



# The Ancient Minstrel

*Jim Harrison*

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Jim Harrison

## The Ancient Minstrel Jim Harrison

*New York Times* bestselling author Jim Harrison is one of our most beloved and acclaimed writers, adored by both readers and critics. In *The Ancient Minstrel*, Harrison delivers three novellas that highlight his phenomenal range as a writer, shot through with his trademark wit and keen insight into the human condition

Harrison has tremendous fun with his own reputation in the title novella, about an aging writer in Montana who spars with his estranged wife, with whom he still shares a home, weathers the slings and arrows of literary success, and tries to cope with the sow he buys on a whim and the unplanned litter of piglets that follow soon after. In *Eggs*, a Montana woman reminisces about staying in London with her grandparents, and collecting eggs at their country house. Years later, having never had a child, she attempts to do so. And in *The Case of the Howling Buddhas*, retired Detective Sunderson—a recurring character from Harrison's *New York Times* bestseller *The Great Leader* and *The Big Seven*—is hired as a private investigator to look into a bizarre cult that achieves satori by howling along with howler monkeys at the zoo.

Fresh, incisive, and endlessly entertaining, with moments of both profound wisdom and sublime humor, *The Ancient Minstrel* is an exceptional reminder of why Jim Harrison is one of the most cherished and important writers at work today.

## The Ancient Minstrel Details

Date : Published March 1st 2016 by Grove Press

ISBN : 9780802124562

Author : Jim Harrison

Format : Hardcover 255 pages

Genre : Fiction, Short Stories, Literary Fiction, Audiobook

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# From Reader Review The Ancient Minstrel for online ebook

## Ron S says

Three novellas from the American master, who died March 26th, 2016. Echoes of Sherwood Anderson, biographical fiction, and a surprise ending for retired Detective Sunderson.

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## Philippe Malzieu says

Dear Jim,

Yesterday I read this book, your last one. You say all, without hypocrisy, alcohol, women, money quickly spent, declining sexuality with age, a life to be burned. Too much excess. Your book is splendid by its beauty and cruelty. But somewhere, I felt some nostalgia. When an author I like die, somewhere it is also a part of me who die. So I chose a bottle of Meursault (Château de Meursault 2002 Premier cru). It was your prefferate wine. And I break to you, to your posterity, at the ogre of the Montana.

Before you die, you asked if it will be possible to smoke in paradise. From my point of view, it is forbidden, but I am sure there will be an exception for you.

So long Jim.

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## Claudia Putnam says

I kind of gave up on Harrison some years ago... too much of a sameness... though I loved his earlier work. I stopped after *The Woman Lit By Fireflies*. Not out of any real objection, just well... how many Tom Petty songs can you listen to, or countenance buying? NOT comparing Harrison and Petty, just saying that each kind of carries on at the same level with himself after a while.

Maybe it's the same with most writers.

But I did read this one because I am writing novellas myself these days and Harrison is, or has been, quite good in this form, and I thought it might be smart to take another look.

I would have been better served, I think, to go back to one of the earlier ones. In this collection, we are really just reading through sequences of events, ending with today's fashion of trailing off into nothingness, except for the final piece in which the MC's troubles with lust get him killed, in a way.

The middle story is the strongest, IMO, because it comes closest to being a story, and because it covers events external to just the character's own head, though the character is a bit over the top what with sleeping in chicken coops. (I like chickens myself, but even the best-kept coops of the free-est ranging birds really do stink.) Still it ends with ... well, as if the air has been let out. You can make a case for this, of course, and many do, Eliot himself, not with a bang but a whimper. Which would be fine if there had been more drama leading up to the whimper, such as the gunpowder plot and the torture and execution of Guy Fawkes. But in these stories Harrison deliberately mutes what drama there might have been, even the London Blitz, not so much keeping an emotional distance as detuning the emotion.

The first story is something like Philip Roth turned relentlessly inward, god help us all. What is there were no theme of race or resiliency to meditate upon as the character wrestled with sexuality in the aging male? Well, here you go. Lots of great quotables and meditations upon creativity in general, but otherwise... a lot of whimpering, and certainly not as interesting as Harrison thinks it is, IMO, and I suppose based on stories I have heard credible, but based on pictures you see of Harrison, certainly hard for ME to believe. Ditto the last story, with the 15-yr-old nymph throwing herself at the aging Harrison-like guy. THAT dude at least doesn't sound as though he has let himself go quite so much as the obviously autobiographical personage in the first tale, so... maybe. Kids can have their own motives, and it's up to adults to be adults. In the confusion of the last dregs of one's sexuality, perhaps it's even harder to know how to manage adulthood. I don't know.

It would have been interesting to have seen this and actually all three of these books fleshed out to actual novels. Because they felt like outlines.

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### **Rick says**

I must say that Harrison went out in fine style. Two of the novellas here are among his best ever. 'The Ancient Minstrel' is a fictional memoir piece that is poignant, funny and beautiful; 'Eggs' is a fine female portrait, something that he often excels at (check out his novel, Dalva); I found the final segment painful to read and would only recommend it to his hardcore fans--my take on it is that he's using his detective character Sunderson to do a final exorcism of the writer's lecherous demons which he inundates the reader with before the final exit.

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### **Angela M says**

I recently read another book about an aging poet , Thomas Murphy, so I can't help but compare the first novella in this collection to it and I can't help but be less than enthusiastic about this one. I fell in love with Thomas Murphy and I will remain faithful. I know that Jim Harrison is a beloved and prolific author and this was my first time reading him so maybe I ought to try something else by him.

This is story about an aging writer , an alcoholic who still drinks wine , has physical ailments , loses his sexual desire , and starts to raise pigs. I don't mean to sound flip . It just wasn't for me .It was promising at first but just didn't grab me . I am not rating it since I am not finishing it or the other two stories in the collection. I'm guessing that I may be an outlier here since his books seem to have fairly high ratings on Goodreads .

Thanks to Grove Press , NetGalley and Edelweiss.

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### **Kris - My Novelesque Life says**

THE ANCIENT MINSTREL: NOVELLAS

Written by Jim Harrison

2016; 256 Pages

Grove Press  
Genre: novellas, fiction

(I received an ARC from the NETGALLEY in exchange for an honest review.)

★★

"Harrison has tremendous fun with his own reputation in the title novella, about an aging writer in Montana who spars with his estranged wife, with whom he still shares a home, weathers the slings and arrows of literary success, and tries to cope with the sow he buys on a whim and the unplanned litter of piglets that follow soon after. In Eggs, a Montana woman reminisces about staying in London with her grandparents, and collecting eggs at their country house. Years later, having never had a child, she attempts to do so. And in The Case of the Howling Buddhas, retired Detective Sunderson—a recurring character from Harrison's New York Times bestseller The Great Leader and The Big Seven—is hired as a private investigator to look into a bizarre cult that achieves satori by howling along with howler monkeys at the zoo." (From Publisher)

I just couldn't get into any of the stories. I read them but I could not tell you anything about them. I find novellas sometimes difficult to get into as they are either too short or seem like there was no story.

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### **P.J. Lazos says**

When I read the news you could have knocked me over with a well-placed word:

He was dead.

How did I miss that tidbit of information? How could I have not known that one of my favorite living authors is no longer walking about the earth plane? Shouldn't I have felt the cosmic shift of the planets as his spirit left? Why didn't the Earth herself — for whom he was such a consistent and persuasive advocate — rise up in protest at his departure. In March 2016, Jim Harrison died of a heart attack. (I wrote heartache at first. Freudian slip, eh?) What Harrison left behind — vibrant, sparse, yet effusive stories that resonated with a quiet truth — will have to be enough.

I remember reading my first, and favorite Jim Harrison book, Dalva, about a young Native American girl who gets pregnant at sixteen and because of her age and circumstance is forced to give up her child. It's a love song to lost innocence and horrible consequences, a sad tutorial on all the ways that Native Americans have been screwed over, both singularly and in the macrocosm, and Dalva is a brilliant blend of the two, full of history, lore, and a collective plight that Harrison deals out in small bites in the form of letters interspersed throughout the story — classic Jim Harrison.

Then there were the food stories. One, the title escapes me, where Harrison was attending a dinner party with 12 or 20 or maybe more courses, a meal akin to Roman times when a vomitorium was a necessity to keep up with the feasting. He wrote about the experience afterwards, about how they had to take a walk after five or six courses to make room for more food and alcohol, and I remember his admonition of, "Courage, gentlemen," referring to the prospect of what lie ahead, as if he were really referring to fighting a great battle or beast. Only Jim Harrison could make food so challenging and gluttony so soulful.

The Ancient Minstrel, the title of his last book and the name of the first of three novellas, is a memoir,

somewhat fictionalized to protect those who wished to remain anonymous (his family), true to Harrison form and full of excesses: food, drink, women, eccentricities of choice, disdain for the temperament of acclaim, but not the money it brought. It begins and ends without resolution but somehow it feels as though there's nothing left to say. The epilogue is a touching, Harrison-esque love song to his art and his wife: "The sanity of a good marriage will enable you to get your work done." Amen to that.

I think Eggs is probably what Harrison would have been like if born a woman a decade or two earlier, internally self-directed, self-assured, deliberately plodding through life with a quiet bravado. Eggs tracks the life of Catherine, the child of alcoholic parents who rises above her family's dysfunction, a beautiful spirit whose attachment to the land, her chickens, and her own heart's choices proves the adage that we may not always get what we want, but, if open to it, we get what we need.

More than a few of Harrison's stories deal with the topic of suicide. Even if he hadn't thought about it personally, it was a point of fascination for him, something to be looked at from several angles. The final story, *The Case of the Howling Buddhas*, is about a clever, brilliant, self-destructive private investigator, leaving you with the feeling that Harrison called out his own death, the timing if not the exact nature of it. By the end of *The Ancient Minstrel*, Harrison's on every page of the book but still nowhere in plain view. In toto, *The Ancient Minstrel* is Jim Harrison's swan song, so final, so deliberate, so determined to suck the last ounce of joy from the marrow bone that it feels as if there is — dare I? — nothing left to say. How much was truth and what remains as fiction we will never know for just as a tuning fork can bring another tuning fork into resonance, good fiction resonates with universal truths that readers can use as needed in relation to their own lives. More than that we don't need to know.

Harrison leaves behind a much respected and well-appointed literary legacy, but it's what he didn't say that troubles me. What will I not get to read and ponder now that he's gone? What noble truths will be lost to oblivion? It makes me want to write all the more furiously before my own voice is silenced. Is *The Ancient Minstrel* Harrison's best work? No, but it's true to his writing style and his most personally revealing, essential to any Jim Harrison collection.

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## Simon Robs says

JH's swan song novellas are meditations on his omnipresent themes and set pieces writ large one more time for all time. A natural pathos of reflection and acceptance of finitude, an old man's well lived life on display unsentimental, humble and still, horny for young stuff even jailbait. He writes spare and sharp as a woodsmen axe, deft in portrayal of hunting, fishing, bird dogs, cooking game and living wild with instinct, an unbridled appetite for all things vices. If there's no hint of sexual perversion usually involving older men and young-(erish) women then it's probably not his. Pert derrieres and panties constantly twisting resolve on his ubiquitous horn dog characters, couched along with reverence of poets and writers at work and brooding.

He is himself in "Minstrel" glossing the ghost of his life, porched outback his estranged wife's farmhouse outside Livingston, MT, in a writing coop thinking of pigs as pets and sneaking 'shooters' of booze which is what led to the expulsion in the first place. His wife assists from time to time with a loose piglet in trouble always depositing a wry or satiric rub as she's back off to the big house. He's in an existential tizzy 'cause his pecker won't dance and he's damn plumbed-out anyways. He puts a nice finish on life as memory mixes with the boozy trail left by poems, screenplays for the money which bought his farm and trips, pieces of

journalism about hunting and sports, and a few or so novels put up. He's got his local gin mill haunt and geezers enough to tell his stories to and fetch back others' romps too. It's like "Brown Dog" my fav. JH revolving character. And the Resurrection (right on cue after Robbins' "ARC" previous book exploring da same ethereal wonder) captures a memento mori to fix a deep link to the death question. Yep, he JH knew he was a goner soon.

Then, like in "Dalva" he gets a woman's skin on and brings her out in "Eggs" a tribute to make up for all the dirty old man hijinks, though his women also devote much emphasis to their own carnal needs and are often creatively twisted in getting them met. Here, anyway, are chickens [eggs too before an after which] that serve as fulcrum to a saga story of survival in transitory time and place situations. She's a Montana gal often displaced but never out of place with her pioneer spirit, gutsy, feisty and respectful of life as gift. Catherine gives hope a nice shine; again Resurrection gets a notice here - teensy whiff of the hereafter. Hunters hope.

And in "The Case of the Howling Buddhas", retired Detective Sunderson—a recurring character from Harrison's New York Times bestseller *The Great Leader* and *The Big Seven* - this is where he goes off rail and gets all "Humberty" with 66 y/o chasing and landing 15 y/o poon on a spoon nymphet who's too much too good to not muff with. He tries to resist but all those years can't keep him safe from himself; he's doomed. The howling is his own Buddha in torment as Dante's hell awaits. There was no mention of Resurrection here. Amen and RIP you ol' perv. JH!

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## David Guy says

I'd like to say I'm Jim Harrison's greatest fan, though there's a lot of competition for that spot. I began reading him back in the eighties when my fellow clerks at the local bookstore raved about him. I started with *Sundog* and went through the entire oeuvre, have continued ever since. Harrison is perhaps best known for his first collection of novellas, *Legends of the Fall*, but has also written novels, poetry, and some offhanded essays, including a marvelous food column that he did for a couple of magazines.

The unique thing about any Harrison narrator is the way he can take the ordinary moments of life and make them magical, partly because of what he notices, partly the way his mind works. I feel as if any paragraph, selected at random, could make my point, so I'll try one from the title novella, a passage about the narrator's pigs.

"He had begun calling the sow Darling or D, elongated to Dee in his midwestern drone which, earlier in life when the comedian was current, people said reminded them of Herb Shriner. This was meant as ridicule but he didn't mind because he liked Herb Shriner. Darling farrowed and gave him nine piglets. He watched it all leaning on the pen. He said to himself ironically, "The miracle of birth," but in truth he felt it deeply. It was a lot to ask of a female. Tragically the third day he lost his favorite, the runt of the litter he had called Alice. The sow had rolled over and crushed one of her children. He carried the little body into the studio and put her on his desk. He sobbed. He had intended her to be his best friend. They would take walks together every day and if she got tired he would carry her home like he had done with one of his dogs. He wrapped her carefully in a big red bandana thinking that she was yet another of the deep injustices of life. He dug a hole near the pen and decorated it with a circle of rocks. He put her wrapped body down in the hole, dropped a

handful of earth on it, and said an actual prayer for the deliverance of her soul. He had crisscrossed two yellow pencils in the shape of a cross, glued them together, and stuck them in Alice's grave."

That seems as representative as anything else, with Harrison entirely out there, weeping at the death of a piglet; he understands the irony of calling it tragic and a major injustice. This is a man who hunts and fishes all the time, kills animals almost daily. He is a member of the first thought best thought school of writing and throws the words down, grammatical or not; I can hear my tenth grade English teacher making any number of criticisms of that paragraph, but Harrison—according to an editor friend of mine who has worked with him—won't change anything, for any reason. But there is something about following a character's days moment by moment that is absolutely fascinating; you're getting the real deal. And there is something lovable about the man. Exasperating, but lovable.

The typical Harrison character—I would almost say every character he's written about—loves the outdoors. (For a while Harrison wrote articles on hunting and fishing for *Sports Illustrated*, including a great one called, "Ice Fishing, the Moron Sport.") He is obsessed with food, and we hear about almost everything he eats, including some strange items and odd combinations. He is a major drinker. (Another editor friend of mine worked with Harrison at Dell, and said that when the man walked into the offices he immediately said, "Where's the booze?") He is also obsessed with, devoted to, and tormented by sex, doesn't hold back on the embarrassing details. In this volume, there is more mention of men sneaking a look up women's skirts than in any other book I've ever read (the only competitor would be another Harrison book). As a man who finds such behavior childish and embarrassing, I don't know what to say. Except that, as with the baby pig, if he does it, he's going to tell you about it.

I think the reason women like him is that he's completely honest.

The title novella, as he admits in an author's note, is about Harrison himself. I always assume all of Harrison's characters—even the women—are somewhat autobiographical—but this is really him; he mentions *Legends of the Fall*. He's up to his usual pursuits, though he is puzzled, in his mid-seventies, by the loss of sexuality, by which he seems to mean he no longer wants to hit on every woman he meets. That sounds like the emergence of wisdom. His wife wants to live apart (I've always wondered what she thought of all the sex, or at least all the writing about it), and wants him to quit drinking. He works at that by buying shooters, those little bottles they give you on airplanes, though he buys so many and drinks them so often that he might as well go ahead and buy a fifth. He speaks frankly of his lifelong tendency to gorge on food. He talks about screenplays, which have been a major source of money, even when they weren't produced.

There is a feeling here of a man clutching his writing the way a drowning man grabs a life preserver. I had the feeling in the past that Harrison had long stretches when he went off and lived, came back to his cabin bursting with an idea and threw it down on paper. Now the feeling is that, perhaps because he's not as physically active, writing is all he can do. If he doesn't write he'll think about encroaching age, or the fact that his wife recently died. He puts in long hours.

The second novella, *Eggs*, is about a woman who is obsessed with that subject, the ones chickens lay and also her own. I sometimes think that writing from the standpoint of a woman gives Harrison a helpful distance—I regard *Dalva* as his greatest creation—though the women tend to have unconventional sex lives, drink and eat a lot, and even love fishing. (The woman in this novella, Catherine, at one point has a fresh grouper sandwich for lunch and an order of fresh shrimp. Hmm.) She has met a man early in life who was badly injured in the war, and becomes determined to have a child with him. I wasn't entirely convinced by Catherine is a character, but this novella—like the first—was a compelling read.



I wish I could say the same about *The Case of the Howling Buddhas*, which features the return of Sunderson, the retired detective featured in Harrison's two most recent novels, *The Great Leader* and *The Big Seven*. I don't understand why a man who, by his own admission, hasn't read much detective fiction felt compelled to write some, but as with *The Big Seven*, which I didn't actually finish, the story seems more concerned with Harrison's private obsessions than with the plot, which seems perfunctory and entirely silly.

In *The Big Seven* the 66 year old Sunderson was involved, unbelievably I thought, with a 19 year old girl; in this story his love interest is 15 and quite attractive, so the relationship is not only unbelievable, it's illegal. Harrison seems to be dealing with some private obsessions in this story, including sexual compulsion and voyeurism. It's both funny and not funny. I don't understand a detective story where the plot might as well not even be there, and an essentially comic work—major laughs all the way through—that ends suddenly and tragically. Harrison seems to be saying something about his true attitude toward his obsessions. But if he wanted to do that, he should have given himself more space, and another vehicle.

[www.davidguy.org](http://www.davidguy.org)

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## **Andrew Smith says**

This was my first experience of Jim Harrison's writing, so I wasn't sure what to expect. I'd done a little homework and know that he is in his seventies, writes poetry as well as fiction and that he had penned the novella that led to production of the film *Legends of the Fall*. And I like fiction set in the wide open spaces and small towns of America, so I was looking forward to this one.

There are three novellas here – well maybe two and a short story to finish. The forward was funny and self deprecating and I warmed immediately to Harrison's style. I liked the use of language and knew this was someone I could spend some time with. The lead story is a tale of a seventy-year-old writer of poetry and fiction (sound familiar?) who was spending most of his time in a rural location, trying to produce the book he'd promised his publisher. In reality, he was struggling to come to terms with his fading libido and was more interested in raising pigs. It was amusing and colourful and it was difficult to interpret what was fact (biography) and what was fiction. There were some great sections where I was totally absorbed by the descriptions but then I'd go a few pages where nothing much happened and it felt a bit directionless. A bit of a mixed bag, but on the whole a lot of fun.

The second offering was set on a Montana farm and had a similar feel to the first story but adopted a more sombre style. This time it told of a woman whose passion was raising chickens. We got to learn a lot of the back story concerning an English mother who was conned to move to America with her new husband on a promise she'd get to live on a farm. In reality, they set up home in a small town where her husband went to work running the local bank. There was quite a lot here: the hard drinking, selfish father, the wayward, ill-treated brother and the unhappy mother all performed roles. The story also moved to England at one point, where our heroine experienced the grimness of the London blitz and found love - of sorts - with an ex-soldier in Cornwall. Like the first novella, my interest peaked and waned with this one too. Brilliantly descriptive passages were interspersed with dull 'filler'.

The third story was the shortest of all and I didn't like this one. A retired detective in his sixties lusts after a fifteen-year-old girl who offers to do some gardening tasks for him. Their sexual encounters are graphically described and I found the whole thing seedy in the extreme. There was a wider story this was wrapped up in but that held no interest for me at all.

Harrison is no doubt a gifted writer and at times his prose is totally captivating. His honesty and his power are undoubtedly his strengths. But his mind (and his pen) wanders in some strange directions and he consequently delivers both highs and lows. I may well seek out more of his work though, because when he's good he's very good indeed.

My thanks to Grove Atlantic and NetGalley for providing an early copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Tony says**

THE ANCIENT MINSTREL. (2016). Jim Harrison. \*\*\*1/2.

This volume presents a trilogy of novellas by Harrison that are not inter-related. The first two, "The Ancient Minstrels," and "Eggs" present us with a side of Harrison that we are more familiar with. In those he takes a specific individual – actually, himself in the first story – and probes deeply into that character's motivations. "Ancient Minstrels" tells the story of a writer who is down on his luck; his luck being the ability to come up with a new story. He is constantly advised by his editors and publishers as to what he needs to do to get out of his slump, but what they tell him just doesn't seem to matter to him. While they are talking about his legacy, he is thinking fishing. It's too late to turn your life around when you have reached the end. "Eggs," however, although it focuses on the life of a young girl, is really about the creative process using eggs – and ultimately chickens – as the main symbol. She then discovers that eggs are key to human reproduction, too, and becomes a slave to the biological drive to have children. She doesn't care about who the father is, she just wants her eggs fertilized. It's a pure and simple plot element that drives the story on. The third story in this volume is "The Case of the Howling Buddhas." We again encounter retired detective Sunderson. In this short 'case', he is after the leader of a cult of young people (sound familiar?) who gather at the zoo and howl along with the howler monkeys as a way of ultimately reaching satori. Who knows? Maybe there's something there. Back when I was a teenager in high school, I worked summers at the Philadelphia Zoo. The howling monkeys were the first noise you heard in the mornings before the crowds descended. The sound is numbing, and I often found myself howling along with them. Of course, we do a lot of things when we are kids that seem OK at the time. The cult leader is typical of those we have come to know through the press: randy and rapacious. That's OK; Sunderson can handle those characters. This last story seems to jump out at the reader. What is Harrison trying to do? Is he turning into an aging reflection of Philip Roth? The sexual musings of the writer are much stronger than the talent that shows through in the first two stories. It makes you feel as if the impulse to write about the sex urges of an old man is much stronger than the simple urge to write his usual stories. In all, however, these three stories do not represent Harrison at his usual peak. It seems as if this was a sorry excuse to get some hangers-on in a published form quickly before he stopped writing altogether.

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## **Chris says**

I received an ARC copy of this trilogy of novellas from the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

The Ancient Minstrel is a collection of novellas that reflect upon each other in interesting ways although plot-wise, there is no relation. I found them to be quite deep and insightful and at times abruptly or at other

times quietly disturbing, like a calm pond that discloses something ugly just below the surface. Something that snaps and bites.

The first novella—The Ancient Minstrel reads like a humorous autobiography of Jim Harrison. A reader of his work will recognize themes explored in other novels and novellas. While enjoying the self-deprecating humor I could not help but thinking that Mr. Harrison and Hemingway would have gotten along personally as well as enjoyed each other's work. The aging literary lion acknowledges his own weaknesses as such and makes fun of himself, yet at the same time displays his substantial talent and insight.

The second novella is straight fiction and my favorite of the bunch. "Eggs" tells the life story of a self-reliant woman who we cannot help but admire. We are taken full circle from her childhood on a farm, her time as an adolescent in WW2 Britain, and her later years back on her farm and are treated to the work of a mature master that again reminded me again of Hemingway's "tip of the iceberg" deepness in a seemingly a straight-forward narrative tale. I do have to say that Harrison is in no way derivative of Hemingway—they just both happen to have a similar simplicity to their writing that belies the depth of meaning and subtlety.

The Case of the Screaming Buddha's brings back retired Detective Sunderson from The Big Seven yet this time the focus is turned to an aspect of his character that I found disturbing in the earlier novel. Without giving anything away as far as plot, I will say that the character's flaw that merely taints him in The Big Seven comes to the forefront here and we watch the play of denial, rationalization, and ultimately devastation in all of its aspects. I found this story to be profoundly disturbing to the point that I initially hated the story until I was able after a couple of days to distance myself and realize that hating it was, probably, the whole point.

5 stars. Harrison is one of my favorite writers.

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## **Counsel182 says**

Jim Harrison is one of my favorite authors. This was not one of my favorite books.

Years ago I was compelled by forces unknown (I.e., business associates) to make a futile attempt at golf--I could of course go on endlessly about this seemingly insatiable desire of some to pursue something so relentlessly to the point of distraction but that itself is a distraction for another day. I plainly sucked at golf--I was told by someone there were so many thing wrong with my "swing" they didn't know where to begin in an attempt to "help." Even so I enjoyed being outdoors, the comradely involved and every so often you would hit a great shot. That is how I felt about this book which actually entails three separate novellas.

In the Ancient Minstrels--a false memoir--Harrison in an ode to his far more enjoyable Wolf (also a false memoir) apparently tries to catch us up on his more recent canards. Harrison has often been portrayed as a misogynistic writer (Dalva perhaps aside) this collection seems to somewhat prove it--although he certainly is no Donald Trump. Harrison also seems to want to impress us with his erudite knowledge of French wine, artists, food/cooking and other writers which while charming at times becomes somewhat irritating. The crass nature of some of his blatant sexual references when compared with the far more satisfying philosophical renderings can only leave one scratching his or her head in wonderment: are these thoughts really coming from the same person?

The second novella: Eggs is a bit more satisfying but also does not appear to go much if anywhere. Harrison

seems to make a minor attempt to return to the Dalva or female voice--which he once said was most difficult for him to do and prompted him (undoubtedly just temporarily) to give up drinking. Unfortunately, this story gets a bit lost in a lot of intricacies that were somewhat difficult to follow but then such is life. It does follow a woman's quest to have a child absent the entanglement of having to also be left with a husband--of the three novellas I liked this one the most.

In the last novella from this collection Harrison reruns us--apparently for the final time--to one of his recurring characters--Saunderson, an ex-cop turned private detective living in Michigan's U.P.--which Harrison of course did for awhile (or at least had a cabin up there) but Saunderson is also a creep as a "peeping Tom" and a pedophile preying on young girls ( something which is quite uncomfortable to read about especially in an author of Harrison's talents--you cannot help to wonder, "my god, does Jim foster these thoughts?). He tries to portray Saunderson as "a like able" character torn by his sexual desires and not by what one would normally view as "morality" but rather a narcissistic concern that at age 66 if he is convicted of statutory raping underage girls he will end up in prison for 7-10 years. This hardly makes him a noble character and nobility is what perhaps I have misguidedly looked for in Jim's protagonists. It doesn't matter to me that Saunderson ultimately redeems himself by committing suicide....there certainly a far more redeemable endeavors.

Harrison of course is getting on in years. I was sadden to hear of the recent passing of his wife. He is a writer of immense talent--perhaps now his storytelling should be limited more to his poetry? He still would be someone it would be great to sit down with and have a Scotch or two....maybe he could somehow explain the point of these collection of stories for like an errant golf shot I certainly cannot.

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## **Sebastien says**

I stumbled upon this author because very good friends of mine recommended his work. Initially I was a bit leery but once I started reading I was quite blown away. Harrison has incredible gifts with language, and a phenomenal mind. He has a keen sensibility and a sharp humor. Humorously self-deprecating as well (always a plus to me).

This book is made up of 3 stories. They are interesting in their own ways but the 3rd I found most, mmm, problematic/disturbing?

Firstly, the strengths to me are the quality of writing, the fantastic use of imagery and language (he is a poet and I think one feels this in the writing). The other strength is what I felt was an underlying powerful honesty and unflinching introspection. I suspect there is a huge part of himself in all these stories (most especially 1st and 3rd), and he is unsparing and seemingly quite self-aware. The 3rd story focuses on an older man and his relationship with a teenage girl. It's kinda icky to say the least. And yet this recurring theme of old men lusting/preying after young women in 2 of the 3 stories makes me think this was a fundamental aspect and truth of his life experience and he was self-aware, realized it as a problem, but was unable to control it? That's just pure speculation on my part, I really know next to nothing about his life. But I don't doubt some readers would have problems especially with that 3rd story.

I'll def read more of his work because I think he is a great writer and he knows how to tell his truth. His examination of relationships and meandering introspection captivated me. And even if as a human being he probably had major flaws at least he seems to show us some layer of truth about himself no matter how ugly it is. That's always hard to do.

I most liked the 2nd story, a good balance of introspection and narrative development. This one was written from a woman's point of view and I was surprised (especially after my impressions from reading that first story) that he could write such a great female character. Complex, smart guy with keen sensibilities but also had his issues I guess.

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## **Alan says**

Harrison at his best. Three novellas. All great.

#1 is a false memoir, which makes you wonder which parts are true.

#2 "Eggs" is Harrison writing in a genuine (as far as I, male, can tell) female character, which he has done a great job of since "Dalva"

#3 is disturbing, on many levels, but it's what happened to Sunderson after the last book featured him ended.

As I write this, Harrison died two days ago at 78. As someone else tweeted about it, "The world feels smaller today." Harrison was not the next Hemingway, though he wrote about some of the same places, and loved food and sex and life and death as much as Hemingway did. Harrison took what Hemingway did, brought interesting female characters into the mix, and improved on the prose in the way only a poet as good as Harrison could do. (Would Hemingway ever use the word "daffy" to describe someone?) Harrison's nuanced (if raunchy, or maybe 'earthy' is better) prose and poems, and wide ranging curiosity and intelligence engaged me much, much more than Hemingway ever did.

And, if the reports are correct, Harrison died with a pen in his hand, in the middle of writing a poem. He lived to write well, to eat well, to live well. And it seems he did.

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