warned his friend Ben Curtis, who, joining him from Chicago, still had a few funds. "If anybody discovers you've got any money they'll kill you for it."

They were living in a Sinclair gas station between Rio Hondo and Harlingen with an ex-con from New Orleans named Luther, selling little gas each week and trying to make their fortune packing the black-eyed peas Luther picked up from local farmers. One night Luther failed to return to the station. When Algren heard him, very late, drive up and fill his tank, he realized the man was going to skip town without paying the farmers and that he and Ben would end up with knives in their backs if they didn't clear out. He was, quite simply, living in a world where human life had lost its value. "I'd been assured it was a strive and succeed world," he said later. "You got yourself an education and a degree and then you went to work for a family newspaper and then married a nice girl and raised children and this was what America was. But this was not what America was." And in "So Help Me," the story Algren wrote almost immediately about a naked Valley exploitation that ends in death, the nightmare cries of the victim David - "We're cut apart-cut apart-cut apart!" punctuate the narrative like a shocked, futile refrain in a landscape of overwhelming spiritual desolation.

Algren wandered aimlessly around the Valley. He lived briefly in a friendly boardinghouse, worked as a shill at a carnival wheel of chance. He crossed the border to Matamoros and came back again, ate in missions, slept in hobo jungles, lost in crap games, rode in cattle or refrigerated boxcars. He met men whose eyes were rimmed with grime and dust or whose mouths were covered in sores, one who'd spent five months at Huntsville for stealing a chicken, another who went about on all fours like an animal, men who were starving, men who had lost legs or arms in accidents on the tracks. Around Christmas of 1932 he headed home to Chicago, emotionally and physically exhausted. There, he rode the streetcar downtown to write in the office of a friend who owned a typewriter and sought out the literary arm of the Communist Party.

When "So Help Me" appeared in Story magazine in 1933, an editor from Vanguard Press asked if he were working on a novel. Algren said yes, secured a \$100 advance, and returned, by boxcar, to the Lone Star State. For no apparent reason, Algren began the novel *Somebody in Boots* (1935) in the West Texas town of Alpine, a railway switching point for

migrants riding the rails to the California fruit fields and a shipping center for a vast ranching area controlled by legendary Texas land barons. Hoping to make himself "the American Gorky" and dedicating his novel to the homeless, Algren planned to tell the story of Cass McKay, a shoeless, hollow-chested, illiterate youth "utterly displaced, not only from society but from himself ... adrift in a land that no longer had any use for him." A man without responsibility even to himself, McKay appears in portions of 'The Texas Stories as he wanders' aimlessly through life being brutalized. Algren created him on a typewriter in an empty roomful of them at Sul Ross Teachers College. Living in a boardinghouse frequented by railroad hands and cowboys, Algren plausibly claims to have met Frank James's widow. When it was time to get back to Chicago, however, he couldn't bear the thought of leaving all those idle typewriters. So he stole one, packed it off to his parents' house in Chicago, and caught an eastbound freight thinking he'd committed the perfect crime. But the forces of the law merely called ahead to the next town: he was taken back to Alpine's Brewster County jail to await the circuit riding judge, likely to face two years' hard labor at Huntsville. The month he spent in the Brewster County jail-which he later remembered as five-had an incalculable, lifelong effect on his work: there is a long jail sequence in every novel he wrote and the individual alone against the law became a familiar theme. Algren witnessed rapes, beatings, sadistic games. The lockup was cold in midwinter, and a "wet filth" soaked the floor; since the guards' take came from how much they could save on the prisoners' meals, the inmates grew thin on cornbread and mush. Fortunately for the cause of literature, at Algren's trial his lawyer, in a surprisingly literary plea, compared him to Jean Valjean of *Les Miserables*, and, though convicted, Algren was given mercy and twenty-four hours to get out of the state. "Had I been black, of course, I would have gone to Huntsville, "he knew all too well. A pecking order based on race had naturally reigned in the jail: blacks and Mexicans were the lowest of the low, and Algren, still going by his given name of Nelson Algren Abraham, was the Jew. But Algren understood intuitively that this hierarchy merely reflected the institutionalized racism of the Texas state. He had seen, in any group of hoboes, that blacks were invariably shipped off to jail; he'd watched a Mexican prisoner, shot by the sheriff's men, die on

the cell-block floor without medical treatment. Themes of racism and anti-Semitism resonate in most of his Texas stories; and they were crucial to Algren's conception of the state.

Algren's awareness of state power was hardly diminished when he found himself forcibly obliged to return to Texas to join the army at Camp Maxey, near Paris, in late 1943. Even at that late date a sense of the old pioneer life could still be glimpsed in rural Texas, but while Algren was always deeply affected by the state's stark landscape, his evocations of it have little to do with the celebrations of nature and open spaces that Texas chroniclers J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb were writing during the same era. Instead, the land Algren saw mirrored the moral indifference he found there. The wide open spaces only illusorily suggested an untamed land; the forces of authority were firmly entrenched. Even in the late 1960s, when he went to Dallas to speak against Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policies, Texas always seemed to give him a heightened sense of being a radical in a conservative country. The Texas that Algren understood was one in which the law-racist, abusive, and corrupt-ruled with an utter ruthlessness and power. It was the man or woman caught hopelessly by the law that attracted Algren as subjects for stories--the young prostitute paying too high a price to avoid hard labor, the mythologized Bonnie and Clyde, the hungry man in a West Texas jail looking at four years on the pea farm at Huntsville. The instinctive need to speak for the powerless, the driving force behind all Algren's work, began in Texas. Later he would sum up this literary vision succinctly: "Literature," he wrote in the early days of the Cold War, "is made upon any occasion when a challenge is put to the legal apparatus by conscience in touch with humanity."

The Texas stories also provide a revealing overview-in-microcosm of Algren's writing career. The first seven pieces, written in the 1930s, find our young author attempting various literary devices and innovations in search of his strengths: his assessment that *Somebody in Boots* was "an uneven novel written by an uneven man in a most uneven of American times" can easily apply to many of these early pieces. Originally appearing in the long-forgotten Texas literary magazine Calithump, "Lest the Traplock Click" is both a gem of boxcar lore never reprinted elsewhere and a fascinating study in techniques that Algren almost immediately abandoned. The

narrative itself shows a verbal gift not yet shaped and controlled; the point of view of the college man, expressing impatience with the uneducated hobo, was a mistake Algren would never repeat. Most significantly, the story is overtly autobiographical: the hero, Jonathan, is a college-educated vagabond like Algren himself, who is finally able to return to a hot bath in his family's middle-class home; Algren learned almost immediately to disguise such obviously autobiographical elements in his fiction. He always treated themes suited to his own emotional needs, but his work nearly always focused on the outside world and depicted characters who were very, very different from himself. "So Help Me," his first success, was another matter. Although the victim, David, was similar to Algren—a young Jewish man from the North carrying a watch and a suitcase—there autobiographical ceased. A monologue told in a Southern transient vernacular, the story reveals David only from the point of view of his companions—as someone to be used and then killed when he gets in the way. The narrator's shrewdness in structuring his tale to gain the sympathy of the big league lawyer Breckenridge and to shift blame onto his partner suggests the subtlety of vision that Algren later brought to his portraits of lost people in his finest work. Algren would often return to the dilemma of the man who must choose between informing and being sent up himself. "So Help Me" is one of Algren's finest stories, easily a great part of the reason that Larry McCurry wrote some thirty-five years after it appeared that Algren still held the best literary claim on the Rio Grande Valley.

But to judge from handwritten drafts "So Help Me" was written quickly, in an uninterrupted stream, and Algren was not, in the 1930s, able to regularly conjure up such impressive narrative feats. The following year in Alpine he wrote a number of third-person narratives that he later worked into the novel: "Kewpie Doll," included here more for its portrait of West Texas townspeople looting the freight trains than for its mastery of the short story genre, has the feeling of a folktale, while the glimpse into the lives of ranch hands in "Holiday in Texas" includes a direct attempt to inject the rhetoric of proletarian realism into his fiction. Algren quickly abandoned this rhetoric as an impediment to his art—but not before publishing related ideas in *Somebody in Boots*, which may help to explain, to a small degree, his lifelong

dissatisfaction with the book. Yet that novel, and its excerpts "If You Must Use Profanity," "A Place to Lie Down," and "Thundermug" in *The Texas Stories* provide an important record of the outcasts' daily experiences in the 1930s--a relentless struggle to keep clean, avoid violence, sleep unmolested, and eat something better than garbage. In response to the despair wrought by the Depression, American writers actively articulated the experiences of the dispossessed, from the plight of the migrant workers in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to the jobless people dancing for a living in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* by Horace McCoy. The era's economic victims occupied a generation of writers from Caldwell and Cantwell to Herbst and Hemingway; in Texas, Edward Anderson left *Hungry Men* and *Thieves Like Us*. But with the notable exceptions of Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs*, Edwin Newhouse's *You Can't Sleep Here*, and Tom Kromer's forgotten period classic, *Waiting for Nothing*, relatively few unflinchingly and graphically depicted the gruesome conditions endured by the human beings who made up the bottommost level of society. Today, when homelessness has been accepted as a fact of life rather than as widespread evidence of a societal breakdown, it can only be hoped that writers of our era will document the wretched existences of the hundreds of thousands of homeless Americans as vividly and sensitively as Algren did in *Somebody in Boots*.

Algren continued to write about people from the lower tier of society throughout his career, and by the late forties, settled in Chicago, he had won a number of literary awards for short fiction and had masterfully explored the violent underworld of juvenile delinquency and prostitution in *Never Come Morning* (1942). *The Texas Stories* includes two stories of this period, taken from the successful collection *The Neon Wilderness* (1947). Written shortly before Algren began work on the National Book Award-winning *Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), "Depend on Aunt Elly," springing from his army days near Paris, evokes the long-fingered hand of Texas authority reaching even into the love relationship of the outcast woman, Wilma; "El President de Mejico" was a late reworking of the prisoner's death in the Brewster County jail that shows Algren as a first-person narrator with the role of the victim assigned to someone else,

in the author's now-characteristic habit. Both of these stories are excellent examples of the thoroughly modern and poetic naturalism for which Algren is most widely known and celebrated. After the publication of *A Walk on the Wild Side* in 1956, Algren took a twenty-year break from the novel form. During that time, he described himself as a journalist, pursuing travel writing, criticism, short fiction, book introductions, and essays. The last two pieces in *The Texas Stories*, written during the late sixties and early seventies, are evocations of the Texas past that illustrate Algren's continuing affinity with the state over the decades. In "After the Buffalo," which originally appeared as the introduction to *The True Story of Bonnie and Clyde*, Algren again displays his fascination with characters from uprooted and displaced social groups. Describing the historical and social context of the outlaws, Algren sees them as relatives of Cass McKay and Dove Linkhorn from *Walk on the Wild Side*, "outcasts of the cotton frontier," descendants of fiddle players who drank from the jug and either fought for the Confederacy or sat out the Civil War in their backwater cabins because they didn't want to work for the man on either side. To Algren, Bonnie and Clyde were anachronistic bank robbers, misplaced in an era when the really big bucks came out of perfectly legitimate transactions with the fountain pen, and he takes pleasure in showing that the public response to these two products of the dust bowl was in many ways as outrageous and mean-spirited as the hunted themselves.

"The Last Carousel," which earned second prize in Playboy's annual fiction contest in 1972, brings this small collection full circle, for *The Texas Stories* moves from the intense anger of Algren's proletarian writings to the controlled naturalism that he practiced so brilliantly during the forties, to the lyric nostalgia, laced with absurdist humor, that was so uniquely Algren in his later years. In this last evocation of the gas station and his travels through Texas, Algren looked back with a gentle humor and a kind of awe for a world long past that he had been permitted to experience. The looming horror of death that once haunted "So Help Me" was gone. In Algren's final vision, at the end, there is only a lone figure, poised above a crowded backwater carnival, riding a Ferris wheel in a swirling Texas dust storm.

In the more than sixty years since Algren first visited Texas, the ranches and stockyards and railways have given way to skyscrapers and airports and freeways and brand-new subdivisions. The state has in many ways completely reinvented itself in the national imagination, gaining an updated urban image as hundreds of thousands have come from out of state to take advantage of its easy business climate and Sunbelt living. Conditions in the jails are reported, fortunately, to have improved. Texas has long been a land known for both its millionaires and its grinding poverty, however, and a modern landscape of private shopping malls and underground downtown walkways and gate-guarded communities and the individualized transport of the automobile has served ingeniously to keep the people without plumbing or sanitation in shacks along the Rio Grande, or the thousands in Texas cities who have no place to lie down or rest, from entering meaningfully into the public view or consciousness. Their continued presence in a land of such plenty, however, suggests that the desperation Algren was writing about hasn't really changed, in human terms, that much at all.