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Wisconsin Death Trip



Synopsis

First published in 1973, this remarkable book about life in a small turn-of-the-century Wisconsin town has become a cult classic. Lesy has collected and arranged photographs taken between 1890 and 1910 by a Black River Falls photographer, Charles Van Schaik.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In the spring of 2000, I was sitting in the admissions office at Hampshire College, waiting to be interviewed. With some time to kill, I browsed a bookshelf featuring the works of Hampshire professors. One of these books was Wisconsin Death Trip. It caught my attention thanks to the Static-X album of the same name (of which I was a big fan at the time...no longer, though), so I pulled it from the shelf to find that haunting cover photo staring at me with its dark, blurry eyes. It drew me in, in a way that was far from comfortable. It left me no choice. I had to see what was inside. As it turned out, I had a long wait for my interview, and I made it through most of the book. If it had been anything other than a sunny spring afternoon, I doubt the interview would have gone well at all. Suicide and murder, madness and despair, babies in coffins and grim stone-faced Lutherans. The images were haunting, and those conjured up by the simple matter-of-fact accounts even more so. This book haunted me. Fast forward a year and a half, and I'm a first-year student at Hampshire. I walk into the bookstore and what do I see but Wisconsin Death Trip. I'm short on cash, but I buy it. I haven't really got a choice. Just about everyone who comes into my room gets to look at it.

Fortunately, this is Hampshire College, so that probably helps my social life a bit. Four years later, the Death Trip still holds a prominent place on my shelf. Every so often I take it out and open it, and inevitably I end up reading it cover to cover. This book is powerful, haunting, and above all else important. Uncomfortable as it may be, this is American history. This is a tale of the price we pay for progress. These are the souls who were caught in the gears of the machine.

This is a true story. When I was around 11 years old (I'm 46 now), we got this book as a Christmas present from my quiet uncle, who was a doctor far away. I pored over this strange book in horror. I said, "Mother, I think something's wrong with Uncle James. Why would someone give a book like this to us?" About three years later, he gassed himself to death. From my child's eye view, it was a book overflowing with black and white pictures of long-dead children: propped in coffins, posed in their lying-outs amidst prickly flowers and poofy silk pillows. It was filled with photos of wasp-waisted women and descriptions of the brutality of a diphtheria death. I read about the "black membrane" of diphtheria growing over the backs of countless babies' throats--of parents made desperate by the wheezing (and then strangling) of hundreds of children. It was riveting, immediate, terrifying: history whipped into a frenzy. Honest to goodness, this was unspoken--but when I heard Uncle had killed himself, I wasn't surprised in the least. I know there must have been more to the book (as reviewers here attest)--I do recall reading a few newspaper articles about madness--but all I truly remember, too vividly to ever forget, is a dead girl then my age, slumping at a grotesque tilt in a coffin, her eyes waxy and lids half-closed, with vine-like lilies circling her. They'd propped her coffin up in order to photograph it, for goodness sake. If you were ten, wouldn't that be all you recalled? The book disappeared, and I didn't find it when my mother died. I'd dearly like to read it again. The Victorian-era obsession with children who'd gone to Jesus didn't make sense to my vaccinated, O.J.

"The pictures you're about to see are of people who were once actually alive." So begins historian Michael Lesy's masterpiece - a by turns touching and disturbing examination of life and death in a small Wisconsin town during the final 15 years of the nineteenth century. Lesy stumbled across a cache of 30,000 glass plate images made by a local town photographer named Charley Van Schaick and spools of microfilm from the local newspaper - and combined the most compelling of these images and newspaper excerpts to create a vivid examination of Victorian prairie life. Although there are numerous post-mortem memorial photographs to add morbid appeal to the book, the newspaper and insane asylum excerpts are what I find absolutely enthralling. If ever anyone tries to suggest to you that times were better "before", you might want to refer them to these

matter-of-fact tales of murder, suicide, insanity, and lethal pestilence. Death was a constant threat and entire families of 6 children could be wiped out by diphtheria in a matter of days. It's no wonder that so many were driven to suicide: the depth of despair that these people must have gone through is at times palpable. To give you an idea of the sort of macabre fascinations you can find in these olde newspapers, here are some excerpts: "The 60 year old wife of a farmer in Jackson, Washington County, killed herself by cutting her throat with a sheep shears" "Mrs. James Baty... died suddenly of a hemorrhage of the lungs. She leaves a husband, her family of 6 children having died of diphtheria last summer" "Mrs. John Larson... drowned her 3 children in Lake St. Croix during a fit of insanity... Mrs. Larson imagines that devils pursue her" And my personal favorite: "Mrs. Carter...

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