

SAMPLE REVIEW

The Marginal Traveler

Travel narratives benefit from having a framing structure — the author is following in someone’s footsteps, searching for something, racing around the world in eighty days, something that justifies our interest in the writer’s wanderings. Robert D. Temple has come up with a unique and quirky structuring device in *Edge Effects*: Places located on state lines and named for the two states. Think Texarkana. The author tracked down eighty-one such places across North America and traveled to all of them. It turns out that this strange premise takes the reader in some surprisingly entertaining directions.

On one level, this book is about the places. With descriptions full of detail, Temple takes us on road-trip adventures from the east coast (Carova Beach) to the Mississippi Delta (Arkla) to California deserts (Calada) and back, to big cities and prairie towns, to desolate coal camps and abandoned railroad sidings. Some of these places are so obscure that the author may be the first traveler ever to have visited them intentionally, certainly the first to write about the experience. He grounds the places well in natural history, consistently flavoring the narrative with geology, wildflowers, and weather.

The theme of boundary lines permeates *Edge Effects*. The “Border-Name Places” exist because of edges; boundaries define them. The places often serve as entry points for exploring deeper concepts of boundaries, frontiers, and marginality. The author makes convincing cases that edges shape local histories and cross-border differences enrich cultures.

First-person travel tales, precise and sometimes elegant, mix with unexpected historical digressions and information treasures, while always returning to the facts on the ground. Nice writerly flourishes catch the reader’s attention without derailing it. Without implying comparisons, the book may remind the reader of literary travel books by Heat-Moon, Theroux, and Chatwin, with Bryson-esque flashes of humor. It also follows in the long tradition of books about place names, tracing perhaps to Mencken’s *American Language*.

The presentation of *Edge Effects* is a sequence of relatively short, free-standing chapters covering each of the “Border-Name Places.” Those seeking a dramatic, novelistic narrative or a travel guide with advice on charming B&Bs and fine dining options will want to look elsewhere.

Those looking for a good read and some mind-stretching ideas will enjoy Robert D. Temple's thick and juicy new book.