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William Dean Howells

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The Leatherwood God Details

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From Reader Review *The Leatherwood God* for online ebook

Kristin Boluch says

This book is one of Howells' last and is very odd, very different from his others. It seems to be a contemplation of a cult of religious personality type who takes over a village and results in violence and civil discord. The narrative is strange in terms of Howells' work; usually, earlier narratives offer deep contemplation of manners and implications, but this narrative doesn't evaluate the actions of the characters, and seems to lay them out to the reader to figure out for themselves; this is frustrating and odd for Howells, but maybe he is laying out for the reader the choices without direction the townspeople faced? I hope to reread this one day if I ever get around to a Howells review/critical analysis.

Cooper Cooper says

William Dean Howells was a biggie in American letters during the second half of the nineteenth century. He was a novelist and critic and editor of the influential *Atlantic Monthly* literary magazine. Early on he spotted Henry James as a talent, and he was the first among the Eastern literary establishment to take Mark Twain seriously and became his friend and champion. Though in his time a literary lion, Howells is little read today; probably his best known novel is *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. His favorite theme was America's transition from a land of hardy, independent, egalitarian frontiersmen to a class-conscious urban society scarily reminiscent of Europe.

The Leatherwood God is one of Howell's lesser novels. The year was 1828 and the place tiny Salesville, Ohio; the Salesville area, in Appalachian hill country, consisted of a patchwork of small farms that had recently been hacked out of the forests. The Indians had been driven off a few years earlier, so the area was peaceful and industrious; most farmers had graduated from mere subsistence and were selling their excess corn and tobacco for the cash that would allow them to buy tools, salt, cloth and even a few small luxuries. But life was sunup-to-sundown hard work; few traveled far from home; anybody who rode in from the outside world (often called "over-the-mountains") was immediately pumped for the latest news. The hottest social events all had to do with the church: Sunday services, circuit-riding preachers cycling through town, and in summer, inter-denominational camp meetings, wild revivals in which local and itinerant preachers saved people after terrifying them with threats of hell and brimstone—all the while being heckled by the Hounds, young drunk non-believers who considered the camp meetings a kind of carnival where they could raise their own kind of hell.

At Salesville, the camp meetings were held at the Temple, a building jointly built and shared by the five local religious denominations. One day in August of 1828, just after a local preacher had delivered a hot sermon in the Temple, there came suddenly a sound of whinnying, and then a booming, "Salvation!" Nearly frightened off their seats, folks turned to see who had made these weird sounds. They saw an imposing stranger classily dressed in black broadcloth and wearing a yellow beaver hat. No one had noticed him slip into the congregation. Mystery! Excitement! Which the interloper, one Joseph Dylks, carefully cultivated over the ensuing weeks, selectively putting out the word that he was on a mission, then that he had special powers, then, as he won people over, that he was the real Messiah and immortal, and finally, that he was the Lord God Himself. He knew his Bible; he preached briefly but with force; he whinnied and cried "Salvation!" Chumming with some of the leaders of the community, he split the town between believers and non-believers, setting brother against brother, husband against wife, parents against children. And oddly, among his most ardent disciples were some of the most intelligent and prosperous people in Salesville. Of course, it didn't hurt that Dylks anointed a couple of them as his equivalent of St. Peter and St. Paul.

The community was in an uproar. To settle the issue, Dylks proposed to perform a miracle before believers and non-believers alike. If someone would bring a bolt of cloth to the local mill, Dylks would miraculously convert it into glorious raiment. A time was set; a huge crowd assembled, believers and non-believers heckling and harassing each other. They waited. And waited. And waited. Dylks never showed. So the non-believers, considering him exposed as a fraud, tracked him down. They hauled him next morning to the nearest justice of the peace (in the town to the north now known as Old Washington), and asked for a ruling against the “Leatherwood God.” The JP studied his Ohio law code. He couldn’t find anything to charge Dylks with, since there was no law against claiming you were God. So he dismissed him. Dylks ran like hell from the enraged non-believers and laid low in the woods for a few days, waiting for things to cool down. Then he reappeared among the faithful, preaching as usual; but recognizing that he was at risk, he announced one day that the New Jerusalem would not appear at Salesville, as he had been prophecying, but in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He said that he and his leading disciples should set out at once for that city, which Dylks would take over and prepare for apocalypse. Dylks and his three leading disciples, two of them leaders of the community, set out on foot for Philadelphia. After a meal-cadging, prayerful trek they arrived near the city at a point where the road split in three directions. Dylks directed two followers to take one route, the other to take a second route, and he himself took the third. He said they would meet in the city. They never saw him again. Nor was he ever heard of again.

Now the most interesting part. Even after their leader chickened out on the miracle, the flock of Dylks believers did not diminish. Even after he ran from the crowd in Old Washington (after repeatedly claiming to be immortal and that “no man can harm a hair of my head”), his flock did not diminish. Even after he disappeared outside Philadelphia and failed to meet his disciples as promised, his flock did not diminish. Most, including the abandoned disciples, went to their graves believing Dylks was God; not only that, many who had been mere children during the episode believed in Dylks for the rest of their lives. And the word among them was that in fact people had actually seen the New Jerusalem in Philadelphia, and people had actually seen Dylks rise up in glory, on a chariot of fire, into Heaven. Cognitive dissonance, anyone? But of course we’re a lot more sophisticated now. Ever heard of L. Ron Hubbard?
