



The Book of What Remains

Benjamin Alire Sáenz

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“To write well about your life, you need to have a life worth writing about. On that score, Sáenz hits pay dirt.” —*Booklist*

“A former Catholic priest, this poet creates prayerful verse that is at once mystical and utterly human.”
—*The Washington Post*

Poet, novelist, and popular YA writer Benjamin Alire Sáenz writes to the core truth of life’s ever-shifting memories. Set along the Mexican border, the contrast between the desert’s austere beauty and the brutality of border politics mirrors humanity’s capacity for both generosity and cruelty. In his numbered series “Meditation on Living in the Desert,” Sáenz turns to memory, heritage, and a host of literary progenitors as he directly confronts matters of faith, civil rights, and contemporary politics—always with the unrelenting moral urge to speak truth and *do* something.

I am looking at a book of photographs.

The photographs document the exodus of Mexicans crossing the desert.

I am staring at the face of a woman who is more a girl than a woman.

She is handing her documents to a government official.

I know and you know and we all know that the documents are forged.

The official is not in the photograph.

Only the frightened eyes of a girl.

A former Catholic priest who worked with Mother Teresa, **Benjamin Alire Sáenz** has published five books of poetry, four novels, a collection of short stories, and two bilingual children’s books. He received the American Book Award and teaches in the bilingual MFA program at University of Texas, El Paso.

The Book of What Remains Details

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From Reader Review The Book of What Remains for online ebook

Jeremy says

A glorious collection of poems about immigration, nostalgia, the past, the present, finding a home, then finding another home and celebrating culture even in the darkest of times when it seems like history is all that is left, The book of what remains, is yet another example of Saenz undying love for Mexico and its diaspora and the gifts it has given to him, even when news of death and dying consistently weigh on his mind. His words speak to every day life and while many are ripe with melancholy, so many still have a tone of strength and survival, that ultimately help make this a hopeful collection. My first poetry collection from this author, I love his free-verse, almost amorphous style, as his words dance along the page in a variety of formats from psalmic-esque meditations on nature to longer letters that seem ripped directly from a personal diary. He has such an honest voice that is so genuinely his own that I would be able to recognize his writing anywhere. In his writing Saenz gives us a blend of the literal and figurative, he contemplates situations that sound so far away yet that are happening just across the border and that keep him awake at nights. We see him as he thinks back to his marriage and now his divorce, glimpses of a hard childhood punctuated with happy moments, then to an adult life of relative contentment peppered with so many feelings of doubts, shames, regrets, and yearnings (particularity for an old dog who became a true companion and a garden that became his creation).

Not a big reader of poetry, I can't really offer commentary past the banal "I think this sounded beautiful", but for what it's worth I thought so much of this collection read gloriously and found myself tabbing page after page. And though I'm not sure I've been converted into a poetry fan in general, I know that I am a complete fan of Saenz's poetry and will be sure to pick up more of their poetry offerings in the future. 4.25 stars out of 5 from me!

Laura says

I read this cover to cover this morning. There is much to love in this book. The longer pieces have a wonderful momentum impossible to convey in an excerpt. I enjoyed the voice and sense of humor in these pieces and how the shorter meditations on living in the desert were interspersed throughout the collection.

". . . Alive
is a place. *Alive* is the new word for *home*."

"When a man takes out the words
he has hidden in his heart for over fifty years
and gives them to another--
that is called a miracle."

After the Dying

"Sometimes I think my tongue is a desert praying for rain."

Meditation on Living in the Desert No. 17

Longer pieces that stood out to me:

Confessions: My Father, Hummingbirds, and Frantz Fanon

Prayer in the Garden

After the Dying

Sin música no hay vida.

Meredith says

I wanted to like this more than I did. Some of the poems are really wonderful, but others seem too self-conscious. Also, it may be a small thing but I hated the fact that every line began with a capital letter, even when that didn't make sense. That shouldn't happen with poetry.

Northpapers says

Sabbath Book #10 for 2018.

People are irreducible, despite our best attempts to neaten them up, place them within certain borders, categorize them. One by one or in large groups, people keep surprising us in the way they respond to internal and external complexity.

The rewards of reading this collection of poems are found in the author's boldness to dwell near borders and speak from within transition points. These poems find him (and us, fellow readers, thanks to second-person narration) at the border between marriage and divorce, Mexico and the United States, stillness and storm, dreams and waking, faith and doubt.

Content-wise and thematically, this was a five-star collection for me. But the craft tripped me up. Returns to well-worn metaphors like gardens, cities, deserts, and plants shed little light. Some poems fell formally between essay and poem, seeming to lose some of the power of either form in the compromise.

Still, I enjoyed the collection, and I found it frequently rewarding. Highlights were "The Comforts of the Neighborhood," "Last Summer in the Garden," and "A True and Perfect Sound."

Shin Yu says

The Book of What Remains by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2010. 126 pp. \$16.00 paperback.

The Book of What Remains is the fifth volume of poetry by El Paso-based writer and artist Benjamin Alire Sáenz. Best known for his work as an accomplished author of young adult books and novels, Sáenz returns to his redoubtable roots as an inimitable poet in his latest collection. In *The Book of What Remains*, Sáenz, a former Catholic priest, explores the aftermath of both private and public tragedies, border violence, and the casualties of war, to consider the Christian apostle Saint Paul's dictum on what remains, namely faith, hope, and love. (115)

Sáenz divides his book into three major sections. Long narrative poems are intercut with a series of eighteen meditations on living in the desert, inserted throughout the first and third sections of the collection. The poet characterizes the harsh and unforgiving qualities of the desert: "your dreams will not save you from the sun" (18), but also points to the ways in which "human history is even crueler than the desert" (184), in recording the history of nuclear testing in Alamogordo, New Mexico. These short contemplative poems illuminate the disharmonious relationship between mankind and the land; Meditation No. 2 satirizes a poetic speaker who endlessly consumes natural resources. His lack of concern for the future of the land culminates with a tongue-in-cheek statement "When all the trees have disappeared, we can all read Robert Frost poems / and feel sad." (8) There are no traces of "Imperialist Nostalgia" in Sáenz's poems, which are intense political reflections on a personal ecopoetics rooted firmly in the life and culture of the border experience.

Tragedy, simultaneously pedestrian and life altering, is a major theme throughout Sáenz's collection. "The Comforts of the Neighborhood" tells the tale of nineteen-year-old Juan Patricio Peraza, an unarmed and undocumented migrant worker that is mercilessly gunned down by Border Patrol agents in the poet's hometown. Elsewhere, the poet writes of the breakdown of a marriage that results in the loss of his home and a beloved pet in the divorce settlement. But it is the capacity for deep feeling that bestows truth and beauty upon the poet and gives him the gift of song throughout *The Book of What Remains*.

At the heart of Sáenz's collection are the long poems "The Ruined Cities of My Broken, Broken Heart" and "What I Have to Sing About." In "The Ruined Cities..." the poet addresses himself:

You have been wandering
in the desert for forty years
searching for water
and a politics
and a theology
and a city you call home (55)

Seeking reconciliation in a life filled with ruin, the poet only arrives in "What I Have to Sing About" at the truth that "the road to happiness is a long fucking road trip" (108). There is no performative lament that encumbers Sáenz's poetic searching, only a gesture towards the transfigurative act of redefining one's own terms. Through a belief in certainty, goodness, and compassion, the poet arrives at an emancipatory poetics that rejects the "logic of slavery" (5) to realize the poignant epigram that opens the third section of *The Book of What Remains*: "You are what you remember." (67)

Sarah says

Part poetry, part philosophy, mostly amazing. This is modern poetry at its best.

S.W. Gordon says

Way too political and sanctimonious for my taste. That's "what remains" for me after reading this book.

Lara says

So yeah, I'm not a big poetry reader. I feel like I keep running across things written as poetry that...just, why? I get it stuck in my head that writing something as a poem is lazy somehow, because so many things I've read in verse just feel empty of all depth and emotion and beauty. But then there are people like this guy who make me get it.

I only read this because I've read two of Sáenz's books and thought they were fantastic and I got curious about what he could do with a poem. I really liked the first couple in this book and then I hit a section that felt a little too..."look at me, I'm writing poetry," you know? Like...weird spacing and line breaks and that annoyed me. But then all of a sudden I just couldn't put this book down and I read the whole rest of it all at once and felt like going back and reading it again almost.

I love the raw honesty of these poems. I love his thoughts on dogs and living in the desert.

I love the depth and the emotion and the beauty.

No, this collection isn't perfect, but I mean, this guy can write! And it's definitely reconfirmed my desire to read everything he's ever published. He's fast becoming one of my very favorite authors.

Isis says

Absolutely stunning! *This* is exactly what poetry should be. It should be beautiful, painful words put together. Words crafted so perfectly that at times you smile, laugh, press your hand against your heart, and tear up.

Saenz, that man is a genius. I admire him. I adore him. I want him to never stop writing.

Manuel Tejera says

Each time I read B. Alire Saenz I love him more and more. I am so excited for his new two books that will be released this year. I am sure they will be as great as all his novels/poetry books.

He can explain impossible things and feelings with a very easy and understandable way of writing, and I think this is the nearest thing to magic that we can find.

For those who are thinking about reading that book: do it, you won't regret it!

(¡Gente no angloparlante, tiene un lenguaje bastante fácil de entender, así que animaos a leerlo también!)

Leigh Ann says

Read this at the same time as *_Inexplicable Logic_* and it was interesting to see all the overlap, even though the books are quite a few years apart.

Some of the longer prose-y poems are sermons of the best kind. I suppose that makes them homilies.

Rossdavidh says

So, I don't review poetry books very much. To be honest, I don't read poetry books very much. If you were to ask me why I decided to read this one, I don't know that I could give a very satisfying answer.

Some of Sáenz's poems are several pages long, but some are short enough to quote in a blog post. For example:

"Wallace Stevens's blackbirds come into my yard sometimes. I'm not sure why they like my yard. I suspect they like my sprinklers and the fact that I don't have a cat.

Even though the blackbirds have learned to live in the desert, they have never acquired a taste for modernist poems."

This is a fairly representative example, aside from being shorter than usual. Sáenz's poetry (in this book, anyway) is definitely grounded in a particular geographic place (the Mexican-American border, mostly the American side of it). There is a series of short poems through it entitled "Meditations on living in the Desert". It isn't about Arabia or the Sahara.

I read this book before going to sleep every night for a few weeks. It is possible that this fact has colored my impression of them. However, I think it is not only for this reason that they reminded me of the times when you are awake at night, wondering about the past, or the future, or maybe the present, sometimes anxious but often contemplative. Sáenz's poetry usually caused me to do this, after I had put the book aside and turned out the light by my bed. Lie there, and think, and contemplate.

Not that he does not sometimes express some emotion beyond the contemplative. For example:

"The mesquite growing outside the window when I write
is in full bloom, its branches swaying in the breeze.
By August, the pods will hang heavy and fall
to the ground. When I was a boy I used to chew
on the pods pretending they were sugarcane. Maybe only boys do
such things. This summer, I am contemplating
a return to my old boyhood habit of chewing
on the pods. This will give me an excuse to spit
when I am reading the New York Times Book Review."

Well, Mr. Sáenz, it may be poor consolation to you, as I am no New York Times Book Review, but I very much enjoyed your book of poems. Please continue.

Patty says

I did not read every poem in this book, but for now, I am finished with it.

I really loved Saenz' poems about the desert. They made me think about deserts more than I would have any reason to. Especially given that we have had enough rain lately for me to believe that deserts no longer exist.

I had a harder time with Saenz' political poems. They just did not strike a chord with me right now. I plan to come back to this book at another time.

One thing poems have taught me is that you need to approach them at the right time for both you and the poem.

Chris says

My reason for recommending this is the same reason I'm not sure I'm qualified to recommend it: it's the first book of poetry I've ever voluntarily read cover to cover. I'm certainly not anti-poetry and really enjoy evocative language that has rhythmic and aesthetic qualities—poetic language, if you will—but long chunks of ongoing poetry piled on top of one another just generally don't do it for me. I was delighted when this one did.

Perhaps one of the things I liked was that, for poetry, it's almost prosaic. Often poetry seems to me to be about language first and content second, but in this I very clearly felt the language was just the tool being used in the service of what it was saying. Very conversational, at times organically stream-of-consciousness-

ish, but with a non-linear, connected circularity that belies any attempts to call it random. Saenz's writing is intimately personal and confessional, giving voice to raw pain and anger, although themes like politics and place and race keep showing up as they inform his identity, and there is a sense of connecting his particular struggles to a greater humanity. The overarching theme is finding the fragile, struggling, harsh life and defiant beauty in the desert, which serves as a metaphor on many levels, particularly that of his damaged psyche.

Meditation on Living in the Desert

No. 2

I love the sand, the heat, the arid nights.

I am in love with plants that can survive the droughts.

I am also in love with air-conditioning.

I refuse to recycle.

I am helping to make the entire world into a desert.

I live in the desert. I want everyone else to live in one, too.

When all the trees have disappeared, we can all read Robert Frost poems and feel sad.

Tasha says

Stunning.
