

## *False Promise*

Nicholas Lemann. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1991. Pp. 410.

Nicholas Lemann's work is an engaging and powerful analysis of the movement of African-Americans from the rural south to the urban north in the mid-twentieth century and of the sweeping federal programs that were enacted to combat the problems caused by this migration. Lemann follows several central individuals along the route from the share-cropping culture of Mississippi to the racialized ghettos of urban Chicago. He weaves the individual stories of poverty-stricken African Americans into a larger narrative on both the increasing role of race in American society and on the effects and importance of federal antipoverty legislation. Lemann, a journalist and self-described non-academic historian, produces an impressive and compelling social commentary, employing all of his journalistic skills to make the point that the United States should once again enact comprehensive new legislative programs in order to end American poverty. "An ambitious wave of new programs of this kind," he argues, "is the best chance we have to make a real difference in the ghettos." (p. 350) The very elements that make this work such a powerful call-to-arms, however – its unusual organization, reliance on personal stories and interviews, and clear tone of advocacy – simultaneously detract from its value as an objective work of history.

Like the migration it describes, Lemann's work is structured around the theme of grand movement. The book opens abruptly on a small hog farm in the southern town of Clarksdale, Mississippi. This farm, Lemann explains, was one of the places where the mechanical cotton picker was introduced, and was so one of the focal points of the agricultural revolution that drove blacks into the North. Lemann then follows individual migrants from Clarksdale northwards to

Chicago, which was growing enormously as a result of the new influx of African Americans. After describing how these new migrants worked to find jobs and establish families in Chicago, Lemann pulls back from his metaphorical migration and instead focuses on Washington, the center of the federal government's new social programs. Lemann finally returns first to Chicago, and then to Clarksdale, recounting how these new legislative programs altered life in the urban ghettos and the rural south respectively.

Lemann's novel organizational style sweeps the reader into the tide of the great migration, but it proves unwieldy and counterproductive in several key respects. His attempt to mirror the grand journey of the migration in very general steps, for instance, requires him to structure his narrative around long and unwieldy chapters. These long chapters (one of which is over 100 pages) make it difficult for the reader to maintain a hold on the thrust of Lemann's argument and also prevent Lemann from addressing particular thematic questions in any depth. Although he touches on the influence of gangs, the implications of the drug culture, and the specific impact of individual legislative programs, therefore, Lemann is not able to treat any of these subjects in a comprehensive fashion. A more important drawback to Lemann's organizational style is his decision not to include an introduction or a prelude to his narrative. While he is therefore able to draw his reader into the story very quickly, he also leaves his audience confused and unsure about his approach and ultimate direction.

*The Promised Land's* organizational style, while both powerful and theatrical, demonstrates how Lemann's conscious decisions to make his work both accessible and compelling as an advocacy piece detract from its usefulness as an objective history. Lemann makes a similar decision when he determines to use the lives of individual migrants as the primary tool in giving his work shape and meaning. "Perhaps I'm displaying a reporter's bias

here,” he adds, “but it seemed to me that as rich in information about the black migration and its consequences as the archives and published sources were, the memories of the people involved were richer.” (p. 360) This choice ensures both that *The Promised Land* will be engrossing and that its discussions on policies will be inextricably tied to the effects that those policies had on real lives, but it also forces Lemann to rely upon biased accounts that are not clearly representative of the millions of individuals that he claims to discuss.

In selecting subjects to interview, Lemann looks to the population represented in his work: African-Americans who were in some way part of the great migration northwards. His interviews of these individuals are themselves comprehensive and interesting, but they do not present an objective view of history. Even though he is writing about the effects the great migration had on America, and in particular on both Clarksdale and Chicago, he fails to interview a single Caucasian or Hispanic individual in either community. The reader of this book might well wonder if there was anybody in the inner-city ghettos of Chicago who was *not* an African-American from Clarksdale, Mississippi. When southern Caucasians, and even middle-class northern African-Americans, are represented in this book, they find themselves portrayed in the narrative more through generalization and innuendo than through their own voices. “The white Clarksdale planter-businessman class of the late twentieth century [believes] that . . . many of the new black officials were unqualified and incompetent,” Lemann declares, (p. 13) but he cites no interviews and provides no support for this bald assertion.

Perhaps because of his background in journalism, and perhaps because of his desire to make this work accessible, Lemann tends to identify too closely with his characters. As a result, he typically justifies their misdeeds and failings by attributing them to responses to racism. When Lemann explains that Ruby Lee Daniels was pregnant with her married lover’s child, for

instance, he hastens to add that though such actions might seem irresponsible, “for Ruby and perhaps others the real motivation was a desire to live with a basic human complement of love and respect.” (P. 8) Later on in the work Lemann indignantly describes how a social worker asked Ruby if she knew who the father of her third out-of-wedlock child was, “as if Ruby was so promiscuous that the paternity might be a mystery to her.” (p. 68) Recounting yet another such interview after the birth of Ruby’s *fourth* out-of-wedlock baby, Lemann writes that Ruby, “knowing the social workers would believe anything about the promiscuity of black women, said she didn’t know [who the father was].” (p. 84) Lemann tends to reproduce his interviewees’ claims as if they are his own declarative statements. This approach enables him to adhere to the true spirit of comments made during interviews, but it also suggests that all such comments are factually true.

A question far more crucial to the validity of this work as a history than whether Lemann’s choice of subjects is biased is whether those subjects are appropriately representative. Effective oral histories or micro-histories derive their power from the use of representative examples; readers can generalize from specifics only if they are reasonably confident that exemplified individuals resemble the larger populations in question. In selecting subjects to follow throughout his narrative, however, Lemann identifies several individuals who had been born in Clarksdale, moved to Chicago, and then moved back to Clarksdale after living in the Chicago ghettos for decades. As Lemann himself notices, this sort of return was very unusual. “Statistically,” he writes, “the movement of blacks back to the South is insignificant . . .” (p. 302) Some of his figures, such as Uless Carter, are highly unusual in other ways as well. “By committing his life to the solitary pursuit of his ministry,” Lemann agrees, “Uless had taken himself out of the mainstream of black Chicago and staked out a permanent place on the

fringes.” (p. 79) By tying his narrative so closely to these “fringe” examples, then, Lemann sacrifices objectivity for persuasion, and rigorous proof for rhetorical flourish.

Just as Lemann focuses on unusual and extraordinary individuals, moreover, he also focuses the bulk of his narrative on unusual and extraordinary communities. Ignoring for a moment the chapter on Washington, Lemann seems to be suggesting that Clarksdale and Chicago were representative of rural southern towns and urban northern metropolises respectively. Not only does he not provide any support for this implied claim, however, but he actually succeeds in proving almost directly the opposite. He notes that in 1965 several Clarksdale representatives met with Sargent Shriver himself, “a sign of how much this one little town’s antipoverty program meant . . .” (p. 314) In a work on the importance of the great black migration in the twentieth century it seems highly unusual for there not to be a single mention not only of New York and Boston, but even of the great industrial centers of Detroit. In essence, there is no reason to believe that Lemann’s work is more than a close, careful analysis of the relationship between these two individual cities.

*The Promised Land* ultimately lives a double life as social commentary and as history. As a history, the central portion on the legislative atmosphere in Washington stands out as objective, balanced, and strongly supported, while the remainder of the book instead appears at times overly emotional and biased and contains controversial arguments that are unsupported by notes or citations (the question of “forty acres and a mule” on page 12 and the debate over the importance of sexuality to segregationists on page 27). The very failures of this work as an academic history are the ones that help make this work so approachable and compelling as an editorial. Lemann’s conclusion reads far more like a sermon than an objective summary of historical observations and interpretations, but perhaps he feels that a little sermonizing is not

remiss. Academic historians should analyze the past, rather than advocate for the future; they ought not, at least in objective works of history, try to explain what would or should have happened, nor to rail against injustice. Lemann, of course, is not a professional historian, and in writing *The Promised Land* had very different goals in mind than those of the Academy. The work he turned out is powerful, compelling, and quite defensible, and should be an indispensable tool for all serious students of American public policy. Historians should read and use this book as well, of course, but perhaps they should take it with a larger grain of salt.