



# Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor

*Jaime Joyce*

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**Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor** Jaime Joyce  
**Nothing but clear, 100-proof American history.**

Hooch. White lightning. White whiskey. Mountain dew. Moonshine goes by many names. So what is it, really? Technically speaking, "moonshine" refers to untaxed liquor made in an unlicensed still. In the United States, it's typically corn that's used to make the clear, unaged beverage, and it's the mountain people of the American South who are most closely associated with the image of making and selling backwoods booze at night—by the light of the moon—to avoid detection by law enforcement.

In this book, writer Jaime Joyce explores America's centuries-old relationship with moonshine. From the country's early adoption of Scottish and Irish home-distilling techniques and traditions to the Whiskey Rebellion of the late 1700s to a comparison of the moonshine industry pre- and post-Prohibition and a look at modern-day craft distilling, Joyce examines the historical context that gave rise to moonshining in America and explores its continued appeal. Even more fascinating than the popularity of the liquor itself is moonshine's widespread effect on U.S. pop culture: moonshine runners were NASCAR's first marquee drivers; white whiskey was the unspoken star of countless Hollywood film and television productions; and numerous songs inspired by making shine have come from such musicians as Dolly Parton, Steve Earle, Metallica, Ween, and others. While we can't condone making your own illegal liquor, reading Moonshine will give you a new perspective on the profound implications that underground moonshine making has had on life in America.

## **Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor Details**

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## **From Reader Review Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor for online ebook**

### **Todd Thompson says**

It's a concise, seriously-researched book on the cultural history of moonshine (white whiskey). Written well, and filled with stories from its Colonial beginnings, through prohibition, the early days of NASCAR, and today's artisan distilleries, this book is a delight to read, and is a topic proven worthy by this author for serious attention in the study of American culture.

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### **B. Rule says**

Even though this book is very short, it still felt simultaneously padded and rushed. There are some interesting anecdotes and trivia bits in it, but overall it felt a bit like reading PR copy or listening to an enthusiastic but amateur docent at a single-subject small-town museum. Unfortunately, the cover of the book is the most interesting part, and she doesn't even mention a lot of the fun slang in the actual book! I wouldn't really recommend this one unless you are a true distilling geek. You can probably learn just as much by going on a distillery tour.

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### **YourLovelyMan says**

A casual read about moonshine, its history, how it's made, and its place in pop culture. Some of the tales are exciting, some humorous, some scintillating. And let's be real--who doesn't occasionally fantasize about making money and skirting the law?

Moonshine: A Cultural History is not comprehensive or overly scholarly, but it is an entertaining and informative book. If you're interested in moonshine stories or just have a soft spot for white lightning, you'll enjoy it.

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### **Mark says**

Good, quick (almost too quick) read. Nice history of moonshine and the operations around making and distributing it. Definitely informative and worth the \$3 on the kindle.

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### **Cristina says**

There are definitely interesting tidbits in this historical overview of moonshine (more whiskey distilleries in the earlier chapters), but the narrative is entirely too jarring. The author tries to make things exciting at the beginning of each chapter by focusing on a personal story, but it ends up being more confusing than personable. I was usually left wondering why a particular antidote was put in and how it related to the

overarching issues of moonshining. Explanations of historical significance tended to come too late in the chapter.

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## **Jess Zimmerman says**

Before Pinterest made mason jars the ‘in’ thing at country-chic events or the go-to jars for anything baked, stored or displayed, it was synonymous with alcohol. Moonshine to be exact. Now, this was before moonshine became a hipster thing to drink. No, the time in question, was when the drink could get you thrown in jail, kill or blind you and was considered a heathen drink. Moonshine has had a long and varied place in United States history. From the days of the colonies, to prohibition and lastly to modern times, Moonshine was there throughout it all. “Moonshine: A Cultural History of America’s Infamous Liquor” by Jaime Joyce tells its story. Zenith Press was gracious enough to offer me a book for review.

### **What is moonshine?**

“Moonshine” intrigued me from the beginning as I have never tried it. The only thing I knew about it was that it was illegal and could blind you. Many consider it a southern drink with the big concentration on the Appalachian area. Growing up in Minnesota, I do not know of anyone who makes or sells it – let alone anyone who drinks it. I am not much of a connoisseur when it comes to alcohol. I can not even tell you what the difference between the different types nor the history behind them. Last summer, on a vacation to Kentucky, we toured the Jim Beam American Stillhouse. I tried bourbon for the first time.

Bourbon is like moonshine. By like, I mean not like it at all. Confused? I would think so. If, like me, your historical knowledge on alcohol is nonexistent then this is the book for you. Moonshine, whiskey and bourbon are like a tree. The tree’s seed is moonshine. The seed then grows into roots and forms the foundation of the tree. This would be the equivalent of whiskey. The trunk and branches are bourbon. What does this long and somewhat incoherent analogy mean? A tree takes time to grow from a seed to a full grown tree. The same goes for the difference in the three alcohols. Moonshine is un-aged whiskey – meaning you can drink it right after you make it. Whiskey is aged in barrels – the amount of years varies. And lastly, bourbon is whiskey that is aged in charred barrels, sometimes for the same or longer periods than whiskey.

As Joyce’s cover above shows, moonshine goes by MANY names. Some of which are familiar (to me at least) – hooch, shine, white whiskey – while others are more, well, unique. Moonshine was created at night, or before dawn, by illegal distillers with only the moon as their light. For the majority of history, moonshine was illegal since the distillers would not pay tax on it. They would smuggle it from their concealed stills to their paying customers all while the government tried to stop them. This struggle, between distillers and the government, makes up the bulk of moonshine’s history.

### **Book Structure & Content**

There are ten chapters with a prologue and epilogue. Joyce also included Notes & Sources and Photo & Music Credits sections in which she breaks down her chapters and where she found what piece of information. It is obvious in reading “Moonshine” that Joyce thoroughly researched this topic. She pulled in many sources – primary, secondary and visual sources in the book. The visual sources were especially helpful in setting the stage.

“Moonshine” is a quick and easy read. Joyce presents it straight up and does not drag out sections – something I think all readers appreciate. She details moonshine’s history and distilling from early America through Prohibition into how moonshine brought on the creation of NASCAR and ends with a summary of

modern, legal, moonshine production. Within each chapter, there were side stories in separate boxes that added to the content on hand.

There were only two things that I thought were distracting. I felt that quotations (both inline and block) were overused. On one hand, it does show the variety of sources used. However, on the flip side, too many quotes break up the sentences and the author's summary of the sources. I enjoy a good quote but it is important to get the most out of your quotes. Placing a quote every paragraph or every other, takes away from the punch of the quotes. This is something a graduate professor once drilled in me and, perhaps, is merely a personal issue.

The other distracting thing did not occur nearly as often as the quotation issue. At times, I thought the paragraph structure could use some work. For example, when listing statistics about rum in various cities within one paragraph the cities were not listed in chronological order. Also, in a few other cases, she ended a topic and began a new one within the same paragraph. Of course neither issue was enough to take away from the book as a whole, but it did make me notice and have to reread certain sections.

### **Overall Impression**

I really enjoyed "Moonshine." It has always been my stance that if a person learns and takes something away from a book, than it was, on some level, a successful book. If that is the rubric to follow, than "Moonshine" was very successful. I knew very little about the topic. Now I feel I could hold my own in a conversation about it. Joyce's research was extensive, her chapter breakdown made it easy to follow and, most important, her writing style was unpretentious and inviting. I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in the history of distilling, prohibition or just good ole' American history.

Review found on HistoryByZim.com

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### **Rebecca says**

There may be no more quintessentially American drink than moonshine, so named because it was made in secret by moonlight. As Jaime Joyce notes in her new cultural history, the drink is typically Southern, unaged, corn-based, and clear like whiskey. During the Temperance movement (1850s onwards), whiskey-making went underground to avoid taxes and governmental interference. It wasn't uncommon for people to die of moonshine poisoning, caused by lead stills.

Although moonshine drinkers have often been characterized as hillbillies, the drink has undergone a recent revival. Brooklyn opened its first distillery since Prohibition in 2010. Nowadays, many distilleries, such as Dawsonville in Georgia, brew "white lightning" deliberately. "Heritage is what moonshine is all about," Joyce writes. "Moonshine is tradition. It's family. It's folk art, and people are invested in keeping the art alive."

(Included in a BookTrib article on recent books about drinking.)

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**Related reads:** *Mint Juleps with Teddy Roosevelt* by Mark Will-Weber and *Gin Glorious Gin* by Olivia Williams.

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## **Brandon Montgomery says**

My personal experience with moonshine is very limited and involves an insufferable amount of hipstering with other insufferable hipsters and things I'd rather not talk about. It was odorless and clear, in a jar (because of course) potent and somewhat terrifying. I was afraid I'd go blind...I'm still kinda afraid I'll go blind, like the moonshine equivalent of an acid flashback, or something. Any day now, man, any day. But come to find out that wasn't *real moonshine*. real moonshine is "untaxed white (un-aged) corn whiskey" **untaxed** being the keyword here...So my personal experience with real moonshine is nada...And I'm okay with that after reading this brief volume which includes a chapter on the unsanitary conditions of actual stills and a quote from a moonshiner about "...[a] dead possum in the mash." I for one draw the line at drinking anything which a dead possum has been soaking in, but that's just a personal preference.

The fleeting chapter about the Whiskey Rebellion was by far the most interesting part of this book and it spurred my interest in the subject enough to try to find a better history of that particular event. Though that chapter was far too short, the chapter on NASCAR was far too long. For non-fans such as myself, the endless list of names were meaningless and the stories weren't at all interesting (they're all variations on the "guy drives a fast car with moonshine in the trunk" theme, which would make for a fine Bruce Springsteen song, yet a very repetitious and long chapter.)

Over all, this is the sort of book one should skim through rather than read through, as it overstays its welcome despite its short length. Is it informative? It's informative enough for the average person, be they curious onlookers or inebriation enthusiasts, but those looking for a scholarly history of the subject best take a pass on this one.

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## **Kelly Hockersmith says**

### **Get your Shine on.**

An interesting glimpse into the history of moonshine. From the Whiskey Rebellion to Discovery Channel's "Moonshiners," Joyce reveals America's favorite illicit industry.

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## **Ben Vogel says**

A perfect skimming book. I found it easy to skim through the parts that did not interest me (about 1/3) and slow down for the more engrossing parts. For me those were the sections on history, the anecdotes past and present about the individual characters involved in moonshining, and some of the stuff about how moonshine survives today as a less illicit "industry".

If I had a wish for this book, it would be to spend more time on the history of moonshine during prohibition. For a book on this subject, it seemed to give rather a brief account of that most interesting period of illegal drink.

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### **Harvey Smith says**

Distilling your own alcohol came to the United States with settlers from Europe. Who knew?

The manufacture of "white liquor" was both a cultural idiom , and a business that supported families when there was no other way to make money to live on in the old days. Then, starting around the time of the founding of the United States, the governments in their varied forms decided it was a tax generating situation. The only problem was, the tax structure adversely affected those who relied on it to feed their families out in the country and the mountains. Then the long history of moonshiners and revenue collectors started and went on and on and on.

As a result of reading this book, I learned how whiskey was made...9or whisky, depending on which country you are from). whisky is simply "white liquor" that has been aged in oak barrels.

The book traces the advent of modern "boutique" and craft distillers, which is an evolution of a time honored practice.

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### **Eric says**

This book was very informative, but it was way too short and rushed for the subject matter. I found myself wanting more in just about every chapter.

\*\*\* I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads \*\*\*

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### **sappho\_reader says**

A short yet informative social history of Moonshine in the United States. I learned much about Moonshine and how engrained it is in our culture as far back as Colonial days. Jaime Joyce provided a very clear and concise examination and I appreciated her inclusion of the pictures of still raids and anti-Moonshine ephemera produced by the government. I previously did not know that Moonshine runners were the first drivers for NASCAR, or that tax collectors were tared and feathered during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791. My personal favorite was reading how women took an active role in making and distributing Moonshine. Lots of such interesting tidbits included.

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### **Cat says**

Loved this book! So much history! And all the great stories about the NASCAR racers! I can't recommend this book highly enough to anyone who wants to learn about moonshine. This book tells of it's beginnings, the government crack down on it through taxation, to prohibition, to it's new rise up in the world of small

distilleries as a craft and heirloom beverage! The world does turn! Worth a read by anyone interested in history, alcohol ad it's history, and even racing. Wonderful book.

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### **Jessica says**

intriguing book recounting the history of moonshine. there are some repeats of stories in the various chapters, but overall had a logical flow. appreciated "coming full circle" with the beginning and ending of the book discussing the distiller, Cheryl Woods.

\*I received a free digital copy of this book from the publisher through Edelweiss.

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