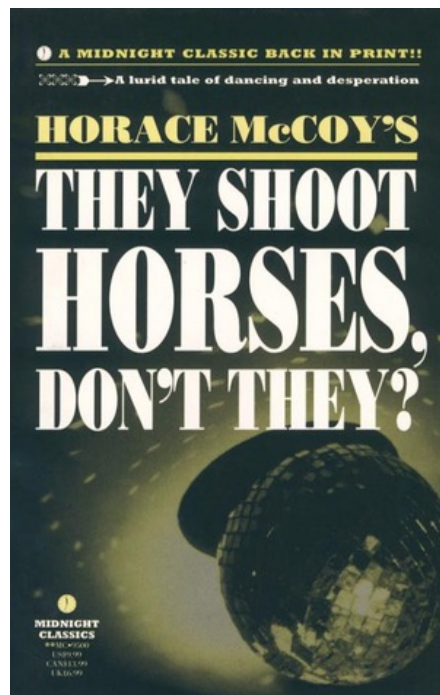




They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Horace McCoy

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They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Horace McCoy

They Shoot Horses, Don't They? Horace McCoy

The marathon dance craze flourished during the 1930s, but the underside was a competition and violence unknown to most ballrooms—a dark side that Horace McCoy's classic American novel powerfully captures.

"Were it not in its physical details so carefully documented, it would be lurid beyond itself." —*Nation*

They Shoot Horses, Don't They? Details

Date : Published September 15th 1995 by Serpent's Tail (first published 1935)

ISBN : 9781852424015

Author : Horace McCoy

Format : Paperback 122 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Noir, Classics, Crime

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From Reader Review They Shoot Horses, Don't They? for online ebook

Lark Benobi says

A one-day bleak read. Relentless and great.

Noir's relationship with muckraking/social justice journalism is very much evident in this novel. The story's grim linear march is fueled by the desperation of poverty.

Not as brilliant, as noir goes, as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*...but it's so confidently written that its flaws become moving. It captures a moment and an age.

Mohamed Al says

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Paul Bryant says

HOURS ELAPSED 879

COUPLES REMAINING 20

Short and very brutal, this is a matter-of-fact account of the bleakest despair. The marathon dance contests of the 20s and 30s were like something dreamed up by Caligula but they really happened and the powers that be never saw fit to close them down, even as the young couples sagged to the floor from physical and mental exhaustion after only being allowed 10 minutes rest every two hours for three solid weeks. It was all “don’t worry folks, they’ll be back in a few moments after our medical staff have given them the once-over”. The very memorable movie from 1969 made me think I didn’t need to read this but I’m very glad I did.

I read the whole thing today. My cat Hatter came over when I finished and asked me what it was about. When I’d explained he shook his head and said “Humans – what are they good for, really?” Then he reconsidered. “Okay,” he said, “you learned how to make cat food. So there’s that.” Then he shrugged and walked away.

Cphe says

Novella length, but it packs an emotional wallop. Bleak, grim, seedy, gritty, the story of a dance marathon in the 1930's and how far people will go to survive, how much a soul can take.

Another of those novels where I couldn't see how the title could fit in with the synopsis on offer but "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" fit perfectly.

Well worth a look at.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Doug says

This is definitely a dark little gem, but I really don’t see it as belonging to the Noir literary genre. To me, its violence and darkness seemed very peripheral to its more meditative existential content and I believe it shares more of an affinity with *The Catcher in the Rye* than *The Big Sleep* or *Double Indemnity*. Anyway, labels are always misleading. What really matters is that I thoroughly enjoyed it. And, in the process of enjoying it, I learned more than a few new things about the ~~good~~ bad old days. I'm very much looking forward to reading more from this author. For a better review, check out Franky’s dead-on and much more thoroughly thoughtful analysis here: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Lisa says

Finding out the meaning of the title broke my heart!

Tristan says

*** Read from LOA's exquisite Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s & 40s edition***

Horace McCoy's "*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*" is a bleak, tautly written existential noir text which wouldn't look out of place in Arthur Schopenhauer's personal library. I imagine the old fellow perusing it with a satisfied grin on his face. It's his philosophy's perfect expression in many ways.

The novel takes place during the dance marathon craze of the 1930's. Impoverished, often mentally broken proletarian dancing couples were drawn to its promise of food and shelter for the duration of the competition (which often ran up to a thousand hours) and a substantial sum of money in case of a win. This, however, often came with a heavy price. Health risks were enormous, and the presence of dangerous criminal elements within or on the periphery, made it a hazardous enterprise. McCoy's extensive, lurid description of this -to me, formerly unknown -world is quite excellent.

The two protagonists of this drama couldn't be any more dissimilar. Gloria is an unabashed, rather coarse pessimist that toys with the idea of suicide on a near permanent basis, while occasionally making the case for antinatalism (one scene involves her trying to persuade a fellow contestant to abort her baby). Not exactly the makings of an ideal conversationalist, to say the least. Her dancing partner and philosophical opponent Robert, who just tries to eke out a living, has the frustrating, self-imposed task of keeping her alive for as long as possible.

As in all noir, they are both ruined from the very start. Finally granting her wish with a gunshot to his partner's head, he fails at the latter, and dooms himself in the process. Slim piece of fiction, but one which packs quite a punch.

Trudi says

I know I must be missing something here, but I just don't get why this has endured as a profound piece of classic American literature. Apparently 1930s French Existentialists went gaga over it and Simone de Beauvoir named it as "the first existentialist novel to have appeared in America". So if you are a literary theorist, and get off on those labels and how they come to mean something to a certain group of people during a certain period of time, then you probably want to read this book and are going to think it's pretty important.

As for myself, I was bored senseless. I didn't know what to expect going in (having never seen the movie), but somehow I had the words horror and dystopia clanging around in my head. I was neither horrified nor presented with a gripping dystopian landscape. The concept is appealing I give you that -- an idea redolent with potential: a marathon dance in the dirty '30s that exploits and capitalizes on participant despair and desperation. The dancers dance because they have no other options. Guess that's what got the French Existentialists all worked up.

In the introduction to this 2010 edition Gloria Beatty is described as driving the story:

with a tremendous negative energy that wells up from her understanding that the world – her

world, the world that plays out beneath the Hollywood sign – is one of amorality and illusion.

She is also described as a complete nihilist. ::yawn:: Nihilists piss me off. It's too easy to hate everything and everyone and only see the hypocrisy and cruelty in the world.

So the themes are “big” in this book, I get it, and I get why certain people would be attracted to it and want to *talk* about these big themes (I went to grad school with some of you), but not I sir for this very simple reason; I hate “big” ideas (insert jazz hands here) that don't come wrapped in a gripping story that's going to smack me in the face and wake me up. Story. Comes. First. Always. You may be brilliant and have awesome insights into the human condition, but unless you can weave a tale that's going to put me on my ass I don't want to hear about it. And I'm not helping you along by faking it When Harry Met Sally Style pretending you wrote a great novel because I'm keen to wax poetic on how the world is shit and then we die.

I think what really pissed me off is this review on Amazon.ca which writes:

it's McCoy's *Horses* that...so beautifully reflects the darkest side of the Depression days in the U.S., even more so than Steinbeck's wonderful *The Grapes of Wrath*. McCoy gets to the very core of human desperation and misery, a cutthroat atmosphere where people will resort to ANYTHING just to survive.

Excuse me?! First of all, unlike Steinbeck, McCoy doesn't come close to accomplishing any of that and second of all, comparing this short, painful, pretentious book to one of the greatest novels ever written is JUST SO WRONG. Epic delusions of grandeur my friend and *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Epic fail.

Franky says

They Shoot Horses, Don't They is a novel that speaks to our times: we are inundated with reality shows, where fame and fortune, tragedy and despair are brought to us on a whim and often in the public eye. The public's livelihoods and fates are broadcast for the world to see, and this sells.

The basis for this story is concerning the promotion of a dance marathon during the Great Depression. The winner is promised cash and free food. And, unlike the many reality shows we see today, there is a realness and desperation to this contest that is quite grotesque, disturbing and bizarre.

They Shoot Horses, Don't They is very existential; it has a deeper layer of meaning beyond its basis and simple plot. Desperate times call for desperate measures, even if it is in the form of a dance marathon.

There's a seemingly trivial moment in this book when the narrator catches a glimpse of the sun outside and becomes enamored with the idea of being able to see it during the contest. I thought this a fitting moment in expressing one of the major themes. I think this reinforces the claustrophobic mood depicted in the dance; these contestants are in a “prison” that is this contest, confined to either enduring the race and trying to win the prize or retreating back to a harsh reality with their hopes dashed. The contest, in many ways, is the illusion and falsity of the American Dream. Illusion being that, it is a spectacle, a modern day gladiator fight: barbaric, humiliating, sensationalist. Yet, it sells: the promoters see at it as a cash grab, something to create public interest and sensationalism.

I thought this short work was beautifully assembled, alternating narrator perspective of the dance marathon with quick snapshots back to the courtroom and the sentencing. Although the prose is quite simple, the narrator gives insight into the events of the dance marathon and the character of Gloria, a nihilist if there ever

was one, who sees through the façade and falsity of this marathon.

We know exactly how things end, and are told this within the first moments of the book. This is secondary; the understanding of how and why certain acts were carried out are the primary basis for the narrative.

Emily May says

This book is essentially about existentialism and nihilism. However, the plot of this small novel features little more than a dance marathon competition and the petty arguments that happen behind the scenes. I suppose this is meant to form a platform on which Gloria can whine about life but it's just insanely boring. I obviously made a mistake choosing to get some of the shorter novels on the 1001 list out of the way, so far they've all been really disappointing.

Cynthia says

“...she died in agony, friendless, alone...”

Thus the book begins...It's the 1930's right outside Hollywood in Santa Monica California and yet another version of the marathon dance craze is being enacted. Two Hollywood hopefuls, Gloria and Robert, happen upon one another and decide to team up, after all there's a \$1,000 prize to the last couple standing. So begins this tortured story. It's one of struggle reflective of the depression. The couples are required to stay in motion with a ten minute rest break every so often and meals eaten standing up but a free meal is a free meal! There's a creepy zoo like feel as an audience gathers to watch the couples in the center. Robert longs to see the sun but is prodded back into the building by his keepers; Gloria is in despair and keeps saying she wants to die. Nerves become more and more frazzled.

The 70's movie starring Jane Fonda as Gloria might even be better than the book. Though there is much license taken with the book, the movie is more overt in the theme of struggle and the dichotomy between the rich vs. poor during the depression, it's still incredibly well done and worth watching. Sadly it seems relevant to our contemporary situations in many ways. McCoy however, gives a wider palette of emotions and issues in his writing. He emphasizes the morality of the character's actions. It has sub themes such as who is a criminal, is it ever moral to kill and if so in what situation(s)? McCoy also touches on the exploitation of people especially of women. Last is the theme of reconciling the childhood heartbreaks and the values they've inherited from those early sorrows and how people carry that pain into adulthood. As I'm sure you gathered both from McCoy's title and my reactions to his book this isn't a feel good experience but it's well worth taking the time to read this vintage story.

This review is based on an egalley provided by the publisher.

Brian says

If the Great Depression wasn't soul-suckingly terrible enough, there were cruel men willing to take it down another few notches by creating Dance Marathons to give gutter-poor people a shot at winning just enough money to keep them alive for a few more months by dancing for days (weeks?!?) on-end. Selling tickets to

watch their misery. Oh, the humanity.

McCoy uses this minor-but-dark chapter from the '30s as his vehicle for telling the even more depressing story of Gloria, a lady sick of the world and wanting to die. The author leaves it to the reader to decide whether the protagonist is right to offer her the solace she seeks. I'm afraid my particular filters failed in the reception of this work - it could be the dated style, or my personal preference of not having themes delivered to me on silver platters. But at 115 or so pages, and for a light read, you can do much worse.

GR friend Anthony Vacca recommended this book to me before he quit this site forever. I really wish he was still around so that he could educate me on what I missed from this novel. That bastard.

UPDATE 1/6/14: Anthony is back! When he gets around to it, I want to hear from him on this book. Review, good sir, review!

Andy says

In the 1930's Hollywood wannabees were humiliated by making them dance for endless hours in public, reminding me of American Idol's more sadistic moments.

Still fresh today as the day it was written, "They Shoot Horses" is a bizarre existential horror story about people who have shit canned their pride thinking there's a pot of gold at the end of their self-inflicted degradation.

(The only person to attain stardom from the marathons was June Havoc, who was Gypsy Rose Lee's sister, so she would have made it, anyway.)

Dan Schwent says

Robert and Gloria enter a marathon dance contest with \$1000 as the top prize. Too bad Gloria thinks about death more than winning...

Horace McCoy is bleak enough to be one of Jim Thompson's drinking buddies. This tale is really slim but also kind of exhausting. McCoy's depiction of a dance contest that lasts over a month is hellish and he paints a depressing picture of life during the Great Depression. See what I did there?

It's a pretty powerful story. You know how it ends in the first few pages but getting there is still an ordeal. I felt for Gloria at times but others times I was waiting for her to get to it. She wasn't a likeable character but I did feel sorry for her when she wasn't being a bitch.

That's pretty much all I have to say. If Jim Thompson wrote a book about a marathon dance contest with a suicidal contestant, it would look a lot like this.

Glenn Russell says

Horace McCoy's 1935 novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* contains one of the bleakest lines in all of literature. It's where Gloria, who dances in the marathon dance, asks without a trace of irony or black humor, "Why are these high-powered scientists always screwing around trying to prolong life instead of finding pleasant ways to end it?" Can there ever be a more negative, more downbeat, pessimistic view of life?

Turns out, Gloria was raised in the most dreadful way, by abusive, cruel people in West Texas. She eventually escaped, moving to Los Angeles, looking to make it in Hollywood movies. Can there ever be a staler, more pathetic aspiration, to see the pretend, artificial world of Hollywood as your salvation?

To be abused and debased as a child growing up and then, as a young adult, to be pushed into marathon dancing – the true bloodsport of the Great Depression. And then, after receiving your fifty dollars for a month and a week of marathon dancing, handing your partner a pistol and asking him to blow your brains out. Vintage 1930s America captured in Horace McCoy's outstanding classic.

FotisK says

Αν δεν υπήρχε ο ήρωας "Υπαρξιστική νουβέλ", θα έπρεπε να εφευρεθεί για να περιγράψει αυτό το μοναδικό στο έδος του μυθιστορήματος. Χρησιμοποιώντας ως κεντρικό θέμα μια κανιβαλιστική πρακτική της σκοτεινότερης για τους Αμερικανούς εποχής του Great Depression, ο Horace McCoy χτίζει μια εξαιρετική αλληγορία πάνω στην ανθρώπινη κατάσταση.

Δεν είναι τυχαίο που οι Γάλλοι (πώς σοφά ειπώθηκε, λάτρες με εξαιρετική γοστο για τη λογοτεχνία των... άλλων!) ανακάλυψαν αμέσως υπερβόλлон πλεονασμα ... Υπαρξισμός στους δόστινους ήρωες του ήρωου.

Άλλοι, μπορούν να αναγνωρίσουν μια ξεχωριστή κριτική του κρατούντος και αδηφύγου οικονομικού συστήματος. Και αυτό είναι η γοητεία του "Σκοτώνουν τα λόγια..." και εν γένει της αμερικανικής λογοτεχνίας (σινεμά / θέατρο). Η ποια αλληγορία, το ποιο σημαίνον (η ενυπάρχουσα έννοια) δεν επικαλείται τη λογοτεχνική φόρμα, παρά αποτελεί συμπλήρωμα του ήφους. Και επαφεται εις τον εγγράμματο αναγνώστη να ανακαλέσει "τι-ποτέ και".

Mark Desrosiers says

Wow, talk about your serial misapprehensions. First dismissed by American critics as grim dime-novel trash, then adopted by the French as a founding example of their cross-eyed tedious existentialism, this novel begs to be read -- especially in 2012 -- for what it is: a story about the exploitation by racketeers of a collapsing, desperate society, and how nihilism is the only logical response to it. The marathon dance here is an attempt at money-making voyeurism, complete with corporate sponsorships, manipulation of "reality", staged couplings, celebrity appearances, an attempt to rake in cash from an audience that doesn't have much -- I don't have to spell out for you how this is echoed in 2011. Did Horace McCoy have special insight into the nature of American DNA? Hell if I know, maybe he just lucked out: bouncer at a marathon dance was his IRL job just before he typed this out. I know that his staging of the dance contest over the Pacific, on a pier -- complete with our narrator digging the waves under his aching feet and constantly reaching for sunbeams in the dark space -- represents the literal limit of America, just over land's end. I say McCoy was onto something.

