



## Redneck Riviera

**James Hooker**

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*Recounting the stages of a couple's cross-country move, Redneck Riviera is an amiable, humor-filled novel.*

In James Hooker's reflective novel *Redneck Riviera*, a couple flees Silicon Valley for North Carolina's coast.

In 2002, the unnamed narrator's corporation reorganizes after an acquisition. He resigns to avoid being laid off. With savings and severance pay as a buffer, he and his chirpy girlfriend pack their car, pets and all, to move to Treasure Island, North Carolina, beguiled by a brochure with palm-lined photographs.

As they try to acclimate to their new environment, the fortysomething Californians meet locals who puzzle and amuse them. And whether the narrator is commenting on joining in on a redneck card game, fishing, or being heckled for cycling in his "molto sportivo" spandex suit, his observations about his surroundings remain consistent in tone, combining strong comic timing with self-awareness. He and his girlfriend seem destined to remain outsiders, though, even as they prove curious and good-natured about the changes they face. Still, there are few real problems in their new lives.

Recounting the stages of the couple's move—buying an ideal home through a saucy realtor; the girlfriend's efficient planning—this is an amiable story with touches of cleverness and humor. There are colorful detours to cover Treasure Island's past, including information about a pirate ship in the 1700s, the island's importance to the Confederacy, and the intrusions of 1930s Hollywood revelers. The couple themselves are made a part of this panoramic island history.

However, facile humor detracts from the book's Southern community portrait, including observations of even minor differences between California and the South. The islanders have a stereotypical habit of treating all strangers with suspicion and calling them "Yankees"; they sprinkle Civil War references into their everyday exchanges. They are typecast by the narrator as well, as with jabs about their limited gene pool.

As the book continues, the narrator settles into his environment, acting as somewhat of a cultural anthropologist. There are discussion of politics, religion, hurricanes, and relationships too. Through him, the island setting is established via contrasting observations, as of the wealthy beachfront development projects that are juxtaposed to the island's less elegant outposts; these sensibilities combine with mythical lore to create a distinct sense of place. The narrator comments on local dialects as well, troubling what it means to be from "round here." The story's return to one of its 1930s characters is jarring, though.

In the whimsical novel *Redneck Riviera*, jaunty transplants from the West Coast observe the Southern characters whom they now live among.

KAREN RIGBY (February 19, 2024)

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