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West of Eden: A Life in 21st Century Los Angeles

Chuck Rosenthal
What Books Press (Oct 1, 2012)
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Rosenthal's latest book of magical journalism—a term for writing that is "informed by ideas that are impossible to believe and overdetermined by the conviction that those are the best kind"—explores contemporary Los Angeles and its neighborhoods with often irreverent wit. Recurrent themes include the illusory nature of Hollywood; life in Topanga Canyon; exchanges with his daughter, who in this work, has renamed herself Jesus; love for his partner, surrealist poet Diosa (Gail Wronsky); campus politics; and the ineptitude of students in a series of satirical essays on the Jesuit University of La-La Holy, which serve as interludes throughout the book; the peculiarities of celebrity; and longstanding friendships.

Novelist, memoirist, National Book Award nominee, and author of an earlier book of magical journalism (*Are We Not There Yet? Travels in Nepal, North India, and Bhutan*), Rosenthal is particularly gifted at creating a persona that is unabashedly hyperbolic. Encounters with cultural icons, actors, and poets become a sendup of eccentrics and narcissists. Ordinary activities, from waiting in line at Trader Joe's to dealing with a property line dispute, reveal him as both hapless bystander and clever social commentator. The best of these selections, including "My Chicken, Obsidian" and "Ask the Dust," layer domestic concerns with a heightened reality and emphasize the challenges of navigating vast yet simultaneously too-close-for-comfort environs.

Less effective moments draw humor from familiar academic complaints that are not exclusive to locale, including a false accusation by an entitled student, general cluelessness—rendered through circular conversations—and administrative cover-ups. Sexual candor and repeated parallels with biblical stories may also raise a few eyebrows. Still, there is little sense of ill intent, and the author is just as likely to skewer himself, often to strong effect.

West of Eden presents an inventive alternative to the limitations of "creative nonfiction." Recommended for fans of popular culture, Angelinos, and readers who are open to the idea of dispensing with concerns over objective versus subjective truth, this book is a model in brevity, exhibiting cheeky wisdom and unexpected tenderness in the midst of absurdity.

KAREN RIGBY (Winter 2013)

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