

Home is where you park it

Jessica Bruder's book "Nomadland" looks at a left-out segment of society searching for a place to park their lives

BY JOE MARTIN
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The headlines may talk about growth, but we are living in a dark economic era. For most families, income and wealth have stagnated in recent decades, barely keeping pace with inflation. Nearly all the bounty of the economy's growth has flowed to the

affluent." That's commentary penned last April by New York Times columnist David Leonhardt.

For many, the vaunted American dream has become a mirage. The United States is the most unequal nation in the developed world. Despite a booming economy and low unemployment rate, economic insecurity is pervasive. A reasonably

comfortable retirement is a receding prospect for millions. According to the National Institute of Retirement Security, our nation "is facing a retirement crisis." That crisis has arrived.

Arising out of this shifting landscape is a phenomenon captured by journalist Jessica Bruder in her chronicle, "Nomadland." It depicts an army of mobile proletarians forced out of settled lives. Proud and determined, they don't consider themselves homeless. They have opted for precarious travel and temp work. Drove of aging citizens who have worked in all economic sectors find themselves strapped for cash.

"Many of the people I met felt that they'd spent too long losing a rigged game. And so they found a way to hack the system. They gave up traditional stick-and-brick homes, breaking the shackles of rent and mortgages. They moved into vans, RVs and trailers, traveled from place to place following good weather, and kept their gas tanks full by working seasonal jobs."

A subculture spawned by the drive to survive. Nobody following the debate

about homelessness will be surprised by Bruder's revelation that "there are only a dozen counties and one metro area in America where a full-time minimum wage worker can afford a one-bedroom apartment at fair market rent. ... The consequences are dire, especially for the one in six American households that have been putting more than half of what they make into shelter."

Traditional pensions are becoming a thing of the past. Older Americans are rudely awakened to the inadequacy of their monthly Social Security checks. In many instances, Social Security is the sole income. Do limited funds go for rent, food or a prescription medication? Difficult choices are a common dilemma.

Bruder's narrative provides an entrée into the lives of resilient Americans meeting challenges with courage and humor. In the nomad world, Bruder encounters an array of appealing characters. They are portrayed with respect and admiration. Some have become friends for whom she has a deep affection. One such is Linda May, an ebullient woman in her 60s who raised two daughters on her own. Her home is a small trailer dubbed "The Squeeze Inn." Many itinerants name their wheeled homes. Bruder named her own van "Halen."

May's path has been a struggle. She "wondered, not for the first time, how anybody could afford to grow old. Of the many jobs she had held in her life, none had brought even a modicum of lasting financial stability." May epitomizes citizens of the "precarariat" (a term in sociology that merges precarious with proletariat) who perform "short term jobs in exchange for low wages." It is not known how many people comprise this portion of America's populace.

Some work undertaken would prove grueling for individuals considerably younger than May and her cohorts. Overseeing federal campgrounds, picking apples, hiring on for the annual sugar beet harvest and performing rigorous tasks in one of Amazon's gargantuan warehouses are strenuous endeavors. The depiction of conditions in those warehouses is shocking. The company refers to its seasonal workers as "CamperForce." It hires these people in the months leading up to Christmas. Some can walk 15 miles in one shift. Workers refer to themselves

as "Amazombies."

A 77-year-old man able to endure warehouse demands says, "I've never had any problem finding jobs ever, but the work is at these slave wages." He laments that this is "the new age of retirees." Bruder admits that she began to see the encampments of those toiling for Amazon as "microcosms of a national catastrophe. The RV parks were jammed with workers who had fallen a long, long way from the middle-class comforts they had always taken for granted. These were standard-bearers for every economic misadventure to afflict Americans in recent decades."

Amidst tedium and unpredictability there is camaraderie, compassion and mutual aid among these travelers of society's edges. They share knowledge, skills and food. An encampment of multiple vehicles can provide safety from the uncertainty of parking solo in a strange place. And there is the annual Rubber Tramp Rendezvous, which is a kind of gypsy convention for the citizens of Nomadland.

Bruder admits that her experience has made her very uneasy about the implications of profuse inequities ubiquitous in today's America. The "chasm" that separates the opulent elite from the rest of the nation may be but one indication of a society unraveling. "And as bad as the situation is now, it's likely to get worse. That makes me wonder: What further contortions — or even mutations — of the social order will appear in years to come? How many people will get crushed by the system? How many will find a way to escape it?"

Some of the people Bruder met were fatalistic that the road was their final option. Yet her irrepressible friend Linda hopes to someday leave the nomadic life. She plans "to construct an Earthship: a passive-solar home built using discarded materials such as cans and bottles, with dirt-filled tires for its load-bearing walls." On remote acreage she purchased near Douglas, Arizona, Linda intends to make her Earthship a reality.

She envisions a simple life lived in peace and harmony with maybe a close friend or two.

Linda, may your dream come true.

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Oregon Government Ethics Commission dismissed the charges two months later.

Since Williams has been in office, the city has also considered rezoning residential areas as "vacation rental zones," and included in these areas were the properties of at least four of William's campaign donors.

When Lincoln City changed its ordinances to allow only "accessory" vacation dwellings in residential zones, Oregonians in Action and Oregon Home Builders CEO and lobbyist, Jon Chandler, sued the city. Chandler was also the man behind Oregon's (now-overturned) ban on inclusionary zoning.

The lawsuit argued the city's limits on vacation homes was in violation of state law, which requires a city to provide for needed housing. It stated that because tourists need housing when visiting Lincoln City, vacation rentals are mandatorily required under the law.

Oregon's Land Use Board of Appeals sided with the city, affirming that state law does not "identify vacation rental dwellings as needed housing."

While statewide political action committees and real estate interests sway local politics, many longtime residents have been pushed entirely out of the democratic process.

Elizabeth Reyes has lived in Lincoln City most her life. It's where she runs the nonprofit Family Promise of Lincoln County that serves homeless families. But she doesn't live there anymore because it's become too expensive.

"A lot of us that live here year round and can't afford to live here in town, have become disenfranchised," she said. "We don't get to vote anymore on anything dealing with the city."

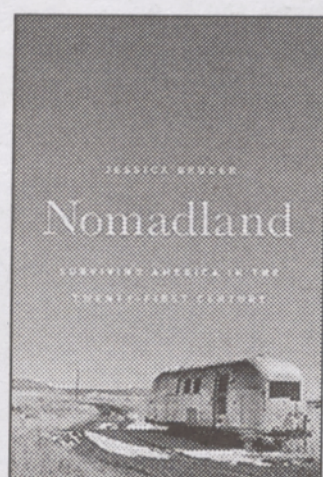
Reyes was able to buy a house for her family in the nearby, unincorporated and inland town of Otis, where she said her mortgage, interest and insurance is less than she would pay for a 3-bedroom apartment in Lincoln City.

About 40 minutes south, the situation is similar. Many people working in Newport's hotels, restaurants and other businesses live in the nearby, inland town of Toledo. It's too tough and too expensive to find housing in the town where they work, and in many cases, used to live.

But as Reyes explains, this means many people whose livelihood depends on the policies put forth in the towns where they work don't get a say on those policies.

"I gave up the right to vote on anything that affects my town," she said. "I don't get to vote on things about (vacation rentals), I don't get to vote on city council members, I don't get to sit on a lot of committees because you have to be within city boundaries, so even though I grew up here, my children go to school here, I work here, I shop here, I do a lot of volunteer work here, I don't get a voice anymore."

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Nomadland:
Surviving
America in the
Twenty-First
Century, by
Jessica Bruder

