



True North

Jim Harrison

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True North is the story of a family torn apart and a man engaged in profound reckoning with the damage scarred into the American soil. The scion of a family of wealthy timber barons, David Burkett has grown up with a father who is a malevolent force more than a father, and a mother made vague and numb by alcohol and pills. He and his sister, Cynthia, a firecracker who scandalizes the family at fourteen by taking up with the son of their Finnish-Native American gardener, are mostly left to make their own way, and often to play parent to their dissolute elders. As David comes to adulthood - often guided and enlightened by the unforgettable, intractable, courageous women he loves - he realizes he must come to terms with his forefathers' rapacious destruction of the woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, as well as the working people who made their wealth possible. In the course of thirty years of searching for the truth of what his family has done and trying to make amends, David looks closely at the root of his father's evil - and threatens to destroy himself.

True North Details

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From Reader Review True North for online ebook

Alene says

This was a great story, a little gloomy, but so well told, that I just loved it. Its so interesting not only the things we choose to take on in this life, but our ways of going about it as well. Sometimes we take on burdens that aren't ours because we feel like we have to or we actually believe they are ours. And we get so accustomed to being the way we are that it's extremely difficult to change.

The characterization was wonderful, though I would certainly hope to not be any of the characters in this book. About halfway through I experienced some real feminist anger about how women are portrayed in the novel, even though it's just the way the main character experiences them, but I still felt pretty upset that they didn't seem to have any value outside of their physical features. I wish not only of course that the characters didn't think that way, but that the author had developed the women more, but I'm the first to admit that sometimes books that focus on mother/daughter or just female relationships simply don't interest me, where the father/son / brotherly dynamic seems more interesting, perhaps because I just don't know it and I wish I knew what it was like.

Adam says

With Barry Lopez and Marilynne Robinson, Harrison was one of three authors I remember hearing discussed in glowing terms by my Interlochen friends but somehow felt I'd missed out on at the time. I rectified that quickly with Lopez and a bit later with Robinson, but somehow never took the Harrison recommendation as seriously. Which was obviously a huge mistake, because this is a bit of a revelation. *True North* gets a fair amount of free points from me by sheer coincidence of its myriad commonalities with my own life--taking place in Michigan and Veracruz, and focusing on an interminable historical and philosophical obsession with the nature and relationship between rape culture and the destruction of the environment. But it earns most of its enjoyment the old fashioned way, with uncommonly great writing at every scale.

The loose plot covers a big chunk of the narrator's biography, exploring the long arc of his relationship with his family, his vain effort to come to terms with its legacy of violence, and the various friends and romantic partners with whom he lives through those questions. In the abstract, I love the idea of making a book pose an intellectual search by making it a personal quest for the protagonist. *True North*, in practice, is not so much interested in the question as in what it says about the way David frames his relationship with his dad, and as an occasional driving mechanism in the otherwise idle-rich life. David does a lot of research on the history of logging in the UP, on illegal cutting and tract poaching, as well as some on Native American history, but none of it really makes it to the reader. That isn't necessarily a problem; if there's anything I've learned from a near-decade of reading on this question it's that this particular framing can only be its own answer. If you're genuinely curious on the topic you switch framings; if you're committed to the frame itself, you can only run in circles.

The recurring question makes the whole thing feel a lot more conversationally intellectual than most books. But it's the farthest thing from pretentious. In fact, that's kind of the most brilliant thing about the whole book. In every facet, it feels casual and uncontrived. Most of this comes from David's narrative voice, which has a rich combination of vulnerable reflection and a pragmatic sense of his own moment-to-moment urges and tastes. The hanging out scenes feel vividly and relatably realistic, and maintain a constant interest with

practically no active drama. I can't think of another recent book I've read that has such a comfortably, effortlessly enjoyable narrator. It makes a very strong case for the school of thought that fiction is all about immersing yourself in character, plot and prose be damned.

Carl R. says

I've done it again, I think. I've probably missed out and misjudged. Jim Harrison seems to be an author of some note and some longevity. His books have been responsible for a couple of movies, one of which (*Legends of the Fall*) I've heard of, though not seen. However, I'd never heard of either *True North*, nor of Jim Harrison till my neighbor dropped the novel on my porch. What's more, judging by this book, I'm not inclined to explore the his work further.

We join our protagonist, David Burkett ("...fourth in a line of David Burketts beginning in the 1860s when my great-grandfather emigrated from Cornwall, England, to the upper Peninsula of Michigan which forms the southern border of Lake Superior, that vast inland sea of freshwater ."), or rather he joins himself, at age 18 to begin telling us the story of his years from then till "now" at approximately age thirty-five. After a rather baffling, and to my mind unnecessary, prologue, we wend our way through Burkett's life in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. That life is filled with enormous angst and guilt over his timber-baron ancestors' exploitation and desecration of the north woods, its natives, and its working folk. That exploitation has left him with means to live independently, and he can't stand it.

He embarks on a project to write a grand exposé of and apology for his family's misdeeds. It's obvious the grand design will never come to pass. Burkett is so mentally and emotionally unstable, wanders so aimlessly through life and loves, that anything he accomplishes will be purely by accident. He somehow becomes intensely involved with five females, one of whom is a dog (how pathetic is that?), and casually involved with a number of others. What the women (except the dog) find attractive about him is hard to fathom. Maybe he stimulates the maternal instinct or something. Whatever the case, I found little or nothing to admire about this sad sack except his moral idealism, which is whiny, flaccid, badly in need of viagra. The narrative of *True North* wanders as much as the thoughts, emotions, and actions of its narrator, so I never got truly caught up in the tale. There was a great deal of polemic (always a bad sign), even more tell-not-show, and enough incomprehensible two-bit philosophy to drown a duck:

I thought that the natural world wasn't meant to be soothing which was only an abstraction. People were nature too and it was schizophrenic to try to separate them from what we ordinarily thought of as nature. When you allowed your view of the world to vastly expand the questions expanded with it. and so on.

Nevertheless, the guy's been a long-time commercial and literary success, so I'm sure I'm missing something. That happens a lot.

Bookmarks Magazine says

"*True North*," says the *Boston Globe*, "has its moments," which sums up general reaction to this novel. Almost everyone found something to like, be it the passionate narration or the novel's strong sense of place. However, most reviewers also found serious flaws. While some praised Harrison's writing, a few pointed out its sloppiness. And nearly all were frustrated with the novel's structure, complaining that Harrison reveals key events too early and allows the story to founder as Burkett painstakingly searches his soul. Harrison has called American readers "grotesquely plot-oriented," and those who fit this description should avoid his

newest novel. But for those who don't mind a long walk through the woods, there's *True North*.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Linda Robinson says

"Making money is never very pretty." David Burkett's father said, who as near as I can make out never made the money he spends lasciviously. He inherited it. David Burkett inherited the guilt that goes along with pater familias scarring the land on both sides of his ancestry. I thought this was a new Harrison novel, finding it on the new book shelf, but it was published in 2004, so I am a little relieved to offload some of the machismo rife in the book. Harrison is older now, and a little more muted. *True North* is relentlessly male, and the worst of the gender, evident too much in the- also relentless- Breaking News of today's world. There isn't much humanity in here, unless we adopt the view that humanity, when not being brutal, unforgiving and obsessed, is inwardly focused and continually whining. Poor, poor, pitiful me. Even when Burkett is learning, he's not growing. The women in this book aren't so much courageous as they are tenacious: hanging on this dank and manly world because that's how it is. The supposed love interests come off as an ersatz conscience for the men in the book. Every woman, except Cynthia, is poorly constructed, barely there except as a foil for whatever the hero is experiencing. Sooooo tiresome a female character device! Depressing, violent, unabating: the jacket blurb claims this novel has a redemptive soul. I didn't find it. Weak yang. Start to finish.

Tim Lepczyk says

Writing is about making choices. We choose what to write about, from whose perspective to tell a story, and what we want our audience to take away from the narrative. In looking at, *True North*, let's examine the choices Harrison made. He chose this novel to be in the first person. The events are narrated by, David Burkett, the wealthy son from a family that logged and mined the Upper Peninsula of Michigan for three generations. Why use first person for this novel? What does it achieve?

First person narration shields the reader from the other characters in the novel. While the narrative may be about, Burkett, trying to understand his ancestors and make amends for the evils he believes they've brought upon the land, stripping away natural resources and bleeding their labor force in equal measure, it is really about, Burkett, the man, or Burkett, the shadow of man, trying to find his own stride against that of his father's. If this novel were in third person, the reader might end up sympathizing for some of the other characters. They couldn't be as evil unless they are seen through Burkett's skewed perspective. Of course, Burkett's father is a terrible man known for having sex with underage girls, sometimes consensually while other times forced. His terrible nature could still be represented in the third person, but it would be difficult to make him as evil as Burkett believes him to be.

The topic of the novel seems like it could be interesting. I'm from Northern Michigan, so there was a connection between me and the Upper Peninsula. However, while the narrator is writing a history of the logging industry, we never really see it and the story focuses exclusively on Burkett's relationship with the history. This process of writing for the narrator dominates his life for twenty years, in which he spends his time guiltily living off his family's wealth, wandering the woods, fishing, trolling the surface of Christianity,

having sex with women, and feeling disconnected. Perhaps, this could be interesting, but Burkett is a bland narrator, and his story and obsessions come across as mediocre and whiny. As a reader, I found myself unable to sympathize or identify with Burkett. He's petulant. He's weak. If he's an idealist, then it is negated by his utter passivity. What does he risk in the novel? When does he grow? The novel moves from the 60's through the 70's and then the 80's. But the reader never gets a sense of time really moving. The decades seem of little consequence, except that Harrison can no longer use the casual sex of the late 60's as an excuse for Burkett's sexual romps. Burkett, while in his late 30's seems to be the same as when he was in his 20's.

This brings up my last question. What is the audience supposed to take away from this novel? Does the narrator overcome his father? Do we see enough of a change that it pays off? Is the investment of roughly 400 pages of prose worth the ending? Personally, I found very little to take away. In an earlier post, I'd written how I continued to read this book because I couldn't fall asleep and didn't want to get out of bed and dig up a new book at 2 A.M. Not exactly a gun to the head, but not a ringing endorsement either. Worst of all, the ending seems tacked on. As if Harrison realized there was something dramatic lacking from the novel. It's dramatic, but we've seen that on the first page, and it comes hundreds of pages too late.

One thing I found interesting is Harrison's stab at meta-fiction. On page 340, Burkett's sometime lover who is a poet gives him some advice regarding the history he is writing. She says, "Figure it out for yourself. If you can't you'll always write shit. You're dog-paddling in too much material. Start over. Give me a hundred clean pages called 'What My People Did,' or something like that. You're trying to be a nineteenth-century curmudgeon. You're starting twelve thousand years ago with the glaciers then moving slowly onward like a fucking crippled toad. Get over the glaciers in one page, please. You quoted that beautiful prose of Agassiz. Try to understand why it's beautiful and your prose isn't. You wrote nicely in those thirteen pages because you forgot yourself and your thousand post-rationalizations and let your material emerge directly and intimately."

Perhaps, this is Burkett the narrator commenting or Harrison himself in the following passage. Whoever it is speaking, it seems to be a proper response to the novel.

"I had pressed my thumb on the dorsal fin of a trout and now watched a raindrop of blood ooze out. I had asked for this speech and been roundly whipped by a schoolmarm. All these years after the inception and I had thirteen golden pages."

Colleen O'Neill Conlan says

So good! I find myself very drawn to Harrison's writing and storytelling. This is different from the three novellas in *Legends of the Fall*. With those there was a beautiful remote distance in the telling, while this first-person narration feels more intimate.

Here, young David Burkett IV, coming from a family with great wealth on both sides, takes it as his life's mission to understand and fully examine how his forbears, land barons who logged and mined in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, exploited and decimated hundreds of thousands of acres of pristine land. Some of this is research done in historical societies across the region, but that happens more "offstage" while the bulk of what he calls his "project" involves walking the land and seeing the results of all those years of logging.

Parallel to this is his coming to terms with his father, a member of the idle class who seems to spend the family money, travel with his Yale cronies, and hang out at "the Club" with other offspring of the "Robber

Baron" generation. He's a full-blown alcoholic who has the same privileged sense of entitlement as the earlier Burkett's, but with a more personal, sinister twist. It could be said the elder Burkett's raped the land while the father simply rapes. At one point David calls the men in his lineage "alpha predators" and the description is apt on several levels. His father's wealth and family name allow him to walk away from several legal binds (what he refers to as "foibles"), but this being a Jim Harrison story, some form of restitution is sure to eventually follow.

Harrison is a very "male" writer, and if I had a dollar for every time his main character mentions his dick or his erection, I could buy three more Harrison hardcover books, at least. But it's his narrator's relationships with the female characters that resonate for me. His sister Cynthia is a strong-willed, take-no-bull girl who clocks her father with a garden rake (you'll learn why later in the book) and effectively cuts her father from her life. Other women: Laurie, his sister's friend and someone he's with to the end; Vernice, a poet he hopes to keep, and who he shares his project with; Vera, the young daughter of Jesse, his father's WWII buddy and all-around assistant; Riva, his uncle's no-nonsense sometime girlfriend; and his mother, a woozy pillhead at the start of the story who finds her true sense of motherhood late, but not too late. David loves them all and carries his love throughout the book. There is also a wonderful image, a "great mother" of a tree stump among acres of tree stumps, that the author and his narrator return to in the book. I loved this very powerful and very female image; it seems to become a kind of touchstone for David.

My only quibble, and it's minor, is that sometimes the chronology gets confusing. Harrison sometimes zigs and zags in time, and it's not always clear when we're still in a flashback or when we've emerged into the present. A few times I had to page back to orient myself. But his beautiful language, never false or overwritten, wins me over again and again.

Nancee says

True North is a young man's search for answers regarding the destruction of thousands of acres of White Pines in Northern Michigan, and his ancestors' greed. Mining was another ruthless endeavor of greed throughout the Burkett ancestors. David Burkett's life reveals a deep and complicated story of overwhelming circumstances, both in his family, and his personal life. Alcoholism and rape are examples of sinister situations included in this account of the Burkett family.

I'm impressed with Jim Harrison's writing. It took me a little while to get into the story, but once I became involved with the characters which are well developed, I couldn't stop reading this interesting narrative. This book isn't for everyone. Its depth alone may make it unsuitable for readers who enjoy a lighter read or object to obscenities and sexually explicit content.

Stefani says

As of late, I've been noticing a strange sight in NYC—the appearance of many bushily-bearded men, clad in woolen plaid lumberjack shirts, their pants held up by suspenders as they saunter through the urban wilderness that is Brooklyn waiting to fell a tree or, perhaps, to whittle a trinket for a lovely lady, should the

mood strike them. They can often be found in the local watering hole that specializes in artisanal beers or attempting to start a campfire in the park while simultaneously being harassed by the homeless population for encroaching on their turf. What a bunch of urban whistle punks.

True North is the opposite of the faux-rustic trendiness that's plaguing the NYC boroughs, taking place in the rugged corner of Michigan known as the Upper Peninsula or "UP." It's the story of the scion of a wealthy timber family whose dysfunctional upbringing causes him to reject not only the moneyed class privilege he grew up with but the methods by which that wealth was acquired. His father—a morally repugnant sexual offender who exclusively preys on underage girls—seems to glide through life with ease, buffered by his ability to pay his way out of nearly every transgression. As David, the son, drifts aimlessly through life, he gradually realizes that the anger and hostility he feels toward his father is holding him hostage.

One thing that I think that's worth mentioning is how the theme of solitude is treated here. I think all too often in literature the solitary character is meant to invoke the reader's pity and sympathy...generally, we're supposed to feel *sorry* for someone who chooses to spend their time alone because it couldn't possibly be a choice they willingly made, but one that was made for them based on some abnormality or personality quirk. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. The lone cowboy on the plains of some dust-ridden prairie or an adventurer scouting uncharted territory would seem to inspire more of a rugged individualism than be an object of scorn.

Here, the loneliness of one man is drowned out by the largesse of the landscape. He is no longer an individual, he is a small part of a much larger universe.

Brian says

"My father had closed the windows to the world and I was spending my life struggling to open them." So goes the story of David Burkett, a U.P. native struggling to come to terms with his family's history, his father's perverted transgressions, and his own place in the big picture.

True North begins with a three-quarters page italicized prologue that feels right away like an (the?) ending. Occurring in the dawn hours after an awful act of violence, the short scene is sad, disturbing, and quite possibly the most powerful page I've ever read. Really.

It's too bad, then, that the first half of the novel fails to deliver on the promise of the prologue. Though arranged quite linearly in three parts - The 60s, The 70s, and The 80s - I often felt out of focus and a tad uncertain due to Harrison's penchant for wandering - rather fluidly, I'll admit - back and forth between present and past and future. Too, the wanderings are quite often rendered in a passive voice which bleed off any sense of energy and urgency that has developed. A more sophisticated reader with critic credentials will certainly see the literary logic in such maneuvers (for Harrison is regarded as a master, so he must have done this on purpose), but I ain't a sophisticated reader.

The second half of the novel begins to make up for the first. As the story progresses into and through The 80s the scenes begin to acquire a subtle energy, a solid sense of "in the moment", mainly because they are allowed to develop without too much interference from passive returns to the past. You begin to feel the novel rolling along as David comes to understand more and more where he is, who he is, and what he must do to reconcile it all. Nearly two-thirds of the way in I began thinking of the prologue, began wondering if that is what the novel was building to. I won't spoil anything here at all (though I guess one could always flip

ahead to the end to see for themselves), but the thought will most definitely be in your mind, and it will keep you turning the page with a sad sense of dread.

David Burkett's friends and family never quite materialize as characters the way he does. As often as some of them appear there's always the sense they are an arm's length away from being fully developed. Perhaps this is a flaw in the novel. Or perhaps it is an intentional move by Harrison to convey the emotional distance David places between himself and the outside world, despite his best intentions otherwise. You decide.

True North isn't uplifting. It isn't oppressive or depressing, either. It's like life - quite often uncertain, but always heading toward something. A shaky beginning, a strong ending: three stars for Jim Harrison's True North.

Joseph D'Lacey says

I decided not to read past p50.

Clearly, many readers have enjoyed True North but I found the prose flabby, the story meandering and the protagonist bland.

Grove/Atlantic should take responsibility for the poor copy editing. In addition, pruning 30% of the text would enhance the pace.

Wish I could have enjoyed it more.

Adam Szczepanski says

So many times I wanted to devalue this book and felt like it was hack and deserving of much less than five stars, but in the end I'm a Harrison sucker and his storytelling wins out.

Why hack? As a Yooper and Marquette resident so many of the geographical references were forced and seemed to be added to prove Harrison's knowledge of the U.P. In short, it seemed pretentious to add so many anecdotal names and places to this work of fiction.

In the end, like all of his books the prose is beautiful and speaks to me. I'm not sure how this one slipped by me the last decade since publishing, but you can bet I'll be at Peter White (Public) Library tomorrow to see if I may have missed any other Harrison Classics.

Drew says

This was the first book that I read of Harrison's, back when I was 24 (I bought it for the title as I'm a native of Northern Michigan). It took a while to get used to the writing but was a literary watershed for me;

Harrison is now, by far, my favorite author. I agree that a lot of the plot elements occur early but the plot is secondary to how it affects Burkett. If some of those elements occurred later, we couldn't see how fully they integrate themselves into his life and perception of life. I've re-read this book multiple times and find something new with each reading. It's not an easy read: it isn't meant to be. It challenges the reader to keep a mental map of the events in the life of the book and I think it is the more rewarding read for it. I'm tempted to say that it's fun to spend some time in Harrison's world but he stays firmly rooted in the earth; like truly great writers, he forces the reader to consider this world with a more specific vitality.

Michael says

A disturbing yet satisfying read. As with all Harrison fiction (this is my sixth), you are immersed in the painful moral struggles of his protagonist, in this case the life long journey of David to come to terms with the evils of his ancestors and father. They made their money clearcutting vast areas of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and his father became an alcoholic and sexual predator. David has a good heart, but finds no clear pathway to make amends or forge a healthy family of his own. Instead he endeavors for many years to explore the geography and people of the region and write what he learns of the history and consequences of his family's damage. The pleasure comes from Harrison's language and imagery as a poet, which is used to create a keen sense of place, the rhythms of the seasons spanning his childhood to middle age, his handful of failed attempts to find love and transformation through sex, and well developed set of characters that sustain or impede his progression. He does a good job of capturing the darkness in light and lightness in darkness, and his saga seems a fair allegory for how we must try to amend our damage to the natural world in order to recover the ability to find it a touchstone for human life.

Robert says

I read this at the perfect time which is to say after having read several volumes of his novellas, it was helpful to have a meaningful understanding of the themes that seem to concern Mr. harrison. Harrison strikes me as a special writer in terms of a particular kindness to his readers. He always intends delivers the goods to his readers in the form of a dynamic narrative. His stories are variously entertaining, his characters I certainly find endearing. Supporting his narrative is a lot of hard earned insight regarding what it is to be a human being. He takes on larger cultural concerns with equal passion. True North is one of my personal favorites by Harrison it stands alone and is worth the time to be read well. I must admit, for some reason, I am glad I read Farmers Daughter, The Woman Lit By Fireflies, The Summer He Didn't Die, Legends Of The Fall before I read this novel. The reasons I feel that way would be better discussed over coffee perhaps.
