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*The Hard Way on Purpose: Essays and Dispatches from the Rust Belt* by David Giffels (review)

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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

1970s and the early 2010s. True to the title, the book highlights the almost masochistic way Giffels remains loyal to a community whose glory days he never experienced firsthand. From a sense of commitment to the consistently disappointing Cleveland Cavaliers and Browns to the modern fascination with photographing abandoned buildings—also known as “ruin porn”—to a music scene attempting to find its footing after having exported the “Akron Sound,” Giffels describes his appreciation for Akron in spite of itself. At the same time, Giffels describes a powerful sense of possession that boils down to a tongue-in-cheek response to the all-too-common questions about why he stayed. His response: “All my stuff is here” (226).

Giffels’s stuff is not merely his personal possessions but the detritus of Akron’s decline: abandoned factories, vacant storefronts, once glamorous hotels now occupied by transients, a sluggish canal smelling of sewage, and a music venue named the Bank after the building’s original purpose. His knowledge and appreciation of these locales are undoubtedly personal. The Bank, for example, dovetailed with the importance of music to Giffels’s identity, a nostalgia for which drove him to visit the structure years later, after it had again been abandoned, and was being razed for the construction of a minor league ballpark. Fittingly for a city actively losing population, these aspects of the landscape often play a larger role in his essays than all but a few people. While Giffels has a clear affinity for Akron’s blue-collar heyday, the folks sporting those collars make very few appearances in the book. For Giffels, Akron is virtually defined by its exodus of people and those individuals worthy of mention here tend to be the strange characters who stuck around. Giffels tries to make bowling shirts and records found at thrift stores stand in for the workers who left but one cannot help but see the abandoned buildings, shadows of their former selves, standing in place of those blue-collar workers who surely continue to exist.

If a criticism can be applied to this book, it is that Giffels’s own luck and privilege—the college educated son of an engineer who was able to find long term employment with the *Akron Beacon Journal* before transiting to an assistant professorship in the University of Akron English Department just as print news media imploded—receives little reflection. These opportunities certainly allowed him to develop this love of a hard to love place, to become possessive about buildings possessed by no one. Without a doubt Giffels took the hard way on purpose, but one has to wonder how those taking the harder way might respond; what of those for whom an abandoned factory was not a hauntingly beautiful place to explore but rather the very real representation of lost wages, security, and sense of place?

While *The Hard Way on Purpose* collects the observations of a single individual, Giffels's meditations on the Midwest have remarkable reach when he turns to his stints as a newspaper reporter during the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. As politicians predicted both elections could turn on the results from Ohio, the media looked for simplistic evidence from a monolithic entity. Giffels, however, traveled the state and found many Ohios: the rust belt he calls home, Amish farming communities, a corner of Appalachia, small towns, and the vastly different cities of Athens, Columbus, and Cincinnati. In Cincinnati, he juxtaposes a conservative Catholic fair with a three-day punk rock festival, noting that attendees of both were applying similar logic to arrive at vastly different political decisions. The punks, in turn, sparked remarkable observations on a code and sense of devotion they unknowingly share with the Amish. Giffels's Ohio is complicated and varied in ways that make the Midwest unique, yet, at the same time, the nation's Ohio is average enough to divine the country's political future.

For scholars of the region, Giffels does a service by offering a counterpoint to the trope of rural nostalgia. By calling attention to the urban, industrial Midwest, Giffels reminds us that this vast region is much more than the patchwork of farmland derisively known as flyover country. By highlighting his own deep appreciation for Akron and its once thriving blue-collar middle class, he also shows us that midwestern nostalgia is by no means limited to the seemingly lost days of the family farm and Main Street. Like the strange comparison between punks and the Amish, Giffels's wistfulness for rust belt Akron is not all that different from nostalgia for a rural heartland, albeit grittier and without the gloss of a lost Eden.

Fittingly for this new journal, *The Hard Way on Purpose* should help us evaluate how we define the Midwest and how we justify its importance. As Giffels shows, the Midwest is hardly homogenous yet, in the rust belt especially, supports a widespread ethic of trial by adversity that pervades the lives of its residents. For Giffels, admiration and awareness of these qualities make the Midwest distinct from those regions quick to dismiss them. The question remains, however, should we define the Midwest through these overlapping lenses of nostalgia and emotional attachment?

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