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Runaways

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RAISED BY WOLVES By Jim Goldberg in collaboration with Philip Brookman. Illustrated. 320 pp. New York: Scalo Publishers/Distributed Art Publishers. Paper, \$45.

THE pitfalls faced by Jim Goldberg as he began "Raised by Wolves," his project on teen-age runaways in Los Angeles and San Francisco, must have been daunting. How does a middle-aged photographer with a home, a wife and daughter, a good job and access to grant money infiltrate the fugitive, hand-to-mouth lives of street kids? What is the right distance from which to look at trouble? The photographer Larry Clark seems to have become a kid before he made "Kids," his faux documentary about teen-age amorality in New York. Whereas Sebastiao Salgado, in "Workers," his book on the plight of laborers around the world, ignored individuals in the hope that deeper patterns in the carpet would emerge.

Mr. Goldberg must have known, too, that he could be walking into a political crossfire, taken to task by the left, quick to file charges of exploitation, as well as by the right, which sees any empathy with the dispossessed as liberal sloganeering. The issue of how best to report from the social margins -- on the homeless, on people with AIDS, on drug addicts, on war refugees -- has preoccupied artists and journalists since the early 1980's. License is no longer freely granted to anyone with a camera and a clean conscience. The wrath directed at Eugene Richards last year for his book of photographs about cocaine in the ghetto showed just how perilous this sort of well-meaning documentary project can be.

Mr. Goldberg has thought about and found solutions to these problems before. "Rich and Poor," his wonderful 1986 book of portraits, used a collaborative tactic -- asking the people portrayed to write their own captions -- that broke down the prevailing asymmetry between photographer and subject. The technique has since become a cliché for those who want to give over some measure of control to the photographed in the interpretative process.

"Raised by Wolves" is far more ambitious than "Rich and Poor" and not as well resolved. Mr. Goldberg spent 10 years photographing, audio-taping and videotaping to prepare this book, which was produced with the collaboration of Philip Brookman, a curator of photography and media arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. (An exhibition of Mr. Goldberg's photographs is currently on display at the Corcoran.) The book pairs images of the adolescents in their makeshift environments with extensive interviews. Their stories are accompanied by testimony from social workers, doctors, parents and police. The truth about a runaway's childhood is sometimes hard to determine. These kids seem acutely aware of what adults want to hear. Some may not separate the rights of parents to exercise authority from fantasies of child abuse. But the blase accounts they gave Mr. Goldberg of violence at home and of streets rife with prostitution, AIDS and hard drugs are too numerous to be discounted.

At the heart of the book is a doomed love story between two 16-year-old misfits. Tweezy Dave and Beth, known as Echo, share an appetite for heroin but not much else. He moons after her, proposing marriage and children, fueled by impossible, sweet bravado as he walks, half-starved, down Hollywood Boulevard with his bedroll. She recognizes him as worse than a bad risk and dumps him to run with other boys, who abuse her. She becomes pregnant, has her baby, then returns, broke, to her mother's home.

Dave exits laughing by banishing reality. The exotic guest list he prepares for his funeral -- "Dylan, Keith, and Sid and Nancy (if she promises not to whine)" -- is a heartbreaking, hilarious cross section of his young brain, crazed and nourished by dreams of American pop culture,

"Raised by Wolves" avoids the temptation to sensationalize or sentimentalize the lives of the poor. These aren't Lewis Hine's waifs but children much harder to connect with. They sprawl across Mr. Goldberg's pages, revealing to us their own fragile sense of community. A pivotal but unobtrusive figure, he asks the questions and takes their collect calls. They keep him up to date on their activities by writing him long notes on the backs of fast-food place mats. (A few of them also relish the chance to display their misery on a tabloid television talk show. They are nothing if not media aware.) Adults are a vague presence to them, useful as cash machines in emergencies, otherwise to be skirted if possible. Even so, these teen-agers are noticeably kinder to one another than the characters in "Kids."

Mr. Goldberg's subjects occasionally pose for him, but more often he reports as a trusted fly on the wall. He has reproduced color photographs of a T-shirt, the bottom of a skateboard and a police drawer of confiscated weapons and drug paraphernalia as an anthro-

photographs of a T-shirt, the bottom of a skateboard and a police drawer of confiscated weapons and drug paraphernalia as an anthropologist might document artifacts. He does not allow the teen-agers to present themselves only as they would like to be seen, but he has also been careful not to impose his own authority on them either. As much as possible he seems to have wanted to make the book theirs as well as his, taking his title from one of Dave's hand-scrawled lyrics: "Born a wicked child / raised by wolves / A screamin kamakazi / I never will crash."

The casual technique of the pictures owes a lot, perhaps too much, to the work of Robert Frank and Nan Goldin. The Polaroid snapshots and rough-hewn images lifted from Mr. Goldberg's videos declare his refusal to make precious photographs. But in worrying where to stand in relation to his outcasts and to the art world, he may have sacrificed too much. The lives of teen-age runaways seem much less alien for his strenuous documentary efforts, but no less shapeless, and I'm not sure what to blame for the emotional void at the center of this book: the solipsism of youth or Mr. Goldberg's failure to make pictures that will carry the weight of his mournful ballad.