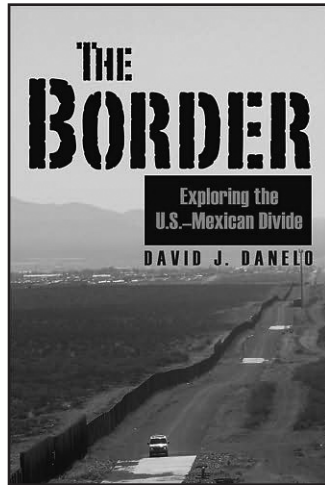


Crossing the Fence to America

The Border: Exploring the U.S.-Mexican Divide by David J. Danelo. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008. 208 pp. \$24.95 cloth)

This book is something else. In *The Border: Exploring the U.S.-Mexican Divide*, David Danelo has a whole different take on the region. He has three story lines interwoven into one fast-paced, page-turning narrative that leaves you “gob-smacked,” as the Brits say, and what we call “astounded.” Books about the border keep coming, almost as many now as there are about the Big Bend. And many of them are geared to rouse feelings of pity for the “aliens” who sneak across the Rio Grande only to be caught by “computer databases with fingerprint and biometric identification technology,” wielded by men and women whose job is to send them back where they came from. Then we feel guilty. Like it’s our fault that these poor folks have to come crawling under cover of darkness to earn a living, to get away from the money-grubbing, politically corrupt Mexicans. Not a personal opinion, you understand, just the tack most authors take.



David Danelo, raised in San Antonio, is an author, a journalist, a former Marine, and a man with a mission, a tale to tell. In 2007 he traveled 1,952 miles from the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas, westward all the way to Tijuana. He interviewed people on both sides of the cultural fence, i.e. people on both sides of the issue. He examines the history of the heroes and villains who have affected the region, and then—no holds barred—he writes about the drug cartels and those who wage war. He makes it absolutely clear that these are no less foreign terrorists than those we are coached to expect will head our way from the Middle East and South Asia.

Texans, whether native or adopted, are keenly interested in the border. We have read *Dying to Cross*, Jorge Ramos’ numbing account of the 2003 tragedy when 19 would-be immigrants, including a little boy, died in a locked truck. We have wept at *The Tortilla Curtain*, T. C. Boyle’s novel about two couples sharing space but not lives near a Los Angeles canyon, the rich who became richer and the poor who ended up infinitely poorer. Danelo’s book doesn’t skip this type of tale, and no matter how many versions we read, it isn’t hard to become emotionally, helplessly sad about the hardships of the virtually innocent.

But he goes much further.

His first premise is that Texans have scant ill-feeling toward “the other side” and shrug off the importance of a wall. In Arizona, the wall counteracts the tunnels through which immigrants sneak, and the U.S. citizens’ attitude about those on the other side of the river is wholly different. Danelo interlaces the bare facts by talking with agency officials like the chief of *la migra*, the Border Patrol, who told him, “[A] good Border Patrol chief has more in common with an exceptional Marine than with a local sheriff.” He meets men and women working for the various official agencies as well as oddballs, optimists, humanitarians, the sympathetic, and the detractors.

Danelo delves back decades, even centuries, to remind us of the heroes and villains like Judge Roy Bean. Advancing to the present day, he discusses the pros and cons of the NAFTA agreement and the *maquiladores*, and how, despite the thousands of jobs created, 25 percent of the population in Mexico still earns less than a dollar a day. Some information is less familiar—for example, the southward migration of Anglos who are also in need of the jobs offered on the border.

The book takes a grave turn as Danelo confronts the barbarism in the drug cartel war. He urges that these men and women are the epitome of evil and must be kept out of the country. How? No solutions yet, just a black picture, a terrifying scenario of what will happen as the drug wars spread up from the border. The newspapers give us the headlines. Danelo fills in the rest.

The book is certainly disturbing, but it’s an unequivocally compelling read.

Jane Manaster is a writer and reviewer living in Austin.

★ NOTICE ★ NEW RATES

Beginning with the Spring 2009 issue (Vol. 29, No. 1), subscription and single-issue prices for *Texas Books in Review* will be as follows:

	USA	Overseas	Student	Overseas Student
Single issue (current):	\$5	\$11	—	—
One-year subscription:	\$18	\$24	\$12	\$18
Two-year subscription:	\$34	\$44	—	—
Back issue:	\$6	\$13	—	—