

The Arizona Water Bar: Tales from the Desert Southwest

Drew Aquilina

Drew Aquilina, Illustrator

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The Arizona Water Bar is a humorous, environmentally aware graphic novel with a strong sense of place.

Drew Aquilina's graphic novel *The Arizona Water Bar* features cartoon animals in situations inspired by the American Southwest.

Flo Webb is a pack rat who finds an old irrigation hose and turns it into a business—The Arizona Water Bar—though her parents still hope she'll take over the family nest instead. Flo lives among others whose names evoke Arizona-connected politicians and celebrities, including Del Webb, the namesake of an Arizona real estate developer, and a mountain lion, Amanda "Kitty" Blake, named after the *Gunsmoke* actress. A glasses-wearing burrowing owl, Barry Goldwater, leads an effort against the construction of a border fence between the United States and Mexico, citing environmental concerns; a frog and an insect are dispatched to document the effects of the wall.

The book collects comics in one-page layouts that run from two to five panels. These strips tell a continuous story: in one section, Flo hosts a mother quail and her eggs; in another, she returns home to see her parents. Later, there's a visit from vacationing Galapagos penguins, and a spiny lizard who retires to the lizard rest home. The stories draw inspiration from their Arizona setting; some incorporate photographs of Arizona landscapes and local Phoenix sights. Facts about Arizona animals, their inspirations, and their environment are woven into the strips, too.

As the book's action shifts to the border, the change of scenery, introduction of new animals, and strong sense of purpose reinvigorate it. Powerful commentary and humorous highlights work in, as when an Arizona pronghorn attempts to coax a potential mate to his side of the fence. But the characters are developed in sporadic terms, and some of their issues are never resolved, including the question of whether Flo's father will accept her decision not to take over the family business.

The book's references to some politicians and cultural mainstays will limit the audience in terms of age, and its humor is too reliant on tropes: Mrs. Quail is angry at her husband as she lays her eggs; hatched quail chicks imprint on a tortoise; and bad hair days are caused by humidity. More original humor comes in the form of the visiting penguins, who discover an "ice spa" in the freezer outside a convenience store.

The illustrations are pleasing in terms of their color palettes and detailed backgrounds. The book's humor is delivered by its art as much as by its text; while laugh-out-loud visuals are rare, the images complement the dialogue well. But because the book's format sets up the expectation of a punch line at the end of every page, many of the jokes are flat.

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PETER DABBENE (March 8, 2021)

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