



Cutter and Bone

Newton Thornburg

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The headline reads ? LOCAL GIRL SLAIN, BODY FOUND IN TRASHCAN. When Richard Bone sees a picture of conglomerate tycoon J.J. Wolfe in the newspaper, he's struck by how closely he resembles the man Bone saw dumping the body: could this millionaire redneck be the killer? Bone's close friend Cutter, a crippled Vietnam vet, is convinced that Wolfe is the killer. With nothing much more to lose, the reckless Cutter and handsome gigolo Bone hit the road to the Wolfe headquarters in the Ozarks, totally unprepared for what awaits them. Cutter and Bone are two of the most brilliantly drawn characters in modern American fiction. Cutter and Bone is a brilliant look at the underbelly of post-Vietnam America. Filmed and immortalized as Cutter's Way, this new edition marks the return of one of the greatest American post-war novels.

Cutter and Bone Details

Date : Published March 16th 2001 by Serpent's Tail (first published 1976)

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Author : Newton Thornburg

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From Reader Review Cutter and Bone for online ebook

Maureen says

i am stingy with my stars, i admit it. but i read this book twice in a row on first reading, and that means one of two things: i'm not sure how i feel, and i need another go, or i love the book so unabashedly that there is nothing for it but to read it again right away. in this case, cutter and bone kicked my ass, and i'm still sort of reeling.

i read this book a year ago, in june 2010. it's not in my possession anymore, and i gave back my borrowed copy reluctantly. i need to buy it and read it again, and yet i'm glad i've taken some time between readings. (update jan 2013: the original owner gave me their copy. and i am reading it again now. :) i still think of it, often, how much i felt all the ugly joy, and loss and frustration that threads this book, and yet there is still joy: these characters are entirely engaged in their own disintegration, they scramble and they struggle to get it all figured out; they are tearing at the throat of life. thornburg's painted a vivid visceral world in words and the story washes in around me. i haven't said much about plot here but it's enough to say somebody witnesses a murder, and there is blackmail, and car chases, and sexy scenes in squalid circumstances, and a hell of a lot of fury.

two friends are at the centre of this book: cutter, the tortured, maimed vietnam vet, a genius, a puck, is balanced by richard bone, a former ad man gigolo, physically revolted by a conventional life, broken in his own way. the two embrace each other, scrape up against each other, and their symbiosis beats like a pulse through the suspense of the caper, the opportunity that cutter hangs all their hopes upon. cutter's girlfriend is named mo and the experience of reading her was nerve-wracking. it's rare i find characters in books with my name and she was so much my opposite in thornburg's description, and yet sharing a familiarly chaotic frame of mind that i wondered if he wasn't spying on me. mo is the third main figure of the novel. she influences both the men and the pattern of the novel but she is still secondary to the two men; she is their ophelia.

this is a perfectly paced, completely engaging and wonderfully written novel. the characters are etched they are so well drawn, and their voices will ring in your inner ear. it's raw. it's not exactly life-affirming, but it is as real as fiction gets, i think.

Krok Zero says

I finished this two weeks ago and I can't get it out of my head. The blunt-force terror of the abrupt ending haunts me, the characters and their miseries and their desperation and their awful milieu imprinted on my brain. Newton Thornburg's *Cutter and Bone* is a bleak masterpiece and I can't recommend it more highly to those of you who are predisposed to love bleak masterpieces. Anyone who doesn't love heroic bleakness, just fuck off.

The cineastes among my GR circle may have seen the 1981 film *Cutter's Way*, based on this novel. It is commonly cited as the swansong of the '70s paranoid-thriller genre and has become a cult favorite, not without reason. John Heard's performance as the irreparably damaged Vietnam vet Alex Cutter is so great that you will sadly wonder why his career never really went anywhere afterwards. (Biggest mistake the *Sopranos* writers ever made was killing off Heard's corrupt cop in season one.) But good as the movie is, it

only scratches the surface of the depressing perfection of the book, and boy does it have the wrong fucking ending. So I deem the film optional and the novel absolutely essential.

The story. It's the '70s, and the zeitgeist is crawling with the traumas of Vietnam. Cutter's been home a while but he's a total mess, crippled physically and psychologically, constantly putting on a show of psycho theatrics, ranting and raving and lashing out at the world. His odd-couple buddy Richard Bone (like Marty and Doc in *Back to the Future*, it's never really clear how these two became friends) is a sleazy pretty-boy bum who walked out on his middle-class family life to work a gigolo racket and sponge off Cutter's meager resources. One night Bone witnesses somebody dumping a dead body in a trashcan, Cutter gets the idea it might've been this prominent tycoon, and suddenly he has something to put his energies toward besides suicide, i.e. blackmail (or whatever). From this point the guys spiral down to the bottom, not before taking some others with them. Cutter's wife Mo is the closest thing the book has to a moral voice, but of course she's a near-nihilistic junkie who neglects her kid.

Cutter's mania is terrifyingly convincing. Thornburg gives him a brief, amazing monologue related to the photos of the My Lai massacre that's gotta be one of the high-water marks of dialogue in 20th century American literature. I won't spoil it here though George Pelecanos does in his reverent intro to this edition. The prose snaps throughout, an unembellished journalistic style so unflinching it borders on sadism at times. Cutter and Bone barrel toward their destiny and Thornburg follows them. The ending is correct.

Maybe the essential post-Vietnam American novel?

Jordan West says

4.5; a masterpiece of despair, disillusionment, and mounting dread. It feels ironically appropriate that I finished it on the 4th of July.

Richard says

Edit: Just found out that ALL of Newton Thornburg's work was finally released as inexpensive ebooks this year! Check em out on Kindle here for \$3 each! He was an important writer and should be rediscovered. Can't wait to jump into more of his work as well.

There is a mystery at the center of this novel. But *Cutter and Bone* is less of a whodunit and more of a melancholy look at post-Vietnam disillusionment and weariness. The story follows two best friends who couldn't be any more different: Richard Bone, who abandoned his wife, children, and corporate job to live a dead-end life as a man-whore, mooching off of lonely women, and Alex Cutter, a severely wounded Vietnam vet, who seems desperate not to let anyone close to him. After Bone tells him that he might have witnessed a rich tycoon murder a teenage girl, Cutter becomes obsessed with it and dedicated to the idea of blackmailing him.

The truth of whether or not the tycoon really did commit the crime becomes almost completely unimportant, as is any kind of quest for justice. What becomes significant for the main characters is that the blackmail scheme gives some purpose to their dead-end lives, and for Cutter, it gives him a chance to strike back against what he sees as a symbol for all of the crap that has happened in his life.

It's a really well-written novel about desperate characters searching for significance.

Paul says

A rather good thriller come buddy novel come "road movie" come description of a descent into despair. Difficult to rate because in patches it was brilliant and in patches very much not; with a strong streak of nihilism running through the middle.

The novel centres on two friends and is set in the mid 1970s. Alex Cutter is a Vietnam veteran who is emotionally and physically scarred; missing part of two limbs and one eye; he is the driving force in the book sometimes malevolent, sometimes tender and touching; mostly out of control. His friend Richard Bone has dropped out of middle class ad man life and now pretty much makes his living as a male gigolo and we mostly follow him through the rollercoaster that is the novel. The gist is that Bone, late one night, witnesses a body being dumped from a car (at least he realises it was a body when he sees the news). He later sees a picture of a prominent businessman and thinks he may have been the one who dumped the body. Cutter comes up with a get rich quick plan that involves a spot of blackmail.

The crime and the blackmail are the backdrop for the friendship between Cutter and Bone and for Cutter's downward spiral into despair and madness. There is a very large amount of alcohol consumed; and Thornburg describes hangovers with a vividness that can only come from experience! The attempt to make sense and profit out of the murder is shown to be as impossible as the character's attempts to make sense of their lives. There are no easy or neat solutions. The female characters seem to provide a conscience for the male ones; especially Cutter's girlfriend Mo, lost soul though she is. Bone pretty much wanders through the whole thing and at times, I think this weakens the plot and strength of the narrative.

The Vietnam War is there, but not often mentioned. Having said that the wounds inflicted on America by the war (On Cutter) are at its heart.

When Cutter (reluctantly) does talk about the war, he talks about the My Lai massacre and the infamous pictures

"I studied them all right. I went to school at those pictures. And you know what I found out? I found out you have three reactions, Rich, only three. The first one is simple - I hate America. But then you study them some more and you move up a notch. There is no God. But you know what you finally say, Rich, after you've studied them all you can? You say - I'm hungry."

This is powerfully good writing; but only in parts. The ending, especially the last sentence is also very powerful; in a more conventional thriller type way.

Brilliant at times; the redneck town at the end is in sharp contrast with Cutter's increasingly manic and reckless decline; juxtaposing two very different Americas.

Bill Kerwin says

This crime novel begins in Santa Barbara, in the mid '70's, but this is not the country of Ross Macdonald. Instead, it is the land of Macdonald's lost children, the ones detective Lew Archer pitied and helped but could never quite seem to understand.

Those damaged young people have "grown up" now, full of self-destructive impulses and desperate visions:

Richard Bone, the feckless gigolo, in flight from the American Dream Achieved (an ad executive position, a wife, two kids); his cynical friend Alex Cutter, the drunken one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged Vietnam vet, who delights in vicious put-downs, outrageous scenes, and conspiracy theories; and Mo, daughter of a well-to-do family, the pill-popping, wine-drinking mother of Cutter's infant son.

One evening, Bone unwittingly catches a glimpse of someone chucking a woman's body into the trash, and later tells Cutter he "thinks" he knows who the "someone" is: J.J. Wolfe, Missouri good ol' boy and head of a major American corporation. It's not clear whether Cutter wishes to blackmail Wolfe or bring him to justice, but soon his investigations—and even more, his flamboyant and obnoxious behavior—expose himself, his friend and his family to grave danger.

As I said, this isn't Ross Macdonald, so do not expect to see a complicated plot tidily resolved. This is a crime novel, but it is a serious novel too, about the waning years of Vietnam and its impact on the generation most closely affected by it. And—I would argue—it is a great novel, which lays bare the scarred, desiccated heart of America by depicting its human casualties—Bone, Cutter, Mo, and others—with honest cynicism, dark humor and cold compassion, revealing the disillusion and chaos these lost souls carry inside.

(How did I manage to miss this great book up to now? I love the 1981 movie, *Cutter's Way*, directed by Ivan Passer and starring Jeff Bridges, John Heard and Lisa Eichorn as Bone, Cutter and Mo. The ending—although startling and effective—is inferior to the book's, but it is a marvelous film nonetheless, a classic unfairly neglected. Which—come to think of it—the book is too.)

Gary says

Possibly my favourite noir novel. This one manages to grab onto a weird brand of post-vietnam American malaise, which brings an extra dimension to the unfolding crime drama.

Steve mitchell says

Ok since this is a mystery I will be careful, but this a great book, I can't believe I had never heard of it or the author Newton Thornburg.

Cutter and Bone is fantastic, it has everything a superb novel should be; great writing, great characters, great story, it has surprises, heart and empathy, it is believable and very entertaining. I will tell everyone to read this for quite awhile.

Alex Cutter is a cutup, I love this character!

When he crashes his car into a car that is blocking his driveway, and Mo says "That was beautiful, absolutely beautiful. You know our insurance has lapsed?" Cutter responds "That's her tough luck."

"And if you lose your license?" "its already expired. And anyway wheres it written you got to have a license to drive a car? Mine runs just fine without one."

This is one of the more poignant lines:

"Because nothing he did here and now would matter. It never had and never would. One could spend all his life climbing onto crosses to save people from themselves, and nothing would change. For human beings finally were each as alone as dead stars and no amount of toil or love or litany could alter by a centimeter the terrible precision of their journeys."

and this was another great line:

"If piety and patriotism ever had a bedfellow, it was violence."

Aramys says

Pensaba yo que Thornburg se marcaba con esta novela un relato pulpero de carretera y manta y un par de gorriones forajidos...y no podía estar más equivocado. Cutter y Bone es un relato desgarrador de pérdida; de la pérdida de identidad, de la pérdida de futuro, de amor, de posibilidades; un relato de autodestrucción, de locura, de lo que la guerra de Vietnam escupió de vuelta a casa. Una novela con muchísimo calado, con un estilo fuerte y sólido.

Un retrato de finales de los sesenta alejado del optimismo hippie y de todo esa explosión de amor, luz y color. Una imagen borrosa de muchos de aquellos que volvieron de la guerra con el alma destrozada y que se convirtieron en extraños en su propia casa.

Dave says

Cutter and Bone, like Thornburg's Dreamland, is a story that on its surface is about murder and conspiracy, but is more about the twisted characters in it than it about the crime story. Both this book and Dreamland involve amateurs who are rootless drifters trying to solve a mystery. But Cutter and Bone is the R-rated version, involving not just rootless but decent characters trying to do good in a crazy world, but essentially nihilistic worthless cancers on society's backside.

Cutter and Bone is Hunter S Thompson's Fear and Loathing meets murder mystery. It's a long strange trip involving two cynical men with no jobs, no real connections, and both half mad. One is an unrepentant gigolo living off any woman he can hypnotize or crashing in his buddy's pad. He once walked away from a middle management job, a wife, and kids. The other survived Vietnam with one less eye and one bloody stump of an arm.

Witnessing the dumping of a teenage girl's body is what changes their worlds. They set out to blackmail the culprit together with the victim's sister. Then, after drowning in the sea and more booze than twenty bathtubs would contain, it's a trip to the Ozarks with a college co-ed

and not much of a plan.

Not your ordinary crime fiction, but a powerful study of despair, rootlessness, and losing one's mind. No one writes this stuff like Thornburg. No one.

Joe Valdez says

Pirates might seem like they'd be a fun to cruise around with, and while *Cutter and Bone*, the black as midnight novel by Newton Thornburg published in 1976, has that marauding spirit to it, a sense of dread began to build as I realized the ship was headed for a reef and was not turning around. Set in the margins of the jeweled beach resort of Santa Barbara, California during economic recession following the Vietnam War, this is a mystery for readers who hate whodunits, a buddy story for those who think the worst thing the characters ever did was meet each other, an explosive device that left me feeling as bombed out as its title characters.

Richard Bone is introduced in a motel bathroom shaving with a Lady Remington belonging to a vacationing schoolteacher from Fargo that he seduced on the beach a few days ago. Sharing shrimp and champagne, Bone--who doesn't look it, but describes himself as a bum sleeping on the floor of a guy two months behind on his rent--is as uncomfortable accepting the woman's hospitality as she is essentially paying for sex. Bone walks out on her and climbs into a classic 1948 MG-TC with a running board and wire wheels that he was given two years ago by a woman he met in Acapulco and drifted into Santa Barbara with.

Driving along Anapamu Street, Bone's MG runs out of gas and Bone has to hoof it in a cold spring rain. He observes a car swerve into an alley next to an apartment complex. A man whose face he never gets a good look at climbs out and dumps something that looks like golf clubs into a trash barrel. Reaching the house he's crashing at, Bone is greeted by Maureen ("Mo"), a myopic, chain smoking blonde and his friend's woman who might have been more than a friend had they met under different circumstances. Hitting the shower, Bone is interrupted by Alex Cutter, father of Mo's infant son, who barges into the bathroom to puke.

Bone, dry now, felt like killing him. What a sight the man made, what a celebration of the grotesque: the thinning Raggedy Ann hair, the wild hawk face glowing with the scar tissue of too many plastic surgeries, the black eyepatch over the missing eye and the perennial apache dancer's costume of tight black pants and black turtleneck sweater with the left sleeve knotted below the elbow, not pinned up or sewed but knotted, an advertisement, spit in your eye.

Bone discovers that Cutter has brought home a Vietnam vet aspiring to eco-terrorism and a black chick who hitched up with him from L.A. She notices police activity down the street. Cutter's neighbor reports that the body of a teenage girl has been found dumped in a trashcan. Bone confides to his friends that he saw it happen, but didn't get a good look at the killer and would have nothing to tell the police. The eco-terrorist disagrees and Bone has to physically restrain him from calling the cops. Bone further alienates their houseguest by making him sleep on the deck while Bone curls up by the fireplace with the black chick. In the morning, he's woken by Santa Barbara's finest.

Under interrogation, Bone discovers that the victim was a seventeen-year-old cheerleader who died of a crushed trachea and fractured skull. The cops agree to release Bone only after he tells his story to the victim's

twenty-three year old sister, Valerie, who impresses Bone with her calm. His car impounded, Bone is taken to breakfast by Cutter and Mo, where he reads a newspaper article on the victim, Pamela Durant, as well as a piece on the firebombing last night of a car belonging to business tycoon J.J. Wolfe, visiting Santa Barbara for a conference. Bone blurts out, "It's *him*." Clarifying that he only meant Wolfe looked like the man he saw in the alley, Cutter sees a connection.

Alex Cutter subsists on the disability check he receives each month from Uncle Sam, the result of stepping on a Claymore in Vietnam. He spends his time raging against the world but also imagines how far a few thousand dollars could go toward plastic surgery and setting him up on some tropical island. Bone was for a time a successful marketing V.P. in Milwaukee, but walked out on his life, a wife and two children in a quarter life crisis. He now lives day by day, above it all, able bodied but soft in the head. Cutter makes a few inquiries on J.J. Wolfe and bringing Valerie Durant along, hatches a scheme to blackmail the tycoon. They ask Bone to participate.

"But let me tell you, my friend. Just this once, just for the hell of it, for my own amusement, I think maybe I'll let you into the holy of holies, for a moment or two and give you a taste of truth for a change, my truth, Richie, and it is simply this--I don't like this motherfucker. Wolfe and all the motherfuckers like him, all the movers and shakers of this world, kiddo, because I saw them too many times, and I saw the people they moved and shook. I saw the soft white motherfuckers in their civvies and flak jackets come slicking in from Long Binh to look us over out in the boonies, see that everything was going sweet and smooth, the killing and the cutting and the sewing up, and then they'd grunt and fart and squeeze their way back into their choppers and slick back to Washington or Wall Street or Peoria and say on with the show, America, a few more bombs will do it, a few more arms and legs. And I don't care if they were as smooth as the Bundys or as cornpone as Senator Eastland or this cat Wolfe, one fact was always the same, is always the same--it's never their ass they lay on the line, man, never theirs, but ours, mine."

While the mystery is packed away in coach by Thornburg and his morally despairing characters often threaten to ground the plane, I stuck with the book, which gave me the rush of watching someone pour a Molotov cocktail in their garage, look for something to throw it at, and then whip out a lighter. There are men like Cutter and Bone in every bar in America, angered by the realization that those with money get to call the shots and those without often compromise something in themselves--dignity, health, morality--in exchange for money they need to survive. That's not untrue, but Thornburg shows how those resigned to allowing others to make decisions for them end up regretting it.

If Bone learned anything at all in high school it was the importance of initial decisions, those casual first steps that could effortlessly lead to a second step and then a third and before one knew it had locked him in some miserable marathon without end. It was a lesson he learned best of all in freshman track, a sport he was really not at all interested in and probably would not have even gone out for if it had not been for the urging of his father, who had earned his only varsity letter as a member of the mile relay team back in the good old Jim Crow days when white boys only had to run against other white boys. So Bone had gone along, had suited up and run with the rest of the hopefuls, not very fast actually, just trying to stay with the crowd, that was all. But for some reason the coach had liked his stride and had singled him out: "You, Bone--think you could run the mile?" And Bone, indifferent, had shrugged: "Sure. Why not?"

I know an author is doing something right when I start advising characters to make better decisions, which like most of us, they never hear. Thornburg does a masterful job conveying the natural beauty of a California beach city as well as its creeping artifice, but it's the nihilistic surrender of his characters that will stay with me. The novel was adapted into an overlooked classic movie in 1981 titled *Cutter's Way* with John Heard as Cutter and Jeff Bridges as Bone and virtuoso cinematography by Jordan Cronenweth, who'd light *Blade*

Runner and Stop Making Sense and conjured the beauty of darkness equally well for director Ivan Passer.

Bárbara says

4,5.

Paul Bryant says

Fate is a heck of a thing, like an answerless question. It all happened because it couldn't possibly not have happened, the proof of which is : it happened. Thriller writers are in love with fate. Things are meant to turn out in a particular way, their books seem to whisper, in order to demonstrate either moral principles (if written from the point of view of the Party of God) or to demonstrate that life is just messy like that, with wires hanging out, and no neat ends anywhere to be had not for love nor money (the Party of the Devil, aka The Anarchist Party).

In those olden days before a change of diet and too much education imbued us all with irresolution and equivocation and everyone became Hamlet all the thriller did was tell us that murder will out and the truth will set you free, some shinola like that. But things have changed. The heroes are all anti. The villains are worse than that, they're probably priests or presidents of charitable foundations or three year old babies or Pre-Raphaelite wombats.

(Dante Gabriel Rosetti's wombat)

You've seen all those movies, *The Conversation*, *Chinatown*, *London to Brighton*, *Hard Candy*, *The Texas Wombat Massacre*, *Wombat Club*, *The Wombat Redemption*, *Bring Me The Head of Dante Gabriel Rosetti's Wombat*, you're not walking away from any of those with a song in your heart and a feeling of a tough job done well, of a light somewhere still burning, of a mean street down which an unmean man has had to go and has gone. Who was that unmean man? There wasn't one. There's just mean men and even meaner men. Do I mean men? Yes, pretty much.

This is a much loved mid-1970s classic California noir novel which features two anti-heroes, one meaner than the other, but they both have fairly poor table manners, and yes, it's one of those buddy things where the straight man heroes (we know they're straight because they have so much sex with women) are full to the brim with manloving manbanter and go around talking to each other over the heads of women and passing the women between each other like they were practicing American football, and tickling each other's beards and whatall.

One character, Cutter, has what the other calls a "carapace of raillery" around him, and he really does, nothing he says in the whole 300 pages, and he never stops talking, isn't insolent, nasty, sneering, belittling

and louchely ill-tempered. So why naturally that's how he gets all the women! He just snaps his missing fingers and they all fall into his arm. He's a monument of melancholy macho, as well, having left half his body in Vietnam.

But I digress. Was that digressing? Sometimes it's hard to tell.

If you took out all the mentions of alcoholic consumption this book would be one third shorter.

And there are numerous examples of drunk driving too. This is not explicitly disapproved of by the author, so I feel this book sets a very poor example for the young generation.

Therefore I have to deduct one star from its rating. That and the fact that it was only so so.

So so so is not good enough these days, given that I have only a finite number of books I can read before the grave opens its grisly maw and consumes entirely the thing known as P Bryant.

William says

5-stars, brilliant and extraordinary. A masterpiece of tragic noir.

Alex Cutter is the greatest and most unusual anti-hero in all of noir. Wow.

From over 30 years ago, I can still see clearly in my mind, the young Jeff Bridges as sullen gigolo Bone, and John Heard as the poisonous, tragic Cutter. Reading the novel returns the deep sadness of dissipated youth and opportunity, the commercial greed of the obscene Vietnam War and the growing cancer of American jungle capitalism.

Full size image

This 1976 novel was filmed in 1981 as "Cutter's Way". The New York Times called Cutter and Bone "the best novel of its kind for ten years."

The novel starts slowly, and Cutter's abuse is hard to take. We puzzle at the relationship between Cutter, Bone and Mo throughout the first half of the book, and then ... disaster. The seeds of tragedy in each character accelerates their hurtle downhill towards their own destruction. Under Cutter's poisonous self-hatred, Bone and Mo are helpless in his slipstream. We read on, knowing the ending will be very bad, but it's worse than we could imagine.

Note: I much prefer the movie ending... Perhaps the book's ending is more realistic, more in keeping with the tragedy of the story, but it's pretty cynical and unjust, far too much "Easy Rider", far too dissipated and hopeless. It left me depressed for hours after I finished. A real kick in the teeth.

Thornburg is a master, and his prose is powerful and compelling and should be constantly depressing.

However, being human, we continue to hope and invest, particularly in Bone. Thornburg knows we will, and uses this to drive us on and on to disaster. Wow.

-- Notes and quotes:

Bone is burned out already, and on the run from himself:

Christ, he hated California, or at least this coastal strip of it, this crowded stage where America kept trying out the future and promptly closing it, never letting it open for long on Main Street. And yet Bone could not bring himself to leave. It was like loving the meanest, gaudiest whore in the house. You got what you deserved.

When your mortality was that real for you, how could you spend what might be your last hours in someone else's hire, making or selling or serving disposable junk? But now, sober, Bone had no answers, no certitude, nothing but the fear, the coldness trickling through him.

16%

Extraordinary prose from Thornburg here. Wow.

Cutter talks about being a killing machine in Vietnam:

"Not there, on the spot, not while you were doing it, it was nothing, you were a machine, nothing touched you, nothing mattered. But later—later, back here, when the My Lai thing broke—you remember those pictures in Life? The peasants? That one young woman with her old mother and her kid, and they're all hugging each other and crying, waiting to be offed. And the next picture, there they all are in the ditch. Well back here, with time, you know, you had time to study them, those pictures. And that's what I did. I studied them all right. I went to school at those pictures. And you know what I found out? I found out you have three reactions, Rich, only three. The first one is simple—I hate America. But then you study them some more, and you move up a notch. There is no God. But you know what you say finally, Rich, after you've studied them all you can? You say—I'm hungry."

Bone considers his friend's self-destructiveness:

For he knew better than he cared to the lineaments of Cutter's character, that his friend could no more leave the thing as it was than he could leave unopened a ticking box. But it was not avarice he feared in Alex so much as death, the recklessness unto death, the love of death that came off him like the reek of putrescent flesh.

Chapter 9 extraordinary....

Bone's grief is so exquisite and painful, so beautifully portrayed in this, and continuing in the chapter. Extraordinary.

And he thought about what he was doing, why he had to get drunk this day. He did not think it was because of his feelings of guilt and remorse, that they were insupportable. They should have been, he knew. But they were not. And he did not believe the reason was simple grief, the knowledge that she was gone now, gone forever, and the baby with her—the terrible and final knowing that he would not see her again, not talk with her, not hold her, not ever. This knowledge, this grief, had become for him an unrelieved and oddly localized pain, as if an artery in his chest had burst and was now spilling his life there. Even this he could have endured, however, could have faced it sober. He did not need the liquor for that, nor as a kind of ritual thing, part of some private memorial service, a lone man's wake. No, he imagined that the reason for the bottle was simply that he did not care to live through the rest of this day as his customary self, his sober self, Old Faithless in the mirror. Today he needed to take his eye off the ball. He needed an unsteady hand and an

unsure foot. He needed a vacation from the grubby little scavenger that was Richard Kendall Bone.
... chapter continues, ever more eloquent and sad.

Bone to Cutter...

"You know the old phrase about beating swords into plowshares—well I think you've beaten your grief into a sword." For a span of minutes Cutter stood there staring out at the night and the river and then finally he turned and came back, and though he was grinning again, slightly, crookedly, all Bone really saw was his eye and the tears that filled it, made it seem incandescent in the starlight.

Cutter:

And again he shook his head back and forth, like an animal contemplating the bars of its cage. "You ever feel divided?" he asked finally. "I mean, like you was split, like some goddamn worm cut in two, and the two parts of you keep crawling around looking for the other, for the whole of you?"

One could spend all his life climbing onto crosses to save people from themselves, and nothing would change. For human beings finally were each as alone as dead stars and no amount of toil or love or litany could alter by a centimeter the terrible precision of their journeys.

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Johnny says

A powerful book that needs to be rediscovered. The depth and originality of the characters is truly remarkable.

While often categorized as a crime novel (which it is), that is a far too simplistic classification for the book. Crime drives the story in a number of different ways, but that is true with plenty of "literature" that isn't grouped in the slums of genre work.

The moral questions and gray areas of life that give the crime novel its greatest thematic potential (and so often fall short in execution) are explored to their fullest in this often jarring novel.

Never predictable, always interesting, and never pandering. To successfully tell a story filled with amoral characters and bad choices, and still pull off empathy and intrigue is a hell of an achievement.

I just reread my review and it sounds a little hyperbolic (probably all the adjectives). Short version: This is a great read.
