



Acid West

Joshua Wheeler

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A rollicking debut book of essays that takes readers on a trip through the muck of American myths that have settled in the desert of our country's underbelly

Early on July 16, 1945, Joshua Wheeler's great grandfather awoke to a flash, and then a long rumble: the world's first atomic blast filled the horizon north of his ranch in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Out on the range, the cattle had been bleached white by the fallout.

Acid West, Wheeler's stunning debut collection of essays, is full of these mutated cows: vestiges of the Old West that have been transformed, suddenly and irrevocably, by innovation. Traversing the New Mexico landscape his family has called home for seven generations, Wheeler excavates and reexamines these oddities, assembling a cabinet of narrative curiosities: a man who steps from the stratosphere and free-falls to the desert; a treasure hunt for buried Atari video games; a village plagued by the legacy of atomic testing; a showdown between Billy the Kid and the author of Ben-Hur; a UFO festival during the paranoid Summer of Snowden.

The radical evolution of American identity, from cowboys to drone warriors to space explorers, is a story rooted in southern New Mexico. *Acid West* illuminates this history, clawing at the bounds of genre to reveal a place that is, for better or worse, home. By turns intimate, absurd, and frightening, *Acid West* is an enlightening deep-dive into a prophetic desert at the bottom of America.

Acid West Details

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Author : Joshua Wheeler

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From Reader Review Acid West for online ebook

Elle Maruska says

Writing good essays is hard. It's hard to strike the necessary balance between personal and universal, between telling a story and making a point, between what's in your head and what's in your gut. Good essays have to be grounded in both the individual experience of the author and in more generalized concepts so the reader can feel welcome, feel invested. And this collection walks that balance beautifully, stitching together the author's family history with the tidal surges of local, national, and international history. The author writes about South New Mexico, a place not many of us have ever visited or even thought about that much but by engaging with events that ripple all the way across the world-- the first atomic bomb detonation, Virgin's "Spaceport" built on former ranchlands, the exhumation of legendary buried video game cartridges--the local and the global become intertwined, inseparable.

There is a palpable sense of grief pervading most of the essays in this collection: grief for the dead and dying, grief for a city and its murdered multitude, grief for the poison unleashed by the birth of the atomic age, grief for what's forgotten, what desperation forces the brain to cling to, what is passed down in the blood and bone and stories of a family. But there's no nihilism here, not really. There are reminders that faith doesn't necessarily have to be about religion but about the land, the existence of others, the hope that maybe small things can make small changes, that small stories about forgotten people can bring dignity even in the midst of overwhelming pain.

Highly recommend this book

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I got a bit bogged down by this book in the middle (I wondered if some of them could have been combined a bit) but overall enjoyed these essays, all set in New Mexico, about different topics related to the area. There are essays on atomic testing, death row inmates, grandparent eulogies, and free-falls from space, but all very based on this space and the type of people drawn to live in it.

3.5 stars

Thanks to the publisher for providing access to this title through Edelweiss. It came out April 17, 2018.

Alysa H. says

4.5 stars. Very good collection of incisive, impressive writing. I liked this book a lot, though I would vociferously disagree with the official description leading with "rollicking". This book is the opposite of rollicking; it's almost unrelentingly grim. The moments of humor here and there are welcome, but tend to be black. Once my expectations were violently removed by the first essay, I was able to approach the rest in a more apt fashion. I would at least agree with a later assertion in the official description of the book as "intimate, absurd, and frightening."

Wheeler obviously writes from a place of complicated love for his hometown of Alamogordo, New Mexico, and transports the reader there, or at least into caring about what goes on and has gone on there. Each piece, be it discussing the atomic test sites, UFO enthusiasts, the death penalty, buried video games, Spaceport America, or other topics of local interest and import, is more or less a slam dunk in itself. The majority (all?) of these essays have previously been published elsewhere, but collecting them in this way gives them a weight they deserve and certainly attracts new readers such as myself.

Overall, however, it runs a bit too long, and a handful of the pieces -- each long in themselves -- either tread familiar ground, have a slightly off tone, or seem less thematically relevant to the whole. The essay on atomic testing in NM is very good, but probably won't bring much to students of the subject. The bit about Wheeler's great(great?)-grandfather settling in town is intentionally designed to read more like fiction than non, but since it's the only thing in the book that's not a straight-up essay it's rather jarring in a not-great way. The piece towards the end that is set mainly in Ciudad Juárez rather than in NM feels totally out of scope and out of place among the rest and would have been better left out, in my opinion, and perhaps saved for some future collection of essays about contemporary Southwestern USA more broadly, and not about the area directly around Alamogordo, lying 100 miles north.

Upon learning that Wheeler works as a creative writing teacher, my first thought was something along the lines of "Wow, those are some lucky students." It makes me hopeful about the future of creative nonfiction to know that some teachers are actively producing work like this. I hope Wheeler keeps at it -- the writing and the teaching -- and I look forward to reading more of his work as it appears.

**** I received a Review Copy of this book via NetGalley ****

Hank Stuever says

Another one I'd round up to 3.5 stars. Liked and sort-of-liked, and will admit to skimming through in parts, when the author just would not get to it. As far as the creative nonfiction genre goes, I do like that Joshua Wheeler writes with a commitment to fact (endnotes! footnotes!) as well as a literary flair. That's the great combination and when it works, it's the best kind of reading.

I also began my career writing about New Mexico, albeit for a newspaper, which may seem like an entirely different ball of wax, but not really -- I was also nuts for the place (and remain nuts for it), finding stories in every part of the state, not just everything north of Albuquerque, but also (and perhaps especially) Wheeler's "SNM" (Southern New Mexico). The bomb, the Holy Spirit, the alien encounters, the white sands, the truth and the consequences. I enjoyed a trip back there through Wheeler's words, which, unlike the back-cover summary, I did not find to be so "rollicking." I guess the publisher/marketing department was hoping for something more adventurous and wild; because "thoughtful" simply won't do?

Favorite essay here: "Living Room." And not to sound like a broken record, because I write this in so many reviews of nonfiction books, but here I go, with one more reminder that less really can be more. One less piece in this book, or 10-20 percent less from each piece, and I might have moved through it more swiftly and enthusiastically. This is not the same as saying the book needs editing -- it's clearly had that and I'm sure the author sweated and pared and pruned these essays through many drafts. It's a much harder question of knowing when too much is enough, or that the material is not shouldering the word-count. And it's an arbitrary response, for sure, from reader to reader.

Briley Lewis says

Okay, I'm finally saying I'm finished with this book - it's a collection of short stories, and I haven't read them all but I have read most. The ones I didn't read were because they were a bit too much for me to handle emotionally.

Let me explain - this book is called *acid west*, since the a trippy, surreal theme that takes on the subject matter of the southwest, specifically New Mexico. Some of the short stories were a real trip - dreamlike and mesmerizing, leaving you with a sense of awe, slight confusion, and wonder at the world and how everything is interconnected in strange ways. Some of them were more of a BAD trip - ghoulish descriptions of decaying human forms and of the darker parts of humanity. Although I admire this as a genius stroke of writing (seriously, the writing is so so good), some of those bad trips were a bit too much for me and I had to move on.

Overall, really really good though - *Children of the Gadget* is probably one of my favorite essays I have ever read!

Neil Grayson says

I loved this book. The essay on baseball is one of my favorites written by anyone ever. But.

It says in the afterward that one of Wheeler's professors has yelled at him to stop "aching for profundity," advice that Wheeler rejects. And, cool, you're your own you, but the parts when the book is weakest are the parts when it's hard for the reader to put up with this ache; because this ache translates into waxing poetic when there's nothing there to wax on, and it feels masturbatory; and gives the sensation that Wheeler doesn't always exactly know what he's writing about, and so draws the lyrical wool down over his own (and then our) eyes in the hopes that we won't catch him. Caught, bitch.

Kristy K says

A book of essays about New Mexico, I found this entertaining and unique. Wheeler explores all the people, places, and stories that make New Mexico what it is. There are some oddities and interesting facts although parts of it I felt lagged. Overall an enjoyable experience though.

Matt says

I won a free copy of this book as part of a Goodreads First-reads giveaway. I am offering my honest review.

I was excited to read Joshua Wheeler's collection of essays, *Acid West*, because I love place-writing and seeing the way a local geography and culture is expressed in words. At first I was disappointed in the way that these essays, mostly set in Southern New Mexico, seemed to be about anything but the place itself:

space jumps, drone pilots, weapons testing, aliens. However, the more I read, I came to realize that it is exactly these outside forces, what Wheeler may call the "uncanny," that give the locale of Alamogordo its bizarre, outlandish, and otherworldly feel. In many ways this is not "place writing" but "displacement writing."

Two of the essays stuck out to me as especially good. The first, "Children of the Gadget" explores the tenuous relationship the "downwinders" of atom bomb testing have with their country and their forgotten place in history. It would make for excellent reading in high schools. The other essay I really enjoyed, "The Glitch in the Videogame Graveyard," brilliantly weaves together the concepts of virtual reality, archaeology, religion, and the exploitative power of corporations - it's really quite impressive.

In his other essays, Wheeler is skilled at mining his place for fascinating stories - drone pilots practicing over baseball fields, acupuncture in the Catholic Churches of Mexico, the conversion of a death row inmate - but some of these essays felt like a slog to get through. To be fair to Wheeler, this may come down to my own preference in writing style. Wheeler writes these essays in what I suppose I would call "modern creative writing" style - begin with a trying-desperately-to-be-original simile or adjective, sprinkle in some f-bombs for color, include every meticulously-researched coincidental connection to the topic at hand, point out the flaws in a belief system or viewpoint, but then end with a "who really can say?" conclusion.

I would recommend the two essays mentioned above to everyone. The rest will be of interest to those in the Southwest and students of the essay form.

Beth says

Wow, Joshua Wheeler can WRITE. This short story/essay collection would be notable just due to it's wonderfully weird subject matter - the bizarre reality of life in Southern New Mexico, home of the Trinity Site, Roswell, Spaceport America, and a hundred thousand Atari games buried in a dump. But Wheeler's fantastic writing style and voice takes it to another level, evoking the dusty, sun-scorched desert delirium (as well as brief forays into other worlds, including a capsule in the sub-stratosphere, a death-row cell in prison, and an asylum on the outskirts of Juarez, Mexico) in a witty, poetic, unique way. Well done.

*Thanks to NetGalley for the ARC, provided by the author and/or the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

Pop Bop says

Welcome to Southern New Mexico

I know and love Truth or Consequences, Socorro, Bosque del Apache, the Very-Large-Array, Alamogordo, Cloudcroft, and Sunspot, so I was totally up for this collection of essays. It delivers on its promise, but it's also so much more.

This has been blurbed as a collection of "rollicking" essays that capture oddities and curiosities native to Southern New Mexico. Well, I guess in a way that's right, but that also just makes the book sound like an extra-funky "Roadside" travel guide. This book is much more ambitious, multi-layered, and rewarding than

that.

Wheeler seems to have mastered the art of laid back next-level New Journalism. Writers like McPhee and Wolfe pioneered that style, but they still felt mostly like reporters, though opinionated ones. Wheeler's book is more personal. It's based on his roots in the area and his intimate and authentic knowledge of the people and the places and events about which he writes. He is more ironic, more pointed, less whimsical, and more deadpan earnest than would be an author aiming mostly at entertainment. He can also be extremely funny, but that may be the liquor talking.

This book is intended to make very clear points - at the outset, about the effect the detonation of the "Gadget", (the code name for the very first atomic bomb), at the Trinity site had on "downwinders" in Southern New Mexico, and about what it meant for the world, and about the generations of dead and dying New Mexicans who were sacrificed to that test. Other favorite essays address topics like UFO believers, (Roswell is in Southern New Mexico), buried Atari video games, and Spaceport America. The essays share a few aspects - Wheeler is generous in writing about local people, he's wary of government, he's tolerant of ambiguity, he looks at every topic from a variety of angles, and he's willing to follow his intuition. And he's perfectly happy to declare "shenanigans" when warranted.

Sure some of the essays are overlong. Some thoughts are repeated. A few essays don't fit into the Southern New Mexico theme very well. But these are minor quibbles. At the heart of each essay, Wheeler seems devoted to, paraphrasing his words, "trying to differentiate the terrible from the awesome". If that strikes you as at all interesting, then this collection might be just what you want.

(Please note that I received a free advance will-self-destruct-in-x-days Adobe Digital copy of this book without a review requirement, or any influence regarding review content should I choose to post a review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.)

Jen says

**** I received a copy of this book for free through a Goodreads giveaway. ****

This book of essays is grim. Insightful, extremely well-written, with flashes of humor, but almost dark for most of it. This is NOT a criticism! The darkness and 'realness' of the stories is exactly what made them so readable and relatable (even for someone who not only has never lived in the southwest but who knows very little about the southwest). While some of the essays went on a bit longer than they may have needed to, overall this was a fascinating look into the day to day of everyday life in the American southwest and it is definitely worth reading!

Jason says

One hell of a great book. Here's a link to my interview with the author:
<http://www.vol1brooklyn.com/2018/04/2...>

Lori Gibbany says

In the beginning of this book I thought I would never finish it but am so glad I stuck with it. Even though the stories seemed random and some crazy they all seemed to check out as true and interesting. It totally fed into my ADD and information seeking brain.

Lauren says

Have to read this! I grew up in Southern New Mexico too.

Casey Gray says

Fire.
