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**Review of *Sacagawea's Nickname: Essays on the American West*  
By Larry McMurtry**

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*Sacagawea's Nickname: Essays on the American West.* By Larry McMurtry. New York: New York Review of Books, 2001. xiv + 178 pp. \$19.95.

In these essays, originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, Larry McMurtry examines Western writers as mythmakers. Overall, however, his most interesting pieces are those in which he pays tribute to authors who have influenced his own work or have left behind literary treasures he finds moving and wise.

One of the essays is devoted to historian Angie Debo and her influence on McMurtry's development as a writer. As a youth he accidentally found *The Road to Disappearance* (1941), her history of the Creek Indians, and discovered that Debo, from neighboring Oklahoma, had made for herself a life devoted to writing. Her example taught McMurtry that, despite the limited opportunities in the Great Plains region, one could organize one's life around writing. Moreover, the straightforward, unsentimental manner in which she narrated her tragic histories of the dispossession of the Indians of the Five Tribes left an enduring impression on him. This essay is his way of repaying her for those gifts.

In another essay, McMurtry celebrates an "American epic," *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, edited by Gary E. Moulton and assistant editor Thomas Dunlay. These volumes, published by the University of Nebraska Press, now permit Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to do what the best writers have always done—immerse readers in their adventures along the trail. McMurtry provides guideposts for those willing to take that journey across America.

In "Sacagawea's Nickname," the volume's title essay, McMurtry explores the fragmentary evidence of the relationship between William Clark and Sacagawea, whom Clark nicknamed "Janey." The two, McMurtry believes, developed a strong bond. We know little about Sacagawea, but what we do know, McMurtry notes, is largely because of Clark's references to her and his struggle to record her name phonetically so that she would survive in history.

This volume will appeal to a wide range of Western enthusiasts and those interested in good literature, whatever the region. McMurtry's insights are always penetrating, but his tribute to the poet-novelist Janet Lewis deserves careful reading. He studies her as an author over time and lays bare the unflinching honesty and subtlety she brought to both her poetry and her fiction and the tragic themes she explored. *Sacagawea's Nickname* is provocative in some parts, humorous in others, but always rewarding concerning those writers who have helped to shape our views of a region central to America's definition of itself.

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