



Hunter's Horn

Harriette Arnow

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Michigan State University Press is proud to announce the re-release of Harriette Simpson Arnow's 1949 novel *Hunter's Horn*, a work that Joyce Carol Oates called "our most unpretentious American masterpiece."

In *Hunter's Horn*, Arnow has written the quintessential account of Kentucky hill people—the quintessential novel of Southern Appalachian farmers, foxhunters, foxhounds, women, and children. New York Times reviewer Hirschel Brickell declared that Arnow "writes...as effortlessly as a bird sings, and the warmth, beauty, the sadness and the ache of life itself are not even once absent from her pages."

Arnow writes about Kentucky in the way that William Faulkner writes about Mississippi, that Flannery O'Connor writes about Georgia, or that Willa Cather writes about Nebraska—with studied realism, with landscapes and characters that take on mythic proportions, with humor, and with memorable and remarkable attention to details of the human heart that motivate literature.

Hunter's Horn Details

Date : Published December 31st 1997 by Michigan State University Press (first published 1949)

ISBN : 9780870134371

Author : Harriette Arnow

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Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, American, Southern

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From Reader Review Hunter's Horn for online ebook

Camie says

Nunn Ballew, his long suffering wife Milly, and their young family featuring mainly their eldest daughter Suse, are at the center of this circa 1940's novel which is set in the hills of Kentucky. Farm life is desperately tough especially on the women since the men are distracted by hounds, fox hunting, and moonshine. Things really take a downward turn for the Bellew's when their old hound dog Zing dies and Nunn sells the few valuable livestock (basically the families food supply) they own to buy two new hounds Sam and Vinie. Nunn has always been enamored with hunting King Devil an old livestock stealing fox that has become a local legend, but now he becomes obsessed. For the most part Nunn who puts his dog's needs before those of his family is an un-endearing fellow but it's easy to see that much of the men's status comes from the quality of their hounds and the bragging rights that come with their ability to hunt. To his credit he finally learns a lesson or two, and to Millie's credit there remains something to return to after he does.

Because of it's slow pace and unusual vernacular this book started out as homework, but both improve and in the end it turns into a pretty darn interesting book.

I've ordered The Dollmaker which has been touted as this author's best work.

4 stars - April Pre-1980 On The Southern Lit Trail

Lis Carey says

I got yer Great American Novel right here.

In the years just prior to American entry into World War II, Nunn Ballew is raising his family, trying to restore the family land that he bought back with money earned in the mines, and hunting an especially pernicious red fox, known as King Devil, who has been plaguing the district and killing far too much livestock since Ballew's return five years earlier. Nunn is obsessed with King Devil, and during fox season, it's a major distraction from needed farm work, which he knows is vital to his long-term plans.

But this isn't just Nunn's story. It is every bit as much the story of his wife Milly, his daughter Suse, the local midwife Sue Annie, and an interconnected web of extended family and neighbors in the area of Little Smoky Creek, Kentucky.

The lives of the Kentucky hill people are hard, and they're just coming out of the Great Depression and into the beginnings of the Second World War. Some of the men are working for the WPA; others, like Nunn, are cautiously exploring the benefits of working with the AAA and county agricultural agents. And they're running their foxhounds most nights during fox season, trying to get King Devil.

Meanwhile, for all that the men are juggling, the women's lives are harder. Food grown needs to be canned, smoked, ground, baked, processed somehow to last from harvest to the next growing season. Nunn's decision to buy two purebred foxhounds means selling what would have been their winter meat that year.

Improvements to the farm mean no money for Sunday shoes or the bus to high school in town for Suse. Milly and Suse and the oldest boy, Lee Roy, work hard to make ends meet and fill in the gaps Nunn leaves when he's running his hounds, but often see themselves going without things that make them feel exposed before other wives and older children among the neighbors.

And it's Sue Annie and Milly who labor long, hard, and heartbreakingly to save a neighbor's youngest child, while haunted by memories of their own lost children.

This is an intimate and moving look at life among the hill people. It's an older time and a different place than most of us know. The lower status and hard conditions for women are accepted by all as the natural order, and Arnow doesn't regard it as alien, but she also shows the ways in which the women are the strength and necessary binding of the families and the whole community. Nunn seems to have a suspicion, a hope, that his daughter can do something more, if he can find the means to let her. He seems to be catching wind of how the changes disrupting their community can bring good as well as ill--but it's a hard, challenging time, and nothing comes easily.

There's some emotionally rough stuff here, and it's not a cheerful, chirpy, happily-ever-after ending. Neither is it grim and hopeless and negative for everyone.

This is a rich, strong, narrative about a piece of American life and culture that rarely gets respect or understanding.

Recommended for everyone with pulse.

I bought this book.

James Aura says

A masterwork of Americana. This is the saga of a Kentucky Hill Country family in the years around the Great Depression and World War II. A story of obsession, poverty, but also hope and recovery.

The amount of detail into the daily lives of people who are essentially American peasants is so well rendered you can smell the kitchen, sense the desperation and feel the joy with each turn of the story. Highly recommended for those looking for serious, challenging fiction that goes beyond mere entertainment.

Diane Barnes says

OK, first, let me just say that however the stars were aligned to enable me to be born at a time and in a culture where idiotic men could not make decisions about their wives and children's lives and futures with no recourse, thank you, thank you.

Now that that's off my chest, on to my review.

This is a book that I have had on my shelves for years. I bought it after reading "The Doll Maker" by the same author. It was hard to find, had to be special ordered, and cost a lot for a paperback, \$20.00 as I recall. It came in, I looked at the size of the print, the oversized trade book with tiny margins, and promptly put it on my shelf for later. Later arrived when it was chosen as a read on The Southern Literary Trail, I was trying to make dent in my backlog, and it seemed time to read it.

Even then, it started out very slowly, and without the 3 reasons stated above, I would have considered it a dnf, but I persevered. Thank God, because this book has enlarged my life, and understanding of a southern

way of life that has largely (again, thank God) disappeared.

The setting is the backwoods hill country of Kentucky, circa 1938 - 1942, among uneducated people trying to survive and prosper in an unforgiving world. Progress is coming, but slowly, and the "war across the ocean" accelerates things considerably. Nunnally Ballew's family is spotlighted in this novel, in a day to day struggle against the elements, the economy, and modern life trying to intrude. Nunn's years long hunting of the fox known as the legendary King Devil is symbolic of the difference between a life of freedom and that of responsibility when a family is involved.

My favorite characters in this novel were Sue Annie, midwife and local herbalist/medicine woman, who cussed better than any man, and hated religion and men in general, but did more good, with more compassion, than any other character, and Suse, oldest daughter of Millie and Nunnally Ballew, who wanted nothing more than an education, and a chance to escape into the outer world she had heard so much about. An old woman and a young girl, both fighting for the women they knew and saw in their daily lives, and for themselves as well. Both incredible women that deserved more than they got.

This book was 3 stars for the first 1/3 of the book, and a solid 5 stars for the last half, so 4 stars overall. A book I would heartily recommend to anyone with the time and patience to delve into this part of the world, and this time in history.

Harry Heitman says

This story about the Hill Country people of the mid-south was both wide and deep. Great characters, page-turning plot and great descriptive detail. Overall, a sad story, but compelling. Harriette Simpson Arnow was a gifted writer.

Dustincecil says

A slow read with little print, but a LOT of heart.

I loved that this book never really let me settle on final judgments of most of these people,despite really wanting to burden them with my own personal prejudices.

There are a lot of unforgettable scenes in this book. (Lureenie foraging acorns...)

I have to shave a star off because the bible stuff in the last few paragraphs felt a little hokey- but otherwise I wouldn't change a word!

Candi says

"And his voice, snarling and animal-like, seemed to come from that part of him that lived past his will and his reason, the part that hunted King Devil and left all manhood behind until he was but one beast hunting another."

On the surface, this novel is about a man and his obsession to hunt down King Devil, the red fox that has been the bane of the past several years of his existence. Nunn Ballew is a foxhunter and will do anything to catch this fox – including selling off his livestock and sacrificing his land if necessary. The Ballews lack adequate clothing and shoes and often go for weeks on end without meat or milk in their daily diet. Nunn's wife and his children toil and struggle to help out on the farm and in the home, yet poverty rules their little world. But someday Nunn will conquer King Devil and all his troubles will melt away... or so he believes.

At its heart, **Hunter's Horn** is so much more than a story about clever foxes, spirited foxhounds and the fever of the foxhunt. It's a drama about the people of Appalachia in the 1940s. World War II seems a faraway cry, something just whispered about and barely touching the folk of the Kentucky hills. The people here are removed from the progress of the 'real' world. Superstitions abound, the men drink moonshine, and the women barely have time to rest in between birthing one baby after another. The preachers sermonize about hell and eternal damnation, and the need to save one's self from sin.

Those who really shine in this story are the women living along the banks of Little Smokey Creek. They are the strength of the community. While most of the men are off hunting fox and getting liquored up, the womenfolk are the ones keeping it all together. They farm, they cook and clean, they spend hours canning and putting up food for the winter, and they help one another bring new life into the world. Nunn's wife, Milly, is a capable woman, but she can't see much past her own homestead. She sees no use for her eldest daughter, Suse, to receive an education beyond the elementary level. She has no use for doctors and modern medicine. Nunn, however, does recognize the bright potential in young Suse and wishes he could provide a high school education, perhaps even teacher's college, for the nearly thirteen year old girl-turned-woman. The question remains - can he do this while spending all he has on his two foxhounds that are sure to bring down King Devil once and for all?

I think if you read this book, you will likely root for Suse as hard as I did. As the gravel road gets closer and closer to this community, Suse's desire to escape grows stronger. She pities beaten-down Lureenie, who once 'had airs' and dreams for the future like any hopeful young woman. She no longer wishes to be like Lureenie, who has been forsaken by the hill people in her time of greatest need. She does not wish to follow in her mother's footsteps, birthing children and struggling to make ends meet. She ponders and is frustrated by the fate of her mother and the other women: *"Had she or any of them ever heard the trains blow far away and sad, calling you to come away, calling so clearly you wanted to cry? Or had they ever wanted to run and run through the woods on a windy moonlight night in spite of what God would think and the neighbors say? How could they sit so quietly now? How?"*

While the reader, along with Suse, may feel vexed with the resolve of the other women to just accept their lot and not strive for more, Harriette Simpson Arnow deftly illustrates the power of these women situated in such a place and time. There are some astonishing and very tense scenes depicting their triumphs over seemingly insurmountable obstacles and the forces of nature. I found the ending to be quite brilliant.

Hunter's Horn, however, is not a quick, page-turning novel for the most part. It does require patience (for the pacing as well as the regional dialect) as well as tolerance for embarking on multiple hunting adventures. If you don't become too frustrated within the first third of the book, then the remainder should have you hooked. The payoff by book's end is well worth the wait. It is excellent historical fiction, and I would recommend it to those that have an interest in reading about Appalachia by an author that had great skill with sketching out the lives of the people who lived in this much forgotten place and time.

Courtney Umlauf says

It was a sin to think such things, but sometimes, instead of a good king Jesus smiling over them all from somewhere behind the sky, there was a grinning red-eyed devil, hot-breathing and hard as the cracked earth, but cold in his heart as the late frosts of the blighted spring that had taken the apples. And when Milly thought of the devil, she would think of King Devil, who had appeared to her last fall, green-eyed and smiling, and the devil in the sky would without her will, take his face; and day after day in August, while the earth cracks widened and the corn died and even the heat-loving rattlers came down from the dry timbered ridges and made a pestilence along the creeks, dry save for a few scum-covered pools, this King Devil of the sky grinned down on them all

"...This is the strongest contender I have seen for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. In these pages Harriette Arnow has brought to glowing life a people, a way of life, and a culture. Neither William Faulkner nor Jesse Stuart, I think, has done better and it is my guess that Mrs. Arnow's book will have wider appeal for people everywhere than the books of either." *Victor Hass, Saturday Review, 1949*

I've read several of Faulkner's novels, and I love them. I consider Arnow to be in the same league or even better, and I'm still baffled that she has so fallen out of popularity.

In Hunter's Horn, Arnow paints an incredibly detailed and deep picture of people living the Appalachian hills just before the start of WWII. This is a world far removed from modernity, with the "war across the waters" only affecting them vaguely at first, through an increase in selling prices, or more factory jobs available far off in the cities. Families support themselves through farming, communication with the world beyond their hills severely limited by practical barricades like there being no roads reaching all the way to their property. This isolation is a blessing or a curse, depending, but change is inevitable as roads and government institutions move closer to this secluded community.

You could say that the story focuses on the father of the Ballew family, Nunn, and his less than stellar attempts at bringing his old family farm back to fruitfulness. His efforts at farming are hamstrung by his own obsession with killing the fox, King Devil, who frequently kills his and his neighbor's livestock. His obsession with King Devil is in constant contention with his dreams of providing a stable life for his family. But I would say Ballard's introduction gives a better assessment of the novel:

Nunn's obsession with catching the elusive fox killing his livestock undeniably propels the plot, but the influence of the fox on everyone is the true heart of the novel. If we were to examine each character individually and complete the sentence "If not for the fox...", we might come to argue that King Devil is the protagonist of the novel.

Nunn and the fox drive the plot, but for me this story is really about the women in this world. Nunn's wife, Milly, and oldest daughter, Suse; their neighbor Lureenie, and the spitfire midwife, Sue Annie. These female

characters-their joys and deep sorrows, their fears, dissatisfactions, and resignation--I felt them all so deeply as I read. I can't get them or their stories out of my head, Nunn's teenaged daughter Suse in particular.

Suse is intelligent and a hard worker, helping her father and mother on the farm to support the entire family. She also works hard in school, with dreams of graduating eighth grade, and after that, whispering hopes that her father will somehow find a way to pay for her to attend high school. We get to see her as she grows, as she begins to relate her own life to what her mother's life must have been like at her age, when her mother was "sparkin'" with her father at just 15, soon to be married and bearing children. Suse sees what her life will probably be like, and fights against it. She looks at the women around her--aged by their many childbirths, physical labor and meager diet--and yearns for something different:

She flushed and looked away and saw on Sue Annie's wash bench, packed tightly in the scant space and perspiring from the heat, a row of the neighbor women, school mothers Sue Annie had put near the hearth in a place of honor...Suse studied them, then shivered and looked away; she would never be like that, dull and dead and uncaring; she thought of Milly sleeping at home; she would fit well with the others on the bench. Had she or any of them ever heard the trains blow far away and sad, calling you to come away, calling so clearly you wanted to cry? Or had they ever wanted to run and run through the woods on a windy moonlight night in spite of what God would think and the neighbor's say? How could they sit so quietly now? How?

Suse connects with young mother and neighbor, Lureenie, over their shared dreams of a life in far off cities, dreams fueled by what they see only in magazines. Lureenie is young with several children already, but is still dreaming of her family moving to the city, of both the necessities and little luxuries that can be bought if her husband gets a job in a factory there. But even as Suse finds a kindred spirit in this woman, she sees her potential life in front of her

It was hard enough to be a girl child shut off from the world. How would it be to be a woman like Lureenie, married with little youngens, but wanting still the outside world, tied down to a house and youngens, with one baby in your arms and another big in your belly like Milly--and always the knowing that you could never get away until you were dead?

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at the hill as the strong smile at the threats of the weak; she wouldn't be like Milly and she wouldn't be like Lureenie; she'd make her own life; it wouldn't make her.

As Lureenie's life and dreams fall apart, Suse instinctively begins to pull away from her, from her own potential future full of work, labor pains, mouths to feed, tied to a man once loved but now revealed as worse than useless. The question pulses throughout the novel: will Suse find the life she wants? The character of Suse, more than any other, pulled me into this world.

I could go on talking about so, so many things in this incredible work of art, but I'll contain myself. I'll just continue to brood over why hardly anyone else has even heard of Arnow, and internally shout at everyone I see that they need to read this book.

I don't do well selecting favorites in most categories, especially books. But I can say without indecision that this is now my favorite book. Not even close.

P.S.- If you decide to read this, make sure you have a copy that's the full text. Certain printings removed a chapter due to the feeling that it was too graphically realistic.

Nicole says

I've read Between the Flowers and Dollmaker. Both are masterworks and both brought me to tears-- especially Dollmaker which is one of the most heart-wrenching tales I have ever read and some of the most powerful prose. Compared to Dollmaker, Hunter's Horn is a quiet, more understated story. Events creep up on you as you imagine they do for the characters. The book isn't filled with the same level of tension and drama that you find in Dollmaker--which has one particularly horrifying scene--but, in a way, that's what makes it so gripping. What happens is comparatively unremarkable but always authentic and believable. I was especially drawn to Suse's character; her story was the most poignant. Like, Arnow's other female protagonists she is determined to be fiercely independent. As a reader, you root for her to transcend her circumstances--I won't give away what happens to her. There is a hopelessness that marks the three Arnow books I've read, yet the characters are drawn so vividly and the stories are so immersive that the experience of reading her books is worth how sad you will feel afterwards.

Tara Rock says

This book was published in 1949 and I've never read anything quite like it. To call it a "masterpiece" falls short. It has to be one of the finest works of Southern Literature ever published. It takes place in the hill country of Kentucky, set against the depression and World War II. It is as authentic as it gets; "we was a talken about the war, Milly, how it and them factories are a mebbe goen to git ever man out a these hills fore it's over, and us women'll have to be th ones to drive th cows to th bulls an git our own wood . ." There aren't many books that take you thru Maslow's 5-step hierarchy of needs (1943) than this, lingering long on the first step; physiological - food, water, sleep, warmth, etc. A slow read, but OMG, so worth it.

Michigan State University Press has reissued Hunter's Horn and Pat Arnow, a niece, has some very good info online. The Arnows's left the farm and moved to Michigan where Harriette died in 1986 (Washtenaw County). She and her husband, Harold, are buried at the farm in Keno (Pulaski County), Kentucky.

NC Stone says

Really good historical fiction/Americana. The author skillfully takes us into the lives of the simple people living in the Hill country of Kentucky during the depression years. Thanks to the folks who recommended this. Your library might not have it, but worth checking out thru interlibrary loans.

Caitrona Leslie says

This was the first book that my late uncle introduced me to. He was American and he loved American literature - a love engendered in him by his father who was a high-school teacher. Hunter's Horn brings home

the grim, grimmer than grim reality of poverty and inequality in American society in the early twentieth century. A depressing story in many regards but so beautifully told that one is compelled to seek out Simpson-Arnou's other works. I would recommend this to anyone in possession of a pulse.

Dale says

set in rural KY (not clear where) Nunn Ballew is a simple farmer who loves to hunt fox with his hounds, at the expense of the farm and large family. This novel is the 2nd in a series of 3 novels, though I didn't know that the three were part of a series originally. Very, very descriptive paragraphs. Not at all sure that by today's writing standards that this author would even be noticed because detail is so involved. Very interesting descriptions of hounds hunting/foxes evading the hounds—wonder where author got that knowledge. I almost didn't read this novel because it exceeds my 400 page maximum limit but because Arnow is a renowned Appalachian author I gave it a try: thankfully, in the end. I would be dishonest if I didn't say that once or twice early on I thought "this is just too complicated" but kept plugging along. 1949 hardback republished by UK Press in 1986, via Madison County Public Library, Berea, 412 pgs. (very small typeface); 4 out of 5 stars; finished Jul. 19, 2016/#36

* the others in the series: MOUNTAIN PATH, THE DOLL MAKER (which is her most famous book, if I am remembering correctly)

Jill says

This is the book John Steinbeck would have written if he was a feminist and a better writer. It's an American masterpiece. I found it to be engaging and flawless from beginning to end. How did it fall out of the public consciousness?

Brian Tucker says

"The happenchance of it all." This is regional fiction at its finest. Forget Faulkner. Read this.
