

Dark Beauty: Photographs of New Mexico

Jack Parsons

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Santa Fe artists are fond of pointing out that the sky in New Mexico is the landscape. Whether a startling blue backdrop against the brown and pink shades of stucco facades or a swirling rage of storm clouds cleaved by blinding bolts of lightening, the sky dominates everything. It dwarfs the rugged mountains and it curbs the endless desert on the distant horizon. Or, to adapt Willa Cather's description of Nebraska, there is nothing but sky; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.

In his latest coffee table collection, *Dark Beauty: Photographs of New Mexico*, photographer Jack Parsons captures all of these elements as well as the minutia that are New Mexico. His land- and sky scapes show a beauty usually only understood by those who have lived there for generations; photographs of towns, people, trucks, and horses blend the artistic and anthropological. The result is a magical mosaic of the Land of Enchantment.

Whereas Parsons' previous photography collections, like *Low 'n Slow: Low Riding in New Mexico* and *Santa Fe Houses*, focused on relatively narrowly defined subjects, *Dark Beauty* swoops from the majestic to the personal and then back again. Most photographs are placed off-center on the page, surrounded by uninterrupted broad margins. Parsons' audience encounters his visions as he saw them—not all at once, but as individual scenes.

There are no captions or page numbers to interrupt the experience of viewing *Dark Beauty*. Some photos, like the crimson sky saturating the snow-covered Sangre de Cristo Mountains in a blood-red wash, speak for themselves. But others, like the dark, shadow-filled eyes of Teresa Archuleta Sagel's face and her *Pieta* expression, beg for context. For readers who need to know more, Parsons' thumbnail index in the back of the book provides who, where, and when.

Between the grand vistas and religious iconography of New Mexico, Parsons' photographs reveal a gentle sense of humor. Not only is he filled with respect and love for his subject, he also laughs with it. A landscape, for example, focuses on Paul's Bar. The sky above is divided by a brilliant rainbow, lit underneath as if sheltering the adobe dive below from the storm.

Despite his subject's mystique, what makes Parsons' work so wonderful isn't the land. It's the photographer's skill. New Mexico is difficult to photograph. The macro is overwhelming. The golden sunlight blinds all but the keenest observers to the minute details. And the vast distances and deep shadows discourage casual exploration by all but the most intrepid adventurers. But in *Dark Beauty*, Parsons captures for all of us the material out of which countries are made.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (Winter 2012)

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