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Someplace Like America: Tales From the New Great Depression

Dale Maharidge
Michael S. Williamson, photographer
University of California Press (June 2011)
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Thirty million people hungry, one in five children experiencing daily hunger, and ninety million living below the poverty line. Thousands living in fringe tent cities in a "Tarp Nation." "This is not Mumbai, India," according to Dale Maharidge; this is America in 2010. Maharidge and photographer Michael Williamson received a Pulitzer Prize for their book *And Their Children After Them*. With their sixth collaboration, *Someplace Like America: Tales From the New Great Depression*, they return to the subjects and settings from their first book, *Journey to Nowhere*. This is grassroots social journalism at its most revealing.

Maharidge and Williamson expose the "invisible" Americans, isolated and marginalized by poverty, "finding all the secret places, hidden in plain sight." One father, living with his family in a campground outside Houston (a laid-off miner who retrained as a welder only to be laid off again), would never think of collecting a welfare check. A homeless couple living in a tented shanty outside Las Vegas work full time at casinos trying to save $1,200 for a trailer they can call home. These "new-timers," the newly homeless but not always jobless, are often traveling the same routes as the hobos of the Great Depression. Most are neither mentally ill nor addicted to drugs or alcohol. Rather, Maharidge shows, they are hardworking Americans, dispossessed of living wages due to NAFTA-era outsourcing or abusive labor practices, plus bad luck—the reeling second-generation victims of deindustrialization and the resulting joblessness in places like Youngstown, Ohio, a geographic touchstone of the book.

An America ignored by mainstream media is spotlighted in Maharidge and Williamson's description of their brief but shocking residency at a Texas "work camp for the homeless" in the 1980s, and in a chapter on post-Katrina relief for homeless squatters in New Orleans. In another section, Maharidge examines the "police state" (characterized by 2,500 inmates living in outdoor tent-prisons) created under Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Phoenix, Arizona's Maricopa County. Maharidge's argument, "that millions of American workers are in fact in a Depression" rather than a "Great Recession," a term he calls misleading, might lack ethnic analysis (what about Asian-Americans?) and at times borders on polemic. But the sincerity with which Maharidge echoes President Roosevelt's notion, that the government should be responsible to all its citizens, moves beyond journalism's who, what, when, and where. This depth resonates during a multi-state search for a 1980s subject, Sam (then a recently unemployed husband and father of three), whose story haunted Maharidge for almost three decades.

While Maharidge's narrative style invites intimacy, Williamson's photographs peer through the shattered glass of human emotions captured during their thirty-year collaboration. In *Someplace Like America* they deliver another exceptionally well-crafted study of American poverty. The University of California Press design team also deserves high praise for the presentation of a gritty subject in a beautiful layout. The book's undeniable relevance to today's American experience and the humanity with which it is delivered may have these two "runners," who met in 1981 while covering a trailer park fire for the *Sacramento Bee,* back in the race for national literary recognition.
KAI WHITE (July / August 2011)

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