

Conover On Life and People in Colorado's San Luis Valley

Cheap Land Colorado: Off-Gridders at America's Edge

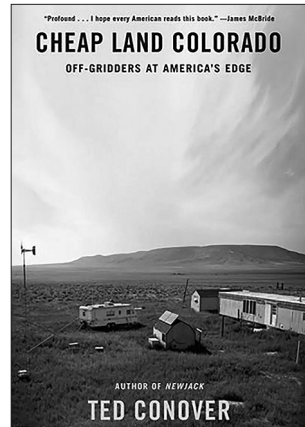
by Ted Conover. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022. Hardcover, 283 pages. USD\$30.

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Literary journalism possesses, at its core, powerful potential for telling the most complex and challenging stories of a culture. Perhaps more than any other form, it has the capacity to untangle and explore the nuances of huge subjects usually only truly tackled in essays or academic papers. At its best, it can be used to take on issues that are both beyond and within the daily headlines that make the world spin faster and faster each year.

Throughout his career, Ted Conover has delved into many of these subjects with his immersive reporting. *Coyotes: A Journey across Borders with America's Mexican Migrants* (1987) addressed difficult questions about what leads to the never-ending tensions over immigration in the United States. *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (2000) explored the uncomfortable line separating the punishers and the punished in the justice system. *The Routes of Man: How Roads Are Changing the World and the Way We Live Today* (2010) got at the heart of structural factors that lead to varying levels of interconnectedness among cultures across the globe. These are big and often amorphous subjects, but good storytelling can make them concrete and real. When that happens successfully, a reader often thinks only of the narrative story right away; the writer doesn't need to hit him square in the face with the Big Issue. It is only upon thoughtful reflection that the reader comes to the realization of what the story was *really* about.

The storyline of Conover's latest book, *Cheap Land Colorado: Off-Gridders at America's Edge*, is a simple one: It revolves around the diverse subculture of people living in the San Luis Valley in rural Colorado. Conover uses the immersive techniques of his previous works—he moves to the prairie, buys a trailer, eventually purchases his own plot of land, and lives among his subjects. He volunteers with a social services group, making house calls and checking on residents, offering firewood and other supplies. But the narrative is just a tool for telling the *real story*. This book is really about the cultural disconnect in the United States, one which leads many to feel their stories are not being heard, their lives not appreciated. It is about polarization, both its causes and its effects. It is about forces that lead people into isolation amid a



feeling they don't belong elsewhere. Daily journalists have been trying to do a better job of amplifying such lesser-heard voices since the 2016 presidential election, but their format often only allows them to scratch the surface. Conover uses the stories of people who live in this rural prairie land to show how reality can both affirm and complicate the stereotypes that often separate U.S. citizens. Furthermore, he treats the land as a character, showing how its beauty—and its offer of solitude—can offer a salve for the conflicts and tensions of modern society.

Through the stories of his neighbors, Conover shows the diverse, underlying reasons that people move to this nowhere land. Some want affordable land. The book's title came from one resident who, following the death of his wife, had wanted a fresh start and Googled “cheap land Colorado.” Some seek to be alone, a desire not infrequently connected to post-traumatic stress disorder. Others are driven by a desire to be self-reliant or want to stay out of the watchful eye of law enforcement. Drawing on his participant observation skills, Conover notes how the valley enticed him, much as it did his characters. It was partly because he was “coming under the spell of land” (136–37) that he decided to buy his own plot after initially keeping his trailer on the land of the Gruber family. Furthermore, he tells firsthand of the feeling that such escape could have on a person: “Last, and probably the biggest thing, was the way I felt out here on the prairie. I felt good. I felt free and alive” (142).

But it is the dizzying array of characters Conover finds who really tell these stories. Ania and Jurek speak of their distrust of government, especially the zoning office, and how capital letters are a code for enslavement, all part of a “Dog Latin” language that they claim dates back to the Roman Empire (89). Others show their disdain for masking mandates or criticize Black Lives Matter protesters, both opinions that lead Conover to respond with a competing perspective. Conover takes pains, however, to ensure the narrative does not become overly simplistic. He shows he is trying to get at sometimes unreconcilable complexities of humans in a polarized world. When heading to a potluck dinner at one resident's home, Conover recalls being asked about COVID-19: “So, do you think it could all be a hoax?” Expressing shock, Conover says he definitely knew it was real. The neighbor, Paul, acknowledges that he felt conflicted; Paul was, after all, wearing a mask and had masking tape six feet apart on his deck to encourage social distancing (224).

Another neighbor encouraged Conover to take all his money out of the bank due to a banking crisis he said was caused by the media. Others showed disdain for Black Lives Matter, responding with a “Don't all lives matter?” refrain and claiming that the protests involved Black people seeking “superiority,” but Conover contextualizes this exchange, noting that “He lived in a universe of poor people where he was competing for a small share of the available resources. Equality, he said, would be fine with him” (227). This exchange demonstrates how the narrative seeks to go beyond the binary, good-evil nature of standard journalistic frames. Conover is looking to get into the often-conflicting nuances of people, showing the ‘why’ behind the ‘what.’

The characters portrayed in *Cheap Land Colorado* also illustrate the universal nature of humankind and some of the commonalities that bind people across class, race, party, and geography. They show the pain of the opioid crisis, as well as the

struggle of veterans coming to the valley after the legalization of medical marijuana. Conover zooms in when finding out the Gruber family will have to put down Tank, an aging St. Bernard that had become sickly and aggressive. He writes of how Frank Gruber's face becomes wet with tears while getting ready to shoot the dog—the most humane way Gruber knew possible. The scenes here describe death and sadness in a way that shows the universality of emotional pain. However, the reality of the political divide is never far in the background. This book is, at times, Conover's most political one. The starkest example is when chapter five opens with statistics from *Harper's Index* indicating that “the number of the twenty least prosperous [U.S.] congressional districts that are represented by Republicans” is sixteen; and the number of the “twenty most prosperous districts that are represented by Democrats” is twenty. It also highlights how—since 2008—97 percent “of statewide elections in the Deep South” have been “won by Republicans” (138). While Conover's own views do come through, the political narrative mostly focuses on showing the extent of the divide in the United States.

One of the greatest challenges in this book is how to avoid “othering” the subjects, to find a way to treat them as humans and not as mere curiosities. A knee-jerk critic could try to argue that Conover was guilty of that here. The critic could say Conover found a collection of oddballs and extremists that violated the norms of the San Luis Valley's population. But, when viewing this cast of characters as a whole, that seems unlikely. This book stays true to its aim of exploring the country's cultural divides and seeking the reasons these people want to get away and live off the grid. It puts human faces on the increasing distrust of institutions, a phenomenon oft-explored by journalists and academics alike.

In the epilogue, Conover describes the commonalities he found: “Rather, they were the restless and the fugitive; the idle and the addicted; and the generally disaffected, the done-with-what-we-were-supposed-to-do crowd. People who, feeling chewed up and spit out, had turned away from and sometimes against institutions they'd been involved with all of their lives, whether companies or schools or the church. The prairie was their sanctuary and their place of exile” (253). *Cheap Land Colorado* is not a fast read; the storyline does not always suck the reader in with action or drama. The characters can be difficult to keep track of. Their story is not a simple narrative; it has no makings of a movie. But that is partly the point: Today's complex issues are not represented by simple stories. Conover takes on the role of docent here, trying to guide the reader through this place and lead to a better understanding of the differences that divide us.