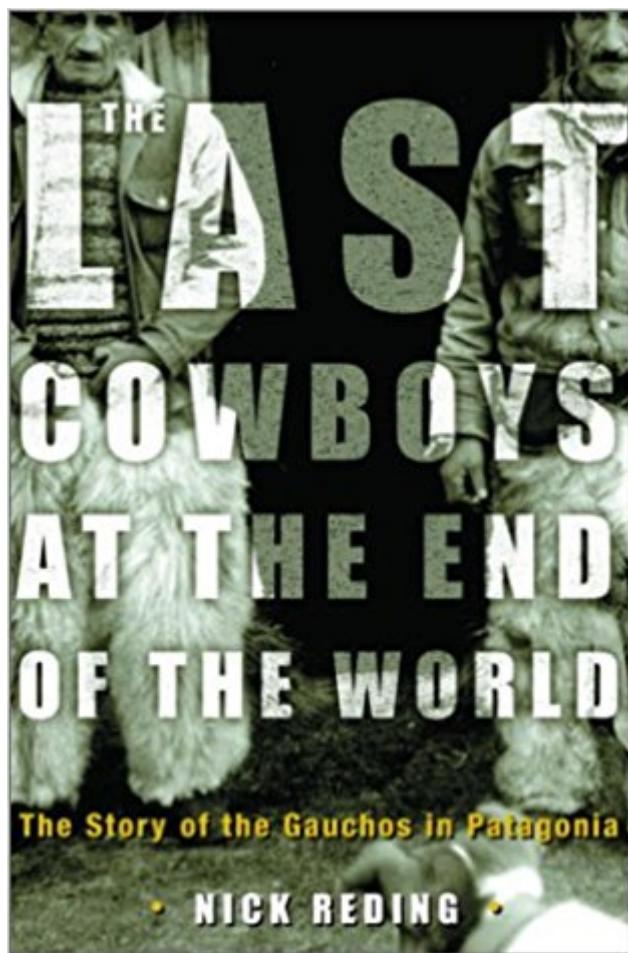


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The Last Cowboys At The End Of The World: The Story Of The Gauchos Of Patagonia



Synopsis

Gaucho conjures up an image as iconic as the word cowboy. But according to historians and anthropologists, their semi-nomadic culture disappeared at the end of the nineteenth century, and no one has seen the gauchos since. Until now. Twenty-five years ago, the government of Chile began building a road into Chilean Patagonia, one of the least-populated regions in the world. In 1995, when Nick Reding traveled down that still-unfinished road into an unmapped river valley, he found himself in a closed chapter of history: a last, undetected, and unexplored outpost of gauchos so isolated that many of them, some of whom are boys as young as thirteen, still live completely alone with their herds, hours on horseback from the nearest neighbors. In 1998, Nick returned to the valley to witness what happens when time catches up to a people whom history has forgotten.

Reding's account of the ten months he spent in Middle Cisnes, Patagonia, is a riveting, novelistic exploration of the longing for change by a people and a culture that, according to history books and the Chilean government, do not even exist. There's Duck, the alcoholic with whom Reding lives and who takes Reding on long cattle drives, teaching him to ride and work as gauchos have for centuries; Duck's wife, Edith, who is convinced she is reliving the life of her estranged mother, who was, according to legend, wed to the Devil; John of the Cows, a famed cattle thief wanted for murder who takes Reding to the secret place in the mountains where he hides his stolen stock; and Don Tito and Alfredo, two brothers who are unsure of their age and communicate with each other through smoke signals. In Middle Cisnes, Reding watches a singular—and ultimately murderous—conflict take hold between those who want to trade life in the nineteenth century for life in the twenty-first and those who want to keep living as gauchos have for hundreds of years. What all of them understand is the near impossibility of a journey through a world where everything from the fierce landscape to a ravaging disease conspires against them, a journey whose terminus—the Outside, the only town in central Patagonia's 42,000 square miles—is a place where the gauchos are not only ill-equipped to live, but clearly unwelcome. The Last Cowboys at the End of the World is a story of regeneration through violence and tragedy. When the people of Middle Cisnes finally try to take their place in the modern world, the results are as horrifying and surprising as they are heroic. In the collision of the gaucho past, our present, and an unknown future, Nick Reding captures a moment in time that we have never before seen and will never see again.

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Customer Reviews

Some people will go to the ends of the earth for a good story; Nick Reding went to the end of the road, which turned out to be one and the same. When the Pan American Highway was extended into Chilean Patagonia, it exposed a people long believed to be extinct--the gauchos. While the gauchos had struggled for centuries with the hantavirus, extreme isolation, and visits by the devil, what the road brought was truly overwhelming. Reding befriends the likes of Duck, an alcoholic slowly breaking from the pressure of the outside; John of the Cows, a cattle thief on the lam; and Don Luis, an aging gaucho with terrific stories to tell. From its dramatic opening to its turbulent end, this elegant, brutal, and funny dispatch from one of the world's most forlorn places attempts to answer the inconceivable: What happens when you suddenly find yourself two centuries in the future? --Lesley Reed

Reding's first book is a fascinating tale of cattle herders (gauchos) living in the desolate reaches of Chilean Patagonia. A successful mix of journalistic reportage and cultural study, it uses the complex linguistic fabric of the gaucho to weave a dynamic story that reads more like fiction than pop-anthropological research. For the better part of a year, Reding lived on land owned by a hardworking, harder-luck couple, Duck and Edith; much of the account focuses on their lives and those of their few neighbors. As a child under Pinochet's regime, Duck saw many people "disappeared" from his semiurban slum, a hotbed of Perin-inspired socialism. Meanwhile, Reding himself embarks on engaging cattle drives, has close brushes with devils real and imaginary, and lives and breathes the stunning isolation and loneliness of life on the high plains of the middle Cisnes River. Despite his fairly intimate relationships with his generous, likable but deeply troubled

hosts Duck is a violent alcoholic; Edith is terrified, angry and convinced her husband is possessed by the devil Reding also delves deep into the inevitable cultural, social and economic divide between them. The gorgeous landscapes, the threatening scenes of drunkenness and folly, the prosaic workdays and the cowboy particulars are surely reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy, but present here is a fastidiously humanist angle, in which the interloping narrator never forgets humility or sensitivity. An exciting third act plays out all the promise and horror when Duck, Edith and their children leave the mountainside and move to the slums of Coyhaique, a fated move for the story's protagonists as they undergo the trials of drink, exorcism and urban decay. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Extraordinary, this uttermost place on earth - still with the dew of earth's first morning upon it and Nick Redding captured this completely through an oblique stance: That of illustrating the angst, the inability of those who are of this place to comprehend the contemporary world that is emphatically overtaking their world. The real persons Mr. Redding meets and writes about are revealed in this book in a thoughtful (though still painful) manner, ultimately showing their hard-scrabble character is as fragile as that of the ever-present wildness of this land. Mr. Redding is correct, for this is the last time this place, these people will exist upon our earth.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book; I liked how the plot jumped in between different characters and I found the dialog between the characters entertaining. I should probably read more books like this one.

Good interesting book. Makes you want to go to Patagonia (or maybe also stay at home). Read it and find out.

These people and their places are disappearing. One day, no one will know anything about the gauchos and or Patagonia.

Amazing story. These are real cowboys,

I liked the book very much because I was traveling to Chile and Argentina and the book is all about the gauchos in those countries. I read it while traveling there and it helped me understand the country, the land and the people who live there.

"Last Cowboys" is journalism of the highest order. It's also a thoroughly enjoyable, compelling, read, a book that could be mistaken for fiction. And first-rate fiction at that. Reding has George Orwell's transcendent approach to investigative journalism. The truth is there to be found. Find it. Tell it. Be as honest and straightforward as possible. But in some ways, "Last Cowboys" is a better book than "Wigan Pier." It's not polemical; Reding is reporting, but he's not grinding any ax. It's much more immediate, with a personal intimacy Orwell never attempted."Last Cowboys" is superb in (at least) five different dimensions:1) a voyeur's view, watching the inner workings of a marriage under stress2) a sociologist's case study of one family making the transition from a herder's life to a modern urban slum. This includes a shift in 'religious' focus, from the all-powerful Devil to the evangelical preacher capable of exorcism.3) an up-close and detailed participation in the life of a pre-modern gaucho4) an incredible adventure. Reding 'went native' to get the story. How he managed the transition from city boy to gaucho is difficult to comprehend. His life there was very tough, very primitive, and sometimes in desperate peril.5) a vivid description of the land forms and the terrain in the Aisen wrinkle of the Andes, along the Cisnes (Swan) River, where the cordillera is tapering off toward the south. It is impossible to know how "true" Reding's report is, how many liberties he took with the material. There is a feeling, from the text itself, and from the Acknowledgments, that the tale has been shaped and edited for the market. My personal estimate is that the shaping and editing were limited to the translation, the selection of material, and the narrative flow. The gaps and loose ends that remain lead me to believe that the facts are true, as they were observed.

This is simply the best book I've read all year. It's the story of a guy who goes to Chile to work as a fishing guide and stumbles on an entire culture of people that history has overlooked--the Chilean gauchos. Most people would have thought, "Wow, that's pretty cool" and left it at that. It's a good thing for us that Nick Reding is a writer with an incredibly sharp and curious mind. Reding returns to live among the gauchos (a cattle-herding people) in remote Chile, where he is exposed to their unique language, culture, and way of life. He stays with a family of five who come to represent many of the different stresses that the modern world places on a poor, rural people--depression, alcoholism, loneliness, desire for material comfort, etc. But Reding gets underneath a lot of this stuff to reveal the spirit of these people who have lived solitary lives in harmony with the stunning landscape for hundreds of years. But don't think for a second that this is some dry sociological account. Reding is first and foremost a writer, and he focuses on the characters he meets and the

many tiny plots that connect people and make up the narrative of a whole culture. He does an amazing job of drawing you in, making you care about the people in the book. He goes on harrowing cattle drives, travels to the mountain hideaways of a known criminal, and documents the way that the modern world is changing the gauchos' way of life.

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