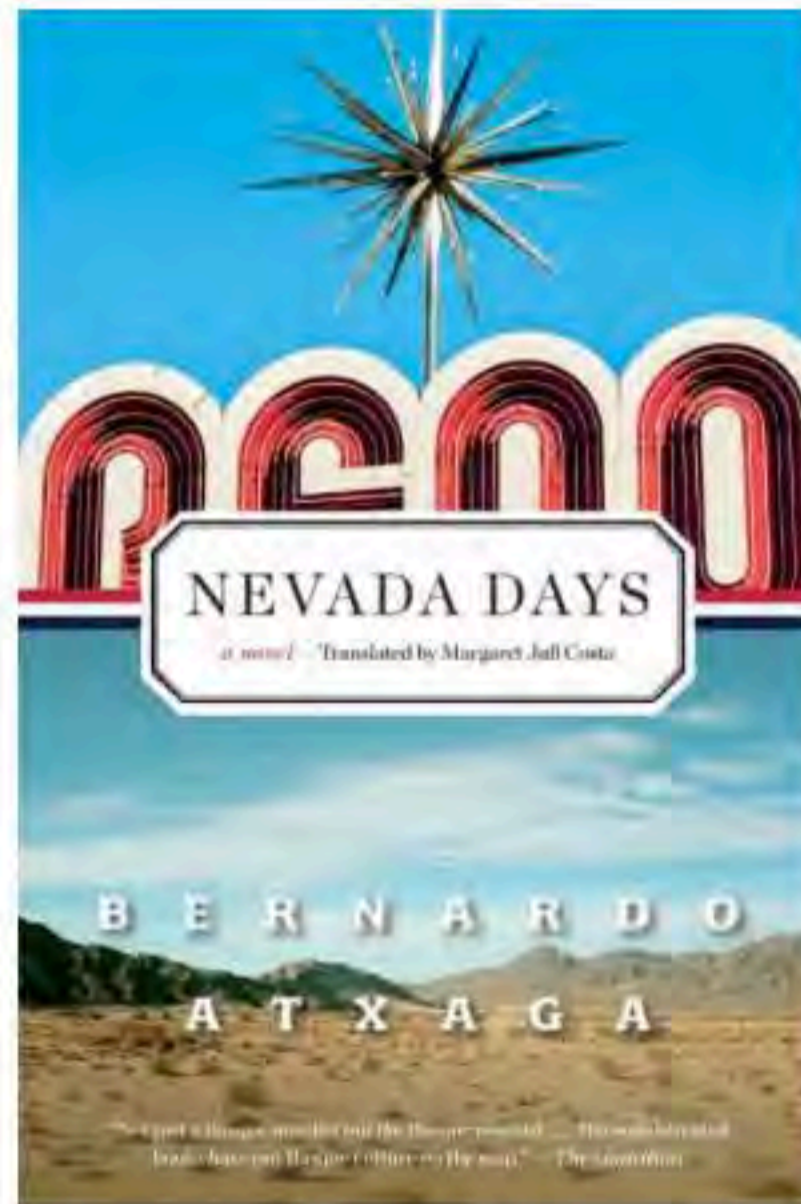




Books • Review

A Basque author contemplates a complex city in 'Nevada Days'

By Matt Gallagher July 16 at 12:39 PM



"Nevada Days," by Bernardo Atxaga (credit: Graywolf)

For author Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Reno, Nev., was a city of new dreams and sprawling physical wonder, memorialized in his novel ["The City of Trembling Leaves."](#) Vladimir Nabokov found it less compelling, describing it as "a dreary town." The Reno of my youth contained plenty of both portrayals. It's a place of spiritual dissonance and contradictions, at once a high desert casino town and an aspirant city of culture. Old money comes from ranches and mines, new money from Tesla. I left at the age of 18 with the grace of a startled dog and it's stayed with me ever since. Home lingers in us all. Mine just happens to smell of sagebrush and mountain air while sounding like slots.

A number of Nevadans have cultivated a proud literature over the years, from Clark and Robert Laxalt to more recent offerings by Claire Vaye Watkins, Willy Vlautin and Caleb S. Cage. Celebrated Basque author Bernardo Atxaga now joins their ranks. His genre-blurring ["Nevada Days"](#) neither loves nor scorns Reno so much as mulls it over slowly,



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Days neither loves nor scorns Reno so much as mulls it over slowly, deliberately. Originally published in Basque and Spanish, it's a book of meditations that blends together travelogues and memories from Basque country with a dark exploration of fading American empire. What's hard fact? What's creative liberty? Atxaga's such an engaging witness, it doesn't matter.

Atxaga's narrator is something of a wandering soul, which serves him well as he and his family arrive in Reno in 2007 so he can write and teach at the university. He finds "a city of white lights, in which the Silver Legacy, Harrah's and the other casinos rose like cathedrals." (Having worked summers at Harrah's, I never once thought of it that way, but returning home through a poet's eye is a joy we should all find.) Once he shakes the jet lag, Atxaga accrues a collection of guides to help him through this strange land.



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A retired professor named Bob introduces him to the surrounding high desert, where wild horses run over ichthyosaur fossils, prisoners find repair work among a "sea of earth," and Native American reservations and ghost towns fall scattered amid "orange-colored mountains . . . shaped like trapezoids." An IT tech named Dennis serves as Atxaga's cultural interpreter, helping him discern which helicopters in the sky belong to the police and which are medical. Then there's Atxaga's wife and two daughters, who share in the journey. A backyard raccoon becomes a fixture in the family's life and adventures. The girls also come home explaining how to survive a school shooting.

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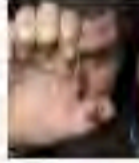






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The most pervasive theme in “Nevada Days” may well be “Et in Arcadia ego: violence and death.” Atxaga finds it everywhere, from the obituaries of fallen soldiers to a gift of dried rattlesnake skin he’s not quite sure what to make of. His interest in our passive acceptance of endless foreign war, bloody myths and social class divide is only occasionally betrayed by muted horror. Outside a bookstore he’s approached by a homeless man claiming to be a Vietnam veteran. “For some reason,” Atxaga writes, “I responded by giving him the thumbs-up. He reacted by giving me the thumbs-down and saying: ‘No, it was terrible. We lost!’”



Atxaga attends a funeral for a Basque shepherd and lapsed Catholic and finds a community he understands. He also attends a funeral for a soldier killed overseas and finds something else. As someone who was serving in Iraq during this time, I found refreshing Atxaga’s bemusement toward military ceremony. It’s honest. It’s thoughtful. It’s what our country desperately needs in this era of star-spangled pomp and fake patriots.



The most significant event of Atxaga’s time in Reno occurs a block from his sleepy campus home. On Jan. 20, 2008, 19-year old Brianna Denison was abducted from a friend’s couch. Her body was found weeks later, the identity of her rapist and murderer a mystery. Denison came from the same suburban enclave I did, a place of water-sprinkler summers and keggers in the hills; things like this weren’t supposed to happen in Reno. A friend of mine described the police presence downtown “like that after a terror attack.”

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Through it all, Atxaga watches mass dread take hold. “We were trapped beneath a taut membrane, which captured and amplified every sound, every movement. . . . I was aware of a kind of vibration.” The veneer of the detached visitor crumbles as he considers his young daughters and how easily a predator could reach their bedroom windows. He and his wife discuss the possibility of returning home early but decide to remain. The dread remains, too. “The vibration affected the whole city now.”

By the time Denison’s murderer is arrested, the Atxagas have returned to Basque country — the same journey Laxalt made decades back in *“Sweet Promised Land.”* “Nevada Days” serves as an inverse retelling of that western classic, and through the precision of Atxaga’s language and the truths about Nevada and America he brings forth, it certainly meets the standard set by its predecessor. Its pages carry the smell of sagebrush and ring of slot machines, and will bring readers deep into its messy beauty.

Matt Gallagher is the author of the novel *“Youngblood”* and the memoir *“Kaboom.”*

NEVADA DAYS

By Bernardo Atxaga

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