

Manifest West: Western Weird, ed. Mark Todd. Western Press Books (affiliated with Western State Colorado University), 2015. 166 pp. No photos or illustrations. Paperback.

This short book is the fourth in an annual series of *Manifest West* anthologies of (mostly) Western American writers. This collection of 35 entries includes 11 works of fiction, three examples of “creative nonfiction,” 19 poems, and only one nonfiction work (which is an “essay” about present-day Utah).

The theme of this 2015 collection (as the name implies) is “Western weird,” short passages that are, in the words of editor Mark Todd, “discomfiting, rather than consoling.” Todd states in his forward, “The tone of these works ranges from light - even campy - to chilling, but all allow readers to gaze straight into the many faces of what makes The West a weird place.” (I never thought of The West as a “weird place.”)

Michael Engelhard’s short story “Blacktop Cuisine” is a good example of the book’s “creative nonfiction.” It’s about eating roadkill: “Skinning the carcasses, Bart found that much of the meat was still good. A frugal guy who hates waste, he began to take these scraps home.” A more light-hearted example is Marlene Olin’s “Laughter Yoga,” about a woman who travels to Wyoming to see her former college roommate: “Years ago, in another life, ... [w]e were the epitome of cool.... Then life happened..... My life had become a *Good Housekeeping* cliché.” Her college friend, however, had kept her hippie lifestyle. This well-written and humorous story culminates in a strange yoga lesson after which the heroine realizes that her “normal” life is pretty good after all (“I’m the lucky one”). Her ex-roommate then breaks down: “‘You’re just perfect, aren’t you? I hate the way you’re perfect.’ She’s joking. Sort of. I get up, walk around the table, and give her a big hug.” Then there’s David J. Rothman’s “Tunnel of Love,” a 12-page poem about a woman who tries to kill her lover. I recommend this poem to anyone who wants to be truly depressed.

If the chapters appear weird as you read this book, you have to keep telling yourself that the book’s subtitle is “Western Weird.” Almost all the passages pertain to the modern West, so there is not much here if you’re looking for historical information. The only entries that are historically based are the first two stories (about Doc Holliday and Soapy Smith), but these accounts are fictional.

Garry O’Hara, C.M., 4/4/2016