

The Summer He Didn't Die

Jim Harrison

Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005. 288 pages. \$24 hardcover.

Reviewed by Brandon Reintjes

At heart, Jim Harrison is the purest combination of romantic and critic. He cares so deeply for the things he values—wildness, food, sex, and proletariat uprising—that his defense of these themes has become comically epic. His latest offering, *The Summer He Didn't Die*, is a dense collection of novellas peppered with discord, tongue-in-cheek subterfuge, and outright hilarity. Overall, it is a bag of mixed delights, with definite high points and glaring slumps. Arguably, even Harrison at his weakest is formidable. His readers have come to expect so much from him that the stakes are continually high, raised by the successes of each previous original contribution to literature.

Harrison has returned to the form of the novella periodically, a form he first made popular with the success of *Legends of the Fall*. Novellas are structured slightly erratically, with the start and stop of multiple stories comprising a book, but they support the terse pieces about revenge, affluence, and sex at which Harrison excels. None of the stories in *The Summer He Didn't Die* are related, but they allow for a wide range of experience to be packaged into a tight form—enough room for things to really swing. Unfortunately, the reader feels as if they don't quite reach the momentum needed to pull us through into belief.

It is often the fictional Harrison I most often have contention with, in characters that are stupidly libidinous, overly

dramatized, or plainly flat. It seems that Harrison is at his best moving through the familiar ground of nonfiction. His essays are complete, gem-like in their clarity and obscure focus, wildly enjoyable, and expertly crafted. In *Just Before Dark* or *The Raw and the Cooked*, the reader is given a straightforward look at Harrison the person—in all of his eccentricity and idiosyncrasy. His most admirable qualities move between genres, like his stunning observations of the natural world, adolescent-like swoons concerning food, and startling insights into people's behavior. These observations are worn on his shirtsleeve, drawn from over seventy years of quirky observation. That he brought the novella back from the edge of extinction and made it acceptable—even popular—is beside the point. For a writer described as dealing “with great vistas and vast distances” by the *New York Times Book Review* and moving with “random power and reach” by the *Boston Globe* (in blurbs from the back of *Dalva*), short narratives don't give him the space—both physical and conceptually—to create greatness. Which returns us squarely to *The Summer He Didn't Die*.

The title piece puts the reader in familiar territory with a farcical yarn about the misadventures of a miscreant Yooper (an inhabitant of the U.P., i.e. Upper Peninsula of Michigan) and expul logger, Brown Dog. This installment of the ongoing Brown Dog chronicles seems tamer, if possible, with the rampant libidos and ethical fudgings that ensue, but one that has heart. Brown Dog is tempered by his role as a family man, taking on the responsibility of raising his lover's two children while she is jailed. Largely a canvas that reflects Harrison's infatuation with the fringe elements of society—dropouts, smugglers, alcoholics, and gluttons—this look at domesticity is a folly in the making. Mix in a handful of

spiritual totems (garter snakes, ravens, and bears), not to mention a slew of Indian activists, misguided journalists, Gabriel Garcia Marquez quotes, lesbian love swoons, and comp dental work against the backdrop of the celebrated small towns of Northern Michigan, and the ambling plot begins to boil delightfully. This is the novella I bought the book for, and despite the material feeling slightly worn, it kept me transfixed, while still wincing occasionally.

Republican Wives is less successful. Still character driven, though by people we care nothing for—the overly spoiled, senseless heroines of the title—it is told in three parts. Each story is told by one of three close friends who have all shared the same lover at one time or another, beginning in college. Satirical and wryly written, the novella draws us into a world of class distinctions that uses the benchmark of their high school children's spring break trip (skiing in Vail) and first-class seating to remind us how much these people are worth. Harrison relies on the conventional indicators of wealth and class, but in a way that leaves the reader unable to sympathize. Their plight, like many people's, is self-inflicted. The lover is a bitter, idealistic leftist who uses the women at every turn through manipulations that are largely voluntary. When one of the three attempts to neutralize the uncaring lover with an overdose, the three rendezvous in Mexico running from the law, trying to formulate a plan. Harrison doesn't pull off snippy female dialog or the cool disdain that he tries to impart to these Republican wives. Everything rings hollow, but again, maybe that's the point.

The third installment, *Tracking*, is a windfall. Walking us through autobiography much as in *Off to the Side*, Harrison revisits his earlier attempt at memoir with fresh vitality. It still assumes the largely chronological pacing of a life lived, but is told third

person and is filled with insight, balanced by its reliance on the fact and circumstances of Harrison's life. It is a long line of well-written remarks strung together by a wealth of far-reaching and lucid quotes by the authors Harrison admires. As much a reflection on the act of writing as it is on the events of a life, *Tracking* has a clarity and grace that exhibit the writer's inherent strengths.

In the Author's Note that serves as an epilogue, Harrison talks about the need to revisit this material. He writes,

Several years ago I wrote a memoir called *Off to the Side* (my favored place to be) and after it was published I began to question how much of the true texture of life it contained. We are born babies and what are these hundreds of layers of clothes? The sheer haphazard and accidental nature of life overwhelmed me from the lucky meeting of the girl I married to the fact that if my father and sister had begun their fatal trip a second later they wouldn't have died in a collision. All of this can become the stuff of insanity or greater mystery, as if the crisp scissors clip of the umbilical cord begins a journey into chaos.

Filled with Harrison's now familiar mythology, *Tracking* seems as if it is the answer by which he is able to greet the chaos. At once tragic, mysterious, down-to-earth, and insightful, this last novella feels as if it hits the mark wonderfully. It comes closest to why reading Harrison is so compelling and seductive, and ultimately so satisfying.