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Weekend Edition

January 21 / 22, 2006

A Review of "Win Miners March"

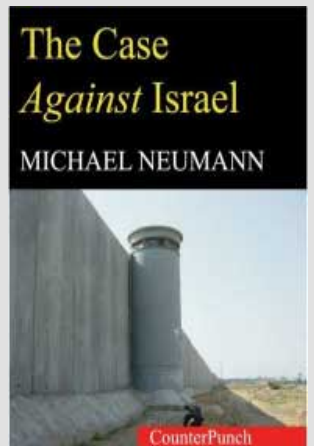
Struggle and Lose, Struggle and Win!

By RON JACOBS

"Some readers, some scholars may protest this writer's method of departing from academic "objectivity," and rooting enthusiastically for the coal miners. That is too bad."

Imagine yourself in a tavern or diner somewhere near Blair Mountain in West Virginia. It's a Saturday afternoon and the television at the bar is quiet for a change. Football season is over. You're sitting at the table with a couple older fellows, one of whom is telling a story. The guy talking introduced himself when you sat down at his table as William C. Blizzard, Jr. The story he's telling is his daddy's and it's all about the miners and their battle for a union in these parts. It's a great story and he's not telling it with any pretense at objectivity. William C. Blizzard is a union man through and through, just like his father was. Furthermore, Mr. Blizzard isn't joking when he calls the story he's telling a battle, because that's what it was. With guns and everything. Just to add a little more atmosphere you

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take advantage of an interruption in William C. Blizzard's story to walk over and take a look at the jukebox. Maybe there's something good on there. By the time you get back to the table--after choosing fifty cents worth of songs--Blizzard is relating how the term redneck came about.

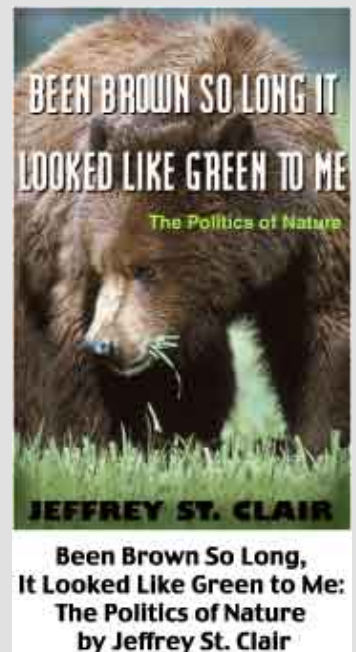
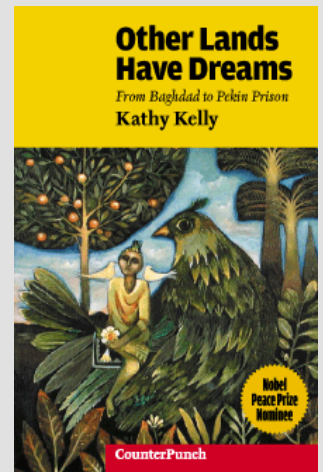
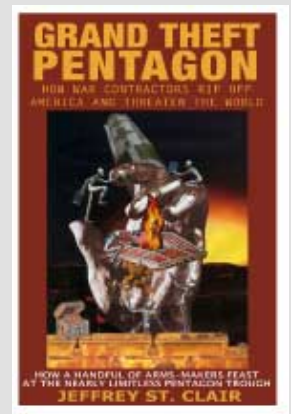
According to the story, miners who were in the union (the union of course being the United Mine Workers of America-UMWA) or sympathetic to it wore red bandannas tied around their necks so that other miners and their families could differentiate friend from foe. Hence the name redneck. Wearing that red kerchief opened one to all kinds of abuse by the forces of law and order, private and public. It's not like there was really much difference between the two, however, seeing as how the coal operators and owners ran the entire state of West Virginia. Some things don't change very much, do they?

The story being told in the scenario mentioned above is now available to the reading public. Some fifty years after it was published as a serial in the national union newspaper of the 1950s, *Labor's Daily*, Mr. Blizzard has finally released his history of the great 1921 battle for Blair Mountain and the struggles leading up to that showdown. Although at least two other books exist on the subject, Blizzard's *When Miners March* is the only one told by a participant. Indeed, it was the author's father, Bill Blizzard, that is known as the unofficial general of the union forces that had finally had enough of the capitalist forces arrayed against the West Virginian coal miners and picked up arms against the coal operators' army. For this role, he ended up facing several charges, with the charge of treason being one of them. Never ones to hide their sympathies, Mr. Blizzard and his father together relate a gripping story of individual hardship and group solidarity in the face of what can only be termed inhuman brutality and malignant neglect.

Underlying the individual misdeeds and local conspiracies of the private detective forces and their mine owning bosses is the greater conspiracy of monopoly capitalism. Ranging from mass evictions of striking miners and their families to racist attacks and murder, many of these deeds are vividly described. Although the conspiracy of capital alluded to above is harder to pinpoint, its evil acts are of greater substance and longevity. William C. Blizzard details some of how this conspiracy worked in the early twentieth century when he describes the machinations of US Steel in the coal mines of southern West Virginia and its boardrooms in Pittsburgh, PA. The dollars saved and profits recorded in Pittsburgh became lost jobs, mine accidents and anti-union activity in the Boone County, West Virginia. The only difference between that time and now is the names of the corporations, their size, and their public relations. In case one needs an example, let me remind you of the recent explosion and death of twelve miners at the Sago mine in Talmansville, West Virginia. That mine was owned by Anker Coal Group until it was bought out by an even larger conglomerate known as International Coal Group. Both corporations ignored several dozen safety warnings and citations, preferring to pay the relatively small fines instead of bringing the mine up to code. If nothing else, this proves that perhaps the major difference between the days of the Bill Blizzard and today is that government is even cozier nowadays with the coal mine owners than they were back then. (As I was proofing this review news came over the wire about another fire in another West Virginia mine, with two miners

[Terror](#)

by Jeffrey St. Clair



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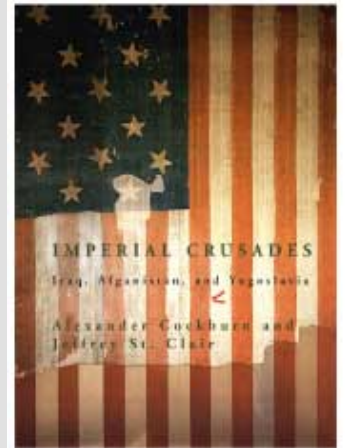
unaccounted for).

Essentially an oral history on paper, [When Miners March](#) is the story of the birth of the UMWA in West Virginia. It is also a study of the reality of capitalism and its toll on those who work in its sphere. It's about men who believe in the the possibilities of human solidarity and other men who succumb to greed and power. It is a testimony to the power of the idea that everyone deserves a safe workplace, a decent wage, and the life such a wage buys. Most importantly, this book is an inspiration to those who still believe that those things are worth fighting for.

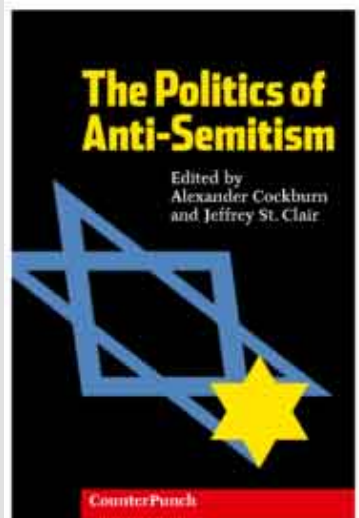
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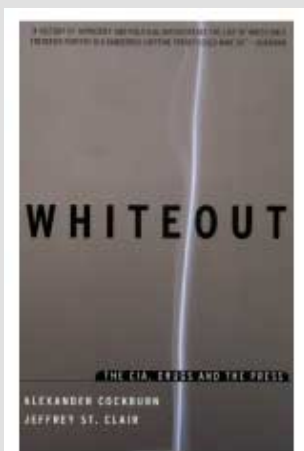
Ron Jacobs is author of [The Way the Wind Blew: a history of the Weather Underground](#), which is just republished by Verso. Jacobs' essay on Big Bill Broonzy is featured in CounterPunch's new collection on music, art and sex, [Serpents in the Garden](#). He can be reached at: rjacobs3625@charter.net



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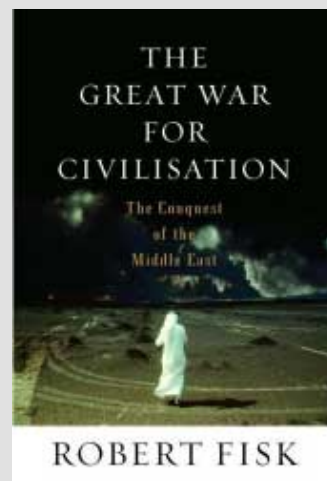
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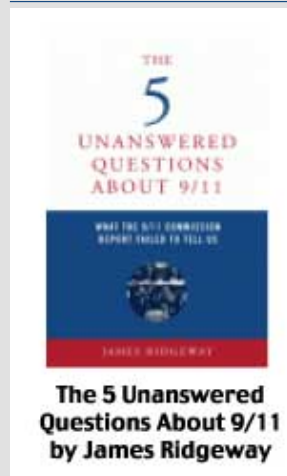
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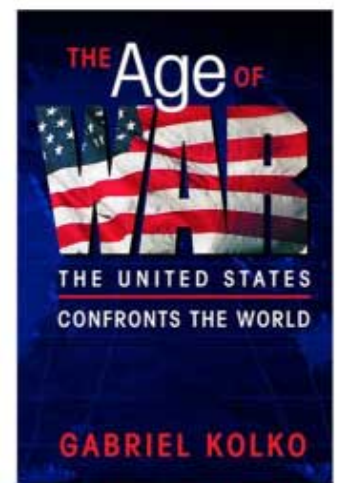
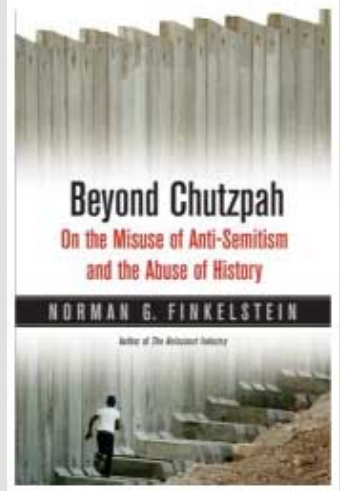
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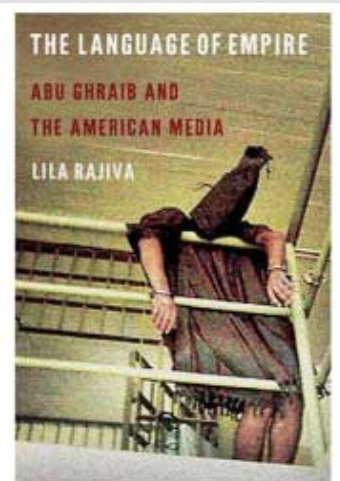
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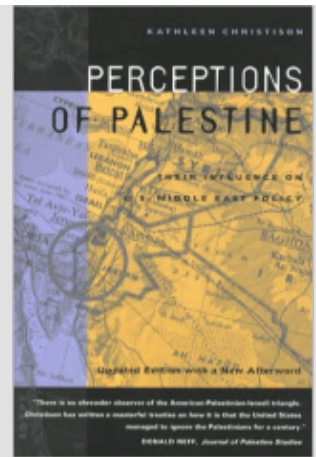
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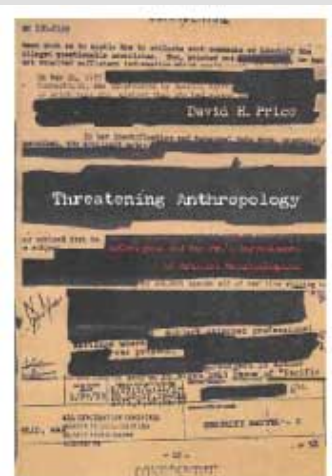
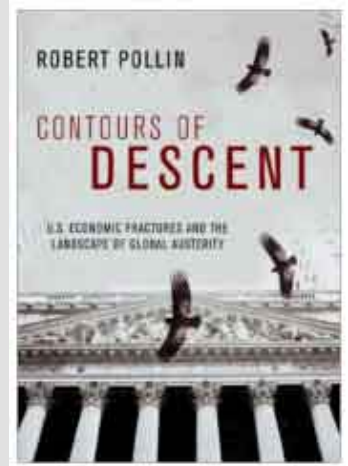
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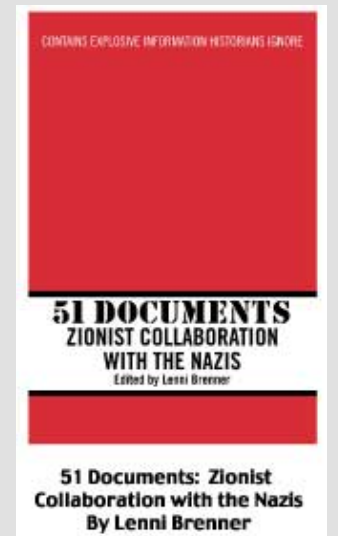
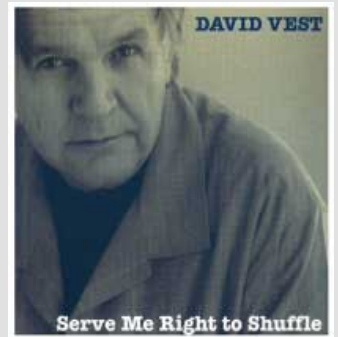
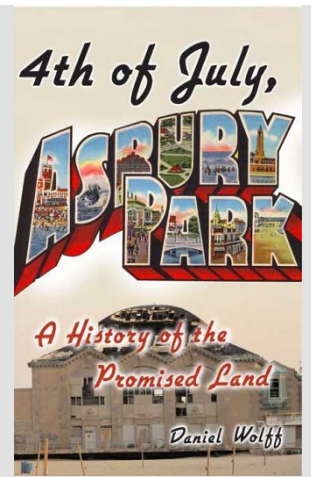
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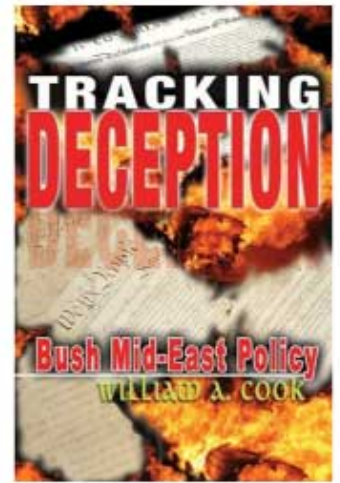
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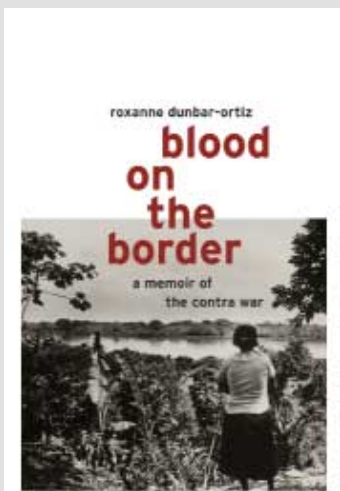
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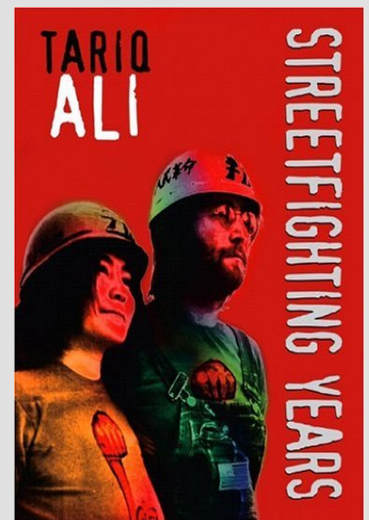
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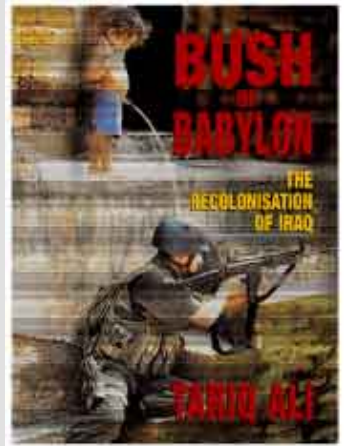
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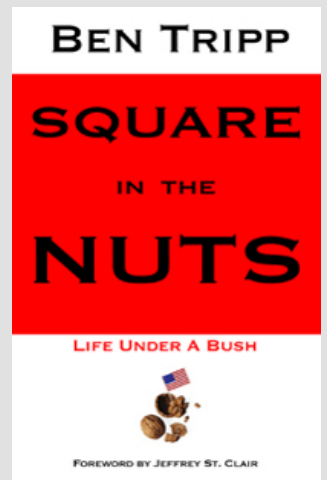
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