

## Saving Texas

**Nancy Stancill**

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*This tense drama harkens back to the glory days of print journalism, when a young reporter with a nose for news could make a difference.*

In Nancy Stancill's fast-moving crime drama, *Saving Texas*, Annie Price, a newspaper reporter, finds herself ensnared in a Texas secession conspiracy that makes for a tense tale of intrigue and murder.

Thirtysomething Price is a go-to reporter for the struggling *Houston Times*, doing her best work with profiles of movers and shakers. A phone call from her wannabe boyfriend Jake Satterfield, a state legislator who is separated from his wife, gives Annie a lead on charismatic west Texas rancher, politician, and secessionist Tom Marr, a man intent on "saving Texas from the corruption and stupidity in Washington." However, Annie soon learns that behind Marr's intelligent and reasonable facade lies a nest of conspirators willing to kill for a Republic of Texas, and their conspiracy may even reach into her newsroom.

Stancill sketches an intense plot, ratcheting up the tension while relating the pressures of the print-news business, which are aggravated as corporate bean counters arrive to focus on the bottom line rather than breaking news. Annie soldiers on in that gloomy atmosphere as other hard-working veteran reporters and editors are laid off. Though the action is intense when it occurs on computer screens and one-on-one interviews, it becomes rushed during the violent confrontations. Dialogue flows naturally and conversationally, which moves the story forward.

Stancill brings Texas to life, illustrating intimate knowledge of bustling Houston and an appreciation for the endless vistas of west Texas. Authenticity of place is found throughout the narrative, from bars and seedy motels to the halls of power in Austin and the Hispanic culture of San Antonio.

The characters comprise a complex group, and the villains are fully formed. Marr is a naive romantic trapped in his illusions of Texas as the new Camelot—and caught up in the corrupt machinations of two other characters, Dan Riggins and Ed Gonzales. Riggins is right out of the Book of Villains: a CIA agent on the cusp of retirement who is organizing a military-influenced security corporation; he's a fascist in all but name. Gonzales, Mexican-national-turned-Texan and president of a community college, has built an off-the-books distance-learning program with Riggins's help to finance the Marr campaign.

Most interesting among the cast is Alicia, a sociopathic killer who was once a member of Peru's Shining Path guerrilla movement, and is now Riggins's lover. While Price evolves into a stronger, more intelligent woman, her initial portrayal as a good reporter who's a hard-drinking, bed-hopping good girl at heart is dissatisfying. Price seems too smart and sophisticated to be careless and stupid about her personal life. Even as she becomes stronger and more confident, she clings to her romance with self-absorbed Satterfield, a man she seems attracted to solely because of his looks and superficial personality traits.

Fans of crime fiction will enjoy *Saving Texas*, a tense drama that harkens back to the glory days of print journalism,

when a young reporter with a notebook and a nose for news could make a difference.

GARY PRESLEY (February 10, 2014)

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