

Interview by Frank Rose, publisher of **ArtsHouston** Spring 2008.

Frank Rose: How (and when) did your collaboration with Kent begin?

PB: Back in 1999 Kent had a reading of his novel *Plainsong* at Brazos Bookstore here in Houston. I'd read the book and thought it was one of the best things I'd read on the High Plains, the country that I'd been photographing for over twenty years. I also thought that his writing transcended regionalism – that *Plainsong* simply was one of the best novels I'd read period, and that the man who wrote it and I seemed to have a similar take, not only on the High Plains, but also generally on life. He seemed a kindred spirit of sorts. So I went to the reading and gave him a copy of my photographic book, *On the Plains*, which had just been published. We spoke briefly (Kent was ill) and he proceeded on with his book tour. A week or so later I had a wonderful letter from him, praising my book – and we began a correspondence. And *Plainsong* then went on to become a finalist for the National Book Award.

When the sequel to *Plainsong*, *Eventide*, was to be published a few years later (2003), Kent asked his publisher Knopf to hire me to take the cover photograph. He had a fairly specific idea and wanted to be with me when I took the picture. So the two of us met in Yuma, Colorado, out on the eastern plains and for four days, froze at dusk, trying to get the photograph just right.

There was a lot of time standing around, and it quickly became clear that we had much in common. Both of our fathers were ministers: Kent's Methodist, mine Presbyterian. We had similar tastes in literature, politics and humor and oddest of all, we were dressed almost identically – down to the same boots. But the differences were there too – his father had moved the family every five years from small Plains community to small Plains community, as is the case with the Methodist Church, while my dad was more of a theologian, and I grew up in academic surroundings: Union Theological Seminary in New York, McAlester College in St. Paul, St. Andrews University in Scotland and Stanford in California.

As we talked out there in the cold, and in bars and restaurants it became apparent that there might be the possibility of doing

something more - and we decided to stay in touch.

Back in Houston (this was fall of 2004) after *Eventide* had come out, I was talking with Jean Caslin, then Executive Director of Houston Center for Photography about the great time I'd had with Kent and how it might be fun to continue working with him in some way. She suggested that we apply for the Dorothea Lange/Paul Taylor Prize at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke, a prize that gives seed money to writers and photographers working collaboratively. Why this had not occurred to me before, I don't know, but it was a great idea. *On The Plains* had been published by the Center in conjunction with W.W. Norton, and staffers had asked me to apply in the past. I thought about it and got in touch with Kent and suggested this. We agreed fairly quickly and began to think seriously about what we might do, mapping out the beginnings of a way of thinking about a new kind of book on the Plains. Kent sent Duke a writing sample and I sent photos - we drew up a proposal and got to work.

And we decided to proceed whether or not we got the award. So I shipped him up photographs that I had done recently on the Llano Estacado of Texas (Kent lives in Salida, Colorado). And Kent sent me small bits of writing, pieces that were evocative of the Plains - the place, its history, human relations, weather, current issues, overheard remarks --- wonderful and multidimensional bits of writing that often were very visual. And then I flew up to Denver, as I have done many, many times in the past few years, and we began to travel together, and work on a visual/literary narrative that would join our images and texts. And then the phone calls, the emails, the travel on my own, more travel with Kent. The laying out text and photos in motels and conference rooms in many small Plains towns. And lots and lots of talk.

We were also helped by people that Kent knew in Yuma - Tom Parks the town vet drove me all over the area repeatedly and Rollie Deering, a local rancher took me out past fence lines and into fields where cattle were grazing. These two particularly opened doors to local people - and the book began to take form.

We did receive the Lange/Taylor Prize, and through our talented agent, Nancy Stauffer, sold the book to W. W. Norton after a dual presentation to Norton and to Knopf, Kent's normal

publisher.

The book then began to include our editor Jim Mairs, who has been the head of visual books at Norton for over thirty years, Carol Houck Smith a legendary poetry/fiction editor and Katy Homans an equally remarkable designer who had created numerous MOMA and Whitney catalogues, all of Lee Friendlander's books, and who produced what all of us thought was the perfect design for *West of Last Chance*. Norton spared no expense with any of this – and the book was printed at Mondadori in Verona.

FR: What level of influence did the text have on the photographs?

PB: I had a good number of Kent's texts in my mind as I photographed – and every time I had a sense that an image, or a series of images that I was working on would jibe perfectly with the text, I was wrong. Ultimately there is only one shot in the book that I took with Kent's text firmly lodged in the forefront of my mind – and that's of a hog farm. All the rest were arrived at separately. I would photograph, Kent would write, we would get together and as a team would move the words and images like a mosaic. We tried hundreds of different combinations.

In some cases in the book, the text and words seem an easy mix – they go together in obvious kinds of ways. In others there is more of a stretch. In some, there are series of images that take the text in new directions. And in a few, the image or images run counter to the text completely.

We trusted the reader to make these connections for him or herself. We decided early on that we did not want an Introduction – no explanation for how the book was to be dealt with. We wanted the reader to take it at face value and work his or her way into it.

There is a narrative arc to *West of Last Chance*. It has five sections and each section, while relating to the others, has a specific set of things that it's dealing with.

In many ways, it's a difficult book. We hope it's not what a

reader might expect: a series of photographs dealing with Plains culture coupled with captions.

Like the country, we hope it takes some time to work into the book and understand it. Our idea from the beginning was to “confound expectation”.

FR: Do you see the book as equal parts word and image?

PB: Absolutely. Although the pages of photographs outnumber the pages of text, the idea is that the resonance of the words pervade the book in ways that merge the stories into the images following. We also know well that pictures remain in one’s mind as one turns pages - reading, looking, considering. And that words produce images as well. There is a mix that finally is uncontrollable but quite dynamic.

But the book is a genuine collaboration and the text and images are meant to have equal weight.

FR: Is there a story behind the title?

PB: Kent and I were heading East in Colorado, driving along U.S. Highway 36 casting around for ideas. We needed a title obviously and each of us had thought of a number of them.

None of them seemed to work well. The best we had come up with was *The Correction Line* – which is a topographic term having to do with the gridded nature of the Plains. Almost all the roads run true north/south or east/west. But given the curvature of the Earth, if you continue straight, you don’t actually end up at the Pole, you end off to the side. So – every seven miles there is a shunt to the side, known as a Correction Line. Why this appealed to us I’m not sure. But I’m glad we didn’t use it. We did want some sort of warning in the title though. The Plains are not in great shape, as everyone knows (dwindling towns; the over use of pesticides, fertilizer, and chemicals in general; a terrible depletion of the Oglalla Aquifer; industrial hog farms, chicken farms, and feedlots etc.) And we rolled right through the little town of Last Chance - and we turned and looked at each other. Last Chance. We were suddenly east of Last Chance, heading for a little house on a very wide prairie. And the title East of Last Chance jumped out at both of us. And we fiddled directionally with that thought

back and forth for a while. West seemed a little more hopeful. And less like *East of Eden*.

FR: Do you think this project allowed Haruf to experiment a bit in his writing?

PB: I wouldn't presume to answer that. Kent is simply one of the best writers I've ever read. His prose is lucid – whether it's a sentence in a novel, a line in *West of Last Chance* or a description in an email. Or for that matter a public presentation. He is remarkably articulate and he carries his words with him. There seems little separation between the narrator of his wonderful novels and the guy I've gotten to know. There's just this magic of making up the stories. That is true wizardry. I don't know how he does it.

As for *West of Last Chance* though – some of the short pieces are made up. Most of them however have some basis in real life. And a good number are stories that he had overheard or had had people tell him. Or he had experienced for himself.

FR: Is this book editorial; commentary; simply an exploration; other?

PB: I don't want to spill the beans too much here. The book is the book and our intentions for it were various. It's also very funny in parts, laugh out loud funny as far as I'm concerned. But it's certainly all of the above. There is a political content to it – both historic and contemporary – it's a commentary on life in these little towns and out on the Plains themselves, and by extrapolation we hope, to wider American culture. And perhaps for me, more than anything, it is and continues to be an exploration – a trip out into that wonderful country, a place that I never tire of visiting.

FR: I read a review of the book that says: "West of Last Chance is a book for people who are in on the secret of the Great Plains." What's the secret?

PB: There is a wonderful secret. And one of the reasons I wanted to publish this book and my earlier book *On the Plains*,

was to share that secret. It is a resonant place. The mantra for *West of Last Chance* is the following "You have to know how to look at this country. You have to slow down. It isn't pretty, but it's beautiful."

That's the second text in the book and it sets the tone I think for the rest. The High Plains are a beautiful and confounding part of the world. A place where you can feel as though you are on top of the Earth. The equivalent of Everest – and two days later or ten minutes later feel as though you are the most insignificant thing ever to live.

There is a quiet beauty, a scale of space that exists nowhere else, a set of colors and a quality of light that I have come to love and a subtlety that merges with grand space in a way that for me is intoxicating. I love being out there. I love those struggling, tenacious little towns. I've come to have great respect and affection for the people I've come to know – and it's a nice thing to share.

The High Plains keep the mind hopping – from serenity, to history, to anguish, to community, to splendor – it's a fascinating part of the world, and I hope you come to know it.

FR: Anything else you'd like to share?

PB: Thanks for listening to me go on. The book does a better job of describing this than I ever could – so I hope you find time to take a look.

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