



Reading the Signs and other itinerant essays by Stephen Benz

With a wandering spirit and an inquisitive mind, Stephen Benz ventures around town, across country, and overseas in search of forgotten, overlooked, or misunderstood stories. From rock concerts and courthouses to farm towns, battlegrounds, historical sites, and quirky museums, these “itinerant essays” revel in discovering “new wonders every mile.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Along with two books of travel essays—*Guatemalan Journey* (University of Texas Press) and *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America* (Lonely Planet)—Stephen Benz has published essays in *Creative Nonfiction*, *River Teeth*, *TriQuarterly*, *New England Review*, and other journals. Three of his essays have been selected for *Best American Travel Writing* (2003, 2015, 2019). His poems have appeared in journals such as *Nimrod*, *Shenandoah*, and *Confrontation* as well as in a full-length collection, *Americana Motel*, published by Main Street Rag Press. *Topographies*, a collection of essays, appeared in 2019 from Etruscan Press. Formerly a writer for *Tropic*, the Sunday magazine of the *Miami Herald*, Benz now teaches professional writing at the University of New Mexico.

ADVANCE PRAISE

Stephen Benz’s essays are simultaneously personal and universal in the way they tap into human experience. From family stories to travels of great distance, Benz takes readers on a compelling journey. Rich in sense of place, these essays deftly challenge physical and spiritual divides while exploring various crossroads near and far.

—Diane Thiel

Benz’s essays hold the reader all the way, section after section. This is a book for anyone who has a traveling heart.

—William Heyen

Nature: Selected & New Poems 1970-2020

ADVANCE PRAISE

In his progress from “the place we called home” to “remote and little visited,” Stephen Benz meets a lot of out-of-the-ordinary people: Dale the tobacco-spitting harvest field-crew hand; Mr. Johnson, the gruff Bible-reading grounds crew boss; Carolyn Terry, the curator of the world’s only apron museum; an unnamed Elko, Nevada waitress who bets all her tip money; his own suddenly-appearing but finally-disappearing Uncle Joe; Daniel the Romanian partisan. He also sees a lot of out-of-the-way places: the Palouse; Iuka, Mississippi; Quanah, Texas; the Parting-of-the-Ways; Transnistria; Camaguey. Benz journeys from the bones to the stars, and along the way he makes himself into Everyperson: *Reading the Signs* offers up the stories of the Listener, the memories of the Watcher.

—H. L. Hix, *Demonstrategy*

Benz’s fascinating new book teaches us to read the land through his experience, whether driving a truck, cruising battle sites or Indian and Latin American culture. By the end, he helps us understand what it means to find one’s place in history.

—David King Dunaway,
The Ballad of Pete Seeger

SAMPLE FROM THE BOOK

En Route: Elko, Nevada

A late-night arrival in Elko, Nevada, means no vacancy except in cheap dives like the Louis Motel on the far west end of town. At night, Elko seems rather joyless, even though the bill-

SAMPLE FROM THE BOOK (cont’d)

boards on the approach to town promise good times in the form of casinos, brothels, and bars. The point is underscored by a song playing in the Horseshoe Club: “You’re supposed to be feeling good ...”. But in the town’s joypots, there’s no evidence of good feelings, not on this night. Tonight, Elko is ground zero in a vast dislocated landscape, the place Emerson called “unapproachable America.”

The bars are hazy and rank, with a lineup of men drinking hard and quick, their loud talk lapsing into expressions of resignation: Yeah, but what you gonna do? That’s the way it always goes. Same old, same old. Around the corner, a gun shop sells “tactical survival” supplies. Just down the street, neon signs flicker in the desert night: the town’s three brothels all in a row. Ghostlike in the glow, patrons pass in and out of a shabby door with squealing hinges. In the casinos, people play fast, pumping in money, mesmerized by slot machines or the numbers flashing on the keno board. Everybody’s drinking. The historical marker in Railroad Park says Elko’s always been a “rough, drinking, cowboy town.”

In the light of day, Elko tries to strike an upbeat note. After all, it’s the home of LeeAnne’s Floral Design, Haley’s Fine Gifts, the Cowboy Gear and Arts Museum, and a storefront Wedding Chapel. And there’s a bargain breakfast on offer in the coffee shop of the Commercial Casino: two eggs any style, toast, and your choice of sausage or bacon. A cup of coffee and things look a little brighter.

BOOK INFORMATION

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