

Under Sonoran Skies: Prose and Poetry from the High Desert

Bill Black

Jeannie Burrows-Johnson

Susan Cosby-Patton

Kay Lesh

Patricia Noble

Larry Sakin

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This title of this anthology suggests writing evocative of a place where nature acts as the primary metaphor. It also implies that a certain allegiance to the land binds the writers of the work collected within. *Under Sonoran Skies* does not bear this out; instead, the title refers to a shared writers' group from Tuscon, Arizona.

The book breaks into eleven themed chapters, ranging from "Business, Culture, and Society" to "Myth, Magic, and Inspiration." The styles range from cowboy poetry to historic essay, and the writers themselves boast a former minister, a musician, a magician, and a designer. It is perhaps because of this range that the collection defeats itself.

The writers have interesting and diverse credentials. Bill Black is a cowboy poet of some repute; Jeanne Burrowes-Smith is a design consultant; and Susan Cosby-Patton is a retired teacher. Kay Lesh is an educator and psychotherapist, Patricia Noble a reverend, and Larry Sakin an "observational and attitudinal writer" who has been published in *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*.

Black brings in the tenor of cowboy poetry—narrative, easy-going, and generally in first person. His work is accessible and tends toward familiar subjects and metaphors drawn from nature and relationships. It does little to extend the art, but that very familiarity may be part of the point. In contrast, Burrowes-Smith writes dry, detailed historical pieces on places and events in the southwest. The cowboy poetry, rather than complementing the history, makes the nonfiction feel even stiffer.

Cosby-Patton uses nature as a primary metaphor in pieces like "Sunset," "Mountains and Hills," and "Winter Water." These poems do little to refresh the subjects they engage, rendering even the staggering landscape of Arizona in enervating terms. Some of Reverend Noble's pieces sound like sermons: these works of short prose address a central idea and circle it in new ways, urging readers to reconsider their own prejudices. She also contributes poems and inspirational pieces that tend toward the abstract.

Arguably, the two most successful writers in the book are Kay Lesh and Larry Sakin. Lesh writes short memoir—the funeral of her brother, the airlifting of her ill mother. She uses the situations to reexamine the psychological power of ceremony and home, and does so with honesty and grace. Humor threads through Sakin's pieces even as he is writing about his father's ashes in "Final Wishes" or a dating scene in "Adventures in Middle-Aged Dating."

Under Sonoran Skies has a number of bright spots, but after reading the collection in its entirety, little coheres. The scope of subject precludes depth in many cases, and the authors themselves have such disparate styles that few readers are likely to enjoy all of it. For some, that may be a selling point. One might dip in and out of the book, reading

only that which catches the eye, but as an anthology with a focus as direct as the title suggests, the volume does not ultimately coalesce.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (August 2, 2012)

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