

Flophouse, by David Isay and Stacy Abramson, photographs by Harvey Wang

reviewed by [Roderick T. Leupp](#) in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

When Paul Tillich joined the faculty of New York City's Union Theological Seminary in early 1934, the Bowery of the Lower East Side was in full flower. It was the world's most famous skid row. From the end of the 19th century to the post-World War II era, anywhere from 25,000 to 75,000 men called home. Now only 1,000 remain. David Isay and Stacy Abramson have captured this ebbing culture in a series of interviews at four of the lingering flophouses: the Sunshine, the White House (its name possibly referring to a now-defunct policy of whites only), the Andrews and the Providence.

Beginning with a folder of news clippings about the Bowery, Isay developed a public radio documentary on "The Sunshine Hotel" that then generated a *New York Times* article. Collaborator Harvey Wang added his textured black-and-white photos to both the *Times* piece and this book, which also features an occasional color shot. The photos reveal the closeness of life in cubicles smaller than many jail cells, yet also the conviviality of a place where, for older residents at least, everyone knows your name. The photos show places that are terrifying and intimate at the same time.

The book may be more aptly described as witness, confession or testimony than as a collection of interviews. Of the 100 men who spoke to Isay for ten minutes or four hours, the stories of 50 are here collected. Many of these men came to the U.S. in search of a better life. The format, which omits the questions Isay asked to elicit the stories, mirrors the freedom many experience living on the Bowery. The testimony of the last man featured expresses this joyous spontaneity: "The Lord grabbed ahold of me and I was his! Amen." A knife to his belly had brought him to the Bowery Mission, where he continues as a lay preacher.

This is oral history at its best. A narrative integrity pervades nearly everything the men say. In the conventional theological language of creation and redemption, these are not tales of healing. Destruction, nihilism, futility and sickness of every description interpose themselves between creation and redemption.

Yet, as Martin Luther well knew, "the Lord kills and brings to life: he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (1 Sam. 2:6). *Flophouse* is a compelling demonstration of one pole of the sin and grace dialectic. That it reports so well on our willingness to destroy ourselves does not negate God's counteracting grace. Many of these men have tried to turn their lives around through conventional religious practices, but relatively few have succeeded. Yet small favors like those performed by the man who sells dollar sandwiches out of his room to fellow residents, or the "runners" who for a dollar will retrieve cigarettes, alcohol and drugs for hotel patrons reveal that kindness--however misguided--is very much alive in these places.

The subjects Isay and Abramson present likely would not want to be the subjects of theologizing. They are too honest to blame God for their plight, too proud to accept easy redemption or cheap grace. They resist convenient categorization except through the common miseries that seem to encircle all of them in one way or another: a divorce here, a tendency to drink there, an experimentation with drugs that overwhelmed them. Arising from these messy details are memorably sad stories, like that of the Polish man who never finished his Ph.D. in economics from City College, and whose wife divorced him through the mail. He insisted on being photographed only from the back. Another suffered an early traumatic head injury that hopelessly stalled his grammar school learning.

Bob Dylan, who surely walked these streets in his Greenwich Village days, sang "don't put on any airs when you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue." These 50 men are so believable precisely because they do not put on airs. Not many readers may identify with the man from Tibet, a seven-year Bowery resident, who says "I have 26 language." The 425-pound man (who died before the book was published) who by himself consumes a 26-ounce can of Chef Boyardee ravioli and wears a bed sheet because his pants no longer fit is not the typical man next door.

But *Flophouse* is no freak show. A close relative of alleged mobster Vincent "the Chin" Giganti cuts to the theological center when he says, "I guess God has a way of letting us get what we deserve." The mysterious fusion of divine allowance, human deserts and ultimate destiny is the theological subtext of this marvelous book.