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Were We Right or Were We Right: Charles Bock's *Beautiful Children*

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Charles Bock's debut, *Beautiful Children*, tracks Las Vegas's lost youth with the informed sensibility of a native: Bock (as this [profile](#) notes) grew up behind the counters of his parents' Sin City pawn shops. Reviewers uniformly praise Bock's stylistic pyrotechnics, but some are unwilling to come all the way along for the book's wild ride.

In a review that made the cover of the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Liesl Schillinger reduces her review to one word: "bravo."

The *Times* also gave the book a "daily" review, in which Janet Maslin praises Bock's talent for the "bravura riff," but says that the book's "structure is so slack that it seems like a string of overlapping individual sketches."

(Maslin also takes an uncharacteristically skeptical tone throughout, as noted in *New York Magazine*.)

In the *Washington Post*, John Burdett also cites structural flaws, but "cannot think of another novelist who has dared to attack this most pressing and complex issue"—the dissolution of the family and its effect on kids—"so ferociously."

The *L.A. Times* reviews the novel along with Joe McGinniss Jr.'s also-Vegas *The Delivery Man*, and finds that "the core story Bock tells is rich and compelling" but that the novel is "bloated by a serpentine narrative voice."

And *Entertainment Weekly* somewhat perplexingly gives the novel a B, given that Tina Jordan says the story is "rendered beautifully, even heartbreakingly."

Here's PW's take:

A wide-ranging portrait of an almost mythically depraved Las Vegas, this sweeping debut takes in everything from the bland misery of suburban Nevada to the exploitative Vegas sex industry. At the nexus of this Dickensian universe is Newell Ewing, a hyperactive 12-year-old boy with a comic-book obsession. One Saturday night, Newell disappears after going out with his socially awkward, considerably older friend. Orbiting around that central mystery are a web of sufferers: Newell's distraught parents, clinging onto a fraught but tender marriage; a growth-stunted comic book illustrator; a stripper who sacrifices bodily integrity for success; and a gang of street kids. Into their varying Vegas tableaux, Bock stuffs an overwhelming amount of evocative detail and brutally revealing dialogue (sometimes in the form of online chats). The story occasionally gets lost in amateur skin flicks, unmentionable body alterations and tattoos, and the greasy cruelty of adolescents, all of which are given unflinching and often deft closeups. The bleak, orgiastic final sequence, drawing together the disparate plot threads, feels contrived, but Bock's Vegas has hope, compassion and humor, and his set pieces are sharp and accomplished.

Who got it right? Whom do you agree with and why? Click the "talkback" tab and let us know what you think.

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