

“Life destroyed by Corporate Agribusiness”: Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir

Review of Joe Bageant's Book

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‘Cotton never saw much cash, and never got rich by any means. not on the ten-cent and fifteen-cent purchases that farmers made there for over one hundred years. Yet he could pay Jackson Luttrell for the tomato hauling in credit at the store. That enabled Jackson to buy seed, feed, hardware, fertiliser, tools, and gasoline, and farm until harvest time with very little cash, leaving him with enough to invest in a truck. Unger could run his tomato cannery and transform local produce into cash, because he could barter credit for farm products and services. This was a community economic ecology that blended labour, money, and goods to sustain a modest but satisfactort life for all.
Rainbow Pie



I don't know where to start with *Rainbow Pie*, it's a book of two sides, two faces even. On the one hand there's Joe's evocative, heartfelt nostalgia for a life destroyed by corporate capital and on the other, his anger and frustrations, rants on occasion, as if analyzing sets off an uncontrollable chain reaction to how capitalism destroys human beings and all in the name of free choice! It's a frustration many of us lefties feel, a sense of powerlessness made all the worse by the knowing.

Having read his first book 'Deerhunting with Jesus', I had already gotten a taste for his prose when it came to describing the community he grew up in, Winchester, Virginia on the edge of the Southern Appalachian mountains. His memories of life growing up in a small, rural community, essentially that of subsistence farming is really outstanding. Simple yet powerful.

“The frost was upon the pumpkin one morning in 1960 when Jackson Luttrell dropped the wagon bolt into the tractor hitch, then stepped up on the tractor’s axle, easing himself into the cold, iron seat. He’d done it ten thousand times, but this day it took him three tries. Sixty Novembers in the fields exact their rightful toll, and he was more than feeling his age. Five minutes later, Jackson was down in his bottom land loading corn shocks onto the wagon. (You don’t waste a big truck on light loads.) A skiff of snow covered the dark soil around the corn stubble, or ‘stobs’ as he called them. Every remaining stub of a cornstalk represented one whack of a hand-held corn cutter all fifteen acres, some 300,000 of them, wielded by either Jackson himself or neighbours with whom he’d exchanged such work for forty years.’

What Joe calls the white underclass, some forty-plus million Americans, who struggle to survive out of sight and out of mind of the urban middle class who not only manage capitalism but who also shape the kind of self-image people end up having of themselves. They are Marx’s surplus labour writ big, real big. They are the (former) heartland of the American Dream turned nightmare. A class turned in on itself and entirely ignored by mainstream everything.

To understand the source of Bageant’s anger, he takes us into the world of his parents, grand-parents, great grandparents, all the way back to 1755. Small farmers, manual labourers, trades people of all kinds, the people, the class that built America, along with the slaves of course. But as Joe points out, after Reconstruction, poor whites in the South didn’t get the vote either, excluded by lack of property or money, or both. Blacks got the franchise, briefly, then had it taken away.

But this seems to be a feature of US political life when every generation that comes along seems to be doomed to have to relearn the lessons of the past. Nothing gets handed down, passed on except the illusions. There is no continuity between the generations, something that also now afflicts the UK. The past that we ‘consume’ is an artifice, a sleight-of-hand, a concoction dreamed up in universities and media conglomerates’ ‘creative’ departments.

“When World War II began, 44 per cent of Americans were rural, and over half of them farmed for a living. By 1970, only five per cent were on farms.”

Farming was now big business, agri-business. There was no room for the Bageants in this brave new world. The transformation of the US demographic landscape is truly staggering and just goes to show what capitalism in its most unrestrained form can do to- well everything. When I lived in the US I traveled around a bit, north, south, east, west and I can tell you that the ‘built’ environment has gotta be the ugliest on the planet. Just kinda plonked down, cloned across the country. Main streets populated with franchises and little else except for the ubiquitous Walmarts, yet when we think of the US, an image of Manhattan or wide open spaces is evoked.

“The farm was not a business. It was a farm. Pap and millions of farmers like him were never in the ‘agribusiness’. They never participated in the modern ‘economy of scale’ which comes down to exhausting as many resources as possible to make as much money as possible in the shortest time possible.”

Looking in on Joe’s world it’s immediately apparent that his dilemma in looking back, is that by the time capital got around to demolishing Joe’s “community economic ecology”, it had

pretty much gotten through destroying everything else, in fact ever since the days when Joe's ancestors landed in 1755. Thus without political organization with which to defend their economic (and political) interests, there's an inevitability to the trajectory of US capitalism. So even while Joe's community was still intact and functioning, it was already surrounded by an advancing tide of avarice and destruction.

What's left is what *Rainbow Pie* describes, millions of poor, uneducated whites, who have been left to rot on a once intact rural ecology, just as the original inhabitants, or what's left of them, have been left to rot on 'reservations' or to call them by their correct name, Bantustans.

I don't know if Joe has read any William Morris such as 'News from Nowhere' but I get the same sense of loss, a grievous loss of Joe's cultural, let alone economic, inheritance just as Morris lamented the loss of rural life and all its many skills and traditions, wiped out by his hated Victorian capitalism. Yet over the past two hundred-plus years of capitalism rampant, Joe's experience is the third such auto-destruction to take place in the so-called developed world, where entire cultures and communities have been erased from the face of the earth. All in the name of 'progress' of course as capital yet again must revolutionize the means of production or die.

For what Joe has done (and so far he appears to be the only one) is to record yet another transformation of a culture that had existed in one form or another for nearly three hundred years, just as capital depopulated rural communities in 18th and 19th century England, forcing them in the (yet to be built) industrial cities. And yet again, beginning in the 1970s as capital deindustrialized the UK and the USA, preferring to make its money out of 'intangibles' instead of real things. The Chinese can do that for us at a fraction of the cost. And all of it in vain as capitalism once again plunges us into a global depression and general war on the planet's population by one means or another.

The paradox of Joe's underclass is that it has been harnessed by the most Conservative elements in US capitalism and for a lot of reasons. Firstly, Joe's community has always been very religious and secondly conservative with a small c. Thirdly, it's been jettisoned as being surplus to requirement by what Joe calls the urban-based Establishment except when it comes to voting day. Stereotyped as ignorant and inbred hillbillies in the mass media (shades of 'Deliverance'), the only 'voice' they have is one supplied to them by the likes of Oral Roberts et al, who allegedly speak on their behalves. After all, forty million voters come election time is a pretty big slice of the action.

This explains in part why so many people can be screwed over and over again and yet never revolt. The other part is the simple fact that they are mostly illiterate and deliberately under-educated, fed on a diet which is literally killing them physically and mentally.

But for anyone with a working class background, such as yours truly, *Rainbow Pie*, underneath all the crap Bageant exposes to the light of day in his very own Redneck America, there are so many evocations of working class life that I can identify with, especially the skills we used to possess that are instantly recognizable to a generation of industrial workers like my Dad's. So different yet so familiar.

Joe finds their ignorance appalling but empathizes totally with their condition. These are not bad people, they're just struggling to keep their heads above water and without a voice of their own (except Joe's) what kind of a chance do they have?

The question is whether there is the right balance between recollection and rant in *Rainbow Pie*? Mostly it works but sometimes it doesn't. I suppose it depends on just how angry Joe felt as he pounded away on his laptop. I sometimes found myself rushing through the political 'asides' just so I could get back to the descriptions of Joe's life and times. Yet Joe speaks the truth to the reality of a system bankrupt on every level including now finally the ecological. The rural life that Joe describes, though whilst poor, barely above subsistence level, nevertheless reveals a culture that was in balance with the environment and to Joe's credit, it's not a romanticized vision of a life lost but echoes a lost culture that used to be the bedrock of the life of millions of working Americans.

This is a fascinating and extremely readable account of a life now vanished, destroyed by the insatiable appetite of capital and told with acid wit and great style making it enjoyable to relish the language but not too much, it's not a travelog but a rare account of life that most of us are barely aware exists.

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