

American obtuseness and bluster to find a scapegoat for diverting attention from Cuba's own problems? Mesa-Lago neither raises nor responds to such questions, which are sociological and political, not economic. Thus, although we shall long be in his debt for his massive assemblage of materials, we may also note they have the unintended effect of reminding us that economics, like any single discipline, has clear limits when it comes to telling us not only why a revolution took place, but even what it cost and what it's been worth.

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Tom Miller. *On The Border*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) 226 pp., \$12.95.

Tom Miller's *On The Border* is a disarmingly straightforward book. At first glance it seems to be a simple travelog—the account of his journey at the dawn of the decade in a 1968 Valiant, accompanied by a photographer companion, Norah Booth, along the entire distance of the United States/Mexico border from Brownsville and Matamoros to Chula Vista and Tijuana. The only photographs in the book, however, are verbal ones.

Miller talks with the local people he encounters, both ordinary and illustrious, and offers several anecdotes about them and their lives; he recounts Border history in opportune places and synthesizes everything with a just mix of his own reactions to what he perceives. But as with most trips, especially long ones to such exotic spots as Miller describes, there is much adventure and more than a little allegory involved in the trek.

Insofar as all life is a journey, a narrative like this one takes on larger meaning. More individuals than Miller have been lured to this particular Border and to their own personal borders, whether motivated by escape or something else that might be called “transitional” promises. The Border is a legendary place, mythic in its paradoxically narrow but extended dimensions and geographical vectors. And, as Miller makes clear, others have written about it (e.g., Graham Greene, William Burroughs, Larry McMurtry, Americo Paredes), sung about it (Marty Robbins, Willie Lopez), talked about it, explored it, and measured it in all its blending of promise and despair.

The journey confirms many of the assumptions Miller began with when he symbolically first picked up a handful of sea shells at Kopernik Shores on the Gulf to carry with him and ultimately bury in the sands of Baja California, an ending closer to his home and beginnings in Tucson. But he is a changed man, too, when he comes to the final destination of this particular phase of his life. In the initial experience, the interviewing, the note-taking, and the writing, he understands the people and places of the Border much more fully for all of the aspects of landscape, mind and spirit which make the Border both unique—identifiable as its own very different and special region—and representative of the North/South, East/West racial, linguistic, and topographical forces which create the “Southwest Frontier” ambiances of his crossing and westering route.

Through it all he achieves his major purpose of showing himself and his readers how old stereotypes of Border badness and beauty, like everything else, are changing before our eyes and should be recognized for that not just by tourists and natives of the region but by governments and policy makers as well.

Much of what Miller writes about has already changed since his book was published in 1981: Lopez Portillo is no longer President of Mexico; oil and the peso have different values; present immigration laws are in limbo; and the pop culture allusions which Miller uses are, as one might expect, ironically no longer as relevant—Marty Robbins is dead although Rosa’s Cantina lives on in El Paso; Baretta’s parrot has been killed by poor ratings although the smuggling of parrots across the Border still thrives; Wolfman Jack is no longer associated with the “borderblasting” radio stations of Del Rio.

All in all, what Miller brings to his account of the Border is the kind of style, the kind of New Journalism which gives immediacy to material academics often make so stuffy under the guise of sociology or social science or the disciplines of the “humanities.”

Reading Miller, one is actually on the Border with him: there in the air with a veteran smuggler of electronic and hallucinogenic contraband; there in the pits with the cock fighters; there rafting on the river; there in the restaurants, cantinas, and whorehouses—talking and listening, sensing it.

Reading Miller is to say to oneself yet again, albeit paraphrased, “Ah humanity! Ah the Border.”

—Robert Gish
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