

## BOOK REVIEW

**CHERYLL GLOTFELTY ED.**

***LITERARY NEVADA:  
WRITINGS FROM THE  
SILVER STATE***

**RENO: UNIVERSITY OF  
NEVADA PRESS, 2008**

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### *Abstract*

This review is intended to discuss the contribution of *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* (2008), the first comprehensive anthology of Nevada literature, to western American literary studies. The reader is provided both with a detailed description of its content and with a critical assessment of its main sections. It is argued that this solid and instructive anthology illustrates not only the increasing visibility of Nevada literature, but also the growing recognition achieved by western writing in American literature in the last few decades. The book departs from traditional scholarly prejudice against Nevada writing, revealing the richness and diversity of a distinguished body of literary work that has finally begun to receive

### *Resumen*

Esta reseña analiza la contribución a los estudios sobre la literatura del Oeste norteamericano de *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* (2008), la primera antología dedicada a la literatura de Nevada en su conjunto. Se incluye en esta reseña una descripción detallada de los contenidos de la citada antología y un análisis crítico de sus principales secciones. Esta instructiva y bien fundamentada antología nos muestra no sólo la cada vez mayor visibilidad de la literatura sobre Nevada, sino también el creciente reconocimiento alcanzado por la literatura sobre el Oeste en el ámbito literario norteamericano en las últimas décadas. El libro se aleja de los tradicionales prejuicios acerca de la literatura sobre Nevada, mostrando al lector la riqueza y diversidad de un grupo importante de obras literarias que por fin han comenzado a recibir la debida atención

proper critical attention.

por parte de la crítica.

*Key Words:* Nevada literature, western writing, regionalism, American literature.

*Palabras clave:* literatura sobre Nevada, literatura del Oeste, regionalismo, literatura norteamericana.

This lengthy anthology (831 pages), as its editor, Cheryll Glotfelty, states in its preface, serves the purpose of filling in “perhaps the last remaining blank space on the *literary* map of America” (2008:xxvii), focusing on the writings from Nevada. Actually, Nevada literature illustrates the weight of the traditional scholarly prejudice against western writing, too often identified either with archetypal popular literature (the so-called “formula westerns”) or with mere regional writing, of local interest only. In the case of Nevada writing this prejudice has been usually emphasized by the extended negative image of the state, due to its libertarian laws regarding divorce, prostitution, and gambling. As Wilbur S. Shepperson has stated, “the area was not regarded as a major contributor to the world of culture or an important marketer of refined ideas” (1970:2). In fact, until the last decades of the twentieth-century few people suspected there was a substantial body of Nevada literature worth reading. Even western scholars seemed to share this belief because they tended to reduce Nevada literature almost exclusively to Walter Van Tilburg Clark's novels and short stories, including also sometimes Robert Laxalt's literary production. Thus *A Literary History of the American West* (1987) mentions only two Nevada writers, Clark and Laxalt, focusing mainly on Clark as the major literary interpreter of Nevada. This situation has been partially amended by *Updating the Literary West* (1997), a volume that devotes six pages specifically to discuss Nevada literature.

The new prominence of Nevada literature in literary studies is not only exemplified by Glotfelty's volume, but also by the extraordinary proliferation of Nevada anthologies in the last three decades. Although the first anthology of literature covering the silver bonanza in Nevada was already published in 1950 (*Comstock Bonanza*, edited by Duncan Emrich), we have to wait until 1981 for the first anthology specifically devoted to Nevada poetry: *The Nevada Poet: An Anthology*, edited by Gary Short. Ten years later, the second anthology of Nevada poetry, *Desert Wood: An Anthology of Nevada Poets* (edited by Shaun T. Griffin) was published. Griffin also became the editor of the first anthology of Nevada fiction, *The River Underground: An Anthology of Nevada Fiction* (2001). The pieces included in Griffin's anthologies are not necessarily based in Nevada. For example, *The River Underground* contains fiction written by authors wedded to Nevada “by birth, livelihood, or affliction” (2001:xx). This criterion allows the inclusion of pieces by Nevada writers set in a wide variety of locations,

such as Paris, China, Texas, South Dakota, Vietnam, and the Philippines. However, relevant novels set in Nevada (totally or partially) and written by major contemporary American authors are left out in this anthology. Thus, authors such as Larry McMurtry and Joan Didion are not represented in Griffin's book. The new interest in Nevada literature is also exemplified by two other recent anthologies specifically centered on Las Vegas: *Literary Las Vegas: The Best Writing About America's Most Fabulous City* (1995, edited by Mike Tronnes), a book consisting mostly of non-fictional pieces on "the most mythic, if not mystical of all American cities" (Hausladen 2003:15), and *In the Shadow of the Strip: Las Vegas Stories* (2003, edited by Richard Logsdon, Todd Moffett, and Tina D. Eliopoulos), a volume that contains illuminating fictional impressions of Las Vegas by contemporary authors such as David Kranes, H. Lee Barnes, and John L. Smith. Similarly, another recent anthology, edited by Lawrence I. Berkove, *The Sagebrush Anthology: Literature from the Silver Age of the Old West* (2006), has recovered interesting literature of the mining frontier days in Nevada.

As we may see above, other anthologies have preceded Glotfelty in culling the best of Nevada writing, but *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* is the first comprehensive anthology of Nevada literature. It contains more than 200 pieces, representing outstanding work both by established and emerging writers. The central organizational criterion of this impressive anthology is quite different from that employed by Griffin in his Nevada anthologies because in *Literary Nevada* "every piece [...] is either set in Nevada or about Nevada or Nevadans" (Glotfelty 2008:xxviii). Although this solid volume does not limit its scope to contemporary Nevada writing, we may notice an emphasis on recent literature about Nevada (written both by Nevada authors and by non-Nevadans). In fact, about 120 pieces included in the anthology were published in the last four decades. Certainly, with a history of little more than a century old, the fastest growing-state in the United States for the last two decades cannot boast of having an ancient, prestigious literary tradition, but recent Nevada literature plays a significant role in the increasing visibility and recognition achieved by western writing. In Ann Ronald's words, "more and more Nevada authors are publishing more and more polished literary works" (1997:249).

According to Glotfelty, *Literary Nevada* is designed "to make Nevada's literature more widely known and readily available to Nevadans and to anyone who reads with a spirit of curiosity and a taste for adventure" (2008:xxvii). Fittingly, the anthology includes pieces by well-known Nevada authors including Sarah Winnemucca, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Robert Laxalt, and Frank Bergon, and also the works of writers little known outside Nevada. It is also a generous mix of local and regional writers with non-resident authors commanding national reputation such as Mark Twain, John Muir, Jack London, Arthur Miller, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, Mario Puzo, Terry Tempest Williams, and Gary

Snyder. Actually, the most widely read writing about Nevada is written by outsiders who try to illuminate the contradictory features of this state, usually playing with stereotypes and expectations about the Silver State.

Gloufelty's anthology is divided into thirteen chapters, organized thematically with chapters with such titles as "Fearful Crossings: Emigrant Encounters and Indian Responses", "Great Basin Rangings: Journals of Exploration", "The Biggest Little City: Writings about Reno", "In Our Backyard: Notes from Nuclear Nevada", and "Living Las Vegas: Inside the Entertainment Capital of the World." The different chapters also show the evolution of Nevada's literature. In fact, the book begins with traditional Native American tales and concludes with sections on contemporary poetry and fiction, followed by a chapter on "Wild Nevada" where most pieces have been published in the last few decades. At the end of the book the reader is also offered a chronological list of contents where he/she may trace the development of Nevada literature through time. The book also includes a "Further Reading" section that testifies to the wide opportunities available to those interested in exploring Nevada writing. Actually, the reader of this anthology, a first-rate contribution to western literary studies, emerges eager to read more of the writers less known outside the state or region.

In *Literary Nevada* a short biographical and critical essay introduces each chapter, helping readers to contextualize the selections in that chapter. These essays are particularly helpful and they illustrate Gloufelty's impressive knowledge of Nevada literature and its historical and cultural background. Anyway, the texts speak for themselves, offering insight into the lives of Nevada people through history, and revealing the complex and multicultural dimensions of Nevada experience. An important number of the pieces in the anthology possess a revelatory value in relation to the whole West because they encompass some of the most common thematic trends in western writing. For example, Native American early stories and myths are well represented in the section "Voices from the Homeland." Similarly, Nevada's frontier experience is widely portrayed by lively reports of explorers, compelling accounts of conflicts between the newcomers and the Native Americans (including an excerpt from Sarah Winnemucca's exceptional autobiography *Life among the Piutes*), and witty pieces by authors of the Sagebrush School on the mining era and its decline. Gloufelty's anthology also departs from simplistic literary reductions of Nevada to the frontier themes or to the sin imagery, featuring remarkable pieces on "the other Nevada", the rural Nevada, represented in this volume not only by cowboy poetry, but also by such interesting non-fictional multicultural accounts as Wallace Stegner's "Mormon Trees" and an excerpt of Gregory Martin's *Mountain City*. *Literary Nevada* also illustrates the new prominence achieved by environmental western writing in the last few decades. In the case of Nevada literature this vitality

of environmental issues is exemplified by the increasing attention to issues such as the management of public lands, the environmental impact of growth, and the tensions and conflicts brought by nuclear energy to the New West. The mounting prominence of this last issue is exemplified in Glotfelty's anthology by different pieces on nuclear Nevada written by distinguished authors such as Frank Waters, Terry Tempest Williams, Adrian C. Louis, Denise Levertov, and William Kittredge. Last but not least, *Literary Nevada* also pays close attention to a fundamental aspect of the New West, its urban, technologized, and industrialized condition, featuring an important selection of pieces on the city landscape and scenery, with an emphasis on its recreational function. After all, as Wallace Stegner has contended, "the principal western industry is tourism" (1987:23). The anthology underscores the peculiar condition of Nevada's two main cities, Reno and Las Vegas, whose singularity has attracted the attention of a large number of contemporary American writers, some of them insiders (Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Phyllis Barber [...]), but often outside commentators (Hunter S. Thompson, Arthur Miller, Mario Puzo [...]) who have turned to urban Nevada as a distinctive setting for some of their best-known books.

As in the case with most anthologies, some selections in *Literary Nevada* seem questionable. Perhaps the main objection is the fact that in order to cover as many authors, places, and themes as possible, some of the best Nevada writers are only represented once in this anthology. Such is the case, for example, of Robert Laxalt, the most distinguished Nevada contemporary author, whose masterpiece *Sweet Promised Land* (1957) is not featured in this anthology, though his powerful writing talent is well illustrated in Glotfelty's anthology by an excerpt of his novel *The Basque Hotel* (1989), nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Similarly, *Literary Nevada* includes only one piece by Frank Bergon, an excerpt of his eco-thriller *Wild Game* (1995), whereas his best-known novel, *Shoshone Mike* (1987), listed among the top twelve westerns in Oxford University Press's *Good Fiction Guide* (2001), is left out in this anthology. Anyway, the Native American and emigrant sections in the anthology already contain adequate treatment of Native American stories and conflicts with white colonists. Other omissions in the anthology, including some popular titles, such as John O'Brien's *Leaving Las Vegas* (1990) or Nicholas Pileggi's *Casino* (1995), and some distinguished authors, for example, Larry McMurtry (*The Desert Rose*, 1982), may be easily justifiable taking into account both the myriad of novels by outsiders focused on the stereotypical "sin" image of Las Vegas and the need to limit the anthology to a reasonable number of pages.

Overall, *Literary Nevada* is an ambitious and comprehensive anthology that fulfills Glotfelty's aim of filling a void in western literary studies. Her anthology not only gives visibility to a state rarely recognized as a distinct literary region,

but it also illuminates the diversity and complexity of Nevada literature, with a particular emphasis on the vitality of present-day writing about this state. In this sense we cannot forget that “Nevada is no different from the rest of the West, where regional writing is fast becoming national literature” (Ronald 1997:250). Certainly, with this entertaining and instructive book, Glotfelty provides valuable service to western American letters. In fact, this excellent collection merits reading not only for those interested in the development of western American literature, but also for anyone interested in regionalism as a literary phenomenon.

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