



Pick-Up

Charles Willeford

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Pick-Up Charles Willeford **He Holed Up With a Helpless Lush**

Prowling the grimy streets of San Francisco low-life, Helen is a beautiful, sensuous drunk - and a pathetically easy pick-up. Harry just wants to help, but before long he and Helen are both adrift in a sea of alcohol - until Harry conceives the ultimate crime...

Pick-Up Details

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From Reader Review Pick-Up for online ebook

Greg says

Do NOT look at the final page. No matter what! But when the second to the last line comes around, you might think 1) all this to work up for that reveal? or 2) the entire narrative now spins the story into a different light I hadn't even considered, and just how important, really, is that reveal? Well, it's huge, really, given that most villains in noir books are never given a chance. And the big reveal begs the question: what about the rest of the characters?

BOOK 39: Mid-20th Century American Crime Readathon

HOOK=3 stars: A man and a woman meet in a bar. Standard opener.

PACE=3 stars: Willeford keeps the story steady even after a whopper of a denouement just over half way through the story.

PLOT=4: Man meets woman, they attempt suicide, then there is a murder, then jail time. So far, typical. Then a twist, then another.

PEOPLE=5: You won't remember the names of the characters. But their names aren't important: you will remember them for a different reason.

PLACE=3: San Francisco bars, jails, and cheap apartments, but this could have been set anywhere.

Summary: I'm giving this an average rating of 3.6. And I'm questioning the author's final twist. Yes, it gives the book a completely different spin. But at the same time, it neither makes the book itself, the writing, better or worse. A person gets fair treatment, and that is unusual for a noir novel.

Karla says

Would have been 5 stars, except the "shocker" ending which, IMO, doesn't have any bearing on the plot whatsoever. I mean, what is that supposed to mean? That he, despite his.....inescapable stigma...for lack of a better way to be spoiler-free...was able to end up the way it did?

Yeah, this book is one of those spoiler landmines. Just read the friggin' thing and make up your own damn mind. :P

Anyway, the spare prose was great. Loved the style. I loved and hated these characters because they were packed full of human frailties.

Definitely checking out Willeford's other stuff. It's no-nonsense pulp, just the way I like it.

ETA: Reminiscent of Julien Green's *The Dark Journey* and Francis Carco's *Only a Woman*, if only for the sheer miserable feeling I got reading about miserable people behaving miserably.

Krok Zero says

Dayumn. Willeford was one subversive motherfucker in the '50s. Like his contemporaneous masterpiece *The Woman Chaser*, this is a dark novel with serious ambition and zero pretense toward the pulp thrills promised by its original marketing--or even its current marketing, deceptively packaged in the Library of America's

1950s crime-novel volume. But unlike *The Woman Chaser*, which was basically a very deranged comedy, *Pick-Up* is pure nihilism, a sustained howl of bleak, hopeless agony. Honestly, it's not for the faint of heart. But if you're willing to follow Willeford down the darkest alleys of the soul, there are ample rewards.

Another reviewer mentioned *Leaving Las Vegas* as a reference point, and that film occurred to me as well. But while the premise and tone is quite similar, I daresay Willeford went in a considerably ballsier direction with the narrative. The concept of suicide is introduced early enough in the book that it's not a spoiler to say that death plays a major role in this story of lovestruck, alcoholic depressives in '50s San Francisco. It's fair to say that the characters spend all their time either dead or wishing for death. Or drinking till they black out. Like I said, not for the faint of heart.

So why is this brutal stuff so compelling? Willeford treats depression with respect. There's not a trace of hysteria or melodrama here--nor, on the other end of the spectrum, is there a romanticization of the characters' self-destructive lifestyle (a crime of which some have accused *Leaving Las Vegas*, though I've never been sure I agree). The psychology, while simple, feels heartbreakingly authentic. Willeford writes with the cool, readable propulsion of a pulp master. And he builds up to an absolutely devastating final-page twist that, as the AV Club's Keith Phipps noted, changes everything and nothing about what comes before.

It's so weird to think that the Willeford who wrote this and *The Woman Chaser* went on to pen the near-geriatric Miami crime novels about Hoke Moseley in the '80s. I've read 3/4 of that series now, and they're perfectly fine as light cop thrillers go, centered on an everyman detective besieged by a midlife crisis. But they're so *tame* compared to this early subversive stuff. Funny parallel between this and the Hoke Moseley book *Sideswipe*, written 30 years later: both have characters who are "non-objective painters." Dude really likes that phrase.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

OK. This is the third and last time I am going to write this review. If it disappears yet again, too bad.

First of all, I did not even like this story. It is about two people who can think of nothing better to do with their lives than get drunk and finally, out of the emptiness and despair relentlessly gnawing at their souls from which they can no longer run they agree to kill themselves.

This does not go as smoothly as they anticipated; however, one of them succeeds in dying and the other one gets to spend a lot of time getting examined by psychiatrists and sitting in jail cells.

The story was about as interesting as following two alcoholics around and watching them drink. The last sentence of the story provides a crucial detail that forces the reader to consider the entire story in a new light. It is something that was probably considered shocking in the 1950s but today would be regarded as merely surprising.

If Crime Noir is your cup of tea, then you may very well enjoy this novel and I won't judge you.

Richard says

Man, that was depressing! A bleak and nihilistic look at a destructive relationship and the negative effects of alcoholism. I imagine that if David Goodis and Jim Thompson teamed up to write the screenplay for the movie *Days of Wine and Roses*, they would've churned out this novel!

Failed painter and alcoholic Harry Jordan meets a pretty blonde lush named Helen in the bar and grill where he works. They almost instantly fall head over heels for each other, but anyone with common sense can tell that their relationship is doomed and will be mutually destructive, feeding off of one another's depression and their unhealthy need for alcohol and each other. They soon start down a dangerous path of self-destruction.

The synopsis reads like a standard noir novel but Willeford puts his own spin on it. The femme fatale is as tragic as the protagonist she "seduces", and Willeford treats the plot elegantly and with little melodrama. The book is carefully crafted, with the author doling out exposition and back-story about Harry just when it's necessary.

And then there's the ending...man, that ending! I won't spoil it here, but I'll say that one moment, I'm finishing up an already well-written tragedy about alcoholism and doomed love, and the next, I read the last two lines and it drops a bomb, changing the entire way I viewed the story, making me want to read it again. Some people may see it as a cheap gimmick but I disagree. While a gimmick ending like the one in the movie *The Usual Suspects* negates the entire rest of the story, I think that this book can still work without its denouement, the conclusion acting as a cherry on top, forcing you to consider the story from a whole new angle!

This is my first book by Charles Willeford. I've heard that in most of his novels he takes interesting new looks at the noir and hard boiled genres. If any of them are even close to being as awesome as *Pick-up*, I can't wait to read them!

Melki says

". . . I hit the bottle so hard I'm not sure whether I came to San Francisco on the bus or on the train."

Stunning, though massively depressing tale of what happens when two self-destructive souls collide. This is bleak as all-get-out, though Willeford's writing is beyond amazing. I was reading this at the same time I was listening to *The Sun Also Rises* (well, not at the exact *same time*, but you know what I mean), and I couldn't help musing on which characters could drink one another under the table - the duo from this book, or Jake Barnes and his peeps. And, I also couldn't stop thinking about what a much better writer Willeford is than Hemingway . . . yet which author is shoved down every young person's throat in school?

Maybe it's better this way. Discover Charles Willeford on your own, and let his words wrap themselves around you.

Steve says

Years ago I read Willeford's *Miami Blues*. It was good crime novel, that kind of reminded me of Elmore Leonard (second drawer), or Carl Hiasson. (The Hare Krishna scene at the airport was a keeper). It was made

into a good movie with Fred Ward and Alec Baldwin (still the best thing I've seen Baldwin in). As I said, the book was solid, but it perplexed me a bit, because I was aware that Willeford was held in high regard by crime writers like Leonard. Looking back, I'm guessing at this late point in his career, Willeford was cashing in. *Miami Blues* was the kind of novel Willeford could write in his sleep.

Pick-Up is an entirely different affair. It's like a completely different writer. Clearly, at *this point* in Willeford's career, he wasn't playing it for laughs. *Pick-Up* is a short novel, where every word counts. It's an extremely sad story about two losers, Harry and Helen, caught in an alcoholic spiral. The term "losers" is perhaps too harsh since both Harry and Helen seem more damaged by life rather than by their choices. But that's probably a distinction with a blurred line, and yet one by the novel's end that I felt necessary to underscore. One of the nice(?) things about *Pick-Up* is that it's pure noir, but noir that will cut against your expectations of just what noir is. I'm reluctant to say much about the novel itself, though there is crime, booze, sex and, surprisingly, Art. Harry Jordan, the narrator, is a former art teacher. (Even that little detail is more than I want to reveal, since it came as a surprise, further underscoring Willeford's masterful accumulation of detail, and slow reveal of his characters. Another nice touch is the portrait Willeford supplies of late 1950s San Francisco. What a gritty time capsule! The one thing that may bother some (but not me), is the last sentence surprise. It's a gimmick, no question, but to my mind, it's entirely earned. *Pick-Up* is such a tight effort, that I can easily slot this one up there with Jim Thompson's best. It's a classic.

Ruth Turner says

This story felt a bit rushed to me. The downwards spiral, after Harry and Helen met, seemed to happen too fast; just a few weeks.

The ending came as no surprise, although the second last line was, but that didn't effect my overall view of the book.

A quick read, but not an easy one. In fact, it was downright depressing.

Patrick says

A couple of down and out transients drink and pass time in 1950s San Francisco. Good hard boiled style. This novel has a SURPRISE ENDING. I usually don't like gimmicks at the end of stories, but this one makes you re-think your IMAGINING of the narrative. Four stars.

Steven says

Wow. Just jaw hanging open, wow. Willeford's description of the wrist slitting suicide attempts must be one of the purest expressions of literary decadence this side of Yukio Mishima's description of *seppuku* in his story "Patriotism." And that is just one of the many surprises in this novel that was originally published as a pulp in 1955, but one has to wonder if the publisher had any idea what they were publishing. Despite the in your face downward spiral of despair, depression, and alcoholism that is the main focus, Willeford delivers a fully realized literary novel whose moments of caring are a blinding light against the unrelenting darkness

portrayed. To read this novel from the perspective of "it is a noir, a pulp novel" would, I think, completely miss the point. And, although I'm not sure on this, it is hard to imagine that the audience reading all those other noir pulps in 1955 would even get through *Pick-up*. Yes, you eventually get to a crime and it's aftermath, but the unrelenting early focus is depression and drinking and the path to suicide. Willeford's counterpoints to that focus, however, are crushingly brilliant. Wish I'd read this in grad school days; could essay the hell out of this book!

The little trick at the end - that's an essay, too. Don't want to spoil anything for those who haven't read the book yet. But some thoughts. My first thought was why would Willeford do that? Making a point, right? Look at how Jordan is treated throughout. Most books of this era are full of epithets. So, striking. There are a couple of clues, for those who want to go back and look. Towards the end of the interview with the doctor at the first hospital. And also carefully reread the dialogue with the old stenographer. Overall, though, the ending did not make me reconsider the whole book, and I don't think that is supported by the text. What it does do is make, in the most simple and elegant way, a gigantic point that probably could not be made in any other way. I mean, there have been whole novels written trying to do just that. Makes me curious how it came about. Part of the intent all along? Or added at the end in response to something?

Could write so much more on this novel!

Carla Remy says

I sort of loved this. It's well-written and readable. The subject matter is depressing, verging on disgusting. I mean, it could be worse, but it's not exactly charming. It's not much of a crime story, more one man's issues, psychosis and guilt. As such it calls strongly to mind Highsmith and Thompson - Willeford was their contemporary, and very similar, but also talented. I read one of his books before this, and would like to read more ...

Jason Coleman says

Took a detour from *Brothers Karamazov* to read this thing and, shallow person that I am, preferred it. There is a crime at the center of this story, but for a *noir* writer, Willeford is too interested in character and setting to be distracted by crime-story clichés. At one point the hero is held at gunpoint, but eventually he turns around and finds that the guy with the gun has wandered off, so he just goes home. During a spell in a psychiatric hospital, he goes up to the roof with a male nurse for a smoke; asks the guy why he does this work, and the male nurse says, "For the girls." Funny thing about nurses, he says—the women nurses—is that when they're not in their uniforms they're horrible dressers. The book has many great casual, lived-in observations like this. But it's no breezy read. We're firmly in *Lost Weekend* territory here, a long and inevitable descent into alcoholic crash and burn, living day to day, even minute to minute, the only reckoning coming when there's no change left to buy a drink with. The hero and his girl attempt to kill themselves in a harrowing wrist-slashing episode that suddenly comes out of nowhere (I'm not giving much away here—it happens early in the book, and the chapter is called "Suicide Pact"), and it is powerfully imagined. After their failure, they rip up the bed sheets and bandage each other; her bandaging is neater than his, Willeford points out (women tend to wrap Xmas presents better than men, too). Some people complain about the gimmick ending, but it's inconsequential; the book has already done what it needed to do.

Tfitoby says

A far cry from the Hoke Moseley novels this bleak piece of nihilism is a novel that astounds with its dedication to the central theme of despair, anguish, alienation and self destruction. Harry meets Helen in a diner, they are high functioning alcoholics, they get together and proceed to push each other further in to oblivion until suicide is a very real option for both of them and Willeford doesn't flinch once from his evocative descriptions of their state of mind. A lack of respect and understanding of depression and substance dependency has been in the public consciousness recently with the high profile deaths of two incredible actors and, apparently, wonderful men but Willeford was clearly somebody who could treat the subject with an objective calm and an understanding of why and how people from various walks of life can all fall to the same weaknesses with no respite in sight beyond the promise of peace brought by that final moment when you stop fighting. There's no hysteria here, no glamourising of the subject, but also nobody to tell them that they're wrong, not one character attempts to divert them from their destiny, they're just two kids living in their own insulated bubble of pain. This is the stuff that elevates Willeford above your modern run of the mill literary types who pack their novels with interventions and worried family members, psycho babble bullshit and happy endings, *Pick-Up* just paddles on out in to hell on Earth and keeps rowing without a look back to the comforting shadow of shore. I'm going to keep coming back to this book, I know it.

Treece says

This is one of the best books I've read in quite some time. 165 pages of superb, concise writing that delves into the deepest, darkest reaches of the human psyche.

Helen and Harry are complex, obsessive and totally lost. This is brilliant. I never feel pity for them, just a sinister fascination and understanding. You respect their honesty, commiserate with their self-destruction on some level.

This is a classic must-read if you can locate a copy. I guarantee when I got to the end, many areas became clear and it was completely worth the entire journey. Dark irony, pulp fiction at it's best.

Jack Tripper says

(Updated 1/21/17)

Here's my 1992 Futura mass-market (187 pages), which isn't listed here. Not quite as nifty as that 1955 edition up top, but unless anyone has an extra \$60 lying around that they could do without, I guess I'll just have to stick with this one.

Without a doubt one of the three or four best classic -era noir novels I've ever read, *Pick-Up* is a bleak, heartbreaking story about a newly-met alcoholic couple who are seemingly doomed, spending their days and nights in various bars drinking themselves into oblivion in order to forget the world and their lives. It's like watching a car accident, in that as much as you may want to look away, you can't.

I found myself connecting with these two right away, becoming wrapped up in their lives and really rooting

for them to make it work, which is astonishing considering the entire novel is less than 200 pages, and is a testament to Willeford's proficiency at characterization. The descriptions of the seedier side of San Francisco in the 50s really pulled me in as well, and added to the depressing and hopeless atmosphere.

Willeford has a clean, unobtrusive prose-style that disappears while reading, allowing the reader to become fully enveloped in the story, a story that kept me glued to the pages til the final, game-changing line.

Highly recommended for any and all fans of noir.

5 Stars.
