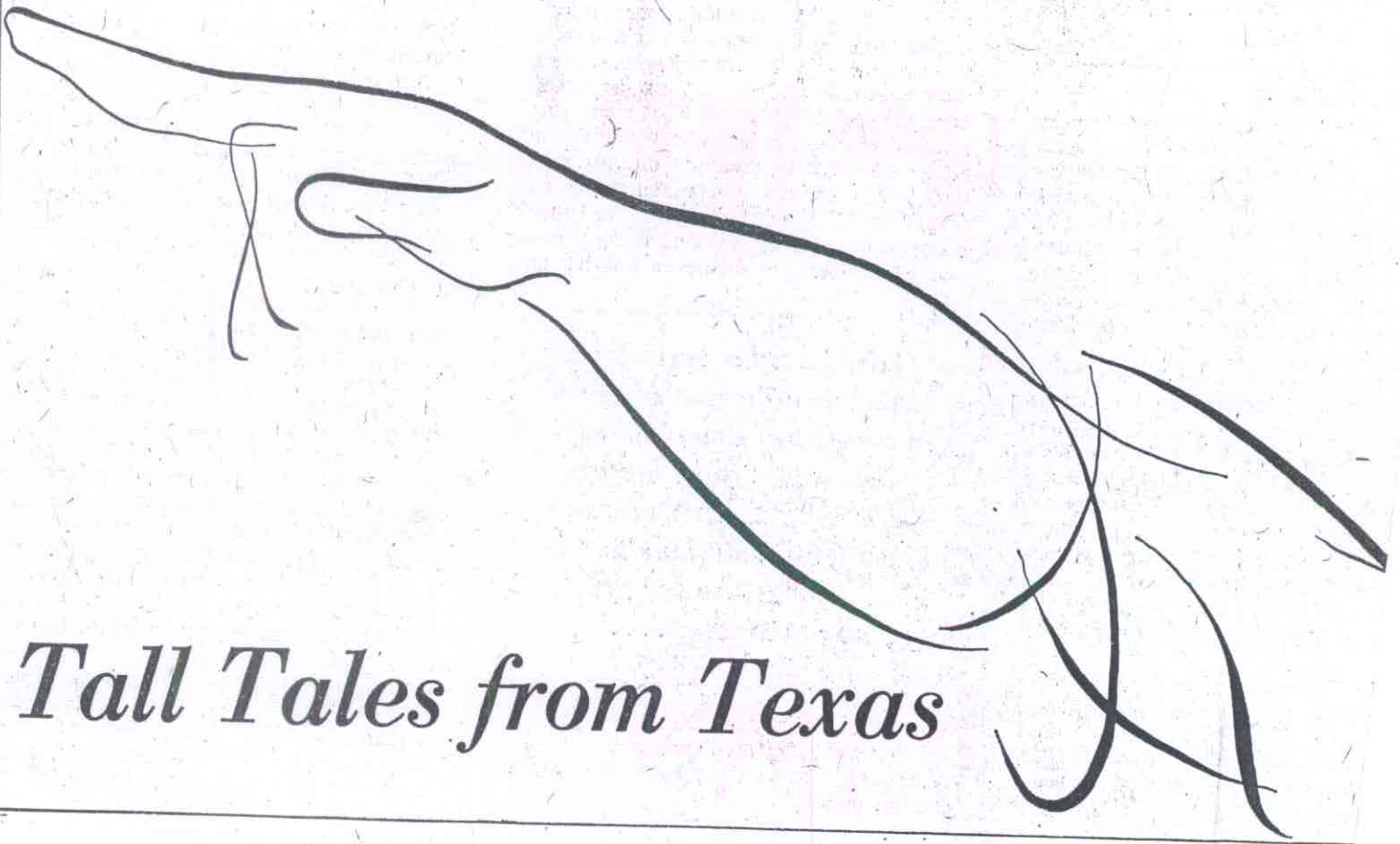


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# BOOK WORLD

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*Tall Tales from Texas*

*Recordings / Gardens*

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Drawing by Vint Lawrence for The Washington Post

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**LYNDON JOHNSON AND  
THE AMERICAN DREAM.**  
By Doris Kearns. Harper &  
Row. 432 pp. \$12.50

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By HORACE BUSBY

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**T**HE SPECIAL AGONY and torment of Lyndon B. Johnson's life was success. He rarely knew anything else. From boyhood to retirement men bent before his will, institutions reshaped themselves in his image. Whatever milieu he entered—in college, as a congressional secretary, or through his long succession of public offices—he invariably emerged as a central and commanding figure of each universe.

While he savored this, he also resented it. Success, he thought, denied him the sympathy that comes with failure, the affection accorded the ineffectual. To compensate, he constructed for himself a past which, he believed, would transform him into a weak, even pitiable, figure. Surely, the young, the intellectuals, the writers—all those put off by his power—would be moved to compassion if only they understood he was disadvantaged by his birthplace, deprived by his schooling, demeaned by his lack of hereditary graces and manners.

Lyndon B. Johnson in life had only limited success with this tactic. Always there were those around

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HORACE BUSBY was a long-time friend and associate of President Johnson.

who knew him—and his life—too well to accept his revisionism about parents, home and childhood. Now, though, three years after his death, he has finally had his way.

In *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, Doris Kearns permits her subject to paint a self-portrait as he deemed it would be advantageous for it to be painted. It is all there, the full pleas of disadvantage and deprivation. For one who knew the man long and intimately, however, the result is exasperating: overdrawn, debasing, perhaps not even one-half true-to-life. Yet I must begrudgingly concede that maybe he was right: the Lyndon Johnson in this Book-of-the-Month Club selection is, "warts and all," the most fascinating and absorbing and, yes, sympathetic, yet to appear in contemporary literature.

The author is catalyst for the Johnson performance. Now a professor of government at Harvard, she came to Washington in 1967, a 25-year-old Ph.D. candidate from New York, newly chosen as a White House Fellow. A bristling critic of Johnson policies in Vietnam, Kearns seemed to become, in Johnson's eyes, a surrogate for the academic-intellectual establishment with which he had so little successful rapport. First at the White House, then later in Texas, while Kearns served as a research assistant on the preparation of his memoirs, Johnson devoted himself to teaching "you Harvards" about the political system, while also endlessly telling her the stories of his origins and childhood.

It is, as Kearns relates it, "a painful story of an unhappy boy, trapped in a divided home, relentlessly tumbled among the impossible demands

of an unyielding mother [and] contempt for a father who failed." As if to confirm Johnson's thesis, Kearns is moved. "To know fully the disabling conditions of Johnson's youth," she writes, "can only increase admiration for the inexplicable power of his will."

Kearns's prose is vivid and sensitive. The question, though, is, as it always was, whether Lyndon Johnson's stories support such characterization; or, indeed, whether the stories are fact or fable.

That is the problem old acquaintances of Johnson's will have with this book. Members of the Johnson family, including brother and sisters, quietly dispute his portrayal of the family home life; before her death in 1959, his mother, Rebekah, became greatly distressed about the inaccuracies of Lyndon's memories. Furthermore, contemporaries who knew him in his Johnson City youth insist he was disabled not by parental deprivation, but by parental indulgence, which left him "spoiled rotten." Lamentably, Kearns's footnotes reflect no effort to interview the many persons still living that might have contributed insights into the reality of those formative years.

Kearns's interest, of course, is in those revelations from the Johnson recollections which support her psychobiographical approach. That interest makes her prey to "the greatest storyteller of the age," as she describes her subject, when he begins to relate dreams and nightmares to her. These dreams are of a piece with Johnson's larger purpose: he is invariably weak, paralyzed, helpless, invoking sympathy.

In one dream, he is sitting in a chair, in the middle of great, open

plains; a stampede of cattle is coming toward him, but when he tries to move, he cannot. He cries out for his mother, but no one comes. Johnson, ever sensitive to his audience, realizes that Kearns— thoughts of Oedipal wishes flashing to mind —likes that. Another dream happens to be handy: this time, he is in the White House, dreaming that he is Woodrow Wilson. "Dr. Kearns, meet Dr. Woodrow Johnson, fellow intellectual." Paralyzed and helpless, he hears his assistants in the next room dividing up his power; he can neither talk nor walk and "not a single aide tries to protect him."

Dreams are now coming thick and fast. Even Kearns pauses to wonder if, perhaps, Johnson is saying to himself, "You intellectuals, you like dreams? I'll give you all you like." At that moment of belated recognition on Kearns's part, one wants to stand and cheer.

Whatever may be the designs, Lyndon Johnson, as he appears in much of this account, is not fully serious. "One can safely assert," Kearns says in the author's postscript, "that no American political leader has ever equaled Lyndon Johnson in the capacity to know the motives, desires and weaknesses of those with whom he dealt." Quite obviously, his talents have not deserted him in dealing with Kearns. She wants to write a book; he clearly wants one written, by someone who is, as she describes herself, "already a member of that inner group which wrote the books and which, he firmly believed, shaped the final verdict of history." Considering the likely sales and popularity of this book, Lyndon Johnson didn't do badly for himself.

The principal concern overhanging Kearns's work is how well she does for herself. She has gleaned many insights into Johnson behavioral patterns: his aversion to confrontation, his fears of emotionally charged language, his tendency to withdraw from those who disappointed him, his propensity for falling ill during each major political campaign, and for attempts to withdraw from key races. Kearns is one of few writers to discern, correctly, that beneath the contradictory exterior, Johnson was, truly, a fervent radical. She has, as well, made a keen analysis of his methods of acquiring power, an analysis which should be required reading for today's burgeoning Congressional staffs, since that is the base from which Lyndon Johnson's political career began. All this is a valuable addition to the understanding of the man.

That said, much about the book raises questions regarding Kearns's own seriousness. Eighteen pages are devoted to establishing Doris Kearns's relationship with Lyndon Johnson. His relationship with Franklin Roosevelt is treated in a single paragraph; Sam Rayburn is dismissed with less than a full sentence; no effort at all was expended on Johnson's quite important relationship with Harry Truman. Texas, the South, the Civil War, all rich and crucial shaping influences, are similarly ignored.

Kearns dwells upon Johnson's cowboy heritage. This greatly distorts the reality of the man. Of his 43 adult years, Johnson spent 37 of them in Washington; he was much more a cosmopolite than a cowboy. A serious psychoanalytic study can

hardly leave aside the *complexes* introduced by that contradiction.

Surprising and distressing is the book's slipshod way with detail important to any biography. For example, much of the emphasis throughout is upon his college education, yet Kearns has him attending and graduating from "San Marcos College," which does not exist. She elects him to Congress at the wrong age, misdates his election to the Senate, places his proudest life work—electrifying the lower Colorado River—in the "Pedernales Valley"; misplaces the Pedernales itself in East Texas, rather than West Texas; and scatters other errors throughout her text. In recounting Johnson's beginnings as Senate leader, she relates how Richard Nixon, as vice president, broke a 48-48 Republican-Democratic tie in the Senate to choose Robert A. Taft, rather than Johnson, as Majority Leader in 1953. There was no such tie and no such vote by Nixon.

Of special regret to his friends and family will be Kearns's depiction of Johnson during the time she worked with him. He is, in her telling, "ragged, crumbled, defenseless," "like a cold and frightened child," "defeated, dieing." Kearns's association with the late President ended 18 months before his death, about the time my own long association resumed actively once more. At no time, even very near the end, did Lyndon Johnson match such descriptions. He was still his vital and vivid self, up to all sorts of personal and political mischief, and, in the last month of his life, busy making some of the most ambitious post-White House plans. He still had his vision of the American Dream. □