

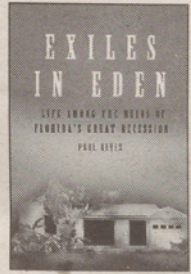
## In witnessing foreclosure crisis, author forgoes judgments

BY MIKE WOLD  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I can't think of a more promising premise for a book than the experiences Paul Reyes narrates in "Exiles in Eden: Life among the Ruins of Florida's Great Recession." Reyes centers his memoir around experiences in his father's business, which involves "trashing out" — that is, emptying and cleaning — houses that have been foreclosed upon when their owners went bankrupt or otherwise defaulted on their payments. Working with banks and realty companies, but surrounded by the debris of ruined lives, Reyes has a unique perspective on the victims and perpetrators of the recent housing crisis.

Reyes holds a degree in fiction writing and it shows: "These were starter kits to the (American) dream, their privacy fences tagged with graffiti, their roofs sprouting satellite dishes." He is fascinated by the detritus of lives left behind for the trash-out crew: "The owner's name was Sue, a fact gleaned from the pile of bills and letters left on the bedroom floor ... she had inherited money from a will ... and was collecting Social Security. ... She'd scribbled epigrams and lyrics on index cards and coupons: 'Words express both the best & worse of life' ... 'She walked across his heart like it was Texas...'"

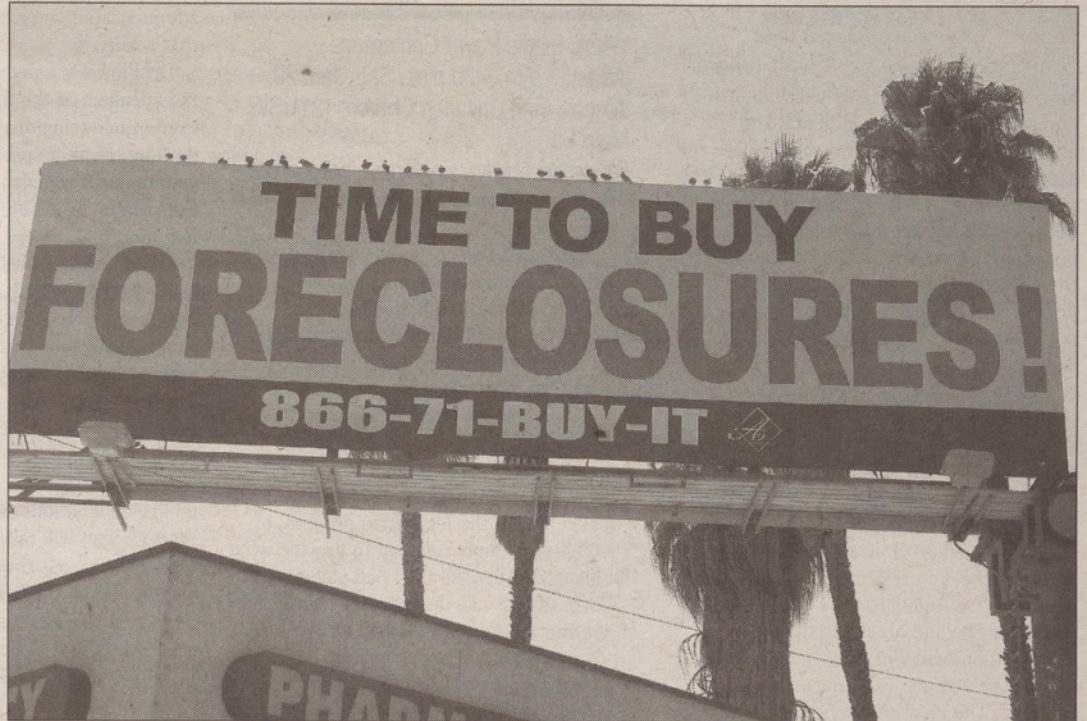
It wasn't too far into the book that I



**Exiles in Eden: Life among the Ruins of Florida's Great Recession**  
By Paul Reyes,  
Henry Holt and Co., Hardcover,  
2010, 272 pages

**Reyes cares about people losing their homes — as do his mother and father — but he never comes to terms with being a cog in the great wheel of home buying, foreclosure, trashing out and selling to yet another family that may or may not be able to afford its mortgage.**

began thinking that this kind of attention to detail would work as well, or better, as a novel. Reyes is working with two Puerto Ricans, one an evangelical Christian who makes pronouncements on God and destiny, the other his mostly silent, verbally abused partner. They work in all kinds of neighborhoods, though mostly poor ones. Reyes asks the neighbors about the people who had lived in the houses. He tracks down one of them, a deacon at an African-American church. He tries to save another from becoming homeless. He accompanies an organizer who moves homeless families



back into foreclosed properties. I longed for a plot to tie these fascinating but disparate elements together: I wanted Reyes himself, the central character, to go through some kind of change of understanding or achieve greater maturity.

Instead, Reyes casts himself as the more-or-less objective, unchanging observer: "I have no excuses, other than naiveté, to explain why the equation between foreclosures and homelessness wasn't more obvious to me. ... I never imagined that the owners I'd met or erased from a place were enduring anything worse than the depressing inconvenience of living on a mother's couch." But even here he can't get out of his head as he displays his ambivalence about Max, the organizer: "I sensed an intelligence in him, of course, but still couldn't peg him, still couldn't tell who, exactly, I was writing about, a revolutionary or a knee-jerk Marxist." As Max moves a family back into the home they had lost, Reyes worries that they may not deserve it: "I wondered if moving this family back into a home they had themselves ruined might make things a little more complicated. ... 'Were they good neighbors?' ... 'Were they rowdy?' It was a leading question, but I thought it was important to know."

Reyes may be too close to his subject — perhaps worried about what his father or his realtor mother will say if he's too sympathetic to radicals or poor people. A

realtor points out the obvious cases where people who lost their houses "knew the market was depressed. They knew they couldn't sell the house, so they ... refinanced it, and then tried to do a short sell." Reyes cares about people losing their homes — as do his mother and father — but he never comes to terms with being a cog in the great wheel of home buying, foreclosure, trashing out and selling to yet another family that may or may not be able to afford its mortgage.

The narrative takes a very different direction, leaving the current foreclosure crisis far behind and visiting the aftermath of a 1950s Florida land scam, one that had taken in his parents when they were newly married. Reyes visits the lot his parents still own. "I stood there looking at the brush, picking burrs off my pants. ... I couldn't imagine this land being worth a tenth of what those hucksters had promised." Yet some of the other lots in the scam eventually developed into a thriving town; it's just that his father's lot was in the wrong place. It's unclear why Reyes chose to end his book this way: Is he saying that winning or losing on real estate is just the luck of the draw in a capitalist market? It's evident that, however much he cares, he's not willing to judge.

*Originally published in Real Change News, Seattle, Wash.*

### Stories: From the Streets

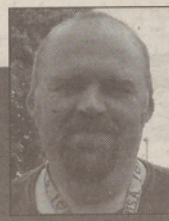


Two nights of poetry, stories, satire, music and art from the streets.

Jan. 28, 6:30 p.m.  
Jan. 29, 8:30 p.m.  
Sellwood Masonic Lodge, 7126 SE Milwaukie Avenue.

\$12 suggested donation

Presented by Lunacy Stageworks and Street Roots.



"It feels so good when people say, 'Good morning,' and smile at me."

— Allen Bennett Jr., Street Roots vendor



**Comments, rants and insights welcome 24/7**

[www.streetroots.wordpress.com](http://www.streetroots.wordpress.com)

If you've missed a copy of Street Roots, check with your local vendor or stop by the Street Roots office at 211 NW Davis St. Or read up on past stories and comments at [www.streetroots.wordpress.com](http://www.streetroots.wordpress.com).

Interested in becoming a vendor or know someone who is? Vendor orientations are Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the Street Roots office, 211 NW Davis St. Orientations on the East Side are at 1 p.m. Fridays at 1435 NE 81st Ave. in the JOIN building.