

# H. L. Davis – Bard of the Oregon Landscape

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What is one of the best-kept secrets in The Dalles? No, not the brothels, not the Chinese opium dens, not the site of the last public hanging in the U.S. But rather that The Dalles was the home of Harold Lenoir Davis, Oregon's only Pulitzer-Prize winner for Literature!

## Biography

**D**avis was born on October 18, 1894, at Nonpareil, in the Umpqua River Valley. During his early childhood, the family moved frequently as his father found work as a teacher, arriving in Antelope in 1906, and finally settling in The Dalles in 1908, where Harold graduated from high school. His father became county assessor in 1912, and Harold became his deputy, a position he held off and on during the years he lived in The Dalles. During his final two years he saved nearly \$1,500, and took off for Stanford University. He quickly discovered that his money would not get him through even one term, and promptly returned home. He held various short-term jobs, with the Pacific Power and Light Company and the First National Bank in The Dalles, as a railroad timekeeper and with a survey party near Mt. Adams, and served briefly in the military in 1918.

His first group of poems was published in April 1919 in *Poetry*. In November of that year this group of poems was judged winner of the magazine's Levinson Prize of \$200. His poems continued to appear in *Poetry* throughout the 1920s. He also sold a couple of poems to *American Mercury*, whose editor, H. L. Mencken, suggested that he ought to try something in prose.

In 1926, Davis had privately published, together with James Stevens, a small booklet entitled *Status Rerum: A Manifesto Upon the Present Condition of Northwest Literature*. Although only about 200 copies were printed, the booklet attracted the attention of the Northwest literary establishment by its bluntness and heavy invective against a number of literary figures.

By 1928, the taxpayers of Wasco County began complaining about their assessments, as well as other county problems, and Davis' father was voted out office, just after Harold had married Marion Lay, a daughter of the town milliner. She had been working at the *Seattle Times* after graduation from the University of Oregon, and the Davises planned to live there after Harold had finished working on the assessment rolls for his father. They moved to Seattle in August of 1928. Here they found a nucleus of congenial friends, writers and artists, and Harold increased his efforts at writing. His first prose efforts were sketches of The Dalles and Eastern Oregon – picturesque, but not complimentary – which were published in *American Mercury*.

In 1932, Davis received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and left the Puget Sound area for two years in Mexico. There, fully committed to writing, Davis completed *Honey in the Horn*, for which he received the Harper Prize – a \$7,500 cash award – for the best first novel of 1935. The following spring he was



awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Characteristically, Davis did not go to New York to receive the prize, saying he did not want to make himself a subject for exhibit.

The Davises bought a small “ranch” near Napa, California. Davis continued to work on novels, but wrote short stories as a primary source of income. His next novel, *Harp of a Thousand Strings*, appeared only in 1941. This period of low production reflected the crises in his life – a personal one, resulting in divorce in 1942, and a professional one, with his publisher Harper and Brothers, a long-running dispute apparently over royalty payments. His remaining books were published by William Morrow and Company. Over the next ten years, he published four novels, a collection of earlier short stories, and a number of shorter pieces, including movie-script projects. His fourth novel, *Winds of Morning*, was highly acclaimed and became a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. With his marriage to Elizabeth Martin del Campo in 1953, his personal life also came back on track. However, now health became a problem. As a result of arteriosclerosis, his left leg was amputated, and although he survived the operation, he never completely recovered, and was able to write only through the pain. In 1960 he suffered a fatal heart attack in San Antonio, Texas.

## Writings

**T**he first poems Davis submitted for publication were received enthusiastically by Harriet Monroe, editor of the magazine *Poetry*. The group of eleven poems was published under the title “Primapara” in the April 1919 issue; and immediately brought a letter of praise from Carl Sandburg. Over the next ten years, Davis published more poems in both *Poetry* and *American Mercury*.



Davis at 17

The same themes that later characterize his prose are also found in the poetry: ironic views of death, the fleeting nature of life and the isolation of man, portrayed against the natural landscape. Davis’s poetry also illustrated his breadth of knowledge. While Harriet Monroe characterized Davis as “a pastoral poet of the great western ranges,” his biographer Paul Bryant states that “he had the same depth of cultural background as those American poets not born so far west.”

His first experiments with prose were short pieces – sketches and short stories. The sketches were generally historical accounts of people, towns, and areas during pioneer times, or the period immediately following. Among the first was the sketch “A Town in Eastern Oregon,” a rather irreverent history of The Dalles, which “stirred up quite a hellabaloo among the newspapers of the region” when it was published. Apparently, the sharp commentary, while tailored to fit the dramatic structure of his sketch and humorous development of his point, came too close to reality to be ignored or laughed away. The piece, written in 1928, closes with “Things will get better... Somebody may strike petroleum in the hills; maybe a syndicate will come along and build a ten-million-dollar power plant on the rapids....”

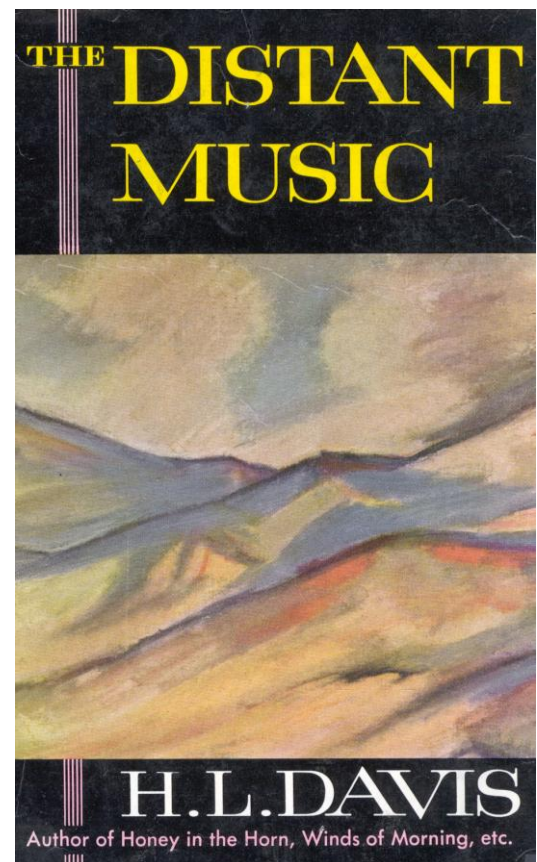
Between 1928 and 1941, Davis made a large portion of his living from short story writing, many of which were sold to *Collier’s* and *Saturday Evening Post*. Some have been reprinted in the collections *Kettle of Fire* and *Team Bells Woke Me*. His first short story to be published under his own name, “Old

Man Isbell's Wife," is remarkably mature and polished work. In this story, Davis "focuses on a pair of grotesques: a doddering, senile old man who can neither button his fly nor wipe the food out of his whiskers, and a hugely fat, bewhiskered young woman," but treats them with dignity and without sentimentality.

Davis best known work, *Honey in the Horn*, is a "coming of age" story, set in rural Oregon in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The initial reception of the novel was very mixed, ranging from high praise to abrupt dismissal; even the praise was often for its Western local color. Davis did not consider himself a "regional" writer, but as a "serious writer about the human condition who uses regions with which he was acquainted as settings for his work. *New Yorker* critic Clifford Fadiman attacked the novel on many grounds, not the least that "the novel had too many eccentrics...merely presenting degeneracy and violence to make his readers laugh." Not all reviewers were as misled as Fadiman. Robert Penn Warren saw in the work the humorous style of Mark Twain, but realized that Davis was not primarily a humorist: "humor is simply the basic way which he asserts his objectivity and his control of the material." The best endorsement of the novel was, of course, being awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Several years were to pass before Davis's next novel, *Harp of a Thousand Strings*, was published and won a number of serious reviews. It is the only one of Davis's novels to use openly historical material, a foreign setting, and a more formal style. As a result, the novel is less vivid and immediate than his best writings. *Beulah Land* returns to the American West, and is a good adventure story, but quieter in tone and less humorous than *Honey*. Most feel that Davis's next-to-last novel, *Winds of Morning*, is his best. It returns not only to Oregon for its setting, but also to some of the basic themes and folk patterns, dialect and ironic humor that is characteristic of *Honey in the Horn*. Along with the themes of coming-of-age and landscape, it is a love story and a murder mystery. Perhaps more than in the other works, his descriptions of the landscape help to develop and reinforce the story.

Davis' last novel, *The Distant Music*, is a family saga about several generations of the Mulock family and their settling in Oregon. Davis was never completely satisfied with the picture of The Dalles that he presented in "A Town in Eastern Oregon," and felt that a "more deeply-studied thesis" was needed. In *The Distant Music*, Davis attempts to present some "deeper truths": what happened to the hopes of the first settlers and succeeding generations. It is not a pleasant novel, and lacks the frequent wry humor of his most successful works. This somber tone elicited some negative reviews. The most perceptive review noted the connection between the novel and the earlier sketch, and recognized the land as the "motionless center" of the novel – "all motion radiates outward from the land and is drawn back to it, and the central characters' movement away from the land decreases as the novel progresses." And as the pioneers settle down, they begin to "entertain such homemade illusions as Progress, Betterment and civic Virtue."



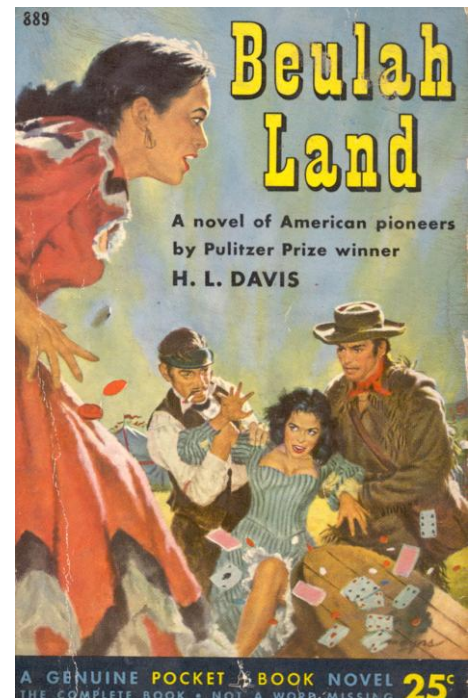
## Chronology

- 1894** Harold Lenoir Davis born October 18 near Nonpareil, Oregon [Rone's Mill] to James Alexander and Ruth Bridge Davis. Father was a county schoolteacher.
- 1906-1908** Family lives in Antelope, Oregon. Summer of 1907, Harold works for *Antelope Herald*.
- 1908** Family moves to The Dalles, Oregon.
- 1912** Harold graduates from The Dalles High School.
- 1912-1916** Deputy county assessor, Wasco County, Oregon
- 1917** Survey work for U.S. General Land Office. Tries to enroll in Stanford University, but finds funds insufficient, returns to The Dalles.
- 1918** Drafted into army. Serves at Fort McDowell, California. Discharged in December.
- 1919** "Primapara" poems published in April issue of *Poetry*. Wins Helen Haire Levinson prize.
- 1919-1928** Works in or near The Dalles at a variety of jobs.
- 1926** Publishes *Status Rerum* with James Stevens.
- 1928** Marries Marion Lay May 25. Moves to Bainbridge Island, Washington.
- 1929** Publishes first prose fiction under own name, "Old Man Isbell's Wife," in the February *American Mercury*.
- 1932** Receives Guggenheim Exchange Fellowship to Mexico.
- 1935** First novel *Honey in the Horn*, wins Harper Novel Prize.
- 1936** Receives Pulitzer Prize for Literature.
- 1937** Moves to Napa, California.
- 1943** Harold and Marion Lay Davis divorced.
- 1953** Marries Elizabeth Tonkin Martin del Campo, June 2 in San Antonio, Texas.
- 1960** Dies October 31 in San Antonio after two heart attacks.

## Selected Bibliography

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- The Selected Poems of H. L. Davis*, introduction by Thomas Hornsby Ferril, Boise, Ahsahta Press, 1978
- Davis Country: H.L. Davis's Northwest*, Edited by Brian Booth & Glen A. Love, Corvallis, OSU Press, 2010

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