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Boring Postcards USA



Synopsis

In Boring Postcards Magnum photographer and postcard enthusiast Martin Parr brought together 160 of the duller postcards of 1950s, 60s and 70s Britain to make a book that was, contrary to the conceit of its title, both fascinating and extremely funny. It was one of those ideas that seemed so obvious that no one could believe it hadn't been done before, and it caught the public imagination in a big way. In Britain Boring Postcards was discussed everywhere from daytime TV shows to art and design magazines, from local newspapers and radio stations (outraged that their town should be labelled 'boring') to Time magazine. Now Parr has turned his attention to the USA for a new book of Boring Postcards. Just as before, for a postcard to qualify as sufficiently 'boring', either its composition, its content, or the characters featured must be arguably boring or the photograph must be absent of anything that might conventionally be described as interesting. As the study of postcards becomes a field of academic interest, this book offers more than amusement: as a folk art recording of the non-places and non-events of post-war America, it reveals poignant insights into its social, cultural and architectural values.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book breaks the maxim, "You can't judge a book by its cover." With a honest title and a no frills cover, you open the book and you find postcards that live up to everything you didn't expect: No humor. No fancy photography. No witty postcard statements. No nothing. These are simple photographs of the most boring subjects a person can chance upon: Interstate highways, hotel

rooms and Cafeteria Food. But then you stop for a moment and wonder why something so boring could possibly hold your attention for so long. I think the mesmerizing element of these boring postcards is that they are actually doing what they were intended to do during their creation: They are bookmarks of a person's travel. They show you where a person was as they crossed the state line into Ohio. Sure the toll booth in the photograph is not much to look at...but you almost feel as if you are in the car with the traveller. Also, because these photos are from the 50's and 60's...you feel as if this is not only a travel across the country. But a travel back into time. A young fella like myself can actually appreciate the look of days that are before my time. The best part is that they aren't tampered with. No photography tricks or advertising acrobats. These were point and click photos that aren't trying to be sexy. So yes, these postcards are definitely boring. But that's what is so exciting about them.

This book is very funny. Whoever came up with the concept has a delightfully twisted sense of humor. And, I like the fact that the editor lets the cards speak for themselves (rather than indulging in an ultrahip forward). Bravo!

First a word of clarification. These are not postcards to be mailed. I didn't read the description clearly. This was only my fault, but someone else out there might make the same mistake. Second, the publisher's description and viewers' comments are correct: These are boring, charmless, insipid images, that might tell us a lot about who we think we are -- perhaps of how proud small-town America was of its new airports, bus terminals and banks after the war. But I thought that not including any reflections by a student of our culture (Lord knows there are enough candidates), was just plain cheap, and makes this little book, well, boring.

The title is something of a misnomer - there's nothing boring about the cards collected in this edition. Banal, perhaps, but not boring. The irony encapsulated in a desolate stretch of highway titled "Picturesque Indiana" cannot be underestimated in its appeal or entertainment value. The pride displayed in entrance ways to multimillion dollar turnpikes or the cafes of motels on well-traveled tourist highways speak to a time when the connectivity of automobile travel was still miraculous. Similarly for the cards documenting the rise of shopping centers (malls were still to come), factories, trailer courts, and all manner of 50s and 60s innovation. It all feels quite quaint now, magnified by the editor's terrific selection of poorly composed and wackily titled cards. The editor has a terrific eye for oddball cards, and the inclusion of cards that show edge wear or postmarks helps bring them to

life as mail-art. Perhaps the only negative is that the card backs were not included; a shame, given that the descriptions given there are often as good as the picture image. I also note the peculiar insertion of blank pages here and there. A must-have volume for postcard collectors, collectors of kitschy 50s/60s art, or just about anyone with an interest in the intersection of industrial and consumer arts.

Boring Postcards is a conundrum. Then name perfectly describes the contents of the book yet they become fascinating, baffling, and sometimes hilarious. What goes through one's mind is why would anyone take a photo of this then try to sell it or use it to attract tourists. Why would anyone make a postcard of an interstate, a bend in the road, a truck stop, an aerial view of a hotel, a hospital room? Individually, no one would pay attention to them. But put together they become mesmerizing. It has the same effect as looking through a bunch of photos that have no meaning to you. You know no one, the photography is bad, you don't know why the photographer chose to take a picture of what they did yet they remain interesting. And Boring Postcards, perhaps because they were ostensibly done by professional photographers, remains intriguing.

Looking at the postcards in this book is like travelling back to the 1960's. A time when the highways were not packed with traffic, and stopping for lunch meant pulling into the local, non-franchised restaurant. Yes, the motel interiors really did look like that, and my brothers and I were thrilled to sleep in a room with air conditioning and color TV. We find this book fascinating, and so have the friends who have looked through it with us.

"Oh my Gosh, Mommy, here's a postcard of that toll booth we just went through on the Interstate. Let's send it to Aunt Milli to show her we've come this far!" I can imagine myself saying more or less that, sometime in the mid-1960's, as we're cruising in our Rambler station wagon on the way to summer camp. This collection is great. I ran across it in a bookstore, giggled as I paged through it, and immediately bought one as a housewarming gift for the couple who has everything. But when I got home, I found myself opening the package up to giggle some more. I felt kind of sad actually giving it away - the same feeling as sending off a postcard. It goes into the mailbox and it's gone, but not forgotten (at least for a moment). The collection is not only funny, it says a lot about America. I guess I need to get my own copy of the book...

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