



Bone by Bone

Peter Matthiessen

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Although it stands alone, "Bone by Bone" is the conclusion and capstone of the Watson trilogy as well as a true literary tour de force. Matthiessen brings his anti-hero to life with a complexity of character and profound humanity that establishes this novel as a modern classic.

Bone by Bone Details

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Author : Peter Matthiessen

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Jason says

In this novel, the third book in the Watson Trilogy, Mr. Matthiessen gives us E.J. Watson's first-person narration of his own lifestory, from his birth in South Carolina to the moment before he is gunned-down by his friends and neighbors. Unlike the previous mega-rashomon-like narratives that presented various stories of Watson's life and deeds in often conflicting, often exaggerated, always sensational terms, this book deflates the myth of Watson-the-terrible-outlaw and presents Watson-the-man-lover-father-friend-capitalist (albeit still a killer, but a rationalizing killer) from one point of view. Watson answers several nagging questions unanswered in the previous volumes such as 'who killed Belle Starr?'; 'what really happened to Les Cox?'; and, most unexpected and revelatory, Watson tells us who Henry Short really is. The audiobook narration by George Guidall is, as always, superb.

Donna says

Too long. By a lot.

Charlene says

I've spent a lot of my reading time over the last few months with this trilogy -- it is well-written, a fascinating story and place. My favorite was the first book; this one was the most painful to read. The first book was set entirely in south Florida; the second book did include some north Florida and Indian Territory settings. But this one begins with the childhood of the main character, in a very difficult time and place in American history, immediately after the Civil War, in Edgeville County, South Carolina. Was Mr. Watson a killer without a conscience? Was he a victim himself in childhood of a violent time, place and a father who beat him? Mr. Watson, as a young boy, is drawn into terrible things. . . . and since the story is narrated by Mr. Watson himself, it is told in the language he would have thought in but I had trouble sometimes with that language.

Somehow this trilogy manages to touch on so many American issues -- race, frontier, violence, greed, disregard for nature. I may even go back and reread the first book of the trilogy again. I'm not sure I picked up all the themes and relationships in the book. Certainly good books to make one think.

Daniel says

The characters in this book were like watching car wrecks, or dangerous animals. It felt like a really long book. I accidentally read Bone by Bone without knowing it is the last of a trilogy. Now I want to read the others: Killing Mister Watson and Lost Man's River.

Judi says

Bone by Bone, the third of three books in a series, follows the life of Ed Watson from childhood in the post Civil War days in the South through adulthood in the early twentieth century. I love historical fiction/non fiction on the Civil War. This is probably one of the most well written book on those times that I have ever read. Nearly every page made me flinch at the painful everyday way of life after the war. The poverty, race relations, the toll taken by the war in so many ways. A great book. I must read the first two.

Ian Billick says

Wonderful book and great finish to the trilogy. I am tempted to read the trilogy backwards to unpack things.

Victoria Grusing says

First, I did not read the first two books in the trilogy that were set after this book; but to be read before. Second, it felt like a man would have enjoyed it much more than a woman.

The writing is excellent, the subject sad and disgusting. Mr. Watson was a battered child both physically and mentally. This can not excuse all of his actions and the delusional way he dealt with his decisions in life. He proceeded to marry and have children with a number of very young women. Admittedly, one was an old maid of 20. When he killed most of the people, he convinced himself that it was best for them or that a lot of other people didn't like them either.

Often, he thought they probably should die just because they had character traits that were not acceptable - mostly exactly like his own - only he didn't seem to realize that.

It is a very long book with lots of names, most tend to be recalled at various times in the book - as nicknames, initials, relationships (in-laws - of which there are many) and others that can slow recognition.

If I didn't have many more appealing books to read, Matthiessen's non-fiction books might be more interesting to me.

The writing reminds me of Faulkner.

Ron Charles says

The cover of a new book about juvenile crime made me pause. It's called "Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent," by James Garbarino (Free Press). On the front are two sweet looking kids about eight years old. One's holding a shotgun to the other's head.

In a period of rapidly falling crime rates, incidents of juvenile violence are even more perplexing. The past year has produced several trenchant books on the tribulations of young men, a male echo of the warning sound about young women broadcast by Mary Pipher's "Reviving Ophelia" in 1994.

Peter Matthiessen isn't a social worker, a psychiatrist, or a youth counselor. And his new novel is a work of art, not sociology. But "Bone by Bone," the brutal story of how a reluctant murderer is made, conveys the kind of Shakespearean insight into human nature that outstrips what nonfiction can do.

The novel breaks open with a long chapter that's almost as traumatic for the reader as for the young narrator. One of Edgar Watson's first memories is of his uncles lynching a runaway slave toward the end of the Civil War.

Shamed by his "unmanly feelings" of pity, Edgar thinks, "As for my fear, it was nothing more than common dread of swamps and labyrinths, of dusk, of death - the shadow places. Yet poor black Joseph sprawled unburied in the roots, losing all shape and semblance to the coming night, was an image etched in my mind's eye all my life."

Over the next 50 years, we see the effects of that early exposure to violence. Edgar's budding conscience is shredded by the conflicting attitudes of a region decimated by war, poisoned by racism, and struggling to ignore the equality of all people.

His drunken father, Ring-Eye Lige, infects Edgar with a deadly code of honor even while beating him almost to death. When his father invites him to another lynching, the young boy admits, "My pride in my father ... was edged with deep confusion and misgiving."

Woven into the frayed edges of a powerful South Carolina clan, Edgar instinctively feels the nobility of his despised cousin Selden Tilghman, who pays a ghastly price for opposing the racial violence he realizes is thwarting the South's recovery.

Psychologically fractured by these opposing models of manhood and afraid for his life, Edgar finally runs away from his family. But throughout this pitiless story, Edgar's thinly repressed anger conspires to ruin his chances in life. In this grinding blend of disposition and circumstance, "Bone by Bone" rises to the level of classic tragedy.

"I howled at the high heavens, but to whom?" Edgar asks. "Alone on the highroad in the leaden light, I knew my life had lost its purchase. The future was flying away forever, like a dark bird crossing distant woods. Not knowing where to turn, with no one to confide in, I hurried onward."

Moving to Florida at the turn of the century, the story drives through a bewildering collection of his wives, relatives, employees, and enemies. It's a remarkable look at the Southern frontier, a land that remained wild and violent long after the Western frontier settled down.

Edgar eventually becomes a syrup manufacturer, but murders and rumors of murders continue to leach his reputation and throw him into violent confrontations. Through all the horror, some accidental, some deliberate, Edgar never loses that strangely endearing desire to understand himself and his violent urges.

"For taking a life, one paid with one's own soul," Edgar laments. "To behold the light in another's eyes before extinguishing that light was self-destruction, because those eyes looking back at you became your own."

Along with a fascinating history of the Southeast, Matthiessen has written a classic story of how crushed innocence mutates in the crucible of a macho culture. He's captured the nature of a murderer who fully comprehends the horror and waste of his crimes.

Judith says

There is a lot to recommend this book. It provides remarkable pictures of the US, in particular Florida, during the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. It provides one way to view the world of E.J. Watson, a legendary character in Florida in that time. It offers a bit of a cautionary tale about ecology, albeit in the background. Yet for me its story of Watson was almost relentlessly awful. That is, the things Watson did and the things that were done to him were almost all bad. The small lights in his world did not shine brightly enough to turn his character around, and his actions led to retaliation of the worst sort.

Watson was a real person. The people surrounding him were based on real people, including his three wives and I-forget-how-many children. However, this is not history. It is not even fictionalized biography. It is the author's effort to explain the little he was able to find out about this man.

Watson's start in life did not bode well for the future. He fled from an abusive dirt-poor home when he was sixteen. He had a powerful work ethic, which helped him build a sugar cane plantation in Florida, along with other efforts. He fell in love seriously with his first wife, who died young. Perhaps his loveless childhood and the loss of this wife were contributors to his view of the world. Try as he might, he was unable to maintain an ethical, decent manner toward all. Instead, when pushed he would push back, and worse. He "did right" by a few people but even in those cases there was a limit to what he could offer. He put himself first.

The book is written in an interesting way, almost, in some places, like a book on the environment or a historical nonfiction book. As Matthiessen has written nonfiction as well, I think it was natural for some of that style to slip in here. The passages about Watson himself are well-drawn, yet I was never able to be fully sympathetic. Not having that connection made it difficult at times for me to push on.

Certainly it is a remarkable book. The author has taken what little he could find and pulled it together in not one but three books. This is the third of a trilogy on the Watson saga. This is the one that gets into the flesh and blood of the man. I found I was less impressed by it than were others because of the constant beating of awful awful awful. It was hard for me to swallow some of his actions and to continue wanting to know what would happen next. I sincerely hope that this book finds other readers who do not find it as much a chore as I did.

Mom says

The EJ Watson books are hard to forget. This is the second one I've read, after *Killing Mr Watson*, and the main character has become so compelling, complex and comprehensible that I want to know more about him even though he's doomed from the beginning and dead at the end. His all too human capacity to dig himself into a hopeless pit from which there can be no escape is tragic and real. Playing out this one person's virtues and vices and strengths and weaknesses in the frontier of the Florida Islands and in the company of the individuals there allows the reader a perspective on human nature and life and death.

Lora says

Peter Matthiessen is a master storyteller. I can't imagine opening one of his books and not becoming deeply engaged very quickly. I listened to *Bone by Bone* narrated by George Guidall. He, too, is a master of his art. So much so that I've now added other audiobooks narrated by him to my 'to read' list. I highly recommend the audiobook for this story.

Ellen says

Very disturbing and hard to read, but a compelling picture of the desperation (and greed) leading to the settling and development of Florida's Gulf Coast. I'm not sure I'll make it through the rest of the trilogy; EJ Watson is an unpleasant character; but it was a powerful experience reading it soon after traveling in that region.

James Murphy says

Bone by Bone is the 3d volume in Peter Matthiessen's epic trilogy about E. J. Watson and the southwestern Florida coast at the turn of the century. I'd already read *Killing Mr Watson*, the 1st volume, when Matthiessen published his revision of the trilogy as *Shadow Country*. Rather than read that single volume, as fine as it's reputed to be, I decided to stay the course with the original 3 novels. So last year I reread *Killing Mr Watson*, then *Lost Man's River* during the summer. And now I've completed *Bone by Bone* and the trilogy. E. J. Watson had a reputation as an outlaw. He was thought to have killed Belle Starr in the Oklahoma Territory, later had to leave northern Florida under the shadow of murder, and all that baggage followed him to the 10,000 Islands where his neighbors feared him and considered him a man who'd go to any ends, even break the law, to be successful as a sugar cane grower and syrup manufacturer. *Killing Mr Watson* is told in the many voices of those neighbors. Matthiessen's treatment of Watson is as the Satan in the Eden that was southwest Florida around 1900. *Lost Man's River* occurs half a century later. It's told through Lucius Watson, E. J.'s son, and again the same voices are used in interviews to retell the story with different slants and perspectives. I thought *Bone by Bone* to be the most accessible of the novels, and I like to think maybe because it isn't in multiple voices but is, instead, spoken by Watson alone, those dreadful events finally given his point of view. As reader, I was able to establish and maintain a rhythm so that the story flows as smoothly as the tides so frequently mentioned. Without quite seeing himself as Satan, Watson recognizes the verdant coastline rich in foliage and wildlife is a heaven. But here Matthiessen sees the conflicts as the expulsion of Satan from heaven, Satan's fall, all overseen by the oracular 1910 passing of Halley's Comet. Who knows, in the end, the truth? The inhabitants of the coast, that region south of Naples, fear him as a violent man, a murderer responsible for many deaths and other shady happenings. Horrors proliferate. Watson's portrait of himself is that of one who cares for others while at the same time careful to control events to his social and economic advantage. He paints himself as well-intentioned but influenced by the designs of others, his innocent intention corrupted as events and situations slide out of his control. It's for the reader to decide whether or not goodness triumphs, whether or not greed wins, whether or not evil is defeated. What's certain is that fear, rather than good or evil, is the greatest force at work in the islands. In my opinion, this final volume and the trilogy don't quite match a couple of other Peter Matthiessen novels: *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and *Far Tortuga*. But he's a very fine novelist and with this trilogy has written something worthwhile. To me he demonstrates one of the most admirable traits of the novelist--elegance. By the last page, *Bone by Bone* and the trilogy have become elegant.

Drew Eichholtz says

I'm prouder that I finished this series than when I finished Stephen King's longer Dark Tower series. The reason is because those books--all of them--were enjoyable. Lost Man's River is one of the driest things I've ever read. But somehow, I pushed on. I did it. And I'm happy. This novel delivered. The depth of depravity and character as well as determination and grit shown in this novel were compelling and richly rewarding. There were moments when it got too much, such as the portions of the narrative when Watson begins to tell things he couldn't know unless he were omniscient--which you find out he isn't at the end--is one example. All in all, a great ending to a decent series. Really, just cut out Lost Man's River--unless you enjoy reading about an angry old man driving around Florida.

Clay Fink says

Finally finished the third book in the "Shadow Lands" trilogy. This one's Edgar Watson's first person version of the story. Still not entirely sure how reliable a narrator he was. Maybe excerpt for the ending, that is. :)
