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Review: 'Desert America' by Ruben Martinez

A city boy heads deep into the American West, where old and new cycle through each other amid the pinon trees and rugged individualists.



Author Rubén Martínez in his Los Angeles home. (Rick Loomis / Los Angeles Times / August 3, 2012)

By Hector Tobar, Los Angeles Times

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Desert America

Boom and Bust in the New "New West"

Rubén Martínez
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In his new book "Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New 'New West,'" Los Angeles writer Rubén Martínez leaves the city behind for the beauty and desolation of the dry, sparsely populated corners of what he calls the "inner West."

He alights in northern New Mexico, a land of pueblos and piñon trees, of sweeping vistas and old adobes. Many an adventurer and seeker has come to this land before him: Spanish conquistadors, American artists, New Age spiritualists, clipboard-toting Realtors.

The home he rents with his wife-to-be is within earshot of the roiling waters of the Rio Grande, amid old fruit trees and mesas where wild horses roam. Here, Martínez searches for truth and meaning. He is also trying, without much success, to break his drug habit — in a place notorious for its epidemic of [heroin](#) overdoses.

"I desired this place," he writes. For a self-described city boy, it's a kind of paradise. But a fraught one. Soon Martínez discovers that northern New Mexico is "Eden with poverty, Eden with drugs, Eden with class warfare."

Martínez, now a professor at Loyola Marymount University, is the author of four previous books. "Desert America" is his deeply moving and insightful account of his years searching for redemption and renewal far from L.A., in the sun-baked communities of "the new old west." In New Mexico and also in Joshua Tree and Marfa, Texas, he joins a steady stream of bohemians and outcasts who are fleeing the fakery and the high rents of Los Angeles, New York and other places.

The new old West, Martínez tells us, is where [John Wayne](#) filmed many an iconic movie and where immigrants die crossing the desert. It's home to cookie-cutter subdivisions and water wars. Americans think of its open spaces as a blank page where any loser or dreamer can rewrite his or her life story.

At each of his stops, however, Martínez probes the local history and quickly discovers how wrong-headed that thinking is. "Desert America" is a memoir that also manages to be an excellent work of reportage. Its main subject is the resilient people who populate the West's harshest landscapes.

In the semi-rural subdivisions near Joshua Tree, Martínez encounters military families, hard drinkers and poor working people. All sorts of weird things happen: for example, a casting call for locals to play Iraqi villagers in a simulated battle at the nearby Marine base. The locals like the weirdness, their down-and-out bars, their pickup trucks and their anonymity.

When Martínez and his fellow bohemians arrive, they bring a real estate boom in their wake. More real estate booms follow Martínez to New Mexico and Texas. "And everywhere the boom arrived," he writes, "it erased the stories and the people that stood in the way."

The tension between old and new, between boom and bust, pulls "Desert America" forward. It's a book about what the West was, and what it's becoming. In its pages, Martínez and countless other people fall in love with the rugged West, only to discover how painful that love can really be.

"The sense of mourning is the desert West's eternal refrain," Martínez writes. "The land is there to remind you that it is no longer yours."

In northern New Mexico, Martínez tries to grow vegetables in the poor soil. He embraces a new life mission.

"I'd live and write about the West in a veritable Western museum," Martínez says. "An American writer, I would claim my birthright, my place in the lineage."

Soon afterward, he's listening as the drug-dealing couple next door fire insults at each other. Various neighbors and activists invite Martínez into their world, including retired Hispanos with nostalgic memories of a now-fading rural culture and Anglo environmentalists who try to keep the Hispanos from gathering firewood.

Martínez discovers that life in New Mexico is a centuries-old knot of dark history. All the varied groups that live there — the native Pueblo peoples, the Hispanos descended from the Spanish conquistadors, and assorted U.S. transplants — have their own claims to, and obsession with, the land.

To each, Martínez is an empathetic listener. He's also an astute observer, and a disciplined researcher who's perfectly willing to sift through centuries of literature about New Mexico and its history to make sense of what's really going on around him.

Indeed, Martínez treats all the people he writes about, and the places where they live, with the kind of profound respect all too rare among the legions of Western writers who have preceded him. The result is an emotional and intellectually astute portrait of communities long neglected and misunderstood by American literature.

Martínez respects his subjects enough to be honest about their failings. He's also trying to be honest about his own. In New Mexico, he continues feeding his [addictions](#), hiding his drug use from his fiancée — she has come to the region, ironically enough, to study the local epidemic of overdoses and to work at a clinic with addicts.

Addiction, sadness and loss constantly return to haunt the narrative of "Desert America," for both Martínez and for many of his neighbors in his adopted home.

"Depression here is both economic and existential, exacerbated by the dimming of prospects for a better life or even maintaining the life of one's forebears," Martínez writes of northern New Mexico.

But one man's loss is another's gain, he discovers. "Depressed real estate values mean an 'opportunity' for elites, a 'steal,'" he says. It's the unending circle of recent Western history: bust following boom, hope following loss, rebirth following death.

Indeed, in the final pages of "Desert America" death itself makes several appearances, often thanks to the scourge of drug addiction. Each passing is a reminder of the fragility of life in those rugged places.

And yet "Desert America" is not a lament. The people who live in the new old West embrace the hopefulness that has long defined life there. It's an ethos, he writes, born of the desire "to imagine for ourselves a new life, another country where we will no longer be strangers to ourselves or to each other."