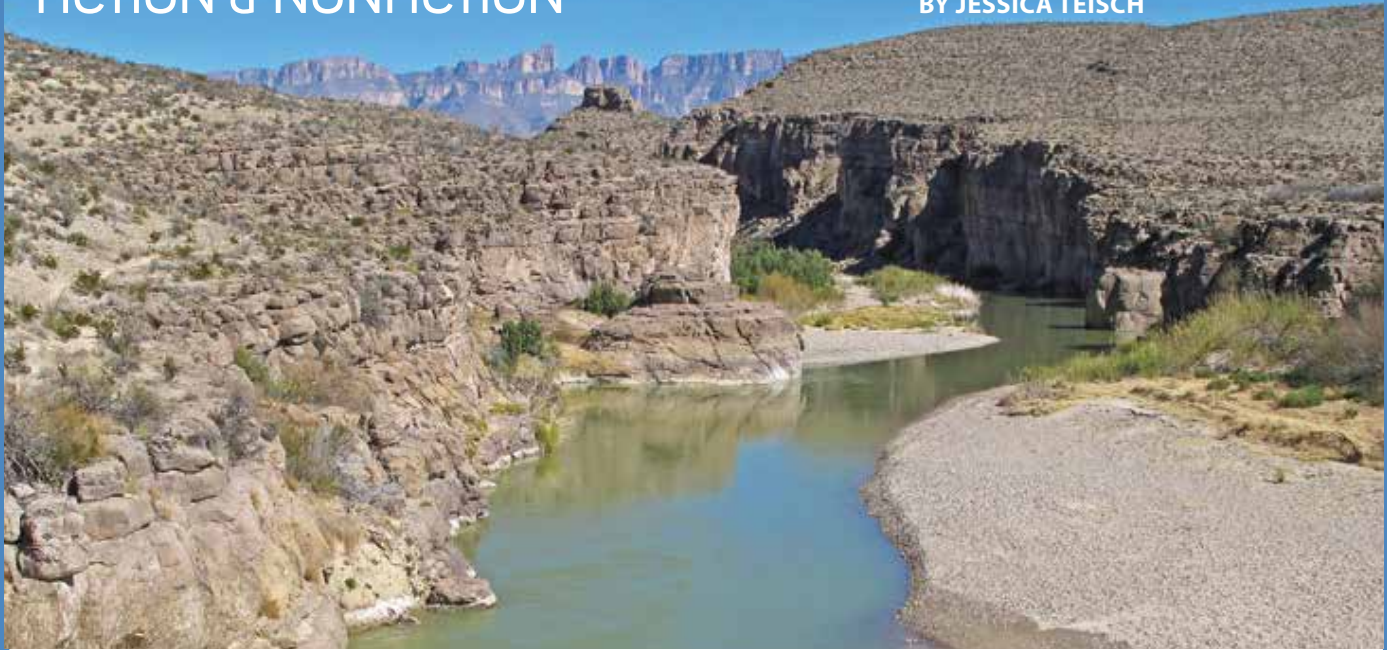


Tales from the U.S.-Mexico Border

FICTION & NONFICTION

BY JESSICA TEISCH



“Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual, discrete.”

— Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*

The border can be so many different things at once, from a physical line dividing two countries or geopolitical entities to the symbolic, invisible lines that separate different cultures and identities, to one that may mix and blur over time. The point where Mexico and Texas meet at the Rio Grande, for example, is not simply a river or a border. Rather, it marks the intersection of two cultures, two economies, two worlds.

The U.S.-Mexico border, extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico and containing 23 U.S. counties and 39 Mexican municipalities, is the most frequently crossed border in the world. Nearly 2,000 miles long, it follows vast areas of desert, mountain, and river, while serving as a hub of trade and cultural exchange for cross-border cities. Approximately 350 million legal crossings occur annually; an additional half a million people cross illegally, with hundreds of deaths from heat stroke, dehydration, and hyperthermia reported each year.

The following books, both fiction and nonfiction, capture a sense of both the people who live along both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and those who cross over. Some of the works convey a sense of freedom; others a sense of severe restriction and tragedy. All, however, reflect the mixing of culture, language, religion, family, and economies; the human tendency to draw arbitrary borders; and the highly

personal relationship each person has to this physical and metaphorical line.

Fiction

Signs Preceding the End of the World

By Yuri Herrera (2015)

Herrera is considered one of Mexico’s greatest novelists, and, in this slim work—by turns surreal and devastatingly real—a young woman, a telephone operator in a Mexican silver-mining town, crosses the Rio Grande via inner tube and runs through the perilous desert underworld in the hope of returning her brother to their mother—and to deliver a mysterious package. Herrera explores the idea of freedom—Maki-

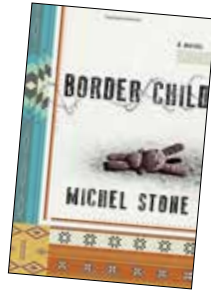


na’s understanding of herself in a country that often dehumanizes migrants—as well as the go-between of drug lords and the different states of physical and emotional existence in the traversing of borders. His “great achievement,” noted the *Guardian*, “lies in elevating the harsh epic of ‘crossing’ to the ‘other side’ to soaring myth. ... At times this feels schematic, yet a chilling climax contains emotional truths about the estrangement from their families of those who leave their homeland.”

Border Child

Michel Stone (2017)

In *The Iguana Tree* (2012), a young man crosses illegally from Mexico to the United States, intending to send for his wife and their baby once he is settled. But when his wife decides to surprise him and to cross over earlier, their baby, left with a coyote, vanishes at the border. This sequel picks up three years later, with Héctor and Lilia deported back to their small Mexican village, still haunted by their baby's unknown fate. When Héctor runs into the man who arranged Lilia's crossing, he embarks on a quest to understand what happened to the baby—but at great cost. "This isn't really a mystery," wrote the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "It's social realism, reminiscent of Steinbeck. ... Stone shows us the inner lives of characters who are the victims of an unjust world, spun and redirected by fates beyond their control, forced to carry on in the wake of crushing disappointment."



Caramelo

By Sandra Cisneros (2002)

Cisneros, a dual citizen of Mexico and the United States, is best known for *The House on Mango Street* (1984). This sweeping multigenerational and autobiographical saga of conflicting cultures is every bit as good. Spanning the 1920s to the 1950s, the novel starts with an annual road trip from Chicago to Mexico City before branching out. It centers on the Reyes family (including six brothers and an Awful Grandmother), with Chicana narrator, Lala, at its center. Like all immigrants "caught between here and there," Lala tells a personal history and a larger political one. Filled with humor and colorful melodrama (the narrator often evokes Mexico's famed telenovelas), *Caramelo* is "a joyful, fizzy American novel, a deliciously subversive reminder that 'American' applies to plenty of territory beyond the borders of the United States. ... Cisneros writes poetry as well as prose and her language ... is a lovely fusion of Spanish and English, idea and emotion, geography and spirit" (*New York Times*).



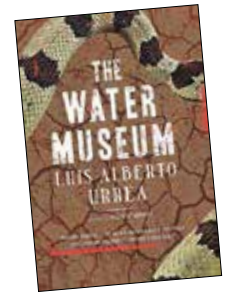
The Water Museum

Stories

By Luís Alberto Urrea (2015)

In these 13 stories, Tijuana-born poet and memoirist Urrea (see *The Devil's Highway*, below) reflects on both sides of his Mexican American heritage, as well as the porous physical and emotional boundaries of love, relationships, family, and community. Most of the stories take place in the Ameri-

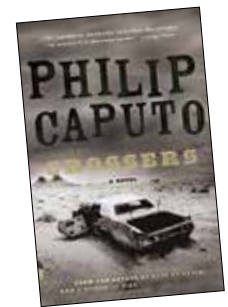
can West and Southwest, a few in Mexico; all feature immigrants or Anglos in all stages of life, attempting to overcome class and cultural walls, often tragically. In one story, a farmer reflects, "Like that clown on NPR said ... Every American town is a border town now." About identity, religion, social responsibility, and doomed relationships, *The Water Museum* "is refreshingly bereft of a preachy tone and relies upon a kind of folksy power. This is especially evident in the Eudora Welty-like 'The Sous Chefs of Iogua,' which unveils the charming and lighthearted story of immigrants trying to Americanize their restaurant food for their white customers amid criticism, scorn and, finally, resignation" (*Dallas Morning News*). See also *Into the Beautiful North* (2009).



Crossers

By Philip Caputo (2009)

After his wife dies in the 9/11 attacks, Gil Castle retreats to his family's century-old homestead in Arizona, on the Mexican border. When he comes across a Mexican left for dead after a border crossing deal gone bad, different worlds collide: that of Gil's family history, ranching, drug runners and cartels, coyotes, bloody turf wars, and murder. Gil's grandfather, Ben Erskine, shares his adventures—and dark truths—throughout. Violence past and present haunts the story, and as Gil tries to reinvent himself, he comes to understand that he can't escape his family's savage history. "At times, Caputo crosses into Cormac McCarthy's fictional borderlands, with brave young cowboys and modern drug thugs, but the prose is more northern and the tone more overtly political," wrote the *Washington Post*. "Caputo is such a careful researcher and nimble writer, so unafraid of cultural and narrative complexities, that he manages to deliver an enthralling and thoughtful novel about our southern border."



Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club

By Benjamin Alire Saénz (2012)

♦ PEN/FAULKNER FICTION PRIZE

♦ LAMBDA LITERARY AWARD

"The border is more than just a place in his stories; it's a silent but ever-present character," reported NPR with respect to Saénz's seven tales about the fluidity of life along—and across—the border between El Paso and Juárez (the site of the Kentucky Club, a real-life bar a few blocks south of the

border crossing that connects the intergenerational characters of the collection). As the mostly miserable characters—Spanish and English, Mexicans and gringos, rich and poor, gay and straight, and more—forge relationships across the border, the stories reflect on class, love and sexuality, drug addiction, identity, and survival. “Saénz, with these masterfully hewn stories, presents this hardscrabble yet tenacious city as beautiful in its contradictions, disquieting in its ambiguities, and heartbreaking in its quotidianness,” wrote the *Texas Books in Review*. “Filtered through this book are the lives of its singular people: doomed, broken, resourceful, and, above all else, faithful—to the city and to the parts they play in its intricate dimensions.”



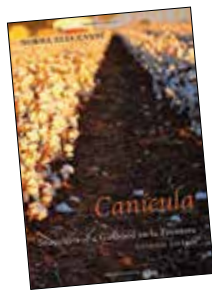
Canícula

Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera

By Norma Elia Cantú (1995)

◆ PREMIO AZTLÁN

Cantú, a postmodern Chicana writer, was born in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, but attended public school in Laredo, Texas. Using family photographs and memories as inspiration for her vignettes (and the deconstruction of physical and emotional borders), *Canícula* fictionalizes her female-centered childhood on the border between the 1940s and the 1960s. The eldest of 11 children narrates her world of poverty, hard work, and tragedy, all cloaked in love; her present tense narration draws readers into her world. When she becomes “Americanized” in Texas’s sister city, she must reconcile her Spanish culture with her new home to avoid being ostracized. “One of the many virtues of *Canícula* is Cantú’s ability to enter the minds and hearts of her characters in order to express a sense of the community,” wrote the *Washington Post*. “The sound of taffeta and the fragrance of orange blossom give each page a sense of the real. Peppered with Spanish, the book is a joy to read.”



Further Reading

THE RIVER FLOWS NORTH | GRACIELA LIMÓN (2009)

MEXICO: STORIES | JOSH BARKAN (2017)

LUCKY BOY | SHANTHI SEKARAN (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2017)

IN THE ROGUE BLOOD | JAMES CARLOS BLAKE (◆ LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE, 1997)

ZERO SAINTS | GABINO IGLESIAS (2015)

THE BORDER TRILOGY (ALL THE PRETTY HORSES, THE CROSSING, CITIES OF THE PLAIN) | CORMAC MCCARTHY (1992–1998)

THE TORTILLA CURTAIN | T. C. BOYLE (1995)

THE DEPORTATION OF WOPPER BARRAZA | MACEO MONTOYA (2014)

THE GUARDIANS | ANA CASTILLO (2007)

THE CRYSTAL FRONTIER | CARLOS FUENTES (1995)

AMIGOLAND | OSCAR CASARES (2009)

2666 | ROBERTO BOLAÑO (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2009)

BLESS ME, ULTIMA | RUDOLFO ANAYA (1972)

ACROSS A HUNDRED MOUNTAINS | REYNA GRANDE (F AMERICAN BOOK AWARD, 2007)

Nonfiction

The Boy Kings of Texas

A Memoir

By Domingo Martinez (2012)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

Martinez’s memoir about growing up Mexican American in the poor border town of Brownsville, Texas, just across from Matamoros, Mexico, offers unusual insights into how the culture of machismo, as well as the cultural expectations of “American” and “Mexican,” influenced his identity, his family, and his neighborhood. Coming of age in the 1980s, Martinez tells stories about his gun-toting grandmother; his “Valley Girl” sisters; his father’s drug trafficking; his abusive upbringing; and his strong bond with his brother. He imbues stories of hardship and violence with humor and irreverence as he comes to terms with his life. “*The Boy Kings of Texas* reads like a rollicking cross between Facebook rant, meandering blog, comedy club routine and NPR personal essay,” wrote the *Washington Post*. “Like one of his drunken relatives, Martinez often rambles and repeats himself, but settling emotional accounts here functions as the necessary psychological clearing-of-the-air before the memoirist can begin to understand the bigger issues his family faced as Mexican Americans in a famously hurting border town.”

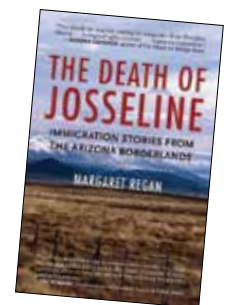


The Death of Josseline

Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands

By Margaret Regan

This indictment of U.S. immigration policy starts with the death of Josseline, 14, a girl from El Salvador, who became gravely ill during her journey across the desert. She was left to die, while the rest of her group, including the younger brother she was supposed to protect, continued to the border. Regan, a *Tucson Weekly* columnist, uses Josseline’s plight to shed light on the larger issues and players at stake,



from Border Patrol agents to American activists dedicated to helping border crossers survive. Regan accompanied Border Patrol agents on their rounds, interviewed detained migrants and humanitarian groups, environmentalists, biologists, and tribal members. Above all, she humanizes the plight of the immigrants attempting to enter the United States in search of better lives. “Although Regan must speak for Josseline, she allows the others who are most intimately involved with border issues [to] tell their stories. She does this again and again and in this way flips what we know or think we know about the border” (PopMatters).

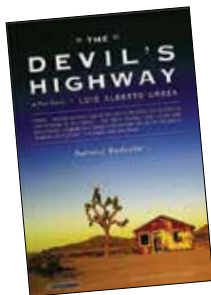
The Devil’s Highway

A True Story

By Luis Alberto Urrea

♦ PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST

In 2001, 26 Mexican men and teens attempted to cross a blistering stretch of Arizona desert nicknamed the Devil’s Highway. Challenged by the U.S. Border Patrol, murderous vigilantes, and, most lethal of all, the heat, only a dozen survived. Urrea reconstructs their story with exhaustive reporting, complementing his research with his own imaginings. The saga sheds light on the challenges of the Mexican immigrant experience, as well as the ironies and ethical dilemmas of the political and economic systems that oppose them. “In the desert,” Urrea concludes, “we are all illegal aliens.” “Urrea ventured into the world of pollos and polleros, and his book rings with the authenticity and authority of an eyewitness,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. “Above all, the tale he tells ... comes vividly alive with a richness of language and a mastery of narrative detail that only the most gifted



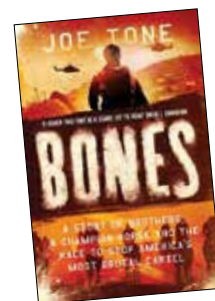
of writers are able to achieve.” (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2004)

Bones

A Story of Brothers, a Champion Horse and the Race to Stop America’s Most Brutal Cartel

By Joe Tone (2017)

Tone, former editor for the *Dallas Observer*, illuminates an often overlooked aspect of U.S.-Mexico relations: how cartel money is laundered in the United States. Mexico-born José Treviño built his life as a bricklayer and as a family man in Dallas, while his younger brother, Miguel, rose as the violent leader of the Los Zetas cartel. When José suddenly became a racehorse owner, the FBI suspected his involvement in a money-laundering scheme for his brother. Tone follows these characters and more, as he sheds light on the complexities and violence of life along the border. “In addition to following the drug money,” reported the *New York Times Book Review*, “Tone has found a great yarn. His finely-painted cast of characters includes a rookie F.B.I. agent hungry to make his name, a Texas cowboy fighting to keep his family business afloat and a talented Mexican horseman picking winners for a very dangerous boss. Tone weaves the threads together with skillful pacing and sharp prose, marking him as an important new talent in narrative nonfiction.”



The Distance Between Us

By Reyna Grande (2012)

Grande, who was raised by her poor, abusive grandparents in Guerrero, Mexico, after her parents left to find work across the border, entered the United States at age nine as an undocumented immigrant. This memoir, written after two acclaimed novels about the Mexican immigrant experience (*Across a Hundred Mountains* won the 2007 American Book Award), reveals the lasting impact of families being torn asunder. Grande describes a painful childhood defined by her parents’ absence, her alcoholic father’s flawed expectations after being reunited, her mother’s episodic involvement in her life, her own search for higher education and identity, and the metaphorical ties that still



continued on page 62