



## Book Review: "The Good Hand"

John Lepley

***The Good Hand: A Memoir of Work, Brotherhood, and Transformation in an American Boomtown* by Michael Patrick F. Smith (New York: Viking, 2021). 458 pages. \$18.00 paperback.**

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“We need to be *bad motherfuckers* because the alternative is fear, and fear fucks up” (p. 405, emphasis in original). Michael Patrick F. Smith had good reason to be afraid. In 2011, two years before he began working as a “swamper” in an oil patch in North Dakota, 138 oil field workers died on the job in the United States. It doesn’t help that one of his coworkers, the appropriately nicknamed “Wildebeest,” subjects him to mental cruelty on a regular basis. Smith faces other occupational hazards besides verbal taunting and machinery that could crush him in a split-second. Alcohol, isolation, and testosterone endanger Smith and his workmates as much as the equipment they erect and disassemble across the Bakken Shale. *The Good Hand* is Smith’s memoir of exhausting work in an unforgiving climate.

Thousands of people flocked to North Dakota as an oil boom promised a respite from the financial crisis and recession of the late 2000s that continued into the 2010s. Although he had a steady job in New York City, Smith felt other reasons to go to the Great Plains. The dirty, physical labor of cleaning up from Superstorm Sandy in 2012 satisfies him unlike his office job. Ironically, Smith is conscientious about the role of fossil fuels in climate change, but that doesn’t deter him from venturing west to stake his claim in the fracking bonanza. Like Theodore Roosevelt—whom Smith discusses—the Strenuous Life beckons him. “Standing in the backyard of the flophouse, a day shy of starting work as an oil field hand, I know somewhere deep inside myself that I want to get my ass kicked,” he explains (p. 115). This is the *Brotherhood* part of the subtitle: Smith getting his ass whooped by tough manual labor and bonding with men in bars in Williston, North Dakota, over booze and stories of how their fathers abused them.

Corny self-reflection is a common pitfall of memoirs. Smith veers into this territory when he describes himself becoming aware of the physical and mental transformation the work is doing to him: “I feel big, powerful, and resolved. I’m finding my place here” (p. 299). Reading against these tropes, though, *The Good Hand* offers a stark portrait of the material aspects of the fracking boom. Williston simply did not have enough housing to accommodate all the people who flocked there. Rents skyrocketed and landlords squeezed too many people into small spaces. Some of the most affecting parts of this memoir are Smith’s descriptions of his living companions and conditions. At one point, he shares the living room of a small condo with four other men (in addition to several people who live in the condo’s other rooms): “Life in the flop is how I imagine jail must be on work release. It’s all about killing time, watching TV, maybe reading, trying not to let the other guys get on your nerves too bad” (p. 160).

The people that Smith meets in Williston are deracinated and on the edge of destitution. Their experiences recall the “hard living/settled living” binary that Joseph T. Howell describes in *Hard Living on Clay Street*, and most of them live hard.<sup>1</sup> Some of his coworkers served time. For example, Erwin “Jack” Jackson worked in the oil patch with Smith for a while and was then arrested for a parole violation in Washington State. He later reappears in Williston selling marijuana. Another coworker, a Native American, nicknamed “Porkchop,” sports gang tattoos and has teeth that were sharpened with a file. Smith does not romanticize their backgrounds. “Arguably, they are drawn from the bottom of society’s totem pole,” he writes. Smith has an advantage over them since he has a small savings account to cover expenses, and friends that loan him money for an expensive rental deposit, but he is hardly secure.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph T. Howell, *Hard Living on Clay Street: Portraits of Blue-Collar Families* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 6–7.

Smith's class awareness has its limits, too. Even if the heavy labor has salutary effects on his physique and sense of self, the workdays are long, weekends off rare, and his employer is cheap; on a job that requires overnight travel, it doesn't provide per diem or holiday pay. In one instance, Smith's boss and his peers confront him over the accusation that he's "a Democrat" and voted for Barack Obama. However, apart from this political spat Smith's encounters with management are infrequent and generally benign. In short, the transformation he seeks is based in the workplace, but he does not try to transform the workplace.

*The Good Hand* is an enjoyable read. The chapters are short and episodic, and Smith is a compassionate writer. His coworkers' casual racism angers him, and he is aware of the gendered violence in the oil boomtown. This memoir also offers a sincere picture of Smith's friendship with his work buddy, Huck, a sweet-natured giant whose self-destructive behavior frequently lands him in trouble, and later kills him when he chases liquor with opiates. *The Good Hand* is at its best when Smith's interactions with coworkers and friends reveal his thoughts and feelings.