

A WORKING STIFF'S CRAWL

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Jon T. Coleman. *Here Lies Hugh Glass: A Mountain Man, a Bear, and the Rise of the American Nation.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2012. xii + 252 pp. Notes and index. \$28.00.

Credit Jon Coleman withchutzpah. As a biographer, he chose a figure “more Homer Simpson than Homeric,” a “loser,” a “historical wisp,” a “barnacle on a ship of fools,” and an “ordinary man with exemplary style.” Hugh Glass, you may recall, was the mountain man who earned fame for being half-eaten by a grizzly bear in 1823. Abandoned by his fellows, Glass crawled hundreds of miles to Fort Kiowa, and lived to tell the tale—or have others tell it for him, and retell it, again and again. As Coleman writes, “the dude abides.”

Like so many book titles, this one misleads. Perhaps ten percent of the book is about Hugh Glass the biographical person (whose entire documentary record consists of a single letter). I was more surprised at how little space Coleman devotes to bears, considering that his previous book made such a strong case for the importance of wild animals in U.S. history.¹ The last phrase in the title comes closest to Coleman’s two main subjects: the significance of the frontier in American culture, and literary nationalism in the era of humbuggery. Coleman’s touchstones are Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Nash Smith, and Richard Slotkin; and, from the more recent literature, Andie Tucher, Ann Fabian, Stephen Mihm, and Trish Loughran.²

Coleman ties together these two historiographical strands with his concept “environmental Americanism.” The way Coleman explains it, environmental Americanism was the middle-class ideology of literary nation-builders who espoused the proto-Turnerian idea that the Far West was the birthplace of American futurity and progress, the font of national exceptionalism, and the land where men became Americans: a “new race of men.” Coleman’s great contribution is to insist that these legendary men—hunters, trappers, Indian traders—were first and foremost working men. They were proletarians, crew members, contract laborers, wage slaves, apprentices, ex-slaves, runaways. In terms of class and race, they were unlikely candidates for national valorization. More to the point, these men didn’t own or profit from their valorized selves. They suffered on the job. The popular printed stories of ordinary folk

transforming into American folk heroes—through contact with Indians, bears, and other wild things—required bodies to be tested to naked extremes. On behalf of Eastern consumers, travel writers and semiprofessional regionalists romanticized and commodified this bodily damage and disfigurement. Writers abstracted the smashed-up frames of hunters and traders for the amusement and edification of genteel Americans who would have despised such unlettered, unruly, unwashed men in person. Even their disembodied invitation to the national stage was a mixed honor, because, in the context of imposture—an antebellum obsession—many literate Easterners distrusted the very stories they desired. In short, Coleman recasts mountain men's storied travails—starvation, frostbite, weapon malfunctions, boat accidents, Indian attacks, animal bites, maggoty wounds—as catastrophic workplace injuries sustained without worker's compensation. In Coleman's powerful words:

By targeting the weaker segments of the populace, the nationalists hoped to pull off the bait and switch of exceptionalism: they wanted their differences to signal their superiority. They hid the paleness of their colonial imitations beneath black-face, buckskins, or Indian garb and declared the resulting oxymoron a natural aristocrat. They stole from the fringes in order to strut for the metropole, and for the most part they pulled it off. The frontier became a wellspring of American identity. [pp. 209–10]

After the success of the "New Western History" of the 1980s and 1990s, it became commonplace to regard cowboys—icons of American rugged individualism—as proletarians on the prairie. But fur traders operating in the "multi-West"—Coleman's term for the multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, multinational, pre-American Far West, the subject of Anne Hyde's prize-winning *Empires, Nations, and Families* (2011)—have thus far mostly remained outside the narrative of American capitalism and the "market revolution." Coleman changes that. He also follows a series of Western environmental historians—notably Conevery Bolton Valenčius, Linda Nash, and Thomas Andrews—who have placed "the body" at the center of the story.³

Coleman's most original sources are notices of runaways published in St. Louis newspapers, which allow him to show the similarities in the way that slave owners and regional writers memorized and described the scars of workers' bodies. But most of his evidence comes from antebellum wordsmiths who will be familiar, at least in the gist, to Western historians—names such as Timothy Flint, George Yount, James Hall, and James Beckwourth. The great American author of the period, Herman Melville, makes an appearance. But some of the men who immortalized the crawl of Hugh Glass were, as Coleman points out, British travelers. Peter Pagnamenta's *Prairie Fever* (2012) has chronicled the astonishing number of British aristocrats and expatriates who went on safari in the American West in the nineteenth century. Of British-born

writers, George Frederick Augustus Ruxton is most important to Coleman's ironic story; he and other foreign nationals, in their hunt for literary material, become tools of environmental Americanism.

It is impossible in a review to replicate Coleman's omnivorous approach. He ruminates on many, many topics in passing (e.g., oral culture, vernacular and jargon, regional humor, humoral fluids and medical geography, cannibalism, the semantics of starvation, the metaphysics of species boundary crossing, Indian hating, interracial couplings, labor advertisements, and ursine biology). For large stretches of the book, one can see neither hide nor hair of Hugh Glass. Human females are even scarcer.

The book becomes more focused as it follows Glass into the twentieth century. Coleman discusses John G. Neihardt's *The Song of Hugh Glass* (1915) as regional modernism; Frederick Manfred's novel *Lord Grizzly* (1954) as a Freudian western; and the film *Man in the Wilderness* (1971) as the Vietnamization of Hugh Glass. With this rather slim evidence, Coleman argues that Glass figuratively crawled back from the dead and reclaimed "his" story, which was, in its original retellings by fellow fur traders, an anti-authoritarian tale of how to survive the mishaps and indignities of an inhospitable workplace environment. A story long indentured to environmental Americanism is now free again to satirize and demythologize American narratives of conquest and manifest destiny. "He was the working-class body that wouldn't go away" (p. 210); as exhumed by the loquacious Coleman, Hugh Glass silently gives us the middle finger.

Coleman's final chapter trails off with a weak discussion of Glass appearances (not many, but intriguing) in guidebooks of the contemporary survivalist movement and disaster-preparedness industry; and his conclusion contains an obligatory mention of pop culture analogues to Hugh Glass who, unlike him, have visual and digital media immediately at their disposal: Bethany Hamilton (the surfer who lost her arm to a shark—adapted into the film *Soul Surfer* [2011]); Aron Ralston (the hiker pinned to a canyon wall in Utah who amputated his arm with a pocketknife—adapted into *127 Hours* [2010]); and Timothy Treadwell (the amateur filmmaker eaten by the bears he loved—seen in Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* [2005] and Animal Planet's *Grizzly Man Diaries* [2008]).⁴

Coleman missed an even better comparison: James White, another Western working man, failed prospector, drifter, and ordinary loser with an extraordinary story. In September 1867, an emaciated, sunburned White emerged from the Colorado River at Callville, Nevada. He claimed to have floated down the Grand Canyon—the first to do so—on a crude raft made of cottonwood logs. Having lost a traveling companion to the rapids, he had lashed his body to the raft. James White lived another sixty years and repeated this tale many times, each time with slightly different details. Many others borrowed and

embellished his account, turning it into folklore. White's veracity became an issue after John Wesley Powell completed the first documented traverse of the canyon in 1869, becoming a national hero in the process. Virginia McConnell Simmons' *Drifting West* (2007) ably examines this history and shines a light on the legions of hapless single white men who, despite their economic failures, collectively transformed the Far West through acts of pluck and violence.

I strongly recommend *Here Lies Hugh Glass* to scholars of antebellum working-class masculinity, the frontier in American culture, and U.S. environmental literature. But be advised that Coleman's book is not the place for an in-depth analysis of fraudulence in antebellum print culture; for that, one can turn to Lara Langer Cohen's *The Fabrication of American Literature* (2012). Likewise, as a study of American frontier narratives and environmental literature in the early national period, it doesn't aspire to match the scope and rigor of Thomas Hallock's *Far from the Fallen Tree* (2003). Nor is it meant to be a definitive biography of a famous frontiersman like John Mack Faragher's *Daniel Boone* (1992); Michael Lofaro's *Daniel Boone* (2003); or Jared Orsi's new book on Zebulon Pike, *Citizen Explorer* (2013). History buffs who claim the fur-trade period and who enjoyed Eric Jay Dolin's sweeping *Fur, Fortune, and Empire* (2010) will probably be disappointed by Coleman, as indicated by an unhappy reviewer on Goodreads: "Coleman showed how much he knows regarding obscure subjects that are totally unrelated to the title character." I can see why a non-academic might feel bewildered or bamboozled after purchasing a book with such a ferocious title (and equally awesome cover image), for Coleman is a paradox of nonconformism: unstuffy yet highbrow, direct yet circumlocutory. His ultimate purpose is to celebrate an American loser—to "partner up with an outlaw"—rather than revalorize a nationalist hero.

As a revisionist history, Coleman's work invites comparison to William Benemann's *Men in Eden* (2012), which, in its own way—by examining same-sex desire—destabilizes the familiar man-story of the fur trade. But *Here Lies Hugh Glass* shares even more with Scott Reynolds Nelson's *Steel Drivin' Man* (2006) and Paul E. Johnson's *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* (2003). Nelson aimed to discover the true identity of John Henry, the working-class folk hero famous for dying on the job, and to follow his strange career in American culture. Johnson, like Coleman, brought labor history analysis to the short life of an antebellum proletarian who earned fame pushing his body to the limits. All three authors dealt with the problem of having scant sources about their subjects. Nelson combed the archives for biographical clues; Johnson plumbed the archives for cultural context. Of the three, Coleman's book is the least archival, the most speculative, and the most fun.

Johnson, who provided a dust-jacket blurb for *Here Lies Hugh Glass*, is an interesting counterpart: I can think of no other historian better at the art of concision and deliberate understatement. Coleman, by contrast, shoots from

the hip. He piles image upon image, metaphor upon metaphor, displaying equal parts virtuosity and indiscipline. Here's a typical paragraph:

The West bit and clawed, robbed and bewildered. It bloodied flux, stoked fevers, gnarled joints, and turned stomachs. Still, despite all its invasive power, the country inspired wonder as well as dread. Like all places, this location could swing for or against you. The wilderness emerged from the radical swings in the arcs of fortune. Nature vacillated between sickness and health, poverty and riches, famine and feast. [pp. 134–35]

At 200 pages, *Here Lies Hugh Glass* feels longwinded. It would be intolerably redundant if Coleman weren't so skilled at making the same point a dozen times in a dozen different stylish ways. As an 80- or 100-page essay (in the European sense of that word), this work might have been a tour de force. I'm reminded of Amazon's new digital-only series, Kindle Singles: "compelling ideas expressed at their natural length." Without endorsing Amazon, historians might be wise to embrace this general model. I for one would prefer to assign very long essays (or very short books) to my students. Our major historical associations should give prestigious awards for cumulative achievements in essay writing (excluding peer-reviewed journal articles, but including blogs and online essays, book review essays, single-essay books, essay collections, etc.). There are, of course, notable historians who have made their names writing in the short form, but our discipline has a clear preference (or prejudice) for monographs, a preference that poses problems for the profession, given the changing economies of publishing and higher education.

Coleman's true calling as a writer may be as an essayist. Readers may recognize his name from his series of mordantly funny, painfully honest diary essays (advice columns, really) for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that have told his professional journey from graduate student to adjunct lecturer to full professor as an unorthodox, sometimes self-loathing academic who must also contend with the everyday challenges of being a husband, father, and son. Recently, he even wrote an essay in which he bares his nerves about critical reviews, even though he "aspire[s] to write offensive books."⁵ In a workshop on professionalization for students entering the job market, it would be instructive to pair these deeply humane personal essays with Coleman's book(s).

How else might *Here Lies Hugh Glass* be used in the classroom? It would be perfect, I think, for first-year graduate seminars. This ornery text is sure to inspire strong feelings and spirited debate among people who care about the discipline and craft of history. I suspect most groups would be divided between "love it" and "hate it." For methodology assignments, teachers could easily pair the book with primary sources, since many of Coleman's key documents are available online.

The book would also be useful in courses on historical writing. *Here Lies Hugh Glass* is part of "American Portraits," a series of biographies coedited by Louis P. Masur and Thomas P. Slaughter; but the book would fit just as well, perhaps even better, in "New Directions in Narrative History," a series coedited by John Demos and Aaron Sachs for Yale University Press. Coleman cheekily uses anachronistic terms ("lizard brain," "grunts in the sticks," "freaked-out," "messed with," "messed-up," "ditched," "hard-core," "funky," "pissed," "frat-boy," "streakers," and so on). He delights in inserting himself into his narrative: he imagines how much easier his task would be if he had this or that piece of archival evidence; he talks a lot about the book he wishes he could have written; he pleads with authors of nineteenth-century texts, asking them to reveal what a twenty-first century historian would want to know. Excitedly, Coleman introduces a primary source unknown to earlier Glass biographers that "qualified as a coup for me," only to tear it down, with equal verve, as another fabrication. This is one of his favored rhetorical strategies: to present a convincing interpretation with some flair, only to immediately destabilize it with a doubting statement ("or not," "well, maybe," "at least, that was the hope," "either works," etc.).

Coleman's point is to remind readers of the problem of epistemology: all historians contend with omissions, fragments, distortions, misrepresentations, faded recollections, false memories, and outright lies. The difference with Hugh Glass is that his biographer can't, like most historians, conceal these things. Fabrication is his substance. Jon Coleman may be one of the most honest historians I've ever read, for he shows, with a rascally wink, how he fashioned his literary product. I'm a workingman, too, Coleman seems to be saying. I put in my hours at the shop. Here is the result of my labor; take it or shove it.

For me, *Here Lies Hugh Glass* was a frustration and an inspiration. Coleman has written some of the most artful phrases and playful sentences I read this year, alongside some of the most turgid (e.g., "the stew of hemoglobin that coursed through his veins chained him to the truth"). His final paragraph, a personal meditation on mortality and transience, is superb. But many prior paragraphs contained more style than substance. Coleman, like his anti-hero, possesses exemplary style. Where a cultural studies theoretician might cloak familiar concepts like "frontier" in abstruse terminology, Coleman refreshes them with direct, vivid language. If I must choose between these two approaches, I'll take the latter. However, after reading Coleman's post-modern biography, I hope that someday he produces a post-monographic history so excellent that it requires no apology no matter how many rules it breaks. I was disappointed that he felt compelled to issue this insecure boast: "As a writer and a historian, I consider myself on a prolonged expedition to see how much I can get away with in the company of sober academics" (p. 210). He might take inspiration from Dan Flores, one of the best historians of ani-

mals and environments in the U.S. West, who has created an exceptional and idiosyncratic body of work as a semi-autobiographical essayist who prefers to live, academically and otherwise, off the grid, in the company of coyotes.

Academia needs more mavericks. Long may they run—not crawl.

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1. John T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (2004); see also Coleman, "Two by Two," *Reviews in American History* 33 (December 2005): 481–92. For recent bear books, see Bernd Brunner, *Bears: A Brief History* (2007); and Michel Pastoureau, *The Bear: History of a Fallen King* (2011).

2. Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (1994); Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-century America* (2000); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (2007); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (2009).

3. Coneverly Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (2002); Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (2006); Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (2008).

4. In a spin-off article, Coleman makes the more apt contemporary analogy to reality TV shows that allow armchair rubbernecking of workingmen ("human chew toys") in hazardous conditions—e.g., *Deadliest Catch*, *Wicked Tuna*, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Ax Men*, *Swamp Loggers*. See Coleman, "Welcome to the Grunt Show," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 6, 2012.

5. Coleman, "Book-Review Angst," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 10, 2012.