

PUBLISHED ON JULY 27, 2006:

## Desert Chronicles

*The artists and writers behind some UA Press books gather for an informal public get-together*

By **MARGARET REGAN** ✉

El Gran Desierto has many names.

Stinking Hot Desert. Cactus Coast. Forty Mile Desert. And, most ominously, Devil's Highway.

Lying in the northwest corner of Sonora, in between the Arizona border and the Gulf of California, this arid wilderness stretches from Rocky Point almost all the way to San Luis Colorado, below Yuma. Desolate and dangerous, it's claimed the lives of unknown numbers of travelers over the centuries. In recent years, undocumented migrants have been among the dead.



"Stem in Sand," by Michael P. Berman.

Yet, it's also a place "where stately saguaro cactus stand near aromatic elephant trees, where suave sand dunes caress the edges of jagged granite mountains," writes Bill Broyles in his new book, *Sunshot: Peril and Wonder in the Gran Desierto* (University of Arizona Press, 2006, \$24.95). Hardy travelers braving its heat can "go from watching bighorn sheep in the morning to whales in the afternoon. As our friend Charles Bowden reminds us, 'It's a desert with a beach.'"

Broyles, an author associated with UA's Southwest Center, has ventured many times into this unlikely territory. For his book of elegant essays on Gran Desierto, photographer Michael P. Berman of New Mexico also went in to this Mexican outback, to shoot its peaks and dunes, its ocotillos and animal bones, its human footprints fading in the sand.

An accomplished photographer (and occasional painter) with work in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other institutions, Berman came back with some 4,000 black-and-white images shot with a large-format camera. He culled them down to an exquisite sampling--maybe a couple hundred--for the book. Some of them were exhibited last fall at Tucson's Etherton Gallery.

The book's text and photographs chronicle life, and death, in this *camino del diablo*, conjuring up the wanderings of early explorers and of contemporary would-be immigrants. The Berman photo "Crossings," picturing hundreds of footprints

disappearing into a forbidding mountain barrier, opens a chapter ominously titled "Ground Zero." Broyles moves between migrants and migra in the text, juxtaposing the tale of Carlos and Paco, a couple of intrepid Mexicans from Nayarit, with the workday peregrinations of Jack and Dane, two agents with the U.S. Border Patrol.

But Berman (a biology major once upon a time) and Broyles also delineate the primal beauty of the Gran Desierto's landscape. A field erupts into flowers in one surprisingly benign photo; the windswept dunes trace out patterns in the earth in many others.

Both writer and artist will turn up in the somewhat cooler precincts of Tucson this Saturday afternoon to regale potential readers with their adventures. They'll be part of an informal gathering of UA Press photographers and writers that's the finale in a weeklong salute to the nonprofit press. All of the artists and authors take the desert Southwest or Mexico as their subject.

They won't give formal talks, but they'll be available to meet the public from 4 to 5 p.m. at the Barnes and Noble on Broadway Boulevard. The photographers will have samples of their fine art on hand, and the books, naturally, will be for sale. Refreshments are also on the menu.

Photographer Stephen E. Strom created the images for all three of the other books that will be featured. His most recent is *Tséyi' / Deep in the Rock: Reflections on Canyon de Chelly* (UA Press, 2005, \$15), a collaboration with Navajo writer Laura Tohe.

A professor at Arizona State University who was raised on the Rez, Tohe writes both prose and poetry, some of it in the Navajo language. Two poems about the rain, male and female, are in both languages.

*Female rain / Dancing from the south / cloudy cool and gray / pregnant with rainchild*, begins one.

*Male rain / He comes riding a dark horse angry / malevolent / cold*, are the opening lines of the other.

Strom, a Harvard-trained astronomer, works at the National Optical Astronomy Observatory, located in Tucson and at Kitt Peak. His stargazer's eye is much in evidence in his long views of the Navajo Nation in the book. In his beautifully textured colored photographs, the rocky land reads as a moonscape, full of etched patterns. The sweeping landscape of mountain and canyon seems to unfurl into infinity. But he also comes up with such classic Western images as an orange-drenched canyon at sunset.

Photography is not just a sideline for this scientist. He's been collected by the Center for Creative Photography; coincidentally he's also an Etherton artist. Some of these Navajo photos will be in a solo show scheduled for the Temple Gallery this October and November.

*Sonoita Plain: Views From a Southwestern Grassland* is co-authored by Carl E. Bock and Jane H. Bock, biology professors at the University of Colorado and co-directors of the Research Ranch Sanctuary south of Elgin. Their text describes the region's ecology and geography, and Strom's color photos capture the sweet beauty of these rolling grasslands, punctuated by the round canopies of deep-green trees. (His photos call to mind the lovely watercolors of the same place by Barbara Smith.)

Strom's other book, a collaboration with Creek poet Joy Harjo, is *Secrets From the Center of the World*. Published way back in 1989, it remains in print, and is a perennial best-seller for the press, says publicist Holly Dolan. (Harjo is the only author who is not scheduled to be present in the flesh Saturday.) The palm-size book pairs more Navajo landscapes by Strom, in color, with lyrical musings by the well-known poet.

Some of her lines could serve as epigraph for any of these books that so lovingly conjure the desert. She writes, "This land is a poem of ochre and burnt sand I could never write, unless paper were the sacrament of sky, and ink the broken line of wild horses staggering the horizon several miles away.

"Even then, does anything written ever matter to the earth, wind and sky?"

### **UA Press photographer/author informal presentations/book signings**

4 to 5 p.m., Saturday, July 29

Barnes and Noble

5130 E. Broadway Blvd.

512-1166

### **An Afternoon with Michael Berman**

2 to 3:30 p.m., Sunday, July 30

Barnes and Noble

7325 N. La Cholla Blvd.

742-6402

### **Recently in Review:**

- **Vivacious Vicars** - The energy and cast of this British farce carry the play to hysterical success **by JAMES REEL** (07-27-2006)
- **Orchestral Maneuvers** - The Tucson Symphony's new season shows the organization is being fiscally tight without selling out **by JAMES REEL** (07-20-2006)
- **All About Water** - Ingrid Williams uses paint derived from milk to create blue-heavy images **by MARGARET REGAN** (07-20-2006)
- **Review in the archives** »

### **More stories by Margaret Regan:**

- **Taking Route** - **by MARGARET REGAN** (06-21-2001)
- **Back to 'Bolero'** - Ballet Tucson mixes demanding, eclectic works with tasty,

varied desserts **by MARGARET REGAN** (03-10-2005)

- **Mask Magic** - An Arizona State Museum exhibit shows the adaptation of Mexican masking rituals **by MARGARET REGAN** (10-27-2005)
- **Margaret Regan in the archives** »