



The Midnight Cool

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The Whiting Award—winning author of the story collection *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing* delivers her enchanting debut novel, set in 1916 Tennessee: a rich and rewarding tale of two flawed yet endearing grifters who pursue women, wealth, and a surprisingly valuable commodity for the troops in Europe—mules.

A middle-aged Irish immigrant, Billy has a gift for illusion—making damaged objects look new. His companion, Charles, the smooth-tongued teenage son of a prostitute, is a natural salesman, just like the mythical father he’s never met. Longtime horse traders and partners, they’ve recently turned their talents to trading mules. But in the summer of 1916, these seasoned grifters skilled in the art of the underhanded deal have just been swindled themselves. They’re saddled with the one thing they may not be able to unload: a gorgeous, murderous black mare named The Midnight Cool.

Charles should have listened to Catherine, the beautiful, rebellious daughter of Leland Hatcher, the richest man in Richfield, Tennessee, and the former owner of The Midnight Cool. The horse would be worth a fortune—if she weren’t a verified man-killer who attacks on sight. Charles and Billy are rooted in this muggy town until they can miraculously retrain their recalcitrant mare, and in the shadow of the growing inevitability of war, their bond begins to fray. Falling in love with Catherine—and under the spell of the deceitful, wealthy Leland, the vision of himself he’d like to be—Charles pulls away from the older man.

Despite their growing distance, Billy and Charles find their business thriving when the war in Europe pushes the demand for mules sky-high and the United States enters the fight. But when a trade goes terribly wrong, Charles is forced to reevaluate his allegiance to his country, the moral implications of his lifestyle, his relationship with Catherine, and, ultimately, his mysterious and surprisingly deep connection to Billy.

Populated by spirited, memorable characters, *The Midnight Cool* is a startlingly profound tale of aspiration, loyalty, and love—and the eternal search for something lasting in a transitory world.

The Midnight Cool Details

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From Reader Review The Midnight Cool for online ebook

Sarah Bruton says

This was a random pick off the shelf at my local library. It was set in 1917 in the South and told the sad story about the prisons we create for ourselves with the secrets we have to live with. Americans were in love with the idea of entering WW I and that love was temporary. Those who lived to tell the truth shared an ugliness that continues today in our constant need for war. The war to end all wars created multiple victims, human and animal alike, and ultimately created that famous Lost Generation.

Barb says

Rarely, when you have finished a book do you recognize you have read something great. This book is one of those - multi-layered, taughtly woven, full of insights. The mule-traders shine a light brightly on immigration and war in a time in America that today seems sadly ripe for repetition.

Laura says

Not a bad debut novel. I think I wanted a little more depth of story and more grit. I have found when mules are part of a story I want some grittiness. The story was too mild if that's possible. I will definitely read the next book the author releases.

Mary Beth says

Midnight Cool builds gradually, with quietly revealing dialogue, evocative turns of phrase, and a vivid sense of time and place—all evidence of Peelle's finesse with language and her gently humanistic approach to her characters. With her artistry, the story of Billy and Charles and their mules—and the looming specter of World War I in small-town Tennessee—is deeply resonant and piquantly poignant.

Janet Morrison says

I was conflicted as I finished reading *The Midnight Cool*. Lydia Peelle has a way with words, but I found the book hard to follow since the dialogue was not enclosed within quotation marks. It was tedious to have to go back a couple of paragraphs at times in order to discern who was speaking. I was interested in the subject matter, but the middle of the book did not hold my attention. I enjoyed the last 50 or so pages of the book, so I'm glad I didn't give up on it. I never want to give a book a less than favorable rating; hence, I'm conflicted. I'm giving it two stars because I did not enjoy the book as much as I did many books I've given three stars. For all the hype of the book to be about mules for World War I and a killer horse, I found it to be more about the two men who traded in mules and the women they loved.

If Lydia Peelle writes another novel, I will check it out because she has a gift for turning a phrase.

Melissa Crytzer Fry says

I had never really considered the number of mules sent to fight during World War I, and the reality of that historic occurrence was heartbreaking. But I guess I wanted my heart broken a bit more in this novel. I wanted more of a connection, as a reader, to the mules and to the horse, *Midnight Cool*. The few times I *did* experience those connections, I was emotionally engaged. The equines, however, were secondary to the main thrust of the story.

This is a novel about a man and a boy, the same man who loved a woman, and the boy who also fell in love. It is a story of mistakes, regret, and the question of what */is* the “right” thing: What is the right path to take? How do we rectify our mistakes to make things right? It’s a story of men who want women they can’t have. It’s a story about duty to country. It’s a story about war.

While the writing was spare but lovely, and the author is obviously very talented, this book – for me – just didn’t engage me the way I had hoped. To be certain, this is a ‘quiet’ book (which I generally enjoy). But it wasn’t until the last 50 pages that I really felt there were high stakes for the main characters – and that’s when I connected the most. I confess that I also was a bit put off by the lack of quotation marks for dialogue; they made it confusing, in many instances, to discern who was speaking. I am still trying to figure out the reason for this mechanism. While I’ve seen it before in literary fiction, I’ve read only one other book where I felt that particular treatment of dialogue had purpose and actually worked.

However, I really loved the character of Billy (and, as an aside, for some reason I confused Billy and Charles throughout the book – thinking Billy was a young boy’s name and Charles was a man’s name – when they were named opposite). Billy really was a softie for animals and I felt I understood his pain, motivations, and actions the best.

I like sad stories, and this is one. And while I did like it – with a “3” rating – it was a book I was able to walk away from for periods of time without rushing back to. Others may have a different feeling, and I urge them to give it a try if they like family stories and historical fiction. I did learn quite a bit about horses and mules, which I enjoyed.

Rebecca says

I was not interested at all in reading about mules in Tennessee being sent to help during WWI, but it was my book club book, and I heard it was good. Absolutely beautifully written, so much so, that I could not put the book now.

Margaret1358 Joyce says

This is a lyrical, eyes-wide-open in the biblical sense, tale of 2 pre-WWI horse-traders rambling around Tennessee, scratching out a living and learning to read the different faces of people they meet: the rich and hypocritical, the rebellious, the true believers. They get into mule trading in support of the eventually fast-

developing war effort; mules are needed on the front lines in France, to transport supplies and ammunition. At its core, this is a love story and an 'everyman' tale of the personal moments of truth that each one must face. There are echoes of Ecclesiastes, in the ethics of the dominant character, Billy, who reflects throughout this beautifully written tale, on how everything changes, nothing is permanent, and one should know when to love and when to let go.

Roxy says

The impoverished people in America when WW1 started, the horses, the mules, the awful sadness of every day life, the struggles to survive, to try to get ahead; I read this in one day, and sobbed through much of it near the end. It is a heart-rending story, so well told, and another lesson on what war does to all of us, people and animals.

Dale Williams says

This well-written story describes places in the south I don't associate with WWI. According to this novel, mules played an important part in the early stages of US involvement in the war. Why these animals were important and how they were gathered and made it to France sets the stage for this story.

The pace of the story rolled along, not too fast but moved nonetheless—sort of like mules :). The characters have depth and struggle with questions about identity, duty, doing the right thing, and family secrets.

Jennifer Ferencz says

I received this book in a Goodreads Giveaway and am thankful for the opportunity to read the author's work.

I entered the giveaway for this book because, while it is outside the scope of what I traditionally read, it seemed like a book that I would enjoy. When it comes to fiction, I prefer crime/forensic novels. There is a concise arc and a defined plot. These books are structured and, to an extent, formulaic.

This book was a bit more meandering than I am used to. The book jumps back and forth in time, and, in that way, tells two meandering love stories. This also makes the main characters a little interchangeable. Not much about their day-to-day lives was engaging. Even the love story of Charles felt lack-luster. He was simply obsessed with a girl. He claimed that she made him want to be a better person but then he never became that. I felt more attached to some of the more minor characters.

I also felt that there is a scene near the end about the horse, *Midnight Cool*. Some people will probably boycott the book because of animal cruelty. Some people might feel more emotion toward the horse than they've felt toward any of the other characters in the book.

I've been trying to figure out how to rate/review this book because it is not in a genre that I typically read. I don't know how it compares to other period fiction. But on its own, it just wasn't that engaging. I had to force myself to sit down and finish the book when I didn't care enough about the characters to be drawn back in on my own. The ending was compelling in a way that I wish the rest of the book was.

El says

I received a copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for a review.

Caveat emptor, that was the first rule. The second was to never lie. Twist the truth, yes, hide it, decorate it, do what you would with it, of course, but you never looked a man in the face and opened your mouth and spoke an outright lie. You never knew when you might come through a town again, and you wanted to maintain a reputation. Besides, it took the fun out of it. Trading was a game, after all, nothing but a match of wits, and what fun was a game without rules.

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These are the rules of a grifter that Irish immigrant, Billy, and Charles, the son of a prostitute, live by in 1916. They are talented in scamming people, primarily in trading mules. They find themselves tasked with trying to unload The Midnight Cool, a black mare who has a history of attacking. While they spend their time in small town Tennessee trying to retrain the horse, the friendship between Billy and Charles grows fraught as love and the war comes into the picture.

It took me a little bit to get into the flow of Peelle's story, but once I did I found I was attached to the characters, and interested in the different timelines that occurred throughout. For a first novel, I find *The Midnight Cool* to be pretty impressive, and I look forward to seeing what Peelle brings us in the future.

Full review here.

Sarah says

Very disappointing. It sounded like the book was going to be mostly about a horse. It wasn't. I will not be reading another one of her books.

Richard J. Alley says

From my review originally published in *The Memphis Flyer* (See full review at [http://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/l...\).](http://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/l...)

Lydia Peelle, by her own admission, is a time traveller when she's writing. In her new novel, *The Midnight Cool* (Harper), she takes us along with her to the American South of 1917 and the beginnings of World War I.

At the center of Peelle's book are mules, the most maligned and stubborn of beasts. The author has a soft spot for them and writes with compassion about the animal anomalies. "A lot of the elements of the book have long-captured my imagination: The relationship of men and horses and mules is one, horse traders and that subculture and characters is another," she said by phone from her home in Nashville.

The story follows two less-than-ethical horse traders, Billy Monday and Charles McLaughlin, skilled at masking the flaws of lesser animals and at smooth-talking customers, respectively. The tables are turned when they themselves are duped and Charles purchases a spirited (read: dangerous) horse from a wealthy man in fictional Richfield, Tennessee. Perhaps Charles is mesmerized by the stateliness of the sedated mare, or perhaps it's the horse owner's daughter, the beautiful Catherine Hatcher, clouding his judgment. Either way, the two hustlers find themselves in possession of a man-killing horse and, Charles, anyway, of a lovelorn heart.

Against the backdrop of the beginnings of a Great War in Europe, we learn the connection of the two men — a middle-aged Irish immigrant (Billy) and the teenage son of a prostitute. Charles has dollar signs in his eyes and a youthful obsession over the wealthy. Thus is he drawn into the coterie of Catherine's father, Leland Hatcher, just as he's pulled further in by his daughter's charms. War and love begin to take a toll on the men's relationship even as they take on the task of supplying war mules to the U.S. government. The action comes to a head as Charles is forced to make a decision between his life and country, his love and duty, and a secret and truth.

Peelle is a masterful storyteller who has honed her craft with short stories and the collection *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing* (Harper Perennial, 2009). *The Midnight Cool* is her first novel and is rich with voice and in detail, the sense of place as familiar as her own backyard. "The writing and research evolved side by side," she said. "The research was like a treasure hunt. One door led to another and another, until about halfway through the drafts I realized I had opened one literally onto my back doorstep."

She grew up on her grandfather's farm in upstate New York and has had a lifelong love affair with horses. "My father was the first person in his family to leave the farm, so it's in my blood," she said. "When I was growing up, we would go back to the farm, but all of the animals were gone so there were empty barns and empty pastures that really captured my imagination." While in college, she worked giving horseback riding lessons and leading trail rides, and she ran horses at a horse auction, the first place she came in contact with the horse-trading subculture.

Only recently, though, did she become acquainted with mules, true characters within her book as they plow a straight and true furrow through the storyline. "You cannot tell America's story without talking about mules," she has said about the horse-donkey hybrids. "Mule power essentially built the physical infrastructure of our cities and our country: the roads, the power lines, the telephone lines, the transcontinental railroad, etc."

Peelle has a long road to travel in the countryside of literature, and, though some will be short jaunts, I look forward to these longer walks through the lives of her characters and the times that have passed.

Elizabeth says

Because I liked Peelle's short story collection and because she was a wonderful book club guest, I gave her novel a try despite it being about a time I don't typically read about. It was an excellent choice with beautiful writing and narration that was almost heartbreakingly evocative at times. I learned much about this specific setting (East Tennessee during WWI) that was unknown to me.
