



Why I Stopped Signing My Books

Readers of Max Apple will perhaps recall a wonderful story called "Free Agents" in which the organs of the body, oppressed by their slave-like relationship to a personality they don't wholly respect, decide to become free agents, like baseball players sometimes do.

Those who, like myself, have had coronary by-pass surgery, will find Max Apple's story not clever fantasy but sober realism. Every year, as the anniversary of my surgery approaches, I experience about six weeks of extreme agitation: muscle, bone, organ, tissue remember; they want it made clear that what happened in 1991 had better not happen again. This protest that I annually ride out is not born in the head; it comes from deep inside. Now that I have lived with it for 11 years I see it is not particularly surprising that sometime around 1987-88, my right hand decided to stop signing my books—or, at least, to stop signing them legibly.

In recent years, a number of booksellers have devoted a good deal of not particularly gracious copy to my "legible" signatures. You would think that I had only been able to perform the supremely difficult act of signing my name clearly only five or six times in my life.

Oh, please! I signed my name clearly for more than a quarter century, from the beginning of my career in 1961 until the post-*Lonesome Dove* deluge in 1987 or so. Those last were vexing years; my signature certainly deteriorated, and yet my right hand struggled on until a book tour I took with my collaborator Diana Ossana for our novel *Zeke and Ned*. We were, I believe, in Oklahoma City when my right hand suddenly had enough. It became a free agent, consenting only to perform a single jerk, producing a mark on the flyleaf that rather resembled a triangle.

Since 1997 when this occurred, I've been careful not to ask too much of my right hand. It will, if not hurried, produce very decent signatures, perhaps as many as five in a

Selected anonymous bookseller descriptions

McMurtry rarely signs books any longer. These are becoming more rare each day!

A wonderful, early inscription, neatly written and with every word, including the signature, clearly legible.

1st edition of his first book, with an early inscription (i.e. legible) by McMurtry

First Edition and inscribed by McMurtry in a very legible hand. This is a very early signature.

The inscription and signature are very legible, unlike his later scribble.

McMurtry has crossed out his name on the title page and autographed the book above (in his early neat hand).

Signed by the author on the front free endpaper in his early hand in which virtually all of the letters of his name are in evidence.

Signed by McMurtry in an entirely legible (and lovely) early hand, most uncommon thus.

day. Mass signings it won't do, and if I push it much beyond five or six signatures it's apt to produce a flash of temperament and start making triangles again.

As far as rarity goes, it is the triangles, not the legible signatures, that booksellers ought to be looking for.

I suspect, now that I've had five years in which to think about it, that my right hand was more moral than I and perceived the corruption in contemporary book signing quicker than I did. Until *Lonesome Dove*, the public valued me as a writer. Because of that book—the *Gone with the Wind* of the West—I moved into the sports-hero category. Before *Lonesome Dove* people came for the books; now they only come for the signature, hustling me as they might hustle a ball player leaving a ball park.

But I'm not a ball player, and my worst book is a better thing than the best sports card. Or so I believe.

In part to spare my hand, but in the main to avoid book buyers of the sports-card mentality, I have sent all my books out of my bookshop. I do still sign a few, for family, for old friends, for occasional supplicants. I sign a limited number of each new book for Julie and Cody Ressel of Three Dog Books, my neighbors in the book town.

I have signed many thousands of books—probably at least 30,000. And the more I think about it, the more wrong it seems. For the signature slowly but steadily slides attention away from the one thing

that really deserves it: the book—that is, the creation—itself. The creation may be good or it may be bad, but no signature, legible or otherwise, can increase its meaning one whit. **Basta!** ■

↳ *Larry McMurtry, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, is the author of 23 novels, two collections of essays, two memoirs and more than 30 screenplays. He lives and sells books in Archer City, Texas.*