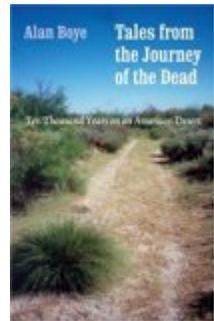


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Boye. *Tales from the Journey of the Dead: Ten Thousand Years on an American Desert*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. x + 256 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1358-6.

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## Jornada del Muerto: The Desert at the Heart of New Mexico

Jornada del Muerto, or Journey of the Dead, contains no national or state parks. What government land exists in this region of central New Mexico desert is largely shrouded in the mystery of White Sands Missile Range or rigorously fenced and protected privately owned range land such as Ted Turner's 300,000-plus-acre landholding, the former Armendaris grant. Roads are very few and, except for U.S. 380, mostly dirt. Thus, in an era when people commonly carry cellular phones with built-in GPS and rental car companies use satellites to track the speeds renters drive, Alan Boye hiked, biked, and conversed, as well as motored, his way across the length and breadth of this desolate desert landscape. The result, *Tales from the Journey of the Dead*, is a collection of historical narratives that tell the story of the desert through the tales of the people who have lived or continue to live there.

"Out there somewhere in the sand and dust and the ruins of war are the stories of sadistic killers, of directionless rebels, and of gun-toting cowboys," Boye, author of *Holding Stone Hands: On the Trail of the Cheyenne Exodus* (1999) and a professor of English at Lyndon State College, writes in the book's introductory narrative, "Traveling the Camino U.S. 380." "And out there somewhere too are the tales of poets and dreamers, of ordinary men and women who spent their lives under the wide and ruthless sky of the Journey of the Dead" (p. 7). Simply stated, this is Boye's objective: to discover and convey these stories and the history, happiness, misery and hope rooted in the 120-by-50-mile swath of desert that witnessed Europeans' *entrada* into North America and the

dawning of the nuclear age. Like much of the West, the Jornada del Muerto is an iconic place at once at the core of American identity and all but unknown—home to Billy the Kid, writers, ranchers, and entrepreneurs as well as the site of Indian wars, bloody Civil War battles, Trinity Test Site and late-twentieth-century wildlife reintroduction efforts. Many previously published histories have discussed aspects of the Jornada's past, but until now, few, if any, focused solely on the region in its entirety or through time.

Each one of the nineteen chronologically arranged chapters comprising *Tales from the Journey of the Dead* is a stand-alone narrative, but read one after the other as Boye arranged them and they proffer a well-rounded and yet particular picture of the Jornada and some of the many people who have passed through its water-poor, sun-scorched expanse, settled there, or died trying (hence the name). After introducing readers to and situating them on the Journey of the Dead, Boye introduces the region's deep geologic and indigenous past, which he explored in the company of federal land managers and geologists. In the remainder of *Tales*, Boye writes about an assortment of historical and contemporary figures and residents—some famous, some infamous, many ordinary. There is the Wild Man, who wandered back and forth across the Jornada, living outdoors, for decades prior to August 1945; there is restaurateur Rowena Baca, who is credited with inventing the green-chili hamburger; there is the infamous scalp-hunter James Kirker, who the Mexican government hired in 1839 to scalp Apaches; there is

Victorio, who was among the last Apache leaders to resist white encroachment in the Southwest. There is the writer Eugene Manlove Rhodes, who, reared on the Jornada, spent most of his adult life trying to return there after leaving to meet and marry his wife in New York. Lastly, among many others, there is Flo Martin, who has spent much of her lifetime fighting to reclaim her land from the federal government since she and her husband were evicted when the military established White Sands Missile Range at the outset of World War II. Many of these people considered the Jornada home and spent their lives eking a living from its harsh and at times unforgiving landscape. Boye portrays these people and their stories (often using interviewees' own words) with compassion and respect. Their words and recollections, meanwhile, make *Tales* more than simply a collection of essay-length historical narratives with the place, or setting, the only common denominator. Read together, the narratives form a whole that presents a palimpsest-like view of the Jornada's history—a layered and particular yet sweeping story grounded in thorough secondary research, oral interviews, and apparently extensive archival research that make tangible the historical continuity of the desert underlying contemporary residents' affinity for the place they call home. This is the book's strength.

This strength, however, is compromised by one major weakness—the absence of numbered foot- or endnotes—that results from a presumably conscious choice to blend narrative styles (the historical narrative, the travel narrative, and the modern familiar essay) to make the story of the desert's history more appealing and accessible to an audience that includes more than scholars alone. Rather than use numbered notes to cite the sources of particular information in each narrative, Boye included as notes in the back matter brief descriptions and/or listings of the sources and what he drew from each. For any historian or literary scholar who wants to follow up on or learn more about what Boye writes, the seventeen-page compilation of notes arranged by narrative, in conjunction with the seventeen-page bibliography, may be of only marginal value and assistance. What I as a reader found most disruptive about this practice, however, were the instances in the book where Boye had recounted an historical event with such thoroughness and detail that I stopped reading and questioned how he knew what he was writing about and where he had acquired the information. Boye's use of a citation style familiar to many of his book's most likely readers (for example, historians) would have substantiated his credibility as a writer, particularly a scholarly writer, as well as ensured the usefulness of his text for

other readers, researchers, and writers.

Boye's use of the narrative "I" to situate himself in the landscape and to suggest the immediacy of his observations and encounters with people and place is also likely to disturb scholarly readers. From the perspective of a historian, Boye's use of the first-person singular prevents him from achieving the alleged analytic distance and objectivity that is the supposed hallmark of proper (and traditional) histories—of professional histories. Because Boye's narratives are not history in the traditional sense, however, but rather an amalgam of historical and travel narrative and modern familiar essay, his use of the "I" is welcome and necessary. Unfortunately, however risky Boye's use of the "I" when considered from the perspective of the historian, his use of the rhetorical "I" was *not* risky enough when considered from the perspective of the essayist. Contrary to the tradition of essay writing, Boye purposefully reveals little of his personality in the individual narratives or the book as a whole. In only one narrative, "The Final Walk," does he in fact attempt to universalize his subject or give voice to his ideas. "Time is not an awareness of the future," Boye writes, "nor is it a dream about the path we have taken in our lives. Time is always and simply the precise point on our voyage. It is the earth navel, the *nan sipu* from which, in the singularity of our birth, we rose, and to which, in the unity of our death, we all return. When, through the blindness of our pride or the mass hysteria of war, we fail to see the unity of our journey, we fight only ourselves to death" (p. 207).

This single instance of reflection also marks Boye's only overt effort to glean or make meaning from the Jornada, its people and past, or his own travel experiences. Boye's singular reflective narrative (or essay), moreover, stands out in strong contrast to the book's dominant experiential style and voice. Although the reflective narrative does not detract from Boye's overall effectiveness at conveying the tales from the Journey of the Dead, "The Final Walk" nonetheless calls attention to the fact that Boye appears to be trying to retain the personal detachment of a historian while also trying to achieve and convey the intimacy of first-hand experience. Unlike the authors of more accomplished and successful examples of southwestern place-based historical narratives (for example, Dan Flores and William deBuys),<sup>[1]</sup> Boye, perhaps because he is a traveler and temporary visitor to the Jornada rather than a resident, never successfully resolves and marries these conflicting narrative objectives into a single seamless whole. This is not a fatal flaw, however, because Boye is writing about the desert as a trav-

eler. And rather than intended for residents, historians or other people intimately familiar with the Jornada and its long history, *Tales from the Journey of the Dead* appears to be written for a general audience largely unfamiliar with the region. Read from this perspective, Boye effectively conveys the histories and stories of the desert and of the people he intended to reveal. The book is especially recommended for people planning their own trip to the Jornada del Muerto or who want to know about the region.

## Note

[1]. Dan Flores, *Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999); and William deBuys, *Enchantment and Exploitation: The Life and Hard Times of a New Mexico Mountain Range* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).

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