

The Son by Philipp Meyer in “pasatiempo,” in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, August 15, 2013

“Epic” describes Philipp Meyer’s *The Son* in spades. This stunning saga of a five-generation clan — shaped by the land, its warring factions, and the sweep and detritus of Texas history — is a tour de force. It’s as if William Faulkner decided to write Edna Ferber’s Texas-family tale *Giant* in the style of *Absalom, Absalom!* The storyline is tantalizing. Meyer unravels the family’s past by alternating the recollections of four characters, whose actions profoundly affect the final outcome. The reminiscences of patriarch Eli McCullough bracket those of his son Peter, great-granddaughter Jeanne Anne, and great-great grandson Ulises.

Eli is a true son of the Republic of Texas, the first child born there on March 2, 1836, when Texas’ Declaration of Independence from Mexico was signed. His pioneering father, Armstrong, an early Texas Ranger, is an able-bodied Scot with a straight back and hard hands. His Castilian-born mother, Natalie Diaz, is thought to be an octoroon.

Considered “close to perfect” by his father, Eli kills the largest mountain lion in Blanco County at the age of 12. His older brother, Martin, writes unsent letters to Ralph Waldo Emerson. The young scholar hopes to attend Harvard and speaks English, French, Spanish, and German, reflecting the Babel that was Texas at the time. In 1849, while Armstrong is pursuing horse thieves, Comanches raid his homestead. Their “papal thoroughness” includes capturing the two boys to become slaves. They also torture and rape Armstrong’s wife and beautiful 17-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. Both subsequently die. After three days in captivity, Martin also dies. Eli not only endures captivity; he prevails. He comes of age among the Comanches and learns hunting, riding, fighting, tracking, and survival skills. During his two-year captivity, he wins respect as a great warrior and talent. Later he draws on those skills as a Texas Ranger and Confederate brevet colonel. Living to be 100, Eli is lionized, revered by Tejanos and regularly visited by Native Americans.

Eli’s son Phineas attains the rank of railroad commissioner, said to be “more powerful than the Governor,” an office he seeks in 1917. Eli’s youngest son, Peter, who disgraces the family, is poetic, like his uncle Martin. Eli deems Peter’s only surviving son, Charles, a fool. The fourth generation’s Jonas, Jeanne Anne’s older brother, fulfills Martin’s dream of education in the East by graduating from Princeton. “Jeannie,” he tells his sister, “everything we were taught was a lie or a bad joke.” Ironically, it is Jeanne Anne who inherits Eli’s business acumen. She significantly increases the family’s wealth and holdings after her father’s profligate mismanagement. Eli had recognized “certainty” in her as a child and predicted she would be something. *Time* twice features her on its cover. Of the 21st-century descendants, Ulises, the youngest to speak, ingenuously pursues an unattainable goal. His cousins Susan and Thomas, Jeanne Anne’s children, are wastrels and never would have earned Eli’s respect. They don’t know how to work.

Meyer's dead-eye fix on 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century events and cultures backlights the McCullough fortune. The flags of Spain, France, Mexico, Texas itself, the Confederacy, and the United States that fly over Texas virulently color its history, as does conflict. The atrocity upon which the plot revolves triggers terrible tension and violence between Texans and Mexicans. Though not cited specifically, the Texas Bandit War of 1910 to 1918, when Mexico tried to reclaim American border states, hunkers in the background. "Sometimes I wish there was another way to live here," a McCullough neighbor laments. As the oil industry grows, along with McCullough interests, Jeanne Anne donates \$20,000 to Lyndon Johnson's first campaign for the U.S. Senate. In her later years, she negotiates with Mideast oil sheiks. Despite her success, rampant male chauvinism denies her the recognition she deserves for her business savvy. Worse, her male peers humiliate her at one of their social get-togethers. She knows "liberals would cheer her death."

The Son clearly demonstrates how a well-written, thoroughly researched work of fiction illuminates the past. And it also demonstrates how family tragedy can be revisited on succeeding generations. The McCullough Texas dynasty is characterized by violence, brutality, and rapacious exploitation of resources and peoples, driven by greed and the lust for power. There was still "something primitive" in Texas, Jeanne Anne notes. The land is thirsty. When John F. Kennedy is assassinated in 1963, the state is still home to Texans who had witnessed Indians scalping their parents.

"No land was ever acquired honestly in the history of the earth," Eli maintains. An outstanding novelist has tilled this fertile ground.