

Humboldt: Life on America's Marijuana Frontier.

By Emily Brady; Grand Central Publishing; 2013; \$27; 260 pages.

Reviewed by Jonah Raskin

Reporter Emily Brady doesn't say if she uses cannabis or not. She might be in the closet or she might not be anywhere near it. Her new book, *Humboldt: Life on America's Marijuana Frontier*, offers what she calls "a snap shot in time of a place." The place, of course, is Humboldt County on California's North Coast and part of the region that law enforcement officials in the 1980s designated "The Emerald Triangle." The name went along with a military assault by the Drug Enforcement Agency and George Bush I to eradicate the clandestine cannabis crop that traveled all the way to appreciative customers in New York and Amsterdam. The time period that Brady covers in *Humboldt* is 2010, the year that saw the dramatic rise and then the sudden fall on Election Day of Prop 19 — which would have legalized small amounts of marijuana for recreational use. She also harkens back to the era of Bush I and to the roots of Humboldt's cannabis economy.

Have we come a long way since the 1980s? Or are we back where we started from? *Humboldt* doesn't answer those questions, nor does it address the big thorny issues surrounding cannabis. Oddly enough, for a book that started as a memoir, Brady herself doesn't make an appearance until the "Author's Remarks" at the back of the book. In a few pages, she provides her own family history, or at least its bare outlines. She explains that she was "born and raised in Northern California just south of the region known as the Emerald Triangle." Where exactly was that? She doesn't say what town or village, nor does she say when she was born or what generation she belongs to.

"My parents weren't growers," Brady writes, "but they were members of the counterculture, and when I was little they would take me to parties that in my memory were a blur of laughter." Did they stand by and not inhale? And how could anyone really be in the counterculture in Northern California and not grow marijuana? Brady doesn't have enough distance on herself, her parents, and the counterculture to see clearly.

In the pages of her own book, she remains a shadowy, mysterious figure, though the dust jacket explains that she graduated from the Journalism School at Columbia University in New York and that she has

written for *The New York Times* and *Time*. Despite those credits to her name, she hasn't yet learned how to tell a good story and how to weave the threads of individual lives into the larger fabric of an entire culture. This is her first book; many of its flaws might be attributed to a beginner's lack of experience. A seasoned editor could have provided useful guidance and suggested where to trim and where to explore. The book occasionally offers glimpses into the marijuana subculture — a brief visit to Harborside, the humongous dispensary, has comic moments — but for the most part it illustrates how not to write about marijuana. Pot reporters might learn from Brady's mistakes. They might map the forest and the trees — the cannabis plant and the larger world of which it is a part.

Humboldt: Life on America's Marijuana Frontier offers a series of blurred snapshots that protect identities and that's understandable. Burning sources isn't a good idea. But blurry descriptions of the Humboldt landscape and Humboldt people pop up far too often. "The trees and river passed by in a foggy green blur," Brady writes.

The principal figures in the book — "Mare," "Emma," "Crockett," "Bob," and others — seem more like sociological clichés than actual individuals. Mare is the New Age Mother Earth grower; Crockett is the macho marijuana outlaw. "Crockett was the perfect example of the kind of men who migrated to Humboldt County every year," the author writes. In fact, men of all sizes and shapes, and from all walks of life, show up in Humboldt hoping to get rich, steal a crop, and/ or become a part of history in the making. They also go to Humboldt to hike, fish, swim, and look at the stars in the night sky. There is no "perfect example," as Brady calls it, of the marijuana migrant to Humboldt.

Then, too, the names for her minor figures — Buddha and Douglas Fir — are too cutesy for their own good. Comparing them to Tolkien's fictional characters — to the Hobbit and to Gandalf — doesn't help matters either.

Humboldt isn't for readers who don't know the ABC's of marijuana. Nor is it for those in the know. "Marijuana comes in different strains," the author says without explaining what those strains might be. Marijuana smells like "sweet pine" she insists. What strain is that? And where's the famous (or infamous) Humboldt skunkweed? It's nowhere to be sniffed, inhaled, and savored in this book. Most growers, she claims, trim their plants right after harvest. Well, some do and some

don't. Most of them dry their marijuana in "paper bags," she insists. Generalizations follow generalizations.

In "Author's Remarks," Brady says she "focused on four people who represented four different aspects of marijuana culture." Oddly enough, again, *Humboldt* offers no portraits of doctors who recommend cannabis and no portraits of patients who use it for sleeplessness, loss of appetite, pain, anxiety, and much more. The whole medical aspect goes missing here. Then, too, there's no description of cartels, organized crime, and the environmental degradation caused by guerrilla growers who pollute streams and soils. One wonders what county Brady was in.

The men and women who trim marijuana at harvest are "California's last white migrant farm workers," she insists. Working in the fields for absentee landlords, is, she adds, like "share cropping in the South."

True enough, small time growers, whether new school or old school, often rail against the Humboldt "pot plantations" that produce tons of marijuana every year. But the analogy between the pot farm and the cotton plantation is absurd. Marijuana growers aren't lynched by angry mobs as sharecroppers were in the American South. Humboldt's pot farmers don't toil on chain gangs, either, buy at the company store, and go deeper and deeper into debt — to borrow the lyrics from Tennessee Ernie Ford's classic "Sixteen Tons."

Growers and their hired hands, too, often make enough money to buy cars and trucks, go on vacations to tropical islands, and plunge into "legitimate" businesses. There's far more social mobility in the California marijuana world than there ever was in southern sharecropping or in the migrant work force today in the San Joaquin Valley. Men and women who grow marijuana usually smoke marijuana on the job. Workers harvesting lettuce don't get stoned in the fields. It's too hot and the labor itself is too hard.

Brady writes about Humboldt as though no one else has ever written about the place and its internationally renowned crop. She offers no bibliography, no footnotes, and doesn't say where and when she conducted her interviews, though she explains, "The majority of my reporting took place while spending open-ended days and nights with my subjects." She would have benefitted from reading Ray Raphael's *Cash Crop* (1985) that provides the best portrait of cannabis in Humboldt ever written. A longtime public school teacher who taught deep in the woods, Raphael watched the evolution of the marijuana

counterculture in slow motion. Up-close, he witnessed the transformation of his own community as cannabis became the region's cash crop and the communal spirit was replaced by individualism and greed. Raphael offered a sound critique of the culture and economy of Humboldt, all the while that he offered portraits of people who were neither good nor evil, right or wrong but living complex stories.

In the "Author's Note," Brady insists, in the manner of a schoolmarm, that the marijuana economy in Humboldt is "based upon something that is wrong." Not so curiously, she doesn't say that the Prohibition of cannabis is also wrong. Surely the whole spectacle of the criminal industrial complex can't be right. Isn't it blatantly wrong, to arrest hundreds of thousands of marijuana smokers every year, then cram them into cells. From her own countercultural parents, Brady might have learned that for the back-to-the-land generation, the only way to survive in the hills of Humboldt was to grow a cash crop. Marijuana brought the hippies, the rednecks, the hip-necks, and more the money they need to go on living in Redway, Garberville, Weott, Fortuna, Alderpoint, Myers Flat, Eureka, and all points between.

"Marijuana was literally everywhere in Humboldt County," Brady observes. No, no, no! Everyone in Humboldt does not literally grow, smoke, or sell cannabis. The bigger story that she misses is over-production and the drop in price per pound. Too many farmers growing too much marijuana for their own good has dropped the price of outdoor weed down from \$4,500 a pound in, say, 1990 to about \$1,500 a pound today. (Of course, price varies depending on quality, the distance it travels and whether it's cultivated indoors or outdoors.) If growers are finding it difficult to sell their product — as they are — it's also because marijuana users are increasingly growing their own plants in their own backyards and well-lit closets. Instead of driving users out of the market, the war on marijuana has prompted more and more individuals to grow it for themselves and to smoke it without having to buy it from a dispensary or on the street.

Brady's *Humboldt* offers too little too late. Prop 19 and the drama of 2010 are already ancient history. Seattle and Denver are headline news now, not Humboldt, and, unfortunately, Brady doesn't offer comparisons between Colorado and Washington, on one hand, and California, on the other, which would have made her book timely and relevant. Failing those options, she might have captured a pivotal moment in the evolution and devolution of cannabis in California.

Instead, she's collected a series of fuzzy snapshots that offer lurid and sentimental profiles of cannabis people who are far more make believe than real.

Jonah Raskin co-wrote the story for the marijuana movie, "Homegrown." He's also the author of the book, "Marijuanaland: Dispatches from an American War" (High Times.)