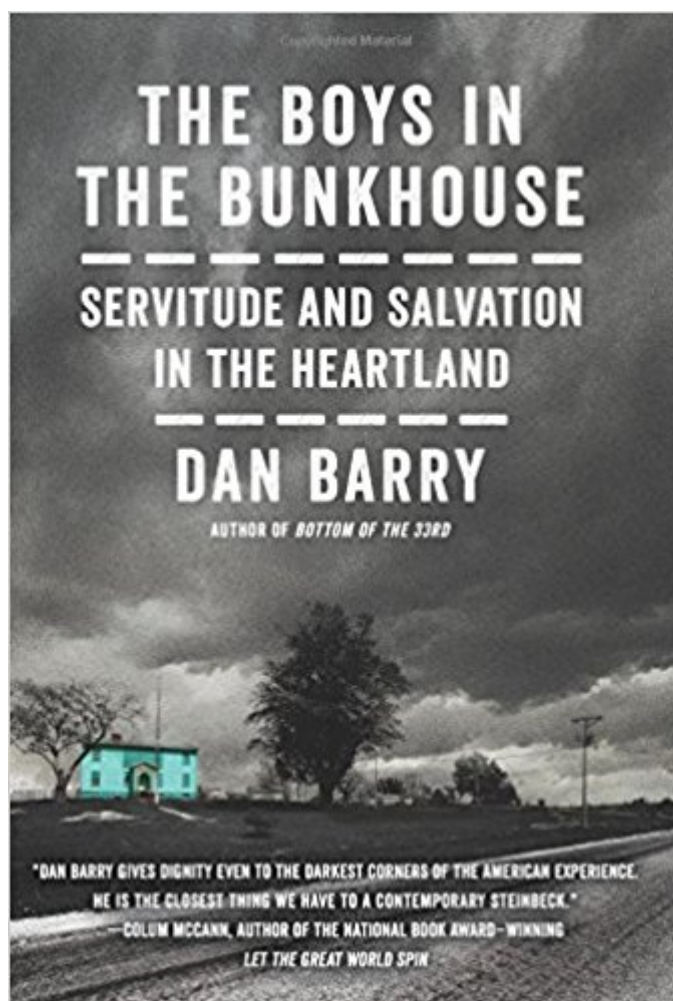


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The Boys In The Bunkhouse: Servitude And Salvation In The Heartland



Synopsis

With this Dickensian tale from America's heartland, New York Times writer and columnist Dan Barry tells the harrowing yet uplifting story of the exploitation and abuse of a resilient group of men with intellectual disability, and the heroic efforts of those who helped them to find justice and reclaim their lives. In the tiny Iowa farm town of Atalissa, dozens of men, all with intellectual disability and all from Texas, lived in an old schoolhouse. Before dawn each morning, they were bussed to a nearby processing plant, where they eviscerated turkeys in return for food, lodging, and \$65 a month. They lived in near servitude for more than thirty years, enduring increasing neglect, exploitation, and physical and emotional abuse until state social workers, local journalists, and one tenacious labor lawyer helped these men achieve freedom. Drawing on exhaustive interviews, Dan Barry dives deeply into the lives of the men, recording their memories of suffering, loneliness and fleeting joy, as well as the undying hope they maintained despite their traumatic circumstances. Barry explores how a small Iowa town remained oblivious to the plight of these men, analyzes the many causes for such profound and chronic negligence, and lays out the impact of the men's dramatic court case, which has spurred advocates including President Obama to push for just pay and improved working conditions for people living with disabilities. A luminous work of social justice, told with compassion and compelling detail, *The Boys in the Bunkhouse* is more than just inspired storytelling. It is a clarion call for a vigilance that ensures inclusion and dignity for all.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I had a very hard time reading this book, about how disabled people have been treated in our own country for years. My grandmother and mother were from Iowa and Illinois, so I learned about farming in the Midwest and how disabled people were treated from them, as my mother got polio at age 13. Even she, with a genius mentality, was going to be warehoused with the mentally challenged, physically disabled and the criminally insane. All because she lost the use of one leg and had to walk with a brace and crutches. This is how ALL disabled people were treated in '40's and '50's. My grandmother always told the story about how she would not allow her daughter to be warehoused (as the men in the story were), and said this would only happen "over her dead body." She kept my mother at home and ultimately educated at the public school who made no effort to make any accommodation whatsoever, or make things easier for her, as there were no laws to protect the disabled as there are now. This would have taken place SEVEN YEARS BEFORE I WAS BORN. She later, after getting her PhD in education spent the rest of her life working for the rights of disabled people. Eventually the laws began to change. Growing up with this first hand experience, reading about these men who were exploited and treated like slaves just broke my heart. I could barely finish the book. It was so similar to the stories I had grown up with, about what *almost* happened to my own mother. Why on earth do so many people turn a blind eye to what they know in their hearts is wrong? Why is it there are so few people that will step up and do something about it? The author, Dan Barry, is a hero in my eyes. I hope other people take heed and try to do the same.

This is a powerful story well told by a writer who knows how to stay out of the way and let the characters and events do all the work - but of course Dan Barry is the one putting it all together and he does a good job. It would be easy to call this a story of "human trafficking" and it is - the 32 men were literally trafficked from Texas to Iowa to work in a turkey processing plant. But in these stories, we expect an easy villain, and this story has more nuance. The villains - the owners of Henry Turkey Services - almost certainly thought they were doing the right thing for these mentally-challenged men. I don't think anybody went in with a scheme to exploit them, as much as give men with few skills and low intellect, this honest work and take care of them. But that same patronizing attitude is not far off the justification for slavery. And like many stories of exploitation, what starts as a well-meaning (if still wrong) attempt ends in abuse, ignorance and cover-ups. The townspeople of Atalissa, Iowa, feel some blame for never asking questions about the men behind the walls of an old schoolhouse in a field - but why would they? The men are out and about, part of the town, so what's the problem? Reporters could have pushed the story a little more. Government employees could

have asked questions a little harder, a little earlier. Plenty of blame. The whole book tells a story not of true evil - but of benign neglect - the sort of well-meaning "we know best" decision making that turns into criminal exploitation down the line. Even as far back as 1979, newspaper reporters and state investigators were aware that something was going on - but in the absence of an obvious crime it was easy to let things go along to get along.

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