



The Kings of Big Spring: God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream

Bryan Mealer

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A saga of family, fortune, faith in Texas, where blood is bond and oil is king...

In 1892, Bryan Mealer's great-grandfather leaves the Georgia mountains and heads west into Texas, looking for wealth and adventure in the raw and open country. But his luck soon runs out. Beset by drought, the family loses their farm just as the dead pastures around them give way to one of the biggest oil booms in American history. They eventually settle in the small town of Big Spring, where fast fortunes are being made from its own reserves of oil. For the next two generations, the Mealers live on the margins of poverty, laboring in the cotton fields and on the drilling rigs that sprout along the flatland, weathering dust and wind, booms and busts, and tragedies that scatter them like tumbleweed. After embracing Pentecostalism during the Great Depression, they rely heavily on their faith to steel them against hardship and despair. But for young Bobby Mealer, the author's father, religion is only an agent for rebellion.

In the winter of 1981, when the author is seven years old, Bobby receives a call from an old friend with a simple question, "How'd you like to be a millionaire?"

Twenty-six, and with a wife and three kids, Bobby had left his hometown to seek a life removed from the blowing dust and oil fields, and to find spiritual peace. But now Big Spring's streets are flooded again with roughnecks, money, and sin. Boom chasers pour in from the busted factory towns in the north. Drilling rigs rise like timber along the pastures, and poor men become millionaires overnight.

Grady Cunningham, Bobby's friend, is one of the newly-minted kings of Big Spring. Loud and flamboyant, with a penchant for floor-length fur coats, Grady pulls Bobby and his young wife into his glamorous orbit. While drilling wells for Grady's oil company, they fly around on private jets and embrace the honky-tonk high life of Texas oilmen. But beneath the Rolexes and Rolls Royce cars is a reality as dark as the crude itself. As Bobby soon discovers, his return to Big Spring is a backslider's journey into a spiritual wilderness, and one that could cost him his life.

A masterwork of memoir and narrative history, *The Kings of Big Spring* is an indelible portrait of fortune and ruin as big as Texas itself. And in telling the story of four generations of his family, Mealer also tells the story of America came to be.

The Kings of Big Spring: God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream Details


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From Reader Review The Kings of Big Spring: God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream for online ebook

Linda Marie Marsh says

HEAD WEST YOUNG MAN!

Many heeded that call, either out of necessity, curiosity or greed. Bryan Mealer tracked down his family history for generations, and did so in an amazingly readable way. It wasn't the least bit depressing, instead it was REAL life, and told how his predecessors coped. The guts, determination, the flaws and the familial love is what this book is about.

I was addicted to the tv shows Hell On Wheels and Longmire.....will patiently wait for the Kings to become a series!

Allen Patterson says

Being employed in a job within the oil industry and having relatives employed presently and in the past was enough to make me interested in this book. I'd like to thank FLATIRON Books for publishing this book by Bryan Mealer and putting it on Goodreads Giveaway. I am thankful that I got to win an ARC of this book. This was my first Mealer book and it left me hungry for more. I loved the old tidbits of the history of Big Spring. I know there has been a lot of families that have had a rough go of it though the generations, especially if you go back to the days of the Great Depression, some not as bad- some worse. What amazes me was Mealer's ability to weave an epic story through it all.

Pam Mooney says

Amazing! I am so impressed that this author was able to follow his family back 4 generations. It is a true treasure of family history as well as American history. So lucky to have this chronical to share. Although a memoir of one family's place in history it is so much more. It reads like a novel and is a true story of an American experience. Also well documented with a bibliography of interviews, newspapers, and historical facts within the book. Many may want to know more and they will be able to do so easily. A good read.

Jordan says

It seems that every family should have an appointed "family memoir" and Mealer has done this in a way that may be a genre unto itself. There are successive eye-opening scenes of the gritty and the raw alongside a fine tracking of historical context. Yet, there are sparks of hope throughout that keep the pages turning. As I read this book, I couldn't help but think, again and again, of Tolstoy's starting line in Anna Karenina: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Mealer's family memoir is likely grittier than most, but it sheds light on the ripple effect of little decisions leading to deep internal family devastation, and I imagine that many of us have family legacies and lore that may even compare.

Jessica says

I received an ARC through Goodreads Giveaways!

The Kings of Big Spring: God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream by Bryan Mealer is boring. I'm reminded of Twenty One Pilots song lyrics in "Stressed Out" that read: "Sometimes a certain smell will take me back to when I was young. How come I'm never able to identify where it's coming from? I'd make a candle out of it, if I ever found it. Try to sell it, never sell out of it, I'd probably only sell one. It'd be to my brother, cause we have the same nose, same clothes, home grown, ..." only Mealer did that writing a book about his family's history. Luckily for Mealer, he has a rather large and extended family spread out across America and they are Mealer's target audience in The Kings of Big Spring.

For the rest of us NOT related to the Mealers, there are scattered interesting moments detailing white poverty over two generations, and a combination of luck, wealth, alcohol and drugs, but 350+ pages? That was abusive to this reader. I had to read lightly because there were too many names of too many people that existed on the periphery of the story and were ultimately NOT important to anything to advance the story. In the end, the last 50 +/- pages were what really held my interest because Mealer dives into the personal story of his father; providing color and texture to a story that had otherwise been as dry as the dust bowl from which he sprung.

I would recommend this book to those who are passionate about small town history and don't mind internal references that will likely fly right over your head.

Happy reading!

Michelle Lancaster says

BIOGRAPHY/TEXAS HISTORY

Bryan Mealer

The Kings of Big Spring: God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream

Flatiron Books

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"Only in Texas was there enough space for so many second acts."

The Kings of Big Spring: God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream is the best kind of history. The microcosm of a family story (anecdote) illustrates the macrocosm of a place and time (demographic). In Bryan Mealer's account, his family's history begins in 1892, when "trouble between the moonshiners and revenueurs" motivated his great-grandfather to leave a Georgia hollow behind to join his brother in Texas, where he landed in Hillsboro. By 1909, motivated by the boll weevil, the Mealers lit out for West Texas, along with many others who "pulled their teams across the 98th meridian and entered the American West," eventually finding their way to Big Spring, where oil has been discovered, refineries has been built, and a fifteen-story hotel is rising.

The Kings of Big Spring is Mealer's biography of his family, part reporting and part deep dive into the psychology of a people, a time, and a place. Mealer is a former award-winning reporter for the Associated Press and Harper's, which experience serves him well in the research and interviews involved in The Kings of Big Spring, his fourth book.

Mealer narrates in a hybrid of first person and omniscient, sprinkled with asides addressed directly to the reader. He has a flair for storytelling, a certain folksiness that is comfortable and humorous, rather than cartoonish. He writes movingly of the individual effects of drought, boll weevils, land swindles, OPEC, illnesses, death and dismemberment, and cyclical oil booms and busts ("a sour smell on the wind promised meat on the table"). He writes informatively on the settlement of Texas, the history of an industry, and the salutary effects of old-time religion in this setting. Mealer is equally adept at descriptions of horrific living conditions during the first oil booms, fascinating geology, and scary meteorology (dust storms mix with blizzards in a "freak circus of nature").

Mealer pulls no punches, but his affection and admiration for his restless, driven family are clear. Mealer is sometimes exasperated by self-defeating behaviors and the fickleness of luck, and incredulous about family members allowed to simply disappear, incidents that wouldn't be tolerated today. Mental illness, alcoholism, and jaw-dropping penury are handled sympathetically, sometimes sorrowfully.

The Kings of Big Spring is swiftly and evenly paced, mostly chronological, with a large cast of characters who are difficult to keep track of—for the family itself and the reader. The family tree and list of supporting characters included immediately before the prologue is necessary; you will find yourself referring to it.

Two steps forward and one step back, rich in detail and imagery, The Kings of Big Spring is an entertaining, educational, and engaging addition to the sparse library set at the juncture of the Chihuahuan desert and the Southern Plains. I grew up in the Permian Basin, born about a decade before the author. I recognize this country and these people. As Mealer writes, "This country can promise less and deliver more than anywhere on earth."

Originally published by Lone Star Literary Life.

Cindy Burnett says

The Kings of Big Spring is a work of art chronicling a bygone era in Texas. Mealer's family history woven in with the history of oil discovery in Texas results in a fabulous book that reads like fiction. Propped up by and relying heavily on religion and fortitude, his family withstands more hard times than any one family deserves. Spanning four generations, the Mealer family survives World War 1, the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, the oil boom, a terrible drought, and countless other heartbreaks. Mealer's family tales are fascinating – he details life in the towns impacted by the discovery of oil, the heyday of Big Spring with its ornate and opulent Hotel Settles, the oil boom and its impact on individuals, and the daily life of those living on or under the poverty line.

Mealer's style of writing is perfect for this book. He deftly portrays his characters and settings with such incredible detail; I could envision the towns and the people he was writing about clearly. One of my favorite parts of the book was the inclusion of various famous people such as Larry Gatlin, Roy Orbison, and Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, including a fair amount of interesting history on Wills' group. I chuckled when Mealer describes his extremely religious grandmother's excitement to be cast in a small background

role in a movie filmed in Texas (Midnight Cowboy) only to discover upon the movie's release that it is rated X and covers subject matter about which she deeply disapproves. I was startled to read about Tropical Storm Claudette, a huge storm that ravaged the Houston area in 1979 (we lived abroad from 1976-1980 so I was not in Houston at the time). Having just withstood Hurricane Harvey several months ago, I was amazed to read about a storm that sounded so eerily familiar.

While I have spent some time in West Texas, I had never heard of Big Spring until I read this book. I look forward to stopping there on my next trip through that region to see in person the town at the heart of this tale. I was thankful that there is a family tree at the front of the book because there are so many characters. I found myself frequently consulting the two-page chart to refresh my memory on the identity of a particular individual and his/her relationship within the Mealer family. The chart was a great addition and extremely helpful.

I loved *The Kings of Big Spring* and highly recommend it. I received this book to read and review. All opinions are my own.

An says

The Kings of Big Spring details the expansive history of Bryan Mealer's ancestors and how they made (and lost) their fortunes in West Texas. It can be difficult to write about family in an impartial way, but I think Bryan Mealer does a great job of documenting his family history in an honest voice. As other reviewers have noted, *The Kings of Big Spring* is not an easy read as there are some difficult truths and real tragedies in the book.

Disclaimer: I received an ARC through Goodreads' Giveaways. *The Kings of Big Spring* will be available in bookstores on February 6, 2018.

Mary says

Bryan Mealer writes his family's story brilliantly. I knew it was non-fiction, but it reads like a novel. Honestly, through out the whole thing I kept thinking "This will make a heck of a mini-series!". I won't bother re-blurbing it for you...read the publisher's pitch...but I WILL tell you that it goes through at least five generations of tough people with tough luck (some of their own making), and that it's quite astonishing they persevered! I like West Texas and have recently been spending some time there, so the area was vivid for me in the story. This book is NOT preachy or judgemental. In fact, I almost got the idea that the author was shaking his head as he wrote about his family, sometimes laughing in disbelief!

I really liked this book.

I'm passing it on to my Aunt Bert who lives in West Texas, and I'm sure she'll pass it on to HER friends. Pick it up in February! (Especially if you're a mini-series sort of person.)

Kathleen Holt says

I really did not enjoy this book, as much as I wanted to. I admired all the research Bryan Mealer put into this book and the obvious candor with which his family spoke during the many interviews they had with him. I grew more engaged by the end, and there were certainly interesting vignettes along the way, but for the most part, the cast of characters was too large, encompassing not just the family, but many they encountered along the way. I lost track of who the main players even were. The family tree at the front of the book was helpful, but photos of the main characters would have been great and I wonder why Mealer did not include any. The boom / bust history of Texas oil is interesting, but unless the reader is a Mealer (in which case the book would be riveting), the level of detail about big and bit players alike could make a reader's eyes glaze over (and did, with this reader).

Josh says

I received this book from a goodreads giveaway.

A thoroughly entertaining family history.

The amount of research that had to have been done to compile this much material is hard to imagine. Not just the genealogy, but the details and tidbits surrounding each person is what really brings the book to life.

In an effort to provide a balanced review, I tried to come up with a weakness in the book or something it was lacking. The closest I could come up with was that there was almost too much material, but I couldn't come up with anything that could have been cut without leaving a gap or void in the story.

The early release version of the book I received does not include any family trees like it appears the final versions may have, that would have been helpful, but I certainly can't hold that against the book.

The only thing holding me back from giving it 5 stars is that I probably wouldn't come back to it again for a reread, but I would strongly recommend it to anyone who enjoys this genre.

Howard says

"Only in Texas was there enough space for so many second acts." – Bryan Mealer, *The Kings of Big Spring*

The subtitle of Bryan Mealer's book, *God, Oil, and One Family's Search for the American Dream*, is much more descriptive of this book than is the main title, *The Kings of Big Spring*. For while we do meet three kings (oil tycoons) of Big Spring, his main emphasis is on four generations of his family's mostly unsuccessful search for the American Dream.

"... the whole book is a roller-coaster of hope and despair." – Don Graham, *Dallas News*

DEPRESSION

Mealer's account gets underway with the story of his paternal great-grandfather's migration from the Appalachian foothills of Georgia to east Texas in 1892 in search of that elusive American Dream. He set about doing what he knew best which was cotton farming. Unfortunately, he arrived at about the same time as another arrival: an economic depression brought on by the collapse of several northern railroads.

The depression resulted in east Texas farmers becoming tenants who found themselves renting the very land that they had once owned.

BOLL WEEVIL

In 1907, east Texas was devastated by another arrival. This time it was an insect that had migrated out of Mexico, destroying the cotton economy in the historical Cotton Belt in the southeastern United States, before eventually making its way into east Texas.

Mealer writes that "Farmers spoke of the boll weevil in reverent tones, while bluesmen honored them with ballads the way they did the Devil and loose women."

DROUGHT AND DEATH

To escape the weevil, the Mealers moved to west Texas where the insect had not learned to survive the colder winters. The land was fertile, but the rainfall was uncertain and in 1915 drought caused the crops to fail and the family was forced to move and drift from one job to another.

The next year, Mealer's great-grandmother succumbed to the Spanish flu outbreak.

DEPRESSION, DROUGHT, AND DUST BOWL

The stock market collapse in 1929 triggered the Great Depression, which was followed by drought and dust storms and the Dust Bowl that blanketed the plains states.

"A storm in late February," writes Mealer, "lasted four days. It arrived from the Dakotas in front of seventy-mile-an-hour winds, blocking the sun. On the third day, it mixed with a blizzard in a freak circus of nature that few residents had ever seen. On March 22, the dust was so blinding that cowboys on the Guitar Ranch lost six hundred head of cattle they were driving through the shinnery [dense shrubbery]."

DROUGHT REDUX

Economic conditions in west Texas improved during the post-WWII era, of course. However, there were still major bumps in the prosperity road. In 1950, there began in Texas an epic and unprecedented drought, one that eventually covered ten plains states, surpassing all recorded droughts, including the Dust Bowl years. It was described by experts as the most devastating drought in 600 years.

The effects of the drought were greater in Texas than in any other state. There was no measurable rainfall for seven years. Elmer Kelton wrote in his classic novel, *The Time It Never Rained*, that it was a time when "many a boy would become a man before the land was green again."

By the end of the decade Texas lost nearly a hundred thousand farms and ranches.

OIL

Because of the vulnerability of cotton cultivation to both economic downswings and natural calamities, some members of Mealer's family took jobs in and around the communities of Midland, Odessa, and, especially, Big Spring, either in the oil fields or in enterprises related to oil production. This didn't entirely solve their problems for the oil markets, subject to fluctuating demand and Middle Eastern competition, especially after the founding of the OPEC cartel, were almost as volatile as the cotton market, and the boom and bust nature of the industry set them adrift as they sought the means to support their families.

GOD

Don Graham wrote in his review of the book in the *Dallas Times*:

The Mealer families worked hard and played hard, and through it all, they counted on religion to keep them on the straight and narrow. What sustained them throughout was that old-time religion Their church of choice was the Assembly of God, which had rules so strict that they didn't even allow their children to play football or attend football games.

Mealer contrasted his family's church with that of their southern Baptist neighbors:

The Baptists down the road believed that once a person accepted Christ and was cleansed by his blood, their ticket to heaven was guaranteed. But not the members of the Assemblies of God, who in those days believed that even the slightest blemish of sin carried the whole weight of damnation. Each tiny transgression had to be reckoned with and expunged.

Practically every reviewer refers to the book as a "sprawling family saga," and it is that for sure. It is the history of four generations over the course of more than a century. Fortunately, the author includes two family trees that help the reader to sort out the members of the large family.

But it is more than a family saga. It is also a history of twentieth century Texas, with an emphasis on the economic and natural calamities that made life so difficult for that family and so many others.

"A masterwork of memoir and narrative history. 'The King of Big Spring' is an indelible portrait of fortune and ruin as big as Texas itself. And in telling the story of four generations of his family, Mealer also tells the story of how America came to be." – Barbara Bamberger Scott, Bookreporter.com

Susan Wright says

Dear Mealer family, what a privilege it was to read your history! Through trials and tribulations your resilient nature stood true. I never knew much about the oil rush of the Midwest or, more importantly, the struggles of families during this time period.

It is evident the author put an enormous amount of research into this text. (Permian Basin was a foreign place to me, prior to reading this narrative.) Through draught, poverty, heartache, drugs, war, and so much more - the search of the American Dream is ever present.

Next work: tips and insight on how to research one's own family heritage.

Carin says

I heard this book described as if J.R. Ewing was real, and wrote a memoir. And of course, that's incredibly intriguing. Also, it turns out, more than a little misleading. I wish it had been that.

Mr. Mealer's family has long roots in Texas going back over 100 years, and throughout that century, they've gone boom and bust several times, and most of their fortunes and failures have been tied to the oil and gas industry. His family can be a lens through which to see the economic story of America, and certainly of Texas, writ small. And if he stuck to that, it would have been good. It would have been nice along the way to have more national context inserted here and there, but good.

But for me, it went off the rails at the end, where it also wants to be a memoir. Bryan didn't exist for the majority (9/10) of the story. But at the very end, where he does exist, but is a child, he reverts to calling his parents "Mom" and "Dad" instead of by their names, which was disconcerting. If the entire book had been a memoir instead of only the last 10%, that would make sense. Even if it had maybe been bookended or framed out as a memoir with a starting point from his point of view, and ideally a couple of midpoint stops where we get some perspective, that could have worked. It also would have made some sense if the end were at all memoir-like. If, for example, Bryan had been more than 10 years old and understood what was going on.

It wants to be a history of the country told through a single family, a family history, and a memoir, and since the author failed to decide on which one of these three books he was writing, and instead tried to be all of them, he failed at being any of them. Don't get me wrong--it's an interesting story and it does succeed at being a family history, and even in being an example story of the Great American Dream story. It fails at being a memoir, and when the narrative goes off the rails in that last section, it pulls the book down with it. I wish he'd been reined in more by his editor, and made to focus on one structure/goal for the book, as it could have been great. He has wonderful material he's working with here. But by being indecisive and trying to be everything, it ends up just a mess. It's a good read, if you don't mind that.

Barbara says

I enjoyed reading this book. I see other reviewers have deemed it depressing. This is how life was at this time in this area of the country. My husband's grandmother wrote about her early life in Eastern New Mexico. There are many similarities. Folks had it hard.

The cattle, the farming, the oil busts and booms of West Texas and Eastern New Mexico are familiar to me, having lived in Eastern New Mexico as a small business owner with experience in cattle ranching and cotton farming for the past 45 years. Oil was and still is the driving force of life here.

Bryan Mealer does an excellent job documenting the effects of the Oil Patch on the lives of his family members. He brings us from the beginning with his great-grandfather leaving the foothills of Georgia making his way to Big Spring, Texas. We join in on their tragedies and successes.

