

THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING
EPIC MASTERPIECE OF THE AMERICAN WEST

LONESOME LEAD DOVE



LARRY

A Novel by the Author of
Dead Man's Walk

MCMURTRY

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WHEN AUGUSTUS CAME OUT on the porch the blue pigs were eating a rattlesnake—not a very big one. It had probably just been crawling around looking for shade when it ran into the pigs. They were having a fine tug-of-war with it, and its rattling days were over. The sow had it by the neck, and the shoat had the tail.

“You pigs git,” Augustus said, kicking the shoat. “Head on down to the creek if you want to eat that snake.” It was the porch he begrudged them, not the snake. Pigs on the porch just made things hotter, and things were already hot enough. He stepped down into the dusty yard and walked around to the springhouse to get his jug. The sun was still high, sullied in the sky like a mule, but Augustus had a keen eye for sun, and to his eye the long light from the west had taken on an encouraging slant.

Evening took a long time getting to Lonesome Dove, but when it came it was a comfort. For most of the hours of the day—and most of the months of the year—the sun had the town trapped deep in dust, far out in the chaparral flats, a heaven for snakes and horned toads, roadrunners and stinging lizards, but a hell for pigs and Tennesseans. There was not

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even a respectable shade tree within twenty or thirty miles; in fact, the actual location of the nearest decent shade was a matter of vigorous debate in the offices—if you wanted to call a roofless barn and a couple of patched-up corrals offices—of the Hat Creek Cattle Company, half of which Augustus owned.

His stubborn partner, Captain W. F. Call, maintained that there was excellent shade as close as Pickles Gap, only twelve miles away, but Augustus wouldn't allow it. Pickles Gap was if anything a more worthless community than Lonesome Dove. It had only sprung up because a fool from north Georgia named Wesley Pickles had gotten himself and his family lost in the mesquites for about ten days. When he finally found a clearing, he wouldn't leave it, and Pickles Gap came into being, mainly attracting travelers like its founder, which is to say people too weak-willed to be able to negotiate a few hundred miles of mesquite thicket without losing their nerve.

The springhouse was a little lumpy adobe building, so cool on the inside that Augustus would have been tempted to live in it had it not been for its popularity with black widows, yellow jackets and centipedes. When he opened the door he didn't immediately see any centipedes but he did immediately hear the nervous buzz of a rattlesnake that was evidently smarter than the one the pigs were eating. Augustus could just make out the snake, coiled in a corner, but decided not to shoot it; on a quiet spring evening in Lonesome Dove, a shot could cause complications. Everybody in town would hear it and conclude either that the Comanches were down from the plains or the Mexicans up from the river. If any of the customers of the Dry Bean, the town's one saloon, happened to be drunk or unhappy—which was very likely—they would probably run out into the street and shoot a Mexican or two, just to be on the safe side.

At the very least, Call would come stomping up from the lots, only to be annoyed to discover it had just been a snake. Call had no respect whatsoever for snakes, or for anyone who stood aside for snakes. He treated rattlers like gnats, disposing of them with one stroke of whatever tool he had in hand. "A man that slows down for snakes might as well walk," he

often said, a statement that made about as much sense to an educated man as most of the things Call said.

Augustus held to a more leisurely philosophy. He believed in giving creatures a little time to think, so he stood in the sun a few minutes until the rattler calmed down and crawled out a hole. Then he reached in and lifted his jug out of the mud. It had been a dry year, even by the standards of Lonesome Dove, and the spring was just springing enough to make a nice mud puddle. The pigs spent half their time rooting around the springhouse, hoping to get into the mud, but so far none of the holes in the adobe was big enough to admit a pig.

The damp burlap the jug was wrapped in naturally appealed to the centipedes, so Augustus made sure none had sneaked under the wrapping before he uncorked the jug and took a modest swig. The one white barber in Lonesome Dove, a fellow Tennessean named Dillard Brawley, had to do his barbering on one leg because he had not been cautious enough about centipedes. Two of the vicious red-legged variety had crawled into his pants one night and Dillard had got up in a hurry and had neglected to shake out the pants. The leg hadn't totally rotted off, but it had rotted sufficiently that the family got nervous about blood poisoning and persuaded he and Call to saw it off.

For a year or two Lonesome Dove had had a real doctor, but the young man had lacked good sense. A *vaquero* with a loose manner that everybody was getting ready to hang at the first excuse anyway passed out from drink one night and let a blister bug crawl in his ear. The bug couldn't find its way out, but it could move around enough to upset the *vaquero*, who persuaded the young doctor to try and flush it. The young man was doing his best with some warm salt water, but the *vaquero* lost his temper and shot him. It was a fatal mistake on the *vaquero's* part: someone blasted his horse out from under him as he was racing away, and the incensed citizenry, most of whom were nearby at the Dry Bean, passing the time, hung him immediately.

Unfortunately no medical man had taken an interest in the town since, and Augustus and Call, both of whom had coped with their share of wounds, got called on to do such surgery as

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