



## Texas Institute of Letters Memorials 2022

### Jane Roberts Wood 1928-2022

Our beautiful, delightful friend, Jane Roberts Wood, with a beautiful mind to match, and a way with words that delighted all of us and her readers around the world, departed for greener pastures on Wednesday January 19, 2022.



Jane, a third generation Texan, grew up in Hall County in West Texas and in Texarkana in East Texas. She was born to Allien Richards Parsons and Joshua Morris Parsons. Her mother, twin sister Betty Parsons Dooley and brother David George Parsons moved to Texarkana after the unexpected death of her father in 1935 and lived there until her marriage.

She received her bachelor's degree at Texas Tech and soon married Winston Harvey Roberts in 1950. They lived in Fort Worth where Melinda Allien Roberts was born, then moved to Arlington where Susan Jane Roberts Read was born.

Throughout her life, Jane frequently returned to her childhood home in Texarkana to visit her beloved family there, including her mother, her aunt Grace Richards Tanner and her brother, his wife and their children, David and Holt, often reuniting there with the members of her family who had remained in West Texas, including her sister and her sister's children, Melissa and Bob, and another aunt, Lois Richards Webb and her children, Ann, Jane and Buddy, through the years.

She continued her love of the study of British literature, starting at the University of Texas at Arlington and finishing her master's degree in English from Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. In later years she also studied at Yale University and the University of London. She was a very popular and much loved teacher of English at Mountain View College and Brookhaven College in the Dallas County Community College District.

Following the death of Winston, she married Judson W. (Dub) Wood of Dallas and, while continuing to teach and write, made a new home in Dallas with Dub and his two children, David Judson Wood and Barbara Wood Scott – who became her own – until the couple moved to Argyle, Texas in 2004. She loved her many grandchildren, Annabel and Tommy Roberts-McMichael, Alex and Catherine Read, Charlie Wood and Victoria, Clint and Sarah Scott. She loved, too, her children-in-laws, her many great friends, her dogs, her long walks and sitting outside on the porch swing simply enjoying all the little details, the wildlife, the sky, the vista, the soft breezes, that life steadfastly offered up to her.

She was called a "Texas icon" by the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, and rightly so after her first novel, *The Train to Estelline*, was published by Austin, Texas publisher, Ellen C. Temple in 1987 and touted by such luminaries as Liz Carpenter, author and former White House Press Secretary to Lady Bird

Johnson; Larry L. King, author of Texas and Washington, D.C., including the Broadway musical “Best Little Whorehouse in Texas”; and Jean Stapleton, actress of stage and screen, including the role of Edith Bunker, the wife of Archer Bunker in “All in the Family.”

Ellen and Jane were also excellent marketers, with Jane even calling the CEO of the Burlington Northern Railroad and telling him she needed a train to go to Estelline, to which he surprisingly complied. Who could ever turn Jane down? It turned into quite a show with people lining the railroad tracks from Fort Worth to Estelline to see the first passenger train to go along those tracks in many, many years. The trip ended in Estelline with a big book-signing, refreshments and general merriment among all. Jean Stapleton was along for the trip as was another Texas icon, Molly Ivins, and Larry Summers of *Publishers weekly* joined us. And, of course, some of Jane’s family members, friends and supporters. A big billboard along the highway in Estelline, put there by the citizens of Estelline, touted *The Train to Estelline* for many years after that. The novel was such a best-seller that it caught the attention of the New York houses, who published the next two novels in what became the Lucy Richards Trilogy, with novels *A Place Called Sweet Shrub* and *Dance a Little Longer* completing the trilogy.

*Train to Estelline* is an epistolary novel, a form extremely difficult to write, with the format being heroine, Lucy Richards, writing letters to her folks back home about her adventures teaching in West Texas. Jane, however, did this type of writing with an ease that was surprising to many other writers. In *A Place Called Sweet Shrub*, Lucy had married a teacher, Josh Arnold, and has had a baby. This novel addresses the racial tension that was happening in East Texas among other issues. In the third novel of the trilogy, *Dance a Little Longer*, the family has moved back to West Texas where Josh is principal of a school. The novel explores local problems, the drought and tragedy along the way. The trilogy received excellent reviews from critics and was later reprinted as a trilogy in paperback by UNT Press in 2000.

Jane became a Fellow of both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and is the 1998 recipient of the Texas Institute of Letters Award for Best Short Story, “My Mother Had a Maid.” She was also a member of invitational organizations like the Texas Institute of Letters, PEN, and the Philosophical Society of Texas, where she participated in the meeting “Texas Writers Talk.”

While still teaching at Brookhaven in 1989, Jane edited, with associate editors Donna Dysart Gormly and Sally Schrup, a book of fourteen stories written by members of the faculty and staff of the Dallas County Community College District, titled *Out of Dallas*, and published by UNT Press. This collaboration between the DCCCD and UNT, brought about a presentation “Innovation Abstracts, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD),” at The University of Texas at Austin, August 24, 1990, presented by Jane Roberts Wood and Frances B. Vick.

Jane’s fourth novel, *Grace*, published by Dutton in 2001, set during World War II, details the lives of four families living in Cold Spring, Texas. Grace is an English teacher trying to help students work through daily traumas while the war whirls around them. Bonnie Johnson in *Booklist* writes that Jane has created a novel that “illuminates the puzzles of racism, sexism, patriotism and poverty.” A *Publishers Weekly* critic described Wood as having “a rare gift for transcending the ordinary” in this period piece. As her publicist writes, “Jane Roberts Wood reveals her remarkable talent as a chronicler of both time and place.” UNT Press again published the paperback version of this novel as number 3 in the Evelyn Oppenheimer Series out of UNT Press.

In 2003, Dutton published *Roseborough*, where Jane writes of grief and shifting bonds between parents and children and the friendships that liberate and transform our lives. The *Dallas Morning News* wrote of Jane, “She is a genuine Texas treasure [who is] more than a storyteller. . . [She] is a social historian who tells a quality story in a way it ought to be told.” The paperback version of *Roseborough* was published as number 4 in the Evelyn Oppenheimer Series out of UNT Press.

In 2003, Bright Sky Press published a children’s book Jane wrote, titled *Mocha, The Real Doctor*, inspired by her daughter Susan’s veterinarian practice. Mocha sleeps all day but when the staff goes home he begins his rounds of a variety of hurting animals. A. F. Hopkins, D.V.M., former president of the American Veterinary Medical Association, wrote: “What a delightful book. I always wondered about some of my ‘miracle cures.’ Now I know!” Wishbone, of Betty Buckley’s award-winning PBS children’s series, says: “When Mocha purrs my heart sings.”

In 2010 UNT Press published a new novel by Jane, *Out the Summerhill Road*, inspired by an event that occurred in Texarkana when Jane was growing up there. “A young couple is brutally murdered in fictional Cold Springs. And now, in the quietly riveting novel revealing the faces of evil in a small East Texas town thirty-four years later, the rumor is that Jackson Morris, who had been the only person of interest in the murders, has come home. Or has he?” So Jane’s first murder mystery is also compelling and riveting.

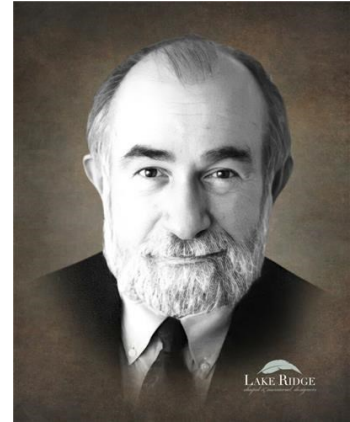
And then in 2011 De Golyer Library at Southern Methodist University, in honor of her accomplishments and in gratitude for her donation of her archive to SMU, published *Seven Stories*, a collection of Jane’s short fiction, with the Foreword by Phyllis Bridges, Ph.D., beloved Cornaro Professor of English at Texas Woman’s University and a dear friend of Jane’s. Phyllis writes, “In all the stories of the collection, there is a striving for understanding, a quest for beauty, a desire for belonging, a search for love. . . . These qualities invite the reader to participate in the story, to engage in an active way with the narrative.”

Jane Roberts Wood had many honors and awards. But most of all, to those of us who loved her and who she loved, there was a deep sense of sisterhood that goes beyond the need of blood ties. It was deep and real and full of laughter and understanding and all the things that are the deepest in one’s heart. She will always be with us, for she left us these endearing treasures of her words in her writing and a shining personality that will be there forever in our hearts. I once wrote for a jacket blurb, Jane “writes with such clarity that you can smell the newly turned earth in the flower garden and taste the tea the women are drinking. She’s a social historian on top of being a perceptive and lyrical writer of the human heart.” And that is why she will always be with us.

---Frances Vick

**Walter Robert “Walt” McDonald**  
1934-2022

I had the privilege of becoming a friend of Walt’s the last decade of his life. When his wife, Carol, became a victim of Alzheimer’s, he poured all his energies into caring for her. He always said, he adored her from the first moment he saw her, and she was truly the other half of him. Though Walt was a bit too young to be considered a member of the “Greatest Generation,” he embodies most all of the traits: Personal responsibility, humility, a strong work ethic, discipline, patriotism and faithful commitment to God and family. He was a combat veteran with commendations, which he would never mention. I would refer to him as the Jet Jockey and he called me Jarhead. He was one of the few Texas poets in the sixties and seventies published and lauded in national journals, which he always downplayed, seeming embarrassed when these achievements were mentioned. I once sent him an elegy I had written for a close Vietnam veteran friend, and he told me he could hardly stand to go back there, having lost so many friends himself. He then apologized for telling me what the poem did to him, when I felt I owed him the apology. There is a cliché, “They just don’t make them like that anymore,” which fits Walt. Realizing he is gone, puts a hole in the heart of all that knew him. However, I am certain the impact of his writing and his commitment to family and friends leaves us with a bounty of joyous memories. The following obituary appeared in the Lubbock paper and was obviously written with the insights of one of his many close loved ones.



---David M. Parsons

Walter Robert "Walt" McDonald, Texas Poet Laureate of 2001, died January 22, 2022, in Richardson. Born in 1934, in Lubbock, Walt was the youngest child of Charlie and Vera McDonald. In 1959, he married artist and Abilene Christian graduate Carol Ham, his lovely darling of his heart. They had been classmates at Lubbock High and were blessed with three beloved children, nine grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. They shared their faith and love of family, friends, and pets with their children, and always the grandeur and grace of God.

A retired U.S. Air Force pilot with B.A. and M.A. degrees from Texas Tech and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa, Walt taught English at the U.S. Air Force Academy for two tours of duty, served in Vietnam, and returned for a third tour at the Academy as Tenured Associate Professor until his retirement. He then taught for three decades at Texas Tech and retired from Tech as Paul W. Horn Professor of English, Emeritus. Giving church talks on God's grace and love was his favorite work. A long-time member of the Broadway Church of Christ, Walt cherished those friends and hundreds in other churches.

After Vietnam, Walt wrote poetry for thirty years, and the Texas Senate and House selected him as the Texas State Poet Laureate in 2001. Publishers of his 23 books of poetry and a book of short stories included Harper & Row (now Harper Collins) and university presses such as Abilene Christian, Massachusetts, North Texas, Notre Dame, Ohio State, Pittsburg, Texas Christian, and Texas Tech. More than 2,300 of his poems were published in journals including dozens that he most admired, such

as *The Atlantic Monthly*; *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*; *London Review of Books* (UK); *New York Review of Books*; and *Poetry*.

In 1987, Walt was appointed as a Paul Whitfield Horn Professor, Texas Tech's highest academic honor, named in memory of Tech's first president, and in 1992, he received the national Texas Professor of the Year Award. He also received Tech's Distinguished Alumnus Award; the President's Excellence in Teaching Award; the University's Distinguished Research Award; the President's Academic Achievement Award; and lifetime awards for writing from the Texas Institute of Letters and the Texas Book Festival. Four of his books won the Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

By far his most cherished honor was his and Carol's anniversary each August, for on the first day he saw Carol in their sophomore year at Lubbock High, he shouted to a friend after school as they rode motor scooters to work, "I'm gonna marry that girl someday!" –an audacious dream that came true.

Preceded in death by his beloved wife, Carol; his parents; also, by Liz McDonald Paschall and Clyde Paschall (sister and brother-in-law); Bo and Virginia McDonald (brother and sister-in-law); David Michael McDonald (son); and 3 of David's 4 children, Jennifer, Jessica, and Michael McDonald.

He is survived by Cindy (daughter) and husband Kelly Wright and their children, Jacob & wife Jenna, Jordan & husband Christopher Henz, and Jillian; and 2 great-grandchildren, Hayden, and Norah; David Matthew McDonald (grandson) & wife Danielle and two great-grandchildren, Christopher and Marley; Charlie McDonald (son) and wife Amy; and daughters, Riley Glanzer and Amelia McDonald; nieces Tana McDonald Beasley, and Patti Paschall along with her brother and children.

## Robert Schaeffer (“Bob”) Phillips

1938-2022

Robert Phillips would often point out that he’d had three careers: college administrator, advertising executive, and creative writing teacher. Of course, given that from 4 am until 8 am every morning before going to his adman job he wrote poetry, eventually publishing seven volumes including the Pulitzer nominated *The Pregnant Man* (1978), we’d have to add “poet” and say it’s more like four careers. Except there’s his three collections of short stories to consider, including *News About People You Know* (2002) of which Elizabeth Spencer said, “Here light and dark live together, and we find life in our present time revealed.” Then what about the twenty volumes of essays, anthologies, and belles lettres, including his interviews of such luminaries as Philip Larkin, William Styron and Joyce Carol Oates collected in *The Madness of Art* (2003)? To introduce the multi-faceted (seven facets, I’d say, at the least) Bob at one of the many readings he gave in the Houston area could take a while. “After such an introduction,” he once quipped, “I can’t wait to hear what I’m going to say.”



Entering the literary realm after successfully navigating the world of Revlon, Ford Motor Company, and Clearasil, Bob never considered his years in ad writing harmful to what he called his *serious writing*. “Think about the average TV commercial,” he told *American Book Review* in 2007. “You have to get the viewer’s attention, introduce the product, demonstrate its benefits, make the sale and close all within 30 seconds. . . . That takes an awful lot of editing and discipline. I wish some of my students had written advertising and could say something in sixty words or less.”

The writer, who X. J. Kennedy once asserted “is about the only living U.S. poet who never bores,” also served as chairman of the National Book Award for poetry, received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a CAPS Grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, a National Public Radio Fiction Prize, a Pushcart Prize, and fellowships from Yaddo, the MacDowell Arts Colony, and the Djerassi Foundation.

Many of his friends predicted catastrophe upon his move in 1991 from New York City to the uncivilized wilds of Houston, Texas, but he found the state highly congenial. Bob was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters in 1991 and later served on its council. He had a tenure as the poetry editor of the journal *Texas Review*. An annual chapbook contest and prize at Sam Houston State University bears his name. In addition to the literary influence he brought to the region, Bob discovered to his surprise that Houston was much easier to get around than NYC and—the true shocker—that the heat and humidity actually improved his arthritis.

Most in the state who encountered him did so because of his association with the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, which he chaired from 1991-1996, taking over for the late Donald Barthelme. He served students after his chairmanship as tenured professor of creative writing, holding an endowed chair as a John and Rebecca Moores Professor until 2009. It was Robert Phillips who,

making the rounds of the graduate cubicles, gently reminded all of the reason they'd bothered to apply to the CWP in the first place with his friendly question: "So, what are you working on?" He would often call students and alumni to tell how much he enjoyed a poem or story of theirs he'd found in a journal, and always maintained a sincere interest in fellow writers and their work.

When asked once about the use of humor in his work, his response was simple. "I'd rather laugh than cry."

I personally always admired his downright hilarious short fiction: the stories set in Public Landing, Delaware, based, no doubt, on experiences in his tiny hometown of Laurel in that state, and the adventures—better to say misadventures—of the hapless, bumbling, loveable, often tipsy advertising executive known only by his last name, "Fallick," based, no doubt, on . . . *Bob*. For a more expert estimation of his poetry, I've relied on the opinion of his friend (and fellow poet/adman), the 2011 Texas Poet Laureate David Parsons who found him one of our most entertaining contemporary American poets. "His timing and sense of humor were always at play and on point," Parsons wrote in a 2001 review of *Spinach Days*. "There are very few books by the many working poets that bring such pleasures to bring me to share the poems with other than serious poetry readers. I found myself reading Phillips' 'In Praise of My Prostrate' to the man sent to install a door at my home. Robert Phillips is doing something incredibly positive for poetry—he is growing the audience."

Bob is survived by his wife, Judith, his son Graham, daughter-in-law, Karen, and grandson, Chase as well as two brothers and a sister. His family, his friends, the students he showed such kindness and attention, and his appreciative audience of readers, all will miss him.

---Cliff Hudder

## Lars Eighner

1948-2021

It was the 1980s. I was in San Francisco, working as the fiction editor for several gay magazines. By fiction I mean erotica, which means every story had explicit sexual content. The slush pile yielded few literary surprises.

Then I started receiving stories from a writer in Austin. The return address caught my attention, since I was a UT grad (class of 1978) and, then as now, made frequent trips back to Austin. But it was the writing that blew me away—the atmospheric prose, the steady building of tension, the unexpected wit, the exquisite craftsmanship. These stories could be in *The New Yorker*, I thought, if *The New Yorker* published gay erotica.



I had to meet this writer.

On my next trip back to Austin, I made a pilgrimage to the ramshackle house that Lars Eighner was renting in Hyde Park. In a letter, he had told me that he and his then-boyfriend looked like Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. (Lars was Gertrude). That was typical Lars: archly humorous self-effacement with gay subtext and a literary citation.

He was so gifted, I wondered if he might ever move beyond writing for the gay magazines (which was never going to make him famous, or even pay a living wage) and produce something worthy of his potential.

We corresponded and met again in Austin over the years. Then I received a letter with the dire news that he had lost his job (at what he called the Insane Asylum; Lars was never politically correct) and was about to be evicted.

Lars became homeless. He hit the road with his dog Lizbeth, hitchhiking across the vast American West, heading, as so many before him, toward California, in search of some hazy hope of a better life. Along the way, he somehow found paper, envelopes, a pen, and stamps—the only necessary tools of a writer—and sent me letters documenting his experience. Even more than his fiction, those letters astounded me. They were funny, ironic, astute, sometimes harrowing, and full of surprises.

Those letters, I thought, should become a book. Like a lucky 49er, Lars had ventured into the wilderness and stumbled onto a gold mine. This was the stuff he was meant to write. I told him so.

Lars rejected the epistolary memoir idea, but took up the challenge. In fits and starts, whenever he managed to have a roof over his head, he began writing the chapters of the book that would become *Travels with Lizbeth*.

A stand-out was the chapter titled “On Dumpster Diving,” a highly detailed and vividly rendered how-to guide. (On half-finished bottles of wine: “Decant slowly.”) Lars deftly inverted the tawdry subject matter; his observations on the detritus to be found in dumpsters became a comment on the materialism of society at large.



I sent the essay to several magazines. I finally got a nibble from *Harper's*; the editor told me the piece didn't quite fit the magazine, but, if I could get it published anywhere, *Harper's* would run an excerpt in their "Readings" section.

I went to the San Francisco Public Library and combed through the literary magazines. I came upon *The Threepenny Review*, published across the Bay in Berkeley. I submitted "On Dumpster Diving" to the publisher and editor, Wendy Lesser.

Lesser called me on the phone. As I recall, she more or less directly asked me if the essay was a literary hoax, a piece of fiction written not by a homeless person but by a professional writer—perhaps myself? I laughed out loud. What better compliment could Lars receive? The piece seemed too good to have sprung from nowhere, like Minerva from the head of Zeus. I assured her that Lars Eighner was a very real person, possessed of very real talent. She ran the essay. *Harper's* ran an excerpt.

New York editors were suddenly interested. Homelessness was at that time a new, front-burner issue, and who doesn't love an on-the-road story, especially with a dog? But most editors were more in love with their idea of the book than with the actual book that Lars produced. There were messy bits that didn't fit their preconceptions, like the part about Lars trying to write for gay porno movies when he finally made it to Los Angeles. And the sheer bulk of the manuscript (over 600 pages) posed a challenge even to the most seasoned editor.

The book was accepted by Michael Denny at St. Martin's Press. He turned out to be the ideal person for the job. Working with Lars by mail, he judiciously trimmed the manuscript. The hardback came in at 271 pages.

*Travels with Lizbeth* landed on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* of October 19, 1993 with an ecstatic review by Jonathan Raban. A flurry of publicity followed, including a story in *People* magazine and a segment of CBS's "On the Road" with Charles Kuralt. "On Dumpster Diving" became a classic American essay, endlessly reprinted in English textbooks and in writing manuals as a model of style. In 2019, *The New York Times* included *Lizbeth* among "The 50 Best Memoirs of the Past 50 years." And after Lars died on December 23, 2021, in Austin, the *Times* took note of his passing with a poignant obituary by Neil Genzlinger.

As Genzlinger noted: "Although a comic novel Mr. Eighner wrote in the 1980s, *Pawn to Queen Four*, and an essay collection called *Gay Cosmos* were published in 1995, his literary output dried up." Why didn't Lars take root and blossom as an author, giving us many books, perhaps too many, as so many authors do? As he himself noted in an afterword to the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Lizbeth*, the book was truly *sui generis*. "I have no argument with those who prefer to call it a fluke... I knew this book could not lead to a sequel or a series."

There could only ever be one *Travels with Lizbeth*. That makes it rare, and special. I suspect it will endure as a minor classic of American literature, forgotten at times, and then, each time with wonderment, rediscovered.

--- By Steven Saylor