



Crossing California: A Cultural Topography of a State of Wonder and Weirdness

Sam McManis

Craven Street Books (Feb 1, 2018)

Softcover \$14.95 (280pp)

978-1-61035-313-7

Sam McManis, an award-winning writer and former columnist for the *Sacramento Bee*, traveled the length and breadth of his state for five years, seeking the real California. No matter which direction he headed, he found California to be a wild, weird, and wonderful multiplicity of places created by the collision of vastly disparate people and topographies: rednecks and hippies, sophisticated urbanites and back-to-the-land types, Hollywood's "beautiful people" and outsider artists, deserts and forests, mountains and valleys, seashores and dry beds where waters once ran freely.

McManis introduces some of the characters that make up California's human landscape. These include an Imperial County man who engraved a granite history of the universe on over 2,600 acres in the hotter-than-Hades desert; artists who've created their work out of everything from old applesauce lids and discarded vacuum cleaners to toilet seats; and a former ballerina, nearing ninety, whose one-woman show in Death Valley Junction (population: 4) ran for five decades.

McManis found museums dedicated to bananas, PEZ memorabilia, and death. He descended into a ten-acre subterranean oasis in Fresno equipped with its own underground citrus orchards. He visited the Mission District, "where oddity is the norm and grunginess a way of life," and the Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park and Crematory, where among other celebrity pets, the horse from the original *Lone Ranger* series and the lion from *Tarzan* are buried.

He ate in a blacked-out restaurant where all the servers were visually impaired, had a spa treatment in which a guy from Belarus administered "a bout of flagellation using bundles of tree branches," and did time in a "rejuvenation machine" built under the direction of extraterrestrials.

Enjoy this quirky trip through California—a place that the passionate, the individualistic, and the outright weird can all call home.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January/February 2018)

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