

Editor's Note

by

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The organizers of the Vegas Valley Book Festival, especially Richard Hooker, got this project started. Richard and others wanted the festival to offer not only a few days of enlightening literary discussion each fall but to contribute something meaningful to the local culture. Inspired by collaborative writing projects in other cities, Las Vegas Writes was born.

I was asked to serve as the coordinator and editor of Las Vegas Writes, and with help from several local literary experts, I compiled a long list of Southern Nevada's top writers. The seven ultimately selected to participate in writing the novel, eventually titled *Restless City*, are among the best in Las Vegas. I had every confidence going in that this experiment in collaborative fiction writing would be a big success.

The process was fairly simple. Each writer was responsible for a chapter, and the chapters were written serially. So, each writer advanced the story based on what his or her predecessors had written. The only guideline I gave the writers was to maintain the general traits and history of the main characters. Beyond that, they could take the story pretty much wherever they wanted.

H. Lee Barnes went first, creating a main character, private investigator Daniel Brady, and a mystery surrounding the death of one woman and the attempted suicide of another. Through the characters and storyline of that initial chapter, Barnes clearly set the stage for *Restless City* to be a crime noir tale. The other authors followed Barnes' lead, thrusting Brady into a tangled web of intrigue that is pure Vegas.

The plot of *Restless City* is captivating enough, but what I really love are the writers' perspectives on Las Vegas, sometimes offhand comments, sometimes more elaborate commentaries.

In the first chapter, H. Lee Barnes has the private eye, Brady, ponder the Fremont Street Experience:

“The Experience looked to him like the world’s largest batting cage, no view of the sky; in summer it was hot and in winter cold. He didn’t even like the dancing laser light show. . . . Fremont Street was one of those changes to progress that a segment of natives to Las Vegas, Brady among them, resented.”

John Irsfeld outlines a colorful legend about why Benny Binion’s Horseshoe casino had some of the best Mexican food in town:

“The story was that Binion would get homesick for sure-enough good old-fashioned Tex-Mex food, *norteno* — after all, he was a Texas boy — and he’d drive to San Antonio and get him the finest Tex-Mex chef he could find, offer him a lot of money, throw him in the car, and bring him back to Las Vegas. Things

would be fine for a while, the story would go, until the chef got drunk and homesick at the same time, and he would quit, tack a GTT sign on his door, and head back to San Antonio. The old man would stew about it for a while, but inevitably, back to San Antonio he'd go himself, lasso another Tex-Mex specialist, and drag him back home to Nevada.”

In Brian Rouff's chapter, Brady ventures to Laughlin, where he meets with a washed-up comedian named “Germy” Boozer, who seems more interested in angering his audience than in making them laugh:

“From somewhere near the stage, a beer bottle whizzed past Boozer's head, splattering against a fake palm tree. A dumpy middle-aged couple wearing identical yellow ‘Colorado River Rat’ T-shirts stood up and waddled toward the door, muttering something about ‘sacrilege.’ A whiskey-soaked voice screamed, ‘You're going to hell!’ As the man behind the voice rushed the stage, two security guards wrestled him to the floor.”

Leah Bailly takes Brady to the underworld of Boulder Highway, which she calls “Sketchville”:

“Land of kitchenettes and weekly rentals and massage parlors with cheap boob-job quacks in the back. The sun was down completely by the time Juliet pulled up to a three-story motel, iron balcony and half-flashing sign. A heavy-gutted thug in a wife-beater and sweatpants eyed the convertible from the office doorway as they stepped out onto the street, the pavement still

warm.”

John L. Smith introduces some memorable new characters, including a venerable Las Vegas named Helen McGreevey:

“She was eighty, had worked at the original El Rancho Vegas for Belden Katleman in the early ’50s. She broke in as an underage shill at the El Cortez when Benny Siegel took over the race wire there. At the El Rancho, she fell in love with Irish Charlie McGreevey, a skilled casino man killed by Johnny Marshall, who was of course never prosecuted for the crime. Helen was known as the first female floorman in Las Vegas. She was tougher than Tyson on cheaters and would point out card counters by ridiculing their arithmetic. ‘What are you, counting with your fingers and toes?’ she’d roar in her cigarette-scarred voice for everyone in the blackjack pit to hear.”

Constance Ford leads Brady to the suburban mansion where the climax of this story plays out:

“A bathroom with a shiny whirlpool tub and thick towels, a room that looked like a sports bar, complete with a stripper pole and neon Budweiser signs, and beyond that, a black and red dungeon. A dungeon? He glanced in, trying to gather as many details as he could. Yes, metal restraints on the far wall, handcuffs dangling, a black padded table, a glass cabinet filled with cattails and flogs. A swing. Not exactly your ordinary Vegas mansion.”

Among the seven writers, Vu Tran had the toughest task. In

taking on the final chapter, he had to make sense of everything that had transpired thus far and try to tie up as many loose ends as possible. Not surprisingly, Tran pulls it off, delivering a satisfying conclusion to this multifaceted story.

In the process, Tran creates a scene that readers won't soon forget: a poker game in which the participants — men and women, young and old — are required to play in the nude:

“Inside the windowless room, amid the sounds of Hank Williams singing ‘Hey Good Lookin,’ a poker game was in progress. Four young women and four older men — including the Ancient Mariner himself — were playing, and there was not a stitch of clothing in sight. The women were quite attractive, and the men were thankfully sitting down.”

These are just tastes of *Restless City*, tidbits to suggest what readers can look forward to as they dive into this novel, which, amazingly, holds together quite well despite being developed by seven different writers working independently.

The Vegas Valley Book Festival, I believe, can be proud of this contribution to the local culture. I personally would like to acknowledge the following people who helped me in one way or another with this project: Richard Hooker, Georgia Neu, Suzanne Scott, Carolyn Hayes Uber, Dayvid Figler, Claudia Keelan, Shane Gammon, Andrew Kiraly, and, of course, the writers chiefly responsible for the success of this work.