

David Brussat: An odd book about an odd state

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, August 20, 2009 Providence Journal

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The Weybosset Street end of the Providence Arcade

Photo by David Brussat

RHODE ISLAND is the nation's smallest state, and just as clearly the oddest state. Rhode Island probably leads America in the number of books per capita poking gentle fun at itself.

Latest in the collection is *Rhode Island 101: Everything You Wanted to Know About Rhode Island and Were Going to Ask Anyway*, by Tim Lehnert, published in June. It follows on the heels of *Rhode Island Curiosities: Quirky Characters, Roadside Oddities & Other Offbeat Stuff* (2007), by Seth Brown, and *You Know You're In Rhode Island When . . .* (2006), by Ryder Windham.

Books of like interest include guides for travelers, foodies, hikers and bikers, history and architecture buffs, or collections of old photos or postcards. My bookshelves groan under the weight of their guilty pleasure, and curmudgeons like me enjoy trolling through them, hunting for typical errors.

For example, to borrow a phrase, you know you are a Rhode Islander if you cringe when someone says the Providence Arcade was the first shopping mall in America. No, it's the oldest shopping mall in the nation. At least it was until its owner shut it last year. Let's hope there's something like a Five-Second Rule (about dropped food) that would let us reclaim our lost dibs on the nation's oldest shopping mall if it reopens soon as a collection of shops. If not, we may lose that point of pride to Watertown, N.Y., whose Paddock Arcade opened in 1850. It has already claimed the distinction on Wikipedia.

(The nation's first shopping mall was the Philadelphia Arcade, built in 1827 and razed in 1860.)

Windham's *You Know You're In Rhode Island When* gets the Arcade right, which, while laudable, offers little grist for critical mastication.

Brown's *Curiosities* calls the Arcade the oldest but also the first. Brown is a poet and the author of epic verse railleries on *The Journal's* commentary pages while a student at Williams in the '90s. Wit runs riot through his book. Literary license imbibed at Williams may be to blame for his embrace of both the "oldest" and "first" Arcade distinctions. Who really cares when you're having so much fun!

Lehnert's book gets it right on the Arcade in part because he called upon me to list the state's five best and worst buildings. The Arcade is No. 2 on the best list, and I didn't miss a beat in calling it the nation's "oldest (not first) indoor shopping mall." The Arcade follows the State House, and is followed by the Industrial Trust, the Providence County Courthouse and Providence Place mall. The worst buildings are entirely predictable: GTECH, Old Stone Square, the RISD Chace Center, Broadcast House (now Johnson & Wales's library) and the Howard Building (at the southwest corner of Kennedy Plaza).

Lehnert let one of his contributors (me) get away with selecting only Providence buildings as the best and worst in the state. Such manners! What about Newport's Redwood Library? What about the CCRI campus in Warwick? Lehnert got me off the hook by giving both of them "outside Providence" honorable and dishonorable mentions (respectively).

Nobody that I know has criticized Lehnert for including in his book a list whose best buildings are all traditional and worst are all modernist. And they'd better not! After all, the facts are the facts.

Unlike the other two, Lehnert's book is less a look at particular oddities of the state than at the overall oddness of its history, its geography, its climate, its population, its culture and its politics. The collection of exiled founders, the burning of the Gaspee, our early declaration of independence from Britain, our boycott of the Constitutional Convention, the Dorr War, the Bloodless Revolution, H.P. Lovecraft, the rise of the state's top mob lawyer to be its chief justice, the Haven Bros.' diner next to Providence City Hall, the rise and fall and the rise and fall of Buddy Cianci . . . such a book could not have been written about any other state. Rhode Island 101 may pose as a basic primer of the Ocean State, but it pokes into corners of history, and nibbles on doodles of contemporary culture, that validate our oddness. Even the hoariest of historians will be repeatedly startled and amused by the contents of this book.

Such as: "In 1698, Block Island was captured and looted by French privateers, and Colony soldiers were dispatched from Newport to repel the invaders. The French fled following a two-hour battle."

Who knew? That only scratches the surface of what I read that was new to me — some of which I figured must be erroneous but which turned out to be merely odd. Part of this strangeness is inherited from Rhode Island's founders, who turned religious liberty into a mutual

disagreeability pact. Cram all of this into the smallest state and what you get might be fairly described as predictable. “It’s just as you expected: Rhode Island’s got issues” reads a July 13 Journal story on a British study that tags Rhode Island as the second most neurotic state (after West Virginia). Well, that just sums up what’s in the paper every day. Tim Lehnert’s Rhode Island 101 merely puts it all in a handy nutshell.

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