



Great American Outpost: Dreamers, Mavericks, and the Making of an Oil Frontier

Maya Rao

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The story of a twenty-first century American frontier—where the free market reigns supreme as profiteers rush to develop a massive new oilfield.

The word was that you could earn \$17,000 a month in the Bakken Oilfield of North Dakota. So they flooded in: the profiteers, deadbeats, ex-cons, dreamers, and doers. And so too did Maya Rao, a journalist who embedded herself in the surreal new American frontier.

With an eye for the dark, humorous, and absurd, Rao set out in steel-toed boots to chronicle the largest oil boom since the 1968 discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. Businessmen turned up to restart their careers after bankruptcy or fraud allegations from the financial crisis. An ex-con found his niche as a YouTube celebrity exposing the underside of oilfield life. A high-rolling Englishman blew investors' money on \$400 shots of cognac as authorities started to catch on that his housing developments were part of a worldwide Ponzi scheme.

Part Barbara Ehrenreich, part Upton Sinclair, this is an on-the-ground narrative of capitalism and industrialization as a rural, insular community transformed into a colony of outsiders hustling for profit—a sobering exploration of twenty-first century America that reads like a frontier novel.

Great American Outpost: Dreamers, Mavericks, and the Making of an Oil Frontier Details

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From Reader Review Great American Outpost: Dreamers, Mavericks, and the Making of an Oil Frontier for online ebook

Sam Sattler says

As someone who worked in the energy industry for more than 40 years, I was immediately drawn to Maya Rao's "Great American Outpost." I missed out on seeing the Bakkan Play explosion in North Dakota, but heard many tales over the years about what life was like up there during the boom years - the years when the state was almost overrun by oil company personnel and their subcontractors, plus every shyster, con-man, and ex-con who could find his way there. Having witnessed firsthand what it is like when multiple oil companies descend upon an area to get oil leases signed before the competition can get it done, my automatic sympathies were with the landowners and longtime residents of that part of the state. And, from what Rao has to say in her book, those sympathies were well-placed.

The energy industry is one of periodic boom or bust, with everything based on the commodity pricing of crude oil itself. Because it is difficult to predict a drop in crude prices, oil companies rush to make their money while prices support drilling costs, plus some profit. Service companies (including every existing business in that part of North Dakota) double and triple prices in order to get their own piece of the pie. Then, when the bottom drops out of pricing again, the mess is too often left for others to clean up...state and Federal money has to be spent.

Anyone wondering what a modern gold rush would be like, needs to read "Great American Outpost." As the book's subtitle says, it is an account of "dreamers, mavericks, and the making of an oil frontier." The book's glaring weakness, in my opinion, is that Rao ends it rather abruptly instead of detailing her own re-entry into the "normal" world - as well as others she features in the book handled it.

Michelle says

In this stunning masterpiece debut, Great American Outpost: Dreamers, Mavericks, and The Making of an Oil Frontier author-journalist for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Maya Rao, tells the extraordinary story of the North Dakota Bakken Oil Boom (2010-2015) that centered in the city of Williston, N.D. At the peak of the boom, the area filled with thousands of new arrivals, and has often been compared to the 1849 San Francisco Gold Rush. The Dakota badlands in the Bakken formation contain the largest oil reserves in the U.S. after Texas.

With the price of oil selling for \$100.00 a barrel, oil fracking was used to extract oil from the bowels of the earth, each frack was serviced by one to five million gallons of water. Fresh water was hauled in and salt toxin water hauled out. About 2,300 truck-loads were required to service each operating oil well. Unfortunately, investigators found cases of illegal waste water and other forms of disposal which was forbidden by state and federal regulations. Corporate oil companies were fined, fees were paid etc. However, polluted portions of the land were inhabitable and destroyed for future generations.

Large semi's and industrial trucks clogged Hwy 85 through Williston, and traffic accidents resulting in many deaths were common. The entire area was changing so rapidly with all kinds of construction from man-camps, RV and mobile home parks, strip malls, taverns/bars, gas with service stations and every form of business to accommodate the influx of people arriving from around the globe. All forms of services, food

and lodging were offered at exorbitant costs. With the unrelenting sub-zero winter temperatures, snow, the wind-chill factor of the badlands, life was brutal for those living in their cars or small trailers unable to afford basic shelter.

At the height of the boom, the urban research and civil engineering staff were unable to accurately map population growth. Maya was stunned at the level of criminal activity. A charming British con-man disappeared with a fortune stolen from investors from Singapore and other locations abroad; calls went unanswered, investigative authorities were unable to trace or find him. A well regarded business woman was arrested sent to prison for operating drug ring based out of multiple locations and states.

Maya rode in a tanker, the driver offered to teach her to drive a truck and get her CDL (Commercial Driver's License) so she could get a land a well-paying job at about \$80,000 per year. The experienced oil field workers arrived from Texas and Oklahoma: they were "roughnecks" "wildcatters" "tool pushers" "drillers"-- the work was demanding, dangerous and very hard. Most of the men were single, respectable and responsible fatherhood was typically measured by child-support payments of sons and daughters the men seldom heard from or didn't know.

In 2015, with a global surplus of oil, the barrels of crude oil prices began a rapid decline. Corporate oil companies were turning towards pipelines over using truck transport. This would raise serious environmental concerns that are still being addressed. Workers began leaving Williston as quickly as they had arrived. This culturally outstanding work accurately portrays a boom and bust cycle of an all-American town, events and people daring enough to risk everything they had for a better way of life. ** With much appreciation and thanks to Hachette Book Group via NetGalley for the DDC for the purpose of review.

John Casserly says

I tried, but just never got invested in the story. Not sure why i'm not reading so much more. Maybe I'll try something with less than three hundred pages.

Geoffrey says

(Note: I received an advanced electronic copy of this book courtesy of NetGalley)

Rents for apartments on par with San Francisco out in the far northwest of Dakota. A local minimum wage needs to be at least \$14 to keep up with the amount of money that is flowing around. People who arrive from around the country with little more than the shirts on their backs quickly finding jobs that let them make six figures, yet forced to live in vans or in crowded apartments a la freshly graduated college students. Conmen of all shapes and sizes converging together into some of the northernmost reaches of the upper midwest to carry out scams of all sorts in order to try and get a piece of the pie.

These are only a few examples from a world of literally life-threatening daily work, cutthroat greed, rural communities in chaos, wild breakneck boom, and heartbreaking bust that are so thoroughly-documented in this work by Maya Rao. At one point, a man under investigation from the SEC, a woman soon to be busted for a multi-state drug ring, and a man wrapped up in a massive waste-dumping scandal are all eating dinner together at a party in a swanky new housing development. Yet because Rao's documentation of all the

absurdities of life around the Bakken Formation at the the height of the rush is so thorough, this scene doesn't feel even half as outrageous in the context of the book as it sounds here.

"Great American Outpost" is a magnificent work of modern-day journalistic writing that is exhaustive in coverage of its topic. Thanks to Rao's hard work, you are going to be incredibly hard-pressed to find a more intimate look at life in the oil fields of North Dakota.

Nick Penzenstadler says

Met Maya down at IRE Orlando this year and bought her book. Great journalistic storytelling with the deep sourcing and background needed for this type of book. Enjoyed the absurd sections about NatGeo's reality tv show. They're a disgrace.

Diane Hernandez says

The Great American Outpost is a scattershot memoir of the North Dakota fracking oil boom and its impact on local residents.

In 2011, the first horizontal fracking oil well was drilled in North Dakota. What followed totally changed the laid back farming vibe of the state. Out-of-state workers flooded the area in search of unskilled and truck driving jobs paying upwards of \$150,000 a year. Many were criminals, drunks and/or avoiding their child support orders. The jails were so full they had to take criminals to Montana to house them. With so many large trucks on the road, locals were dying regularly in traffic accidents. Enterprising locals upped their food prices over 100%. Housing was scarce. One English con man scammed international investors with a resident hotel Ponzi scheme.

While somewhat interesting, the Great American Outpost didn't hold my interest throughout. It needed some editing to mine a coherent plot from its episodic stories of North Dakota's oil rush. 3 stars.

Thanks to the publisher, Public Affairs/Perseus Books, and NetGalley for an advanced copy.

Jean says

I've spent almost my entire life in southwestern North Dakota, only a few hours away from the epicenter of the recent oil boom in the Bakken. And even down here on the fringes of the boom, it's hard to believe how much has changed in such a short period of time.

Maya Rao spent two years in the Bakken, investigating these changes, talking to farmers and ranchers, oil workers from around the world, oil executives, and government officials. Rao has written a book that brings to light how complicated this boom has been for everyone involved, while keeping an open mind and remaining neutral. The boom was romanticized, then villainized by everyone who has survived it (depending on which side you're on, of course). Rao is unbiased in her reporting of the issues, making this a perfect read for anyone who is interested in learning what life was and is really like in the Bakken. As someone who lives on the very edge of the oil activity, it gave me a much more clear idea of what happened during the

boom/bust to my neighbors to the North. It's not as clear cut as some would believe, and Rao does an excellent job showing both sides of the story. This is a great book for anyone who is interested in learning about the largest oil boom in modern history, told by the people who lived it.

Thank you to NetGalley for an advance copy of this book.

Roxane says

I really wanted to love this book because the subject matter is so interesting--the oil boom in North Dakota, and the inevitable rise/fall cycle brought about by unchecked capitalism. The author, Maya Rao, clearly immersed herself in the environment. What works really well in this book is how atmospheric it is. Her writing soars when she is describing the people and places of the Bakken oil field. But there isn't enough context. It's never really made clear why she was reporting on the oil boom. Like... she was just there? There were so many strange asides and observations that didn't quite make sense. The book, as a whole, didn't have a cohesive narrative beyond the rise and fall of the oil boom. I didn't understand how the narrative moved from one chapter to the next and one section to the next. BUT, as a series of profiles of a very remote place overrun by greed and the people who might be drawn to such a place, there's a lot to like. The author's research and reportage are to be commended. Curious to see what she does next.

William L says

This book is about some intriguing characters from everyday life and all parts of the USA who made their way to the oil fields of North Dakota to make their fortunes and sometimes to escape their pasts, at least for a while. Ms. Rao did not research her book from afar but rather went to North Dakota to live part of the time and even work as a cashier. She experienced some of the same trials and tribulations and difficult living conditions as the people who worked there. Her book is a flesh-and-blood narrative and a welcome departure from dry biographies about elite Silicon Valley entrepreneurs or NY or Conn. hedge-fund managers who live in luxury. One of the best books I've read in a long time.

Lecy says

This is a documentary about the oil boom in North Dakota and its impact on local residents. Rao introduces a lot of interesting characters and the way she narrates their stories is very much like a memoir. I really appreciated how her writing draws you in and places you on the scene with the people she's telling you about. You know them. You follow their stories and you have a difficult time not feeling invested in them. The book is a little over 330 pages, but it felt so long. Perhaps it's the subject matter that made it more tedious to read. *ARC provided by the publisher in exchange for my honest review.

Janet says

I received a DIGITAL Advance Reader Copy of this book from #NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. From the publisher -

The story of the twenty-first-century gold rush to the gas and oil fields of North Dakota--and of the migrants, criminals, and oil barons willing to do whatever it takes to cash in

The word was that you could earn \$17,000 a month in the Bakken Oil Field of North Dakota. So they flooded in: the pioneers, outcasts, dreamers, failures, drifters, deadbeats, profiteers, and felons. And so did Maya Rao, a journalist from neighboring Minnesota who in 2015 embedded herself in the surreal new American frontier.

With an eye for the dark, humorous, and absurd, Rao set out in steel-toe boots to chronicle the largest oil boom since the 1968 discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, reporting from truck stops, oil tanks, and North Dakota bars.

Part Barbara Ehrenreich, part Upton Sinclair, this is an on-the-ground narrative of capitalism and industrialization as a rural, insular community transformed into a colony of outsiders hustling for profit--a sobering exploration of twenty-first-century America that reads like a frontier novel.

I have family that moved to North Dakota in search of the dream, much like those who went to the Yukon Goldrush and the Goldrush in California --- all hoping to become million/billionaires just like that family in the (awful) TV show "Oil". The oil is there as is everyone trying to make money off of the workers --- many live in drafty, cold, FEMA-like trailers and are bombarded with high prices everywhere around them from everything to the grocery store to the prostitutes. BUT THEY CAN AFFORD IT.

This is not "new news" -- just ask anyone who lives in Fort McMurray, Alberta (Canada) and has these problems around them ... young men making money hand over fist and very little to do but drink and watch strippers there to make THEIR fortune.

Greed is not always good and Maya Rao, the author, brings that out in a wonderfully written book that at times made me shake my head and wonder if it was actually a novel I was reading. Five stars for sure!!!

Sarah says

This was fascinating! Maya Rao embeds in the Bakken from 2014-2016 to report on the oil boom. She befriends everyone from truck drivers, oil rig workers, oil executives, and shady businessmen. Everyone looking to strike it rich. She documents the rise and fall of the oil industry as only an insider can. People who arrived early to the boom, were able to get astronomical salaries only to lose it all a short while later. She has a great talent for telling their stories and making the reader understand their side of things. It was amazing to me the things she was able to get people to talk about. Definitely a worthwhile read. Thank you to NetGalley for providing an ARC for review.

gnarlyhiker says

A hoot and informative read. You'll meet all sorts of people, literally, doing all sorts of jobs. And they don't all live happily ever after.

good luck

**ARC/NetGalley

BDW says

Well written inside view of the crazy side of American capitalism. Rao introduces a rogues gallery of characters along with hard working folks focused on trying to get ahead. she covers the full arc of the Bakken from beginning of the boom to bust to semi settled.
