

A. Muia writes like she's inventing a new language

Her spellbinding novel in stories transforms Baja California into a dreamscape of violence, longing, and hard-won grace.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue
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In Review



A Desert Between Two Seas

A Novel in Stories

By A. Muia
University of Georgia Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

This is the kind of book I don't actually want to review. It's not because I didn't love it. I loved it. I don't want to review it because a review feels like the wrong way to appreciate the book's dreamlike magic. I don't want to come out from under its spell.

The book opens at a mission church in Baja California in 1820. Santa Rosalía de Mulegé is a "stone mission . . . set among rugged hills above the river that flows to the bloodred waters of the Vermilion Sea." After a series of stories following three interconnected characters, the book ends in 1937 at a prison, also in Mulegé, also "above the adobe homes and streets and shops and the groves of date palms and orchards and vineyards." The church is inhabited at the beginning of the novel by a priest, Fr. Magín Matías Espín. The prison is inhabited, more than a hundred years later, by his grandson, simply called Chema, as if titles and names were among the things the characters lost along the way.

The three people that Muia primarily traces through the course of the novel are Espín, who turns from priest to vagabond; Dolores, a fierce woman who was born without ears; and Chema, a musician in love with the wrong woman. We travel Baja California from Santo Tomás near the border of "alta" California to San Xavier in the south, visiting ranching, fishing, and mining communities. Hidden in all three sections of the novel is a pearl that a native boy Espín once knew pulled from the sea.

The magic of the book is in the prose. Muia seems to have invented her own language, drawing on both English and Spanish to do so but taking both languages in her own direction. The result is mesmeric, a drumbeat that runs through each story, even as time and place change. The rhythm of the sentences is staccato, and the sentences almost feel translated, as if we were hearing them from a distance.

Muia builds the narrative out of sparse but precisely seen images. In one section, a character who is often called the *falluquero*, or trader, has carried Dolores into a church:

They went out to the roof and the eastern wall. He saw the crowd below, women with covered heads among the stone mausoleums of the campo santo, men on their mounts in the street, the bells of their spurs sounding high and clear. Children who dared not run. All gathered before the dark fortress of the mission hewn from the black walls of the volcanic bowl in which it rested.

The impression is that, like the church, the people of Baja California have been drawn directly out of the rock, sand, dust, and plants of the landscape. They speak in sparse language. They inhabit an interior and an exterior harshness. Nevertheless, kindness, fidelity, and miracle live among the thorns, the violence, and the betrayal. Muia follows these higher human qualities like a golden thread through a threadbare fabric.

The characters embody contradictions. Espín is both a wayward priest and a man too faithful to his vocation to keep it. Dolores is both vulnerable and so defended that no one is allowed to love her. Chema is a man called in to calm the prison's most violent offenders and himself the perpetrator of crimes of passion. No one emerges as hero, but no one emerges as stooge or enemy either. Trust, we learn, is hard to come by during these years of interaction between the *federales*, the native Cochimí, and the people trying to make a living from a barren and exploited landscape. Even if some of the characters do in fact deserve trust, they are rarely given it.

In one of the final scenes with Dolores, her daughter has returned to the mining camp where Dolores has lived out her years in a small shack. Dolores hasn't seen her daughter in the many years since Dolores's son was killed by the *federales*. Dolores refuses to speak to her, and the daughter says to the *falluquero* who has tended Dolores so faithfully, "She does not want you. She has never wanted you. Leave her . . . and may God repay the one who cares for her, for she will not repay."

In the midst of the contradictions, it is astonishing how much emotion Muia can compel from stark scenes among stark people in a stark landscape. *A Desert Between Two Seas* is a book you should read if you want to fall into a dreamworld that mirrors our world but also stands outside of it. You watch this world through a kind of dusty window, but it is all the more intriguing for that.