



**TRAVELING?**  
Don't miss our  
Top Bookish  
Destinations

Subscribe today for the most up-to-date Texas book news, reviews, and events. **Free.**

Sign me up!

email us



Like 3.2k

Follow @LoneStarLit 725 followers



TEXAS. LITERALLY.

Connecting Texas books and writers with those who most want to discover them

HOME

READ

WRITE

GO

ADVERTISE

PROMOTE

ABOUT

## Lone Star Book Reviews

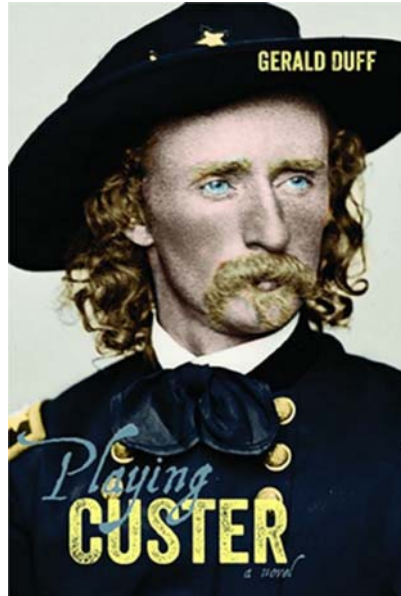


Texas-based writer **Rod Davis** is the author of the novels *South, America and*

*Corina's Way* and the nonfiction *American Voodoo*.

www.rodavisauthor.com

**Gerald Duff** is a winner of the Cohen Award for Fiction, the Philosophical Society of Texas Literary Award, and the Silver Medal for Fiction from the Independent Publishers Association. A member of the Texas Institute of Letters, he has published nineteen books. He published *Home Truths: A Deep East Texas Memory* with TCU Press in 2011. He resides in Lebanon, Illinois.



**Gerald Duff**  
*Playing Custer*  
Fiction

277 pgs., 978-0-87565-606-9, \$22.95 paper  
TCU Press, June 2015

The multi-voiced, time-jumping narrative in Gerald Duff's latest novel, *Playing Custer*, recounts the bizarre world and psychologies of reenactors, in this case of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. But the spine of the story is surely in the evolution of the longtime if cranky friendship between two Texans who after years of commuting to Montana to take bit parts in the outdoor drama wind up finding themselves in the prized roles. One becomes General Custer; the other transforms into Crazy Horse, the Sioux war chief whose daring spelled doom on the Great Plains for the 7th Cavalry on June 25, 1876.

As they head out of East Texas in a Toyota Highlander, Waymon Needler and Mirabeau Lamar Sylestine, a teacher of high school home ec and a computer tech, respectively, are already making an awkward mental and spiritual transformation from their banal lives into the mindset of history. For Needler, it will be an affirmation of manhood; for Sylestine, an Alabama-Coushatta full-blood, a much-needed link to rightful heritage.

Because each of these personal evolutions is based on pretending to be someone else inside an entertainment spectacle pretending to be history, the line between reality and fantasy is all but nonexistent. Duff's choice to move the story along through the contemporary voices of Waymon and Mirabeau—or "Eagle Beak" as the latter prefers to be called—and an array of the actual figures who fought and died at the Little Big Horn—or "Greasy Grass" as the Plains Indians called it—serves to increase the cognitive dislocation. By the end of the novel, it seems completely logical that Waymon would think he is literally dying of Custer's wounds, while Mirabeau is exacting righteous revenge against the nineteenth-century genocide.

But of course neither is the real deal. And thus, as the trip reaches Sheridan, Wyoming, where they've decided the Golden West motel is the best deal for a clean room while rehearsing for the big show, the two Texans are already squabbling like an old married couple. There's a surreal element as they try to decide who, or what, is more authentic, and what, if anything, it all means.

The backstory voices from the actual Custer, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, Capt. Keogh, Major Reno, and many others are drawn from actual history, although Duff acknowledges that any resemblance to fact is "purely coincidental." Some of the characters are more well-drawn than others, but together they all work well to provide a context of lost cultures, bravery, hostility and hubris. Custer remains a damn arrogant fool and murderer no matter how you play it.

Still, what is the point of all this play-acting? The director of the tourist extravaganza, Alec Murray, advances his theory to Mirabeau, who now only answers as Eagle Beak:

*"Here's what I believe happened 125 years ago and what we bring back with every reenactment. Back then, when the historical moment happened, the Sioux and the Cheyennes on one side and the soldiers and officers and General Custer himself on the*



Get your  
Texas book  
reviewed in  
Lone Star  
Literary Life.  
Notable,  
quotable,  
professional  
reviews  
on your  
schedule for as  
little as \$249.

*opposing side weren't really battling each other and trying to destroy every last man as they did. No, nun-unh."*

*"No? What where they doing then when all that killing was going on?"*

*"They were playing their parts in a great dramatic production. They were fulfilling their roles and contributing their necessary obligation to the director of the piece and to the writer and the crew putting it all together. It was all fated and therefore—and here's the kicker, Eagle Beak—it was meant to be from the foundation of time. That's why it meant something then and means something today. Do you see what I'm saying?"*

Perhaps not quite at the level of Hamlet's play-within-the-play, but close enough for regional theater.



**LONE STAR LITERARY LIFE** copyright © 2015 Paragraph Ranch LLC • All rights reserved • **CONTACT US**