



Crooked River Burning

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The critically acclaimed novel of a compelling love affair and the decline of a once prosperous city .

The birthplace of rock 'n' roll, Cleveland was an economic powerhouse and America's sixth-largest city in the late 1940s. By 1969, it had dropped to twelfth. In the summer of 1948, fourteen-year-old David Zielinsky can look forward to a job at the docks, the only way to make a living on his side of the city. Across the river is twelve-year-old Anne O'Connor, daughter of the reigning political boss of Cuyahoga County. In this richly entertaining novel, the two will meet and fall in love, and for twenty turbulent years, as Cleveland falls from grace, they will be consumed by a fiery, star-crossed romance. A natural-born storyteller, Mark Winegardner charts the demise of this fascinating city, artfully weaving in such real-life Clevelanders as Eliot Ness, Alan Freed, and Carl Stokes. A saga reminiscent of the best writing of E. L. Doctorow, Tom Wolfe, and John Dos Passos, Crooked River Burning is masterfully crafted and vastly entertaining-a great American novel in the truest sense.

Crooked River Burning Details

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From Reader Review Crooked River Burning for online ebook

Darlene says

While reading this novel, Crooked River Burning written by Mark Weingardner, I was reminded of another novel I read years ago, American Rust by Philipp Meyer. Both authors created compelling stories which unfolded against the backdrop of once-great towns in what used to represent the industrial might of the United States... but is now referred to as the Rust Belt.

Crooked River Burning is an ambitious novel, perhaps even a bit too ambitious because I struggled from time to time to keep up with the enormous cast of characters, some fictional and some real people making cameo appearances from the past (such as Elliot Ness and Dr. Sam Sheppard). The novel is set in Cleveland, Ohio and spans the period from 1948 to 1969, a time when Cleveland went from being the 6th largest city in the United States to the 17th. At its heart, this novel is a poignant love story between two star-crossed characters... David Zelinsky, who was just 14 years old when the story began and lived in a solid working class neighborhood and 12 year old Anne O'Connor, the daughter of the political boss of Cuyahoga County and who lived in the upscale neighborhood of Shaker Heights. The two met and fell in love and they would meet again and again over the next 21 years and each time they came together, the old social class differences would continue to keep them apart. I couldn't help but recognize that the doomed relationship between David and Anne seemed representative of the class warfare that had been plaguing the city itself, the two sides clashing again and again and ultimately unable to breach the divide.

There is something for everyone and every interest in this story. It's the story of the rise of rock & roll, major league baseball, local politics and the inevitable political corruption that plagues many cities. It's also the story of class warfare and racial tensions always close to boiling over.. and even the Cuyahoga River plays a starring role. The Cuyahoga River (which is believed to mean 'crooked') is located in northeast Ohio and flows into Lake Erie. Since 1968, the Cuyahoga became famous (or infamous) for catching fire due to the uncontrolled dumping of industrial waste into its waters. Fittingly, I suppose, this story ended with the river catching fire for the last time in the summer of 1969. Some people believe that this particular fire, witnessed by a 'Time' magazine reporter and photographed for an issue of the magazine provided impetus for environmental activists to push for legislation regarding the regulation of waterways in the United States. The efforts DID pay off... the Clean Water Act was passed and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created.

Certainly, this novel could be viewed as a wistful homage to a time gone by; and it was also an accounting of the rise and decline of a once-great industrial city. I live in the Rust Belt and although I understand those wistful feelings, I can't say that I view this period in history through the same tinted lenses that others do. When I think about the environmental impact alone of industrialization (as I often do these days), I don't view the good ol' days as being as golden as people want to believe. But I understand that when people are facing challenging times, telling half-truths to themselves can be comforting.

If you're looking for a novel that does an excellent job of relating an important story about a moment in time in America's once-great industrial past, I definitely recommend this book.

Ashley says

Really enjoyed it, but parts of it seemed to go on forever. Some side stories could have been left out.

Lauren says

A bit disappointing at the end. Fun to have set in the context of Cleveland and its history from the 40's through the 70's but never develops the characters or plot as much as one expects.

Kristen says

Winegardner starts his story back in the '40s when, according to the jacket, "Cleveland was America's sixth biggest city," a decent place, a hometown to be proud of. His story, complete with star-crossed lovers, advances to 1969, by which time Cleveland had lost population and prestige. Readers like me are willing to let Winegardner tell us: what happened?

Readers like me are not, however, willing to read about Cleveland Indians' baseball games. Winegardner likes to give us blow-by-blow accounts of famous games, or infamous ones, I don't know and don't care. Easily skipped.

He's a fun writer when he's not trying to be too glib. I can see him sometimes, taking a writerly break, making a sandwich and repeating to himself some phrase he just wrote, feeling awfully proud of it, juggling the mayo and the mustard playfully as he puts them back in the fridge.

Cow patty count for this book is 2 1/2 or 3 out of 10.

Carly Thompson says

This is a very long, slowly paced novel. It was a long novel that felt extremely long. Although it took me about a week and a half to read it, I felt at times that I had been reading it for months. Winegardner writes very detailed prose that vividly captures mid-century Cleveland and is very informative but it can feel like a slog to get through. Throughout the story, Winegardner would intersperse chapters about important Cleveland personalities (Alan Freed, Vic Wertz, a Cleveland Indians baseball player, Dorothy Fuldheim, a local television commentator/journalist, Louis Seltzer, the powerful editor of the Cleveland Press Newspaper, and Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of a white majority city) that covered their entire lives from birth to death (although not told in chronological order) that were interesting but often pulled away from the primary narrative of the lives of David and Anne. Most of the narrative was in the third person, but frequently Winegardner would switch to a strident second-person view ("You were the sort of person around whom myths arose. You said so yourself." p. 244) The abrupt switches were an interesting stylistic choice but they created an unseen authority that didn't work with the more intimate relationship story.

I liked the wide swath of Clevelander history that the novel encompassed (although I am not a sports fan and found the sections on the Cleveland Indians and the Browns rather tedious). However the main characters of David and Anne were not interesting enough or sympathetic enough to sustain such a long narrative. David was dull and strangely incurious about his mother who died when he was a child (there are allegations that she was killed by the mob or his mob connected father) and Anne was at times an unlikeable

rich girl. The author told us that David and Anne were perfect for each other and meant to be together more often than showing the readers their connection. Anne and David enjoy challenging each other at sports (golf, ping pong, bowling) and we are told they enjoy each other's company but I failed to believe that theirs is a great love story.

Colleen says

I had the author of this book for a writing class I took in college. Being a little petty here, I have to say that he was extremely pompous and I see that that carried over into his writing. I will credit him in that story did have it's merits and it wasn't awful but overall it was so slow moving that it didn't hold my interest (in fact, I had to set it aside and read 2 other books before I could finish it). The characters were not likable. David started out as a good guy, a little guy trying to make good in politics, but over the course of the story turned into a jackass. Anne was the typical rich girl who got everything because of her father's name; she actually was somewhat redeemed by the end. What I really enjoyed about the book though was the history of Cleveland that it gave. How Cleveland went from being the 6th largest city in the country to becoming a laughingstock and the butt of jokes. Did you know that Cleveland was the first major city (with Caucasians as the majority) to elect an African-American Mayor? Or that Cleveland is where the first concert in the country took place (the Moondog Coronation Ball)? Or that the only major league baseball player killed during a game was a Cleveland Indian? (If there's bad luck to be had in sports -- it's in Cleveland!) So even though the story wasn't the best, I still enjoyed learning something about the city I was born (and will most likely die) in.

Tracy says

A mix of fictional and real characters paints a rich portrait of an industrial city from a period of strength in the late forties to the beginning of serious decline in 1969. From the blue collar "ethnics" (my people) to the mafia to baseball of a bygone era, Mark Winegardner weaves together a fascinating array of stories and people.

The writer, a onetime Cleveland resident, captures the personality of the city so well. His dialogue for those blue collar "ethnics" is spot on. And along the way, I learned about my hometown's history as well as a piece of American history -- the Steel Belt/Rust Belt era. I often found myself calling my grandmother back home for her recollections of events in the book.

The "Crooked River" is the translation of "Cuyahoga River" (the original Indian name), and the burning, well -- if you are too young to remember, that's another good reason to check out the book.

K says

Originally I thought I would give this book 3 stars, because it had distinct strengths and weaknesses which initially averaged out to a reaction of, as La Petite would say, "meh-whatever." I ended up lowering the

rating to 2 stars, though, because I felt the book was way too long, and that Winegardener went into great detail in describing some less relevant episodes/characters while totally skipping over aspects of the story with the potential to be really interesting. Although I sort of understand why he did this, it didn't appeal to me.

This book reminded me of "The Last Convertible" and of another book (I'm blanking on the title right now) where the time/place seemed to be its own character. 1950s-1960s Cleveland was very much a character in the book, perhaps the main one, and much attention and detail were devoted to developing that character. Although "Crooked River Burning" (like "The Last Convertible") was also the story of a star-crossed love, the love story almost felt like the backdrop to the story of Cleveland in the '50s-'60s, as opposed to vice versa. Maybe if I were from Cleveland, I would have cared enough to appreciate this balance. As someone not from Cleveland and not particularly interested in Cleveland (and Winegardener did not succeed in inspiring my interest in Cleveland, although to be fair, that would have been a pretty impressive feat), I would have preferred to just read about the love story and the various interactions around that.

For example, although I finally did realize what the "moondog" chapter was doing there, it took me a while and I don't think it needed to be that long/detailed. It was way disproportionate to its actual relevance and apparently minor role in the story. Ditto for the long, detailed baseball games. Although they later proved to have some relevance to the overall plot, and were probably also ways of making the time/place its own character, I just didn't care and ended up skimming over these details.

I had a similar reaction to the chapters about Dorothy Fuldheim and Louie Seltzer (and the moondog one about Alan Freed, come to think of it), which also reminded me of some of the weirder chapters of "The Ten-Year Nap" – the ones which described the inner thoughts of people like Nadia Comaneci and Margaret Thatcher. What's with these authors and inserting these lengthy asides imagining mundane vignettes in the lives of celebrities? I find that they really take me out of the story, and don't seem to serve a purpose that I can see. After a while, I didn't even bother reading them; I just skipped over them to get back to the main characters.

I feel like if Winegardener were really good, he could have succeeded in making me care about these characters even though they had only marginal relevance to the love story. Well, he didn't. Additionally, the realist in me says, oh, please, how could anyone possibly know what Nadia Comaneci was thinking as she rode in the car or how Dorothy Fuldheim interacted with her co-workers off the air? If I were reading an entire imagined biography of a celebrity, I might choose to suspend my disbelief if it meant enjoying a fun and interesting read. But to insert it as a random chapter with little apparent relevance to the plot I'm actually following – why? I don't know why editors allow this. It really doesn't work.

Meanwhile, many potentially interesting and dramatic moments were totally skipped over. How did David and Anne's quasi-platonic reunion develop into a full-fledged affair? How did their affair progress, and then break off? Although we're exposed to one vignette where they're together, it doesn't give us a whole lot of information about their dynamics and their overall relationship. How did Irene learn about it? And whoa -- David and Irene got divorced? Irene left David for a surgeon? When? What? These aspects of the story, rife with potential for internal and external conflict, were totally glossed over while boring details of baseball games and imagined celebrity scenarios were painfully spelled out.

On the positive side, I found this book extremely readable, even compulsively so. Winegardner evoked the time and place well; you could really visualize the characters and their interactions. His prose was somehow addictive, even when the story itself wasn't always compelling. In fact, it's an interesting experience to read a book where the prose is so much more compelling than the actual story. I often found myself obsessively

reading, unable to put the book down, and then finally stopping and asking myself, "So what? What was the point, and why, exactly, was that passage so interesting to me?" and unable to answer the question.

Having said that, the writing did occasionally get annoying. For example: "From downstairs came the sound of a wailing trumpet... Twenty years later, David would purchase a copy of this very Louis Armstrong record. Twenty years after that, he'd replace the worn-out record with a compact disc. But now, he had no clue or even, in this respect, a desire for one." Paragraphs like these were frequent interruptions which were irritating and took me out of the story, and I couldn't really see the point.

There were also some instances of really shoddy editing. For example, why does Anne tell David she's not a virgin, and later lose her virginity to some other guy? If she had a reason for wanting David to think she wasn't a virgin when she actually was, the book doesn't make this clear. Why does it first describe David as an eager hugger, and then, later in the book, report that he had reluctantly become a hugger due to his political career but that he still felt uncomfortable, especially hugging his family? I know these things are kind of petty, but they annoy me as a reader -- I really want to immerse myself in the story and characters, and can't when details like this keep changing.

Overall, I do have to give Winegardener credit for inspiring me to write such a lengthy and detailed review, as opposed to simply saying "Dumb book -- don't bother." I was compelled to finish it, although I definitely did a lot of skimming, especially toward the end. Maybe it really deserves 2.5 stars. It certainly wasn't terrible -- with a better editor, it might have actually been a decent read.

David Robertson says

Full disclosure: I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and its suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, so much of this book feels like a homecoming for me; I don't know how much it would resonate for other readers who came of age in other locations. Having admitted my bias, I have to confess that I have not enjoyed reading a novel so much as I did "Crooked River Burning" in a long, long time; I didn't want it to end.

The novel is the account of a two-decade romance between star-crossed lovers David Zielinsky, a working-class mook from the Cleveland's West Side, and Anne O'Conner, a debutante and trust fund kid from Cleveland's East Side suburb of Shaker Heights. Of course, they're like oil and water, but irresistibly drawn to one another. Their story plays out against the backdrop of Cleveland from 1949 through 1969, a time in which the city declined from being the sixth largest metropolitan area in the country to the twelfth largest. And, in the process, Cleveland became a national laughingstock and the butt of endless jokes.

Initially, the book is wry and winsome, perfectly befitting the young characters and the energetic city. Over time though, as the story traces the city's decay and the characters' maturation, the book becomes darker and more cynical. Throughout, the story of Cleveland is as important as the story of the lovers. From my perspective, having lived in the area much of this time, Winegardner gets the milieu perfect: he "knows" Cleveland and communicates it perfectly.

One (slight) criticism: there's an ongoing subtext about the possible mysterious circumstances surrounding David's mother's death in California after she abandons her family to seek fame and fortune in Hollywood. They "pay off" is not worth the build up. However, this hardly matters.

A really great and satisfying read.

Jack Koford says

A little bit disappointed. Great story! Gives a great feel for life in Cleveland during the decline of Cleveland in the decades following WWII. The politics, the unions, the sports. Some great characters, both real and fictional. I didn't realize that Cleveland was still a majority white city when Carl Stokes was elected mayor. I somehow forgot about the Cuyahoga River catching fire.

My beef is that I just didn't like the writing style of the author. Worth reading for the story, just should have been more enjoyable.

Vikki says

if i could give this book two ratings, i would: four stars for the somewhat-fictionalized history of cleveland, 1952-1969, two stars for the absurd and unsatisfying love story that is the frame for it. i'd be interested to know whether anyone who's not from cleveland has read this book, and if so whether they enjoyed it. as a cleveland native the story was personal to me, and i thoroughly enjoyed the five or six "sidebar" chapters that profiled cleveland heroes--particularly dorothy fuldheim, whom i remember well, and carl stokes, who was mayor when i was born but whom i remember hardly at all. the story of david and ann frustrated and annoyed me more with every passing chapter; i found each of their stories compelling when they were apart, but after their first idyllic days on kelly's island, every time they came together i hated them both. i don't know why winegardner never really explains to us how they first reunited or what broke them up, but i suspect it's that he didn't really like them either when they got together. this is a strange and, as other reviewers noted, deceptively long book; huge chunks of the love story are omitted--possibly because the book was getting too long, possibly because the story of cleveland is what winegardner really wanted to write, and the love story was just an excuse to do so. if you are interested in cleveland and its history, you will appreciate this book. for all its flaws, there are a great many perfect paragraphs wherein the author captures some really elusive and universal (particularly to clevelanders) human experiences. if you're looking for a good story about thwarted love, look elsewhere.

Pete says

Took me almost two years to finish this off; if it was about anything other than Cleveland I would have given up on it. There are some great moments sprinkled throughout -- both in the entirely fictional stories of David and Anne, and in the Dos Passos-y segments on famous Clevelanders. This book, feels really long because not a lot happens. The prose is respectable for the most part but overcooked not infrequently. This is a totally competent jazzy historical novel about the decline of Cleveland in the 40s-60s, but the fictional side of it doesn't hold up. I wouldn't say I hate-read the second half, but it was definitely more of a chore than a pleasure. Can only recommend for Cleveland people who really really dig the sour myth that Cleveland's urban woes were somehow poetic or romantic, like haunted castle romantic more than roses and sex romantic.

Katherine says

Did not get past the first three pages.

Caroline says

This book was long and it felt very long. By the end, I didn't care about any of the characters, except the minor ones, the ones that had died and the real life historical figures. Which is sad, because I started off caring so much about the main characters. They couldn't keep my interest. What did keep my interest is the prose. Very good throughout, with a sentence every once in a while that would blow me away. I really liked the parts about Cleveland history and how real people were woven into the story. I do recommend this book, but you must have some patience and endurance.

Karen says

If you are from or are currently living in Northeast Ohio this book might be of interest to you. Winegardner paints a very informative picture of Cleveland beginning in the times when unions, union bosses, and "people who know people who know people" ruled the roost and ending with the jeers of a burning river and the best of the city in the past.

The nonfiction stories of people, places, and events he weaves into the fictional account of 2 star crossed lovers had me reading this book along side wikipedia. Not for lack of details or information but because it had me wanting more. Because of this it took me longer than usual to read this book. Regardless, it's not an easy lighthearted read. Winegardner manages to pack much information into small spaces and to truly absorb it all will take a dedicated reader. He is able to capture the feel of each decade with cultural, historical, and personal references both subtle and large.

Admittedly, the back third of the book was tedious to read and I almost didn't finish it. But looking back I realize this plays into the whole theme of Cleveland... beginning with lighthearted young love in a city filled with promise and ending with the tedium of reality and living in a city that has seen it's better days.

Overall this book captures the heartbeat of a city that thrived, tried to make the future by holding on to the past, failed, and yet keeps trying. Not sorry I read this story but still it's not for everyone.
