

Charles Bowden, Author With Unblinking Eye on Southwest, Dies at 69

By William Yardley

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Charles Bowden in 2013.
Molly Molloy

Charles Bowden, an author and journalist acclaimed for his vivid, unsparing and often lyrical portrayals of life in the Southwest, particularly the brutality on the border between the United States and Mexico, died on Saturday in Las Cruces, N.M. He was 69.

Molly Molloy, his companion of many years, said that he had taken ill recently and died suddenly of an unknown cause. An autopsy was to be performed, she said.

Mr. Bowden's most notable work cut through debates about drug wars and immigration, peering instead into basic human needs and motives, letting individual lives reveal broader concerns.

His best-known book, "Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder and Family," published in 2002, is a blend of biography, history, narrative journalism and essayistic expression that spins outward from a single, seemingly unremarkable crime along the Rio Grande: the murder of a man who had no apparent involvement in the border conflict but turns out to have been the brother of an official at the Drug Enforcement Agency.

“The result is certainly much more than a crime story: It is a mature, deeply felt exploration of the hidden connections binding two very different parts of North America, as well as of the ties that bind a family,” William Langewiesche wrote in a review in *The New York Times*. “The narrative is masterly. It moves out from Bruno’s murder in successive waves, surging, receding, sometimes swirling back in time, but generally flowing forward. One gets the sense of Bowden as a fiercely independent writer, saying exactly what he believes and ignoring the conventional classifications of the nonfiction trade.”

Mr. Bowden became fascinated by the border while writing for *The Tucson Citizen* in the early 1980s. Over the next three decades he wrote a series of books and freelance articles depicting a complicated world where people variously exploit and protect the environment, turn away from traditions and preserve them, and smuggle drugs and people across the border. His subjects were not actors in a political drama, but people literally living on the edge. In “Desierto,” published in 1991, he described a region where “the days tumble together, the sun at noon annoys with light and flattens everything the eye sees into boredom,” and where “the ground boils with the goings of large ants, and every plant seems to rake the flesh with a lust for blood.”

In 1996, he wrote an article for *Harper’s Magazine* about devastating poverty, violence and gang life in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, across from El Paso. The article accompanied graphic photographs and was expanded into a book, “Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future.” He contended that Juárez’s troubles were often the result of free-trade policies — an argument he made more broadly in some of his other work. “Juárez,” he wrote, “is an exhibit of the fabled New World Order in which capital moves easily and labor is trapped by borders.”

“*A Shadow in the City: Confessions of an Undercover Drug Warrior*,” published in 2005, is based on the life of an American narcotics officer whose two decades of immersion in the border drug trade led him to conclude that United States drug policy was dangerously flawed, and that many of those involved in illegal activity were no worse than those enforcing the laws.

“His problem was when he got really deep in it, he slowly stopped believing in it,” Mr. Bowden told National Public Radio in 2005. “As he got to know the people he destroyed, he didn’t think he was any better than they were. Two, he didn’t think destroying them was going to solve what people called the drug problem — that people are going to buy these substances and find them no matter what he did.”

Charles Clyde Bowden was born on July 20, 1945, in Joliet, Ill. His father, a lawyer who read deeply and was fascinated by the West, moved the family to Tucson when Charles was a boy.

Mr. Bowden fell in love with his new surroundings. He graduated from the University of Arizona and received a master's degree in American intellectual history from the University of Wisconsin. He completed work toward his doctorate there but walked out while defending his dissertation, frustrated with what he felt were uninformed questions from his review committee.

In addition to Ms. Molloy, a research librarian at New Mexico State University who specializes in border issues, his survivors include a son, Jesse Niwa, from a previous relationship; a sister, Margaret Bowden; and a brother, George. His two marriages ended in divorce.

Among Mr. Bowden's other books are "Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields" and "Blood Orchid: An Unnatural History of America," which describes environmental destruction and social alienation in the West.

In an interview with The Times in 1991, Mr. Bowden said he once made a publisher remove the word "environmentalist" from the dust jacket of one of his books. "Environmentalism," he said, "is an upper-middle-class, white movement aimed at absolution and preserving a lifestyle with a Volvo."