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Book Review: Five Shades of Shadow

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The Oklahoma City bombing "informs each sentence here," Tracy Daugherty tells us, becoming the epicenter to essays aiming to "gather remains—of family, history, landscape—before they were lost." At work on a novel when the bombing occurred, a book tracing family roots in West Texas and Oklahoma, Daugherty turned to nonfiction as a means of "glancing back in order to look ahead more clearly," to probe personal and regional in relation to national history, to confront instabilities in his own life, in part, by trying to understand violent disturbance in the republic.

The result is an often affecting volume that reflects on an upbringing in the Southwest against the backdrop of Daugherty's parents' and grandparents' experience, then redirects retrospection toward prospects for the future. Among his touchstones are a grandfather's commitment to public service and belief in correspondence between public and private language; Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath as social critique and exemplar of "unironic" truth-telling Daugherty misses in recent literature; mixtures of myth and reality persisting in Merle Haggard's songs or Ralph Ellison's writing; and contending aspects of a need to revisit the heartland from his current home in Oregon, where he teaches writing.

Nostalgia may play its part, but the deeper impulse is to seek in patterns of the past the meanings for American consciousness and culture of dislocations large and small, preeminently the Oklahoma City blast. (September 11 is acknowledged but not engaged, its shock waves too recent and global scale too vast for Daugherty's focus.) Interviews with survivors and others in the region entwine with the author's self-analysis, less to deflect his personal troubles—a failing marriage, clinical depression—into a larger context of crisis (he...
interrogates himself on this point) than to look for common ground, from which perhaps to be helpful to others as well as himself.

Inward inquiry is encircled by an observant outward view of the land, in its physical immutabilities but also in the ways in which its wind-scoured expanses sustain human lives, ephemeral yet enduring. Daugherty conveys a sense of the Plains, in their difference from his adopted West Coast terrain, as a constant horizon to his inner eye.

At one awkward point the author likens himself to Lear in the storm, and he sometimes sounds petulant venting academic discontents. But overall Daugherty's touch and tone are sure, as he comes to terms with contingency. The reader is welcomed into a sheltering space beneath the "Survivor Tree" in Oklahoma City, a place for "each person with a deep, private story, as well as a story here together."

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