

Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy

Volume 4

Issue 2 *What Do Toilets Have to Do With It?
Health, the Environment, and the Working Poor
in Rural South Texas Colonias*

Article 1

2009

Book Review (Submitted by Deborah Popper) - Migration Patterns: Stories

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Recommended Citation

Popper, Deborah E. (2009) "Book Review (Submitted by Deborah Popper) - Migration Patterns: Stories," *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy*. Vol. 4: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/ojrrp.v4i2.47>

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Book Review: Migration Patterns: Stories

by [GARY SCHANBACHER](#)

*Book Review by Deborah E. Popper
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Migration Patterns: Stories, Gary Schanbacher, Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2007, 268pp.
paperback \$14.95

Gary Schanbacher, raised in southern Virginia and now living in Colorado, attributes his story-telling ability to geography—a natural acquisition of his growing up. Perhaps, but on the evidence of the stories, he's got something his characters sorely lack, the ability to create something satisfying. The book works as a series of stories at the same time that it conveys the reality of contemporary America, particularly rural America.

The migration of *Migration Patterns* is not the social scientist's, meaning relocation. The stories take on various locations—the first opens in Indiana, the last in Colorado, and in between they stop along the Virginia coast, the Rocky Mountains, and the Kansas plains—especially the Plains. Whatever the setting, however, the characters are in some form of perpetual motion, seeking, longing, and often moving. As a group, and numbers of the characters recur in several stories, they are emotionally and economically displaced, particularly the young adults, and so they search for home, head home, but arrival just sets off another jag—their welcome short, the reasons they first left still alive. Home and family no longer seem to share the ability to nurture or comfort. Instead disconnection rather than connection suffuses each encounter and each chapter. These are people who grew up to pauperized possibilities. Their parents may have struggled to farm, to fish, to scrounge some sort of living, but their economic and emotional displacement most often leaves them without even that harsh struggle. The first story is organized around scams that turn violent

Much of the sweetness lies in the land, and so description—the words of the returnee to place—betray most strikingly a sense of nostalgia and longing. A son returning home pulls off the highway and follows local roads, noting the sky, the fields, “new housing developments in neat rows from fields that had once held winter wheat.” The older characters need nostalgia less since they have place. The father in “A Garden in Drought,” walks out of the hospital and heads across town, confused at times, but homing in on where he needs to be. The main character of the final story, “Fairweather, Colorado,” an old woman whose life has been marked by loss—deaths of a husband and infant son in World War and the 1918 influenza epidemic and the rest of the years alone amid extended family, provides the little bit of solace. In answer to her nephew's question about how she had managed so well, “never a worry, never a complaint,” she muses, loses herself in thought, and then said “God's grace. That is what keeps me going. The grace of God.” But the answer is not that simple. Instead it is her gift to the family assembled on her

birthday, a reassurance that allows these few lucky characters in the book to continue chatting, sipping lemonade, and enjoying. The ending allows the reader to close the book with an appreciation of the endurance life's struggles demand and a realization of how little we are up to the task.

About the Author:

“Gary Schanbacher’s stories have appeared in numerous journals, including *Colorado Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *The William and Mary Review*, and others. He holds a PhD from the University of Colorado, and he and his wife reside in Littleton, Colorado. *Migration Patterns* is his first collection of short fiction.” (Author biography taken from *Migration Patterns*, page 268). [[back to top](#)]