

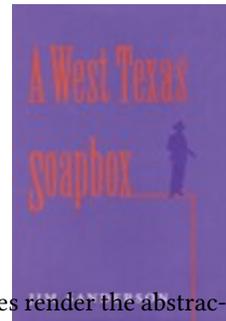
H-Net Reviews

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Jim Sanderson. *A West Texas Soapbox*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998. x + 123 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-819-2.

Reviewed by Jerry Bradley (West Texas A&M University)
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As its title implies, *A West Texas Soapbox* is a collection of autobiographical ruminations by Texan Jim Sanderson. Winner of the Kenneth Patchen and the Frank Waters prizes for fiction, Sanderson is a provocative essayist who has for some years found a soapbox in literary journals. Beginning with "Women in Texas," which first appeared in *New Mexico Humanities Review* in 1991, he has for nearly a decade been boldly critiquing the shallowness and hypocrisy that pervade West Texas life. Of the collection's nine essays, seven have been previously printed, three appearing in *Journal of American Culture* and others in *High Plains Literary Review* and two distinguished Texas journals: *The Concho River Review* and *RiverSedge*.

If Jim Sanderson were Dennis Miller, his essays might be called "rants," but Sanderson's "complaints" are more sustained and analytical though no less amusing than Miller's. What he attacks is a culture that has been repressed by fundamentalist religion and conservative politics. Noting the contrary nature of West Texans, Sanderson claims they have been pulled between conflicting images of themselves, represented historically by the frontiersman and the farmer. Contemporary West Texas, however, is no longer dominated by farms or the frontier, so churches and saloons have become its most influential institutions.

Though a native of San Antonio, Sanderson sets most of his essays in the blue-collar oilfield town of Odessa where he was a junior college professor and movie reviewer. It is a town where "sex, religion, and art are san-

itized and abstracted. If anyone dares render the abstraction concrete, then he produces pornography or blasphemy." Sanderson's anecdotes expose the foibles of college administrators and oil patch trash, students and free-enterprisers, hypocritical zealots and drunks, and they are as instructive as they are entertaining.

What one hears from Sanderson's soapbox is that the mythology of Texas, particularly as presented by the movie industry, is ironically at odds with fact. The more fabulated the state becomes, the more impossible it is for its modern residents to dwell peacefully with their illusions. In Odessa, that conflict invariably manifests itself in a clash between practical vocational training and intellectual elitism.

Sanderson is, of course, on the side of the gods. He defends his position admirably and draws upon an intriguing array of characters for support. He quotes his students, his drinking buddies, his faculty colleagues, his bosses—all of them liars and tellers of tall tales. He also calls upon the usual legendary Texans, but among the non-Texans he cites are Emerson, Howells, Mailer, Flannery O'Connor, John Ford, and David Mamet.

Though often light-hearted, *A West Texas Soapbox* is not superficial criticism. It is reasoned, judicious, and, above all, downright interesting.

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