Books

The New York Times ON THE WEB

TimesSelect nytimes.com
The Gift for the Historian
Enjoy online access to The New York Times Archive back to 1851. Buy a gift today ›

October 5, 1997

You Can't Get Here From There

Louis B. Jones travels back to hippie-era California of the 1970's in his new novel.

By WALTER KIRN

From lava lamps to tie-dyed scarves to ant farms, the bric-a-brac of the 1970's appealed to a certain fascination with orderly chaos, structured flux. Gazing at backlit waves of colored jelly or trembling threads of intermingled ants was simultaneously soothing and surprising; it brought on the light, sub-psychedelic trance state that people back then considered so desirable and people nowadays find so quaintly futile. Consciousness in the 90's has things to do and places to go; with E-mail to read and a stock market to watch, mellow self-hypnosis isn't an option.

CALIFORNIA'S OVER

By Louis B. Jones.

329 pp. New York: Pantheon Books. $24.

Louis B. Jones's third novel, "California's Over," is a satirical elegy for the age of dime-store Zen, when the pop songs were all about watching clouds go by and pot's reputation for killing motivation was actually a selling point. The book is as light and swirly and eccentric as its Marin County setting, and like a lava lamp, its inward stirrings are both entrancing and directionless. Though the story is told from a present-day perspective with lots of ironic ruefulness, it doesn't have much wisdom to deliver. Instead of meditating on social history, Jones sticks to observing his characters' dippy rhythms, their addled voices and fluff philosophies, exaggerating sometimes for effect but mostly just presenting them as they were. The 70's, in their hilarious hypersincerity, were basically self-satirizing.

Jones's story revolves around a week of housecleaning in a very cluttered house. Baelthon, our itinerant narrator (that's his hippie name; his real name is Steve), shows up at the decrepit seaside mansion of the Farmican family and is put to work packing things up for an imminent move. Baelthon is a square Wisconsin kid who has hit the road in search of West Coast kicks, while the Farmicans are what passes in the Bay Area for intellectual artistocracy. The patriarch, James, who committed suicide, was a prize-winning free verse poet best known for an epic about the riots in Berkeley's People's Park. More famed for his life style than his work, Farmican was the sort of bogus genius whose legacy doesn't outlast his funeral, except in his own family. "Having James Farmican for a father," according to his teen-age son Peter, a novice writer who's working on an opera about the Donner party, "was like inheriting a fortune in Confederate currency."

Besides Peter, the surviving Farmicans are Wendy, a trashy-minded 16-year-old who likes to chow down on junk food; Julia, the Aquarian sexpot widow; and Ed, a suburban dork who was given up for adoption as an infant and returns -- to everyone else's horror -- driving a used Mercedes and talking about claiming his inheritance. The stepfather of the moment is Faro Ness, a Harvard-trained psychologist who wants the family to establish a commune in Oregon. Faro is one of the novel's three or four characters whose speeches act like verbal time machines: "The whole middle class thinks it's smart. Cut up the land into parcels and say you 'own' one. So the unpropertied class can say they own property. . . . And then, look at the position of the woman inside that box: the housewife. They literally call her the 'house'-wife."

Against Faro's plan to take everyone to Oregon, a competing scheme arises: Ed wants the family to travel to Nevada and restart a dormant, ramshackle casino that James won decades ago in a poker game. These two plans are supposed to stand for some early-70's cultural choice between ever-more-isolated self-purification and a return to base commercialism. We know what road the country took, of course, and that's also the road that wins out in the novel. Ed, the dyslexic young Republican whose can-do spirit, Jones impishly implies, results from his never having read a book, vanquishes Ness, the lugubrious utopian, whose tirades against tradition and materialism are really ego trips. If there's one thing Jones nails in "California's Over," it's the sound of narcissism posing as the voice of change.

The days of housecleaning, the Nevada trip and its destructive consequences are described in out-of-order flashbacks by the middle-aged Baelthon -- now Steve -- a chain-smoking college tutor who lives alone in a cookie-cutter housing development. The 25 years between meeting the Farmicans and recounting their story have been lost, we sense, to hamster-wheel, middle-class getting by. The spark for Steve's story is Wendy's sudden return to him, their grown-up Nevada love-child in tow. In the "warm sparkling light" of his local Starbucks, from the "completely absolved, trust-free atmosphere of these more recent times," Steve thinks back to poverty, young love and the defunct casino in the desert: "The blue-and-white tent, deflated and pooled among the rocks. The meals we made of Pringles or Slim Jims. Camping on the old scorched cement slab foundation of a burned-down gas station. My stupid cowboy boots."

Though it strikes its share of bittersweet notes, this isn't a tale of innocence corrupted but of fraudulent innocence exposed and subsequent disillusionment survived. The daffy Farmican household is sick at heart, built on the lies of the father's saintly greatness and the times' inflated sense of destiny. As the housecleaning proceeds, though, memories and memorabilia are dragged out onto the lawn and into the light, losing their legendary radiance. "An End to All War," the father's unfinished novel, turns out to be so turgid and unreadable that no one ever notices the suicide note on the manuscript's last page. Once the eight-track tapes, Look magazines and unattached Bic pen caps have piled up, (Jones is a brilliant curator of American junk), it becomes clear that the vaunted Farmican legacy -- and the ideas and attitudes behind it -- barely adds up to a good garage sale.

This isn't, as Jones presents it, a sad conclusion. His point is that worthlessness is precious, that only once a thing has lost its usefulness is its intrinsic value manifest. It's the flea market, not the museum, that moves the heart and links up past and present, matter and mind. What Jones writes about the Western desert applies as well to the era of the lava lamp: "Still today, much of Nevada retains the priceless value of being unwanted by anybody."

Walter Kirn is the author of a novel, "She Needed Me."

TO PURCHASE ONLINE
BarnesandNoble.com

Return to the Books Home Page

ROYAL TREATMENT
Check out what to see, eat and do in London!
The New York Times
Travel
nytimes.com/travel

Home | **Site Index** | **Site Search** | **Forums** | **Archives** | **Marketplace**

Quick News | Page One Plus | International | National/N.Y. | Business | Technology | Science | Sports |
Weather | Editorial | Op-Ed | Arts | Automobiles | Books | Diversions | Job Market | Real Estate | Travel

Help/Feedback | Classifieds | Services | New York Today

Copyright 1997 The New York Times Company