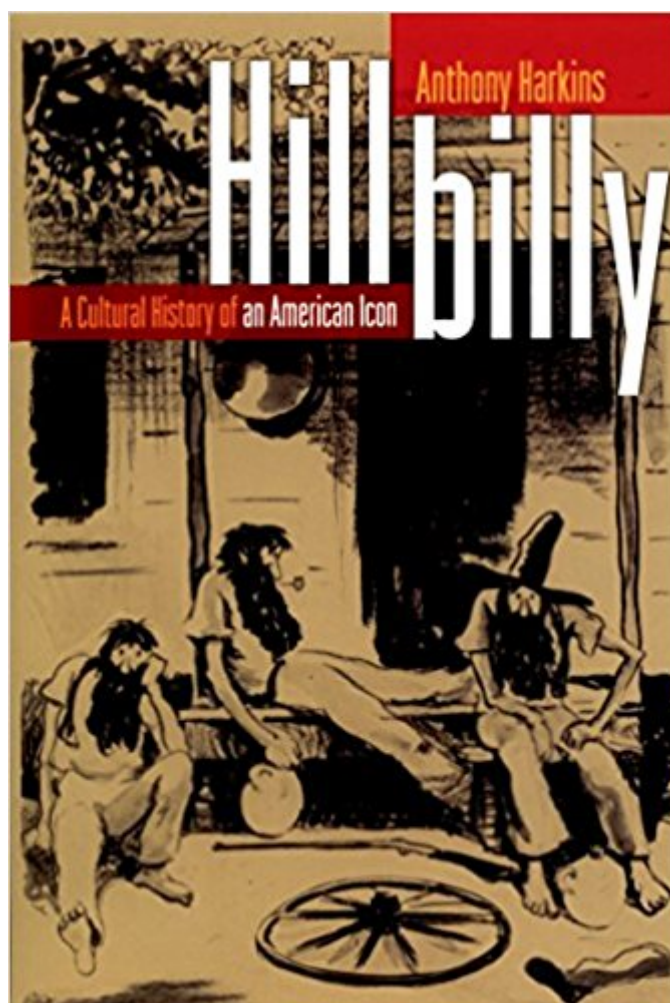


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Hillbilly: A Cultural History Of An American Icon



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

Feels like every chapter carries the same message, just using different examples. In this book you'll learn that 1) the hillbilly is a complex stereotype because every one of his characteristics can be represented both positively and negatively (carefree vs. lazy, adventurous vs. outcasted, etc.) and 2) the popular perception of the hillbilly changed over the twentieth century from dangerous murderer to harmless fool. You'll learn these two central concepts over and over no matter whether you're looking at books, movies, tv shows, comic strips, or what have you. However, this book excels in providing real, multi-faceted evidence to support its claims, unlike some informational books that harp on the same two studies. No, in this book you will be overwhelmed with high-quality, trustworthy evidence from both scholarly sources and original historic documents. You will never have any doubt in your mind as to the veracity of the author's claims, even if you do get sick of hearing him claim them. Since this book primarily deals with how the rest of America perceived mountain culture, if you want to actually learn about mountain culture, then this book isn't for you. But, if you're a serious scholar of the people of Appalachia and you want to know how mainstream American culture responded to the concept of "mountain culture" throughout the decades, then this book will satisfy your uniquely specific craving better than any other.

Professor Harkins does an excellent job in the book, looking at how the "hillbilly" concept came about, from colonial writings to modern movies. He shows that the definition of mountaineer culture has changed as its relationship to mainstream culture has changed. The culture found in Appalachia and the Ozarks) has evolved based upon poverty in the region, outside influences (the Civil War being a big one) and even pop culture icons. Could it be the Hillbilly is a self-fulfilling definition? Certainly in the days of feuding the hill folk seem to revel in the image. If you have the patience really sit down and read this well-researched book you can come to your own conclusions. Besides, any book that has pictures of both Buster Keaton and Ernest T. Bass is worth looking at!

I've had this book on my to-read list for a long time, but didn't feel like delving into a thick academic

book. This book is good catalog of hillbillies appearing in popular culture, however when Harkins draws his big, overall, "what this all means" conclusions, they feel sloppy and poorly thought out. Hard numbers to back up his assertions are pitifully few, and which character does or does not count as a hillbilly seems to depend entirely on the point Harkins needs to make. Still, there's lots of good information and history here.

Definitely worth the read. A clear and concise trace of hillbilly. Powerful

I had to buy this book for a report assigned in my Appalachian Culture class. I found the book to be informative and entertaining. I would not have read the book if not for the assignment, but I'm glad to have read it.

Harkins is a professor at Western Kentucky University, and his academic background is reflected in the writing of this book. It's pretty analytical, throwing tons of facts and research tidbits at the reader, occasionally drawing conclusions or extrapolating from data or hypothesizing. It's not the driest of academic texts though; i wasn't rolling my eyes at any overusage of "trendy" academic semantic BS (by which i mean, he doesn't say things like "in order to appreciate the resonance of the cultural icon, we must unpack the meaning intrinsic to the tropes of hillbilly semiotics" or whatever-the-heck). Chapter by chapter, he traces the development and metamorphosis of the concept of "hillbillies" and all the various meanings of the word, from noble mountaineers to gun-shooting moonshiners to inbred rapist morons to string-band radio stars. The text is full of dozens of illustrations, vintage photography, advertisement reproductions, and cartoons which illustrate his various points. It's not a quick read or a mindless read, but rather, it's fascinating, well-researched, and if you like sociology and cultural studies and various looks at rural cultures, I recommend it.

A great deal of research produced this book, purportedly about images & stereotypes of "hillbillies" in popular culture. As far as the author stays within that stated boundary, I have no problem with this book. Too often, however, he broadens his scope, relating descriptions found in personal narratives of visitors, both US and foreign, to the mountain areas of the south, and attempts to attribute any unflattering (to our modern standards) comments to the same deliberately negative bias found in derogatory, exaggerated cartoon images of the mountain people. Most people throughout history had no knowledge of the importance of cleanliness, germs, healthful vs dangerous practices, foods, medical treatments, etc. Most historic lifestyles would elicit horror to most of us reading this book

today. Rather than view southern mountain life within the context of its time & place, I can't help but get the impression the author would rather rewrite those conditions to make them more pleasing & palatable to 21st century readers.

This is simply the best book on the subject--I use it in my research, and as I do I am continually impressed with the depth of research and documentation and also with the author's interpretations and analyses.

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