

North of Mulholland: Essays from the San Fernando Valley Business Journal

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California's San Fernando Valley is branded in the popular imagination as the apotheosis of middle-class tackiness. "Sadly," Cooper writes, "we have allowed others to define us: Valley girls, strip malls, post-World War II suburban housing tracts, porn capital of the world, culturally deprived, and much worse. The Valley is also branded with the negatives laid on our entire region: smog, traffic congestion, racial strife, too few police and too many crooks."

Cooper, a long-time Valley businessman and regular columnist for the San Fernando Valley Business Journal, argues that this image, never wholly accurate, is definitely out of date. In the columns included in this collection, which cover 2005-09, another picture emerges.

First, there's that matter of demographics. While Hollywood may still populate the Valley with social-climbing Caucasians, Cooper points out that the Census Bureau has a different story to tell.

"It's clear," he writes, "that this region has morphed dramatically from being a white, middle-class suburb of Los Angeles to a particularly diverse area."

More than 40 percent of residents are foreign-born; 61.4 percent self-identify as white, 41.6 percent as Latino, 10.9 percent as Asian, and 4.3 percent as African-American. With 1.74 million residents, if the Valley were a municipality, it would be the country's sixth-largest city.

As a business columnist, Cooper is naturally concerned with boosting the well-being of the corporate community. A campaign to clean up messy profusions of news racks from busy corners enjoys some success. A column about a reading contest and book give-away sponsored by his marketing and public relations company, Cooper Communications, successfully recruits other local businesses.

Sometimes his insights proved prescient. Beginning in the first column of 2006, back before the bubble burst, he began taking Countrywide Financial Corp. to task for its CEO's exorbitant salary and pension plan, not tied in any way to the success of the company. Countywide, of course, turned out to be a major driver of the subprime mortgage fiasco.

Columnists have the difficult job of keeping their readers' interest over the long haul. Many who come on strong fade quickly and lose their edge. Cooper is an exception, never losing his sense of proportion through difficult times, and keeping his material fresh and relevant, whether he's writing about the latest City Council imbroglio or his collector's passion for antique typewriters.

While this book is by nature very local in scope, it should appeal to anyone interested in the changing face of one of the country's iconic, and most maligned, communities.

MARILYN BOWDEN (June 28, 2010)

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