

“SAVING A SONGBIRD” AND OTHER TRUE
STORIES FROM TEXAS TO VENEZUELA

by Jerry Craven

(Slough Press, 2012. 203 pages. \$15.95. ISBN 978-0-9827342-5-4)

A review by David A. Faught

Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa once compared the writing process to the mythical *catoblepas*' self-immolation. Just as Flaubert's creature feeds on itself, starting with its lower extremities, the writer feeds on personal experiences, converting life into fiction. At times the writing process distorts to such an extent that the final iteration of a person or incident is completely unrecognizable when compared to the original.

A lifetime of associating with fascinating characters and experiencing the world in exotic locales such as Venezuela and Malaysia (not to mention Texas), has provided rich fodder for Jerry Craven's twenty-plus books of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. However, with his latest literary venture, *"Saving a Songbird" and Other True Stories from Texas to Venezuela*, Craven hews closely to true life and presents his undigested experiences both artfully and skillfully.

The collection of stories is organized chronologically and traces the author's roots back to his grandfather, an itinerant Baptist preacher and carpenter who roamed the Southwest during the early twentieth century. Craven's father inherited his grandfather's wanderlust and moved his family to Venezuela in the 1940s to work in the oil industry. It is here that Craven spent five years living among the natives and learning about death, love, faith, loss, racism, honesty, betrayal, friendship and family. The bulk of the collection centers on this formative period of the author's life and only a few stories toward the end deal with his adolescence in Texas, the death of the author's father, and his travel to Malaysia as an adult. This organization gives a nice structure to Craven's *bildungsroman* as it circles back upon the themes of family and the impulse to explore that courses through the author's and his ancestors' veins.

While most of the individual stories can stand on their own, the

collection is more enjoyable in the aggregate. Characters and situations are fleshed out as they reappear throughout the collection, and the early wide-eyed wonderment of childhood gives way to a mature world-view as Craven grows and learns to negotiate the world. At times the mature narrator is didactic, but this only deepens the contrast between the child-narrator and the adult.

Though these are personal stories, they appeal to the average reader because Craven deftly handles the tales' narrative structures. The author's signature technique entails tracing a theme across various experiences. For instance, in "Catching a Thief," the young Craven and his childhood friend, a *nativo*, stake out a local store that they believe will be robbed. Having carefully collected stones and fashioned *bolas*, the two await the thief in the dark and witness the shop-owner shoot a man who either is the thief or is merely at the wrong place at the wrong time. Craven never knows, but in the process of attempting to catch a thief, he realizes that he has inadvertently stolen a watch, that the shop-owner's son has copped his trick chess move, and that his friend's uncle may very well be the actual thief. Everyone and no one is the thief. It is this method of finding connections between events and people that gives the stories structure and vitality.

The events related in "Saving a Songbird" serve as an apt metaphor for the collection. Playing with his sling, Craven accidentally kills his mother's favorite songbird and buries it to conceal his folly. Later he goes to uncover the bird, only to discover that it is alive. With this collection, Craven returns to experiences and people long buried in his past, ones who may have died or whom he may have given up for dead. Upon uncovering them, dusting them off, and letting them breathe, Jerry Craven restores his experiences to life and allows them to sing.

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