



## Gringos

*Charles Portis*

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Jimmy Burns "in grass-green golfing trousers" is an expat American idler in Mexico, who unearths pre-Colombian artifacts, does small trucking jobs, and finds missing persons. Louise, a 90-pound stalker, hippies led by a murderous ex-con, and illegal Mayan excavators disrupt his laid-back lifestyle.

## Gringos Details

Date : Published May 1st 2000 by The Overlook Press (first published 1991)

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Author : Charles Portis

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## From Reader Review *Gringos* for online ebook

### Laura says

I wavered between a three and four star on this book, but settled on a four star since I would easily recommend the book to a friend. Rust and sweat wafts off the pages of *Gringos*. This novel makes an art form out of sleepy pacing, giving the reader a real feeling for the tempo of living in Mexico working as a 'guy with a truck' after 'retiring' from exploiting ancient ruin artifacts. Jimmy Burns, our quasi-reluctant hero, wades between a world of trashy, ex-pat *Gringos* and the Mexican jungle. Hippies become the ultimate antagonists, wandering around stealing spark plugs, kidnapping and doing drugs to become one with the gods. At the top of infamous Hippies to Hate list is Dan, the leader of a Hippie Gang, The Jumping Jacks, who believes he can transcend his mortal self and become a powerful god. But that isn't even really the most enjoyable part of the book. Just sitting in the truck with Burns and his cohorts makes the reader feel like they have some grime on their face and they like it.

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### David says

*Gringos* isn't exactly what I wanted from Charles Portis at this time. Yes, I realize Portis probably had his own literary agenda, but naturally I prefer mine: i.e., that he continue to write short, funny, meandering books about semi-enlightened rednecks. *Gringos* fits several of these bills if you want to quibble—and, as I've said before, you usually do—but its humor is a little more serious-minded than I wanted. I have the suspicion that all this rigmarole about crazy Americans trying to work out their neuroses and hang-ups in Mexico and Guatemala is intended to tell me something profoundly insightful about Americans—and perhaps about their childish devotion to myth, hocus-pocus, and the otherworldly because the world they've fashioned for themselves is so underwhelming and prosaic. But this feels too obvious, and Portis's characters are a little too grotesque in this outing to serve as persuasive stand-ins.

This is all wild speculation, of course, because I'm not really sure what Portis's point was. But I am strongly convinced that he had one. The story is too garrulous, overpopulated, and ornamented with recurring themes to be arbitrary or haphazard. Or is it? Maybe Portis is—just as I said in a previous review—a natural-born yarnspinner, and we literarily-minded saps are always still looking for a grand, metaphysical narrative behind the scenes. This is the kind of scrupulousness that makes dullards out of us. Let the novel stand there, on its own, and speak for itself. Was it enjoyable? Maybe that should be the main question. Enjoyability captures so many qualities under its umbrella that I should be content with saying, Yes, the novel *Gringos* by Charles Portis is mostly enjoyable. *That* is enough.

And yet it's somehow not. It's enjoyable but somewhat unsatisfying. Like if you sat down and spooned half a container of fat-free Cool Whip into your gaping maw. It lacks a substantiality that I craved right now. *Gringos* is, after all, Portis's last novel—a statement implying that he's dead, which he's not, in the rigorous sense of the word anyway, but this novel was published in 1990, I believe. The juxtaposed evidence of his advanced age and the twenty-ones year since the publication of *Gringos* leads me to conclude that he's thrown in the towel with this novel-writing business. Just call me Angela Lansbury. Writer's Block, She Wrote. Or, worse, apathy. Discouragement. Plain old-fashioned tiredness.

I wanted *Gringos*, Portis's swan song, to show him at the height of his powers. But no. Of the four (of five) Portis novels I've read, this is probably the depth of his powers. And yet it's good. Just not good enough. It's

the story of Jimmy Burns, an American expatriate, who used to do archaeological things (I say 'archaeological things' because I'm not sure if he was a genuine archaeologist or merely a ruins scavenger) but now mainly does odd jobs for people. The story focuses on an American expatriate community in Mexico predominantly comprised of wackos, UFO enthusiasts, violent cult members, hippies, and general, non-categorizable eccentrics. There are about twenty thousand characters in this three-hundred-twenty page novel, and I had a hell of a time keeping them all straight—which resulted in several anguished searches through the early pages of the book searching for characters' names. Late in the book, Jimmy tells us that a certain character has died, and given the attention devoted to this death, it seemed to be a somewhat significant event, yet I had no recollection of who he was. The name sounded familiar though. Either this book needs an index or my mind is progressing at a brisk clip toward its grand enfeeblement.

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### **M.J. Johnson says**

Very enjoyable, beautifully written and very funny at times.

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### **James says**

It occurs to me, upon my most recent re-reading of this novel a few weeks ago, that this novel sort of works as a cross between Raiders of the Lost Ark (a movie I've seen maybe 45,000 times) and 2012 (a movie I did not see and have no intention of seeing, having already seen enough Roland Emmerich films to make my eyes bleed). But, you know, funny. Really really funny.

Also, this novel is great when you want to read random passages out loud to your friends' voice mail boxes. The only problem is that you need to not laugh while you're doing it, or you'll ruin the whole effect. This is difficult, I've learned, but not impossible. The trick is to repeat the passage over several times before you make the call.

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### **Sherrie says**

This is the 3rd Portis novel I've plowed through, 2 more to go. His prose is a little bit more 'filled out' than his earlier, most stripped- down style as seen in his first novels Norwood & True Grit - but it still 'reads easy' - my way of saying, I enjoyed the living f\*ck out of it. Jimmy Burns is an American ex-pat living in Merida, Mexico - a former temple robber, Burns tries to stick to more honest work nowadays. Gringos is about simply a series of his adventures, from making deliveries deep in the jungle to searching out a lost gringo archeology associate, to stalking a group of dangerous hippies who may or may not believe in UFOs figuring into Mayan cosmology. Good stuff. Wish the world had about 20 more Portis novels.

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### **Dillon Strange says**

Another classic by the master. This book is a little larger in scope than his previous ones, but still classic Portis. Jimmy Burns is the hero, a wise cracking reformed thief of Mayan antiquities turned long haul trucker

and finder of runaways. Here he's searching for a UFO obsessed crackpot friend gone missing in the Mexican jungle with a host of strange and wonderful characters in tow. A must read! Charles Portis is one of the greatest writers America has ever produced!

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### **Bud Smith says**

I wanna go to Mexico and join a cult.

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### **Jeff Tucker says**

If Charles Portis wrote a grocery shopping list I would enjoy reading it. No one else writes quite like him. I do understand that he's not for everyone. It takes a certain type of reader to appreciate his style and wit. He often seems to be toying with the reader. I loved 'Gringos'. It was a little like 'The Dog of the South' but not as funny. It's the story of Jimmy Burns and a group of expatriate Americans living in Merida, Mexico. Like his other books there's road trips with strangers and searches for things lost and allusive. I think Charles Portis needs to be read with the idea of savoring each scene for its beauty and quirkiness and not worrying too much about the overall plot. If you can do that you'll like the book.

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### **James says**

\*\*\* Mild Spoilers\*\*\*

Charles Portis is the funniest American writer currently at work—I hope. *Gringos*, published in 1991, seems to be his last *entrada*, as Doc Flandin calls his voyage into the *selva* throughout the book. And while *True Grit* may be his best novel and *Masters of Atlantis* and *The Dog of the South* tied dead even for his funniest (or the funniest by anyone, anywhere), *Gringos* is my favorite.

I had the chance to teach the novel for a few years when I was teaching high-school AP Literature. One day, a student said to me, "Admit it—you want to be Jimmy Burns." She had me there, dead to rights. Prufrock knew he was not meant to be Hamlet—but who could? That's like aspiring to be Beowulf or Bond: the task is too great for any normal person. But Jimmy Burns is at least visible on the horizon of literary heroes one could emulate. He's tough, he's ironic, and he's a good man. He gets himself into one situation after another because he's trying to help other people and he only complains to the reader. A month doesn't go by without my quoting him or thinking, "This is right out of *Gringos*."

*Gringos*, like life, seems to read as an episodic series of set pieces, unlike *True Grit* which barrels along at a fast pace and ends in a terrific shootout. But, again like life, when one looks back at the action, one senses a pattern in all of it. Jimmy prides himself on his keen powers of observation, working for Gilbert, finding fugitives, but there are other things he can't see, such as Alma's opinion of him or the nature of Rudy and Louise's relationship.

And, for all of the jokes, the novel is one of the most realistic I've ever read in terms of how the major moments are handled. When Jimmy realizes that Big Dan and the Jumping Jacks are behind the City of Dawn business and that Red is a runaway in over her head, he prays—mid-paragraph, mind you—in a way

wholly convincing:

But my poor head was so muddled that I didn't work it out until that moment in the pyramid steps. It came to me all at once. I stopped dead in my tracks and took off my hat in this driving rain and offered up a prayer of my own. I asked God to let me find the little girl, LaJoye Mishell Teeter, promising to not let her out of my hands this time. I promised not to take any money for her recover. The wind was fierce up here against the forest canopy.

We have no reason to assume Jimmy is insincere—and he keeps his promise of not taking any money. A similarly realistic moment is the shooting that occurs atop the pyramid. Thousands of other authors would have offered some banter, some ironic detachment in that scene, but Portis is too good. The shooting happens, and *then* the characters begin screaming at each other because their adrenalin has been increased a hundredfold.

Other moments are exactly like these in tone and spirit: Jimmy's visit to Doc's house when he learns of Doc's illness, the gathering of vets and the hippies at Shep's, the ways that Beth patronizes Jimmy, the barroom attempts at "marks of distinction," Jimmy's quoting Art and Mike, and Jimmy's marriage. How he gets married makes perfect sense and the couple at the end of the book strikes me as far more believable—and likable—than others found on other pages. Jimmy reasons, "You had to plant a tree somewhere," and this novel of how a 41 year-old man ends up planting his tree is a masterpiece. This is probably the tenth or eleventh time I've read it from start to finish. My only regret is that the Coen brothers can't make it because the man born to play Jimmy Burns, Tommy Lee Jones, has aged out of the role.

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### **Bro\_Pair ???? says**

Almost as good as *Dog of the South*, and thus probably Portis's second-best book. Stumbles slightly at the end. Slightly, surprisingly reactionary. But great.

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### **Lars Guthrie says**

If you only want to read one Portis novel, make it, of course, 'True Grit.' Two, add 'Norwood.' Three, it's 'Griegos.'

Portis writes with an unassuming air. Nothing monumental going on, except perhaps with 'True Grit.' That tossed-off, effortless feeling is not so easy to produce, if you want it to come across with any sense of authenticity. Ask anyone who's tried writing like that.

Ask Portis. Here's the narrator of 'Griegos,' Jimmy Burns: 'Writing is hard—it's a form of punishment in schools, and rightly so—and so I stood paralyzed before all the different ways this simple message might be put.'

You just know Portis sweats to craft such deceptively straightforward observation, so plain yet so elegantly witty.

Let him walk you down the length of a saloon:

‘Along the bar various claims to personal distinction were being made.

“I have a stainless steel plate in my head.”

“I am one-sixteenth Cherokee.”

“I have never voted in my life.”

“My mother ate speckled butterbeans every day of her life.”

“I don’t even take aspirin.” ’

In six rather stark sentences, Portis demonstrates the beauty of the fiction form. There’s a whole little pathetic world there that’s pretty funny. A tracking shot would capture the author’s discerning ear for dialogue and eye for ne’er-do-well characters, but without the humor of his introduction.

‘Gringos’ would make an excellent movie, though.

Jimmy Burn is an ex-patriate in Mérida scraping out a living by trading and hauling whatever he can fit in his truck, as well as hunting down criminal fugitives hiding south of the border. He goes on the requisite Portis road trip, meandering through the exotic Yucatan jungle in a search for a vanished eccentric, meeting up with genuine archaeologists as well as kind of kooks whom readers of ‘Masters of Atlantis’ will recognize—the ones who’ve seen aliens, or at least find their traces in Maya ruins.

And the denouement of ‘Gringos’ features a satisfying dose of violent action, somewhat uncharacteristic for Portis. Plus there is a happy ending.

Come on, Hollywood.

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### **Adam says**

Cut from similar cloth as the author’s Dog in the South, a story of ex-patriots (American) living on the Guatemala/Mexico border, and they are a truly eccentric bunch. Plot elements are wispy (another quest for a missing person) and languid, the sense of the comic turns alternately ominous, and the sentences are almost nearly all perfect. His finely pitched sentence after sentence keeps you reading despite the meandering narrative, on strength of the writing alone. A Manson family/ Jonestown type cult and hints of Guatemala’s civil war offer darker under currents.

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### **Rage says**

I enjoyed this book. it didn’t have the kind of quick pattering narrative I expected, but I got to really like the narrator, Jimmy Burns. he’s an expat in Mexico, a retired Marine and retired seller of scavenged archaeological artifacts (such that some of the people around him sort of despair that he’s not doing

something better with himself). no one believes that he's left the business, no matter how many times he repeats himself or refuses to buy/sell anyone's trinkets. there's something of an overarching structure to the plot, the City of Dawn story with the Jumping Jacks and El Mago. there are little hints and signs and symbols throughout the work, some mysticism and supernatural elements, though our narrator doesn't seem like much of a believer. one of the things I really liked about the story is that the reader is privy to Jimmy's thoughts and motivations (not all of them; I don't think we ever get to hear his long term plan), but from the way that everyone else reacts to him, he doesn't convey himself so that other people are able to understand or know him. I appreciate how real all of the characters feel, how Portis can bring them to life with just a few sentences. the co different cities and rivers and ruins really came to life for me, too.

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### **Chrystral says**

Another comic caper by Charles Portis cast in the same mold as "Norwood" and "The Dog of the South." These three novels are really the same story with different characters, which is quite all right with me; in fact, I wish he had 10 more of the same lying around. I would read them all with gusto.

This time the action takes place in the jungles of Chiapas, our red-faced muttering narrator on the trail of both a malevolent hippie (with two yards of fine linen wound around his head) and a UFO-tracker (with a City Planning degree and a broken pedometer). Our fussy bounty hunter finds himself saddled with a truckload of strange companions, including the canine Ramos, head of the 1st War Dog Platoon, and the only one who knows where he is going.

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### **Jeff Jackson says**

Charles Portis: the most underrated comic writer in America. This doesn't scale the heights of his masterwork DOG OF THE SOUTH, but it's enjoyable to accompany his eccentric characters as they drink in small town Mexican bars, trade notes on raiding Mayan tombs, track missing UFO experts through the jungle, and encounter hippie tribes awaiting the end of the world. There's a Robert Stone haze of menace floating around the edges of this tale and Pynchon-esque secret plots furtively winding through the story as well. But mostly it's pure Portis. He immerses you in his off-beat world with ease, tossing off hilarious one-liners so embedded in the action that at first you don't even notice them. Quentin Tarantino has talked about how certain movies - Dazed and Confused, Rio Bravo, his own Jackie Brown - were "hang out movies" where the principal pleasure was the company of the characters. And that's true here as well. Sadly, this was Portis's last book. There are no clues herein about the long and still unbroken literary silence to follow. Instead the book ends with a lovely grace note, a bloody memory transfigured, a lingering tune.

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