



American poet Walt Whitman remembered hearing about the massacre at Goliad when he was young. When he wrote “Song of Myself,” he included verses celebrating those heroes of his youth:

*“They were the glory of the race of rangers,
Matchless with horse, rifle, song, supper, courtship,
Large, turbulent, generous, handsome, proud, and affectionate,
Bearded, sunburnt, drest in the free costume of hunters,
Not a single one over thirty years of age.”*

This is an accurate description of the young men who flocked to Texas for land and adventure. In Lone Star Nation, H. W. Brands describes them as men with “imperfect pedigrees and mixed motives, “often fleeing families and debts, but staying to fight because they believed in liberty and democracy. Among these men are many names which will be familiar to you from seventh grade Texas history. But Brands will give you a richer picture of these complex personalities as men like Austin, Houston, and Fannin tell their own stories in letters to family and friends. We also hear about these men through other observers, both admirers and enemies. Brands will put some myths to rest, but he replaces them with true stories that are stranger than fiction.

What you may find most interesting about Lone Star Nation is the skillful way in which Brands makes Texas history part of Mexican history. While events in the United States that affect Texas are fully discussed, Brands focuses much of the book on the people and events in Mexico that pushed and pulled Texas history to separation and war. This emphasis on Mexico reminds us

that Texas was a part of both the Spanish empire and then the new Republic of Mexico, both of which shaped us in very particular ways. Central to this history is, of course, Santa Anna, perhaps the wiliest politician on either side of the border!

Part of the fun of Lone Star Nation is the fascinating facts that Brands gives to us about these bigger than life figures, and the people who loved them. For example, did you know that Jim Bowie was known to rope and ride alligators? And it was the Ute Indians who gave the Comanche Indians their name— “anyone who wants to fight me all the time” which in Spanish becomes the word “Comanche.” As you read, note the fun facts and bring them to share. You will leave our discussion with plenty of stories to share around the barbeque this summer.

As you read, also note what you learn that is different than what you learned in school. What surprised you about the difficulties of settling Texas or about the people who came here and why? Does this early history tell us what makes Texas distinctive today? Or not? Brands ends his history with the annexation of Texas by the United States and then a brief chapter detailing Houston’s despair as Texas secedes at the start of the Civil War. How do those two events affect what you read before?

I am looking forward to discussing Lone Star Nation by H. W. Brands with you when we meet on **Tuesday, April 4 at 6:30**. Since Texans like to put Texas on anything that does not move, and some things that do, don’t be shy about wearing your Texas t-shirt or cowboy hat and boots to liven up our discussion with local color!

Donna McBride