

# **Naked in Garden Hills Short Guide**

## **Naked in Garden Hills by Harry Crews**

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# Characters

In the various responses of the people of Garden Hills to their changed world, Crews shows a variety of approaches to contemporary life and moves his narrative through the conflicts among them. The primary antagonist to Dolly and her new system is sixhundred pound Aaron Mayhugh—Fat Man. Son of the only inhabitant of the land originally purchased by O'Boylan, Fat Man has grown up in a mansion on the edge of Garden Hills and, having found the world outside hostile and confusing, has retreated to the protection of his house and the power it has always represented. What he needs from the world he attempts to control by importing and ingesting: he orders and consumes huge quantities of food and buys enormous numbers of books.

Since both his food and his books depend on his income from O'Boylan, however, Fat Man remains a symbol of the old order.

As a miner's daughter, Dolly has found herself poorly served by the old order. When she is unable to find those who control it, she appropriates power to herself. The triumph of the new faith requires, however, the capitulation of old gods. Almost totally impotent, Fat Man cannot be aroused by her attempts at seduction but is also powerless to prevent her appropriation of his money and his manservant, both of whom she removes to the disco. The extent of her power is evident in the final choice she is able to force on him: starvation into thinness in his empty mansion or full satisfaction of his appetite in a cage at the disco. In the chaotic conclusion of events, Fat Man surrenders, leaving his mansion retreat to walk between lines of chanting, taunting revelers into the gilded cage.

Side-stepping the conflict between the two systems but affected by its consequences are Wes Westrim, a former mine worker, and Jester, a oncepromising jockey turned carnival performer and manservant to Fat Man.

When the mine closes, Wes retreats into the past, putting his Buick on blocks to rust while he peddles ice to those living without electricity. In Dolly's new order, however, he becomes a historical exhibit, simulating his earlier identity by digging in a now-abandoned mine hole. Regenerated by the activity and income, he buys a new Buick and comes to life as a man. He is defined by whatever order surrounds him and endangered only by the absence of any order.

Jester, too, rides through the changes without damage, but in his case he defines himself outside either order and uses both to his advantage.

Jester, the only one never to have believed in Jack O'Boylan, serves Fat Man as long as he thinks he possesses the secret of power and success. When he realizes the emptiness of Fat Man's position, he abandons the mansion for the disco, using Dolly's system for work and money but continuing to find fulfillment in his love for his mistress and his mystical attraction to horses.



The greatest satisfaction seems to belong to Jester, who is flexible enough to sacrifice unreachable ideals (being the perfect jockey, marrying the perfect women) for available realities (performing a jockey act in the disco and marrying a circus sideshow performer who loves and fulfills him). Yet he remains a minor character, his satisfaction counting for little beyond his own life. His values are possible but not pervasive in the world Crews has drawn.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Built in the pit of an abandoned phosphate mine, the ironically named Garden Hills is the setting for a caustic contemporary reworking of the basic Judeo-Christian story of humanity. The mine and village, created by never-seen entrepreneur Jack O'Boylan, testify to the rape of the land begun by powerful commercial interests and facilitated by ordinary people hoping to share the spoils. Those drawn to this new world have attempted to shape meaningful lives for themselves on terms dictated by those in power, accepting dust and danger in return for the social and physical security of a system with a known author and clear patterns. With the depletion of the phosphate, however, the creator has abandoned his creation, and those who remain must deal with a mysteriously fractured and threatening world.

Most people blindly continue to trust the author of the system. Believing that Jack O'Boylan will return, they create temporary structures for their lives out of the system's past and present debris. These characters endure but at the expense of their own vitality.

The survival of Garden Hills ultimately depends on those who seek out the creator and, finding him nowhere, construct a new system grounded in verifiable realities.

Dolly Ferguson plays the role of savior. Hoping to command the creator's attention by offering herself, she goes in search of Jack O'Boylan. The result of her search, however, is not only a failure to find O'Boylan but the conviction that he never existed and that human appetite controls the world. Inspired by this new gospel, she returns to save Garden Hills. She packages the physical remains of the old order as a tourist attraction, to be viewed through a pay telescope, and converts the blackened phosphate factory into a flashy discotheque to feed the appetites of affluent outsiders. Her final achievement is to cage the surviving heir of the old order, suspending him from the ceiling of the disco for the entertainment of its patrons.

Dolly's success seems the triumph of a decadent humanism in which human appetite is the measure and motive of all things. Ultimately, however, Dolly fails to reshape reality fully to her satisfaction when she is unable to arouse an impotent Fat Man into taking her virginity. Like each of the other characters, she wants to be known and affirmed as a person; like most of the others, she is able to find only partial fulfillment. Money, sex, and power are strong human drives, and those who learn to control them succeed in shaping the world. Love, however, cannot be commanded, and the void left by its absence often fills with hatred.



## Techniques

By placing the novel's present in the aftermath of the mine's closing and freely shifting the time, space, and point of view, Crews puts the primary focus on the consequences of a failed creation and the role of history in interpreting and evaluating those consequences. The scope and significance of those consequences is enlarged by the quasi-allegorical framework of the story: a new world shaped by an unseen creator and left in the keeping of the created, who struggle to understand and control it, and who continually remold it in their own image.

Crews is fully contemporary, however, in his ironic and absurdist use of the mythic parallels: the Christ figure is a grotesque, impotent, self-absorbed recluse who, in the final scene, moves like a grotesque baby through crowds of cheering and jeering spectators in a painful parody of a triumphal entry down a Via Dolorosa toward the disco, his cross a golden cage raised to the ceiling by twelve survivors of the old order.

Reinforcing the mythic qualities of the work is Crews's characteristic use of symbolic objects, many of which represent the controlling values of individual characters. For Fat Man and Wes, Buicks epitomize affluence and power; for Jester, horses epitomize the powers of sex and religion; for Dolly, the phosphate factory is a temple to be reconsecrated. Most comprehensive in significance is the mosaic reproduction of Michelangelo's Creation, which O'Boylan has had mass produced, with his logo in one corner, for all his projects. In the copy on the bathroom ceiling of the Aaron mansion, Adam languishes between two recessed fluorescent lights, looking down on the inheritor of the created world--Fat Man in his bathtub--while God strains to infuse life into mankind with his touch.

## Literary Precedents

Quite obviously, *Naked in Garden Hills* reflects the varied and longstanding literary fascination with man's origins, nature, and ends. Crews, looking at these issues through the dust of contemporary industrialization, sees only humans surviving on their own resources in a world of shifting values.

The realistic social and economic detail in which Crews pictures that world recalls the dystopian social views of such Industrial Age writers as Emile Zola, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris. The specifically southern characters and settings echo the fictional worlds of Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor, and the use of religious mythology strengthens the parallel to O'Connor. The Hollywood values of Dolly's new age and the grotesque entertainment frenzy with which the novel ends suggest Nathanael West's metaphorical vision of contemporary decadence. In the particular combination of these literary echoes, however, *Naked in Garden Hills* seems the sole creation of Harry Crews.

## Related Titles

Naked in Garden Hills is the first of many Crews novels set in wasteland Florida, where Crews spent much of his youth and adulthood. The almost mythic stature of the state of Florida and the degradation of the land by those who have sought to make their fortunes, provide a thematically appropriate background for the survival struggles of the characters in *This Thing Don't Lead to Heaven* (1970), *Karate Is a Thing of The Spirit* (1971), *The Gypsy's Curse* (1974), and *All We Need of Hell* (1987).

In its emphasis on socially underprivileged characters trying to survive and, if possible, prevail, *Naked in Garden Hills* is of a piece with the rest of Crews's fiction and most of his nonfiction.





# Copyright Information

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