



## The Trace

*Forrest Gander*

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*The Trace* is a masterful, poetic novel about a journey through Mexico taken by a couple recovering from a world shattered. Driving through the Chihuahua Desert, they retrace the route of 19th century American writer Ambrose Bierce (who disappeared during the Mexican Revolution) and try to piece together their lives after a devastating incident involving their adolescent son.

With tenderness and precision, Gander explores the intimacies of the couple's relationship as they travel through Mexican towns, through picturesque canyons, and desert capes, on a journey through the heart of the Mexican landscape. Taking a shortcut through the brutally hot desert home, their car overheats miles from nowhere, the story spinning out of control, with devastating consequences.

## The Trace Details

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Author : Forrest Gander

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## From Reader Review The Trace for online ebook

### **Lisa says**

This book reads like it's setting. The pace, the tone, the dialog -- all match the setting of a drive in the desert. I have no idea why I recently added this book to my list, but I'm glad I did.

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### **Andrew Brenycz says**

I really liked the road trip portion of the story and the two main characters. While reading I found myself thinking, this is great, I'd be satisfied even without the car breakdown plot that I know is coming. When we got to that turning point I still wanted to hear them talk about Bierce theories and their married life.

I'm not so sure how I feel about the other main player in the story, and wondered how the story would play without his role entirely. The desert is probably scary enough so the threat of danger would still be in the background. Still a memorable character though.

Overall a mysterious and fun read. I'd recommend this book noting that some portions are pretty disturbing. I will definitely check out some other books by this author.

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### **Lucas Miller says**

At times I feel as if the prose itself is what I'm interested in and have to put the actual plot aside in my mind. The structure, the description, all of the writing is really great. the book remains interesting and experimental without being difficult to follow, which is a hard combination to maintain. Also, I love books that have detailed descriptions of crafts or trades. I'm probably one of the few people who enjoyed this book that walked away from it really wishing the descriptions of ceramics were more fleshed out. I cared more about that proposed anagama than the characters.

It's a desert, and you have to walk all the way across it, it is hard, but you are alive at the end. Staring back over what you have crossed.

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### **Allya Yourish says**

Gorgeous

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### **Katharine Rudzitis says**

It took a hundred pages until I was hooked, but then the story pulled me in.

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## Ethan says

Recently I was asked about my approach to finding the books I read: where do you look? How do you decide? Where do you even begin your search?

In this era where there are enough entertainment reviews to justify the success of aggregator sites like Metacritic, where the passing of a movie critic is a cultural moment warranting a biographical documentary, and decades old music magazines clash with modern webzines to gain notoriety sifting through the web of recommendations surrounding buzz bands, it's interesting that books recommendations still remain so grassroots and word-of-mouth. Sure, there are still book reviewers with some level of fame and prestige (and then there's the excuse that books are apparently a "dying medium"), but there is no defining literary critic whose thumbs up or down causes waves in the literary world or even singularly moves books off of shelves and onto the charts.

So what is the answer? How does one find one's next reading endeavor? That kilobytes-small file or smaller-than-a-breadbox tome that may take a month's (or afternoon's) journey to complete? My long answer is built up of a web of key authors whose words I feel know well enough to decipher at the blurb-level to understand which authors get my favorites excited. (I still haven't read the back cover synopsis to Horacio Castellanos Moya's *The Dream of My Return*, but recently purchased and anxiously await reading the small novel thanks to Roberto Bolaño's bombastic blurb: "Acid humor, like a Buster Keaton movie or a time bomb.")

In short, I simply tell people to buy whatever New Directions is putting out these days. Although, now I'll have to supplement this with "except *The Trace* by Forrest Gander, don't pick that one up."

Listed as one of New Directions popular recent releases, *The Trace* seems so full of promise: a pulp-hip cover, an NBCC-finalist poet-author who was born in the desert, a road novel tracing the last steps of a famous author who disappeared in a war, Mexico!...and it was this promise that propelled me through enough of the book to feel it was worth finishing more than dropping, even as the first 150 out of 240 pages went by without much (or any) incident beyond what is shown in a couple of small passages (including the opening chapter) that detail an unnecessarily evil drug dealer ("unnecessarily evil" is about all that is given in terms of development).

The characters, Dale and Hoa, are a couple of dorks whom at multiple moments react to phantom vibrations to check their blank-screened phones, use words like "tush", don fedoras, and fill most of the pages of this novel with bickering and nauseating married-life details. Between bouts of complaining about the heat we find out that Dale starts his stories with "So..." and that Hoa tends to drive in the slow lanes and never passes (both of which we're told but never get a chance to actually see). Or take this nugget of marital bliss reflected upon in the desert:

"Dale stood...thinking about the little unspoken twenty-year contention they had about toilet paper in their bathroom. Hoa would always put the roll on the holder in the under position, and Dale would sit down, take off the roll and put it back in the over position. Generally, it would stay like that for a few days, a week or two, and then he would find it reversed again with the toilet paper hanging down against the wall. Neither of them had ever mentioned it."

And much of the novel takes on this tone as though Gander himself took a trip to Mexico with his wife with the aim to gain details for a novel but ultimately spent more time bickering than taking notes, and the plot seems awkwardly laid over these bits of character non-development as Gander seems to try to put a kind of college-writing class horror spin on the whole thing.

"What she didn't know was that something would happen in a few hours that would alter the whole trip."

Writes Gander at the beginning of a chapter, "Alter her marriage." I mean holy shit! this sentence written by a man who teaches Comparative Literature at Brown.

Another promising setup is dashed when Dale's memory of taking a homemade hallucinogen and going to a

Neil Young concert is boiled down to a detail that seems to have been written while still coming down while sitting on a dorm bed: "It sounds corny, but I saw myself that night more nakedly than I ever had before. Or want to again. With brutal honesty. It was completely humbling. I'll never forget it." Tell me more, brah. The Trace is a painful read that makes me curious what propelled New Directions to publish it. Were they contractually obligated? Trying to capitalize on National Book Critics Circle finalist buzz before it faded? (which may explain the lack of editing). As a huge proponent of New Directions as a forefront of literature these days, always pushing them as an excellent source for blind book-buying for any reader, guaranteed to entertain and enlighten, this book is a major frustration.

God, what a piece of shit.

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### **kirsten says**

I absolutely loved *As a Friend*. I liked this one but at points too many words and a little clunky but the expansiveness felt like the desert and well, that was the point, right?

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### **Daren Girard says**

A husband and wife take a road trip through Northern Mexico following the purported trail of the last known whereabouts of Ambrose Bierce. Dale, the husband, is a history professor writing a biography on the American journalist. The couple's marriage is a fragile compact that has been seriously strained by the protracted mental illness of their college-age son. They struggle to close the gap that has divided them. The dialogue is authentic with moments of tenderness, as well as frank expressions of frustration and recriminations. When they have car trouble and breakdown in the middle of nowhere in the Chihuahua Desert, they must rely on each other for their very survival.

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### **Joanne says**

Interesting read. It took me a while to get engaged, don't know why, because it is beautifully written. This is really a story of intense marital fidelity and not in a sexual context, but rather an allegiance and loyalty that is hard to achieve. This couple faced with extreme circumstances with a difficult adult child and then the physical peril of the Mexican desert accompanied with the threat of brutal drug smugglers somehow survive with their relationship not only intact, but a source of strength. It is indeed a road trip novel, beautifully written with descriptive passages and poetic chapter introductions. This is well worth the read.

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### **Laura says**

Give it 6 stars--or 7...

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## **Frances Mayes says**

Forrest Gander has written a seamless novel that's hard to put down. The writing is compelling on every page, so compelling that you know you're in the hands of a superb prose stylist. I especially enjoyed the spare descriptions of the desert landscape, creatures, geology, and atmosphere. Gander's joy in the choice of words celebrates the language on every page. The story is harrowing, emotional, and brutal, and at the same time the characters are nuanced and subtle. This strange variation on the classic American theme of the innocent abroad reminds me of all we don't know or recognize when we travel, and how our assumptions of ourselves as we sally forth with our personal agendas can be so dangerous. The couple has no expectation as they begin a literary quest (and the quest to find each other again) that they will encounter pure and random evil. This book is both a page turner and a literary triumph.

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## **Owen Curtsinger says**

At times gripping and tense, other times a beautifully-written travel tale, other times a little too academic and lofty...all these disparate aspects trip up the rhythm of reading and cause the book to fall flat in the final pages. The suspense was well-crafted, but lacked a Hollywood finish that we're sometimes led to expect with suspenseful tales. On the whole worthwhile read, especially against the backdrop of a rich and multi-layered landscape, but failing to live up to some of the momentum that the writing conjures.

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## **Tuck says**

uhoh, they took the short cut..... a history professor and his wife take a summer vacation for hubby to do some research on locations ambrose bierce may or may not have visited in northern mexico, when bierce disappeared. the couple too has been struggling mightly with the loss of their child recently.  
so we get some nice intermingling of usa'ers, eggheads, touring around what is now very very bad lands of Chihuahua state and surrounding states, deep in historical happenings, and also modern day ones of drug smuggling, illegal immigration routes, disappeared women epidemic, and not well marked roads to boot. plus it's hot n dry right? the desert? yes, desert.

well, we knew, the car breaks down on the short cut. dryness and terror ensue.

very nice descriptions of local characters, geology, plants animals, and history, and usaer eggheads too.  
gander's book of poetry looks at some of the same topics here Core Samples from the World

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