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Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City by Gordon Young
(review)

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stood or ignored, and therefore ripe for new definitions. With *The Rusted City*, Rochelle Hurt has ramped up the production of a language for the place that made her.

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Gordon Young, *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 288 pp. \$29.95.

This book opens with Gordon Young sleeping on the floor of a vacant home in the Carriage Town neighborhood of Flint, Michigan—one of America's most depressed cities. *Time* magazine declared the city the country's most dangerous in 2007, so Young slept with his "security blanket"—an aluminum baseball bat. Made famous by Michael Moore's 1989 film *Roger & Me*, Flint has lost more than seventy thousand auto jobs since 1968. Its population is half of what it once was.

A hometown boy, though long exiled to San Francisco, Young is careful to cultivate his street cred from the get-go. Young, a journalist, now runs a popular blog called "Flint Expatriates," which is his way of "thinking out loud about Flint" (30). Fifteen years after leaving Flint, he still felt that he owed his hometown and wanted to give something tangible back. The book is organized around his on-again, off-again efforts to buy and fix up one of the cities many neglected properties. One of the joys of reading *Teardown* is to accompany Young as he squirms over his urban homesteading idea. Did it make financial sense? Would his partner understand? How would his actions look to others? Would it make any difference? He did not want to become another underfinanced absentee landlord—or part of the problem.

When I first started reading *Teardown*, I wondered about its politics. Would Young be another urban explorer wanting to cash in on other people's misery? Was it going to be more "ruin porn"? Early on, he reassures us that he is not some "minor-league George Orwell" intent on slumming it with the marginal for a few days. To his credit, he never aestheticizes rubble into ruin. The book is all about the people who live amidst this ruination. Young is particularly drawn to those who are defiantly trying to dam the floodwaters of decline. "They were all tough people fighting for Flint in their own ways," he writes (240).

Young grew up in Flint at the tail end of the postwar boom. Going back after so many years away led him to revisit his own childhood memories and interpret his hometown anew. He writes, “I caught the end of an era when shop rats could drive new Buicks, buy a vacation cabin up north, and send their kids to college. The utter despair that would grip the city in the nineties was looming, but there was still hope that things could be put right” (51). At some point, he began to see his hometown as a “center of authenticity—my authenticity” (34). This inner journey will appeal to readers who are exiles from other hard pressed industrial towns. It certainly spoke to me, and my conflicted relationship to my own hometown on the North Shore of Lake Superior. One does not have to be from Flint to appreciate this book.

As a freelance journalist working for major media outlets, Young gains access to ordinary people’s homes as well as the corridors of city power (such as they are). Ordinary people are clearly making a difference, one house or one block at a time. He also accompanied successful mayoral candidate Dayne Walling, a Rhodes scholar, as well as Dan Kildee, a prominent urban planner and politician. Young engages with the politics of decline throughout this book, including Kildee’s controversial “shrinking-city concept.” In short, Kildee believes that deindustrializing cities have to physically shrink, buying back abandoned homes to demolish them. Many a house in Flint lay empty and decaying. In fact, there were three thousand abandoned homes and 3,500 empty lots at the time. According to Young, “Every ounce of value was being drained out of the city’s abandoned houses as they crumbled into the ground, but none of the profit was going back into the community” (89).

The wider politics of urban decline are thus an integral part of the journey, giving the book a critical edge. Channeling his inner Michael Moore, another “Flintoid,” Young writes: “What the largest corporation in the world had done to my city was morally reprehensible. It was a crime against humanity.” (232) Sadly, Flint is not alone in its misery.

If I may, I would like to end this review with an excerpt of a February 1998 interview that I conducted with Gabriel Solano, a veteran of three General Motors plant closings, and a resident of southeast Detroit. Reading about the defiant residents of Flint, who are the heart and soul of *Tear-down*, reminded me of him. He died before his time, but Gabriel’s defiant voice continues to ring in my ears:

To watch the people go to work, to watch my dad get up . . . it was mesmerizing because this was what America was about. This is what we all worked for: to make the corporation their money, so that we could get on with our lives. People tended to their houses. Everyone owned a vehicle. Everyone was a part of the community. Community was home. And it was wholesome. Church was a necessity. You had to belong to a church in order to be a part of the community. And to see this wholesomeness was like, this is life. This is what we lived for. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed going to work. I enjoyed being with my coworkers, because this is what we lived for. . . . And as this was taken away, to see the abandoned houses, packing up, to see the storefronts closing, to see the devastation of the joblessness, because the small shops fed the big shops. It was a ripple effect. It was a domino effect. It was an effect that didn't hurt just me; it hurt the guy in the small shop, the guy in the smaller shop, because we all worked as one. And to see this community start actually going down the tubes and down the drain was devastating. It was devastating because this is what I called home. This is what I still call home. Because I never left. And now, to this day, it's starting to bud again, it's starting to rebuild.

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Rachel Louise Snyder, *What We've Lost Is Nothing*. New York: Scribner, 2014. 302 pp. \$25.00.

Ernest Hemingway reportedly said that Oak Park was a place of broad lawns and narrow minds. Since Hemingway's time, this suburb, whose eastern border looks across Austin Boulevard to Chicago's predominantly African American West Side, has continually worked to refute Hemingway's alleged remark with programs promoting integrated housing and community building under the auspices of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center. In her well crafted debut novel, *What We've Lost is Nothing*, Rachel Louise Snyder interrogates this commitment, thoughtfully examining the complexities that result when the ideal of a multicultural community clashes with the realities of early twentieth century life.