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Review of *The Last Resort: Scenes from a Transient Hotel*, by Aggie Max

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Books: review/commentary

The Last Resort: Scenes from a Transient Hotel, by Aggie Max (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997), 175 pp., \$18.95 (cloth only).

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With the Great Depression, the modest workingmen's hotels of downtown America began a decline into disrepair and disrepute. After World War II, local, state, and federal policy encouraged their elimination from the housing stock, and the old hulks began to slump in rows before the wrecking ball. But poverty and housing activists of the 1960s brought the plight of hotel residents to Congressional attention, and in 1970 the Uniform Relocation Act stipulated, among other things, that developers relocate residential hotel tenants displaced by urban renewal projects. "For the first time," noted historian Paul Groth, "redevelopment agencies and other federally funded groups were legally required to recognize people living in hotels as bona fide city residents."¹

In subsequent years, largely due to the emergence of widespread homelessness during the 1980s, the single-room-occupancy hotel—or SRO—achieved a new respectability among planners, housers, and social workers. The wholesale demolition and office conversion of SROs abated; throughout the country a fair number of dingy and decrepit "sleeping machines" were rehabbed with attention to improved community space: they were given bigger lobbies, shared kitchens, tenant lounges, even rooftop gardens. Sometimes rehabilitation extended to specially designed furniture (to maximize room space), private toilets (showers were still down the hall), and vastly improved ventilation and fire safety. Tenant associations, participatory management, and social services on site greatly improved the social order of many SROs, and economic revitalization and community policing tactics made their immediate neighborhoods safer and more inviting. The

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elderly poor in particular, and, to a lesser extent, poor people with persistent and severe mental illness were the principal beneficiaries of this new dispensation, but even alcoholics and addicts have found stability in some well-run “dry” or “damp” SROs that provide both support and restraint.²

And then there are the myriad others: the Cracksmoke Hotel, the Sleaze Hotel, the Hopeless Hotel, the Derelict Hotel, the Pits Hotel—indeed, the Funky Hilton. These interchangeable names are employed by Aggie Max to designate the unreconstructed seven-story lazar house in Oakland, California, in which she finds herself, at age 50, contending with her own substantial demons as well as with the crumbling, malodorous building with its sinister blood stains, merciless management, complement of winos, crackheads and whores, and legion of “mental patients with blank faces [who] sit in the lobby all day, grounded out by Thorazine, staring at the TV.” “Transient hotel,” she observes, is the “wrong name for the place, because nobody in here is going anywhere except maybe to jail, the nuthouse, or the cemetery.”

The Last Resort, to be sure, is neither a romance of solidarity among the dispossessed nor a paean to social engineering. Ms. Max’s cutting take on herself and her fellow tenants is softened only by her sense of their common victimhood. Shouts Dudley, her boyfriend of convenience, a sometimes shipyard worker who sponges on her disability check: “You want me to beat you up, don’t you! You want me to punch your fucking face in . . . you bitch! Don’t ever call me a parasite! I work hard for my money. Not my fault that I’m laid off! I didn’t ask to get laid off!” Explains Arty, a philosophic small-time crack dealer, locally renowned for finishing off a rock even as police broke down his door:

Crack is the perfect drug for people who care about hopeless things. . . . Transported past caring about the hopelessness of your life, the trash heap where you’ve always lived, your sick and dying family, you are thankful only for the relief. Because you’ve tried everything you could think of, and even Jesus didn’t work. Jesus worked

for your grandma, who wore a feed sack dress and carried her Bible five miles to church on Sunday and always made you get down on your knees. She thought Jesus was working, anyway, until she keeled over at the bus stop on the way to church and the ambulance was an hour late. . . . Your parents tried hard work, and worked so hard all their lives, and wound up on welfare anyway. So why bother? You smoke a rock and forget it. Then you die. You gotta die of something, right?

Ms. Max's view of professional authority and helpfulness is skeptical, to say the least. The institutional apparatus of society loom regularly as "They," who are alternately malevolent, bumbling, or merely indifferent. She is surrounded by "the roaring machinery of Justice and Death," plagued by the clueless if well-intentioned:

The Yuppie Psychologist patiently explains to the Baglady [one of Ms. Max's forms of self-reference]: "When you drink alcohol, you are anesthetizing yourself and repressing your feelings of anger."

BAGLADY: "Is that bad?"

YUP: "Of course it's bad! You must let your angry feelings come out!"

Ashby [another self-reference] laughs. "But the last time I did that I wound up in jail and tried to kill myself."

The psychologist is just another of society's Real People, to whom Ms. Max appears "as perhaps a symptom of urban blight, or the ills of society, or maybe just a vague threatening figure from some nightmare."

If I try to talk to them they will not hear what I say, because I am unreal to them. . . . To be recognized . . . I must ask for spare change or a cigarette, or spout obscenities, or exhort about Jesus, and thus become classifiable. What I really want to do is explain how I came to be in this uncomfortable and inconvenient position, but that would take years. I'm sure that all the Real People out there would much rather just give me a quarter or a cigarette.

In a reflective passage that recalls Orwell, Ms. Max summarizes her life as "the endless heaping of small irritations and

disappointments; by this you know you're still alive." The banal affronts of her depression-ridden days are occasionally interrupted by crises ludicrous (a food fight at St. Vincent de Paul) and solemn (nocturnal flirtations with suicide); sometimes by the small, unexpected kindnesses of strangers (a respectful, friendly bailiff). But there is finally "no sense of victory or overcoming; no progress made, just a taste of sour unfairness."

In the end, *The Last Resort* does not number among the classic autobiographical accounts of similar misery; it lacks the detachment and erudition of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the overwhelming gravity of Tom Kromer's *Waiting for Nothing* (dedicated to "Joline, who turned off the gas"). But it is nonetheless memorable: a sad, biting account of a life very much of our time.

Notes

1. Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 284.
2. The phrase "sleeping machines" and the terms "dry" and "damp" (to indicate different levels of tolerated alcohol and drug use) are from Friedner D. Wittman, "Affordable Housing for People with Alcohol and Other Drug Problems," *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 20 (1993), 541-609. For a discussion of SRO innovations, see Wittman's article and Groth, note 1 *supra*, 295-302. There is something of a literature on SROs. In addition to Groth's magnificent history of hotel life, see: Charles Hoch and Robert A. Slayton, *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Robert Hamburger, *All the Lonely People: Life in a Single Room Occupancy Hotel* (New Haven: Ticknor and Fields, 1983); Joan Hatch Shapiro, *Communities of the Alone* (New York: Association Press, 1971); Joyce Stephens, *Loners, Losers, and Lovers: Elderly Tenants in a Slum Hotel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976); Ellie Winberg and Tom Wilson, *Single Rooms* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981).