

Cultural Symbiosis

Ryan Smith

In his introduction to this book, Jim Miller writes, “San Diego is the Anglo Mission fantasy ...,” a city that suffers from the conflict between what Main Streeters and Boosters want it to be – a sunny paradise that seeks to attract the beautiful and the wealthy, the conservative and the complacent – and what it actually is: a roiling mass of commerce, death, sex, cross-border cultural pollination, and, of course, sunshine. But that description isn’t entirely fair either, as Miller later admits; “America’s Finest City” is more complicated than that. Trying to get to the literary heart of San Diego, this anthology collects writing that is influenced by San Diego, and, in turn, represents the city and its artists. The stories, poems, and essays here try to showcase the worlds that spin around this San Diego/Tijuana sun.

One of the best pieces is Jimmy Santiago Baca’s story “Bull’s Blood.” Lynn and Franklin are wildly different, the latter a middle-aged Catholic, Hispanic, broken by drug abuse and failed relationships; the former young, Mormon, white, a rodeo queen filled with nothing but optimism and joy about what the future might bring. Despite these wide gulfs between them, they seem fated for each other: “[Lynn] had no expectations. But when she saw Franklin leaning against the red brick restaurant a sparkling sensation overcame her. As she crossed the street, though it was a warm April day, snowflakes started to float down softly. Later, when she was alone and thoughtful, she would interpret the snowfall as a heavenly omen in their favor.” As the relationship peaks, then declines and cools, they each examine their desire for the other, and what this says about the lives they lead and the worlds they come from. They orbit back into each other’s lives and, in a dizzying, heated, drunken experience at the end of a Tijuana bullfight, make an unspoken pledge to each other never to be apart:

He withdrew his hand, turned, and, all spattered and smeared with blood and guts, handed the cup to Lynn, motioning for her to drink. Lynn looked at Franklin, who nodded, and she drank half of it ... [J]ust beyond the shed, a mob of Mexicans, Americans, and Asians were shouting and waving fistfuls of money high above their heads, hollering for the testicles, horns, tongue, and penis.

It would be difficult to find a better visceral representation of the cultural symbiosis that marks this geographical region, and the ways in which America and Mexico are locked, inextricably, into an arc together.

The essays by Mike Davis and Mark Dery are exceptional, and their deeply analytical look at the region is well counterpointed by the fiction and poetry in the anthology. In “Loving the Alien: Or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Became Californian,” Dery frames the All-Californian-Are-From-Somewhere-Else idea with an examination of Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950). He continues to deconstruct the California ideal: “As I walk, I feel eyes on my back, from behind the drawn blinds, and wonder if I’m inviting

the suspicions of the Neighborhood Watch. Maybe I'll be arrested ...” In his essay “The Perfect Fire,” Davis echoes this sentiment of apprehension in a place desperately trying to be billed as the apotheosis of an open-armed acceptance and suburban familiarity when he writes, “Sunday morning in San Diego. The sun is an eerie orange orb, like the eye of a hideous jack-o-lantern.” Davis examines the incredibly destructive fires that sweep into San Diego and the battles being fought both on the ground and in the legislature to control them, and what those battles reveal about class and economic well-being in the region.

Miller is looking for a place to lodge work that isn't conventional, writing that wouldn't fit neatly into the catalogs of most publishers. Universities, and university presses, have often been a haven for artists, particularly writers whose work is deemed not commercial enough for the big publishing cartels. Included in this category would be Kate Savage's story “Yes. No. Maybe.,” which contains flashes of wry wit; Nadia Mandilawi's poem, “1991,” a savagely concise critique of a town that brooks almost no criticism of the formidable military presence in the area; and the “Keep On Crossing Manifesto,” which posits that no kind of border, whether ideological, physical, or artistic, can keep ideas or people from seeking something better and more vibrant for themselves.

That said, most of the writers included in *Sunshine/Noir* are connected with the academy. The press was founded by the San Diego Writers Collective, a group of professors from various local institutions, and the contributor list reflects this origin. Unfortunately, this skews the perception of the writing scene in San Diego and Tijuana. There is a much wider artistic community than the academically affiliated one exhibited here, a community that deserves to be explored in print. It is a challenge to seek out work from unknown artists, a challenge that the press seems committed to meeting in future publications.

This is the first book from San Diego City Works Press, and it is a noble effort, an attempt to ground the collective, in words, to a place they already inhabit in their daily lives and art. I fervently hope that their future publishing endeavors are as promising as this one, with a continuing focus on plumbing the depths of the writing produced in the border areas of California and Mexico, seeking to bring a vibrant clutch of artists up into the sun.

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