



Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon

Anthony Harkins

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In this pioneering work of cultural history, historian Anthony Harkins argues that the hillbilly-in his various guises of "briar hopper," "brush ape," "ridge runner," and "white trash"-has been viewed by mainstream Americans simultaneously as a violent degenerate who threatens the modern order and as a keeper of traditional values of family, home, and physical production, and thus symbolic of a nostalgic past free of the problems of contemporary life. "Hillbilly" signifies both rugged individualism and stubborn backwardness, strong family and kin networks but also inbreeding and bloody feuds. Spanning film, literature, and the entire expanse of American popular culture, from D. W. Griffith to hillbilly music to the Internet, Harkins illustrates how the image of the hillbilly has consistently served as both a marker of social derision and regional pride. He traces the corresponding changes in representations of the hillbilly from late-nineteenth century America, through the great Depression, the mass migrations of Southern Appalachians in the 1940s and 1950s, the War on Poverty in the mid 1960s, and to the present day. Harkins also argues that images of hillbillies have played a critical role in the construction of whiteness and modernity in twentieth century America. Richly illustrated with dozens of photographs, drawings, and film and television stills, this unique book stands as a testament to the enduring place of the hillbilly in the American imagination.

Hillbilly received an Honorable Mention, John G. Cawelti Book Award of the American Culture Association.

Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon Details

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From Reader Review Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon for online ebook

Andrew says

The variety of cultural forms and mediums which Harkins reads sets an exhilarating example, but I felt as if the book's argument didn't push quite hard enough, or didn't lay out the stakes of the project clearly enough.

Ashley says

Harkins' book does an excellent job unpacking the complex relationship Americans have to poor, white, under-educated people. His book is not, in any way, an apology for bigotry or misogyny but rather an explanation of how those traits got attached to this subgroup.

It is a quick read and full of references to popular culture. This makes the book accessible for a lay audience as well as academics. In addition, he manages to defend the southerner without coming off as a white supremacist or some kind of kook himself.

Teri says

Moonshiner, Redneck, Country Folk, Hillbilly. These are all terms that have been used throughout southern US history to describe the residents of the Appalachian and Ozark mountain ranges. Anthony Harkins details the history of the word Hillbilly which is both a cultural icon and at times, a derogatory term. Hillbilly has its roots in the Appalachian area but eventually migrated to include the mountainous area of Missouri and Arkansas. The term seemed to have its start in literary and regional history and grew to be used in songs, comics, movies, and television.

This book started out as Harkins' dissertation and was expanded to be published in book form. It is at times a bit on the dry side showing its scholarly roots, but by the time you get to movies and television, the information becomes much more relatable. This is a good example of how old regional vernacular is becoming more offensive and derogatory as our country's worldview has expanded.
