

The Nirvana Blues

Book review

Coquilles St. Jacques (Peter Werbe)

1981

a review of

The Nirvana Blues by John Nichols. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981, 527 pp., \$14.95 hardcover.

The Nirvana Blues completes the New Mexico trilogy of John Nichols which began with his *The Milagro Beanfield War* in 1972, includes *The Magic Journey* in 1978 and which maps the destruction of the indigenous Chicano culture of fictional Chamisa County by development-crazed Anglos.

Milagro, the first of the series, is a wonderful book filled with Nichols' love of northern New Mexico, its people and the countryside. The story is told with humor and flair, and the townspeople of Chamisaville, who successfully fight off the encroaching white civilization (at least temporarily) bring the rich Chicano culture of that region to life. By the time of *The Nirvana Blues*, however, white society has triumphed and the rich Anglos now control and own everything in the valley except for a 1.7 acre farm held by the last surviving Chicano, 83-year-old Eloy Erribarren.

To take the place of Chamisaville's departed citizens have come a horde of East and West coast chic, affluent drop-outs who, for all of their protests to the contrary, have left little of their former lives behind them. This is what creates the backdrop for the rush to grab Eloy's land—the last undeveloped plot in Chamisa County.

Joe Miniver, an ex-East Coast adman, is trying to buy the farm with funds from a large, continually botched cocaine deal and is confronted with a host of weird characters all bent on getting the real estate and/or cocaine before Joe does. As in his first book, Nichols' humor is broad, but unfortunately in his latest, he stretches gags and situations to the point where the whole book becomes unbelievable. His digs at New Mexico middle-class hip seem accurate enough (if not easy), but after a while become reminiscent of the Marin County parody *Serial*.

The action comes as fast as in "Raiders of the Lost Ark," with an unending set of harrowing adventures involving goofy monkey cults, Joe's nonstop sexual liaisons, shoot-outs with gangsters, and such oddly named, hyperbolic characters that the story takes on a cartoon-like dimension—anything seems possible and the scenes often end with a bop on the head. Maybe I'm missing Nichols' attempt at whimsy, but if this is what is afoot, it misses the boat on that score as well.

None of this should be read as doubting Nichols' seriousness or the message he intends. His descriptions of the modern world and what it has wrought on a peaceful Chicano valley are powerful: "Chicanos die hard, and by the mid-seventies a few of them still populated the valley, hanging on to tiny plots and scuffling a living by the skins of their aching teeth, while praying for some kind of revolutionary rain that might bring about salvation in the face of the rapacious juggernaut overwhelming the valley, chewing it up, macadamizing its alfalfa pastures, concretizing its orchards, prefab-housing its galleries of native sunflowers, expanding its ski valley and polluting its creeks, and in general thoroughly pizzafying its ancient and powerful spiritual estate."

Also, his understanding goes beyond just the glib, mockery present in *Serial* when he examines the lives of the "Great White Wounded Middle Class (when they) hit the road in search of a different meaning for their comfortable, meaningless lives." To Nichols they are the villains in this story to be sure, but they are also the victims of the

process they sponsor: "Deliberate instability, of course, was the name of the commercial game. Divorce is good for capitalism, which likes nothing better than an endless slew of two-house single-family arrangements: double the groceries, double the heating bills, double the automobiles, double the lawn mowers."

To Joe Miniver, all of his neighbors look like poured-from-a-mold, running suited, Addida-wearing clones who grab onto the latest fad or guru in hopes of pulling something real out of their lives. Joe's difference is rather than partaking in the suburbia-lag madness is that he fantasizes smearing the joggers all over the highway and dreams of continuing Eloy's farm as it was rather than schemes of more development.

For all of its flaws, the crazed pace is at least engaging, but the zaniness drops off at the conclusion and takes a turn toward the tragic as Eloy and Joe's demise are suddenly linked. It is here that Nichols is at his best: a final scene of touching pathos in which Eloy's farm and Joe's dreams are dramatically smashed.

Had things been left at that, perhaps a recommendation of the novel may have been possible, but the reader then is faced with a strange, almost silly leftist/mystical Epilogue in which, the dead are resurrected and Nichols expects his audience to accept Cuba as a heaven committed to ecology and treasuring the old ways embodied in Eloy's rural ways. The politically naive and unnecessary epilogue is characteristic of the book's thematic jumble in general, but one is still drawn to Nichols' tenderness toward a disappearing mode of life.

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