



Crossers

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When Gil Castle loses his wife, he retreats to his family's sprawling homestead out west, a forsaken part of the country where drug lords have more power than police. Here Castle begins to rebuild his life, even as he uncovers some dark truths about his fearsome grandfather. When a Mexican illegal shows up at the ranch, terrified after a border-crossing drug deal gone bad, Castle agrees to take him in. Yet his act of generosity sets off a flood of violence and vengeance, a fierce reminder that we never truly escape our history. Spanning three generations of an Arizona family, *Crossers* is a blistering novel about the brutality and beauty of life on the border.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Crossers Details

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From Reader Review Crossers for online ebook

Norma Wright says

It took me quite a while to read this book because it dealt with such a complicated issue. I had to "digest" one chapter before I could go on. Crossers gives a lot of Arizona history and the "Wild West" mentality but I felt the main theme of the book was immigration problems and drug running problems and how they intertwined. It also dealt with border violence; not just violence on the Mexico side, but violence by us on our side as well. I thought that I didn't like this book but changed my mind. What I didn't like was the subject matter. I abhor the drug running and border violence. I also believe the Mexicans trying to cross the border illegally are only trying to provide a better life for their families. They are the victims in the whole immigration issue. The drug cartels and immigrant smugglers take such advantage of the ones wanting to cross. Caputo did an excellent job of laying out the issues that at times seem completely unsolvable to all of us.

Patrick Brown says

The novelist John Gardner put forth the notion that fiction should "evoke a vivid and continuous dream." In other words, it should immerse the reader in a world that feels alive, from the beginning of the book to the end. Creating this universe -- be it one that looks and feels like our own or a totally different time and place - is the challenge of the novelist.

I thought about this notion of the vivid and continuous dream while reading Philip Caputo's Crossers. I'd never read Caputo, never even heard of him, actually, until a family friend recommended him to me and loaned me his copy of the book. "This guy, he knew what was going on down there before anybody," my friend said. The "down there" he was speaking of is the Mexican border, and in that sense, I think he was right.

The book follows Castle, a minor titan of Wall Street who loses his wife in the 9/11 terror attacks. Grief-stricken and broken, he decides to retire from his career in finance and retreat, literally, to the Arizona desert, taking up residence in an old cabin on the outskirts of his cousin's cattle ranch. There he discovers that the desert is a perilous place, overrun with undocumented immigrants making an often deadly dash across the arid landscape and lethal smugglers toting bales of marijuana on their backs. It's a world where minding your own business is a way of life, and riding into the wrong canyon can spell disaster.

Castle's attempts to seclude himself are thwarted first by a comely female rancher, Tessa, and then by the inescapable blight of the drug trade, which finds its way into the business of his cousin Blaine's cattle ranch. Weaving the stories of several characters -- Castle, Blaine, their grandfather Ben Erskine (The last of the great Western cowboys), a double-agent called, enigmatically, The Professor, and the ruthless and erratic druglord Yvonne Menendez -- Caputo creates a compelling portrait of life along the border.

Caputo's knowledge of the Arizona-Sonora desert, the ins-and-outs of the drug trade along its border, and the incredible details of ranch life and the lifestyle of the working cowboys or vaqueros, as they are called throughout, is beyond impressive. Following the rich cast of characters -- the thoughtful widower Castle, the man of intrigue "The Professor," the hothead Blaine -- was a delight. To be pulled along, through the dream - or more accurately, the nightmare -- of this book, as it slowly unfolded was a pleasure.

If I have a criticism of the book, it's that Caputo's authority is so great when he's operating in an area of expertise, such as cattle ranching, that when he ventures out of what he seems to know, he sometimes strikes a false note. One such example is a description of the crowd at an alt-country show on a college campus. He describes the students as wearing the sweatshirts of the university they attend. This detail -- minor, to be sure -- struck me as incredibly false. At times, the book's one true villain, Yvonne Menendez, felt a little too broadly drawn, that she drifted into caricature. Caputo does a great job of making most of the characters morally ambiguous, and while he does his best to show Yvonne's motives, deeply rooted in history as they are, it came up just short of the kind of nuanced detail that I would wanted. In short, I was hoping for "The Wire" of the Mexican drug trade, and it didn't quite hit that lofty mark.

And in a book of such impeccable detail -- the descriptions of the mesas and canyons of the desert, of the birds and beasts who inhabit it are so obviously from life -- that these brief moments of unreality had the jarring effect of breaking the dream of the narrative, of ripping me out of the world and making me think about the author. And that was a shame.

Thankfully, those sour notes were few and far between, and the plot is so compelling and so well-paced, that I can recommend this book without reservation. To live there, in the foothills of the Huachuca Mountains, for a few weeks, was a true pleasure, and a terrific way to begin the year as a reader.

Kasa Cotugno says

Admittedly, this is the first I've read of Caputo's fiction (I did read Rumor of War decades ago). I chose this upon learning of an upcoming publication of a new novel that shared "similar themes" with this one, and found this riveting. Particularly in today's volatile climate regarding the U.S. border with Mexico. Vengeance that spans generations, and twists that ensue make this an exciting thriller, but it also contains a contemplative examination into grief, loss, and redemption. Beautifully rendered characters populate its pages, very hard to put down.

Frederic says

Blurbs from Jim Harrison and Robert Olen Butler may give the impression that this is a "serious" novel...appropriately heavy elements(9/11,VietNam,Immigration,Seneca...)are undercut by lightweight characters more suited to a Movie-of-the -Week from the 1970's...lots of mini-series regulars like the Porsche Progressive who learns Life Lessons by getting Back-To-The-Land,the fiesty Pioneer Woman,The Single Mother with a Tragic Past,the Latina SpitFire and many more,including my favourite,The Tough,Taciturn VietVet who is bitter because "They Didn't Let Us Win"...but...as a vaguely familiar,mindless BeachRead...it's not the worst I've ever read.

Beth Anne says

perhaps i need to give this book another try...but i found this almost unreadable. i dont know how it's gotten so much acclaim.

i got through half of it and i had to quit.

i was extremely bored by the portion that i did read.

Charles Matthews says

The enormous malevolence of Sept. 11, 2001, still squats upon the imagination, resisting our efforts to comprehend it. Writers as various as Jay McInerney (“The Good Life”), Jonathan Safran Foer (“Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close”), John Updike (“Terrorist”) and Andre Dubus III (“The Garden of Last Days”) have tried working the events of 9/11 into their novels, but most of these ambitious books were doomed to at least partial failure because our memories of the actual events retain an emotional immediacy that even the most skillfully crafted fiction can't approximate.

But Philip Caputo's “Crossers” succeeds, in part because it's about a man who recognizes that the imagination is inadequate to comprehend evil. For Gil Castle, Caputo's protagonist, the enormity of 9/11 is “beyond grasp – an insane act perpetrated by sane minds.” Castle's wife was aboard the first plane that flew into the World Trade Center towers, and the senselessness of her loss has left him emotionally crippled. After pulling back from the brink of suicide, he decides to withdraw from the sources that feed his memories and his grief – the home where he and his wife lived and the city where he worked and she died. Castle, who has made a fortune on Wall Street, liquidates his holdings, sells his house, and moves to his cousin Blaine Erskine's ranch on the Arizona-Sonora border.

Castle takes this course not out of any mythic urge to move West – in fact, he explicitly rejects it: “It was important in America to move on, to avoid living in the past. That, Castle supposed, made him somewhat un-American. He could not help but live in the past; it clung to him like a second skin.” And so he holes up in an outbuilding on Blaine's ranch, nursing his grief and reading the Roman Stoic Seneca, though he finds Seneca's counsel -- “there is such a thing as moderation in grieving” -- inadequate.

Castle's grief will moderate, though not without the hard wrenching away that produces guilt and pain, because he is right about the inability to avoid living in the past. The irony here is that the past that will intrude upon him is not his own but that of his family. The novel begins with a story from the boyhood of Castle's maternal grandfather, Ben Erskine, who was once described as “the last ember of the true Old West,” and as “an adventurer, a soldier of fortune, and a lawman, [who:] put about twelve men in the ground – the ones he didn't put in jail.”

As “Crossers” intermingles the stories of Ben Erskine and Gil Castle, it becomes a novel about the intersection of history and the present, set in a place where, as Blaine's wife observes, things are “like the days of Pancho Villa, except now the bad guys ride Dodge Rams instead of on horses and bang away with AK-47s instead of Winchesters. ... Cell phone on one hip, pistol on the other. The Wild West meets the twenty-first century.” The Erskine family's ranch edges up to the U.S.-Mexican border, a barrier ineffective in stemming the traffic in narcotics and undocumented immigrants. Castle is caught in the crossfire – sometimes literally – between people who run drugs and people who run people, between law enforcement and lawbreakers, and between cultures separated only by a boundary made visible by the barbed-wire fences that deter cattle from crossing, but not human beings.

Caputo gives us characters with credibility and individuality, even though we can see the Western-fiction stereotypes underlying them: the Tenderfoot Easterner, the Rugged Individualist Rancher, the Woman Who's As Tough As Any Man, and so on. There's even a Man With a Mysterious Past known as “The Professor,” who travels between the two countries gathering information. “I can't figure out if you're in this for yourself,

if you're a double agent, a triple agent, a quadruple agent, or what," says one baffled lawman. "I'm an agent of history," replies The Professor. It takes a skillful writer to avoid falling into hokum with a character like that, but Caputo avoids it -- narrowly. He is a little less successful with his novel's villain, the rapacious drug queen Yvonne Menéndez, whose son reflects, "The only thing he would not put past his mother was cannibalism." Caputo takes the character so far over the top that the reader probably won't put even that past her.

Similarly, Caputo's plotting has elements of conventional fiction: Castle's healing process is accelerated when he falls in love again, and the novel climaxes in a rush of thriller-type action. But the book manages to rise above its generic elements. Without any ripped-from-the-headlines artifice, "Crossers" gives us an intense, clear-sighted account of the times in which we live, of 9/11, the Iraq war, the "war on drugs" and the conflict over illegal immigration. Caputo succeeds in showing how our contemporary paranoia and homeland insecurity are rooted in the inescapable past.

Erik says

This thing is only a little weightier than some throw away romance novel. Way too much of the author's personal beliefs filtered through his one dimensional fictional characters. This was sent to me by one of my book clubs and I had high hopes. What a letdown. From the Jackie Collins school of writing I imagine...

MisterLiberry Head says

It's going to sound weird, but I have to describe CROSSERS as the FX network's "The Bridge" TV series meets Steinbeck's EAST OF EDEN. The 2009 novel depicts a bleakly violent border region and contextualizes events with a multi-generational blood debt from the frontier past that must be paid in the present century. A short time after 9/11, protagonist Gil Castle (who lost his wife in the attack on the North Tower) tries to isolate himself in a cabin on the vast cattle ranch belonging to his cowboy cousin, Blaine Erskine. Doubting that he can, 56-year-old Gil wants to learn to "live with this pain that was like a chronic migraine of the heart" (p35). However, the Arizona-Mexico border is afflicted by narco-terrorism and beset by a nearly irresistible tide of immigrant "crossers."

The other story threaded through CROSSERS is recalled from the early 1900s. Ben Erskine, who was Gil's grandfather, is a teenager when he kills his first man in the manner of the Old West. As he ages and continues to restlessly seek violence and excitement, Ben becomes "guilty of an unbending fealty to his own archaic code" (p404)--which he passes on to grandson Blaine, a Vietnam vet.

Caputo is full of sympathy for the desperation of the would-be immigrants from Mexico, typified by the luckless Miguel Espinoza. "Some of these crossers have stories that make 'The Grapes of Wrath' read like a comic book" (p69), one character observes. The drug trade is "market capitalism with the muzzle off" (p135). There's some really good writing in CROSSERS, as well as interesting secondary characters. My favorite is a synesthetic triple agent called "The Professor" who is in the employ of a narco-baron and of government agencies on both sides of the border. To him, the human traffic heading north is the justifiable and historical inevitable "reconquista" on former Mexican territory.

I hadn't read Philip Caputo in many years, but I admired A RUMOR OF WAR (1977) and INDIAN

COUNTRY (1987) as chronicles of the Vietnam War experience.

Chris says

Mesmerizing blending of the past and present. Caputo artfully alternates between the two. Not sure which I enjoyed more-the tales of Castle's grandfather or Castle's present life, but violence is the common denominator. You know things are headed for a train wreck but surprisingly you think it might not be so bad. Lots of plot paths I envisioned didn't happen and I was left surprised and satisfied with the ending. Really not a thriller, more like Cormac McCarthy meets Larry McMurtry-Lonesome Dove meets All the Pretty Horses. Good imagery and description of the land. The landscape is a character as well.

Paul Pessolano says

"Crossers" begins at the turn of the twentieth century to the here and now. The story is being told in the now but references back to earlier history. Caputo is very descriptive in his portrayal of Arizona, and builds characters that come alive. Caputo also gives the reader an outstanding look at the early years of Arizona and the people that lived through that era. Those people were independent, tough, and answering to no one but themselves.

The story also brings to the forefront some of the problems that still exist today in that area. It is a key location for smuggling illegals from Mexico into the United States, and also a pipeline for the shipping of narcotics into the United States.

The erskine family has owned a huge ranch on the Mexico/US border called "San Ignacio". The ranch is barely making a go of it but is being held on to tenaciously by the family. The ranch, also, has become a passage for human and narcotic trafficking. The Erskine family becomes involved when they attempt to close down the passages through their ranch.

Several unfortunate events happen that place the family and the ranch at risk with the major drug cartel run by "La Roja", or Yvonne Menendez. Yvonne will go to any lengths to own the ranch and cause as much harm as possible to the Erskine family. The hatred stems from actions that were taken years ago, and have been festering in the Menendez family.

The story does start a little slow as Caputo brings his characters and the past and present into focus. The book, however, picks up the pace and comes to a "can't put this book down" finish. "Crossers" brings out the best and the worst of humanity showing the total corruption and human tragedy that takes place in the region daily. The reader will also be taken up with a few surprises at the end of the book.

Roger Hawkins says

Maybe a five star rating is one star too high, but I live right in the middle of the area where all this unfolds.

This is a real place and many of the people you meet there are straight out of the book. The week before I opened the book, I was talking to a neighbor as a group of wetbacks went marching through the trees behind him. Not too far into the book I read a description that matched that vision to a "T".

Caputo mentions a restaurant called Santos in the village of Patagonia. While eating breakfast, I asked the waitress, "Have you heard of 'Santos'". She explained that 'Santos' was now 'Mercedes' which I could almost see from my table-not surprising as you can see most of Patagonia from any other place in Patagonia. The one thing Caputo does not mention is that Patagonia is a speed trap, so if you visit be forewarned.

This may be a novel, but the fiction is only skin deep. Caputo was a former Marine Infantry platoon leader very familiar with conflict. And he made his living in civilian life as a journalist. With a little research you can quickly find journals with his reportage of border patrol ride-alongs and his forays into Mexico.

In this part of the borderlands half your neighbors carry guns, and only half of them are crazy. I can only hope Caputo has not mined out his sources here because "Crossers" reads like an intel report for new arrivals.

Jim says

This book is a combination historical novel-crime thriller-romance (but one that is guy-friendly)-story of personal redemption-philosophical reflection on our times. The thing is, it works.

The protagonist, Gil Castle, whose wife died on 9/11, accepts his relatives' invitation to come to stay at their ranch on the Arizona-Mexico border. While there, he becomes embroiled in the schemes of drug traffickers, the desperate plight of illegal migrants, and a relationship with a woman who is also dealing with a lot of emotional baggage. Ultimately, he must confront the past in order to cope with the present.

Caputo blends together a number of themes to produce a really good novel. In the hands of a lesser writer, some of the themes and seemingly stock characters could border on cliché (the emotionally scarred man going into the wild to save his spirit, the healing power of love, the gritty frontier ranchers, the vengeful Latin, etc.). Luckily, Caputo is a skilled writer who is excellent at making these elements work. He is an incredibly evocative writer, able to make the reader see the sights and smell the smells.

Throughout the novel, 9/11 cast its shadow. Through the character of Gil Castle, Caputo muses on the ways in which 9/11, borders, immigration, and cross-border crime are related and muses that, ultimately, the 9/11 terrorists and the *narcotraficantes* are merely manifestations of the same monster. Caputo tackles issues like the aftermath of 9/11, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and the troubled relationship between the United States and Mexico – "so far from God, so close to the United States." In a way, Caputo's use of familiar themes and character types serves his purpose. These are all difficult issues that get people frothing at the mouth and which we, as a nation, are afraid to confront forthrightly and realistically. By telling an engaging story, he is able to get these concepts past people's intellectual defenses so that they might engage them in a thoughtful way.

I read this book at the same time that Arizona was passing laws making undocumented residency a state crime. In the midst of all the overheated arguments on both sides of that issue, it was good to read a nuanced approach to the situation. While there are definitely villains aplenty, most of the characters fit in the gray, in-between areas.

This book intertwines history (in the form of Castle's frontier ancestor Ben Erskine) with the present. All of the characters have to deal with the blowback from the deeds of their ancestors. For some, such as the brutal head of a drug cartel or Blaine Erskine, the brooding Vietnam vet who holds to his grandfather's hard code of honor, history (or the skewed memory-myth based on it) is a constant presence. (One might say the same for the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Fanatics are often obsessed with a version of history.) It all made me think that, while we cannot overcome the past, we can learn to live with it.

Naomi says

Very glad to be done with this book. I knew I was in trouble when I could only find things that annoyed me. Sorry!

Krista Drahos says

The story theme could push others away, however I thought it was very clever. It's relevance can't be denied. Gripping story with developed characters.

Mike says

How many pages does it take to say that Gil Castle was hurting and sad? Obviously it's more than I think it takes.
