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Book Review: The Captured: A True Story of Abduction by Indians on the Texas Frontier

Gary L. Ebersole

University of Missouri-Kansas City

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The Captured: A True Story of Abduction by Indians on the Texas Frontier. By Scott Zesch. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004. xx + 362 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$26.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

This is a well-researched and well-written study of a handful of Indian captivities on the Texas frontier in the 1870s. Its author was motivated by the desire to know more about the life of Adolph Korn (1859-1895), his distant relative, who was captured at the age of ten by Comanche Indians. The Indian captivity tale has been a staple of the literature of the Americas since the publication of Mary Rowlandson's account from Puritan New England in 1682. Hundreds of accounts—factual, fictional, and fictionalized—have told the tale of the innocent abducted and carried off to the world of the alien other. Yet the tale has been told to very different effect, ranging from accounts of divine providence to racist diatribes against “blood-thirsty savages” and from sexually titillating accounts to romantic tales of the return to nature.

Surprisingly, Zesch seems uninterested in either the Indian captivity as a genre or its history. In the main, he uncritically accepts the published accounts as accurate and unadorned. Then he proceeds to cull them for kernels of “fact” concerning what happened . . . and what happened next. Zesch seems driven to tell a swift-moving tale for a modern audience, which at times leads him to fill in gaps in his documents silently, especially concerning the feelings, motives, and psychological states of individuals. For example, in describing the

reaction of neighbors to the abduction of a thirteen-year-old girl, he claims, without any clear evidence, that “they felt a guilty sense of relief that it wasn't one of their children.”

Zesch also seeks a psychological explanation as to why so many child captives embraced the Indian way of life and “went native,” even though they often witnessed extreme violence and brutality in being abducted; yet he finds none. Projecting modern sensibilities and psychology back into the past will not work. Rather, readers must realize that life in general on the frontier was violent and brutal in many ways, while childhood as we now conceive of it, as a time of innocence and freedom from labor, did not exist.

Still, Zesch usefully sketches out the mindset of German immigrants in Texas at this time in chapter 2, “Germans in Comanche Land.” The “Other” for these immigrants consisted of non-German whites and “old-time Texans,” even more than Native Americans. Perhaps the most successful part of this study, though, is its focus on the lives of captives *after* they returned to the white world. Most studies end with the captives' return, but here the reader learns something of the different ways captivity affected the lives of individuals. Many never successfully readapted to the white world, living peripheral lives or lives of silence. Others turned their notoriety as captives into a public or stage persona.

In sum, *The Captured* is a good read, although not a trail-blazing work of scholarship.

GARY L. EBERSOLE
Department of History and
Center for Religious Studies
University of Missouri-Kansas City