



1928 Sunkist Orange crate. SCAN BY MARK CATALENA.

REBECCA ROBINSON

Reading Kevin Starr

Can the California dream be redeemed?

The opening of Gordon Jenkins' *California*, recorded in 1948 for the 100th anniversary of the discovery of gold, begins with a hopeful miner striking out for the promised land. His voice rises, ever hopeful, over swelling strings:

We seek a new land, a dream-come-true land.

A golden rainbow that will never rust.

We've got faith and gumption and trust.

We'll get to California or bust!

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Jenkins's boosterism is the familiar myth of the Golden State. Promising variously wealth, health, fame, and a middle-class wonderland for over a century and a half, it lured millions to California, and no one has done more to weave the promises and pitfalls of the California Dream into a coherent narrative than historian Kevin Starr. His *Americans and the California Dream* series of seven books tells the story of the state's long rise and sharp fall using a dream motif, as illustrated in his book titles: *Inventing the Dream*, *The Dream Endures*, *Embattled Dreams*, and so on. It carries right on through to *Coast of Dreams: California on the Edge, 1990–2003*, at which point Starr concluded that the state wasn't so much on the edge as halfway off it. In an interview, he said that it would take "a near-death experience" to bring the California Dream back from the dystopian destination it seemed to have made of itself.

Bemoaning California's fall from grace has become a source of morbid fixation for pundits and other onlookers, with no shortage of *schadenfreude*. Those declaring the dream dead are often baby boomers who came of age in an era of abundance. Are they riven by guilt about leaving a monumental mess for millennials, the generation born after 1980 to which I belong? Or just nostalgic? Crushing debt, crumbling infrastructure, educational and environmental crises: millennials will pay the price our whole lives for our predecessors' prosperity, we're told, without any of the advantages—economic stability, ambitious public works projects, political consensus—that bolstered California as they came of age.

The California Dream our elders are mourning is the one born in the wake of World War II and chronicled in Starr's *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963*. There is a certain nostalgia to Starr's prose, and he comes by it honestly. This era, during which he transitioned from childhood to adult life, is when California truly arrived on the national stage as a cultural, political, and economic force to be reckoned with—and to be envied. The fawning coverage in national magazines and TV ads featured sun-kissed couples playing tennis and cruising in their

spectacularly finned sports cars on freeways that paralleled the shimmering Pacific waves. This dream was as much a place as a promise, an always-sunny state with residents who lived—indeed, defined—the good life, and stood on the shoulders of a generation that had survived both the Great Depression and World War II. California provided a safe haven for returned soldiers to start families in suburbia; a national model in the interstate system and other ambitious public works projects; and an engine of progress made possible by a political consensus that, up until the late fifties, enabled the growth and expansion of California into a virtual nation-state.

This rosy glow suffuses *Golden Dreams*. True, Starr occasionally reveals cracks in California's veneer, but only in the volume's final pages does he turn his focus to the dissenting voices that never got to bask in the dreamlight. While the California Dream did work for many families who were able to grow and prosper here, many more were left out. And aside from the mention of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta's cofounding of the United Farm Workers and its role in galvanizing Hispanic farmworkers in rural areas, the stories of nonurban residents are largely absent from Starr's examination of this pivotal period in California's recent past. Perhaps it's because their stories can't match the grand scale of Starr's larger-than-life characters (Peter O'Malley, Earl Warren, et al.), but their omission from a nearly 500-page volume serves to reinforce the perception of California as a city-centric state.

Starr's *Golden Dreams* optimism is replaced in *Coast of Dreams* by a decidedly grim tone, as he chronicles the tumultuous events—the LA riots, the Northridge quake, the dot-com bust—that formed the backdrop of my childhood and were seared into my memory and those of residents and onlookers the world over. "Fewer and fewer people were speaking of the California dream these days," Starr wrote in 2003. More "were talking about the challenges facing California." California, it seemed, was becoming "a paradigm of the dream lost—a nightmare dystopia."

Starr's pessimistic turn was well-suited for the real estate bubbles, chronic budget deficits, stunted growth, and polarized politics that crippled the state in the aughts. It sounds all too familiar now, not just to those of us who came of age in the decade since its publication, but I would suspect as well to all those who were bypassed by his dream in the first place.

It would take "a near-death experience" to bring the California Dream back.



Bob's Big Boy and Googie architecture, two icons of California's age of abundance, endure today. PHOTOGRAPH BY RAFAEL GONZALEZ.

But something new is stirring among a younger generation in California. Millennials age eighteen to twenty-nine polled for a 2012 California Forward survey have their fair share of anxiety about the economy and the cost of higher education, but the majority still see the state as a center of creativity, a leader in technological innovation and environmental conservation, and, like the pioneer's mythic promised land, "a place of new beginnings where you can reinvent yourself." Much is made about the flight of Californians to other states, but 85 percent of millennials polled plan to stay. Where some see failure, many of my generation see opportunity. We don't necessarily want the dream of our parents' generation, but a chance to make a place that truly benefits all Californians.

Though Starr, like many California writers, largely ignores rural communities, residents in these vast forgotten areas of America's longest state are carrying out experiments that address head-on the great challenges of our

time. In many cases, millennials are at the fore, leading community-based programs while also working to bridge the rural-urban divide—a crucial component of building a stronger state. And there are signs of renewal to be found in both urban centers and outside city limits.

A place I once called home—Monterey County—provides a vivid example of both the dystopic present and promising paths to a new California. Monterey County, to me, is California contained, with all its riches and contradictions. Its urban-rural split mirrors that of the state at large. Steeped in history, immortalized in art, and inextricably linked through agriculture to the global economy, it is a region equal parts promising and fraught.

The county's natural beauty, human diversity and disparate realities are as strongly imprinted in my psyche as Dodger Stadium and the 210 freeway, where I spent many summer nights and gridlocked days as a Southern California kid. Its sense of history is so strong, from the still-intact



A sign in the Central Valley. PHOTOGRAPH BY CALWEST.

adobes and repurposed sardine canneries in Monterey to the Cesar Chavez murals in Salinas, that it's impossible not to feel part of a California story larger than oneself.

The state's first constitutional convention took place at Colton Hall in 1849; indeed, it could be argued that California's identity began to take shape in downtown Monterey. It is home to extreme wealth, as manifested in the mansions of Pebble Beach, and to grinding poverty, experienced disproportionately by minorities in Salinas and the majority-Latino South County towns. The peninsula towns are peaceful and provincial, where residents and tourists stroll through cypress groves and spot sea otters off the coast. The inland region is tumultuous, where big agriculture pollutes, gang violence claims young lives, and undocumented immigrants live in fear of deportation. It's a globally recognized leader in marine research

and a pioneer in endangered species conservation. Yet it's sucking the Carmel River dry, destroying a vital ecosystem in the process. Its produce feeds a nation, but its workers can't feed their families. Some cities are prosperous, others poor. It has century-old cottages and half-built condos. It's Steinbeck country and Kerouac country. It is, as Starr describes California, "everything and nothing at all."

The county's endless fields of produce, blanketing the Salinas Valley in so many shades of green, belie a cruel irony at the local level. Despite its status as the "salad bowl of the world," Monterey County has the highest percentage of food-insecure households in California. Although there's no denying the vital role the county's agricultural giants play in feeding a nation, it comes at a price: the immense quantities of pesticides used on crops are tainting the water



Flowers in bloom at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens. PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW LEE HIGH.

runoff that empties into Monterey Bay and poisoning the farmworkers who inhale them every day. A land of plenty, a toxic threat: the Salinas Valley is both.

But it's also a laboratory for alternative approaches, which, while still small in scale, have a large reach and great potential to serve as models for a more sustainable future—one that embraces urban and rural, wealthy and downtrodden. The Agricultural and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) is one such initiative. ALBA, which has two farms in rural Monterey County, focuses on small farmers, the majority of whom are first-generation Latino immigrants with limited resources. Through intensive training in organic farming methods and ecologically sound land management, farmers, many of them millennials, grow crops that support the local food economy and make it to the shelves of Whole Foods and Trader Joe's

supermarkets in San Francisco. They're also actively involved in habitat restoration and work with ALBA staff to teach elementary school children in urban and rural districts about soil health, water quality, healthful foods, and career opportunities for small-scale farmers. ALBA's approach, with its emphasis on empowering disadvantaged groups, eliminating food deserts, and promoting environmental stewardship, has earned national attention, numerous accolades, and strong partnerships with supermarkets serving urban centers. A number of its farmers are millennials, who have infused the nonprofit with new energy, ambition, and dedication to strengthening the connection between the rural areas growing organic food and the urban areas they serve.

Some of the most exciting incubators of progressive experiments are taking place in the small-town and rural

Something new is stirring among a younger generation in California.

areas that one in seven Californians call home, but that are virtually invisible to urban California. While they may not rise to the scale of the mega-projects of the state's first modern-day golden age, experiments like these will play an important role in determining just how California will sustain itself in the future.

The new California will not be born of boosterism, and its rebirth may not come in time and at a big enough scale to provide a fitting end to the grand sweep of Starr's works. Rather, small and modest scale experiments, urban and rural, may best be chronicled in understated stories that quietly celebrate the small, incremental changes that slowly but with certainty will move California forward. Our attraction to big themes and heroic stories often has impaired our ability to see progress on a smaller scale.

Yet despite his despair about California's future, Starr contends, and I agree, that we're likely to muddle through all this. Innovation is in California's DNA. From the space program to the semiconductor, from biotech to cleantech, California has long been the birthplace of world-changing ideas, brought into being by natives and émigrés alike. The new California may never again be "that radiant golden vision" Starr believed in so strongly as a young man, but perhaps it's becoming something better: a sustainable state, with an understanding that natural resources are finite, but human capital and imagination are boundless.

Succeeding will require my generation to undertake relentless experiments in service of an all-inclusive California Dream. We may be the unluckiest generation, but that's also why we may be the perfect people to save California from itself: we're sick of the narrative of decline that has been left to us, and we have a fierce desire to prove the naysayers wrong. If we face the future with a balance of idealism and pragmatism, we may win what philosopher Josiah Royce, the man at the center of Kevin Starr's very first book on the California Dream, called our state's "struggle for redemption in the face of failure." **B**