Peter Brown’s haunting photographs of the high plains, interspersed with Kent Haruf’s narratives of the people who live there. West of Last Chance is a unique collaboration between celebrated photographer Peter Brown and award-winning author Kent Haruf. The result is a profound visual/verbal dialogue of short prose pieces and large-format color images that brings to life this sometimes brutal and incredibly beautiful part of the country. Awarded the Dorothea Lange–Paul Taylor Prize by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University for this project in 2005, the authors write: “Our interest in this part of the world is contemporary but also includes its history and a mix of stories that have passed down over the years, stories that resonate with the land in interesting ways.” It is an evocative work concerned with “moments that describe the beauty, power, tragedy, and cultural complexity of the place itself: the way the land has been used, the way people have lived on it, and the visual record that has been left behind.”

My Personal Review:
Like Kent Haruf I first came across photographer Peter Brown years ago through his excellent book 'On the Plains'. This latest book with 151 photos continues the theme with the same vigor and passion. I thought it was a wise choice to stick to the back roads of the Plains, so much more interesting visually than the cities. The photos really convey the hugeness of this area of the Nation though about a third of the photos are of small towns in Texas.

The photos that I think work best are of the buildings. Shot in the classic tradition stretching back to the FSA photos of the Depression: no-nonsense straight on at eye height and mostly they are framed in the composition, too. I would have been satisfied with the book with just the building photos. Brown's composition framing really does bring out the best in so many of the images. For instance there are a couple of wonderful shots taken in Buffalo, Wyoming (plates 118 and 119) that just...
grab when you turn over the page, full of shapes, color and what appeals to me: plenty of signage.

Throughout the book there are signs and lettering, again very reminiscent of the thirties FSA photos. Now, many photographers (in rather elitist thinking) would deliberately avoid photographing hand-made signs, billboards and commercial lettering but these seem such a part of America that I think it would be foolish to avoid them. Fortunately plenty of photographers go out of their way to capture this silent form of communication because of its visual appeal.

There was a possible interesting theme that could have made the book even more enjoyable: the center of town image. On page eighty-five Brown has positioned his camera in the middle of the main street in Apache, Oklahoma, to take a stunning shot looking to the horizon with the shops and other buildings diminishing into distance. To avoid the highway leaving a huge open space for a large part of the image there are a couple of vehicles filling up this area. I would have liked to have seen more of these in the book. In 'On the Plains' there was a similar wonderful photo but taken from the first floor of a building and looking down the center of Duncan, Oklahoma.

As with any book with over a hundred photos there are bound to be some duds but surprisingly few I thought. The pork producing plant in Yuma, Colorado (page ninety-one) makes a nice horizontal shapes of sky, building and grass but lacks sparkle for repeat viewing, the same for the yellow marked road on page fifty-three.

The book's production, like 'On the Plains', follows the classic photo book style with large images (in 175 screen) centered on the page with generous margins. It does though, have the typical photo book annoyance of placing all the captions on a back page, so plenty of page turning to find out where some place is. This does seem so unnecessary because on many pages there is text by Kent Haruf and a one line caption centered under each photo would hardly spoil the editorial flow.

West of Last Chance does a wonderful job of capturing the Plains with photos as unique as the places.

***FOR AN INSIDE LOOK click 'customer images' under the cover.

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