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## **Dollmaker**

by Harriette Arnow

1908-1986

Nationality: American

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### **Sidelights**

Harriette Simpson Arnow was a Kentucky-born novelist whose work captured the erosion of rural life in the Cumberland hills. "I was aware that nothing had been written on the Southern immigrants, of what was actually happening to them and to their culture, of how they came to the cities for the first time in the 1920s, leaving their families behind," she explained to Barbara L. Baer in *the Nation*. "I began writing during the depression which had sent hill people back home again. And then, as I was still writing during the Second War, I witnessed the permanent move the men made by bringing their wives and children with them to the cities. With that last migration, hill life was gone forever, and with it, I suppose, a personal dream of community I'd had since childhood."

To recapture that sense of community, Arnow spent two decades writing her Kentucky trilogy, a series of novels which begins with a coming-of-age story called *Mountain Path*, continues with a serious adventure novel entitled *Hunter's Horn*, and culminates in *The Dollmaker*, Arnow's best known fiction and, according to Joyce Carol Oates, "our most unpretentious American masterpiece." Over the years, many labels have been attached to these writings, but "whether the books are read today as regional, or realistic or even feminist writing, they are first of all a coherent vision in the best tradition of American fiction" in Baer's opinion. They tell the stories of men and women who see their dreams of self-sufficiency shrink and their personal freedoms foreclosed by a rapacious industrial society.

In *Mountain Path*, her first and most autobiographical novel, Arnow focused on a young student teacher from the city and her experiences in a community of feuding mountaineers. Torn between the intellectual existence for which her education has prepared her and the pull of the earthy backwoods culture, the heroine faces a difficult decision, complicated by her love for a mountain man. Unlike earlier novelists who caricatured "hillbillies" or moralized about their violent feuds, Arnow acknowledged the individuality of her characters and the legitimacy of their ways. Even though the book was tagged a "regional" novel and eventually went out of print, it garnered enough attention to establish Arnow as "a writer of considerable talent," Glenda Hobbs reports in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

In *Hunter's Horn*, the second book of her trilogy, Arnow continued her exploration of the conflict between an individual's dreams and society's demands, this time from a male point of view. Nunn Ballew, husband, father, and Kentucky farmer, becomes engrossed in the pursuit of "King Devil," an elusive red fox that has been raiding local farms and destroying livestock. Like Ahab in *Moby Dick*, Ballew will stop at nothing to catch his prey—even though his obsession triggers both personal anguish and the community's ridicule and disdain.

His family also suffers as Ballew invests money in expensive hunting dogs that could pay for his 14-

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year-old daughter Suse's schooling. No sooner does he kill "King Devil"--which turns out to be a female slowed down because she is carrying pups--than Suse discovers she is pregnant. An independent, high-spirited girl who wants to go north and get an education, Suse is confident that her father will support her decision not to wed.

Instead, in a riveting scene that is played out before the assembled community, Ballew capitulates to the local mores he has always scorned. Asserting that his fire will warm no bastard, he insists that Suse marry the father of the child. As Hobbs reports, "Nunn, nearly frozen with ambivalence and grief wins back the neighbors' approval in exchange for his daughter's back and heart being `broke to the plow.'"

Reviewers considered it a mark of her excellence that Arnow sustained reader sympathy for Nunn Ballew. "However much we may resent Nunn's improvidence and his betrayal of Suse," writes a Ms. reviewer, "it is a testament to Arnow's extraordinary skill at characterization that almost against our will we share his anguish and cheer him on after his four-legged red whale. Hunter's Horn manifests Arnow's ability to create male characters as palpable and as complex as her best women. Nunn can't be written off as another hateful man."

In spite of the appeal he exerts, Nunn Ballew pales in comparison to Gertie Nevels, a character Baer described as "larger than life, a rawboned figure hewn from some matriarchal past" and the protagonist of the third and final volume of the trilogy, *The Dollmaker*. Published at a time when strong women were a rarity in fiction, the 1954 best-seller was a critical as well as a popular success and tied for best novel in the Saturday Review national critics' poll. Perhaps partly because most of the novel is set outside Kentucky, critics were less tempted to call the book `regional,' Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor Glenda Hobbs explains.

For thirty-one weeks the novel remained on the best-seller lists, and, when Columbia purchased the movie rights, it appeared as though the story would be filmed. But, with the passage of time, the public's interest subsided and movie executives had second thoughts about the novel's commercial appeal. They shelved the project, for reasons which Chicago Tribune reporter Eric Zorn detailed: "In a year when Ernest Hemingway won the Nobel Prize for literature and the public taste was for action, drama and romance they found onscreen in such movies as `From Here to Eternity' and `On the Waterfront,' Arnow offered a grim picture of the cultural collision of traditional, rural lifestyles with industrial America. It was not thrilling, uplifting, intellectually ambitious or filled with adventure, suspense or intrigue."

The story depicts a Kentucky woman's losing battle to retain her dignity when her family is relocated in Detroit. A simple country woman with a talent for whittling and a love of the land, Gertie Nevels seeks no greater fulfillment than raising her family on a farm of her own. But she gives up her dream to follow her husband Clovis up north when he takes a wartime job in a factory. With her she brings a magnificent block of cherry wood from which she plans to carve a religious figure--Judas, maybe, or the laughing Christ--if, as she explains to a stranger, "I can ever hit on the right face."

In the brutal environment of the Detroit projects, inspiration never comes, and Gertie finds herself sac-

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rificing her artistic integrity to survival. The dolls she once hand-carved for her daughter's pleasure, she now mass-produces to feed her family. And though she ultimately "adjusts," Gertie feels corrupted--her children lost to her, her self-reliance undermined. The book ends with her splintering the beloved cherry wood block so she can manufacture crude dolls for quick money.

While some critics have interpreted this ending as evidence of Gertie's defeat, Dorothy H. Lee offered a brighter interpretation. "The hidden face in the wood is that of Christ: Gertie does not contradict the scrapwood man's assumption that it is," she wrote in Critique. "Questioned further by the man as to whether or not she could find a face for him, she responds, 'They was so many would ha done; they's millions and millions a faces plenty fine enough--fer him. . . . Why some a my neighbors down there in the alley--they would ha done.' She thus reveals that she retains her vision of Christ's humility. Further, she perceives her neighbors as crucified and, although she would not be able so to verbalize, as scape-goats of the processes of urbanization--of competition, poverty, materialism, and mechanization. She has always had compassion for others, but her vision now is less provincial. She recognizes suffering of a broader scope and understands the unity of all men who share it."

In her Nation article, Barbara L. Baer gauged the effect this ending has upon the reader: "In the beautiful last dialogue, as the woodcutter gives Gertie his ax, we learn what Gertie has learned; no individual face can encompass the complexity of human suffering, whether a man's or a woman's, a relative's or a stranger's, a friend's or an enemy's."

Joyce Carol Oates was so moved by the story that she chose to critique it for the New York Times Book Review seventeen years after it originally appeared, calling it "one of those excellent American works that have yet to be properly assessed," and thus rekindling the public's interest. Among the readers whose curiosity was piqued was Jane Fonda, who eventually acquired film rights and successfully brought the story to television as an ABC-TV movie in 1984--two years before Arnow's death.

Though nothing else Arnow wrote came close to achieving The Dollmaker's acclaim, Glenda Hobbs believed that the author earned a permanent place in American letters. "Arnow alone has rendered Kentucky highlanders' fully and fairly," she wrote in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, "rescuing them from the literary stereotype of the lazy, suspicious, ignorant, manically violent hillbilly. Taking their dignity for granted Arnow also avoids the passionate yearning for identification with the rural poor that betrays insecurity and condescension. . . . Arnow's unique, obstinate characters, even in the face of economic ruin and spiritual exhaustion, will endure and prevail. With luck and justice, so should Arnow's place in American literature."

### **PERSONAL INFORMATION**

Family: Born July 7, 1908, in Wayne County, KY; died March, 1986, in Washtenaw County, MI; daughter of Elias Thomas (a teacher, farmer, and oil well driller) and Mollie Jane (a teacher; maiden name, Denney) Simpson; married Harold B. Arnow (publicity director for Michigan Heart Association), March 11, 1939; children: Marcella Jane, Thomas Louis. Education: Attended Berea College, 1924-26; University of Louisville, B.S., 1931. Memberships: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, P.E.N., Authors

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Guild, Authors League of America, American Civil Liberties Union, Phi Beta Kappa (honorary).

### **AWARDS**

Friends of American Writers Award, runner up for National Book Award, Saturday Review national critics' poll co-winner for best novel, Berea College Centennial award, Woman's Home Companion Silver Distaff award for "unique contribution by a woman to American life," all 1955, all for *The Dollmaker*; commendation from Tennessee Historical Commission and award of merit of American Association for State and Local History, both 1961, both for *Seedtime on the Cumberland*; Tennessee Historical Quarterly prize for best article of the year, 1962; Outstanding Alumni award, University of Louisville, College of Arts and Sciences, 1979; honorary degrees from Albion College, Transylvania College, and University of Kentucky; Mark Twain Award for distinguished Midwestern Literature, Michigan State University, 1984.

### **CAREER**

Author. Teacher in Pulaski County, KY, 1926-28, 1931-34, and Louisville, 1934. Waitress, Cincinnati, 1934-39.

### **WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR**

- (Under name Harriette Simpson) *Mountain Path* (novel), Covici-Friede, 1936.
- *Hunter's Horn* (novel), Macmillan, 1949, reprinted, Avon, 1979.
- *The Dollmaker* (novel), Macmillan, 1954, reprinted, University Press of Kentucky, 1985.
- *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (nonfiction), Macmillan, 1960, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1983.
- *Flowering of the Cumberland* (nonfiction), Macmillan, 1963, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1984.
- *The Weedkiller's Daughter* (novel), Knopf, 1970.
- *The Kentucky Trace: A Novel of the American Revolution*, Knopf, 1974.
- *Old Burnside* (nonfiction), University Press of Kentucky, 1978.
- *The Dollmaker*, University Press of Kentucky, (Lexington, KY), 1985. (Library has copies)
- *Mountain Path*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1985.
- *Hunter's Horn*, University Press of Kentucky (Lexington, KY), 1986, Michigan State University Press (East Lansing, MI), 1997. (Library has copies)
- *Between the Flowers*, Michigan State University Press, (East Lansing, MI), 1999.

Also author of short stories in the 1930s, two of them anthologized in O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories. Contributor of articles and reviews to magazines.



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**FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**BOOKS**

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- *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Gale, Volume II, 1974, Volume VII, 1977, Volume XVII, 1981.
- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume VI: American Novelists since World War II, Second Series, 1980.
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**PERIODICALS**

- *Chicago Tribune*, February 10, 1983.
- *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, Volume XX, number 2, 1978.
- *Georgia Review*, winter, 1979.
- *Michigan: The Magazine of the Detroit News*, December 4, 1983.
- *Ms.*, December, 1979.
- *Nation*, January 31, 1976.
- *New York Times*, May 28, 1949.
- *New York Times Book Review*, May 29, 1949, March 22, 1970, January 24, 1971.
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- *New Republic*, August 31, 1974.

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