



Slouching Towards Kalamazoo

Peter De Vries , Derek de Vries (Afterword)

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It is 1963 in an unnamed town in North Dakota, and Anthony Thrasher is languishing for a second year in eighth grade. Prematurely sophisticated, young Anthony spends too much time reading Joyce, Eliot, and Dylan Thomas but not enough time studying the War of 1812 or obtuse triangles. A tutor is hired, and this "modern Hester Prynne" offers Anthony lessons that ultimately free him from eighth grade and situate her on the cusp of the American sexual revolution. Anthony's restless adolescent voice is perfectly suited to De Vries's blend of erudite wit and silliness—not to mention his fascination with both language and female anatomy—and it propels *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo* through theological debates and quandaries both dermatological and ethical, while soaring on the De Vriesian hallmark of scrambling conventional wisdom for comic effect.

Slouching Towards Kalamazoo Details

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From Reader Review Slouching Towards Kalamazoo for online ebook

Susan says

Hmm. Well it's certainly an erudite book. But I didn't really buy that an 8th grader was quite as sophisticated a thinker as was portrayed. And I found some of the supposed erudition to be really authorial showing off (which I found off putting). The story is o.k. but it didn't really grab me and I didn't come away thinking that I really needed to read more by this author. Given that he's apparently someone others consider to be quite literary, I'm wondering if it's the author or just this particular work. Perhaps his other works are more engaging???

Todd says

Beautifully written comic novel, with a feeling of melancholy underneath it all, which is how all great comic novels should be. I didn't want it to end. I've now read four of Peter De Vries novels. I think I have to read them all. "...She called for me at my motel early, around four-thirty, so that we might do a spot of sightseeing in her Mercedes. It was spring, and she had on what must have been a new Easter outfit. It consisted of a dusty pink linen suit and a hat like a shot fowl. It was tilted down on one side of her face at an intendedly jaunty angle, but recalling rather something plunging to earth in the autumn weather, this image to be linked with that of men crouched in duck blinds or taking aim from rowboats in the pitiless weft of things: predators themselves predestined prey in the immemorial Necessity; kin together not only with the poor feathered thing plummeting earthward in the gray dawn, but with all sentient life locked forever in communal doom. That kind of hat."

John Maniscalco says

This book was personally recommended to me by Christopher Hitchens. Seriously. Now, Christopher Hitchens is pretty much my idol. Which is why I found it so odd that this book was so boring. It's obviously supposed to be a comedic novel and it has its moments(in fact, the reason Hitch recommended it to me because in the book there is a scene where a priest and an atheist debate the existence of God, only to finish the debate by convincing each other that the other is correct), but that great scene lasts about a page and the rest of it is so slow and so tedious that I would never recommend this book to another human being. This is probably the only time I felt that Mr. Hitchens was wrong. Wait, strike that. He voted for Obama. So that's two times he was wrong.

Alex Sarll says

Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* is replete with literary allusions, and following one of the ones I didn't recognise led me to an interesting article on Peter de Vries, who was quoted as saying "You can't talk about the serious and the comic separately and still be talking about life, any more than you can independently discuss hydrogen and oxygen and still be talking about water." Which suggested to me the wry wisdom of James

Branch Cabell, and straight away had me interested. This eighties novel detailing how the sixties' sexual revolution in fact began in North Dakota had an entertaining enough way with words, but really didn't live up to that (admittedly exalted) expectation. A better comparison would be Donleavy minus some of the more experimental tics, or maybe the adult novels of Lemony Snicket's associate Daniel Handler.

Gena says

I had really high hopes for this book because I knew that De Vries had written for the New Yorker for so long and that Christopher Hitchens loved this book. My expectations were not met. It is funny, but not that funny; and clever, but not that clever. Perhaps had I gone in with lower expectations, I would have enjoyed it more. I would say that this a funny little fluffy book for the beach--although the atheist v christian parts do give some interesting things to think about--the main character, Tony, becomes a Christian-atheist...

Ronnie says

This is fast-paced, funny, intelligent, and irreverent. A big part of the humor derives from De Vries' richly allusive writing, which plays perfectly into the protagonist's main strength: He's uncannily well-read while yet being a well-known (even to himself) underachiever; plus, he's just a kid (15 as the story unfolds) with no real-world experience but sardonic wit to spare.

At one point, late, he refers to the mostly by now unfolded tale as "'twisted' theatre," and it is that, but reading it in 2018, it is also a throwback in an odd way to a seemingly simpler or more naive and definitely more chauvinistic time--e.g., the jokey situations and observations revolving around, say, women's rights and sloganized T-shirts are funny in part just because they even merit mentioning, much less having the story built around the topics. For another example: In act one, a teacher has sex with an eighth-grader (albeit an older eighth-grader--the underachieving kind who was previously held back and can give vocabulary lessons to said teacher), and the main concern surrounding the resulting pregnancy has more to do with the disapproval of the moral majority about an unwed woman being knocked up and not with any criminal repercussions, which are ubiquitous today. That said, the book's not a serious treatise on that subject and never pretends to be. You do get a sense that De Vries does take "Christian atheism" at least a little more seriously, though.

In short, the more well-read you are, the funnier you're likely to find this book. It has Easter eggs on pretty much every page.

First line:

"My old eighth-grade teacher, Miss Maggie Doubloon, said she was half Spanish, half French, and half Irish, a plethora of halves not entirely unnoticed by some of the brighter pupils."

John Crippen says

I re-read this after 25 or 30 years only because I could not find his *The Mackerel Plaza* at the library. I'm too prudish to have enjoyed the main plot, but the book improved my English, made me laugh/squirm, and had an interesting take on the role of religion in modern society. Still wish I hadn't culled my copy of *The Mackerel Plaza*.

James says

Some funny one liners does not make a comedy. Really disappointing as had heard great things about the book. not sure what went wrong, in general i feel like comedy ages worse than any other genre and this felt super dated. Also the plot in this case kid growing up in north dakota is secondary to forcing a funny line every five pages. Unfunnily enough there is a character in the book who would nudge people very hard every time he came up with a bad pun, by the end i could fully appreciate how annoying that must have been.

Janet says

A challenging book to get through but extremely witty and worth the convoluted journeys to each punch line. I can see why DeVries was chummy with the likes of JD Salinger and was admired and quoted by Kingsley Amis. DeVries was no doubt influenced by Amis's "Lucky Jim" and Waterhouse's "Billy Liar". Tony Thrasher is the extreme underachiever- a genius still in the eighth grade at age 15. I enjoyed slogging through the book.

I must add a postscript to this review: the subject matter of an affair between an eighth grade boy and his teacher was definitely looked at entirely differently in 1983 as it would be in 2016. I suppose it's not so surprising but I did not find one review that commented on this.

David Schaafsma says

It is interesting to think of Peter DeVries, a fellow English graduate of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, pal-ing around with the likes of James Thurber and JD Salinger at The New Yorker. DeVries, from Chicago's Dutch Calvinist community, became the reigning humorist in the country for many years, and fit in at The New Yorker and on the east coast as an erudite former English major. I can't imagine this appealing to anyone who was not an English major, however, because you have to know so much about language and literature to get all the inside jokes. It helps to have been raised religious, even Puritannically, in your life, too.

This is the story of fifteen year old Anthony Thrasher who is more interested in Joyce than the "chief products" of Venezuela, who impregnates his eighth grade teacher, Miss Doubloon in Ulalume, North Dakota. She then has to "slouch" home to Kalamazoo to give birth... (Literary References for \$100? Yeats, "Slouching to Bethlehem"!). The book's title has a grammar mistake in it that former English majors and grammar nit-pickers will find maddening/amusing, and this kind of mistake made by Anthony and other characters is found throughout the book. Almost every sentence has deliberate, gleeful, sardonic language play in it, with a touch of blasphemy. This is less a book with a plot than a book chock-full of jokes, malapropisms, puns, language play, aphorisms, and grammar jokes, though there is a pretty funny staged debate between the town atheist and Anthony's father, a preacher, where they convince each other, and switch positions. And the Thrasher-Doubloon relationship is pretty funny, though feels pretty dated (1983). Sort of like watching drunks on tv now; in the sixties that was funny. Now, not so much.

Since I am an ex-Calvinist Calvin grad English teacher, I am the perfect audience for this book, so this was

very funny for me, though a little too mad-cap and romp-ish than my usual read. I'd read it first in the eighties, so it was nice to return to it, but it is not the masterpiece *Blood of the Lamb* is. But as comic novel focused on language play, it is terrific.

Eric Hensler says

De Vries has an absolute mastery of the English language such that his beautifully arranged sentences seem so effortless one almost doesn't notice. I return to this tome often, just to enjoy the grammatical wonders he creates. Do yourself a favor and get a copy of this book. You, likewise, will probably return to it again and again...

Mike Saou says

Written with the same lyrical mastery that I have come to expect from Peter De Vries, but having read "Blood of the Lamb" first, I'm a little biased toward that work. I think "Slouching Toward Kalamazoo" requires a little more working knowledge of the era in which it refers to fully understand all the references (basically if you're not as genius as De Vries, some humor will slip past, though this may be an editorial confession to being an ignoramus). Fantastic nonetheless.

Alex Sogo says

De Vries may be labeled a "comic author," but *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo* is no light reading. Told from the perspective of a genius teenager who shows off his intellectual powers to the reader in his very narration, the book is a challenge worthy of the most skilled readers. De Vries's linguistic expertise, which is rather awe-inspiring, often borders on ostentation. However, this seemingly absurd pretentiousness perfectly captures the childish mentality of his young protagonist who craves attention and praise to reassure himself of his own value. That said, make sure you have a dictionary and Wikipedia on hand when reading this book; the sheer amount of name dropping and literary references almost forces you to become an expert in British and American poetry in order to fully appreciate the work.

Despite the challenges inherent in the text, the end result is quite a work of brilliance. *Slouching Towards Kalamazoo* tackles issues of religion and sexuality with a voice that is both comic and intelligent. He twists elements of famous literary works to present a changing world, where secularism challenges the religious traditions of old at every corner. Whether you understand all the jokes or not, De Vries's wit alone is enough to make the book entertaining.

The story runs out of steam near the end, but it is soon replaced with a highly academic essay on a new model for religion that De Vries calls "Christian Atheism." While this little tag ending contains some fascinating ideas, I did not think it was necessary and was rather disappointing as an ending.

This book is not for everyone, but those who accept the challenge will find it highly rewarding.

Andrew says

Not finished - it was only 100 pages.. but I loved it! earthy sexual exploration by pleasant young man with lots of snow too. I want more... will finish later. try this book!

Michael says

Very strange in being simultaneously laugh-out-loud funny, but not especially enjoyable. The beginning and end are better than the middle, which sags a bit.
