Lessons about the land, learned during harvest. The consequences of western expansion upon native people and natural resources. The opportunity costs of American colonialism abroad. You will rarely find complete explanations of difficult topics on historical markers, but you will find an earnest author grappling with those challenging concepts in Reading the Signs, Stephen Benz’s latest collection of thoughtful essays that explore concepts of historical justice at home and abroad.

Reading the Signs and other itinerant essays
By Stephen Benz

Synopsis

Lessons about the land, learned during harvest. The consequences of western expansion upon native people and natural resources. The opportunity costs of American colonialism abroad. You will rarely find complete explanations of difficult topics on historical markers, but you will find an earnest author grappling with those challenging concepts in Reading the Signs, Stephen Benz’s latest collection of thoughtful essays that explore concepts of historical justice at home and abroad.

Reasons to Include in the Classroom

At a time when we reexamine how policies of yesteryear shape equities in the present, award-winning writer Stephen Benz challenges readers to delve beyond whitewashed versions of history and reassess our treatment of Native people and the environment with fresh, critical eyes. From westward expansion and Manifest Destiny to the Cold War and the Global War on Terror, Reading the Signs prods myths and provides missing context around events touched by the American impulse to grab land and harvest resources—both within and beyond our shores. These essays challenge us to search for missing layers of truth and decide which versions of history should prevail.

Author Bio

Stephen Benz is the author of Topographies, a collection of witty, insightful and evocative personal essays, published in 2019 by Etruscan Press. Along with two books of travel essays—Guatemalan Journey (University of Texas Press) and Green Dreams: Travels in Central America (Lonely Planet)—Stephen Benz has published essays in Creative Nonfiction, River Teeth, TriQuarterly, New England Review, and other journals. Three of his essays have been selected for Best American Travel Writing (2003, 2015, 2019). His poems have appeared in journals such as Nimrod, Shenandoah, and Confrontation—as well as in a full-length collection, Americana Motel, published by Main Street Rag Press. Formerly a writer for Tropic, the Sunday magazine of the Miami Herald, Benz now teaches professional writing at the University of New Mexico.

Study Questions

Section One: Home Ground

1. What did Benz learn about the agricultural legacy of the crop he was harvesting on the Palouse? How did his understanding of the land align with what he learned in school? How did the tough lessons he learned doing “blue collar work” shape his approach to travel and writing?

2. Consider Benz’s childhood experience at Wright’s Boneyard. Did you ever discover—either as a child, or since—skeletons in your hometown’s closet? If so, what are they?

3. In The Grounds Crew, a wise man concludes Benz leaves college “an educated man.” What did Benz learn from Mr. Johnson and Max? What did he learn about himself? How did these perspectives change from his first to his last day on the job?

4. Would Benz describe himself as a good father? How does his perception about fatherhood change as he moves through life? Are Benz’s knowledge gaps that different from his father’s?

5. Think about where you grew up—your sense of home. In what ways did it provide you with a gauge to measure what you appreciate in new places?

6. In House and Home, Benz reflects upon his memories from each room of a house stripped bare. What would he say makes a house a home?

7. Have you ever moved to or traveled to a different part of the country? What are some of the flora or fauna that seemed exotic when you first arrived but ordinary by the time you left?

Prompt: Think about your least favorite job. With the benefit of hindsight, write an essay about what you learned there and how that aligns with what you thought you were learning at the time.

Prompt: Think about a prior home in which you lived the longest. Go room by room and journal memories about each room. Then write an essay about one of those memories which brings about a sense of wistfulness or nostalgia.
Section Two:
Journey Through the States

1. Benz encourages readers to “get off the beaten track” and explore small towns. What mystique do small towns hold for Benz? Did you grow up in a small town? If so, what things do you appreciate about them? How might those qualities reveal themselves to a visitor? If you are not from a small town, what do you find curious about them?

2. In “Strange and Beautiful”: Ambrose Bierce at Shiloh, Benz explores the topography of one of the Civil War’s bloodiest battlefields while reflecting upon Ambrose Bierce’s essay What I Saw of Shiloh. Is Benz’s analysis of the essay helped or hindered by his presence on the battlefield on a “tranquil, drowsy day?”

3. Which essays address America’s painful history with Native Americans? What common themes do these essays reveal?

4. Which essays address inherent bias in historical perspective? Is Benz’s skepticism about historical markers justified? Who erected the historical markers Benz encounters? What perspectives are missing? How does each marker fail to fully describe its history?

5. How does Benz describe the Western myth? How do his encounters and observations along the route of the Oregon Trail challenge it?

6. Benz describes the Bingham Canyon Open Pit Copper Mine as both an “unnatural wonder” and a natural legacy of the pioneer spirit. How does he reconcile the two? What is the environmental legacy of westward expansion?

7. Benz describes Owens Valley, California as the “perfect backdrop for telling the story of the American West” and its history of “conflict, conquest, exploitation and degradation.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

8. Compare and contrast the work of the three photographers who documented the conditions at the Manzanar concentration camp. Which photographer do you think best captured the true conditions there? Why? (You may find examples of the photographers’ work by searching for images on the Internet.)

9. How do Hollywood depictions of Owens Valley and the American West contribute to a true understanding of the region’s history? In what ways can these depictions be misleading?

10. Consider the locations and history of each of the essays in Section Two. Why do you think Benz chose to bring these specific locations and stories to life?

Prompt: Consider Benz’s experience with a “slug burger” from Iuka, Mississippi. Write a short essay about a unique culinary experience you had off the beaten track.

Section Two:
Journey Through the States (cont’d)

Prompt: Find a historical marker in the town or state where you live and independently research that event online or in your local library. What does the sign say? Have any important facts, circumstances, or perspectives been omitted? Who erected the historical marker? When? What did those circumstances around its placement reveal about historical bias? If the sign omits important facts, how might you rewrite it today to make it a fair and accurate depiction of long-ago events?

Prompt: Imagine that Sacagawea lived in a time with cameras and that she had been given the same freedom and access to document the Oregon Trail as Toyo Miyatake was given at the Manzanar internment camp. Write an essay about the photographs she might have taken and how those images might have resulted in a better understanding of her life or shaped our current perception of westward expansion.

Section Three:
Travelers

1. What influence do you think “Uncle Joe” had on Benz’s appreciation for travel and writing? How is that influence revealed in these essays?

2. How did you experience the supersonic circumnavigation of the globe in Small World? Were you rooting for the protagonist to fail or succeed? How did the story challenge your ideas about the purpose of travel? Don Pevsner shattered the record by hours; what literary tools does Benz use to build suspense about the outcome?

3. Leonid Yelin was a gifted volleyball player and coach. Did his on-the-court prowess help or hinder his fortunes in the former USSR? What about the United States? How are the privileges conferred upon star athletes different in communist societies than capitalist ones?

4. Describe the power of Western culture in the former USSR as depicted in Benz’s essays.

5. What role does food and drink play in bringing people together from capitalist and communist economies? Before reading this essay, what did the word “communion” mean to you? Did these essays change the way you now perceive that word?

6. Benz describes one of the draws of ecotourism as seeing nature and species before they disappear. Does ecotourism hasten or slow that disappearance? How would you describe Benz’s tone in this essay?

Prompt: How do Hollywood depictions of Owens Valley and the American West contribute to a true understanding of the region’s history? In what ways can these depictions be misleading?

Prompt: Before reading this essay, what did the word “communion” mean to you? Did these essays change the way you now perceive that word?

Continued on next page
Section Three: Travelers (cont’d)

7. Benz hovers above William Walker’s gravestone “pondering those things that have changed over the years and those that have not.” Was Walker’s view about the United States’ relationship to Central America different from how our founders or pioneers perceived Native lands in the American West? Why does U.S. history celebrate some founders and pioneers (e.g., Benjamin Franklin, Lewis and Clark) yet ignore someone like William Walker?

8. After learning about William Walker in Central America and then visiting Walker’s birthplace, Benz describes the historical marker there as: “typical of so many I had seen in my travels across America: blithe and oblique in its summary of sanguinary events, content with half-truths, evasive in overlooking key parts of the story, and essentially wrong in other matters.” Is this a fair assessment? What other historical markers in the book fit this pattern? Will this book make you more or less likely to be skeptical about historical markers you encounter on the road?

9. Consider Benz’s observations about the history children learn in school—both in and outside the United States. Does the “home country” always “win”—either through a biased perception, or omission, of the relevant facts?

10. Benz states that the realities of war became real to Spanish-American War journalist Stephen Crane when he realized the person dying next to him was a friend. What does this anecdote reveal about public tolerance for casualties and the ability of a democracy to fight and win “small” wars in places like Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan?

11. Benz states that the “defining attributes of American hubris” have been on display at Guantanamo since 1898. Do you agree? Were U.S. intentions there ever noble?

12. The Global War on Terror will soon enter its third decade, overseen by its fourth U.S. president, comprising leaders of both major political parties. What does the military base’s continued existence—and the activities presently occurring there—say about American politics?

13. What sign does Benz see in his natural yet otherworldly experience at the Cottonwood Campground? What does he take away from this interaction with nature?

Prompt: Write a short essay about a sensory experience (e.g., a sound, a smell, a taste) that transported you instantly to a previous time in a different location.

Prompt: Write a short essay about a chapter of U.S. history that you learned only recently or were not taught in school. Why do you think these events were omitted from your studies? To whom might you appeal now to ensure the full story is told?

Standards for the English Language Arts (compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

5. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

6. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

7. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

8. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).