

# Not Furnishing Factual Answers

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*Robert Trammell, Jack Ruby & The Origins of The Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories.* Introduction by Ben Fountain; afterword by David Searcy. Deep Vellum Publishing, 308pp., \$17 paper.

**R**OBERT TRAMMELL IS AN AVATAR of the Dallas underground. In the introduction to Deep Vellum's new trade paperback edition of Trammell's *Jack Ruby & The Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories* (the title novella was first issued in 1987 as essentially self-published samizdat via Trammell's own Barnburner Press), National Book Award-winner Ben Fountain reveals Trammell as a 1960s wild man inhabiting the 1980s, a sort of Texan Bukowski-Hopper hybrid who at one point squatted in Oslo, Norway, and earlier, while a student at Southern Methodist University, was nearly run down by ultraconservative billionaire and propaganda-meister H.L. Hunt. Trammell spent time in a violent prison for possession of a tiny amount of marijuana, then later served as a fellow at The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. His 2006 obituary (he died fittingly in Old East Dallas) in *The Dallas Morning News* dubs him a "beloved Texas poet whose ancestors helped establish the earliest frontier settlements in East Texas" and whose "work appeared in over 200 magazines including *Southwest Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *The Texas Observer*.

Bob spoke his mind whatever the situation and cut a wide and irreverent swath wherever he went."

Trammell's trippy treatise interpreting Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald as an attempt at performance art initially picked up a readership in conspiracy circles, among assassination buffs mining buried nuggets and alt-truths in increasingly byzantine quarters. If this reminds you of the ever-questioning Nicholas Branch, the CIA operative compiling a secret treatise on the Kennedy assassination in Don DeLillo's acclaimed novel *Libra*, pull up a stool and let's jaw.

I'm in my forties now, a North Texas newbie to the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, and Trammell commands my attention due to his reputation as overlooked *artiste* ("Relatable," the writer deadpans *sotto voce*). As a late gen-Xer, I was in my teens when Oliver Stone's JFK became pop culture's highest-grossing reckoning with the American crime of the century (with all due respect to O.J. and the Lindbergh baby), a wild and speculative swirl of phone-bugging, smoke-filled backrooms, John Candy's Louisiana drawl, Jack Lemmon muttering about Operation Mongoose, Kevin Costner as the bespectacled agitator Jim Garrison, and Donald Sutherland going full-on crazy-wall-guy in a near orgasmic extrapolation about an American coup foisted by Lyndon Johnson and a cabal of ne'er-do-wells, the cigar chomping muckety-mucks "who really run America" like corpulent wizards of Oz.

When asking my students at the University of Texas at Arlington about the defining features of Dallas, almost everybody goes right to football's Cowboys, but only the history buffs and alpha-achievers raise their hands and shout out JFK. Always just those three letters, as if referring to a street, stadium, or airport. Not President Kennedy. No mention of Dealey Plaza, second shooters, or the grassy knoll, and then a *Seinfeld* allusion from their professor that draws little response. Nothing about the larger Kennedy clan or the Zapruder film, Junior's salute or Jackie O's sunglasses. No reference to that lone Catholic POTUS who got himself into the Oval Office by thrashing the less attractive Nixon via television, the handsome young prez who used to shtup Marilyn Monroe and lucked his way out of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Not a "poxed and suppurated Philoctetes," as Christopher Hitchens called Kennedy, whose assassination has, Hitchens argued, "reached an actuarial point of diminishing returns... the colossal images of September 11, 2001, have easily deposed the squalid scenes in Dallas, of the murders of Kennedy and Oswald, which once supplied the bond of a common televised melodramatic 'experience.'"

That melodrama has been wrought into varied forms of postmodern art, from intentionally subversive takes like John Waters's *Eat Your Makeup* (starring Divine in the pink pantsuit and pillbox hat) and Andy Warhol's *Since* (with various "factory girls" and "superstars" playing JFK) to the quasi-camp of Kevin Costner's second go-around in JFK lore, 2000's *Thirteen Days*. Of more recent vintage is *Mad Men*'s presentation, the penultimate episode of Season 3 where Don Draper's workplace is interrupted by news of Kennedy's death ("What the hell is going on?" Don intones), inciting mass-grief solemnity which in mere days turns to full-blown unheld-center chaos invading the Draper home, his wife Betty's afternoon TV viewing punctured by a

scream as she witnesses Ruby's shooting of Oswald and blares out her own "What is going on?", one aimed not at the husband next to her but at the television itself, the medium-message, a palimpsest, kaleidoscope, and vortex.

That triptych is a good way to describe Robert Trammell's *Jack Ruby & The Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories*, particularly the title novella. Reading it, I found it hard not to muse about hysteria on the whole, about Waco and the Koresh compound, the latter's 1993 invasion by the ATF another defining event for my generation and our abiding distrust of governments American and otherwise, or about the hysterical present, where in November of last year, Q-Anoners gathered in Dealey Plaza anticipating the return of the JFK Jr. they believe never died.

I then caught myself wondering who Trammell would be in today's paradigm. Duncan Trussell seems his most likely comp, right down to the name similarity, Trussell the vagabond drug enthusiast, comedian, frequent guest on Joe Rogan's podcast, and co-creator (with Pendleton Ward) of the Netflix animated show *The Midnight Gospel*. Or to push farther towards the extremes, Trammell could be an Alex Jones or an Edward Snowden. Or maybe he'd still be one of those gentle souls misplaced inside a jail.

With "Jack Ruby & the Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas," Trammell's satire, initially published at the height of Reaganism, hit too close to the nerve, a text disruptive to the rhythms of the "heart of Texas," a place where irreverence regarding an American tragedy was "too soon!" Those were more reverent times, and in 1986 Jim Schutze's *The Accommodation: The Politics of Race in an American City* (also now in reprint from Deep Vellum) was dropped by Taylor Publishing Company of Dallas for arguing that the civil rights movement never instantiated itself in Dallas, which Schutze

portrayed as a still-segregated city with an aversion to self-interrogation. Schutze also argued that “Dallas has not yet conceded that Dallas did kill Kennedy, by fostering intolerance and by depriving ordinary citizens of the most important source of sanity in American society—political self-determination.”

Whereas Schutze is an emeritus but still active investigative journalist, reporter, and analyst, Trammell’s work reads to me like that of the classic underappreciated-during-his-lifetime wordsmith. His persona may have been too much that of the bearded and ponytailed wastrel, a literary vandal, a trespasser whose Barthelme-inspired yarn made better sense of a president’s daylight murder than the self-serious truth-seekers in their quests to decipher the Warren Report.

## **“Dallas’s Andy Warhol before Andy Warhol was Andy Warhol” is one of Jack Ruby’s many appellations in Trammell’s novella.**

One thing a reader will notice almost immediately upon perusing *Jack Ruby & the Origins of the Avant-Garde* is that Trammell clearly *likes* the crazies. He opens not with two Jacks and a Lee but with Charley Starkweather and Caril Fugate—those most American of teenage spree killers, as reimagined by renowned Texas filmmaker Terrence Malick in his 1973 debut feature *Badlands*, and also by more famous crossovers like Stephen King, who said he would have become a Starkweather if it weren’t for writing, and Bruce Springsteen, who embodied Charley in the first-person murder ballad title track on 1982’s *Nebraska*.

Another fixation of Trammell’s that is more 1960s and 2020s than 1980s is its intercutting and intertextuality, a Burroughs-ish pasted-together text replete with referentiality that reads as internet-anticipating and Sebaldian. One of the crazies for whom Trammell shows affection is Betty Louise Barry, the murderer of Dallas mafioso “Chicken Louie” Ferrantello (she was his pregnant girlfriend), and let’s not forget the Texan origins of self-made experimental horror, a certain masterpiece about massacres and power tools hatched from the mind of Tobe Hooper in 1974. The true madmen are sometimes subversives and artists, but other times are darkness incarnate. Early in his photo-speckled and multi-fonted text, Trammell appends an eerie blurt at another inimically American madman: “Around that time Richard Speck left Dallas for Chicago where he killed seven nurses. We used to play with him in Tennison Park.”

To go back to those misplaced-and-jailed souls, there is a Dylan-esque refusal to play it straight in Trammell, and a mind like mine wonders if one Bob had a chance to catch the other. Both graduated high school in 1959, and Dylan played at SMU’s Moody Coliseum in September of 1965, his first concert ever with The Hawks (later The Band). Dylan contributed an all-timer to the canon of JFK art in his 17-minute epic “Murder Most Foul,” released in March 2020 during the carceral Covid pandemic lockdowns that initiated the decade. It’s easy to postulate a Dylan who’d cheer Trammell’s chutzpah for painting Jack Ruby as part of the historiographic panorama of American weirdos, a lovable local kook, “an unsaddled hothead with hero ambitions,” a man who tended to almost a dozen dogs and took his favorite, his dachshund Sheba, with him when he went riding off to kill Oswald.

Trammell's book is peppered with political folk, plugged-in rock, and music highbrow and low—everyone from Dylan to Frank Zappa, from Iron Butterfly to The Beatles to Mozart. The mélange reads truest, though, when “all those thirsty country music fans from dry Oak Cliff come pouring over the river to drink, to listen to Bob Wills, Ernest Tubbs, Hank Williams,” and where the title novella's first-person narrator (when he gets a word in edgewise amidst the sketches and poems) goes to interact with the “real cultural life of the city” after issuing his thesis on his subject, the former Jacob Rubenstein: “Jack Ruby Knew No Emotional Plateaus.”

This brilliant section announces Trammell's intentions in an anti-establishment bleat we might now call flash fiction, with Ruby as the invisible hand, a nightclub owner who wanted to go highbrow, “rarely seen at gallery or museum openings. But he played a big part behind the scenes in getting the Museum of Contemporary Arts off the ground. There was a flurry of activity. Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg were seen in town. The Avant-garde in Dallas was bolting quickly to its finest moment.”

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The headlining novella in a book that also traces and traverses—in astute, aware, and intellectual fashion—the city of Dallas and its most esoteric denizens through

twenty-two Tom Waitsian tales originally released as *The Quiet Man Stories* (The Quiet Man was a dive bar named after the 1952 John Ford/John Wayne western), Trammell's is a punk manifesto, one where Jack Ruby consorts with Fluxus-founder Joseph Beuys, flashes back to his vicious upbringing in Chicago, and holds as touchstones both lesser known entities like the Scrap Iron and Junk Handlers Union and enduring icons like Billy the Kid and Al Capone. Ruby would become one of their imitators, and one of the greatest “impressionists” of the twentieth century, the fifty-six-year-old who shot the twenty-four-year-old who shot the president, and he did it under a newspaper on live TV.

“Dallas's Andy Warhol before Andy Warhol was Andy Warhol” is one of Jack Ruby's many appellations in Trammell's novella. “Jack had read a lot about the history of Dallas,” is the introduction to a beaut of a riff on La Reunion, a Utopianist commune from the 1850s, the first communists to settle on the banks of the Trinity River, and “Jack wanted revenge for them.” In *Libra*, DeLillo presents Ruby as a symptom of Dallas itself, a distillation of contradictions and discrepancies, an abuse-surviving bit player who wanted to be a lead on the national stage, the apotheosis of the common man, adopting his middle name, Leon, in tribute to his friend Leon Cooke who had been killed in a labor dispute. Trammell presents Ruby as inevitable, a death silhouette: “Elvis Presley didn't have all that much to do with it. He just took it to the bank. All those Rock 'n Roll visions charged around inside of Jack's brain, his coup at hand. Already known in many International Cities he'd soon be known in the rest.”

Trammell is largely unknown outside of Dallas, but Ben Fountain calls him “an essential American writer” and opens his introduction with a quote by the vanguard

filmmaker Maya Deren. And like Deren's imagery, Trammell's vision of Ruby as performance artist sticks. Its trenchant causticity also conjures up Richard Linklater's filmic debut, 1990 conspiracy-fest *Slacker*, a shoestring Sundance breakthrough for the Austin filmmaker released a year before Oliver Stone's twice-its-size fabulist dream. The avant-garde sometimes goes mainstream, and while this posthumous publication represents one fate for the creator who didn't get much acclaim, Linklater's filmography is Trammell's antipode as much as he seems unlike prestige boomer Stone. From a comic debut about Austin ennui made for less than \$25K to *School of Rock* grossing well over \$100M, one could call his oeuvre uneven, but at his best Linklater evokes real pathos by veering hard away from the sentimental (*Boyhood* and the *Before* trilogy are essential viewing) and he certainly is a wealthy and successful artist in his own lifetime. Had Trammell had more success during his lifetime, perhaps he'd have developed into the mix of experimental and mainstream creator that Linklater has become, or even returned to the subject of Ruby and the Dallas underworld in another guise, similarly to how Oliver Stone recently directed a documentary project titled *JFK Revisited: Through the Looking Glass*.

To allude to a last cinematic spark fired in my Gen X brain by Trammell's writings, it seems apropos to mention the work of a filmmaker that tried his hand at literary insurrection, Harmony Korine (apical American avant-garde wunderkind) in his 1998 bric-a-brac novel *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots*. This may be the single volume I was most reminded of reading Trammell's. In one of Korine's performance art appearances on David Letterman's program, the host says of *Gummo*, "You've assembled a series of very striking, vivid, disturbing impressions." Korine replies, "That's basically my style." *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots* feints

at many things, but one of its core echoes is of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* (edited by Edmund Wilson), particularly the posthumously collected fragments.

Predictable as it is, it comes back to the American dream. Deren, Malick, and Linklater have devoted hours of celluloid to it. Ben Fountain meditates on it in his own career-making opus *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (what's more Dallas, TX than football and the military, two institutions whose pageantry is as irony-primed and self-satirizing as it gets?). I also see Fountain's intro as inflected by "Performance and Persona in the U.S. Avant-Garde: The Case of Maya Deren," published by film scholar Maria Pramaggiore in a 1997 issue of *Cinema Journal* from University of Texas Press. Pramaggiore delves into avant-garde celebrity, stardom, and persona—the self-made subversive, the self-publicizing indie artist, the uncompromised chronicler of the crooked. She quotes Manny Farber's thoughts on Deren's "ambition, belief in her own genius, love for esthetic verbalizing" as Deren pushed along a colony of artists on a tiny budget, quite like the indie-publishing endeavors of Trammell's new imprint Deep Vellum and its executive director Will Evans, a mustachioed maestro self-described as "award-winning publisher, writer, translator, bookstore owner, and advocate for the literary arts."

Deren's works are inspired by poetry and dance, and the dynamism of this edition of Trammell's shaggy majesty (what Farber famously called "termite art") entrances in its display of the best aspects of erratic art house films, improvisatory poetry readings, or semi-pro dance recitals. It deflects narrative and refuses to suborn image to story. Through constant intercutting and rearrangement, Trammell is consistently partial, always endeavoring. His mannerism and his repeated, ritualized, almost fetishized subject matter, in its evocations of Deren,

makes Fountain's introductory comparison a nearly perfect one. The reigning perspective? Outsider Art.

"Deren acts as the dreaming protagonist whose body is both divided and multiplied; her movements are repeated, and certain inconsistencies arise which are incapable of recuperation in the figure of the initial dream," Pramaggiore writes of Deren's most influential film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a work where "repetition and symbolism displace narrative." A shattered-mirror cinema is what the shards on display in *Jack Ruby & The Origins of the Avant-Garde in Dallas and Other Stories* reflect, rearrange, and reconstitute, giving this underread writer's contributions a remembrance, in destabilized times indeed, both within Texas and without. Trammell merits special consideration in a season where Steven Pedigo argues that Texas has become the bellwether of America, unseating California from its long-held post, and where Elon Musk (whether you think him the second coming of Ford, Barnum, or Madoff) has recently moved

Tesla HQ. Scores more have relocated, the locals constantly tell me, for reasons political or economic, as seekers of freedoms or of jobs.

Texas has a history of iconoclastic scribes, from MacArthur genius art critic Dave Hickey and OG lit blogger Maud Newton to more canonical ones like Cormac McCarthy, Katherine Anne Porter, and Larry McMurtry. *Texas Literary Outlaws: Six Writers in the Sixties and Beyond* by Steven L. Davis covers half a dozen regional male writers while Kimberly King Parsons, writing in LitHub, recommends half a dozen ladies of letters. A last observation then about stardom in the literary world, be it poetry or prose, fiction or not-so-fictional—these are exceptions. Far more often for the truly counter-cultural artist, acknowledgement, or even publication, comes after the creator's death. Trammell would be 83 if he were alive today, and the literary scene would be in a better state for it—as *Jack Ruby & The Origins of The Avant-Garde in Dallas* proves, his art was not a safe or cautious one, and risk-taking art is something we face a dearth of in all formats in the present day. A