

Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America, by Stephen G. Bloom. New York: Harcourt, 2000. xiv, 338 pp. \$25.00 cloth.

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The old saying, "you can't judge a book by its cover," does not apply to Stephen G. Bloom's book on Postville, Iowa. The cover photograph features a Hasidic Jewish man, dressed in black and fur hat, reading his prayer book as he passes by five elderly men sitting on a storefront bench. One of the men seems to be eyeing the passing Jew with wonderment or worse. This photo is meant, of course, to illustrate the cultural "war" between Hasidic Jews and Postville residents described in Bloom's book. The only problem is, the cover photo is a collage of two separate photos, neither of which was taken in Postville. Yet the photo does illustrate the central purpose of the book: to pander to stereotypes about rural Iowans and Hasidic Jews in East and West Coast book markets.

Other Iowa communities have and continue to experience ethnic and cultural diversity. But the arrival of deeply devout Lubavitcher Jews in Postville more than ten years ago has received a great deal of attention in the popular press, in part due to Bloom's book. It is a unique cultural and social situation. Bloom gives us some interesting and valuable glimpses into Lubavitcher life in Postville and the history behind their arrival. He also provides some interesting insights into rural Iowa life at the turn of the century. But, alas, Bloom has chosen to couch Postville's story in terms that seem most comfortable to those who already have preconceived stereotypes about rural Iowa communities and Jews. Readers endure dozens of references to the "wilder-ness" of Iowa and to Postville as quaint, perhaps even charmingly backward. Postville is, after all, an isolated community because it is "thirty miles from the closest McDonald's" (40).

The Hasidic Jewish community in Postville is portrayed as an inflexible, isolationist community that interacts with Christian locals only under duress. The Hasidic community is devout and strict in many ways, for example, by maintaining their own schools. But Bloom does them—and established Postville residents—a disservice by pounding on the points of conflict between two seemingly incompatible communities. The problem with this approach is that it is much too simplistic. As a social scientist who has worked in Postville, I know that Postville's situation is much more complicated, and positive, than Bloom would have us believe. Although Bloom does give us a few examples of interaction between the two worlds he describes, there is

little about the subtle interaction that takes place on a day-to-day basis. Bloom would have us believe that the Lubavitchers and their kosher meatpacking operation would do just fine without Postville and its residents—and that Postville might be better off without “the Jews.” He would have us believe that the situation is intractable. Despite the occasional controversy between the village (not necessarily the citizens) of Postville and the owners of the kosher packing plant, there is a great deal of interaction among the community’s diverse populations, including the Lubavitchers. Indeed, among many native Postville residents, a respect for the Hasidic Jews’ need to remain separate has grown. Likewise, many Lubavitchers have developed genuine friendships with *goyim*.

Bloom’s insistence on highlighting differences between Jews and Christians in Postville seems to reflect his ambivalence about his own Jewish background and faith. His personal struggle with Judaism comes across loud and clear in his book. Indeed, in many ways Bloom’s forays into the Postville wilderness are an effort to come to terms with his own ethnic and religious identity. We can certainly respect that struggle, since so many of us can identify with it, whether we are Jews or not. However, Bloom insists on using a script about what rural Iowa and Jewish life *should* be according to his own and most of his readers’ expectations. Bloom did not simply try to find his Jewishness in Postville, but his Iowaness as well. In other words, he used Postville to examine what it means to be a Jew and to live in Iowa after having moved from San Francisco to Iowa City. Too bad. This book is neither a fair treatment of Postville or of his own journey of self-discovery. In the final analysis, it’s just another book that makes rural Iowa look silly to readers who already thought so.

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