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James C. Schaap

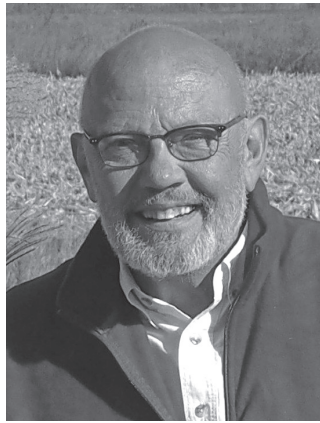
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Dignity: A Review of J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016); Even Osnos' *Wildland: The Making of America's Fury* (2021); and Chris Arnade's *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America* (2021).



by Jim Schaap

It's not difficult to look up at *Dignity*, South Dakota's most recent gigantic sculpture (a la Rushmore and Crazy Horse) and register more than a little snobbishness, despite her remarkable size and beauty. Historically at least, white folks haven't shown all that much respect to Native Americans, women especially, some might argue. If

Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor Emeritus of English, Dordt University.

crime figures tally anything, yet today indigenous women don't command much respect.

Still, there she stands, far above the northern end of Lake Francis Case, a gorgeous, fifty-foot Indian princess looking down at once was the Missouri River but is now one of a series of reservoirs that, ironically, collectively drowned a substantial historical record of Native history and culture forever.

Dignity? Sure. Anyway, there she stands in her diamond-studded raiment, like the royalty Indian women rarely have been, perfectly beautiful as she receives a dazzling star quilt. Night or day, she's impressive—she really is. Still, it's difficult to be enthralled. South Dakota's *Dignity* can perhaps too easily be seen as yet another iteration of the white man's desire to romanticize Native life. *Dignity* may well be the latest version of the "noble savage."

I couldn't help thinking of *Dignity*, that fine sculpture, when I read Chris Arnade's *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back-Row America*, because in it, Arnade does everything he can to feature fellow human beings (of all races, by the way) who in the common mind may least express what most of us believe to be dignity. It's a precious task he's up to.

“The image of God” is not a phrase you’ll find in Arnade’s *Dignity*, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t on the trail of the foundational, Christian truth. He wants to know society’s most unloved, so he hangs out at McDonalds, attends shaky Pentecostal fellowships and smoky strip clubs on seamy streets all over the country, rural areas as well as urban, looking for dignity among those we too easily assume have none. In *Dignity*, he ends up looking to find something of the image of God.

Arnade’s *Dignity* is one of a shelf full of books

Donald E. Trump.

Oddly enough, J. D. Vance is presently running for a U. S. Senate seat from Ohio and has become almost exactly the kind of politician Trump himself appears able to clone. Whatever he is today, he was the first to alert the public to Trump’s beloved reception among those men and women aggrieved by tribal politics and the virtual disappearance of jobs that pay enough to raise a family. They were left behind, and Trump knew it.

Evan Osnos’s *Wildland: the Making of America’s*

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that attempt to understand our cultural time and place, especially the cultic discipleship of ex-President Donald Trump. J. D. Vance gave Arnade’s book a blurb, which makes sense because Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* was arguably the first book to explore the hearts and minds of those who so deeply love Donald E. Trump—and *love* is not hyperbole. Hundreds of thousands turned out on January 6, 2021, the vast majority of whom were not plotting destruction or even the petty criminality that occurred that day.

Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, “published already in 2016, got a running start on what has become since a familiar path. Vance used his own childhood—even his mother and his grandmother—and “the hillbilly culture” in which he was reared to help readers understand how a mega-millionaire who never knew an hour of poverty drew extraordinary appeal from men and women, mostly white, who’d lost everything when coal mines and factories closed up and left for greener, foreign pastures. J. D. Vance began an explanation of the grievance politics that now characterize so much of Trump’s continuing appeal.

Vance’s people were left behind by the “elites.” When they were, there was nowhere left for them to turn for dignity, but escape; hence, the rush of opioids. Vance showed readers forgotten men and women totally abandoned by academia, by government, by politics, by the media, but highlighted by

Fury travels much farther and deeper into our national saga. Osnos’s book is bigger and broader in its judgments and research than anything in J. D. Vance. It’s an encyclopedia of our time, specifically the focus which ex-President Trump has brought into all of our lives.

Osnos, who spent a decade abroad as a writer for the *New Yorker*, is well-positioned to do the work he’s done in *Wildland*. Using his significant journalistic powers (an earlier book, *The Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*, won the National Book Award) examines in persistent detail how life has changed, during his absence, in Greenwich, Connecticut, his hometown; in Clarksville, West Virginia, where he worked at a newspaper, his first job after college; and in Chicago, where he worked later, for the *Tribune*.

What Osnos mines from each of these locales is as comprehensive as his arguments are convincing. By his analysis, Donald Trump didn’t really create Donald Trump. Cultural movements he identifies and examines in detail combined to deliver the ex-President to a segment of the American public who were happy to have a Donald Trump lead them into the future.

As the title suggests, Evan Osnos is not taken with American society at this moment. His compendium of facts and cultural analysis paints a picture of a nation under siege by a variety of ills, piloted along by a government that is, as we all can

see, mired down by divisions all but impossible to transcend. If hope appears anywhere on the national landscape, for Osnos it appears only in little, private worlds created by individuals of courage and will, who work hard and work stubbornly at doing little things to make the world a better place.

Chris Arnade is a journalist/photographer, which means his *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America* doubles as an album of photographs of the men and women he's interviewed, most of them set within the worlds in which they have their being. Aiming a camera at the men and women who appear on his pages—people with issues and often at the bottom of economic and social registers—is risky business because such portraits can feel like exploitation. Maybe that's just me—I don't know; but I couldn't help assessing the gallery of stunning photographs in *Dignity* to be of marginal benefit to the book. I listened to much of it, and when I did, I didn't miss not seeing the pictures. Evan Osnos's *Wildland* is far more comprehensive, by design, than either *Elegy* or *Dignity*. Osnos lays out an encyclopedia of the last several years—right up to and including January 6, 2020. If you're going to read one such book this year, *Wildland's* comprehensive look at the state of our union today is most helpful.

But Arnade's *Dignity* does something neither of the others does: it features the role of faith, the Christian faith in the cultures of his subjects. Faith, of course, is not incidental to the story of Donald Trump; even today, a year after he has left office, the ex-President would be nowhere without his loyal evangelical following. What many still do not fully understand is how so many passionate evangelicals gave their hearts and souls to a man with his past, a man who today wanders Lear-like through life, speaking of nothing but what others call “the big lie.”

It seems Arnade may have been interested in the same target, an investigation into what makes the subjects he decided to quiz, most of them “down and out” but ardent followers of a billionaire who knows nothing about the blues. If that was his original goal, he soon enough wandered from his mission when he discovered that his subjects, quite clearly, didn't want or need to go there. Their stories don't really have time or patience for politics. They

are too often working hard at just staying alive.

What I found most fascinating and blessed in Chris Arnade's *Dignity* is the up-close attention he pays to faith in the lives of his subjects, not as an attribute of Trump's cultic following but for purposes of describing the vital and even redemptive role the Christian faith plays in the lives of people from whom it is easy to look away—sex workers, drug addicts, petty criminals, people literally and figuratively “on the street.” *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America* locates its central characters as those who sit in “the back row.” “Front row/back row” is pervasive throughout. He's describing a kind of church—front row folks, as you can imagine, are those who've been handed the keys to the kingdom, who know the rules, whose lives have been greatly improved by education. I am in the front row.

Arnade, like Vance, ambles along closer to personal memoir than does Osnos. He confesses himself to be the child of cradle Catholics who did not take their faith with particular seriousness. Whatever faith he had as a child fell away in college, he says, a victim of what he calls “science,” as if the two were opposites. It's difficult to find similar studies that analyze the effects of the Christian faith in people's lives, but Arnade casts no doubt: he didn't look for it, but what he discovered in all those interviews is how important the Christian faith is to the dignity we all deeply need and search for. One place he finds it is in church.

The “back row” includes those who barely make it into church at all, men and women who do not play starring roles in our lives or anyone else's—except perhaps in the headline-grabbing crimes they commit. They try—and most often fail—to get clean. They turn tricks. They wear black fishnet and ply themselves on street corners. The imbibe drugs, have for years, and occasionally turn to sales if they need cash. If your seat is in the front row, you've got to turn all the way around and look away from what's happening up front to realize that folks are even back there.

But what he comes to learn is that the Christian faith sustains them. The church, their faith in God and the risen Christ, is a significant source of their dignity. It's all there:

The tragedy of the streets means few can delude

themselves into thinking they have life under control. You cannot ignore death there. You cannot ignore human fallibility. It is easier to see that everyone is a sinner, everyone is fallible, and everyone is moral. It is easier to see that there are things just too deep, too important, or too great for us to know. It is far easier to recognize that one must come to peace with the idea that “we don’t and never will have this under control.” It is far easier to see religion not just as useful but as true. (119)

Dignity is not about Donald Trump, although the pathways it creates into our times inevitably lead us into the neighborhood of the ex-President’s following. *Dignity* is all about its title, how some of us, even the ones in the back row, seek to find it by way of the Christian faith. “We need everyone—those in the back row, those in the front row—to listen to one another,” Arnade says, “and try to understand one another and understand what they value and try to be less judgmental.” Chris Arnade is trying to

understand where people who seemingly have very little find their dignity.

The unavoidable question I had when following the seamy lives Arnade explores is, “Is my religious sensibility big enough, wide enough, to admit even Arnade’s people, to love men and women who so easily make themselves unlovable?” I was raised on the Beatitudes. I cut my teeth on the tale of the Good Samaritan. I wrote a book about grace. The most radical direction Arnade shows us is old-line biblical truth: “to love God above all and my neighbor as myself. On these two commandments...” well, you know.

Dignity isn’t primarily about *our* church, *our* congregation, *our* confession, or our immediate faith family. And yet it is. It’s about me, and maybe you too, about how I judge others, or condemn them, about who I consider to be children of God and who I may consider to be beyond the pale. And who the Creator of Heaven and Earth may not.