



Tijuana Straits

Kem Nunn

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From Kem Nunn, the National Book Award-nominated author of *Tapping the Source* and *The Dogs of Winter*, comes an exquisitely written tale of loss and redemption. Nunn renders the dangerous beaches and waters of California's borderland as only the critically acclaimed poet laureate of surf noir can, and *Tijuana Straits* confirms his reputation as a master of suspense and a novelist of the first rank.

When Fahey, once a great surfer, now a reclusive ex-con, meets Magdalena, she is running from a pack of wild dogs along the ragged wasteland where California and Mexico meet the Pacific Ocean -- a spot once known to the men who rode its giant waves as the Tijuana Straits. Magdalena has barely survived an attack that forced her to flee Tijuana, and Fahey takes her in. That he is willing to do so runs contrary to his every instinct, for Fahey is done with the world, seeking little more than solitude from this all-but-forgotten corner of the Golden State. Nor is Fahey a stranger to the lawless ways of the border. He worries that in sheltering this woman he may not only be inviting further entanglements but may be placing them both at risk. In this, he is not wrong.

An environmental activist, Magdalena has become engaged in the struggle for the health and rights of the thousands of peasants streaming from Mexico's enervated heartland to work in the *maquilladoras* -- the foreign-owned factories that line her country's border, polluting its air and fouling its rivers. It is a risky contest. Danger can come from many directions, from government officials paid to preserve the status quo to thugs hired to intimidate reformers.

As Magdalena and Fahey become closer, Magdalena tries to discover who is out to get her, attempting to reconstruct the events that delivered her, battered and confused, into Fahey's strange yet oddly seductive world. She examines every lead, never guessing the truth. For into this no-man's-land between two countries comes a trio of killers led by Armando Santoya, a man beset by personal tragedy, an aberration born of the very conditions Magdalena has dedicated her life to fight against, yet who in the throes of his own drug-fueled confusions has marked her for death. And so will Fahey be put to the test, in a final duel on the beaches of his Tijuana Straits.

Tijuana Straits Details

Date : Published October 18th 2005 by Scribner (first published July 27th 2004)

ISBN : 9780743279826

Author : Kem Nunn

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Crime, Thriller, Mystery Thriller

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From Reader Review Tijuana Straits for online ebook

Michael says

Interesting but wordy story of a "Big Lebowski" type surfer dude/worm farmer living by the beach along the California Tijuana border who finds a Mexican woman, Magdalena, fleeing for her life after her activist legal confrontation with polluting factory management in Tijuana. The action really picks up in the last half of the story.

All of Nunn's characters (Protagonist/loser Fahey, heroine/activist, Magdalena, and the pathetic killer, Armando) are wonderfully developed and interesting. His writing has a real feel for the atmosphere he creates.

Carolanne says

ACCURATE STAR RATING= 3.5

why did I read this book?

I bought it at the San Diego State University book store. what caught my eye was a gold sticker on the cover that read "local author." the cover itself wasn't very appealing to me, personally.

PROS:

the writing is actually pretty good! I was pleasantly surprised considering I'd never heard of him before.

I like that I can relate to the location in this book and I even went and hunted down some of the location sites in Imperial Beach.

the story moves along pretty well and the characters are likeable, for the most part.

Kem Nunn has a good grasp on local character, biology, and urban setting. I appreciate that he described the run-down conditions of Tijuana, Mexico, without degrading the people.

CONS:

the use of the phrase "in point of fact." I like this phrase. I think I first encountered it while reading Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner, but don't quote me on that. HOWEVER, Nunn uses this phrase like 4, 5 times.

I'm not entirely sure why this bugs me, but it does.

The ending is a bit vague. I don't want to describe the ending in too much detail, but the death of a character is by water-borne illness and I wanted more detail and interaction with the character at this stage.

also, there was a very detailed description of a character's career in Mexico, but it didn't ever really tie in with the main story to me. he could have been a little less wordy and had a better book.

VERDICT:

overall a decent read and especially interesting for people who live in the San Diego area.

Diane Hallam says

After reading this book, you will never think of Imperial Beach, California the same again. The author lives in Imperial Beach and knows the surfing culture and darker underbelly of this beach town that lies so close to its neighbor, Mexico, that it can't help but also be an extension of that country. When the rains come, Imperial Beach not only suffers the onslaught of Baja's toxic runoff, but also creates havoc with the local intrepid denizens of the Tijuana basin. This is a fascinating read. As dark as Nunn paints IB, he also leaves

his reader wanting to be a part of what makes it so unique.

Darren says

A dark and seedy surf novel? Yep... Tijuana Straits takes place along the Mexican border, and features a brooding surf legend as its hero. Nunn has a distinctive voice and tells a gripping story full of myth and redemption. Also take a look at Dogs of Winter.

Gayle says

I so enjoyed Kem Nunn's writing. The book was a Kindle Daily Deal and I am so happy I bought the book. I plan on reading other novels by Kem Nunn. I can't get the characters or places out of my mind. My favorite book this year.

brian says

kem nunn's a cool motherfucker but this review's really a love letter to resident goodreads badass Donald Powell. yup.

i'm always on the lookout for great contemporary american crime fiction, for stuff that can stand up to the old guys. i've checked out all the big names -- connolly, leonard, pelecans, price and all the other cats who write for *the wire* and, as much as i love the genre, i just can't really get into these guys. there's some good stuff, for sure, but nothing GREAT. nothing that spooks the shit outta you in the middle of the night, nothing that makes you happy when you have to crap so you can be alone with the book, nothing that gives you that thrillingly evil 'the world is a horrible place and we are a vile species' feeling...

well, none of 'em, save james ellroy. the one genre-busting genius-goddamn-writer who, in my opinion, bests all his elders and predecessors. and i was alone with ellroy for a while. which was fine. y'know, fine in the 'gang-raped by Satan and a slew of demons' way.

then donald tells me to check out don winslow and i read *power of the dog* and it's tragic and magnificent and fun and dark and great. and also the best book i've read on the mexican drug trade and our phony 'war on drugs' and NAFTA and san diego and tijuana and juarez, etc...

a few days ago donald tells me to read kem nunn, so i pick up *tijuana straits*. well, the book is wildly uneven and the ending chase could use some work, but nunn's there. in the club of great american contemporary crime writers. for sure. his contemporaries, those more highly regarded crime scribblers, they don't have shit on this guy: the overall construction and conception of this book goes places they don't even know exist. there are sentences and passages and whole sections (armando's back story!!!) that are so goddamn gloriously amazing and nunn's sense of place and locale is so perfect and the badass hopeful loser of a lead character he created... it was all so great that i'm about to tear through some of his other books.

i'll end with this: those kids that donald's wife keeps popping out are pretty damn lucky. goddamn, are those kids gonna be flooded with great shit.

Bruce Perry says

Sam "the gull" Fahey was a legendary big wave surfer off the coast of Tijuana and San Diego, but his life has gone considerably sour since its earlier glories. Now he's a worm farmer living out of a trailer not far from the polluted wasteland of the border area, where he descended into drug addiction, selling, and eventually prison time.

This "loser who squandered his glory but now seeks redemption" story is a familiar one, but the author also seasons it with a kind of Dante-esque descent into the hellhole of the Straits and the social and environmental "disaster" that Tijuana has become. The predatory slums and their dystopian inhabitants, the toxic maquiladora factories, the horror of poisoned children and missing women, from which emerges Magdelana, an activist for the poor people of Tijuana and a kind of Angel of mercy. Fahey becomes her ally, and thus she leads him along at least the beginning of his road to redemption.

The story is gripping, complex, and topical, even though written in 2004. My only problem with it was an occasional run-on writing style, long chains of clauses almost without end. It was as though the writer was never enough satisfied with one description, so that another had to be added alongside of it, giving the prose an almost attenuated formality, like the Bible's. Other than this quibble, I loved the ending, and I will definitely pick up another novel by Kem Nunn.

Adam says

Kem Nunn writes a novel like Robert Stone used to (Dog Soldiers and A Flag for Sunrise) so its no wonder he has earned Stone's support and blurbs. Set in the wasteland between Tijuana and San Diego, the titular land is former paradise turned to hell by NAFTA, Narcotraffickers, the border patrol, free roaming militias, wild dog packs, and pollution. A decaying landscape that attacks its inhabitants. The nearby slums of Tijuana with its toxic abandoned factories is a similarly terrifying landscape that breeds the three killers whose remorseless actions propel the plot to finale of redemption for Nunn's protagonist Fahey. While Nunn's never shortchanges the socioeconomic events that form his trio of killers their relentless onslaught and the language that describes it evokes the Cormac McCarthy of No Country for Old Men, Outer Dark, and Blood Meridian. Nunn's tales of blasted border landscapes and redemption also remind of David Corbett's work.

Cbj says

Once in a while (very rarely), the stars align and the disillusioned fan of crime fiction discovers a genuinely talented writer who rejected the elitist cabal that is literary fiction and ventured into the muddy waters of crime fiction. Norman Mailer and Graham Greene have occasionally muddied their feet. Kem Nunn is one such writer.

"The woman appeared with the first light, struggling across the dunes, a figure from the revelation." That is

the first line in Tijuana Straits. I was hooked. Sam Fahey was once a talented surfer. Now he is out hunting wild dogs (he also runs a worm farm) on the dunes of Tijuana, when he saves Magdalena, who is an environmental activist on the run from assassins hired by foreign factory owners who have destroyed her country. Armando, an ex-boxer and factory employee, the sort of person for whom Magdalena is fighting for, is on Magdalena's trail. With him are two violent cohorts.

Nunn describes the fetid and devastated landscape of Tijuana and Mexico with the same cinematic grandeur of Francis Ford Coppola who filmed a destroyed Vietnam in Apocalypse Now. I was also reminded of a Jack Nicholson film called The Border. Tijuana Straits is very much a book of place. The rotting and desolate places ("the beaches they found littered with patches of foam and uprooted kelp and these arranged in positions that might have passed for bodies of the slain") described in the book are wastelands filled with factories to employ the weak, the defeated, the violent and the damaged and bars and whorehouses to keep them dulled.

Nunn uses vivid imagistic language to further intensify these epic scenes - "He had this way of holding his arms when he surfed, like a gull swooping across the face of the ocean" or "The valley was a labyrinth, a trick done with mirrors".

But then, why the 3 rating? Well, the novel was a case of the parts being better than the whole. The writing is brilliant, but it becomes kind of dull in the middle. The relationship between the criminal Fahey and the activist Magdalena is without much tension. The long chase sequence across the beach towards the end sort of made up for it. I intend to check out more of Kem Nunn's work, but they seem to be quite obscure and expensive.

Toby says

An intense slow burn literary noir that shoots itself in the foot with an ending that isn't so much slow burn as dead on arrival.

This is the story of Sam Fahey, a once promising young man who threw everything away and now exists in a meth addicted haze of pain and misery. This is also the story of Armando Santoya, a young man whose dreams were destroyed by the reality of living in a chemically poisoned Tijuana run as much by narcotraficantes as a government only interested in American dollars. Magdalena Rivera is a legal crusader left for dead whose appearance in the lives of these two men that put them on a deadly collision course.

Divided in to three parts Kem Nunn has written a slow building **suspense filled tale of loss and redemption**, in the first part we are introduced to our three main characters, given extensive background on how their lives came to be so messed up, in the second they are put on a path of action that you know will bring them all together, you know it will be devastating when it occurs and then part three doesn't live up to that promise, at least not in any way I would have expected.

The story of Armando is horrifying, told in such a way as to make **you sympathise with his plight and yet be revolted by the outcome** of his choices. The slow decent of a naive dreamer in to madness is captured perfectly in a landscape painted vividly by a man who clearly knows the horrors of the streets of Tijuana.

The evocation of place is central to Nunn's literature here, without his fully realised imagery of a violent place populated by the lost, the disenfranchised, the abused, the deformed, the dangerous and the greedy the

story of Armando and Magalena could have no real weight. The same can be said of the citizens dwelling on the American side of the border, in brief glimpses of Fahey's neighbours et al the insight in to the way of life and mindset provide understanding of who Fahey is and what he struggled against for his entire life.

Great things are achieved in this book, but they are let down by an ending of disappointingly small proportions. It's almost as if Nunn strayed too far from the noir aspects of this novel, found his literary leanings moving him away from the dark to a more wholesome denouement. It's not all happy families but it certainly didn't reach the depths of depravity in heart wrenching confrontations you are led to believe will occur. A shame, but don't let that stop you reading, Kem Nunn has got some real talent when it comes to this stuff and I recommend you check him out when you can.

Lukasz Pruski says

I live about 20 miles from where the action of Kem Nunn's "Tijuana Straits" takes place. Mr. Nunn's feel for the place is extraordinary. The plot of the novel is interesting and the characters of Sam Fahey and Magdalena are rich and well drawn. Magdalena is a young woman from Mexico trying to uncover environmental crimes committed by factory owners. Sam is a famed surfer with a criminal past and a heart of gold. Yeah, a bit cliché but still effective. The ending is top notch.

Yet, I could hardly finish this book. One reason is that I have no interest in surfing whatsoever. I find all this mumbo jumbo about the Mystic Peak, the Third Notch, the one great wave just boring. Sam could be a state champion in knitting or embroidery, and it would be equally interesting to me. This is, of course, my bias, and I am sorry for it.

The main reason for how hard I struggled to read this book is the exalted language. The book is ridiculously overwrought. Pages upon pages of language when one sentence would suffice.

Other readers may find this book great and I will understand them. I can't stand books that use ten times more words than needed (a purely personal pet peeve).

Two and three quarters stars.

Stephen says

Rolling the North American Free Trade Agreement, the resulting industrial pollution, surfing, a working-class California beach town, the vagaries and terrors of the U.S.-Mexican border into literature takes some doing, but "Tijuana Straits" does it well.

Kem Nunn's thriller depicts an obscure corner of the country and fashions a novel example of "Surf Noir," never leaning too much on that one aspect, but mixing it with others just right, so that "Straits" is one story about a number of different things.

The story unfolds (unravels?) in the Tijuana River Valley lying between the southernmost city in California, Imperial Beach, and the neighboring Mexican city for which it is named.

“...the valley beyond her window, as a great repository of bones and dreams as one was likely to find, and above which a flock of shorebirds broke suddenly from beaches beyond her sight.”

It's about a washed-up waterman named Fahey whose legend was earned surfing Tijuana Straits under the tutelage of an elusive and sainted sensei, Hoddy Younger.

“Goat Canyon, Smuggler's Gulch, Spooner's Mesa...He showed him how to find these landmarks from the water and how to line them up with the old Tijuana lighthouse at the edge of the bullring so that he could wait for the waves in the spots from which he would be able to catch and ride them.”

Mired in grim mid-life, Fahey runs a floundering worm farm in Imperial Beach, of which he says, “This is the end of the line, the only beachtown in California no one wants, where the sewage meets the sea.”

Along with the toxic brew that flows via the Tijuana River into the valley, polluting the estuary and chasing surfers from the beach break, locals like Fahey are at the forefront of the human wave surging at the base of the high-tech walls built to keep them out of the U.S.

Still they come: “And so you would see them, scarecrows with frightened eyes loitering in the shadows of the fence, along the cement walls of the flood control channel, at the bottom of every gully, clear to Las Playa, where they huddled amid the reek of excrement in the shadow of the bullring at the edge of the old people's park, fingering rosaries and counting out their luck.”

Fahey lives with these darkneses seeping up from the south in his own way: “He did not ask to hear the man's story or to what end he might have come, then or at any other time, and would in fact go to his own grave without knowing it, for by his own measure the world was composed of sad stories and he saw no reason to learn another.”

Until he runs into Magdalena, an outcast of a different type, given over to saving the world, or some very small part of it. An orphan and product of convent life, for her, “The hereafter would be what it would be. The struggle itself was the act by which one gave meaning to the world.”

They collide on a dark windy beach at the border fence one evening and her perils become his, and the story is about how Fahey rebuilds himself in order to help she who has broken the terminal nature of his loneliness and decline.

Donna says

Smooth noir where the lurking evil quietly edges its way toward the center. The surf lore adds an extra glow. This book has a comfortable cool that walks like a jazz musician.

Erin says

This is Kem Nunn at his best, showing you the dark side of living at the border and all the scary shit that goes on down there. Why hasn't some brilliant director snapped up his work????

Sid Davis says

A hapless ex surfer and a Mexican woman pursued by political enemies meet by accident on the US border. Nunn wrote the book that became the terrible action film Point Break, but he's considered a true talent, and he's won some literary prizes. This is his best, I think.
