

Blood on the Bayou: A Reading and Discussion of Noir Fiction at Lamar University

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Katherine Hoerth



Photo by Gretchen Johnson

What is it about southeast Texas that inspires stories of murder, mayhem, and mystery? This was the driving question behind the panel “Blood on the Bayou: Writing Noir Fiction in Southeast Texas” on October 22nd at Lamar University. Panelists included three published authors: Lisa Sandlin, the author of *The Bird Boys*, Jim Sanderson, author of *El Camino del Rio* and *La Mordita*, two mysteries set in the Texas borderlands, and Deborah DEEP Mouton, a contributor to the anthology *Houston Noir* and the former poet laureate of the Bayou City itself. Brendan Gillis, director of the Center of History and Culture of Southeast Texas, organized and moderated the insightful discussion.

To start off the panel, Jim Sanderson, chair of the department of English and Modern Languages at Lamar University, defined the term as a contemporary evolution of literary naturalism—the result of the end of the frontier and the romanticism of the cowboy hero. “In the 1940’s, the French began talking about the

term “noir,” Sanderson explained, and it meant literature and film that was shrouded in darkness, both literal and figurative.

Gillis added that Jack Kerouac, celebrated Beat author, wrote about southeast Texas with a very noir description of the swamps of Deweyville—“the mansion of the snake, the smell of oil, and the place was a manuscript of night we can’t read.” Another well-known writer, Hunter S. Thompson, described Houston as “a cruel crazy town on a filthy river in East Texas with no zoning laws and a culture of sex, money, and violence. It’s a shabby, sprawling metropolis ruled by brazen women, crooked cops, and super-rich pansexual cowboys who live by the code of the West—which can mean just about anything you need it to mean, in a pinch.” Many Houstonian writers have come to embrace and celebrate this sordid description. “So is there something ‘noiresque’ about southeast Texas and the gulf coast?” Gillis asked.

“It’s dark here,” Sandlin remarked, reminiscing about growing up in the big thicket behind a wall of pines. “There’s danger here, too,” she added, mentioning the numerous poisonous snakes that call our region home, the racial injustices that have plagued the history of this place, and the refineries that feed us but can also be dangerous. Sandlin’s latest book, *The Bird Boys*, examines the dark undertones of Beaumont in the early 1970’s. It is a novel about a young private eye, Tom Phelan, and his ex-con assistant, Delpha, who is on parole after being imprisoned for killing a man who raped her when she was eighteen, as they try to find an elderly man’s missing brother. Sandlin remarked that she enjoys “flipping the conventions of noir” in her writing, and using the genre to interrogate issues of gender, race, and class. Sandlin does meticulous research in writing her historical novels, though much of the details from them also come from her own

childhood and experiences as a young girl in southeast Texas.

Jim Sanderson, who has lived in Beaumont for many years, has written a novel titled *Nothing to Lose*, which is set in Beaumont and the Piney Woods. His novel lifts the veil of the pine curtain, so to speak, to reveal the darkness of the region—the wild landscape, the meth-lab economy, and unique mentality. The novel follows Roger Jackson, a private eye, who finds himself in the middle of a murder. *Nothing to Lose* isn't Sanderson's only successful novel, however. His more recent novels, *El Camino del Rio* and *La Mordita*, follow border patrol agent Dolph Martinez through the borderlands of southwest Texas as he encounters similar seedy characters and situations. Sanderson described southwestern noir as exploring “the darkness in the sunlight.”

Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton is a “Jane of All Trades.” Primarily known for her spoken word poetry and slam performances, she is also a talented noir writer. Much of her work deals with the urban landscapes of Houston. Her short story, “Where the Ends Meet,” follows a young Jamaal who is down on his luck and looking for work on the rough streets of Houston. As a reader, you'll come to identify with the narrator's struggles of trying to pay the rent, put food in his refrigerator, and gas in his delivery truck. Her narrator sounds like a Houstonian, too, referencing things folks from H-town will identify with settings like The Dump furniture store, the crowded “feeder roads” of I-45, and the fishy, industrial smells of Galveston Bay. Jamaal meets a sleazy character who promises him some seemingly easy money. Towards the end of the story, Jamaal, faced with the impossible choice between his morality and making ends meet, does the

unthinkable. *Houston Noir*, edited by Gwendolyn Zepeda, is an anthology of fourteen crime stories set in various neighborhoods around Houston written by Houston-based authors.

After the reading, the authors also took questions from the audience. When asked what advice they had for student writers, Lisa Sandlin remarked that your own life story can be a great inspiration, though you can also change details and use artistic license. Jim Sanderson joked: “My advice is to marry well” because it is difficult to many a living through writing.

After the reading, I spotted one of my students. “What did you think of the reading?” I asked her as we walked out together. Her eyes lit up.

“Ma'am,” she exclaimed, “I didn't know there were writers from my neighborhood. Published writers. Writing about my neighborhood. Imagine that?” She, like D.E.E.P, hails from southeast Houston.

And I think that's the most significant revelation I took away from the panel, too. Great stories happen all around us, and we are fortunate here in southeast Texas to have authors like Sandlin, Sanderson, and Mouton to capture them for us in all their gritty darkness. Indeed, there *is* something ‘noiresque’ about southeast Texas because this land is the meeting place of cultures, languages, and landscapes. It's a nexus of both light and darkness, a wellspring of inspiration, wonder, and mystery. It's the place I'm proud to call home.

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