



Desert Sonorous

Sean Bernard

University of Massachusetts Press (June 2015)

Softcover \$19.95 (186pp)

978-1-62534-137-2

Dislocation, family strife, and the desire to escape the familiar are the driving forces in these stories mostly set in an arid landscape.

In this prize-winning collection of stories, Sean Bernard explores themes of dislocation and emptiness in the heat-scorched region of the American Southwest. The characters in these stories, set mostly in and around Tucson, Arizona, often come from broken homes. They carry with them the sense that their struggle to gain connection and purpose will likely haunt them for the rest of their lives.

In "Pistoleros," a story with distinctly autobiographical overtones, Bill returns to Tucson from Los Angeles to interview for a creative-writing position. Plunged into unhappy memories of his (now deceased) stepfather and his perpetually depressed sister, Bill tries to stay focused for an upcoming job interview and fears losing himself in the desert, "a flat beige surface upon which nerve endings sway."

In this collection of stories, winner of the 2014 Juniper Prize for Fiction from the University of Massachusetts, the arid landscape is as much a character as the living, breathing people who inhabit it. Wanda, the protagonist of "Hike," is involved with a man two decades older than her, and must reluctantly interact with her lover's teenage daughter on a hike in a neighboring canyon. By the story's end, she's achieved a fragile rapport with "the girl" (as the daughter is called throughout) and decides "the world is wonderful in a way when you felt calm and nothing terrible could happen."

Sean Bernard, a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, is an associate professor and director of the undergraduate creative-writing program at the University of La Verne in Southern California. He inhabits male and female characters with equal delicacy and sensitivity, as in "Anniversary," where a high-school girl grapples with the terrible aftermath of the shootings of Gabby Giffords, a member of the US House of Representatives, and others in 2011.

Other stories in *Desert Sonorous* explore more unusual themes in more experimental formats, with mostly successful results. Bernard displays a sure hand at narrative and an impressive gift for portraying characters who seek to escape the confines of life as it's lived in this corner of American desert.

LEE POLEVOI (Fall 2015)

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