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Book review: 'Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old West'

BY GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Tulsa World

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Returning to the desert Southwest to cleanse his drug-addicted body and soul, Los Angeles native Ruben Martinez, the son of Mexican immigrants, follows "brown footsteps" to Joshua Tree, Calif., Velarde, N.M., and Marfa, Texas - and re-discovers a region he never really left.

The author of "Crossing Over" and "The New Americans" (and now a professor of literature and writing at Loyola Marymount University), Martinez tells us, in this evocative and emotional memoir, that he has fallen for the landscape, for its elevation and shapes; its characters (Indians, Mexicans and gringos); and the size and scale of its narrative: "the desire of empire, the trauma of it, the guilt of it, the resistance against it, the adventure of it."

Martinez' boom and bust setting is not the Big Sky desert of the Western or the travel section of the Sunday newspaper. It is a region where lines are drawn between natives and newcomers, wealthy whites and wetbacks, trailer-bound seniors and snowbirds, where "encounters between contraries" are common.

It's also a region where it's worth asking, "What if Plymouth Rock was a footnote and the borderlands were the central trope of American history?" And how, given our nation's diversity of backgrounds and points of view, Americans might "get to have a commons."

Martinez does not think it will happen anytime soon. Most of the literature about the desert, he claims, misses the alienation of so many of those who live there. In a little over a generation, he writes, an "epidemic" of addiction - and fast food - "came to flow along the Rio Grande."

He believes that the dialectic of the American Dream, "in which boom is predicated on bust," and powerful people, who do not hesitate to use force and distribute wealth with grotesque unfairness, assigning real estate and human values across social geography, leaves the "losers" little choice "but to rebel against it all" by dropping out of a process that has dropped them, even if they pay a heavier price for their resistance than their oppressors.

Many of the folks he meets are "so low they get high," reject materialism or yearn for a fresh start in "another country" where they will no longer be strangers to themselves or each other.

Race and class-based cleavages are, indeed, fundamental realities in the American Southwest. But "Desert America" seems, at times, too polemical in its zeal to fill the emptiness of the desert with stories of senseless deaths and "ghosts in search of bodies."

Do immigrants always pay a price in "the land of opportunity," one wonders, "more poignantly or absurdly than back home?" Is the land no longer material for Hispanos, but a palpable reminder of loss, "even as for the strangers it is as pretty as a postcard?"

Martinez dedicates his book to his father, his wife (who studies drug addiction) and his two kids, who will view the desert "with their own eyes." You can't help hoping that they will see the pleasure and adventure in it as well as the trauma.

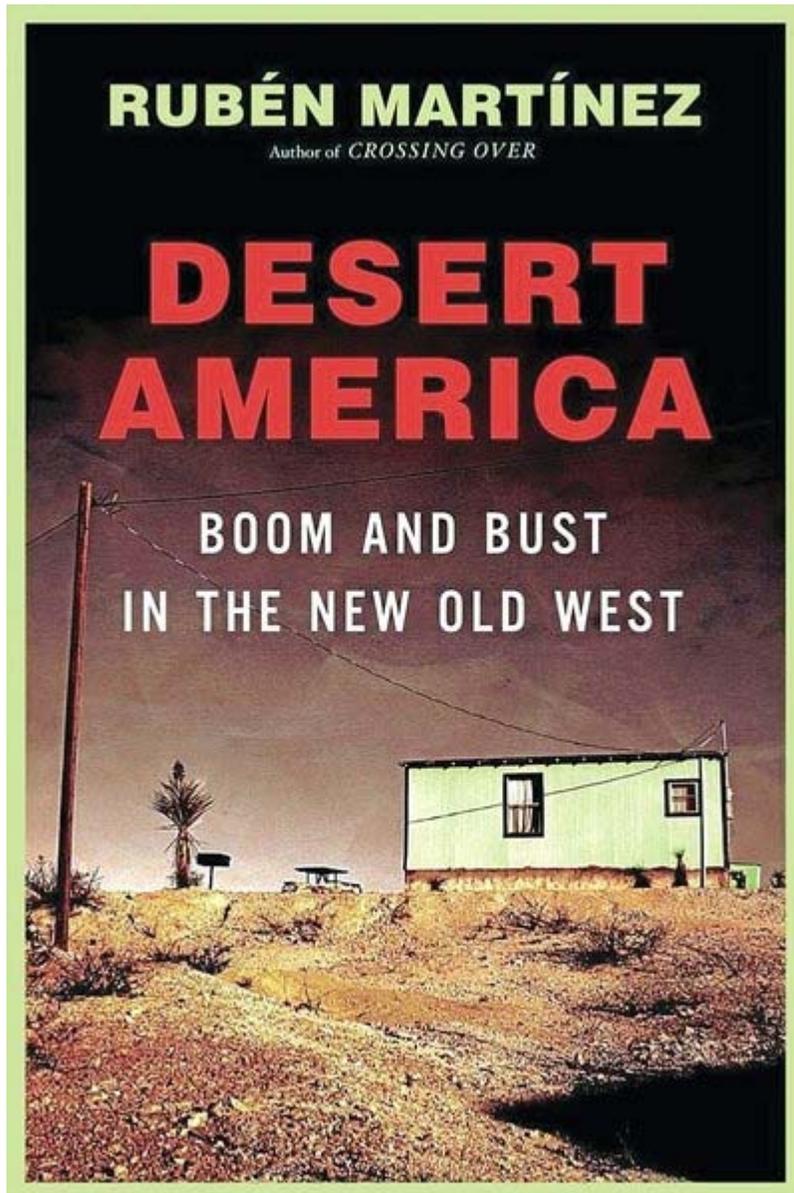
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Original Print Headline: 'Desert' is far from empty

DESERT AMERICA: BOOM AND BUST IN THE NEW OLD WEST

By Ruben Martinez

Metropolitan Books, \$28

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Desert America book. Read 26 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. A brilliantly illuminating portrait of the twenty-first-century West...â€¢ Boom and bust real estate cycles in the desert, and how they affect various populations. â€¢ Cultural clashes along racial and social class lines throughout history. â€¢ How each new group who settled in the desert marginalized groups that were already in residence. â€¢ The arrival of artists in the desert, and the resulting gentrification of towns, making these towns unaffordable for existing populations. â€¢ Conflict between environmentalists and native populations who use desert resources to survive. â€¢ The real life stories behind the headlines about US border control; exploring the fine line bet In August 2012 his book *Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old West* was published by Metropolitan Books.â€¢ *The New Americans* also brings to light many of the difficulties the immigrants face in the process of leaving their homeland and arriving in America. The book shows that the immigrants face problems such as racism, difficulty finding a job, difficulty acculturating, and the overwhelming sadness of leaving the land that they have always known. *The New Americans* is based on a PBS documentary series also named *The New Americans*. The book received many positive reviews.[7]. Articles[edit]. RubÃ©n MartÃ©nez has been featured in many literary magazines for his work. Reviewed in the United States on January 9, 2019. Format: Kindle EditionVerified Purchase. *Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old* by RubÃ©n MartÃ©nez is a difficult book to summarize in a short review. MartÃ©nez is a journalist of Hispanic ancestry, and he is fascinated by the borderlands between the US and Mexico in all its guises.â€¢ Unfortunately, the books reads as a disjointed narrative about the author's life in several places in the Western US including northern New Mexico, Joshua Tree and Los Angeles, California. Some of it even seems to be a bit of a 'recovery diary' as Mr. MartÃ©nez tells of his repeated struggles with drug addiction and his search for a perceived spiritual connections to his Salvadoran ethnic roots.