



Rainbow Pie

Joe Bageant

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Rainbow Pie is a coming-of-age memoir wrapped around a discussion of America's most taboo subject ? social class. Set between 1950 and 1963, Joe Bageant uses Maw, Pap, Ony Mae, and other members of his rambunctious Scots-Irish family to chronicle the often-heartbreaking post-war journey of 22 million rural Americans into the cities, where they became the foundation of a permanent white underclass.

Combining recollection, stories, accounts, remembrance, and analysis, the book offers an intimate look at what Americans lost in the massive and orchestrated post-war social and economic shift from an agricultural to an urban consumer society. Along the way, he also provides insights into how 'the second and third generation of displaced agrarians', as Gore Vidal described them, now fuel the discontent of America's politically conservative, God-fearing, Obama-hating 'red-staters'.

These are the gun-owning, uninsured, underemployed white tribes inhabiting America's urban and suburban heartland: the ones who never got a slice of the pie during the good times, and the ones hit hardest by America's bad times, and who hit back during election years. Their 'tough work and tougher luck' story stretches over generations, and Bageant tells it here with poignancy, indignation, and tinder-dry wit.

Rainbow Pie Details

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From Reader Review Rainbow Pie for online ebook

Ross says

As an Australian born during WWII the USA has loomed large in my life and has had an ever changing cultural influence. I've been deeply interested for many years in the differences between our culture and institutions and those of the US. So I tackled this book as a cultural learning exercise and it did not disappoint. It is presented as a memoir and I agree it is, but only in part. The other part is using memoir driven anecdote to address a number of facets of life for, what the author claims are, 60 million poor whites who are on the lower rungs of US 'prosperity' and often below the poverty line (however that's defined). He illustrates many of the institutional and cultural influence on these people. He uses the term 'rednecks' frequently for this poor white class and he seems happy to claim the title for himself as well.

The memoir takes Joe from his very early life to his teens among his 'rednecks' in the 50's and 60's. His writing in this part of the narrative is spare but often beautiful, poignant, occasionally humorous, and informative about his family and of the cultural milieu in general. Though he obviously loves his people he is sometimes harshly, possibly justifiably (but what would I know?) critical of them. He rails about ignorance, illiteracy, narrow mindedness and susceptibility to right wing manipulation and so on: he despairs.

The other aspect of the book is a polemic against the specific examples of the exploitation of his people. You could probably guess the list: big business particularly big agri-business, banks, confusingly Obama Care as a ploy by big insurance, and so on. His rage is at times palpable and also somewhat confused and even at times contradictory. He is ultimately resigned and pessimistic that this underprivileged exploited class of people that he has sprung from will ever surmount their conditions. He presumes that they will continue to be used as cheap, disposable, labor fodder or army grunts.

All very depressing if you buy the whole picture he paints, but I don't. Never the less I found myself agreeing to some extent with many of his attacks on his targets. The author's conclusions based on his polemical presentation of these and many other issues certainly raised many thought provoking questions for me. I have been motivated to research things like US poverty, gun death rates, US imprisonment rates, and a number of others.

I read most of Steinbeck when I was young and Joe seems to be talking about the same sort of people. Joe is dour compared to Steinbeck, there is humor but not much, he doesn't see much hope and even prophesies some sort of gun driven insurrection. For an Australian many aspects of US culture are an enigma and though I don't buy all of what Joe has written it has given me much food for thought and at least an inkling about one strata of US society that, on the few occasions you hear it referred to, are always spoken about in comedic or derogatory terms. Joe speaks about his people with, love, affection, despair and frustration; and I think that's much to be preferred, appropriately empathetic, and honest.

I liked this book. I don't know about its accuracy. For instance he provides no support for his assertion that there are 60 million poor whites, and he doesn't really define them except as anecdote. At times he rants and rails. Never the less I found it thought provoking; more a rough guide to this strata of US society than a sober analysis. I'm still thinking about it and researching a week after finishing it. I happily rate it 4 stars.

Bill Bridges says

Joe Bageant passed away this year. It's a terrible loss. Over the years of reading his blog and his first book, *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, I came to feel that I knew him. I'm sure that's the case with many of his readers. I wish I'd had a chance to meet him. He was in Winchester (some of the time – he semi-retired to Belize and Mexico), not far from my in-laws. But alas, now he's gone, and he's taken his wonderfully frank and insightful voice with him. Luckily for us, he finished a memoir before he left us, one which was published first overseas and only finally made it's way here, to his homeland, right before he passed. And it's a damn good book.

As with *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, *Rainbow Pie* is full of ruminations on our “classless” society and the hologram of bullshit we live within. It also has touching and wistful reminiscences about his upbringing in rural West Virginia and Winchester, Virginia. A world that is lost to us now, moving farther away in the rear-view mirror every year. Soon, nobody will remember it at all. Unlike life and events in our megalopoli, the rural lifeways of Bageant's people aren't well recorded. Sure, some folklorists try to archive some of this stuff away, but who reads it? It can't inform our lives today if we don't know about it. Bageant's memories reminded me of stories I've heard about my father's pre-WWII, Tom Sawyerish upbringing in Mississippi.

This book is a must-read for modern Americans, even those not completely hypnotized by digital media... yet. Bageant's voice is one we need to hear, and thankfully, he's such a damn good author that it's a joy to read even when he's delivering bad news.

Peter says

“This has been my story, my own memoir, with a heavy dose of redneck social commentary,” writes Bageant on his final page (310), and with fondness for the book I put it down.

While reading it, however, I sometimes grew tired of the socialist tangents the author would go off on, his tone too angry, railing against a government and corporate conspiracy against the hard-working little man. Before the industrial revolution of World War II the latter was self-sustaining on his own little piece of land, in what Bageant calls a family-based economy (“farm families and the small communities that served them in a symbiotic relationship,” 92) where one didn't make money, but made a living (i.e. the food and products one needed); after the 1950s or 60s this gave way to a commodity and consumer-based economy, resulting in a poorly educated underclass and consequent debt, poverty, unemployment. (“that [post world-war II] rural generation, equipped more often than not with less than a high school education, strong backs, and the ability to endure the toil accompanying farm life, were losers in a new race they weren't equipped for. They lost in the competition for the perceived conveniences of industrial, urban society.” 198)

The reason why there isn't a large uprising, is a lack of insight in one's own plight: “Heartland America was and still is a strange place, where poor education and purposefully managed information vacuums prevent social understanding. Things, good or bad, just sort of happen to you, and a passivity reigns for working-class people, as if all things larger than their families are beyond their control, so they believe that Jesus, providence, or plain luck govern their fate,” Bageant thinks (145), and observed exceptions to the affluent Middle-Class ideal are often racial, effectively dividing rather than connecting the enormous underclass: “These underclass-challenger versions [of history], usually ethnic or racial, seldom include the fact that they share their underclass status with a legion of whites several times their own combined number. Beyond that, the challenger versions of national memory include the same seeded basis as the accepted version, such as that all white Anglo-Americans have steadily gained in quality of life throughout our history, as they

marched arm in arm toward the American Dream of affluence" (265).

Rainbow Pie is, I think, at its best when it's actually a memoir, with family relations in its focus, a description of dropping out of school, or when a teenage Bageant dresses up to ask out the prettiest girl in town ("she lived in a whitewashed stucco house" and "One block and a coat of whitewash was the difference between Grosse Point and Hell's Kitchen" 231), or the shame of his dad when they are unable to afford the \$100 remaining after a grant and scholarship, to send his son to an art institute to further develop his son's obvious skills (240). The following social commentary on the lack of means for advancement, as a direct result of these circumstances is cradled much more in Bageant's memoir style and a much more pleasant read.

On pages 280 and 281 he conveys how his ancestral home, Over Home, burns down, with family heirlooms and large chunks of the family's history, even if, in Bageant's own words, its true history had been lost years before: "By 1960, Over Home was over with as a family lifestyle. Year after year of relentless pressure from an escalating transactional-wealth society had eradicated the ancient farm life (275)." Yet to me, the portrayal of the fire is where the Bageant story comes most alive, where he captures the reader, where I become most engaged what is being told.

Another instance is, when he plainly observes how his Grandmother died a diabetic at 63, as did his dad, and "I am diabetic and this week I turned sixty-three" (285). He was to survive the age of 63, but barely: a year after he wrote his ominous words, he would be diagnosed with cancer, and he would die in 2011, before turning 65.

Kristin says

Along with *Deer Hunting with Jesus* a must read (or re-read) in these times. So many lessons about how we could be living (communally and in a community), rather than how we are living (run by corporations and greed).

Todd Martin says

Rainbow Pie – A Redneck Memoir is what *Hillbilly Elegy* claimed to be, and ought to have been, but failed "Part memoir, part historical and social analysis, ~~J. D. Vance's Hillbilly Elegy~~ is a fascinating consideration of class, culture, and the American dream."

In addition to having thought more deeply and insightfully about the issues, Joe Bageant is also a superior writer. It's a shame he didn't have Vance's publicist (or a better book title).

Alaine says

Didn't get very far into this one when I came across a racial slur being used as a horse's name. I understand the horse was named in another time and place, but when writing about that in this day and age, you need to have some kind of qualifier. Say it wouldn't be appropriate now. Say something. The guy said nothing. Just threw it in there and kept on writing like it's totally fine. Life is short. I'm over this book.

Philippe says

With this ‚Memoir of Redneck America‘ I wanted to read something very much of my beaten path. What a surprise to see that it led me squarely into a familiar thicket. Rainbow Pie is not a sober memoir, but an indignant requiem for a way of life that has altogether vanished ... and that some are trying to rekindle today. Joe Bageant was raised in the 1950s in a rural community in the Shenandoah Valley, West Virginia. Life was frugal and devoted to simple duties and community life. It was embedded in an ancient ecology „that blended labour, money and goods to sustain a modest and satisfactory life for all“. Community and economy seamlessly meshed. Neighbors „banded together to make lard and apple butter, put up feed corn, bale hay, thresh wheat, pick apples and plough snow off roads. One neighbor cut hair; another mended shoes. From birth to grave, you needed neighbors and they needed you.“ Money didn’t play a key role in people’s lives. You needed some to make do, but in essence this was „an economy whose currency was the human calorie“.

In the space of a few decades, this „real community of shared labour towards the shared good“ has given way to a „synthetic, petroleum-based commodity economy“. Bageant considers the loss of the yeoman agrarian tradition a true American tragedy: „We have been paid back for our disregard of that tradition and the uprooting of its souls in surprising and often chilling ways. Creating an underclass of throwaway laborers, and sub-prime mortgage and credit-card debt slaves has its blowback - in the form of inexplicable heartland school shootings, backwoods and trailer-court meth labs, or Timothy McVeigh’s Murrah Center bombing in Tulsa.“ In Arendt’s terms: the ‚homo faber‘ has been degraded to an ‚animal laborans‘: „ignorant, under-educated; given to unhealthy vices such as smoking and alcohol; underpaid; semi-literate; misinformed; given to crude entertainments; (...); disposable as a labor force, quick to violent solutions; easily misled; simple-minded in world view; superstitious; and poor in parenting and social skills.“

This cultural sea change wasn’t an accident. Neither was it an invisible hand that led American society into its current predicament. Bageant argues that the creation of a (white) underclass was carefully orchestrated by the country’s economic and political elites. The whole point being the ready availability of a cheap workforce and docile cannon fodder to fight the corpocracy’s wars. To get there they squeezed the farmers and small businessmen in local communities to death, dismantled unions, rigged the tax system to suit their own needs, and carpet-bombed the American psyche with corporate and state-media imagery. The result is an underclass that doesn’t even realize that their country has been looted. The odds to ever make a decent living and gain some respect have been stacked heavily against them.

I found Rainbow Pie to be a compelling read on several accounts. Bageant’s argument is unabashedly anecdotal but that doesn’t mean that it lacks cogency. This tale of a seemingly irretrievable loss of community resilience makes one sit up and examine one’s own assumptions. It also led me to reconsider my own past. Surprisingly, although I was born a good twenty years later than Joe Bageant, and in a different part of the world (Western Europe), there is a lot in his portrait of an era and a culture that is familiar to me. Bageant’s account helps me to better understand where I’m coming from. Finally there is the author’s authoritative and empathetic voice, dressed up in an attention-grabbing, colorful prose.

Clearly, the rural 1950s was not in all aspects a bed of roses. But Bageant is right to point out that we have lost a sizable amount of social capital (self-sustaining networks) and human capital (survival and mending skills) in our embrace of compulsory consumerism and corporate meritocracy. Recommended reading, and not only for Americans.

Sarah says

looking forward to reading this book after this review:

<http://www.dangerousminds.net/comment...>

Jessica says

This book is a series of compelling conspiracy theories about why poor white people tend to vote against their own interests and how corporations and the government are perpetually teaming up to screw working class people of all colors intertwined with the author's family history and memories of growing up in rural West Virginia and Virginia. I mostly found it touching and somewhat interesting in that I feel it gave me a deeper understanding of where some of my own family members were coming from. For instance he explains why farmers like those in my grandmother's family didn't like FDR, even though the rest of the country loved him. However, the author's weird insistence on demonstrating his sexism by talking about random women he or his male relatives wanted to bone was pretty off putting.

Trudy says

A very illuminating and realistic memoir of small farmers ekking out a living and surviving, of community and of family ties. A lovely book.

Mairead says

I will begin by saying that I am from Europe and this was my first in-depth insight into Hillbilly culture. I am torn between liking this book and throwing it in the fire at times.

I think he was very progressive in his analysis of American politics. His description of Rednecks at political rallies in 2008 are the type we saw again on our screens in 2016, 'ruddy, overweight working people with neck veins bulging and fists pumping'. They make for good T.V and can be easily led by the political administration.

At times he puts on his academic hat and provides social analysis, citing research to back it up. At other times he makes wild generalizations with nothing to back it up except an angry rant.

In some sections he addresses the Rednecks out there with an important message, but in reality, the rednecks he is describing are not likely to read this book. It is high brow in places and in his minds eye I don't think he was in fact writing to the people he wants to advise.

He looks back at an America before WWII as being 'The Glory Days'. It may have been the glory days if you would grow up to be the patriarch of the family farm, but I doubt women or POC would hold that view. In fact every-time he refers to women, he does so in terms of looks and body parts. 'Titties' 'cute ass'. Overall, considering Trump, I think he has an important story to tell, so it's 3 stars for Mr Begeant.

Pep Bonet says

Joe Bageant was a pamphleteer. I first came across him while reading an Italian newspaper which talked about his excellent book *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War*. When he succeeded in having his redneck memoirs (or his memoirs of a redneck) in Australia (God praise USA's freedom of press), I got the need to buy it, even though it has been aging in my bookshelf for quite a while.

Don't expect a measured book, don't search for finesse or for nice arguments. You'll find crude texts, direct jabs at anywhere where it hurts, anger, bitterness, pride of his Southerness (no Dixie, plain South, no Gone with the Wind-like owners, poor rural hillbillies, Irish-Scots, fervent Christians).

If you are able to absorb some of the hits (yes, one or another can fall on you), you enjoy his rage, his sense of humour, his confessions of alcohol-abuse, his depressing stories about an old world which has disappeared, and all at week-end driving distance of the DC.

Joe was a socialist who despised the urbanites who control the Democratic party, a radical who wanted unionised work in a place where the legislative works for the corporations, somebody who understood how those working poors have been made to believe that the GOP will save them, while indeed being their outright enemies.

I must admit having moments of doubt while reading it. Too much of a pamphlet, boo. But, o boy, doesn't it make you feel well?

Naum says

Typically, I avoid anything with "memoir" in the title like I would anchovies or pineapple on pizza.

But I originally thought similarly about Bageant's previous *Deer Hunting With Jesus* which was a fantastic read.

Rainbow Pie, for most of the duration, is also an excellent read. It's mainly centered on Joe's reflections of growing up in rural Virginia 1950s to early 1960s, peppered with perspectives on life has transformed in the region (and the "white underclass") even unto the present age.

It could have had 50 or so pages chopped off, as it seemed to linger on a tad too much in the latter third of the book.

Jesica says

This was one of the most important books I've ever read. I learned more about class than I didn't know I didn't know. It was truly astonishing to learn about the trajectory of agrarian whites from a non-monetary, communal environment to the urban setting in the 20th century. I learned so much about how these poor whites came to be denigrated as "white trash", their disdain for "education" and why they continue to have so much distrust for so-called liberals and progressives. I NEEDED to read this book - and any educated urban

white person needs to, especially anyone who can't understand the rage of red-staters, NRA activists and the like. It is truly tragic how an intact subculture was destroyed by the "green revolution" of industrial agriculture and this book restores some dignity to a class of people who are almost universally reviled and disrespected by the rest of our country. So-called White Trash. An amazing, eye-opening book.

Patricia Kadel says

Amusing observations of sometimes less than amusing social issues. Mr. Bageant was a terrific writer taken from us far too soon.
