



Lost Man's River

Peter Matthiessen

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Peter Matthiessen is one of the few American writers ever nominated for the National Book Award for both fiction and nonfiction. When his novel "Killing Mister Watson" was published in 1990, the reviews were extraordinary. It was heralded as 'a marvel of invention . . . a virtuoso performance' ("The New York Times Book Review"), and a 'novel [that] stands with the best that our nation has produced as literature' ("Los Angeles Times Book Review"). Now Peter Matthiessen brings us the second novel in his Watson trilogy, a project that has been nearly 20 years in the writing. A story of epic scope and ambition, "Lost Man's River" confronts the primal relationship between a dangerous father and his desperate sons and the ways in which his death has shaped their lives. Lucius Watson is obsessed with learning the truth about his father. Who was E. J. Watson? Was he a devoted family man, an inspired farmer, a man of progress and vision? Or was he a cold-blooded murderer and amoral opportunist? Were his neighbors driven to kill him out of fear? Or was it envy? And if Watson was a killer, should the neighbors fear the obsessed Lucius when he returns to live among them and ask questions? The characters in this tale are men and women molded by the harsh elements of the Florida Everglades -- an isolated breed, descendants of renegades and pioneers, who have only their grit, instinct, and tradition to wield against the obliterating forces of 20th-century progress: Speck Daniels, moonshiner and alligator poacher turned gunrunner; Sally Brown, who struggles to escape the racism and shame of her local family; R. B. Collins, known as Chicken, crippled by drink and rage, who is the custodian of Watson secrets; Watson Dyer, the unacknowledged namesake with designs on the remote Watson homestead hidden in the wild rivers; and Henry Short, a black man and unwilling member of the group of armed island men who awaited E. J. Watson in the silent twilight. Only a storyteller of Peter Matthiessen's dazzling artistry could capture the beauty and strangeness of life on this lawless frontier while probing deeply into its underlying tragedy: the brutal destruction of the land in the name of progress, and the racism that infects the heart of New World history.

Lost Man's River Details

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From Reader Review Lost Man's River for online ebook

Karen Klink says

Excellent writing. For me, this is the type of book you read slowly, not the type you cannot put down. I have put it down and picked it up again for about three months now, in between reading other books. Still, I do keep picking it up. It is full of accounts of many different people of an incident that happened in the past, along with many of their extraneous memories of the time, and sometimes it drags on a bit. You wander into someone's house somewhere in the backwoods of South Florida, settle down into a dusty, overstuffed chair with broken springs, and listen to the occupants go on and on about their lives and the sorry state of the local environment, before and since the government took over much of it. The incident was the murder of one man perpetrated by a group of folks--or was it murder, self-defense? Or did the man deserve it? This is what his son, who is now an old man, attempts to discover. Was his father evil or good?

Peter Matthiessen must have known these people well to represent them so excellently. I didn't know them, so I can only imagine, but I did know similar folks from Tennessee when I was young and it all rings true.

Ian Billick says

Meditation on truth. Very different than killing Watson yet still quite engaging.

David Ball says

My Grandmother passed this book on to me along with Killing Mister Watson the last time I saw her - it must nearly twenty years ago now. She always had an uncanny ability to find books for me, regardless of my stage of life. This was no mean feat, as although we spent considerable time together when I was growing up in Winnipeg, my family moved away when I was quite young. So for her to be able to figure out what I would like at 12, 22, and 32 years of age - with increasingly infrequent contact - is pretty impressive, almost eerily so. I loved Killing Mister Watson, but gave myself a lengthy break before venturing onto book two of the trilogy. Now Matthiessen is a masterful storyteller, and he's mining a rich vein by revisiting the deep bayous of Florida, but I didn't do myself any favours by trying to read Lost Man's River in parallel with my other late night reading obligations. The plot is fairly straightforward, Lucius Watson investigates the cold blooded lynching of his father E.J. He does so by returning to his roots and trying to piece together what happened to his father by renewing contact with his extended family. Problem is E.J got around a bit - so by the time Lucius locates his siblings, step-siblings, and various cousins it gets pretty confusing keeping track of who is who. This may be ok if you're able to immerse yourself in the story, but it becomes a struggle if you're only picking up the book every other night. Each time, I would need to flip back a couple of pages to try to figure out what was going on before I could proceed. And the pages are dense, so for a long stretch of time progress was glacial, but for some reason - maybe it was the spirit of my grandmother, or maybe it was the undeniable quality of Matthiessen's writing - I kept at it. I took a gamble that if I hung around long enough things would come together. And they do: the story ends up concentrating on a handful of interesting characters, the plot twists unexpectedly, and most of the loose ends are resolved. It felt like a massive investment of time, but I'm glad I persevered. I just wish I read it properly start to finish.

Greg says

When I travel I see some people in the subway or on a street and I think to myself that I would like to know more about them...where they live...what they like and dislike...and who they mingle with.

This book is a fictional account of such meetings, except these are long lost family members from multiple marriages and illicit relationships from years gone by. Matthiessen is a great story teller and makes you want more. This is not a short book, and the length allows the author to introduce so many characters that it is near impossible to keep up with them all. I did find myself getting lost in some of the more remote characters, but in the end I was able to keep track of the main ones.

I would have given the book another star, but there is some language from some of the colorful characters that made me uncomfortable.

Charlene says

This is the second book of an amazing trilogy set in south Florida by an important American author -- the author was so deep into this story that he rewrote the trilogy into a one volume version, *Shadow Country*, which won the National Book Award in 2008.

The first volume of this, *Killing Mr. Watson*, is told from multiple viewpoints, the second volume follows the life of Mr. Watson's third son, Lucius, as he attempts to puzzle out the character and life of his much loved father. Was Mr. Watson the killer many people said he was? Did he deserve his "execution" by some men of the community?

Lucius loves the natural world and Indian history of south Florida and I enjoyed the stories of the Everglades as it was in the early days of the plume and alligator hunters. But the author's time scale is off in this book . . . the story is set in the 1960s, years after the area has become a national park, yet Lucius is thinking about the time his father spent there (1890-1910) and finding many people with memories of those days. One feels sympathy for Lucius but he's not a man of action so the story seems to drag. This book needed editing but still is very worth reading.

Kyle says

I really tried to stay with this book, reading almost half way through, but it just didn't go anywhere for me. I kept wondering where the story was going. It just didn't come together for me.

I have to get into the main characters for a book to keep me captivated. Again, this didn't even come close.

Tom Baker says

Reading *Lost Man's River* was like being lost at a family reunion for a fortnight. On and on the old forgotten stories are repeated and repeated with a different slant each time. The writing is wonderful. The locale is memorable. Sometimes I think he went too far with too many characters resulting in a certain lack of focus for the good of the story. Everything was resolved in the last 2-3 chapters. I did like the ending.

Brook says

There is a reason the Goodreads blurb for this book starts by praising Matthiessen's other works. *Killing Mr. Watson* is a great read, and *Far Tortuga* is in my top 10 of all time. This follows the child of Mister Watson as he seeks to find the "truth" about his father. Was Watson a deranged killer, a man defending his homestead? Was he killed by a righteous mob, or heartless lynchers?

I do not recommend picking this up unless you have read *Killing Mr. Watson*. You will be able to follow the story, but it won't interest you. Even having read the previous book, this was a slog to get through. That said, it's Matthiessen, so it is so masterfully written, and the characters so alive, that if you can ignore the minutiae that he gets into you will enjoy it. Those with an interest in antebellum Florida history, as well as how Florida went from backwater/backwoods to the land of strip malls and Disney will find this engaging, especially if you have read *Watson*.

David Ward says

Lost Man's River (Shadow Country Trilogy #2) by Peter Matthiessen (Random House 1997) (Fiction). This is the second book in the Shadow Country trilogy. In this volume, Lucius Watson, second son of the assassinated Edgar Watson, shows up in the Everglades asking dangerous questions about how and why his father was shot by a mob of neighbors and townsfolk. Is this innocent information seeking, or do these questions have a darker ulterior motive? My rating: 8/10, finished 1999.

Jason says

1/2 for the novel, ** for George Guidall's masterful narration (this novel is about storytelling and therefore should be listened to as an audiobook).

This is book 2 in Mr. Matthiessen's WATSON TRILOGY. In LOST MAN'S RIVER the main theme is Truth or TRUTHINESS: what should we believe is true? Is truth democratic, meaning the belief of the majority trumps the belief of the one? Is a historian's conclusion more veracious than an ancient redneck's eyewitness account of the same incident? Are racists reliable eyewitnesses?

Mr. Watson's youngest son, Lucius, wanders through the everglades 50 years after the murder of his father listening to swamp folk tell the local legends and first-hand accounts of his father's life, his supposed crimes against humanity and his death, hoping to write a factual biography of Mr. Watson. But in his heart Lucius believes his father is innocent of the heinous crimes accorded him and he wants to exonerate his father in his biography; however, in these stories and confessions Lucius hears the truth slowly creeping up on him and it may not be what he wants to hear, and what he believes in his heart and blood may not be strong enough to hide the truth.

My only criticism is that the novel is about 150 pages too long.

James Murphy says

Sawgrass, shell hammock, tree line, sun, water, sky, wall of clouds on the horizon, mangrove. As reader I stood in the middle of this, lost, peering in every direction for rescue. That's not to say I didn't like it--I did. Matthiessen's a wonderful writer, able to describe landscapes, the movement of birds, wind on the water poetically, able to detail characters and their motives clearly. Give yourself some time when you read him--you'll be impressed. But there are too many characters. It's a simple story too slowly revealed by a Babel of voices. The reader badly needs a genealogical chart to help organize and keep straight the characters and families involved. The concerns of the novel are those of Killing Mister Watson, the trilogy's 1st volume, retold in several roundabout ways. And his great epic themes are present: an Eden, good people plagued by a Satan figure, a paradise doubly tainted by the spill of evil and by the despoilization of modern progress. But it's too long. Confused, lost in the channels and tidal flows of plot and character, I stared at the horizon, eager for the novel's end. Last year Matthiessen published his one-volume revision of the trilogy as Shadow Country. I feel sure it gives his narrative the trimming and streamlining and improvement it needs. Later in the year when I read Bone by Bone, the 3d volume, I know I'll dangle a lifeline into that paradise so I can pull myself out.

Pat says

I'm a big fan of Mattheissen, both in fiction and non-, but this one was really strange. (Granted, I didn't read the first part of the Watson trilogy.) There is essentially no plot, just an aggrieved son trying to salvage his murdered father's reputation. The theme is memory and how fickle it can be, plus an examination of what is "truth."

Lucius goes from faulty informant to faulty informant. Too many characters and their connections just confused me. I wish he's just taken NO for an answer--no, E.J. wasn't the saint and innocent you are desperately trying to make him into. Still, this is also an historical novel about the early 20th century Florida cracker pioneers eking out a living in the swamps, bootlegging, poaching, farming and fishing. Oh, and killing each other!

When the national park came in in 1947, an all-out range war broke out with the Park Service and the backwoods families.

Matthiessen's elegy for the Florida that disappeared with the draining of the Everglades is very evocative. I also enjoyed his rendition of the dialect.

Note: The rebound of the American alligator is one of our greatest ecological success stories. Ditto for egrets, which plume hunter decimated before Audubon convinced women to change their hat styles. Males were killed in breeding season for their head plume "nuptial plumage." But a drive through Big Cypress today shows both species thriving.

Josh says

Matthiessen tells a great yarn that holds strong in no small part due to the intimate knowledge of the land, history, creatures, lore, speech, names, and people who inhabit the places he guides the reader through along the way. Stitched into this vivid landscape is a timeless theme of humans struggling with their past, their present, and the truth and myths of both. This theme will cut deep and ring a deep sounding in the heart and mind bays of anyone who has contemplated the contradictory nature of humanity, and in particular one's own part and parcel of it. We are vastly imperfect creatures, but we are beautiful in our imperfection and ugliness,

something Matthiessen has distilled with a skill matched by few others.

Ken says

Sequel follows "Killing Mister Watson" with the story of his son, Lucius, trying to find out the truth of his father's life and death. He does...but he must be about 80 years old when he does. Time passes very slowly in the SW Florida everglades country and somethings are best left alone.

I give it only three stars because it is a 350 page story but it takes the author 500+ pages to tell it. I also had difficulty with the chronology of the story. Some of the characters witnessed the death of Mr. Watson in 1910 but the narrative takes place sometime after the Viet Nam war and I found it hard to believe that they were still taking such an active part in the events of the story at what must be a very advanced age after living on moonshine and enduring the hardships of such a hostile environment. Apart from that, it was a very good -- but dark -- story and a good follow-up to Killing Mister Watson.

The last book of the trilogy is "Bone by Bone" in which Mr. Watson tells his own story. The first book of the trilogy stuck with me for over 15 years before I went back and read the 2nd. I may wait a while again before I take on Watson's own narrative. I am a fan of Joseph Conrad and some of his dark stories but I need to step away from Mr. Watson and his "heart of darkness" for a while.

By the way...Matthiessen re-wrote all three of these books into one volume under the title "Shadow Country" and won the 2008 National Book Club award. Also, if you really get hooked by this story...there is a song titled "E. Watson" by The Decemberists that was included on one of their albums.

Stephen says

"Lost Man's River" is the second novel in Matthiessen's Watson Trilogy. But in this 1997 work, he approaches the story from a different direction.

Lucius Watson has heard the rumors about his father: Edgar J. Watson. Could they possibly be true? Was he a pillar of the community, killed by a mob of townspeople because they were envious of his success? Or, was he a cold-blooded killer, publicly executed out of fear for their own safety?

Rooted in the legend of "the Watson killing," Matthiessen has created a second novel, a loosely structured tale of a son, who wants to know the truth about his lost father. Will he be vindicated by what he learns or frightened? Like "Killing Mister Watson," this second novel is rich in the detritus of the Sunshine State's colorful wild past and the people "molded by the harsh elements of the Everglades." Gator poachers, gunrunners, moonshiners, desperate to hang on to a way of life that was rapidly disappearing.

"A man came in out of the fire mist, crossing the shadow land of the killed woods. He drifted, disappeared, and came again though smoke and blackened thorn, moving from willow clump to bush like a panther traveling across open savanna."

The woods are now killed, and the Florida panther is all but gone.

Matthiessen may be best known for his works of non-fiction (as perhaps, indeed he should), but this proves that he is an equally adept novelist.
