



Deadwood (Vintage Contemporaries)

Pete Dexter

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DEADWOOD, DAKOTA TERRITORIES, 1876: Legendary gunman Wild Bill Hickcock and his friend Charlie Utter have come to the Black Hills town of Deadwood fresh from Cheyenne, fleeing an ungrateful populace. Bill, aging and sick but still able to best any man in a fair gunfight, just wants to be left alone to drink and play cards. But in this town of played-out miners, bounty hunters, upstairs girls, Chinese immigrants, and various other entrepreneurs and miscreants, he finds himself pursued by a vicious sheriff, a perverse whore man bent on revenge, and a besotted Calamity Jane. Fueled by liquor, sex, and violence, this is the real wild west, unlike anything portrayed in the dime novels that first told its story.

Deadwood (Vintage Contemporaries) Details

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Author : Pete Dexter

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From Reader Review Deadwood (Vintage Contemporaries) for online ebook

Adam says

Dexter's Deadwood is boisterous, wild, and darkly humored epic. The humor and the intricate exploring of the characters makes you forget that this book catalogues murder, insanity, sickness, suicides, mutilation, prostitution, and the mud and the squalor of a frontier town. This mingling of darkness and character driven comedy is as finely tuned as anything since Heller's Catch 22.

Brian says

Despite being written 20 years before the excellent show on HBO was first broadcast, it's hard to imagine that it didn't serve as a template for the show's creator, David Milch (minus the profanity ubiquitous throughout the show). So in sync are the characterizations in both the book and show, despite the age difference, that I easily and comfortably envisioned the actors playing the various real-life roles reciting the dialogue from the book.

Since I think the program might well be the best thing ever shown on TV, the book had a lot to measure up to, and I'm happy to say to it was equal to the task. While ostensibly a western, it actually transcends the genre as it is really more about character, friendship, family, love, and the still-present attitudes men have about women and their perceived limitations. But it was all served up in the crucible of a practically lawless mining town deep in Sioux territory, virtually outside the jurisdiction and protection of the US government.

The only reason I'm not giving it 5 stars is I don't trust my objectivity with this one, but I have to say I'm really glad I read it and thought it was great.

wally says

finished this one this afternoon. good story. i really liked it. dunno if it helped that i visited deadwood...and nearby lead...as well as other locations there and abouts maybe ten years ago. never thought to look for a graveyard, cemetery.

i like how dexter writes a scene, plays it out some...and then he returns to and tells it again from the viewpoint of another character in the story. have seen him use the same technique in other stories...this i think is number 5 or 6 from him. doesn't do it to excess and seems like that fell off by what? the midpoint in the story? somewhere around there.

anyway, like the description says and then some.

and again in this one...like in one or two previous, there's a character or two who seem...something, aloof? hickok in this one. almost like the character is waiting for the story to unfold, to take them, as it does here in

this story. aces and eights. quite a cast of characters, too, some real, a few imagined, even a dog. all is well. onward and upward.

Dillwynia Peter says

I'm a little confused over this one when I consider the ratings. It's not a true 4, but there you go. I will point out the personal niggled later.

Who is the main character here, I thought?? Initially, I thought it was Wild Bill Hickock, but then he up & dies. None of the others seemed strong enough to carry it for me, I felt adrift. Then I realised there were TWO main characters: Deadwood town itself, & Charley Utter was carrying the narrative in his gentle way.

A great book about an important town in the 1870s. Wild Bill & Calamity Jane both wash up there & the actions of the others are bizarre, nasty & lawless. Once, I overcame my uncertainty, I did whoosh thru the book as I learnt more & more about events in the town. This is a well researched book & I wonder if it wouldn't have been better as a non-fiction. The facts come thick and fast, but for me the dialogue was uncomfortable, almost intrusive.

And that's why the 1.5 star removal. Some of the language in the text & dialogues just plain pissed me off: peeder, pilgrims, tourists etc, just felt intrusive. I was happy to have them in the speech, but not in the narrative. I will admit this part is purely very personal, and on others this might add local colour & thus pleasure.

I do recommend this however, as I recognise it might just be me that was the problem :-D

Paul says

- Charley Utter & Wild Bill Hickock approach Deadwood...

... following the Whitewood Creek & where things widened enough for a town sign, that was Deadwood.

"How's it look to you?" Bill said.

"Like something out of the Bible," Charley said.

"What part of the Bible?" Bill said.

"Where God got angry" Charley said.

When I started reading this book, I thought it was about Wild Bill & his off-sider & companion Charlie Utter. In fact, Wild Bill is a bit player & departs relatively early, although Utter remains a constant presence & sometime narrator throughout this narrative, the real character is Deadwood; a wild frontier mining town, with it's cast of offbeat, wild & eccentric characters. It's a gritty tale of the Wild West in the late 19th & early 20th century, populated with tales of murder, decapitations, whores, lawlessness, psychopaths, casual violence, mayhem, Smallpox, mud & a colorful cast of characters. In addition to Wild Bill & Charlie Utter,

there is a reluctant Sheriff, the whore-man, a psychopath, Calamity Jane (who lives up to her name), the soft-brain, a cowardly, blow hard, self appointed Captain & an endless coterie of the deranged & eccentric.

Throughout this tale of debauchery & gritty mayhem , the author Pete Dexter, has woven his own brand of dark, droll humor.

“Dr. O. E. Sick had tucked his nightshirt into his pants & tucked his pants into his boots.... “Everyone's a shootist,” he said. “Bang, bang.”

“A woman that can wield an axe is a gift from God to her husband,” the captain said, smiling again.

“Did you shoot him?” she said. Charlie scratched his neck, thinking of a way to explain it. “You did, didn't you?” And she came out of bed naked to look at Handsome's leg.

“It happened in Chinatown,” Charley said.

Boone sat up & began dressing himself under the covers. Seeing he was suddenly polite, Charlie realized Boone might have to be shot too, after he was decent.

I've been meaning to read Pete Dexter for some time. I thought Deadwood might be a good place to start. It is. I'm now a fan & look forward to reading his other books of which I have several. Even if you think you are not a fan of Westerns, approach this as a work of historical fiction, interspersed liberally with dark humor.

One of the most enjoyable books I have read this year. An easy 5 out of 5 stars from this reader.

Alec says

There's a quote in the movie Vanilla Sky (a film which I have always enjoyed, and not only due to the phenomenal Good Vibrations scene) in which a character who has just lost his job with a publishing company drunkenly exclaims, "People will read again!" This scene has always stuck with me, perhaps due to his impassioned slurring british speech pattern, but it feels appropriate to mention after my extended Goodreads hiatus.

In truth, the quote is far from appropriate as I have continued reading (albeit at a relatively slow pace - it's been a busy year+), I just haven't been Goodreading. But now, hopefully, I can consider my extended sabbatical complete and work through some of my backlog.

First on the list is Deadwood. This was a book given to me by then girlfriend (now wife!) Tiffany based on my love of the HBO Series by the same name. These two works are related only in that they share the same source material, though there is some controversy that David Milch (creator of HBO's Deadwood, which might be my favorite show of all time) used Pete Dexter's work as a basis for his creation. I don't buy it, however. There are similarities, but since both works are based on the real story of the Deadwood mining camp and the vibrant figures residing therein, some parallels would be unavoidable.

Though the names are shared (Wild Bill Hickock, Al Swearingen, Charlie Udder, Calamity Jane), that is about where the similarities stop. There are major differences in characterization and the relative importance of each character. For example, I'd say the book is mostly about Wild Bill and Charlie Udder, with Udder being the main character, whereas the series is driven largely by Al Swearingen and Seth Bullock, with Wild

Bill and Charlie as background players at best. I'd also highlight the fact that the Swearingen of HBO glory bears almost no resemblance to the purely evil being in the book. This is an important detail to prospective readers who love the series. If you're expecting the charisma of Swearingen as created by David Milch and Ian McShane, you'll be disappointed. The book soars in other ways which are insightful and enjoyable, but setting this expectation is critical to avoiding discouragement.

Since I finished this book so long ago, my thoughts should be considered suspect at best, but I remember being fully engrossed in this story of a mostly lawless gold mining town, with all the drinking, murdering and whoring you'd expect. Tales of the frontier are always captivating, but this book does a particularly great job of taking you inside the minds of the wild, strong men which inhabit this oft-drunken chaos. I'd recommend it to anyone with an affinity for historical fiction, but particularly those interested in the "wild west." This isn't a tale of cowboys, per se, but I'm confident Gus McCrae and Captain Call would feel right at home.

People will read again!

Randall says

And "NO" it's not that on which the HBO series of the same name was based.

Before you reach the table of contents, you do get a word from the author, saying:

"The large events and the settings of this novel—the fire that destroyed Deadwood, the assassinations of Bill Hickok and the China Doll, the weather, the life and travels of Charley Utter—are all real. The Characters, with the exception of Malcolm Nash, are also real, and were in Deadwood at the time these events occurred."

I know I read several times (granted, on the internet) before watching the first season of the television series or reading this book that Pete Dexter's work was very much integral to the creation of the HBO series.

I'm not going to say I've done a whole lot of investigating since finishing the book this morning, but I wouldn't even be all that surprised to know that nobody on the creative team had even opened the front cover of Dexter's book, especially in light of the aforementioned quote. My sense is that both pieces of art were derived from researching real-life historic persons and events from that place in American history and invoking the creative spirit from there.

In other words, aside from some names, I don't see much similar between the show and the book. Hence, they should be considered separately, other than that I would not likely have read the book had I not also recently enjoyed watching the beginning of the series (and then found a second-hand copy of the book during a timely visit to Pegasus Book Exchange).

My interest level in the old "wild west" was never that great, so my knowledge of people like Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane was of such a level that I'd not necessarily have even thought of them in the context of Deadwood, South Dakota any more than I would have, say, western Texas. Charley Utter, who is the central character throughout the novel, is someone whose name I believe I had never even heard, and, if I had, I'd completely forgotten the context.

Because of this and, again, because I'd just watched 12 hours or so of the HBO series, I entered the world of Deadwood as described by Pete Dexter with some very strong conceptions about characters the second they appeared in writing. Within the first few pages, you have met Charley, Wild Bill, and Al Swearingen. If you've seen the HBO show, you know how strongly drawn those characters are on the screen.

It's of great credit to Mr. Dexter that, writing the book without the knowledge his words would one day be competing with HBO-strength characterizations of the same historical figures, it isn't long before you're (mostly) considering the characters anew. It's not only that he clearly staked his claim to the fictionalization of the history of Deadwood in a completely different manner as did the people with the HBO production, but also that he writes his characters in a very lively fashion. Maybe that's partly a benefit of working within a genre such as the western, but I doubt it's that simple.

I also happen to be a bit of a sucker for strong character development, so there's that.

The style can be a bit tricky in some spots. The word "peeder" appears repeatedly and failed not once to give me a stop. I also think the use of "could of/would of/should of" in place of the proper contractions probably was meant to do something other than remind me of the fact that 90% of the people on the internet actually type those for all to see publicly without intention, but that's what I got, again making me pause each instance.

Small, niggling things, but they stand out in my head. Should be noted that's a small price for what was otherwise a very enjoyable book.

The narrative is divided into five "parts," the first four of which are named for a character around whom much of the action within revolves. The fifth is a rather short summary of Charley's life after leaving Deadwood that, honestly, adds little (if anything) to the story beyond a bit of closure .

Malcolm Nash, the one completely fictional character in the novel, plays an interesting thread through the story, but his role is a bit thin in the middle bits, which makes one wonder at the reason for creating him at all. It's not that he seems out of place, mind you. It's more that I had a natural tendency to wonder a little more about the character seeing as it was mentioned right at the top that he was not in the historic records and was, hence, created out of whole ink. Perhaps it is a failure of the reader to have expected more from such an entry into the story, but I can't see how anyone would look at it differently.

There's also a very realistic chance I've just missed something important in my reading. Wouldn't be the first time.

On the front cover of the paperback is a quote from Jonathan Franzen, saying "If you want to call Deadwood a Western, you might as well call The House of Mirth chick lit."

Not even having read the latter, I can say I understand what Franzen was getting at with this, and think it's a valid consideration. Calling a book a "Western," much as "chick lit" or "science fiction" does have that effect of "ghettoization" of the work into its genre and is somehow looked at as something less. Or, that's the talk these days, isn't it?

What I'm meaning to clarify as being important here is that nobody who enjoys a good book should pass on this one with a "but I don't really like "Westerns." The work itself will survive such an err, but is a huge disservice to the "serious reader" Mr. Franzen likes to concern himself about. Pete Dexter has written a serious book for serious readers of all sorts.

Even those who have cemented in their brain the image of Wild Bill Hickok as the brother of the guy from 'Kung Fu.'

We can overcome.

Clay says

Wow that was truly a surprisingly good read! I saw a quote by Jonathan Franzen on the book cover and as I didn't know what else to read I gave this one a try.

Pete Dexter manages to show you on the very first page what this book is going to be like. He really knows how to set the tone straight away. It is full of masculine, dark humour, lots of violence and so many weird, but vivid characters. The thing is that I've never watched a single Western movie or read a book like this one before so I am definitely not a fan but it was really quite amazing!

This book tells tough stories about tough guys and tough ladies with a lot of off beat humour. If you're interested in that kind of stuff you should pick this one up!

K says

3.5 rounded up. This well written novel could have easily been titled "Charley Utter-- His life and times" since the stories of Deadwood, Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, et. al. all flow through this character. Pete Dexter did a fine job portraying these well known figures as deeply complex and clearly flawed humans. To some degree, his story is sad and full of melancholy, but he usually manages to interject some humor or sex (often simultaneously) just when it's needed most.

Like many others, I thoroughly enjoyed the HBO series, Deadwood, but can state with confidence that the screenwriters charted their own course; one bearing very little resemblance to this book. Liking one by no means guarantees enjoying the other. I'm glad I saw the series prior to reading this book-- a rare statement from me-- but in the reverse I'd have probably been bothered by both casting and story decisions.

In sum, this is a leisurely stroll through the development of a few memorable characters that inhabited "the Badlands" of S. Dakota during the late 1800's. Fans of the period should enjoy.

Harold says

it's seems pretty obvious that this book had to play some role in the creation of the tv series of the same name. I have seen online that the producer of the series, David Milch, says that it didn't, but there is something about the attitude of this book that suggests to me it did, particularly the similar characterizations of Charley Utter, the main character of the book and a prominent character on the tv series, Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickock. That being said, many of the other familiar names from the series do not bear much resemblance to the portrayals in the book. I'm not enough of an expert on Deadwood to know how historically accurate either is. The names are real, but I know little of their actual story. It's safe to say that if you liked the series you will probably like this book, but one isn't a carbon copy of the other.

Derek says

In an enticing mix of historical verisimilitude and wild conjecture, Pete Dexter provides a compelling portrait of a wild west town in *Deadwood*, one that more than lives up to the famous HBO television show of the same name (and in fact, the book predates the show by quite a few years, leading one to believe that David Milch gleefully pilfered from Dexter's excellent novel as he saw fit).

The Franzen pull-quote on the book's cover claims that you oughtn't refer to *Deadwood* as a Western, but I beg to differ; Dexter is expanding and improving upon the genre, but this is by all means a Western. Admittedly, I'm far from an expert, but *Deadwood* is really everything a Western ought to be: a character-centric story full of dirt, killing, fucking, heartbreak, misery, drunkenness, and limited but necessary moments of austerity. Dexter gives us these in spades, splitting his narratives between Colorado Charley Utter, Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, Al Swearengen, and others. There's little hope or light to be found here, which is appropriate. The men and women who populate Deadwood find themselves struggling to eke out a living from the Black Hills, whose streams are beginning to carry less and less gold, and whose whorehouses, saloons, and theaters now provide the only limited joy that might be found (unless, of course, you're Mr. Hearst).

Perhaps Franzen is suggesting that Dexter employs none of the stereotypes that detract from the popular novels of Louis L'Amour and others, an assertion I'm inclined to agree with, though Wild Bill does fit the stoic man-of-few-words cliché with which you might already be familiar. If these characters do fit a mold that's already been well-established, they're at least given a believable interiority to justify it. Calamity Jane, in particular, is shown as a drunken mess but also an extremely tender woman who cares for the sick during an outbreak of smallpox, and the complexity and inconsistency of her character make her one of the most magnetic in the book. Solomon Star is perhaps the most disappointing in this regard, even if his story *is* the most interesting; he makes a bevy of bad/interesting decisions, but we never see inside of him enough to know what might compel him to burn down Deadwood and wordlessly shoot the "celestials."

Clearly, *Deadwood* is head and shoulders above any number of similar books, and well worth your attention if you're fond of turn-of-the-century character studies or American history. And you really ought to be.

Shirley Schwartz says

I watched every episode of the Deadwood series, and was so disappointed when it ended so abruptly after only 3 seasons. When I saw that this book was actually the book that David Milch built his series around, I had to read it. The book is similar in many ways to the excellent series, but it is different too. It's actually much deeper and Charlie Utter (one of my characters in the series) is the main character in the book. He is the glue that holds everything together. The book is totally surprising, and there is so much depicted in it. Utter is the voice of reason in the wilds of Deadwood. He's a man who is best friend to the legend, Wild Bill Hickok, and he's a man who studies and examines humankind all around him, and even if he's not surprised at the depravity he encounters, his ability to mediate and provide a voice of reason even under the most shocking circumstances, helps his friends and acquaintances through difficult times. Charlie is very much a

man of his time (1870's), but he's also a modern man in a changing world. The book is hilariously funny in spots, and totally shocking in others, but through it all we have Charlie making his way through it, and his experiences are so well depicted that it helps us assimilate the multitude of humanity and the multitude of violence in Deadwood, USA. I didn't think I'd find another book about the old west that I would like as much as Lonesome Dove, but this book can hold its' place beside Lonesome Dove and even rises above in many aspects.

Wayne Barrett says

When I came across this book I wanted to read it because I had seen the HBO series, Deadwood, and thought it was fantastic. Unfortunately, the book was nowhere as good as the series. Just so I don't confuse anyone, I want to point out that the series was not a film adaption of this book. They are both based on the same town and characters but are two different animals when it comes to the telling and style. The book is not bad, it's just that it lacks the dark, dramatic backdrop set in the series. Even though the book gives some harsh details and explicit sex scenes, it has more of a whimsical feel about it. That style put me off and I had a hard time taking the story seriously.

This may be far more entertaining for those who don't know the history of the town and the legend of Bill Hickok. If you haven't heard the story, take my opinion with a grain of salt and know that this might be an enjoyable read for you.

O'linda says

After reading a history of Annie Oakley, Wild Bill, and Buffalo Bill Cody I picked up this book and wasn't disappointed with the research or insight into the characters and historic detail. Dexter draws on actual events and people to paint a portrait of the American West that is neither romanticized or based solely on violent drama. The demise of the town of Deadwood, a real place in the West, and Wild Bill Hickock's death are used as metaphors for the changes that came to America during the 1800s. Dexter's spin on Calamity Jane, the Sioux Indians, and the various "upstairs girls" and saloon owners in this town are humorous and filled with pathos. As is usual in Dexter's books, everyone in town is their own worst enemy and redemption comes in a variety of unpredictable ways.

Stephen Durrant says

A novel difficult to rank (3.5 stars[?]) and to summarize. "Deadwood" is set in the Badlands during the 1870s and concerns Wild Bill Hickok, his sidekick Charlie Utter, who narrates much of the novel, and an array of other historical figures, Calamity Jane perhaps the most skillfully and delightfully drawn. It is the product both of careful research and of genuine literary talent. The novel begins with two desperados carrying human heads around the town of Deadwood, South Dakota, one of which briefly becomes a prostitute's pillow, and ends with two men struggling with the stiff corpse of Wild Bill Hickock, who falls from his coffin as his grave is being relocated three years after his death, a scene apparently based upon an actual event. Much in between is equally grotesque and exaggerated, and sometimes also very, very funny. Dexter puts an original spin on the Old West, one that simultaneously de-romanticizes and, in a peculiar

way, re-romanticizes. There is nothing here of the clean, nicely pressed West of so many films and novels. At the same time, the Neanderthal quality of Deadwood carries a perverse charm of its own, as long as one is not shot in the leg, or some other appendage, too many times. "Deadwood" is not a novel one easily forgets--although one may well wish to forget some of its scenes and images! Dexter is a master of language who writes here in a strange and appealing mixture of registers ranging from the crudest colloquial to the most carefully crafted formal. One reviewer calls this "the best Western ever written." While I am not sure "Deadwood" warrants such high praise, it is surely one of the most original Westerns ever written. I suppose next I should watch the television series.
