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West Of Last Chance



Synopsis

Peter Brown's haunting photographs of the high plains, interspersed with Kent Haruf's narratives of the people who live there. *West of Last Chance* is a unique collaboration between celebrated photographer Peter Brown and award-winning author Kent Haruf. The result is a profound visual/verbal dialogue of short prose pieces and large-format color images that brings to life this sometimes brutal and incredibly beautiful part of the country. Awarded the Dorothea Lange "Paul Taylor Prize by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University for this project in 2005, the authors write: "Our interest in this part of the world is contemporary but also includes its history and a mix of stories that have passed down over the years, stories that resonate with the land in interesting ways." It is an evocative work concerned with moments that describe the beauty, power, tragedy, and cultural complexity of the place itself: the way the land has been used, the way people have lived on it, and the visual record that has been left behind.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

West of Last Chance offers up nothing more than thoughtful large format photographs of beautiful and rough country and the people and things inhabiting it, perfectly paired with spare and equally eloquent prose poems (though Haruf probably wouldn't call them that). I seldom write reviews, but this book, printed in Italy on luscious semi-matte paper, is well worth taking a moment to recommend - and making some time to read. Rather than a prosaic description of the vastness of the plains, or a trite complaint about the environmental crises facing the land and its people, *West of*

Last Chance reads (both Kent Haruf's words and Peter Brown's images) more like a long, meditative poem, spanning a huge narrative arc that includes the religious beliefs of the people, the remnants of (and occasional denigration of) its native American Indian inhabitants, the way the water, land and resources are sometimes thoughtlessly used and abused, and the economic hardships of fighting for a livable space in so vast and hard a world. There's a fair amount of humor in the book too. Coming from a fairly small town in South Texas, I can promise you: the people in the book are the real thing. They are tough but often tender, and appropriately wise to the ways of their world. To someone who doesn't know rural America, it may be a real eye-opener that everyone in the sticks doesn't meet the stereotype. To those who do know small-town America, it will be a nice visit home. Peter Brown offers up some of the best documentary images (and by that I don't mean less than artful) of this rugged landscape and its equally rugged, poetic and just flat-out interesting people, that you'll find anywhere. The writing is spare and understated and beautiful, which matches the subject perfectly.

Like Kent Haruf I first came across photographer Peter Brown years ago through his excellent book 'On the Plains'. This latest book with 151 photos continues the theme with the same vigor and passion. I thought it was a wise choice to stick to the back roads of the Plains, so much more interesting visually than the cities. The photos really convey the hugeness of this area of the Nation though about a third of the photos are of small towns in Texas. The photos that I think work best are of the buildings. Shot in the classic tradition stretching back to the FSA photos of the Depression: no-nonsense straight on at eye height and mostly they are framed in the composition, too. I would have been satisfied with the book with just the building photos. Brown's composition framing really does bring out the best in so many of the images. For instance there are a couple of wonderful shots taken in Buffalo, Wyoming (plates 118 and 119) that just grab when you turn over the page, full of shapes, color and what appeals to me: plenty of signage. Throughout the book there are signs and lettering, again very reminiscent of the thirties FSA photos. Now, many photographers (in rather elitist thinking) would deliberately avoid photographing hand-made signs, billboards and commercial lettering but these seem such a part of America that I think it would be foolish to avoid them. Fortunately plenty of photographers go out of their way to capture this silent form of communication because of its visual appeal. There was a possible interesting theme that could have made the book even more enjoyable: the center of town image.

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