

Reviews

Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen, edited by Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019. 270 pages).

Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen, a collection of essays divided into seven thematic sections and released to commemorate Springsteen's seventieth birthday, brings together personal reflections on Springsteen fandom with analytical and artistic pieces. The collection reflects the scope of Springsteen's impact, which extends across the cultural, political, personal, literary, and musical realms as well as over time and space. *Long Walk Home* also features photographs by Frank Stefanko, Rocco S. Coviello, and June Skinner Sawyers.

The contributors to this edited volume come from a variety of professions, including novelist, poet, professor, critic, biographer, musician, photographer, and politician. They score somewhat lower on cultural than professional diversity. As editors Jonathan D. Cohen and June Skinner Sawyers note, "unforeseen changes" in their roster of authors led to a higher ratio of "middle-aged American straight white men" to writers from other countries and from underrepresented groups (5). While the demographics of the contributors resemble the audience at many North American Springsteen concerts, this circumstance is unfortunate because the perspectives from those voices less frequently heard are some of the most compelling parts of the book and more of them would only make it stronger. Nonetheless, the writers who appear in these pages are eloquent, their stories compelling, and the book as a whole is a refreshing mix of styles and genres. One might finish an analytic essay and turn the page to find a poem. Each contribution is short so the collection lends itself to sampling a few pages here and there, and yet the chorus of voices is so pleasing that one easily could devour it from cover to cover.

The book aims to examine Springsteen's legacy, in particular "at the personal level" as it has impacted people from all parts of the world over fifty years and counting (2). For this reason, contributors (all of whom are Springsteen fans) were encouraged to get personal. The prompt that elicited each text in this diverse collection was simply, "Why Springsteen?" (4). Its title, *Long Walk Home*, references a song of the same name on Springsteen's 2007 album *Magic*. In the context of the book, "long walk home" reflects both the journey on which Springsteen's music takes his avid listeners and the ways in which Springsteen has inspired, comforted and healed his fans on their own journeys.

Part I, titled "Springsteen Stories," contains four personal reflections by self-described fans on their connections to Springsteen and his music. The pieces range in length from a page and a half to eight pages and encompass both personal connections (e.g. Frank Stefanko, who photographed Springsteen for the cover of *The River* album, among other things) and connections solely through Springsteen's work (e.g. Deepa Iyer, who immigrated to the U.S. from India and found in Springsteen's music a way of understanding her complex feelings about her new country). These essays feel like connecting with fellow fans in the parking lot before an E Street Band show. Everyone has a Springsteen story—often about a first concert, a life-changing mixtape made by a friend, or, best of all, meeting Bruce himself—and sharing those stories creates bonds. Starting the collection with these (literal and figurative) Bruce encounters welcomes us into the company of friends and fellow travelers as we embark on an exploration of Springsteen's significance.

Part II, "Springsteen, Politics, and American Society" turns to professors for an examination of Springsteen as an icon of American culture. The pieces in this section explore and analyze Springsteen's evolving relationship with politics, from the understated—the way he addresses the social conditions that shape lives in songs on *The River* and

Nebraska –to the explicit—songs like "American Skin (41 Shots)" and appearances at Barack Obama's campaign events. Surprisingly (and wonderfully), this rather academic section includes a poem. Paul Muldoon's "At the River" evokes the settings of Springsteen songs and combines the language of politics with the terminology of auto parts.

Part III, "Springsteen Live," is a brief interlude in which we return to personal reflections. As one might expect, the section devoted to Bruce's live performances takes readers on a lively tour of some legendary shows. Our guides are famed music journalist Greil Marcus, singer-songwriter Wesley Stace (AKA John Wesley Harding), and essayist David Ulin. In addition to the shows, these pieces encompass the related activities of camping out for tickets and bootleg collecting. As in Part I, the nostalgia is strong and the writing vivid.

In Part IV, "Springsteen the Artist," *Springsteen on Broadway* is the thread that runs through a diverse group of selections. Appropriately, a section that includes an interview and a listicle as well as more traditional essays, Part IV illustrates the range Bruce achieves in his storytelling. In the first piece, "Brilliant Disguise: The Completely True Fictional Adventures of Bruce Springsteen" Peter Ames Carlin deftly weaves together the fantastical yarns Springsteen would spin on stage (e.g. God handing down an eleventh commandment to Bruce and Clarence in the woods of New Jersey), Carlin's own work of short fiction about Springsteen engaging in various unexpected heroics, and Bruce's introspective musings from the Broadway stage about The Boss, his persona on other stages. The next three selections consider influence—the influence Springsteen has on individual songwriters, like Martyn Joseph ("The Welsh Springsteen"), the influence Springsteen has on the public discourse ("This Train: Bruce Springsteen as Public Artist"), and the influence author Flannery O'Connor had on Springsteen ("Born to Write: Bruce Springsteen, Flannery O'Connor, and the Songstory"). In the last of these pieces, Irwin H. Streight explores how Springsteen structures a narrative and crafts characters much as a short

story author might. Part IV concludes with "Ten Great Springsteen Moments (and Five Iconic Concerts)." Befitting a section that identifies Springsteen as an artist, Kenneth Womack's list format recalls a museum exhibition catalog.

Part V, "Springsteen, Sex, Race, and Gender," begins with Natalie Adler's exploration of Springsteen's "performance of masculinity" as a facet of his showmanship that in fact "allows him to reveal the smoke and mirrors behind the construct of masculinity" ("Our Butch Mother, Bruce Springsteen," 157). A Sappho line that perfectly complements "I'm on Fire" is a nice illustration of her alternate reading of the lyrics (158). Gina Barreca ("Springsteen's Women: Tougher Than the Rest") brings together the women in Springsteen's songs and the women in his life to explore his impact on women who are fans. Part V then turns to race with "Shackled and Drawn" and "American Skin: Springsteen and Blackness." These pieces explore Springsteen's relationship to soul music, girl groups, and rhythm and blues and the intersection of these genres with Springsteen's bands, many of which cross the line between "white bands" and "black bands" (181), both in membership and musical style.

Two final, short sections (Part VI: "Springsteen and Aging" and Part VII "Springsteen Beyond Borders") examine Springsteen over time and space, allowing readers a bird's eye view of his career as the book concludes. Jim Cullen offers a retrospective look at the evolution of the rocker persona from one inextricably tied to the literal rebellions of youth to one more concerned with generational differences linked to social reform (rebels without/with a cause) and Springsteen's eventual transcendence of the dichotomy to embrace a world-view more tinged with faith. Daniel Wolff, on the other hand, gives us a snapshot, focusing on just two albums in "Work and Play: Midlife Music." He juxtaposes Patti Scialfa's *Play It as It Lays* with Springsteen's *Working on a Dream* to illustrate the two artists' approaches to a long relationship. With "Springsteen Beyond Borders," we return one last time to personal reflections, specifically those that convey

the expansiveness of Springsteen's worldwide impact on his fans. From a river in Dublin that evokes "The River" to "Land of Hope and Dreams" in Bulgaria, to the Springsteen-inspired political career of an Australian Member of Parliament, this final section brings the collection full circle and reminds readers that Springsteen's art has far-reaching effects and has changed the world in countless ways.

As the editors observe, Springsteen's "music, career, and personal life" have been the subject of extensive coverage and analysis, especially in recent years (6). *Long Walk Home* endeavors to examine the impact the art and the artist have had on individual people around the world. The book fulfills this mission admirably. Individual contributions are of uniformly high quality. The collection as a whole is an engaging read that will interest scholars and fans alike.

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