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## BOOK REVIEW

### The sordid world of Sin City's lost kids

'Beautiful Children' by Charles Bock and 'The Delivery Man' by Joe McGinniss Jr.

By Tod Goldberg  
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Live in Las Vegas long enough and you'll realize it's built on false hope. Certainly, the games of chance are a loser's folly, but so too are the master-planned excess of Summerlin, the cookie-cutter streets of Green Valley and Henderson. And in between the sprawl is the reason anyone knows about the place at all: the narrow casino canyon of Las Vegas Boulevard, which winds through glamour and glut until it stops at the sea of rugged humanity known as downtown. It's no small wonder that the city was founded by gangsters and that its current mayor is a former mob attorney. The entire city is the vig.

Yet for all of its potential, literature hasn't captured Vegas in a truly convincing fashion, with its unchecked decadence, sex as voyeuristic sport and, perhaps more frighteningly, the idea that someone, anyone, actually lives in a place where what happens there stays there. All of which makes the debut novels by Charles Bock and Joe McGinniss Jr. so filled with promise.

In "Beautiful Children," Bock attempts not only to take on the very real issue of the runaways peopling the streets of Las Vegas, but also tries to place these children in a larger cultural context. Bock uses both Columbine and Sept. 11 as illustrative background noise, as if to say the reasons children run away don't have to be the clichés of sexual, chemical, physical or psychological abuse (although certainly, the runaways depicted here suffer from those too) but that the world created for them has gone topsy-turvy and that it only makes sense they would try to escape.

Take, for instance, the case of 12-year-old Newell Ewing -- son of casino executive Lincoln and his pinup-looking wife, Lorraine -- who seems to be suffering from an existential angst befitting middle age. After his older, troubled friend Kenny touches him inappropriately during what turns out to be Newell's last good night before disappearing, he dips into thoughts that feel far more authorial than character-driven: "Whatever response Newell was expecting, it was not coming. The little lesson at the end of the mistake. The attempt to right the ship and get back on course. No assurances from Kenny. No apologies. No arguments. Just Kenny, seething in his seat, not even trying anymore. It was another shattered border between them, one whose dissolution shocked Newell. . . . If he felt bad about anything, it was the hitch that marred his question. Helpless was the last thing Newell was."

Bock does an admirable job parsing out a lost world of strippers, runaways and amateur pornographers, along with the casual brutality that accompanies it, and captures the hallucinogenic setting like a fever dream, but he is less effective when attempting to figure out the cause of Newell's disappearance. Lorraine and Lincoln come off wooden, despite dozens of

pages of interior narrative concerning them and their various foibles (mostly sexual, as seems to be the case with all the characters in Bock's world).

### **Passivity, above all**

His parents' worst crime is that they didn't love each other enough prior to Newell's disappearance and are too passive to interact after the boy is gone. Is that enough to cause a child to leave? Perhaps, although it doesn't compare to the stories the other runaways tell. Passivity, though, infects most of Bock's characters (even Ponyboy, a violent would-be porn pimp, tends just to let things happen without any exertion at all) to the point that one wonders why, in a place of such sensory overload, not even a local boy like Newell can see the light.

The more damaging issue is one of simple craft. "Beautiful Children" is bloated by a serpentine narrative voice that flashes back, forward and around time. Point of view shifts with disorienting speed; a chat-room conversation involving a secondary character and his friends freezes the narrative here; a stripper named Cheri imagines a movie of her life, replete with the screenplay, on the page there. The core story Bock tells is rich and compelling -- the disappearance of Newell is known from Page 1 and the novel unwinds on the night in question -- and his evocation of Las Vegas is cunning and true, enough to make one wonder what "Beautiful Children" might have been like had the author not tried all his tricks at once.

### **More noir**

"The Delivery Man" hews closer to the noir tradition. McGinniss (the son of the "Fatal Vision" author) aims for a deep cut into the sordid world of teenage prostitutes in Las Vegas through the eyes of Chase, a 25-year-old artist who, despite glimmering promise, couldn't hack NYU. He's moved home to Vegas and is teaching high school. When that doesn't work out, he joins his childhood friends -- the morally inert casino scion Bailey and the troubled hooker/graduate student Michele -- who enlist him to drive the coterie of prostitutes they're running.

Factor in his goofy pal Hunter, a pirate at Treasure Island with a taste for teenage girls, a fiancée getting her MBA at Stanford and the looming ghost of his sister Carly and it becomes clear that this Las Vegas is no playground -- it's a circle of hell.

It's a slick read. McGinniss doesn't spend much time developing emotional relevance for any of his characters -- there's no good or bad here, just levels of horrific degradation. Chase manages to rise above the cast by virtue of his ability to see how awful things actually are -- there is exhilaration found in watching the world come to a slow boil. The book's beginning actually takes place at the action's close, with Chase stumbling through a hotel suite, his face disfigured. The onus is on the author to make the ride getting here believable enough.

And that's where things tend to fall apart for "The Delivery Man." If the essence of drama is that man cannot walk away from the consequences of his actions, one must constantly suspend disbelief while Chase's world spirals into abject danger when he could find safety and security in fiancée Julia just a short Southwest flight away.

Unlike Bock, who so exquisitely details his physical world, McGinniss takes a slipshod approach, substituting names of streets and highways in an attempt to paint a more visceral landscape. There's nothing that says you can only write about places you know, but when dealing with a world so many know at least passably well, such missteps strike an arrow through the author's authority.

What "Beautiful Children" and "The Delivery Man" share -- apart from the obvious thematic portrayal of Las Vegas as "Caligula" -- is, surprisingly, hope. Both Bock and McGinniss flash across the page with firm style, compelling voices and the desire to go deeper than their subject

matter. Although neither of their novels has defined literary Las Vegas, both carry the imprint of burgeoning talent, and that is always worth gambling on.

*Tod Goldberg is the author, most recently, of the short-story collection "Simplify."*

**Beautiful Children**  
A Novel

**Charles Bock**

Random House: 432 pp., \$25

**The Delivery Man**  
A Novel

**Joe McGinniss Jr.**

Black Cat: 288 pp., \$14 paper

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