



The Moonshine War

Elmore Leonard

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It was Prohibition, and a big, hell-raising Son Martin had himself something special: \$125,000 worth of Kentucky's finest home-made whiskey, no one was going to steal it. Because when it came to shooting, fighting, and outsmarting the Big Boys, Son Martin wasn't just good. He was bad... dangerous... and deadly.

The Moonshine War Details

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Author : Elmore Leonard

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From Reader Review *The Moonshine War* for online ebook

Lee says

One of Leonard's earlier story's, and he was already writing good novels. Proabition going on in 1931 in the hills of Kentucky. Moonshine was a good but illegal business, but you had to feed your family somehow. Son Martin was said to have 150 barrels stashed somewhere on his property, that his daddy had made. Eight years later, the well aged whiskey was getting some attention. Leonard is just a darn good (as they would say back then) writer, storyteller,a with some thrills thrown in.

sappho_reader says

Before I finally came to realization that I am not an audiobook person I tried to listen to this via Audible.com but I didn't get far. The story was engaging but I just don't have the attentiveness to listen to books on tape. I am horrible at multitasking and my commute to work is only 5-8 minutes so it is not feasible to listen while driving. So I abandoned the audio and told myself that I would continue reading it in proper book form. The only problem was that it took me six months to get around to checking it out from the library.

This is a riveting tale of a battle of wits over 150 barrels of whiskey hidden in the Kentucky hills during Prohibition in 1931. The dialogue and characterizations were excellent. I kept guessing who would win the war up til the last couple paragraphs with the great suspenseful ending. Son Martin is not one to mess with.

Steve says

One of Leonard's lesser known novels, *The Moonshine War* is, nevertheless, Grade-A Leonard, well worth seeking out. Written in 1969, one could say it was written at a time when Leonard was still a wonderful secret, and not yet a trendy discovery for People Magazine. What makes *The Moonshine War* a bit different than some of Leonard's crime novels, is that it is set in the not too distant past - 1931. So to some extent it is a historical novel. The setting is eastern Kentucky. True, Leonard skates pretty lightly over the regional specifics (dialect, land descriptions, etc.) - the kind of things that make Faulkner or Cormac McCarthy so authentic in a literary sense. But Leonard does throw enough in to make it thriller believable. Authentic details regarding the making of moonshine, historical nods, such as the Spanish flu, WW 1, and the kind of overalls men wore, for the most part root the reader well enough. The characters are as solid as any Leonard has created. Son Martin, the novel's hero, is your typical Leonard tough-guy. Quiet, operating on the edge of things, something of an outlaw himself. The bad guys are what you would expect. Vicious, erratic, and often kind of stupid. Of particular note, however, is Dr. Taulbee, a murderous bootlegger, who is smarter than your average Leonard criminal, and a difficult opponent for Son Martin. But he has a weak spot - Miley, a beautiful (and amoral) prostitute, who's along for the ride, though she's always looking for a reliable man. Son, with his internal code of honor, is closer to fitting that description than the good doctor, and Miley, who recognized this, is in her own way a more admirable character than Mrs. Lyons, Son's long-running love interest from town.

The plot in *The Moonshine War* is pretty simple: bootleggers trying to steal Son's hidden whiskey, and Son's reluctance to let that happen. There are echoes of *High Noon*, as Son's friends and neighbors abandon him to the bootleggers. One questions whether mountain folks would abandon one of their own to an assault from outsiders, but Leonard seems to anticipate this, when he has a neighbor of Son's tell him that the difference in their predicament is that Son has no family being threatened. In essence, to what extent Son cares for his neighbors is thus returned, in kind, which makes the ending appropriate, and well done. Leonard's endings can sometimes be disappointing. I have remarked on this myself (*52 Pickup*). But my complaint had more to do with the fireworks leading up to the end of that novel. If you look at the range of Leonard's work, you see an author who likes the open ended ending. It is a deliberate artistic choice by Leonard. At his best (for example, *Valdez is Coming*, *City Primeval*) he leaves the reader with a vivid, even mythic, tableau that invites the reader in. Leonard loves his *High Noon* moments, and will often freeze frame it in novel after novel, like a photograph of opponents squared away on Main Street, guns drawn, with the sun beating down. *The Moonshine War*, to my mind sits up there with the best of Leonard.

Dan Schwent says

Bootlegger Son Martin has 150 barrels of whiskey his dad made stashed away somewhere and his old war buddy, Frank Long, now a crooked prohibition agent, has his sights set on them. Will Son cave in under the pressure and hand over the whiskey or will he put Long and his cronies into the ground?

Reading an Elmore Leonard book is like bullshitting with an old friend on their front porch. In this case, it would be whiskey we'd be drinking instead of a couple frosty beers.

Rural Kentucky in the 1930's is far from Elmore Leonard's usual haunts but after watching several seasons of *Justified*, I figured he could handle it. I was right.

The Moonshine War plays out like a lot of Elmore Leonard books. The promise of violence keeps building until the glorious shitstorm at the end. Frank Long trying to strongarm Son Martin out of his valuable whiskey is more of the same. It went a little differently than I thought it would near the end, which is always a plus for me.

The country dialog is very well done and drives the plot forward. Like in most Leonard books, Son Martin is just a little slicker than Frank Long and the others.

Son reminds me of Raylan Givens a bit of Raylan was running moonshine instead of being a US Marshall. He's a conflicted character, his young wife dying from the flu while he was in the army leaving him somewhat directionless. He's got a bit of that Givens inner rage going as well. When his neighbors started turning on him when he wouldn't roll over for Long and the others, I knew the violence was coming. *The Moonshine War* actually feels like a western more than anything else.

Any gripes? Not a one besides wanting to read more about Son Martin. 3.5 stars.

J. says

I really liked this book but I can see how it's really not for everyone. I don't usually venture into the historical fiction genre, but when I saw this book at the library I had to pick it up. I've been wanting to read an Elmore Leonard book for quite a while now, and this is a good one to get me started with this author.

The Moonshine War is a historical fiction piece set in 1930's Kentucky during prohibition. Immediately you get a terrific sense of presence, as the author sets up a whiskey raid in the back hills and hollows of rural Kentucky. Part of what I loved about this book is the unapologetic viewpoints and characters. There's no attempt to make the delicate reader LIKE these people. It simply tells a great story and let's you decide. It's a book written by a man, about southern men, doing backwoods hick men things. If that's not in your wheelhouse, then give this one a pass.

The Good: Great dialogue, great cast of villains - nearly all of the usual types are represented, from the simple thug, to the manipulative mastermind - good pace, perfect length, nice action, decent suspense, believable premise and plot from beginning to end.

The Bad: Abrupt end, protagonist isn't proactive, reading this book makes you want to reach for the whiskey bottle just for a snort to relate.

This book didn't get the fifth star for two reasons. One, the abrupt end kind of left me cold. I understand it, I just would have liked to know how some of the character issues were resolved once the book was past its climax. Two, I'm not a huge fan of protagonists that let the action happen to them. Son Martin did very little to try and resolve the situation before it reached the boiling point, and while that was his character's nature, it made me want to wring his neck at times. The highlight of the book for me was the interaction of the trio of villains, Frank Long, Dr. Taulbee and Dual Metters.

I would recommend this book to anyone who has ever lived in rural America, and anyone who is a fan of historical fiction. If you're a fan of prohibition era fiction and/or moonshine/whiskey then read this book!

Daniel Villines says

If this book is anything, it is certainly entertaining, and reading for the pure enjoyment of a story is something that every reader should do from time-to-time. While I seem to be obsessed with searching out that next morsel of wisdom or insight from my next book, I also need to remember that I would not be the book-geek that I am today if it were not for John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee series and the enjoyment that I drew from those mystery novels.

But there is more here for readers that are indeed looking for that next morsel of wisdom or insight. Our country is a diverse place that is comprised of many geographical locations and each of these regions has its own distinct culture. In visiting these places we may be amazed by the food, but eating green chili in New Mexico is only a clue to the deeper feelings and mannerisms of those that actually live there. The same must be true for the South.

The Moonshine War illustrates aspects of Southern culture. For those that view the South from afar, like me, the story highlights an approach to life that finds enjoyment in the smallest of things. Things like family, neighbors, serenity, and moonshine take precedence over things like Facebook, 'those people next door,' happy hour, and Chivas Regal Scotch. It's the depiction of this way of life that makes me wonder if more of life can be enjoyed in the absence of everything else that is desired by other cultures in other regions, and contemplation is the mark of a good story.

Kemper says

My review of this one and some thoughts about Elmore Leonard now up at Shelf Inflicted.

aPriL does feral sometimes says

A very peculiar semi-fictional world of masculine struggle for relevance and self-esteem is exposed by the genius author Elmore Leonard in his usual grand style. The backdrop for this peacock display of virility in this early book by Leonard consists of extreme 1931 Tennessee poverty, isolation, lack of oversight and American male machismo. In Spain, machismo is defined by bullfighting, in Russia and China they have hierarchical domination, but in America it's the loner.

Being female, I recognize the displaying of tail feathers that is as much about the thumping of the male's chest as displaying sexual prowess. Anyone familiar with America's ways knows that the movie character of Clint Eastwood is THE male icon for our men, with his display of large pistols and silent judgement. Nobody captures this image in more clever ways than Elmore Leonard, and no one can skewer it with style of smirking intellectualism while helplessly admiring it at the same time as Leonard. I also find myself helplessly full of admiration while a sneer is on my lips.

Son Martin is living on a forested mountain farm hollowed by mine shafts, passed down to him by his father. The art and living of making moonshine, hard liquor, has also been passed down, along with a secret cache of superb whiskey hidden for 8 years and reputed to be worth \$150,000 in this Prohibition time. If it exists, Son has never sold it, but envious rumors abound in this small community of poor moonshiners spread out among the trees.

A different kind of prodigal son returns in the form of a Federal Prohibition agent, Frank Long. He is eager to make a name for himself in Washington, D.C. by recovering this hidden whiskey and he doesn't care how he does it, short of murder. When threats only get him a silent stare, he decides to hire some of the thugs he has arrested in his career, particularly a sociopathic dentist, who had served time for raping his unconscious female patients under ether, to harass all of the moonshiners to force a showdown. Long thinks if he burns down everybody else's stills, the entire community will put pressure on Martin to give up the whiskey. It works as far as organizing the neighbors to talk to Son about giving the cache up, but Son Martin politely says no.

This is a big mistake. For who, I'm not going to say (politely staring, polishing my gun).

William says

Audio book while the characters are plausible and the story was well delivered, it is forgettable. Having said that, my time was not wasted and as usual, Leonard's stories are best suited for audio and visual.

Scott says

Can't really go wrong with Master Leonard. I'd like to know if this story was somehow re-imagined many years later as Justified.

Melki says

People did crazy things where whiskey was concerned. It being against the law to drink wasn't going to stop anybody. They'd fight and shoot each other and go to prison and die for it...

I suffer from ELADS - Elmore Leonard Attention Deficit Syndrome. His books grab me at the get-go, then leave me drifting away somewhere in the middle. His fault or mine? I don't know, but this one was different. I was gripped tightly, in a good way, the whole way through this thrilling read.

Like his father before him, Son Martin makes shine. The town's sheriff has a taste for the stuff, so things work out for everybody, until Son's old army buddy shows up. He's not exactly there on a social call. He's now a Prohibition agent. What follows is a clash of wills that leads quickly to an all-out war.

The book is well-paced with plenty of unsavory characters doing lots of unsanitary things. It also includes this little speech by the sheriff that I just love:

"People around here have built their stills and drunk whiskey for more than a hundred years. They believe if a man plows the ground and sows it and raised corn, it's not the place of another man to tell him he can eat it but he can't drink it. That's what we think of your Prohibition law."

All right! It's The Man telling off The Other Man!

Have I been cured of my ELADS? Don't know, but I'm willing to give it another shot.

Bam says

#2016-usa-geography-challenge: KENTUCKY

*3.5 stars. Well, now I've finally read an Elmore Leonard book! I've been wanting to do that since watching the movie Get Shorty. This suspense story is a fun, quick read set in the days of Prohibition in the hills of Kentucky, where nearly every farmer has a still. Son Martin has inherited 150 barrels of the best aged whiskey that his father made while Son was in the army. These are hidden on his property, probably in one of the old coal mining shafts, and are now worth a fortune. Unfortunately, Son told a friend in the army about

them while drunk and now that old buddy works for the United States Federal Government as a Prohibition agent and wants Son to turn in the whiskey. And so the war begins...

The most interesting part of this story was the moral dilemma Son Martin faced--to do what was best for him or for his neighbors.

Jamie says

Well, this just came out of nowhere to be *all kinds* of good and then some. Between this and you-know-what I hereby petition Elmore Leonard to write about nothing but Kentucky from now on.

First read June 2011

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September 2012:

I wanted to see if this was still my favorite and yes, yes it is.

Andrew says

I got pretty burned-out on Leonard a few years back, but I've been watching "Justified" lately and it put me in the mood for another of his books. This is an early Leonard novel, set in the Prohibition-era. Like all Leonard novels, it's breezy and could be read in a day or two if you're so inclined, but I liked stretching it out, reading small increments here and there. The deadpan humor and period detail are thoroughly enjoyable, and Leonard builds and releases tension without overplaying it. Well-constructed, well-executed fun.

John Kues says

Listened to this in the car, really liked it, and the reader was great (Mark Hammer). My wife didn't care for the slow development but I really loved the Elmore Leonard dialogue. I put off listening to it until I was alone. Leonard as usual captures the characters and gets you involved in the times. Small town Kentucky life. Son Martin is sitting on 150 barrels of prime moonshine left him by his father. Rumors about where it is hidden, and what it is worth. Frank Long, an acquaintance of Son's from the army shows up as a prohibition agent. Seems Son told him about the barrels while drunk in the army, and Frank has designs on getting the moonshine for himself (some agent!). Frank brings in some gangster bootleggers who plan on forcing Son to tell where the stuff is hidden. He focuses on Son's neighbors, busting up their stills and the only source of their income, until the neighbors join in and want Son to give up the 150 barrels. A real showdown develops, and the tension builds to a surprise ending. A good yarn.

