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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Characters Adrift on the Fast Track to Nowhere

By JANET MASLIN

Among the lost souls drifting through Charles Bock's avidly seedy Las Vegas novel, "Beautiful Children," there is a loner named Kenny. There are three things about Kenny that the reader needs to know.

First of all, he has an inner life that is embodied by the detritus in his car. "He saw segments of tangled ribbons from cassette tapes," Mr. Bock writes, as Kenny gazes around. "He saw loose magazine subscription cards and the hardened remains of deformed french fries." There are diner place mats, burger wrappers and the detached metal spine of a spiral notebook. Ominously, there are also a couple of shotgun casings buried in this mess.

Second: Kenny earns the playful nickname "Chester the Molester" from the 12-year-old Newell Ewing, a bratty, disaffected kid who devastates his parents when he chooses Kenny's company over theirs — and then fails to come home. "He's gonna take me out tonight and abuse me," Newell jokingly tells his mother just before he vanishes. "He told me so."

Third: Kenny has hidden talents. Along with the book's other principals he shares a love for all that is lurid, cartoonish and profane about popular culture, with comic books and pornography at the red-hot center of his enthusiasm. So Kenny has taken an image from one of his father's stash of hard-core magazines. He has focused on a woman's face. And he has carefully, fastidiously reproduced it as a pencil drawing.

Kenny has done this with such disproportionate skill and tenderness that the image, while impressive, is way out of whack with its squalid subject matter. Mr. Bock has written his ambitious debut novel in much the same way.

"Beautiful Children" purports to see something new in the woozy, wasted lives of its principals, most of whom are rootless young drifters on a fast track to nowhere. It eagerly amplifies even the most negligible things they do. Using sleaze as his trustiest resource Mr. Bock establishes a workaday honky-tonk world that is only marginally different from the stereotypical Las Vegas fantasyland.

BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN

By Charles Bock

417 pages. Random House. \$25.

With a slight shift of emphasis, for instance, he can describe Newell's mother, Lorraine, and stress something other than her gaudy days as a showgirl. Instead, in what passes for authenticity and grit (Mr. Bock grew up in the city's equivalent of a real world), he can explain what happened after Lorraine quit dancing, dropped into domesticity, lost her son and began compulsively taking in stray cats.

"Revealed in her eyes," the book says, with one of its not infrequent, not subversive dashes of soap opera, "a pain that would not end."

Mr. Bock puts most of his emphasis where the smart money goes: on tattoos, piercings, comics, stripping, drugs, nonconsensual sex and various shocking states of delirium. ("She was pretty baked, her thoughts vomiting forth, shooting straight from her brain into her mouth.") He appears to have done considerable research in order to get these details right.

So his book's most compelling characters include Cheri Blossom, a stripper whose stage act is admirably described. ("Remaining perfectly still while completely naked and surrounded by a roomful of horny guys, this took a certain amount of poise.") This book is intrigued, in seemingly equal measure, that Cheri peels off a girl's Catholic school uniform for the delectation of her customers — and that she imagines she is being guided toward moral redemption by a nun.

Cheri's boyfriend, who goes by the name of Ponyboy and has so many studs in his face that they resemble pimples (though what he'd really like for personal decoration is a triple-A battery stuck through his nose), is another strongly envisioned figure — with another kind of conventional characterization hidden beneath his hipster trappings. Ponyboy is devoted to Cheri, but he can't resist the opportunity to exploit her. When he winds up behaving badly even by the decadent standards that prevail here, Ponyboy seems guided more by the book's desperate need for dramatic momentum than by any human failing.

And "Beautiful Children" has no real built-in trajectory. Beyond knowing that his characters are en route to trouble, Mr. Bock has few clear destinations in mind for any of them. This book's structure is so slack that it seems like a string of overlapping individual sketches, some much better than others. At his most revealing Mr. Bock creates a bravura riff for a drifter named Lestat, after Anne Rice's vampire. (One place he has drifted haplessly is to New Orleans, in vain search of his favorite author.)

Late in the book Lestat gets lost in the midst of a desert concert, an evocatively described panorama with "fans bouncing up and down like human bingo balls in a popper" and mass anxiety in the air. After he wanders through both this literal landscape and his own interior, he becomes Mr. Bock's most eloquent stand-in.

"Lestat wanted to be someplace safe and warm where he could write down everything he

had ever seen,” the book says. “He wanted to write a book that would change the world.”

With “Beautiful Children” Mr. Bock expresses that same desire. He even makes fun of it: one character here is a famous, jaded comic-book illustrator, Bing Beiderbixxe, whose cheesy ideas include a variation on the “Beautiful Children” plot.

But in the end Mr. Bock knows more about easy anomie than hard-won resolution. “Each and every one of us moves toward fates we cannot possibly know,” he writes in conclusion. “Each of us struggles against the pain of the world, even as we are doomed to join it.” And each character in this covertly mundane novel winds up asking some version of Kenny’s ultimate and pointless question: “Just what am I supposed to do now?”

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