

His Magical Misery Tour

[William Easterly](#). [Wall Street Journal](#). (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: [Mar 2, 2007](#). pg. W.5

POOR PEOPLE

By William T. Vollmann
(Ecco, 314 pages, \$29.95)

WORLD poverty seems to cause distress both to poor people themselves (obviously) and to the rich. The distress of the poor deserves the utmost compassion. It is less immediately obvious that the main reason world poverty should end is that it makes rich people feel uncomfortable. Unfortunately, William T. Vollmann's "Poor People" portrays the distress of the rich more effectively than that of the poor.

The book starts with an idea that must have sounded good on paper -- go around the world (including parts of the U.S.) and ask the poor "Why are you poor?" It quickly runs afoul of the proverb: If you want to know about water, don't ask the fish. Asking "why are you poor" elicits answers like "lack of documents," "destiny," "no job" and, perhaps most characteristically, "I don't know" and it is "no one's fault." More questioning doesn't help much: "Do the rich have any obligations to you?" "No." "Why don't they?" "I don't know why."

What we learn from "Poor People" is that people immersed in poverty have very little idea of how they wound up there. (In other contexts, billionaires mouth cliches so banal that they seem to be equally clueless about the reasons for their income.) When Mr. Vollmann does try to venture insights about the causes of poverty, they sound sophomoric.

He includes, in his misery exhibit, the victims of dictators who poisoned their own people. These include Chernobyl cleanup workers who were duped by the Soviets into exposing themselves to deadly radiation and sufferers from illnesses caused by pollution from the state oil company in Kazakhstan. Yet somehow it's our fault -- "you and I are more guilty than they," Mr. Vollmann writes to his Western audience. He urges us to "read this story . . . and then decide whether you would be willing to forgo your petroleum addiction for a single day."

At times, Mr. Vollmann seems to be coaching the witness: He asks one lady whether "rich people, corporations or nations might be at least partially responsible for her poverty." Her answer: She isn't poor. He reports on a conversation with a Mexican prostitute named Angelica, expecting that "beneath the veneer of individualism and self-reliance, Mexico's class hatred can easily be pricked." But Angelica merely blames the poor for their own poverty. Another Mexican street-person says that he is not poor because "I have enough money to get drunk." Mr. Vollmann wonders whether he is "merely expressing the bitterness of class estrangement."

Mr. Vollmann may profess to be on a listening tour, but he inserts himself into the narrative with shameless verbosity. "Why are you poor?" he asks a man in Tokyo. The

answer: "Because I don't have a job." Mr. Vollmann pauses to explain: "Call this answer fatally and irrevocably familiar, fatal being an especially appropriate descriptor because when conceived in such limited, monotonous terms (appropriately so, because poverty is limited and monotonous), his situation feels tautologically hopeless. It may be (why not hope, since that chemobiological entity dies last?) that if one avoids this conceptualization of existence, rearranging the movements of one's consciousness into something more multitudinous and complex, or arranged in a less obvious order, one might be able, however provisionally, to feel less impoverished." Other passages in the book lack even this pithiness.

Mr. Vollmann spends far too much time conducting a debate with himself over how he feels about the poor, what he should feel, how he treats them, how he should treat them, etc. In his own Sacramento, Calif., neighborhood, he is eager to treat a homeless man named Carty with courtesy -- "Less frequently than I believe I did, I gave him money or booze." The internal back and forth continues: "Had I known for a fact that he was an active thief I would not have stopped liking him," Mr. Vollman writes, since "the achievement of gain by any means need not be personal." But he does retreat into his house and lock the steel front door behind him. He then wonders: "Might not the continued existence of my domain behind that steel door have been a perpetual offense and harm to Carty?" He later asks himself, about an incident during his travels: "What do I owe the men in Minneapolis who robbed me?"

Will such exhibitionist self-laceration inspire rich people to care more about the poor? Probably not. It certainly doesn't do any good for the poor, who presumably couldn't care less about a well-off writer's torment. It would be easy to lose patience with Mr. Vollmann altogether, but in the end his compulsive self-doubt helps to rescue his book. He is honest enough to admit it when the poor fail to follow the script (which is virtually all of the time). We learn that the poor are real people who do have a life and are amazingly diverse and unpredictable, that they are none too interested in acting like noble victims waiting for the rich to save them, that they have many different ways of coping with their dire circumstances (and who are we to judge them for how they do so?). Some poor people say "we're just humans," some say they are happy, one says "I think I am rich." One of the book's most touching chapters is about a long-time American expatriate in the Philippines who somehow wound up living like a poor Filipino. His story is a complicated mix of contentment and misbegotten hope.

Mr. Vollmann's account vividly shows that people are not defined by being members of the mass category so often invoked by aid agencies in their sloganeering -- "the poor." (The phrase is today's equivalent of the Marxist "proletariat.") He has a lot of fun at the expense of bureaucrats at the United Nations when they promise to offer the poor "more aid, better directed." He asks: "Couldn't we all use that? And what if the universe enacts less aid, more poorly directed?" His definition of "false consciousness" is a classic: "a charge leveled against the perceptions and experiences of others whenever we wish to assert that we know their good better than they do."

After a survey of the world and Mr. Vollmann's soul, we get no closer to understanding why there is poverty. But we do understand, perhaps better than before, that "the poor" include a lot of real people who don't have enough opportunity to avoid a lot of real suffering.