

***Westering: A Novel in Stories.* By J. M. Ferguson Jr.**

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Twenty-five years after the publication by Texas Christian University Press of his well-reviewed *Summerfield Stories* (1985), J. M. Ferguson Jr. has released his second finely wrought novel. In the tradition of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), the independent parts in *Westering* form an aesthetic whole. As a writer, Ferguson seems most at home in the shifting territory between the spiritual and the physical, the imaginary and the actual, the traditional and the experimental. By patiently following a fragile train of flashbacks, foreshadowings, and changing points of view in this complex seven-story structure, the alert reader will piece together a novelistic plot surrounding the writer's fictional counterpart.

Conditioned by his susceptibility to the wonder, beauty, and sadness of life, Charles Graves is married, has three sons, and aspires to write serious fiction. For many years now, this former college English instructor has earned a modest living traveling throughout the Southwest as a gentlemanly publisher's representative for college textbooks. His beautiful wife, Hadley, a career woman, tends to regard her husband's literary efforts as "little bursts of quaint imaginings" (15). Seeking back roads and lingering in small towns, the itinerant bookman's one constant companion is indeed his imagination. From his hair-trigger "drifting" flow rueful memories, impossible dreams, heartbreaking illusions, and random writing (5).

Following the death of one son, a deeper reserve grows between Charles and Hadley. One summer, Charles goes camping with his youngest son, and another summer, he and Hadley drive to Florida to make peace with their estranged eldest son. For years, Charles has been haunted by his dead son's last "I love you" over the telephone and by his wife's "I wish to God that you had died instead" (23, 17). Years pass. After Hadley's retirement, Charles still travels the textbook circuit, but—as when first married—husband and wife again explore the countryside together. Although Charles is "no subscriber to the supernatural," he, like a character out of Hawthorne, experiences hallucinations, mostly embodiments of his dead son (23). Enchanted and disenchanted by turns, Ferguson's aging protagonist still yearns for an oasis in the desert, a seaside City of Cibola.

After Hadley dies, Charles lives much in the past and even sees his double in lonely men. Following his own retirement, he tours Ireland briefly, but then clings close to home. His last love is for a shelter dog he volunteers to walk; but before he decides to claim it, the shelter puts

it down. More and more, the guile, roughness, and clamor of the outer world intrude on the integrity, refinement, and peace of the inner. The last word in *Westering*—"gone"—foreshadows not only Charles's departure from his once-ideal Westward Inn (the detailed setting of his last story), but also his departure from the light of consciousness itself (151).

Thus, "westering" for Charles Graves—indeed his name is significant—means traveling the roads of the region, yes, but also traveling the road of life. To go west means to journey toward the setting sun, toward the universal grave. The danger of the novel-in-stories, of course, is the potential insurrection of the parts to the detriment of the whole. Although the story-episodes in *Westering* vary at times in tone, tense, and length, as well as in point of view, Ferguson's subtle linkages, along with the person-place-theme denominator, uphold the overarching narrative. Like Conrad's writer-character who meticulously dramatizes the setting of Marlow's intricate Congo story-within-a-story in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Charles Graves holds in check (and tension) his tales about two colleagues who influenced his thinking—one about the singular "Eighth World," the other about the modern world as a "Fool's Paradise." Analogous to Charles's inscape is his musing on the landscape as expressed in his prose poem of the phantasmagoric Llano Estacado in eastern New Mexico.

The bookman's poignant quietude displays qualities not generally found in on-the-road fiction. In wistful Charles Graves, Ferguson has created a new type of the Old West book peddler and has drawn a kind of portrait of the artist as an *isolato* as well, and he has done so with an uncommon delicacy of feeling and ingenuity of form.