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By Michael Upchurch
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“The Call of the Weird: Travels in American Subcultures”
by Louis Theroux
Da Capo, 266 pp., $24

Louis Theroux is the son of writer Paul Theroux and a TV star in his own right, having worked on Michael Moore’s “TV Nation” and hosted his own British TV series, “Louis Theroux’s Weird Weekends” and “When Louis Met … ” So he’s got connections to burn.

But please don’t hold that against him.

In his first book, he emerges as a charming and slightly nutty character venturing among characters considerably nuttier than he is: neo-Nazis, UFO enthusiasts, porn stars, get-rich-quick con-artists, death-cult survivors, gangsta rappers … and more neo-Nazis.

His prose is conversational yet concise. His psychological reading of his interviewees is probing, even if he does run into some brick walls of mutual incomprehension.

As for his reportage method, it veers between I-Am-a-Camera objectivity and sudden pleas to his subjects to be a little more reasonable.

Sample exchange:

Theroux: “You must see that there’s good and bad in all people, so why not try not to be racist?”

Interviewee: “Because I *am* racist.”

All the pieces here describe second encounters with his subjects, who initially were featured on “Louis Theroux’s Weird Weekends.” Theroux seems to have developed a natural rapport with his interviewees, even when horrified by their actions or beliefs, so he wanted to check in on them and see how they were faring in a post-9/11 world. Setting up shop in Las Vegas, he drives vast distances to drop in on old contacts who include:

Thor Templar, lord commander of the Earth Protectorate in the Alien Resistance Movement (Thor claims to have killed 10 outer-space aliens).

JJ Michaels, retired porn star who finds his new career with Boeing (“something to do with computers”) less “fulfilling” than making movies.

Jerry Gruidl, former member of Richard Butler’s infamous Aryan Nations white-supremacist movement (it was a personality clash, not a change in his beliefs, that got Gruidl kicked out of the organization).

Not everyone is pleased to see him, as Theroux acknowledges. But in most cases, he charms his way past their resistance — even if, in Gruidl’s case, he finds himself “slightly uncomfortable” at “being treated in a grandfatherly way by an unabashed neo-Nazi and anti-Semite.”

A few of his contacts seem disappointed he hasn’t brought his TV crew with him. But Theroux’s switch from talking-head interviewer to writer goes smoothly. He has a great knack for description, whether he’s evoking the atmosphere of a Reno brothel or recounting a lonely drive from Nevada into Southern Oregon: “Farm towns appeared, with John Deere dealerships and feed stores. After the clamorous hoardings and hotels of gambling country, these towns seemed spooky and aloof.”

Calling the communities he seeks out “subcultures” is a bit of a stretch. But whatever you call them, they deliver their fair share of surprises.

At the Idaho “patriot community” of Almost Heaven, Theroux discovers that right-wing tax rebels and would-be secessionists are no happier with the present Bush administration than the most agitated liberal: “They hated the Patriot Act with a passion and they opposed the invasion of Iraq, not on humanitarian grounds so much as an example of the federal government overreaching its lawful powers.”

At a UFO convention, he comes across a man who believes we’re fighting in Iraq not just for the oil but “because they’ve got stargates there.”

Talking with a producer in the porn industry, Theroux elicits this gem on the shortcomings of smut purveyors: “They can’t really put the time into creating eroticism because, hell, most of them don’t know how to spell eroticism.”

Reading this book can make you fear for the American soul. But Theroux is careful to remind readers how marginal these “subcultures” are. Even the largest neo-Nazi movement, the West Virginia-based National Alliance, is said to number less than 1,500 dues-paying members.

“Why do people believe and do weird things?” he asks in his wrap-up. “Because in the end, feeling alive is more important than telling the truth. We have evolved as living creatures to express ourselves, to be

creative, to tell stories. We are instruments for feeling, faith, energy, emotion, significance, belief, but not really truth."

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