

## Reader's Guide: Goodnight, Texas

### Other suggested books:

**The Last Picture Show**, Larry McMurtry

**Leaving Cheyenne**, Larry McMurtry

**All My Friends Are Going To Be Strangers**, Larry McMurtry

**One Hundred Years of Solitude**, Gabriel Garcia Marquez

**An Inconvenient Truth** (movie, documentary about global warming)

**Plainsong**, Kent Haruf

**Los Gusanos**, John Sayles

**The Milagro Bean Field Wars**, John Nichols

### About the Author:

William Cobb was born in Texas City, Texas, lived for a time in San Antonio, and spent his high school years in Fulton, Texas, near Corpus Christi, where his parents owned a restaurant named The Tall Tale, and where he worked. He says that the characters in **Goodnight, Texas**, were at least partly inspired by that experience and his friends there. Gusef, for instance, is based on a Polish gentleman who taught him to play chess. And, like Falk, the 17 year old boy who works for Gusef, he too was kicked out of school for a while his junior year in high school. He is an avid bird watcher, and as a reader of **Goodnight, Texas**, might surmise, has a deep and informed love of the land and interest in the environment, which he also credits to his upbringing on the coast of Texas. He graduated from Texas State University in San Marcos, took his MFA at the University of Texas in Austin, and the Phd at the University of Houston, where he studied writing with distinguished and best selling novelist Rosellen Brown. He worked for several years as an editor in New York City, and now directs the writing program at Penn State University. **Goodnight, Texas**, is Cobb's 2<sup>nd</sup> published novel. His first was **The Fire Eaters**. He has also published one collection of short stories, **The White Tattoo**.

### About the Book:

**Goodnight, Texas**, has a mythic, or larger than life quality to it, seasoned with a good measure of comedy and just a suggestion of magic realism: it is a children's story for adults, so to speak. Cobb admits to being a fan of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and says this novel grew out of a dream he had about a giant fish with a horse in its mouth and a Viking funeral where all the people on the beach were his friends from high school. The novel begins with the one and ends with the other. And, like Marquez, who says that many of the fantastic tales in **One Hundred Years of Solitude** were in fact embellished versions of history and stories his grandmother had told him, Cobb confesses to using regional folklore – such as an island ranch which reportedly has a huge herd of wild mustangs that run free on it – in **Goodnight, Texas**.

Set in the near future, the story centers around a culturally eclectic cast of characters as distinct and spicy as the ingredients in the gumbo served at the Black Tooth Café. Their language is peppered with Spanish. They live in Goodnight, Texas, on Red Moon Bay near Corpus Christi,

where the shrimp fishing is drying up from ominous changes in the water, and the local economy is increasingly dependent upon *las turistas*, “Snowbirds,” seniors from the north who drive big RV’s and winter in the south. Their patriarch is Gusef, Russian émigré owner of the Black Tooth Café and the Sea Horse Motel, located down a ways on Shoreline Drive. Falk Powell is 17 years old, a budding photographer recently expelled from high school for carrying a knife. He works in the kitchen. Una Vu, daughter of a Mexican mother and a Vietnamese shrimper father who drowned at sea, waits tables. Leon tends bar. Regular patrons include Mr. Buzzy, an ex-shrimper amputee, and Una’s abusive boy friend Gabriel, just fired from another shrimp boat gone under. Seasonal patrons include Walter and India Hamilton, Snowbirds from Wisconsin. Falk, whose parents drowned the year before, has been taken in by his Uncle Ed and Aunt Vicky. He shares a room – odd but innocent -- with his 15 year old cousin Leesha, very pretty, very blond. Other characters who figure in the action include the Mustang County Sheriff John Littledog: a “quarter-blood Kiowa, the tallest man in Mustang County.” He wears a black eyepatch on his left eye, lost “over a woman.” Another is the nutty taxidermist Oscar Martinez, Gabriel’s cousin. Finally, there is the woman in Room 17, at the Sea Horse Motel.

Outside The Black Tooth, a big storm is looming in the Gulf of Mexico. Inside, Falk is obviously smitten by Una, setting off Gabriel’s very bad temper, moving Una closer to acting on her decision to get him out of her life, for good. A giant zebra striped fish, of a type never seen before in those parts, washes up on the beach with a mustang colt stuck in its throat. Everyone agrees this is not a good sign. But in the remarkable spirit of optimism that pervades **Goodnight, Texas**, Falk and Gusef see an opportunity here. Falk for selling his photographs of this strange and smelly sight, Gusef for increased business once the creature is properly stuffed and mounted atop the Café, perhaps to be re-named the Swallowed Angel. Bringing all this to pass is one of the novel’s plot lines. Another is Gabriel’s attempt at revenge upon Falk and his family, which involves Leesha. But the novel’s narrative trajectory is organized around the responses and behaviors of the people of Goodnight to the build up, the storm become Hurricane Tanya itself, and its aftermath. It is the storm especially which drives the personal dramas of Falk and Una’s relationship, and their respective searches for a life direction. Facilitating them as employer, mentor and father figure is Gusef. Next to Tanya, he is the major agent of change in the world of **Goodnight, Texas**.

While Tanya’s damage to Goodnight and its people is not as cataclysmic as happened the fall of 2005 in Katrina, comparisons are inevitable and render Cobb’s vivid and riveting rendering of a major hurricane that much more prescient. In fact, Cobb has lived through several hurricanes in his lifetime, so writes from life experience in **Goodnight, Texas**, and he probably drew on that as well for his equally vivid and true to character treatment of people caught in a “wicked hurricane.” Sometimes playing more than one role in the drama of the storm, there are the deniers and the defiant who throw Hurricane parties; the panicked motel guests who jump in their cars and speed out of town without so much as packing their suitcases; the prudent and responsible who stay to board up their places up and help others; the jaded who stay to guard their stuff; the trapped, the stubborn and the fatalists, which includes the poor and physically vulnerable; the ditherers who wait too long and get caught; the show-off’s; and the clueless. They all intersect, directly or indirectly. Most who are able do their best. Some die, some live, some prevail, some run away, and some grow wings to fly.

Finally, despite all the sad and destructive things that happen in the course of **Goodnight, Texas**, this is a tale infused with an odd atmosphere of hope. We are persuaded that loss and what one learns from it can turn into compost for growth. We are reminded that all endings are also beginnings, and shown that sometimes, that is a good thing.

### Book Study Questions:

1. What is your personal reader response to this novel? Are there things in **Goodnight, Texas**, that remind you of your own life experience? What are they? How did this affect your interpretation or appreciation of the novel?
2. How would you describe the tone of this novel? Sad? Happy? Funny? Hopeful? Serious? Playful? What things about the novel make you identify the tone you choose? The language? The characters? What has happened to them in the past? The events of the novel?
3. Cobb intended **Goodnight, Texas**, to have a lyrical children's story quality about it. He also intended for it to be nostalgic. How well, or not, do you think he succeeded? What elements can you find in the events of the novel, its structure, its title, or its tone, that give it those qualities? What are your favorite stories from childhood? Can you find similarities, or affinities between this novel and any of those children's stories? Why do you think he named the town "Goodnight?" If it did, how did the title of the novel affect your interpretation of the novel?
4. An old saying is that "truth is stranger than fiction." What elements can you find in **Goodnight, Texas**, that support that saying? Are any of them things that could be seen as "magical," or surreal? How realistic did you find the novel, and why? Cobb says it comes off as folksy but he thinks it is actually more like the real world of coastal Texas than most people think. Are there things about the novel that you can identify this way? The events? The characters? The physical landscape and setting?
5. Events and circumstances that we might call "acts of man" or "acts of nature," play a major role in this novel, and Cobb says he wanted the novel to be driven by its landscape. What do you think he meant by that, and how do you see that operating in the novel? Cobb also believes that global warming is both a fact and a danger to our future. What did you think or believe about global warming before you read this novel? Did the novel change your mind or make you question your point of view about global warming?
6. The first two epigraphs to the novel are about global warming and the 19<sup>th</sup> century Krakatoa disaster, respectively. One is man made, the other a natural disaster. The third is a hilarious absurdist exchange of seeming *non sequiters* between two Texas gunslingers. Why do you think Cobb might have chosen the last of these three epigraphs to this novel? Why?
7. Did you find the novel to be funny, or humorous? If so, in what ways? What did the humor add to the experience of the novel for you? How do you think Cobb was using

humor in this novel? If you were to describe the kind of humor that he uses in **Goodnight, Texas**, what would it be? To what extent could this be called a comic novel?

8. Discuss the characters of this novel. Who do you think is the main character? Whose story is this? What role does each of them play in the cast that Cobb has created? Why do you suppose he made most of them orphans of one kind or another? What do they all seem to be looking for? Can you imagine what kind of a novel this would have been if each of these characters came with a fully developed family background? How would you describe the town of Goodnight, based on these characters? Would it be a complete community in your point of view, or experience? An extended family? What do you see happening for Falk and Una in life after this novel?
9. There are some who argue that all good fiction is political in some way. Do you see anything political about this novel, at least in the background? If so, what would it be? You might want to look at the demographic of the town, as portrayed here, the economy, maybe the cultural and linguistic diversity among the characters? How does Cobb's portrait of Texas, at least this part of Texas, which he describes as "folksy," fit in with your perception of the state, or that part of the state? Did this novel make you question or change your mind about your perception of the sociology of the Gulf Coast in Texas?
10. What do you think is the theme of **Goodnight, Texas**? Why? If someone were to ask you "What is this novel about?" what would you tell them?