ForeWord Reviews

If I Was a Highway
Michael Ventura
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The call of the road might be the most iconic and enduring American image. Authors from de Tocqueville to Steinbeck to Kerouac, motion pictures (who of a certain age could forget John Belushi's battle cry, "Road Trip!" in *Animal House?*), and television have all searched for what America is and who Americans are, as writers and their fictional characters bound from one part of the country to another. Michael Ventura's compilation of essays, which he calls letters, does the road genre proud.

The author has written more than a thousand articles and eight books, including *Cassavetes Directs* and *The Death of Frank Sinatra*; this work includes mostly his finest *Letters at 3A.M.* columns that appeared in *The Austin Chronicle*. The entries brim with wonderful stories of colorful people and the sometimes beautiful, sometimes harsh land they call home. Ventura, now in his mid-sixties, has owned one car in his life, a 1969 Chevy Malibu, on which he logged an astounding 750,000 miles in search of the country and himself. The essays were mostly written during the 1990s and 2000s but cover the author's entire life, from his childhood in New York to his current home in Lubbock, Texas, by way of Los Angeles.

The essays range from the funny to the poignant. One describes a bumper sticker, "SORRY WE MISSED CHURCH, WE WERE BUSY LEARNING WITCHCRAFT AND BECOMING LESBIANS," and how it riled the sensibilities of the good folk of Lubbock. Another entry praises Lubbock for becoming a more tolerant city as its economy and culture changed. Possibly the most moving contribution, "Across the Great Divide," describes how the author faced his sixtieth birthday with the realization that "the rest of your life is about saying goodbye," and how he thought that if "Death approaches with something like a smile," live fiercely, so you could "smile back."

Other notable entries tell about Cabeza De Vaca, the conquistador who came to wipe out the Native American population but was humanized by his interactions, and the memorable early TV series, *Route 66*, which brought tales of the road into American homes.

The essays are complemented by Butch Hancock's stark black-and-white photographs. (The book's title is taken from a Hancock song.) Ventura's simple but profound writings include many gems that will be enjoyed by all readers for whom the call of the road still resonates.

Karl Helicher