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Detroit: An American Autopsy by Charlie LeDuff (review)

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of agriculturalists in this and other industries and begin to reexamine our broader judgments about the nature of farming in the Midwest.

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Charlie LeDuff, *Detroit: An American Autopsy*. New York: Penguin Books, 2013. 304 pp. \$27.95.

In recent years the death of Detroit has joined such perennials as the sinking of the *Titanic* and the explosion of the *Hindenburg* as a favorite topic among disaster aficionados. A long list of books, articles, film documentaries, and television reports have fed the curiosity of those millions seeking to know what went wrong. Photographers, both amateur and professional, have descended on the city, providing an ample visual record for those wishing to gawk at the disaster that is Detroit. The Motor City has become the wreck on the highway that everyone slows down to stare at. Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit: An American Autopsy* adds to this mound of postmortems. Better written and more gut wrenching than previous works, LeDuff's account has achieved bestseller status. As LeDuff observes: "There is little else Detroit has to export except its misery" (283). Judging from the favorable response to LeDuff's account, that export industry appears alive and well.

Actually *Detroit: An American Autopsy* is as much a memoir as a commentary on a city in distress. Raised in the Detroit region, LeDuff returned to his hometown in 2008 after a stint with the *New York Times* and took a job with the foundering *Detroit News*. His book is a personal account of his two years covering the corruption and chaos of the once-great city. Not only is LeDuff himself the protagonist and first person narrator of his work, but his dysfunctional family serves as a symbol for the dysfunctional city. Plagued by drug use, a lack of education, and underemployment, the LeDuff clan, like the city, is clinging to existence, toughing it out in a hostile world. LeDuff chronicles the chicanery and buffoonery of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick and city council president Monica Conyers, befriends the city's beleaguered firefighters, and reports on the feckless police department. Interlaced with these tales of civic larceny and frustrated but conscientious public servants, he poignantly tells of his deceased sister—a prostitute and drug addict who died young—and her daughter, who fatally overdosed on heroin. He

repeats the oft-noted data on deplorable police and ambulance response times and like previous accounts tells the reader that Detroit's vacant lots could accommodate a city the size of San Francisco and Manhattan (5). Yet there is a personal edge to LeDuff's story. He is a son of Detroit, and his kin are among the victims of the city's collapse.

Despite its subtitle, LeDuff's book is not an autopsy. An autopsy is a scientific dissection of a dead body performed by an objective expert seeking to determine the cause of death. The next of kin do not carve up the cadaver, and the pathologist does not pen a three hundred page lament for the deceased. Instead, LeDuff has written a roman noir elegy, a tough-guy send-off for his home turf. The dispassionate language of an autopsy report is absent; "fuck" and "shit" are the most common refrains in LeDuff's elegy. This is a profane Raymond Chandler tale revealing the dark corners of the Motor City. No white-coated forensic scientist, Charlie LeDuff is a hardboiled detective reporter with a heart of gold. A cigarette hangs perpetually from his lips, except when he is swigging beers or whiskey; he talks the language of the street. Though his legal name is Charles LeDuff, he notably goes by the more streetwise moniker of Charlie.

Moreover, LeDuff's work is not truly an "American" autopsy. He repeatedly implies that Detroit exemplifies what is wrong with America at large; put crudely, the whole nation is fucked up. Yet the world's fascination with Detroit stems from the city's relative uniqueness. People do not flock to photograph the ordinary or devour accounts of the mundane. What attracts people are freak shows-the giant luxury line that sinks on its maiden voyage, the Arsenal of Democracy that nosedives to oblivion over the course of a couple of generations. Millions of Americans have inhabited the Rust Belt for decades without finding a frozen corpse in an abandoned elevator shaft as LeDuff does in the memorable first pages of his book. Americans have witnessed deindustrialization, periodic rises in unemployment, and the physical decay of inner-city neighborhoods. Those are mundane facts of life in the world beyond the gates of Eden. Detroit, however, surpasses the mundane and offers the sensational. Its ruins, both physical and human, are unequalled and consequently worth reading about.

The sensationalism of LeDuff's report and those of other writers and photographers can serve as a needed wakeup call to a numb citizenry indifferent to supposedly impending disaster. Yet unfortunately LeDuff fails to offer any useful analysis that might forestall what he perceives as the coming crash. The reader is awakened but left staring in the dark because the

author has not turned on any lights. LeDuff aims occasional jabs at Wall Street, auto company executives, and corrupt politicians. Thus he rounds up the usual suspects, the favorite cardboard villains of people too lazy to delve deeper. But he offers no serious suggestions about how to remedy the mess nor charts any possible paths that might lead to change. LeDuff's Detroit seems to be the forerunner of future doom with only a few stout-hearted firefighters delaying the inevitable apocalypse.

What Detroit and the midwestern Rust Belt needs are fewer laments and more creative thought aimed at improvement. Obsessed with the loss of supposedly high-paying manufacturing jobs, too few midwestern commentators appear willing to face the reality of change and consider optimistically how to adapt. Cotton is no longer king in the South, and Studebaker no longer reigns in South Bend. The South seems to have moved on, but many midwesterners remained shell shocked by change, failing to realize that time has never stood still and economic conditions are ever shifting. Symbolic is Detroit's Packard factory. Packard ceased production in 1956, yet LeDuff repeatedly drives by the surviving ruins of the auto plant. Perhaps after fifty-eight years it is time to realize that Packard is history; it is time to level the plant and shift some of the energy expended on lamentations to the needed re-creation of a region.

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David Giffels, *The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt*. New York: Scribner, 2014. 256 pp. \$15.00, paper.

In this fun, breezy collection, writer David Giffels shares a lifetime of experiences from Akron, Ohio, while simultaneously coming to terms with his own willingness to stay in a piece of the Midwest far removed from its heyday. For Giffels, Akron is a deindustrialized city of abandoned tire factories and storefronts yet also a place of endless fascination and a blue collar aesthetic appealing to his Gen X sensibilities. His Akron is a city where the greatest claim to fame has become a growing list of celebrities from there: LeBron James, Chrissie Hynde, and the band Devo, to name a few. Through a series of related essays, divided into four parts, *The Hard Way on Purpose* teases meaning out Akron's decline as experienced by Giffels between the