

Defender of the Texas Frontier

David R. Gross

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An artful take on Texas history, Defender of the Texas Frontier fleshes out a legend.

David R. Gross's dramatic retelling of a historical legend, *Defender of the Texas Frontier*, captures an era as it follows a young man's rise to hero status.

Nineteen-year-old John Coffey Hays missed fighting in the battle for Texas's independence. Full of vim and vigor, Hays joins up with a ranging patrol to defend the Texas border. So begins his storied career, which spans close to two decades. Along the way, Hays leads a ragtag group of men and forges an elite squad known as Rangers. Hays and his Rangers defend the US while skirmishing with both Mexicans and local native tribes. As his exploits become legend, Hays continues to affect change in Texas that ripples outward.

Hays's story is entwined with the Texas Rangers's origins. Known as the toughest and most judicious lawmen in history, the Rangers are shown starting out as a rough group, but becoming a power to be reckoned with. With strong attention to historical detail, the narrative shows how Hays learns and evolves while helping his men do likewise.

The book's tone blends textbook dryness with drama and reads like an embellished historical document. The story unfolds through two primary perspectives: Hays's, and that of his childhood friend, John. The focus shifts back and forth between the two, with highlights given to other important characters, too. These character transitions round out the narrative, allowing each character to give it their own touch. Hays's commander and the commander of the tribal army are two of these: Hays's commander comments on tactics, military prowess, and his personal life, while the tribal army commander highlights the respect between the Texans and the tribe as both defend their lands. It's an interesting dichotomy that enriches the narrative.

Frequent dialogue tags are almost unnecessary because of the distinctiveness of the characters' voices, whose subtle vocal tics make their discussions engaging and individualized: one character, despite being able to converse in fluent Spanish, speaks Spanish with a southern drawl, and words like "Mexicans" come out as "mesicans."

This fictionalized version of Jack Hays uses key events from his life to build up the legend, enjoyably following him from his youth into his established adulthood. It is an artful take on Texas history.

Defender of the Texas Frontier fleshes out a Texas legend with aplomb, setting him in the midst of an engaging historical adventure.

JOHN M. MURRAY (July 29, 2019)

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