

*Who represents America?*





# AMERICAN

by Robin de Puy





OPEN  
TOMORROW





*Sitting in the quiet basement where many people once worked diligently, the silence suddenly overwhelms me. “Is magic dying out?” I ask him. “It’s the second oldest profession,” Greg says. “People want to believe. People want to dream.”*

Greg Bordner, owner of a magic shop in Colon, Michigan. Episode 23

*AMERICAN* is a collection of audio, film and photographic portraits by Dutch photographer and filmmaker Robin de Puy. The series, which comprises 25 episodes, was created in the US between 2022 and 2024. Her images invite us to look closer at, and listen to, the stories of a cross-section of people who make up one of the world’s most powerful, extreme and divisive countries, at a politically turbulent and poignant time. Beyond globally renowned celebrities and politicians whose voices and opinions we are privy to, what are the thoughts, concerns and dreams of the largely unheard people of America?

Through images and words, *AMERICAN* captures moments of resilience, vulnerability, humor and heartbreak. Whether it’s the magic shop owner in Michigan still chasing miracles, a young biologist-in-the-making who believes in “killer cats,” or a Sikh family forging their American Dream in Muscoda, Wisconsin, each encounter sheds light on universal human experiences in extraordinary personal contexts. De Puy’s view lets us lean into these stories—not to judge, but to understand, to witness the intimate and often untold sides of America.

“Over the past few years, I’ve reconnected with old acquaintances—some dating back to 2015—and forged new relationships. As divisions deepen and empathy wanes, I wanted to see beyond the headlines and capture who truly endures here,” says De Puy of the series. “My approach was nearly always met with generosity; so many were eager to share their stories. The people you will find in this book are immensely precious to me. Their openness is profound—and I believe the only way to bridge the gap is by truly seeing each other.”













Emily (6)  
Twin Falls, Idaho  
Episode 14





Emily (6)  
Twin Falls, Idaho  
Episode 14







Angus (20), Logan (18), Savannah (19) and Devon (19)  
Wichita Falls, Texas  
Episode 6



Savannah (19)  
Wichita Falls, Texas  
Episode 6

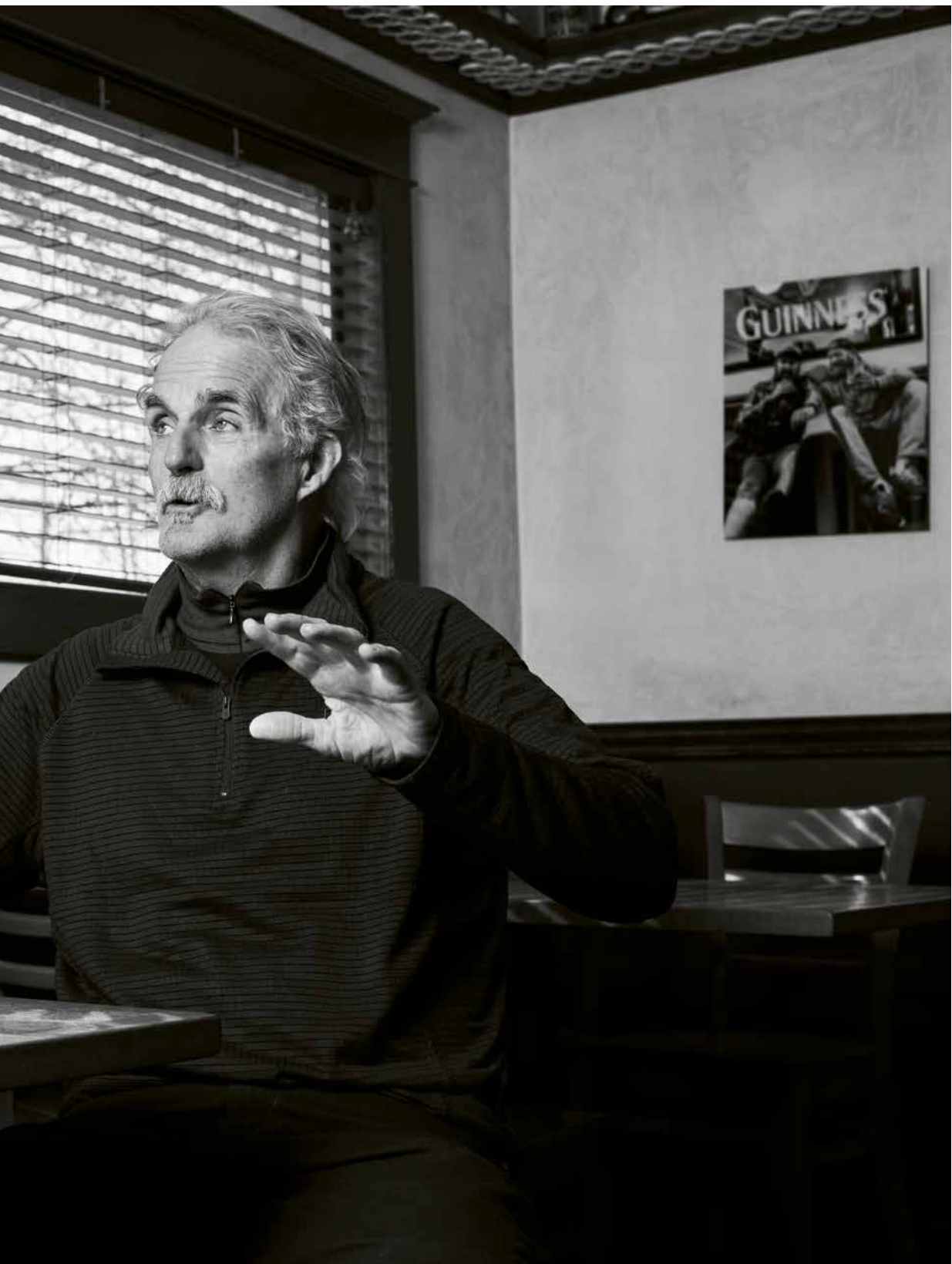














Savannah (19) and Devon (19)  
Wichita Falls, Texas  
Episode 6



Derek and Quentin (29)  
Elkhart, Indiana  
Episode 17

















Episode 1  
**Pretty Close to a Million**

*Nick (79) and Zorka (76)*

I spot an old, blue Dodge pickup truck under a blue, sun-scorched neon sign that says Maverick Motel. In the empty lot, a lady in a blue shirt sits under a canopy. My photography heart leaps at the perfect confluence of all that blue.

“Can I maybe take your picture?” I ask her. “Yes, of course,” she replies with a distinct voice in an accent still unfamiliar to me. In the distance, I notice a man stepping out of the motel—also dressed in blue. It turns out to be her husband Nick. He starts talking from afar, and from that point on my toes barely touch the ground. I float in a blue bubble carried by Nick’s sentences. Virtually all of them sound like iconic anecdotes ending with an exclamation point, supported by affirming—or dissenting—sounds from his wife. I learn that the accent is from the former Yugoslavia.

Nick visited America in 1968 as a tourist, and became an American citizen in 1976. “You gotta take chances ... All you need in this country is common sense and the will to work!”

After working as a welder in Denver, Colorado, for 18 years, he took the plunge and started a motel in Raton, New Mexico. At first he ran the motel by himself, but then, through a cousin in Canada, he heard about a single Yugoslav lady. Soon after, Zorka and Nick got married, and together they ran the successful Maverick Motel.

“I thought I married a millionaire!” Zorka says, laughing. “I was very close to a million!” Nick says. Back then, he adds, there were a lot of horse races in Raton. “The motel was always fully booked.”

Nowadays, the motel is for sale. Large, corporate motel chains are rapidly taking over the industry, making motel life hard, and sometimes impossible, for the smaller and older motels. On top of that, staff shortages and higher wholesale prices lead to older motels collapsing—sometimes literally. For Nick and Zorka, there is also another reason to quit: their aging bodies need rest.

In the evening, we drink Slivovitz in an un-American living room, surrounded by fake sunflowers and dozens of photos of their children and grandchildren—even the sofa is covered by a large family photo. Nick picks up a tamburica-like instrument and plays a song. His fingers move slower than he hoped, but it still sounds good.

Episode 2  
**Five Hundred Tire Shops**  
*Jamario (20) and Damaj (17)*

One day in the 1930s, at the crossing of Highways 61 and 49 in downtown Clarksdale, Mississippi, American blues singer Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil, the legend goes, in exchange for the art of playing the guitar. For a moment I fear Robert did not only sell his own soul but that of the town as well.

We cruise the empty streets, looking for someone that can play the promised blues for us. Because of our slow tempo and me staring out the car window, people immediately take us for police. And believe me, that is not a good look here. Feeling kind of mopish, we try to wash the day away in the hairy pool at the motel.

At night the town still feels quiet, but light seeping through the cracks of wooden walls of abandoned-looking buildings promises otherwise. Finally we discover the blues, hidden under a plastic ceiling. A toothless singer, unintelligible to me when he speaks but not when he sings, welcomes us—his only audience. He treats us to a private concert and, for a while, we don’t feel like going anywhere.

The next morning, looking for coffee and intriguing faces, we pass a tire shop. Jamario, who is 20 years old and Damaj, who’s 17, sit under a canopy waiting for their first client. Damaj is the owner, born in Yemen and brought to America by his beloved dad. This boy can have anything he wants, his dad has told him, as long as he stays in school. But Damaj has other plans; he wants to work. His dream? To own a nationwide chain of 500 tire shops, within ten years: “Like Starbucks or McDonald’s.”

I ask Jamario what his dream is. He tells me he's turning 21, and will go to the Police Academy. In a month, he's becoming a father. I ask Jamario a bunch of questions, sounding out the practicalities of his big dreams, but he soothes my doubts. Dreams are big here, but seldom misplaced—as long as you see them through the eyes of The American.

And remember: If you can't make it on your own, you can always sell your soul. Without it, you can go very far. Just look at Robert.

### Episode 3

## Spoiler Alert

*Carol (22)*

"Spoiler alert: Jesus wins," a roadside sign reads. I don't know what exactly Jesus would define as winning, because I haven't seen much I would consider prize-winning over the past few days.

We are driving through the small town of Lawton, Oklahoma. It's seven in the evening. The sun is low, but it's still well over 40°C. The streets are empty except for a few cars. Hardly anyone is out here for fun. There is no need to be because there is a drive-through for everything: besides ordering food and drinks, you can also withdraw cash, pick up medication, buy cigarettes, weed or alcohol, get a new tire or even an oil change, all from the comfort of your air-conditioned—or not—car.

Since most people stay in, it is all the more noticeable when someone is out. In the corner of my eye, I see a young woman with a white flapping dress on a little blue bike. I am not reducing anything to patronize, the bike is small. The only thing that is not small is the huge Slurpee cup in the wicker basket of her bike. Her eyes are squinting from the sun that's still bright; her short, unkempt hair standing upright and sweetly blowing in the almost imperceptible wind.

Her name is Carol. She is 22, and has been living on the streets for four years now. Written on her collarbone are the words "awaking my soul from darkness". They refer to her late father, who passed away when she was only two. He was 27 years old. The grief is still immense. Softly she says: "I just miss my dad."

Carol really wants to get a job, but Lawton is a military and university town. That means the jobs go to those who study or are affiliated with the military. There is no one to look after her, no one to comfort her, no one to really see or help her. "It's hard to find help in this country." The only places Carol can get food are the Salvation Army or the church. If this is what Jesus would mean by winning, he has won.

After I take her photo, she cycles off. She bravely defies the bright sun. Her shadow makes her bigger than anyone else; she just doesn't know it herself.

### Episode 4

## Some Real Cowboys

*Nino (54)*

"Yeah, I scoop them up."  
"What are you scooping up?" I ask him.  
"The people on the bull!"

My dazed look reveals that I have no clue what he is talking about. His nephews, Christian and Stephan, elaborate: "In bull riding, cowboys try to stay on a wild bull or bucking horse for eight seconds. Once those eight seconds are over, my uncle scoops them up, ideally before they hit the ground." Nino, his uncle, confirms the story with a Southern yeah. "I used to be really good at bull riding. But now I'm too old. Usually, you give up bull riding in your thirties. By then you're pretty beat up."

The scooping up, it turns out, is not just something Nino does with bull riders. For example, there's Twinn ("the crazy one"), whom he met about 30 years ago. Twinn also rode horses, but had no place to board his horse. So one day, Twinn brought his horse to Nino, who, without hesitation, shared his self-built stables with him. A friendship developed that is still going strong. Over the years, Twinn has needed scooping up a few times, too—like that one night after Mardi Gras, when he drove his freshly washed, shiny red truck and trailer into a lamp post, and all the lights in a three-mile radius went out. Fortunately for him, Nino drove by at that exact moment. He got Twinn and his horse back on the road, and made sure no one knew that it was Twinn that turned off the lights.

## COLOPHON

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