



West Of The West

Mark Arax

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Teddy Roosevelt once exclaimed, “When I am in California, I am not in the West. I am west of the West,” and in this book, Mark Arax spends four years travelling up and down the Golden State to explore its singular place in the world. This is California beyond the clichés. This is California as only a native son, deep in the dust, could draw it.

Compelling, lyrical, and ominous, his new collection finds a different drama rising out of each confounding landscape. “The Summer of the Death of Hilario Guzman” has been praised as a “stunningly intimate” portrait of one immigrant family from Oaxaca, through harrowing border crossings and brutal raisin harvests. Down the road in the “Home Front,” right-wing Christians and Jews form a strange pact that tries to silence debate on the War on Terror, and a conflicted father loses not one but two sons in Iraq. “The Last Okie in Lamont,” the inspiration for the town in the *Grapes of Wrath*, has but one Okie left, who tells Arax his life story as he drives to a funeral to bury one more Dust Bowl migrant. “The Highlands of Humboldt” is a journey to marijuana growing capital of the U.S., where the old hippies are battling the new hippies over “pollution pot” and the local bank collects a mountain of cash each day, much of it redolent of cannabis. Arax pieces together the murder-suicide at the heart of a rotisserie chicken empire in “The Legend of Zankou,” a story included in the *Best American Crime Reporting 2009*. And, in the end, he provides a moving epilogue to the murder of his own father, a crime in the California heartland finally solved after thirty years.

In the finest tradition of Joan Didion, Arax combines journalism, essay, and memoir to capture social upheaval as well as the sense of being rooted in a community. Piece by piece, the stories become a whole, a stunning panorama of California, and America, in a new century.



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