

how the west was lost

Review by Mark Lamster

The camera, the railroad, and the American West: For a century and a half, they have grown together, their histories inextricably intertwined. In the wake of the Civil War, photographic survey teams, sponsored by the federal government and the railroads themselves, captured the raw expanse and physical grandeur of the land beyond the Mississippi, shaping its destiny. Where those intrepid voyagers set their tripods, the iron highway would soon follow, heralding a future of Progress.

Robert Adams discovered those same western landscapes in the middle of the 20th century, when they were no longer quite so pristine, and when the American photographic tradition of majestic pictorialism, now personified by Ansel Adams (no relation), was beginning to seem passé. For a new generation, the challenge was to record a West transformed by humans' ever-growing presence. In lesser hands, that might have been a dispiriting exercise, but not with Adams. "All land, no matter what has happened to it, has over it a grace, an absolutely persistent beauty," he wrote in his 1974 ode to the suburbanized American frontier, *The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range*. "Even subdivisions, which we hate for the obscenity of the speculator's greed, are at certain times of day transformed to a dry, cold brilliance."

Whether such a broad generosity of spirit is still possible in 2008 is a question left to the reader, but at least within the confines of its own covers, *The New West* succeeds in elevating its humble subjects—desolate strip-mall parking lots, swarms of tract houses—into portraits that have a rigorous, almost clinical beauty. Aperture has just rereleased the book in a facsimile edition and is justifiably hailing it as "a classic" on the order of Robert Frank's *The Americans*. It is that, but to merely call it such is to sell it short, for the *The New West* is something else, too: a perfect



The New West: Landscapes Along the Colorado Front Range
By Robert Adams
APERTURE, 124 pp., \$45

book—judiciously paced, discreet, essentially humane. The construction is flawless, with exquisite reproductions from original prints; paper like velvet; and a clean, straightforward design that reflects the nature of Adams's photographs as it enhances their presence on the page. Put the book down and you'll find yourself infected by its sense of optimistic possibility—the very impulse that has always drawn Americans to the West.

The western landscape is Adams's muse; for Jim Shaughnessy, it is the railroad itself, which he

began photographing as an adolescent in Troy, an old industrial town along the Hudson River in upstate New York. It's not hard to see what caught the boy's imagination. One of the first images in *The Call of Trains: Railroad Photographs by Jim Shaughnessy*, a new monograph of his work, shows a mighty diesel of the Boston and Maine Railroad pulling through a snow-blanketed Troy intersection during the winter of 1958.

In the rarefied world of railroad photography, Shaughnessy is something of a legend, admired particularly for his dramatic night photography

of brooding iron titans hissing steam and beams of lamplight. If his images lack the complex staging of those by O. Winston Link, the king of all train photographers, they demonstrate a knack for composition and an innate sense of drama. Gothamites will surely appreciate his picture of a New York Central diesel thrumming across the High Line, New York City's park-of-the-future, with the Empire State Building in the background as a counterpoint to the train's horizontal thrust.

Shaughnessy is nothing if not indefatigable, as the 170 images collected in the book amply demonstrate. A bit too amply. *The Call of Trains* has its gems, but too many of the photographs are either redundant or banal. The editors would have done better to reduce the quantity and put the savings into a coat of varnish on the plates, to help those that remain to jump off the page. As it is, the book evinces a numbing flatness that only exacerbates the sameness of its images. A glossary of railroad terminology would also have

been appreciated. That said, one suspects that railroad enthusiasts, the primary audience for the book, won't be put off by these flaws, such as they are. Sometimes too much of a good thing can be very good indeed. ■

Mark Lamster is writing a political biography of the artist Peter Paul Rubens, to be published next year by Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.

PRINT EDITORS RECOMMEND

Made in India, by Kalim Winata and Reed Darmon (Chronicle, \$14.95), is a light-speed trip through a century of Indian culture, in which Hindu gods crowd in with matchbook-cover illustrations and Bollywood idols jostle maharajas. CD • **Handmade Nation: The Rise of D.I.Y., Art, Craft, and Design**, by Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl (Princeton Architectural Press, \$24.95), collects pleasingly twee first-person testimonials from sewing, stamping, and beading entrepreneurs in each region in the country. CL • The newest of **Toon Books'** comics for kids (Raw Junior, \$12.95) continue to delight: Art Spiegelman's gently illustrated *Jack in the Box* will have children blissfully shouting along with the title's rhyme-happy toy, and Eleanor Davis's *Stinky* offers a sweet-natured argument for mutual understanding—and for the messier side of life. CD
