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BOOKS

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Can it be that humans are pessimists by nature? How else to explain why some people seem fixated on the notion that yesterday was good, today is bad and tomorrow will be worse yet.

William Finnegan, the New Yorker magazine writer, wallows in this bleak notion in his "Cold New World." Beginning with an intriguing premise, he visits a neighborhood — usually one in economic, ethnic or cultural flux — and submerges himself for a time in the local culture. His particular focus is "hard-pressed people whom I liked enough to spend months with."

"American real life is rowdier, more disturbing, more charming, than anything dreamt of in your or my philosophy," he writes in an introduction. The four resulting stories are extensions of essays that appeared in New Yorker over the course of this decade. The writer trails a diverse series of kids:

Terry, a teenage drug dealer growing up in the gutted inner-city of New Haven, Conn., as crack cocaine swept the East Coast in the late 1980s; Lanee, a young mother in a rural East Texas town living with the aftermath of a massive federal drug raid; Juan, a youth in Washington's Yakima Valley trying to shed his Mexican peasant roots and find an identity in a sterile American suburb; Mindy, a white teenager torn between rival gangs of neo-Nazis and non-racist skinheads in a depressed, and depressing, suburb of Los Angeles.

The stories have compelling

Down on American Dream

and insightful moments. Mr. Finnegan's tale of the rise and fall of the longtime sheriff of Lanee's native San Augustine County, for example, is a fascinating illustration of the almost mystical power of rural southern sheriffs.

Unfortunately, Mr. Finnegan is not content to be a teller of interesting tales. He tries to stretch his unrelated stories into a sweeping work of sociology and stumbles

COLD NEW WORLD: GROWING UP IN A HARDER COUNTRY
By William Finnegan
Random House, \$26.395 pages

badly.

Mr. Finnegan concludes that his four stories illustrate a pervasive "downward mobility" in American society, as the United States "deindustrializes" and the children of the Baby Boom face the prospect of falling into poverty. Class lines, Mr. Finnegan says, are hardening and America is becoming a frightening and "hard" place in which to grow up. "Now, in the postindustrial world, this two-hundred year rise [in the standard of living] appears to have slowed greatly, if not stopped altogether," he writes. "Most workers are losing ground."

Never mind, of course, that the U.S. economy is booming, home

sales — even among the post-Baby Boom youth — are at levels not seen since the 1960s, and that industry accounts for as much of the U.S. gross domestic product as it did in the 1950s.

Mr. Finnegan seems to assume that the troubled teenagers in the dead-end towns he visited represent the future of the entire nation. In the end, the book suggests more about Mr. Finnegan's frame of mind than anything to do with the central players in his stories. Indeed, most of the kids he writes about are optimists, believing that they can move up and out of their difficult circumstances.

But Mr. Finnegan sees their optimism and desire to succeed as pathetic, as part of "that Depression cliché, the American Dream." Again and again, he shows himself not an insightful economic and social critic so much as someone who simply doesn't like popular culture and isn't afraid to beat his readers over the head with his prejudices.

He attacks "liberal consumerism" and writes sneeringly of the "cheesy ironies of David Letterman and Seinfeld." In all four stories, a television blaring unnoticed in the background becomes a symbol of decadence and rot.

Modern restaurant chains are used as another metaphor for decay. Mr. Finnegan mentions McDonald's with a detectable shiv-

er of disgust and at one point offers to take Mindy, a former neo-Nazi gang member, and a friend to dinner anywhere of their choosing: "The fanciest place they knew in the Antelope Valley turned out to be a Red Lobster franchise ... we ordered out Maine Lobster and Louisiana catfish," while the girls talked about their gang-infested lives.

Mr. Finnegan's condescension takes on an unsettling edge dealing with his black subjects: Terry and his New Haven neighborhood, and Lanee and her kin in the historically black township of Greertown. The writer spares no effort to proclaim himself sympathetic with minority culture but is unambiguously judgmental about the black families he interviews — looking askance at their lifestyles, homes, clothes, tastes in entertainment and style of child rearing, being condescending about their dreams.

Had Mr. Finnegan been content to let his essays simply be the interesting stories of people ignored by the mainstream media, he could have had a better book. Lanee, quite inadvertently, provides a fitting epitaph for the book as it has turned out: "People always like to think the worst thing," she tells the writer. "They believe that makes life more interesting."

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