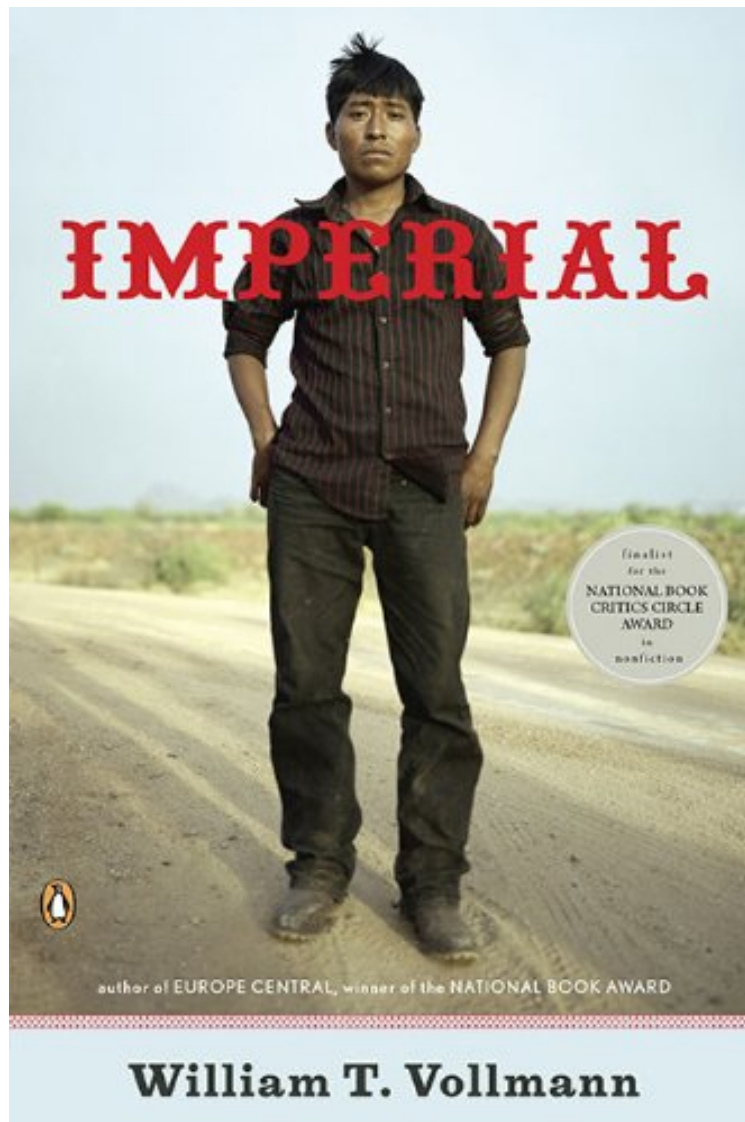


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## Imperial

William T. Vollmann

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**William T. Vollmann : Imperial** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Imperial:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. parts greater than the sum?By brydurI have read this book. However, I did not manage (or attempt) to read it straight through. Rather, I picked it up every now and then when I wanted to escape into a different place and/or time and maybe just gain some perspective on a region I didn't know very much about. I like Vollmann's writing and I am also interested in the Imperial County region and its history, so I

was happy. This book is not for everyone. Hell, it's probably not for most people. Between the size, the price, and the subject matter, it's not light reading or light carrying. It's not all great. Some of it is quite tedious and overdone. But if you've any interest in the growth of southern California, life in a border region, or the evolution of agriculture in this country, you might want to give it a try. And it's Vollmann, so there are the assortment of prostitutes and view of the seedier side of things that you'd expect. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Total ImmersionBy Joan ColbyIf one best learns a language by total immersion, then one can likewise learn of place as William Vollmann sets out to prove in his massive study "Imperial" which bombards the reader with every sort of datum on the California-Mexican area. Major themes include distribution of water, the transformation of small farms to vast agricultural domains, the plight of the Mexican illegal immigrant, the history of the Chinese in Mexico, accounts of early settlers, and more, much more. "Imperial" documents the conflicting cultures of American domination and Mexican poverty that poses a political and so far insoluble problem. 18 of 20 people found the following review helpful. A rich collectionBy Chris C. HillWilliam Vollmann has been reporting on the interface of the underclass with popular American culture for over twenty years. Since collaborating with Ken Miller on a book of photographs, a number of Vollmann's documentary books, including "Rising up and Rising Down," "Poor People," and "Riding to Everywhere" have included his own photographs of persons encountered in the texts. Vollmann's latest work, "Imperial," seems to have exacted the most effort of his documentaries, being at least ten years in the making. Apparently, the number of photos he wanted to include with his work exceeded the resources of Viking Penguin. Hence this coffee-table book from powerHouse Books. Vollmann's documentary photos are published as 8x10s in black and white, as (approximately) 11x14s in sepia, or as landscape formats of various dimensions printed across two-page spreads. Apart from seven pages at the end, there is no commentary because the Viking Penguin book of the same title has the relevant text. Some may find this collection of (mostly) posed portraits technically limited. I would not disagree. However, within those limits something eloquent can be found in virtually every page opening. To mention a few of this collection's striking moments at random: the way the shadow falls across the face of the border patrol cop on page 7; the portrait on page 11 in which the man and his cap encapsulate the closeness and distance between haves and have-nots; the contrasting mothers on facing pages 84/85; the similarity of character and visage between the ranch owners on facing pages 154/155. Vollmann's chief subject is the human condition, and his chief interest as a photographer is capturing what people both present and inadvertently manifest to the unhidden camera. Thus the subtleties in these pictures spring from the undisguised and unpredictable way their willing subjects relate to the camera's eye. In this sense the photographic medium constantly announces itself throughout the collection. Here the camera is no voyeur. The trade-off is a lack of (apparently) unselfconscious moments, which have their own telling power. For those, however, one can view the work of almost any other documentary photographer. Can this collection stand on its own apart from the text it accompanies? Clearly, the publisher believes so. They have produced a handsome, well edited volume that can without apology continue a lineage extending through "Forgotten Village" and "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" back to (at least) "People of the Abyss." One doesn't need the companion prose to enjoy Vollmann's pleasure and belief in the power of the artifact and his empathetic witness to and celebration of people and environments seldom encountered by us book readers.

From the author of *Europe Central*, a journalistic tour de force along the Mexican-American border. For generations of migrant workers, Imperial Country has held the promise of paradise and the reality of hell. It sprawls across a stirring accidental sea, across the deserts, date groves and labor camps of Southeastern California, right across the border into Mexico. In this eye-opening book, William T. Vollmann takes us deep into the heart of this haunted region, exploring polluted rivers and guarded factories and talking with everyone from Mexican migrant workers to border patrolmen. Teeming with patterns, facts, stories, people and hope, this is an epic study of an emblematic region.

.com Best of the Month, August 2009: How do you describe a 1,300-page book in 150 words? Start with adjectives (some of them opposites): vast, intrepid, passionate, and yes, sometimes dull, illuminating and infuriating, satirical and confessional, exhausting and exhaustive, dirty, fertile, and dry. William T. Vollmann, legendary for his huge, all-consuming books of fiction, history, and reporting, has spent much of the past ten years returning obsessively to one of the harshest but most contested territories in North America, the desert borderlands of southeastern California and northern Mexico he calls Imperial. Wading through water-use arcana, agri-booster archives, and centuries of colonial history; listening to lettuce farmers, motel clerks, and dance-hall hostesses; and crossing the border hundreds of times (while meeting those who cross via other means, and those who try to stop them), Vollmann has written an intensely personal fever dream of an encyclopedia that makes a strange, northern companion to last year's giant borderlands masterpiece, Roberto Bolano's *2666*. --Tom Nissley From Publishers Weekly Signature ed by Michael Coffey This is an exasperating, maddening, exhausting and inchoate book by the stunningly prolific Vollmann, who has really outdone himself. Eleven hundred pages plus endless endnotes about a single county in California is as perverse as Vollmann has dared be which is saying a lot for a guy who has written a massive collection of tales about skinheads (*Rainbow Stories*), a seven-volume history of the settling of a measly continent (*Seven Dreams*) and another seven volumes on

the history of violence (Rising Up and Rising Down). But a big book about one county? Well, it's not just any county. Imperial is the southeastern-most county in California, bordering with Mexico to the south and Arizona to the east, across the Colorado River. Is it a place deserving of this seemingly disproportionate chronicle? Today, it is a hot spot for illegal immigration, law enforcement action, drug trafficking, prostitution and sweatshop labor in maquiladoras, fetid border factories. It is a place, sure enough, where imperialism has made its mark. Over the past centuries, a lot of bad things have happened in El Centro, as the region is also called, and very little good, as Vollmann's excessive data-dump demonstrates ad nauseam. The Spanish came, murdered, plundered, left; America annexed; land grabs ensued and Colorado River water was illegally diverted westward to render a temporary agricultural paradise and make a few fortunes. As with most of his books, Vollmann has performed mind-boggling feats of research, gobbling up obscure and arcane texts about the Spanish conquests, hydrography, citrus cultivation, immigration, poverty rates, desalinization, drug use, human smuggling and exploitation of the weak by the wealthy in all its guises as it applies to this benighted, once beautiful desert region. If Vollmann has a point of view here, an axe to grind, it is that he is appalled by the power inequities and the subsequent suffering of the Mexicans, and he is moved by the latter's simple desire to have a better life. But gouts of a bleeding heart make for some viscous prose, and, as seldom happens with Vollmann, his emotions overcome his cool and his positions fray into incoherence. Vollmann's normally reliable narrative voice veers between tour guidespeak and backpacking sociologist, with the occasional lyrical paean to a lady of the night. As a result, Imperial County is a place that few will have the stomach to visit, and Imperial a book few will be willing to read. (powerHouse is publishing a book of 200 photographs Vollmann took during the course of his research: \$55 [200p] ISBN 978-1-57687-489-9.) Photos, maps. (Aug.) Coffey is executive managing editor at PW. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Bookmarks Magazine While some of them said it more politely than others, reviewers generally agreed that most readers will find the size of Imperial overwhelming (not to mention the \$55 price tag). But none could dismiss Vollmann's work, and most praised it strongly. They admired not only Vollmann's bombastic literary and personal style but his choice of subject matter. For all his digressions, Vollmann centers his story on a region defined by humans' ongoing attempts to control water, and several reviewers were impressed by the way this theme filtered into the economic, cultural, and personal stories Vollmann tells. But they also agreed that the real theme of the book is Vollmann himself, a writer whose endless interests and ideas are enough to sustain even the most desolate landscape.