



West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders, and Killers in the Golden State

Mark Arax

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Teddy Roosevelt once exclaimed, "When I am in California, I am not in the West. I am west of the West," and in this book, Mark Arax spends four years travelling up and down the Golden State to explore its singular place in the world. This is California beyond the cliches. This is California as only a native son, deep in the dust, could draw it.

Compelling, lyrical, and ominous, his new collection finds a different drama rising out of each confounding landscape. "The Summer of the Death of Hilario Guzman" has been praised as a "stunningly intimate" portrait of one immigrant family from Oaxaca, through harrowing border crossings and brutal raisin harvests. Down the road in the "Home Front," right-wing Christians and Jews form a strange pact that tries to silence debate on the War on Terror, and a conflicted father loses not one but two sons in Iraq. "The Last Okie in Lamont," the inspiration for the town in the *Grapes of Wrath*, has but one Okie left, who tells Arax his life story as he drives to a funeral to bury one more Dust Bowl migrant. "The Highlands of Humboldt" is a journey to marijuana growing capital of the U.S., where the old hippies are battling the new hippies over "pollution pot" and the local bank collects a mountain of cash each day, much of it redolent of cannabis. Arax pieces together the murder-suicide at the heart of a rotisserie chicken empire in "The Legend of Zankou," a story included in the *Best American Crime Reporting 2009*. And, in the end, he provides a moving epilogue to the murder of his own father, a crime in the California heartland finally solved after thirty years.

In the finest tradition of Joan Didion, Arax combines journalism, essay, and memoir to capture social upheaval as well as the sense of being rooted in a community. Piece by piece, the stories become a whole, a stunning panorama of California, and America, in a new century.

West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders, and Killers in the Golden State Details

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Golden State Mark Arax

From Reader Review West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders, and Killers in the Golden State for online ebook

Joy Hepp says

As a granddaughter of two California natives of vastly different backgrounds, I'm no stranger to tales from my native land . However, Arax has proved that understanding the state's diaspora is an unending journey. Each new generation arrives with it's own whirlwind of cultural challenges, enigmatic schemes and memorable characters.

Continued...<http://chi.me/K07uM7>

Stephanie says

I loved this. I have such a love-hate relationship with my home state. There is so much beauty and such spirit and such heart...and such plasticity and ugliness and cruelty...

Some years ago, I read "In My Father's Name," in which Mark explores the murder of his father, a bar owner in that hellhole of Fresno in the early 70s. The final essay in the latest book is the epilogue to that story, and is fascinating to watch him continue the quest yet remain a reporter...and the story of the migrant family in the Valley - should be required reading for every Californian...but maybe the one that entertained me the most is the chapter on the Marijuana Culture in Humboldt/Mendocino...it totally captures the good that has come from the economic boom the north coast growers have enjoyed for a couple of decades...and made me wonder, if legalization happens as some predict it will in the next few years, what will it do to the boom? Maybe the 2 essays will come together - there will be agribusiness dope farms in the Valley, changing the lives of the farmworkers, and the culture of Southern Humboldt will change back to more what it was in the 70s when I lived there.

In any case, the title of this one comes from Teddy Roosevelt's quite "When I am in California, I am not in the West, I am west of the West."

It's really well-written, thought-provoking, and entertaining. Loved it!

Stephany Wilkes says

There's the California of image, the California that is sold and marketed across the U.S. and internationally, and it's the same California one usually sees while on vacation: Malibu, surfers, cable cars, maybe Yosemite and Napa Valley vineyards. Then there is the California you get to know after you live in it, because it takes a few years to find it. That's the California this book is about.

I don't think it's too generous to say that Arax is a modern-day, nonfiction Steinbeck. As a California resident, I can vouch that Arax's portrait is fair and hits all the points of life one doesn't see in "vacation California:" the battles between the old hippie marijuana growers vs. the young, polluting indoor growers (who worked hard to ensure marijuana wouldn't be legalized this past election); the corrupt real estate

developers and city employees who ensure the destruction of the most valuable farm land in the entire U.S.; the Mexican migrant slaves who are, for some reason I cannot understand, less sympathetic in their present than Steinbeck's Okies are in the past to too many observers, most of whom don't live here and see farm slave labor in action; and the paranoid Baby Boomers who think every neighbor is an FBI agent and believe in "chem trails" created by the government to change the atmosphere to make it more friendly to mind-control waves.

(Regarding this last group, I was astounded by just how many I encountered so soon after moving here. They're everywhere, and you can't meet so many of them and not wonder "What on earth happened to these people?!" They are people I thought only existed as characters in Pynchon novels.)

This is the book to read if you want to learn something about many of the "real Californias."

Emily says

I enjoyed what I read but did not finish, and then it was due back at the library and not renewable because of the enviable popularity.

But I did recommend it to a couple of co-workers who blew me off.

Update: I recommended to an in-law who seemed interested. Maybe my pitch improved with time.

Laura says

I picked up this book thinking that it would be a glorification of California, something to match my enthusiasm for my adopted state (5 years and counting). Instead I found all of our sins laid out bare on the page. All the ugliness, all the disillusion, all the mean and hard and crazy. Looking now at all the quotes on the covers of the book, I have no idea where I got this notion of glorification. Probably I looked no further than that fantastic Teddy Roosevelt quote and plunked down my cash.

What I got from this book was the opposite of what I expected, and I loved every page of it. It was real, and it was riveting. Now I just have to find out who this Saroyan person is that the author keeps name-dropping.

Jeremy says

One of the best examinations of California's current state I have read - and I read copy from California newspapers as part of my job. Arax, a former L.A. Times reporter, does a great job here avoiding the cultural touchstones of the state - L.A. and the Bay Area - and spending a lot of time in what I would call Steinbeck Country, the dusty towns off the beaten path that help define the state but are generally ignored by us city dwellers. Chapters about the battles between old-school and new-school weed growers in Northern Cali and a young SoCal Vietnamese-American whom Arax befriended as a child before he grew up to a rough life, are especially well-written and memorable. Excellent book and an easy read.

Tony Gleeson says

One of the fringe benefits of having a son who is a bookseller and avid reader is that now and then he hooks me up with a gem I may not have found by myself... at least not right away. Mark Arax was a reporter for the Los Angeles Times; his Armenian family settled in the Fresno area after the first World War and he grew up in the central valley of the state. California is, to use a cliché, in his blood. His journalistic journeys have taken him all over California to observe people and events-- and the intriguing relationships among them-- with a decidedly different point of view. This book mostly consists of reworkings of essays he has had published in various venues, including a fascinating (and amusing) look at the marijuana culture of Humboldt County, the story of a tragic murder in a Glendale family who had built a small fast-food empire, a revisit to the unique activism that still fights to exist in San Francisco and Berkeley, and an overview of the real-estate-driven culture of the central Valley cities. Throughout his writings are sprinkled wry observations of the state of our society, people and institutions today, especially journalism. The writing, the insight, and the clarity-- as well as the centered humor and the refusal to fall into journalistic self-importance-- are all there. For me, reading this book was a sheer pleasure. Unfortunately Arax, and way too many other fine journalists and writers like him, are no longer associated with the Times, once a terrific newspaper and now a sad shallow shadow of itself. My city is much the poorer for this.

Frances says

This is a wonderful book that is part journalism, part essay, part memoir. Arax travels to different parts and cultures of California and explores the dark side of the Golden State. While not exactly a cheerful or optimistic portrayal of California, it is a fascinating one. I especially enjoyed his portrait of a migrant farmworker family, the marijuana industry of northern California, and the emotional price he has paid for his father's long-unsolved murder.

John says

Mark Arax, former LA Times reporter, take a look at central valley. His personal past as an Armenian son of a murdered night club owner only adds to the realism of this modern look at farm country. His chapters chronicle the movers and shakers, the farmers, the farm workers and even some Homeland Security manufactured terrorists. This is a sympathetic look at California in all its complexity. His personal struggle with his father's death is not the high point.

Sarah says

Arax really feels for the Central Valley and that shines through in this book. The chapters on the Central Valley are great- really moving. They mostly focus on the change of farm land into either exploitation of migrant farm workers (though Arax never actually says this but dances around the issue) or into suburban wasteland from the traditional family farm that used to provide a decent income. I really liked his chapter on

Humboldt county as well. However, I thought his chapter on the Bay Area was just filler- he could have focused on how much San Francisco and the peninsula has changed thanks to the tech boom and the money generated but he focuses on conspiracy theory obsessives instead. All in all, a great book on a diverse state like California written by a native. Slow in some parts, but still really good.

Noah says

Some of the chapters in this book didn't work for me - the section on radicalism in San Francisco and Berkeley seemed particularly misguided. But when it's good, it's great. Arax blew me away with some parts, especially the chapters on migrant farm workers in the San Joaquin Valley and marijuana growers in Humboldt. Of course, there are plenty of other subjects in California I would have liked to see him cover, but this book was never intended to be thorough like that. It's more emotional than factual. Highly recommended.

Jocelyn says

I really enjoyed this book. Living in Fresno, although not a native Californian, it was very interesting to learn a bit about the area and great to recognize some of the things he talks about. His few political issues really made me think. I also think his look into his own history was well done and I want to read *In My Father's Name*, if not all of his other works. Mark Arax came in to talk to my American Ethnicity class and it was obvious that he really cares for the things he writes about. He's also not at all as scary as his picture makes him look, haha.

Dan says

Engaging and well written collection of essays and investigative journalism that touches on so much of "the other" California. The California of Fresno Armenians, Humboldt County pot growers, Mexican migrants, Berkeley tree sitters, and big agriculture.

If you always wanted to know what was happening in the big valley in the middle of the state, or those points outside of SF and LA, this is as good a place to start as any.

Randy Long says

I first got exposed to Arax in an Op-Ed he did for the Sacramento Bee regarding Armenians in Fresno who are farmers.

I'm about half-way through the book and I have to admit, this book really confirms my suspicions/intuition regarding California and the almost mythical status it has.

Farming in the Central Valley and it's ugly side.

Immigration from Southeast Asia.

DEVELOPERS...yes, it's in caps.

I kind of have a love/hate relationship with the Golden State, but having been raised in Rancho Cordova

(Sacramento), you see first hand politics (and it's seedy side), and development of your open fields where you used to ride your bike and play around as a child.

I'll finish the book in a couple of weeks and finish up the review, but it's excellent so far.

Paul says

Really great. California is more glue, more connective tissue, than it is subject matter here, in that many of the essays concern inter/national politics and things like moonshining and the author's father's murder -- things beyond California. That said, everything is always tied in and/or brought back to the golden state, and as a collection these pieces work really well together. Even though the book is less about California than it is simply set (t)here, I did learn a lot about the state, particularly in the realm of agriculture. A good deal of the landscape is covered, mostly that between LA and SF, but Arax seems most comfortable in his home region -- the central valley -- and most of the book seemed to focus on this region. (Hence all the ag talk, and, NB, not to the book's detriment.)

What's really impressive is how Arax manages to write with as much pathos and suspense and character development as any good fiction writer would, even though the book is non-fiction. The writing is definitely very polished and informative, though we've all trudged through well-written and informative non-fiction that's bored the tears out of us. Not here. *West of the West* is certainly a pleasurable (if, at times, depressing) read.
