



The Horse's Mouth

Joyce Cary

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Joyce Cary wrote two trilogies, or triptychs as he later preferred to call them. The first comprises: *Herself Surprised*, *To Be a Pilgrim* and *The Horse's Mouth*. *The Horse's Mouth* is a portrait of an artistic temperament. Its principal character, Gulley Gimson, is an impoverished painter who scorns conventional good behaviour. He may be a bad citizen, but he is a good artist, so wholly preoccupied with his art that he is willing to endure any privation for its sake. Such is his contempt for orthodox mores, he takes a delight in cocking a snook at them. For him there is only one morality: to be a painter. 'Mr Joyce Cary is an important and exciting writer; there's no doubt about that. To use Tennyson's phrase, he is a Lord of Language ... if you like rich writing full of gusto and accurate original character drawing, you will get it from *The Horse's Mouth*.' John Betjeman, *Daily Herald*

Cover: A detail from 'Desire' by Stanley Spencer, in the collection of Lady Watson

The Horse's Mouth Details

Date : Published 1968 by Penguin Books Ltd. (first published 1944)

ISBN :

Author : Joyce Cary

Format : Paperback

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Literature, Art, Humor

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From Reader Review *The Horse's Mouth* for online ebook

Alan says

Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* is the Portrait of the Artist as a middle-aged man. A real artist, not a writer. The afterword notes this a "comic novel, but Gulley is often near despair" (Wright, 351). Joyce Cary "impersonates" the artist, rather as Faulkner does the psychopathic "I" in the third of his trilogy, *The Mansion*. (For most of the novel, Mink Snopes is in prison for murder, dreaming of getting out and killing—and by the end of the novel, you're with him.) Joyce Cary's Gulley Jimson is far from a killer, though he threatens murder over the phone, and he flirts with prison, from which the narrator writes in the first novel of this trilogy, *Sarah Monday in Herself Surprised*. She's in prison for various thefts done to help Gulley and his son live.

In a nod to actual English culture, the artist is son of an artist. Jimson's father is "a real artist," with his paintings in the Royal Academy, but they are displaced by the new style, the Pre-Raphaelites Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt. So his dad dies penniless.

Not sure about insights into artists themselves; in fact, it may be better as an historical novel pre-WWII.

Take this exchange,

"I respect artists," said Plantie, "they give their lives to it."

"And other peoples' lives," I said, "like Hitler."

.... "but do the Germans want a war?" "Don't know what they want until they get it," said Mr Mosely, "and then they want the other thing."....

But I was thinking of artist Hitler. (74)

Jimson thinks of Hitler by quoting inexplicable Blake's "Mental Traveller,"

But when they find the frowning babe

Terror strikes through the region wide;

They cry, 'The Babe! the Babe is born!'

And none can touch that frowning form,

Except it be a woman old;

She nails him down upon the rock,

And all is done as I have told.

Also historical (and a bit hysterical) are social roles, like the critic Professor Alabaster whom Gulley shows how to pawn his winter overcoat to buy beer and bacon for the two of them. (221) When Sir Reginald picks the Professor up in his Rolls, he is delayed packing a cardboard box with socks, toothbrush and notes on the Works of Gulley Jimson. How teaching has changed, with professors themselves driving luxury cars.

May I observe that Cary writes many superb nuggets, comparisons like a single man to a fire:

"But he's a bachelor. Driven in on himself. Banked down and still burning, the fire in the hearth." (77)

Or consider Rozzie, "full of good nature and resignation. Yes, that was the attraction of the poor old barge; her despair." (299)

If we recall Wright's afterward about Gulley himself, Rosina / Rozzie is a mirror reflection, sometimes turning despair to laughter.

Partly because I haven't read it for forty years, partly because I never did sort out the plot, I think spoilers almost impossible for this novel. It arrives more or less where

it starts, all of a piece. "You can't leave brushes and paint where kids can get them. They all love art. Born to

it.” (9)

Kerfe says

The painter Gulley Jimson is a soundrel, and no mistake. He would not be judged either a good man or a success, yet he has a talent and an appetite for living.

Joyce Cary's trilogy was good, better, and this, the third book, best for me. At the same time, all three now beg to be read again--the different points of view (Sara, then Tom, then Gulley), filled in by each character's separate inclinations, prejudices and intentions, would illuminate especially Sara's story, *Herself Surprised*.

None of the three would pass muster with the moralists of the world. And yet all have an endearing ability to acknowledge their faults, take their knocks, and move on. They do not wallow in pity.

Gulley, especially, has an oversized ability to seize the moment and make the most of it.

"For it saves a lot of time between friends to swear that life is good, brother. It leaves more time to live."

A cynical, William Blake-quoting, opportunistic optimist, he knows art is "self-indulgence". And yet he must.

One of the book's genuine pleasures is Gulley's continuous descriptive interior monologue about the colors and forms he sees around him, always inspiration for a new work of art, or an addition or alteration to a work-in-progress. For Gulley Jimson, no matter his situation, good or bad, the world is always fresh, surprising, new, and alive.

And he is always ready, and eager, to do it again.

Leslie says

3.5*

Gulley Jimson was quite a character but on the whole I felt that the humor in this book was more of the sort which made me smile inwardly than the sort which make me laugh aloud. Jimson indubitably was an artist but one who had gone off the rails sometime in his past. I loved the way that he was always describing the sky and clouds in terms of colors & shapes. What I found more melancholy was the fact that it seemed to me it was clear to him that his best work was behind him but he couldn't admit that to himself. Perhaps the funniest thing was how he would suggest to someone that he do some painting for them & despite the fact that this proposal was turned down, in his mind he would not only decide it was agreed to but come up with a price for it & in short order, would believe that the person owed him that money!

Kay says

Gulley Jimson is one of the great literary creations, and as many times as I've read this novel, Gulley still

appears as unique and unpredictable as he did the first time I read it. Joyce Cary's novels aren't as popular as they once were, but his First Trilogy remains a timeless masterpiece. I read the series backwards, it seems, for this is the third (and my favorite) novel. It's one of the finest descriptions of an artist and the artistic process ever written, in my opinion.

Oh, and as an aside, it was my introduction to William Blake.

Darren says

Amazing (hence 5 Stars) *tour de force* telling the story of the latter stages of the life/career of artist (painter) Gully Jimson - one of the greatest individual literary creations I've ever come across :oO
He is a "proper" artist - seeing *everything* in terms of his artistic temperament; obsessed; material matters such as money for food/clothes/lodgings etc being of minor importance/inconvenience; personal relationships similarly take a back-seat. Consequently his life is a continuous switch-back rollercoaster - both hilarious and tragic at the same time. Jimson's internal narrative is rendered with a unique style, and you genuinely feel like you have been transported into the mind of another human being. Masterpiece.

Vit Babenco says

"I was walking by the Thames. Half-past morning on an autumn day. Sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried fish shop. All bright below. Low tide, dusty water and a crooked bar of straw, chicken-boxes, dirt and oil from mud to mud. Like a viper swimming in skim milk. The old serpent, symbol of nature and love. Five windows light the caverned man ; through one he breathes the air
Through one hears music of the spheres ; through one can look
And see small portions of the eternal world."
The sheer beauty and the cloudy poetry of *The Horse's Mouth* just leave one dumbstricken and turns the novel into the one of the best books ever written about the artistes.
"Nothing like poetry when you lie awake at night. It keeps the old brain limber. It washes away the mud and sand that keeps on blocking up the bends."
A life of a true artist is a perpetual and unremitting debacle.

Bryan says

3.5 Stars

The story of the last days of the artist Gully Jimson is by turns comedic and long-winded, sometimes pell-mell, and sometimes a bit shocking, at least by today's standards. Long sections held me pretty well entranced, while the beginning took a while for me to get into, and the ending seemed to last and last and last.

The Horse's Mouth appears on the *Guardian's* list of 1000 Novels Everyone Must Read, and it has also been re-issued under the NYRB imprint, so obviously it hasn't been forgotten, but I hadn't heard of Cary or this

novel--possibly his most well-known--before picking up an old paperback at some library sale on the strength of Harper & Row's Perennial Library imprint from the 60s, and the fact that it was probably selling for fifty cents. I pick up too many of these 'why-not' purchases (why not? it's only fifty cents), to the extent that I'm drowning in them now, but this one was worthwhile, I think. I don't know that I've ever encountered a character quite like Jimson in my reading--eccentric is putting it mildly.

But Jimson's ruminations on the world as he finds it is worth at least fifty cents...and it doesn't begin and end with the London of 1939 either. If you're cynical, you'll find his ideas on art, art patrons, government and women (among countless other subjects) have a certain appeal even still--if you're an optimist, you might be better off giving the whole thing a pass. That isn't to imply that the book (or Gully Jimson) is a downer--just the opposite, actually. Few characters I know of possess such reckless and manic *joie de vive* as he does, and accepts every rotten thing just as it is. Imagine an aging Dean Moriarty who is obsessed with painting and you'll have the idea.

I think there's a good chance some of the effect of the book has rubbed off over the years--in the mid-40s, when it was first published, I can imagine the book being a riotous finger right in the eye of a...well, in a lot of eyes, but mostly in small-minded, straightjacketed society that finds it difficult to accept modern art, but also points that same finger back at the unreasonableness of what modern art sometimes asks of society. By his extreme behavior, Gully Jimson shows that there's a lot of ridiculousness on both sides.

My view is that if you can find a copy out there for fifty cents, you should pick it up. Why not?

Pouting Always says

Gulley Jimson is a starving artist in the 1930s (maybe the 40s), who consistently borrows and steals money from those around him to help keep him fed and with art supplies. Not only does he seem to have trouble paying anyone back but he himself seems to find his actions reasonable at all times because they are in the name of art. With his constant lack of decorum and respect for other's feelings and property, Gulley manages to constantly get him self into situations of questionable legality, requiring his constant attempts to then flee said situation.

Ok so I requested this on netgalley apparently and also did not realize that it was a part of a series (wow shocker I know). To start off with this books really does stand on it's own and I didn't particularly feel lost while reading it in the way I usually do when I mistakenly pick up books from the middle of a series. That said though, I did sometimes have trouble following Gulley. My god he's just so British. The way he kept talking on and on it felt so strange and foreign and I'm not sure if it's because again the who British aspect of the writing or the fact that the book is somewhat dated. Also Gulley would just start going off on rants, which I guess is typical of old men, and the whole time I'm reading it I'm just like what why oh my god.

I know the book is supposed to be funny, and I actually did find it amusing, though I don't think I ever actually laughed out loud. This book was a 2.5 stars for me and would have been 1 if the writing hadn't been so witty. I do think the portrayal of Gulley is one that makes him seem charming and okay the whole episode where he shows up at the rich people's home while they're on vacation and sells all their things so that he can buy art supplies and then manages to only paint a pair of feet on their wall was hilarious. That was probably my favorite part, especially when they still want to buy art from him at the end. Also his constant instant that the boy, he keeps calling him Nosy so I can't remember if we ever actually learn his name, who wants to learn from him shouldn't waste his time on art because of how worthless it is. It was just amusing to have

Gulley's running commentary on art, and I did get a new perspective on things from it.

Regardless of that though, the plot was hard to follow somewhat and it just kept jumping from one episode to the next with Gulley. Like the 6 month time he spends in jail just kind of disappears. Also I just kind of felt uncomfortable with his treatment of women, especially Sara. I know I'm supposed to laugh and I also know it's an older book written when norms were different but I can't help that I also am reading this in another time period with different norms, and as a woman I just couldn't be like ha ha remember when he hit Sara in the face and broke her nose. Or ha ha remember when he pushes her down the stairs and basically kills her, just to sell a sketch she kept of herself, to buy more art supplies.

I just feel like a lot of humor in the older literature that I've read is like ha ha look at the hijinx of this crazy man and I do try to take it lightly but the whole time I'm like wow that was so awful. I think it's just a divide caused by difference in culture. Anyway this one was a hard one to get through, because even though it was witty and amusing at times, the plot was just Gulley ranting and treating everyone badly. And at the end everyone just kind of died including him. I wish there had been more coherence to the story line than lets follow Gulley until he drops dead.

Roger Pettit says

I meet two friends every six weeks or so to discuss a particular book that the three of us have agreed to read. One of the many pleasures of such an arrangement is that you are sometimes encouraged by one of the other members of the group to tackle a novel that might otherwise have passed you by. I had never heard of Irish writer Joyce Cary or of his novel 'The Horse's Mouth' before it was suggested as potential reading material by one of my book group friends. I am so glad that my friend nominated it. It's a brilliant novel, one of the very best I have read in a long time. 'The Horse's Mouth' also demonstrates the folly of giving up on a book prematurely. I did think about abandoning it after having read the first 40 or so pages. At that stage, I simply could not get into it. I was finding the language, the ideas and the characters difficult to follow and to warm to. I am so pleased that I stuck with it though. 'The Horse's Mouth' yields its pleasures slowly. It's a very rewarding read.

Set in London in 1938 (on the banks of the Thames, in an area known as Greenbank), 'The Horse's Mouth' features Gulley Jimson. (What a wonderful name!) Jimson is a 67-year old painter. As the story opens, he has just been released from prison and is making his way back to his artist's studio in Greenbank. Jimson is essentially a lovable Bohemian scoundrel. He lives a hand to mouth existence, constantly borrowing money and getting into debt in order to try to fund the one thing that matters most to him: painting. His materials are frequently stolen or ruined by the rain that seeps into his ramshackle studio. He drinks a lot. And Jimson is irascibly impatient with the youngsters, most notably one named Nosy, who approach him for advice on how to paint and how to pursue a career as an artist. His personal relationships seem to have all ended in failure. Jimson has a penchant for the work of the English poet and painter William Blake, and frequently quotes passages from the latter's poetry. (In that respect, and in many others, Jimson reminds me more than a little of John Mortimer's character Horace Rumpole. I wonder if Mortimer based his independently-minded barrister to some extent on Cary's creation?) Jimson is trying to finish 'The Fall', a painting which depicts the Biblical account of Adam and Eve and which he hopes will enhance his somewhat tattered reputation.

On reaching Greenbank, Jimson comes under the influence of Coker, the barmaid at his local pub 'The Eagle'. Keen to recover the money (almost £5) that he owes her, Coker persuades Jimson to visit Sara Monday. Sara is one of Jimson's ex-lovers. She posed as a model for him in the past and is in possession of a

few of Jimson's early paintings of her. At one time, she had several more of Jimson's paintings, which she kept when their relationship broke down. But she later sold them to a man called Hickson, who is a wealthy art collector. Coker persuades Sara to sign a statement to the effect that the paintings were not hers to sell in the hope that this will provide Jimson with evidence that will help him to get them back from Hickson. A rapprochement takes place between Sara and Jimson when he responds positively to her attempt to revive their relationship. Things move on from there in a story that is a powerful mixture of humour, tragedy and pathos.

'The Horse's Mouth' is not always an easy read and is initially very difficult to get to grips with. But, as I have mentioned, it's well worth persevering with. It's a quite brilliant portrayal of the artistic temperament, of the attitudes of the art establishment of the time and of what it must be like to be someone who is single-mindedly dedicated to painting, whatever the personal and financial cost. It's suffused with wit, intelligence and humour. The dialogue and the characterisation are excellent. Indeed, Gulley Jimson, a fascinating and complex person, is surely one of the great characters of 20th century English literature. I am frankly astonished that 'The Horse's Mouth', an offbeat novel of depth that is brimful of thought-provoking ideas and attitudes and which boasts a very sympathetic central character, is not better known. Although it's the third book of a trilogy, it can be read in isolation without any knowledge of the two earlier stories. It may well be one of the greatest novels of the 20th century. I think it's certainly a minor masterpiece. Do read it. 10/10.

Bob says

While it might be too broad a generalization to declare a stylistic similarity amongst many mid-20th century Irish writers, Joyce Cary has a bit of Joyce and quite a bit more of Flann O'Brien.

The Horse's Mouth is actually the third of a trilogy, though not having read the prior two parts was not remotely a problem. It is set in London in the late 1930s, where a 67-year-old painter who has had his share of success at various junctures in his career is now completely down and out and fresh out of a brief prison stay, only one of many as it turns out, owing to a succession of small frauds, outbursts of pub violence, attempts to extort money out of his former patrons and the like.

The book is very funny and alternates between the terse street dialog of the small-time con artist and his milieu, and his William Blake-inspired way of perceiving the world. Every scene is interrupted as a mackerel sky completely distracts him from whatever is happening. The prose is terse and precise; his inner monologue would be a more conventional stream of consciousness if there were ellipses between each phrase, but instead Cary uses a succession of incomplete sentences with full stops, which small a typographical difference as that may seem, gives a very distinctive rhythm to the prose.

Matthew says

I've read *The Horse's Mouth* about four times since I discovered it through the film adaptation written by and starring the incomparable Alec Guinness. I'm still baffled how a book can be so hilarious even while referencing William Blake and Spinoza all over the place. I don't know how a writer goes about creating the kinds of majestic sentences and authentic characters and vivid images that fill this book. I've read a bunch of other works by Joyce Cary and had extremely varied reactions to them. I'm so impressed by the amount of thought he puts into his characters even when I don't enjoy spending a lot of time around them, but I would love to be able to hang out with the painter and rogue Gulley Jimson or the man who was able to create him. I guess Jimson would probably tell me "Tie lead weights to your feet, fireworks in your hair, kiss your

mother goodbye and jump in the river," but I feel like I wouldn't be able to help myself. I'd hang on every word he said and bask in the light of his genius. Jimson's paintings, though of course one never gets to see them, are as compelling and arresting as almost any real piece of art. It's the passion and the complexity that Joyce Cary puts into Jimson's thoughts about art that gives this book its sharpness. It's amazing that he achieves such a level of vivid depiction and that Jimson is such a bold and inovative character, especially when even Cary's essay *Art and Reality: Ways of the Creative Process* is a little on the conservative side. I feel like he must have gotten completely absorbed in Gulley Jimson himself and started to feel Jimson's paintings inside of him, almost as if in writing this book he was breaking down walls and flinging open the doors of perception to a degree that he never achieved with his own paintings. The writing feels more expansive than anything else he did. It feels like a joyful soul in print. At the same time, though, the book is perfectly precise. There isn't a word out of place, the story never escapes itself, everything seems like it has to have been thought through a hundred times because it fits together like an easy jigsaw puzzle. So I ask myself over and over again when I read *The Horse's Mouth* how such precision can coexist with such dynamism, and all I can come up with is that Joyce Cary deserves the name of genius. If this book was a painting or a piece of music, something that more people could experience more instantaneously, I think it would be a lot better known. I consider myself extremely lucky to have found it.

Lisa says

I loved this book: it was a window into the mind of a modern artist and (along with *The Shock of the New* it changed the way I looked at and understood modern art forever. It's too long since I read it to write a proper review, I should read it again!

Logan says

I can't begin to describe this book, any attempt is just a dead sketch of a vivid painting. It is roughly about a rather harmless and scoundrelly old artist, who repeatedly cons (or attempts to) everyone he knows in order to get cash to carry on his obsession with painting. It is quirky, delightful, sad, and beautiful throughout. It is poetry in its descriptions and feeling.

Stephen says

"Remember I'm an artist. And you know what that means in a court of law. Next worst to an actress." --Some words from the many of Gully Jimson in *The Horse's Mouth*.

There are two English novels that may give some profound insight into the artistic mind. I say "may" because how the hell am I supposed to know to a certainty, not being an artist myself. Those two novels in question are *The Horse's Mouth* and *The Moon and Sixpence* by W. Somerset Maugham. You will forgive me, I am sure, if I do not include Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* or his *Lust for Life*. And do not forget that *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* is just that, an autobiography, although the son of a bitch was such a liar that a great part of it is probably fiction.

Given a choice between either *The Horse's Mouth* or *The Moon and Sixpence* but not both, opt for *The Horse's Mouth* because of the added bonus of the great black humor of it and the delightful social

commentary unrelated to art. Then get ready to revisit the poet William Blake, Gully's idol, in depth.

Gully has to be one of the most vivid and rollickingly entertaining characters ever created in an English language novel. Unlike Dickens's great comic creations, Gully Jimson is not a caricature. He lives and he breathes while we are with him. Yossarian lives, and so does Gully. He is life affirming in the face of the irredeemable bleakness of his circumstances. Intrepid and inspiring amid his quixotic artistic ventures, he is also an inveterate con man, a trait shared by many artists living and dead. . .I think. If artists were responsible citizens, would they be artists in the first place?

Robert Wechsler says

I found this novel both brilliant and boring. The brilliance appears in flashes throughout. The narrator is an original character, low and high all at once, completely incorrigible, much like Roth's Mickey Sabbath (or vice versa). Cary also uses language marvelously. I don't know if it's a matter of Cary's style being copied so much, but after a while the prose, the observations, the personality come to seem more relentless than brilliant. And more pretentious, as well. I wanted a respite from the wild lyricism and the pitiful relationships and characters that surround Gully Jimson.

Bettie? says

Description: *The Horse's Mouth*, the third and most celebrated volume of Joyce Cary's First Trilogy, is perhaps the finest novel ever written about an artist. Its painter hero, the charming and larcenous Gully Jimson, has an insatiable genius for creation and a no less remarkable appetite for destruction. Is he a great artist? a has-been? or an exhausted, drunken ne'er-do-well? He is without doubt a visionary, and as he criss-crosses London in search of money and inspiration the world as seen through his eyes appears with a newly outrageous and terrible beauty.

Opening:**I was walking by the Thames.**

After thumping down to earth with the second in the triptych, namely To Be A Pilgrim, I was put off Cary for a long while. Now I'm back and relishing the thought that this, The Horse's Mouth, is the best of them all. Gully Jimson's father was tentatively based on abstract artist Gerald Wilde. There is a Shepperton Studio film of this book starring Alec Guinness, unfortunately the full film is not available on youtube.

If you want to get that scholarship and go to Oxford and get into the Civil Service and be a great man and have two thousand pounds a year and a nice clean wife with hot and cold and a kid with real eyes that open and close and a garage for two cars and a savings book, you'll have to work your dinner time.

Well, I thought, here's another of the Jill's in the box. But no woman really gets old inside until she's dead or takes to bridge. Scratch the grandmother and you find the grandbaby giggling behind the nursery door at nothing at all. Nothing a man would understand.

- 2* To Be A Pilgrim
- 4* The Horse's Mouth
- 4* Mister Johnson

Jolanta Da says

„Ka zinai, gal kiekvienas paukstis, kurs nardo ore, yra didelis dziaugsmo pasaulis, atskirtas tavo penketo pojuciu?"ir dar.....„Zmogus jaučiasi daug laisvesnis, kai jis nieko nesitiki. Ir tik tada jis sugeba gyventi nesirsdamas."

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E. says

This is Tom Robbin's favorite book. Thought it worth reading for that alone. I had to order an old copy from somewhere in the midwest cause I couldn't find it around here. We'll see.

Chrissie says

I have read this but I ought to reread it since ALL that I remember is I liked it a lot. Why I do not remember. I remember it being humorous.
