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## WESTWORDS

# The place we call home

By Jonathan Kirsch

Jonathan Kirsch, a contributing writer to Book Review, is the author of, most recently, "God Against the Gods: The History of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism."

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OF the books published about the Golden State this year, few offer as rich and delectable a sampler as "*California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present*," which captures the experience of life in California as it has been perceived by 101 poets over the last century and a half, from Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller to Kenneth Rexroth and Charles Bukowski. Some of the poets are interested in great men and great events; some are wholly absorbed by the intimate details of their own lives; some are enthralled by the beauty of nature; and some are appalled by the abuse of nature. Just about the only thing the writers assembled in "*California Poetry*" (*Santa Clara University/Heyday Books: 400 pp., \$21.95 paper*) have in common is that they lived in California.

Another memorable title about the American West is "*Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect That Shaped the American Frontier*" (*Basic Books: 304 pps., \$26*). Jeffrey A. Lockwood takes a fresh and fascinating look at the famines that resulted from a nightmarish infestation of locusts that spread like a biblical plague in the 1870s. The author shows the sights, sounds and smells of a plague of locusts with scientific precision and the soul-shaking effect of a horror movie. The last third of Lockwood's book is a kind of scientific whodunit in which he makes a compelling case for having solved what he calls "perhaps the greatest ecological mystery of modern times": what caused the infestations and why they disappeared so abruptly. Along the way, he tells a tale of the Old West that few of us have heard before, and does it exceedingly well.

Southern California is sketched with deft, sure strokes by Alan Rifkin in "*Signal Hill*" (*City Lights: 128 pp., \$12.95 paper*). Not a soul in these short stories is comfortable in his or her own skin — the women are tantalizing but troubled figures, the men yearn but are always checked by the curse of what Rifkin calls "male circumspexion." They are, however, redeemed by Rifkin's compassion, insight and humor. Above all, these stories are the hauntingly beautiful work of a gifted storyteller with a sharp eye and a big heart.

"*The Devil's Highway: A True Story*" (*Little, Brown: 240 pp., \$24.95*) is Luis Alberto Urrea's tale of the desperate effort of men, women and children to cross Mexico's desert wilderness into the United States, a saga on the scale of "The Exodus" and an ordeal as heartbreaking as "The Passion" — what Urrea calls "a savage gospel of the crossing." The author brings his considerable powers as a verse-maker and a storyteller to what is essentially a courageous work of investigative journalism. It's a harrowing tale, full of danger and drama but told with empathy and insight, about the border-crossers and the Border Patrol agents who must chase them.

Racism, its burdens and challenges, is at the heart of "*Burro Genius: A Memoir*" (*Rayo/HarperCollins: 336 pp., \$24.95*), Victor Villaseñor's intense and intimate account of the author's lifelong struggle to make sense of love and loss, to penetrate the mysteries of his family's colorful but troubling history. Indeed, he shows exactly how racism works in the real world, and that is what makes this book not only poignant but also a great, important and ultimately redemptive American memoir.

"*My California: Journeys by Great Writers*" (*Angel City Press: 208 pp., \$16.95*) is a lively collection of travel writing by 27 authors who paint much more than a series of quaint and colorful scenes. The book is full of reflective and illuminating moments, and each of the contributors manages to transcend the thoroughly respectable genre of travel writing to achieve something more exalted. The book benefits the California Arts Council, an agency that editor Donna Wares notes is "on the brink of destruction" because of the state's financial problems. Thus, the collection is hot-wired into both the zeitgeist and the politics of California in an urgent and worthy way, making it a good read and a good deed. •

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