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Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

A young runaway descends into the hellacious lost world of modern America.

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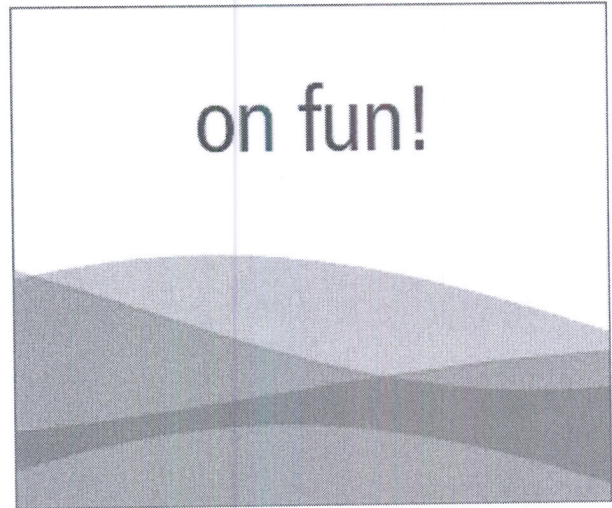
BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN

By Charles Bock

Random House. 417 pp. \$25

Las Vegas is the expression, in glitter and concrete, of America's brittle and mutating id. This is not the argument of Charles Bock's exceptional *Beautiful Children*, so much as the starting point from which he explores the survival strategies -- usually doomed -- of the citizen-mutants themselves. He proves an expert guide, being a native of the city with an encyclopedic knowledge of every perverted nook and narcissistic cranny. His ability to share a deep understanding of America's million or so lost street kids and their tormented parents gives the book a whiff of greatness.

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The story begins with 12-year-old Newell running away from his home in a suburb of Vegas. He is foul-mouthed, cynical, needy, cute, emotionally exhausted, an old-before-his-time product of the city, but he is not fleeing anything like sexual abuse, poverty or starvation. His mom and dad adore him, and, as his mother reflects, "They had tried to give Newell everything he had wanted. Where was the crime in that?" In other words, he is spoiled and given to tantrums. By implication, he decides to join the hordes of America's street kids because it is impossible to find a path to adulthood in a world that has no knowledge of such a thing. His parents are not bad but, as damaged goods themselves, have very little structure to their relationship beyond sex, and not much talent in relating to their child or each other.

The novel presents a cityscape inhabited by a sub-species of *homo urbanus*: young men and women who embody an obsession with sex so bizarre that sodomy is merely the platform from which they bungee jump into a moral void of alarming practices. Cheri Blossom had her nipples cut open so that she can use them as candle holders for her floor show; Bing Beiderbixxe is a bald undergrad nerd whose imagination works exclusively in the realm of pornography; Ponyboy is a late teen coiffeur-conscious deadbeat who improbably drops toothpaste drool on his backside. Kenny, a gay virgin whose childhood was spent touring pawnshops with his wacky gambling aunt, picks up our young hero in his dilapidated "FBI mobile," makes inept passes at the kid and, equally ineptly, offers to take him home, an opportunity that Newell half-heartedly rejects.

"What am I supposed to do," Kenny asks at the end of the book, not only on his own behalf but in the name of lost and confused humanity. "Just what am I supposed to do now?" All these characters stand alone in paranoid isolation, even when they are having sex with each other.

Beautiful Children is not an easy read, nor is it a polished work. Bock's moments of simple honesty are far more impressive than his poetic flights of fancy, which can seem gaudy and pretentious, and one wishes his editor had persuaded him to cut the manuscript by a third. The two-speed time structure, ingenious though it is, can be an irritating impediment to understanding who is doing what and when. Put simply, the book needs to be read at least twice before one can grasp its full scope -- a stiff requirement, coming from an author who is painfully aware of the limits of the modern attention span.

And yet this novel deserves to be read more than once because of the extraordinary importance of its subject matter and the sensitivity with which he treats it. As I considered Bock's work, Lawrence's opening to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, "Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically," rattled constantly through my brain.

Beautiful Children is also about the aftermath of war -- not merely Iraq, although that is mentioned -- but more important "the war of all against all," which seems to have been raging for at least a couple of generations. That war is, as Bock demonstrates, destroying our kids with the demonic ingenuity of modern drugs and technology, not to mention the demise of the family itself. In the no-man's-land of Bock's Vegas there remain only the survival strategies of the hopelessly inept young. I cannot think of another novelist who has dared to attack this most pressing and complex issue so ferociously.

--John Burdett is the author, most recently, of "Bangkok Haunts."

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