



The Dollmaker

Harriette Simpson Arnow

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Strong-willed, self-reliant Gertie Nevels's peaceful life in the Kentucky hills is devastated by the brutal winds of change. Uprooted from her backwoods home, she and her family are thrust into the confusion and chaos of wartime Detroit. And in a pitiless world of unendurable poverty, Gertie will battle fiercely and relentlessly to protect those things she holds most dear -- her children, her heritage . . . and her triumphant ability to create beauty in the suffocating shadow of ugliness and despair.

The Dollmaker Details

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Author : Harriette Simpson Arnow

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From Reader Review The Dollmaker for online ebook

Nathan says

This book just made my "greatest novels of all time" list. Probably because it pretty much sums up my political ideologies in a simple and beautiful narrative. It was recommended to me by my grandmother-in-law and I wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone else. I dream to have a life just like the life Gertie Nevels dreamed of and only hope that my dreams won't also be squashed by the military-industrial complex that thrives off of unbridled capitalism and unchecked nationalism.

I found the theological discourse throughout the book to be of an uncommonly sofisticated nature, yet it could not be more unpretentious. It reaches well beyond the shallow religious debates we're used to being subjected to in modern media and print.

Finally, this book serves as a welcome reminder of where America once was and the "progress" we've been forced to adjust to. This is the story of America in the twentieth century.

Debbie says

I read this book when I was 10 or 11 and cried all the way through it. I was mad at my mother for letting me read it because it was so sad, but later in life realized this book helped to shape me into the person I became. I have looked for this book off and on over the last 40 plus years and am very glad to see it is still in print and people are reading it. This truly was one of the best lessons about life my mother taught me.

Karen says

I had been trying to remember the details of this book and the title, I read it years ago and was excited because the setting was in Detroit (I live just outside Detroit)

After a few years of trying to remember the name of this book, someone just reviewed it on my feed!!
I need to read this again but it is definitely a 5 star read!!!

debra says

I just saw this book on GR and remembered how very much I loved it. I read it sooo many years ago-but as soon as I saw Gertie's name(main character) scenes from the book immediately popped into my head. The 5*s I give this book are in a different category than the 5*s I give to many other books.

I don't know if this book will stand the test of time -but I do know that when I read the book it totally knocked me out!!

Mary Soderstrom says

The Dollmaker: A Novel about Detroit--and Ordinary Courage--During World War II

It took me a couple of days after the announcement of Detroit's very close brush with complete bankruptcy to remember Harriette Arnow's novel about life in Motor City during the Second World War, *The Dollmaker*.

First published in 1954, the story centers on Gertie, a strong, capable woman who moves with her husband and children to Detroit so he can work in the war industry. As a gripping story of what it was like to move from Appalachia to a big, crowded city, the book has few peers. It opens with Gertie, whose hobby is whittling dolls, doing a tracheotomy on her little son who is choking with diphteria. From then on, the reader is hooked.

I first read the book after Joyce Carol Oates wrote about it in *The New York Times* in 1971. It had more or less been forgotten, even though it had been a big best seller when it was first published. Whe I read it, I found it engrossing. The image of the steel mill Arnow paints has stayed with me ever since.

Oates's essay apparently is now an afterword for an edition that is still in print: a paperback edition was published in 2009. To judge from the number of teacher's guides on-line, the novel must also appear on reading lists for a number of high school and junior college English classes.

That should not scare you away, though. Read it to get a feel for what it was like to work in the factories of Detroit in the city's heyday, to understand what ordinary folk were up against, and to appreciate the strength of the women who had to stand by their menfolk.

Kati says

I rated this a 5 because I read it at least 15 years ago & it still remains one of my favorite books. A TV movie was made in the 80's based on it (Jane Fonda starred) -- did not come close to doing the book justice. An Appalachian woman, along with her husband and children, moves to Detroit where the family hopes to find a better life. The setting is just after WWII when industry was in full swing. Main character carves wooden dolls, thus the title. Book is about leaving "home", culture shock, relationships. Have recommended to book groups & always get positive feedback. Copyright 1960's.

Larry Bassett says

The Dollmaker opens with intense action that proves to be foreshadowing . A mother is taking her young son to a doctor; they are riding on a mule, the only transportation available in this emergency. Using the mule in desperation as a road block, she stops a speeding car on a back country road. As the son is suffocating due to a congested throat, she takes out her knife and with the unwilling help of the men in the car cuts a breathing hole in his neck. The boy does survive thanks to the determination and skill of his mother.

After this startling beginning the book settles into the story of a subsistence farming mountain family. The father earns some hard cash by hauling small amounts of coal for people to use in their heating stoves in his ancient truck. It is the beginning of the U.S. participation in the Second World War. All the able-bodied men are being taken into the army or going north to work in the high paying factories producing war goods.

The story takes you into the life of one extended family as they struggle to live off the land, the only way they know to live.

I cannot tell you how many times I have started to read this book. I was assigned to read it in a 1967 college social work class and I am giving myself one more chance. I think the fact that the book has over 600 pages has something to do with my failure to date. But now I have actually read a few pretty long books so maybe I can manage this one. And this is actually the “short” book of the several I am reading right now.

I am on a Detroit-setting jag at the moment. I hadn’t remembered that the setting here was the motor city during WWII when the auto industry converted to a war industry making everything from the Jeep to the huge bombers.

In the United States the preparation for industrial mobilization was negligible until 1940; in fact, there was no serious effort even to restrict civilian automobile production until after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Still, the American automotive industry represented such a concentration of productive capacity and skill that, once its resources had been harnessed to war production, its contribution was tremendous. Between 1940 and 1945 automotive firms made almost \$29 billion worth of military materials, a fifth of the country’s entire output. The list included 2,600,000 military trucks and 660,000 jeeps, but production extended well beyond motor vehicles. Automotive firms provided one-half of the machine guns and carbines made in the United States during the war, 60 percent of the tanks, all the armoured cars, and 85 percent of the military helmets and aerial bombs.

It had been assumed that automotive facilities could be readily converted for aircraft production, but this proved more difficult than anticipated. Automobile assembly plants did not readily accommodate airframes, nor could an automobile engine factory be converted without substantial modification. These problems were eventually resolved, and automobile companies contributed significantly to aircraft production.

Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/t...>

The Nevels family of five children moves from the Appalachian mountains of Kentucky to join the father Clovis who has gotten a job in a Detroit war factory. The mother, Gertie, gives up her hopes of buying farm property to improve their lives. She feels she must do this since it is the duty of the wife to follow her husband. It is the early 1940s and they move into a crowded, dirty slum project in Detroit built for the factory workers. Gertie hates it, unable to adjust after life in the country living on the land. She takes her ways and family into the city and struggles to make it work.

She begins to see the pressures of their new home on the children. Talking with the school principal:

“Are you sure you won’t mind leaving it? I guess it’s an heirloom,” the man said.

Gertie smiled. “I’ve left four youngens here. I oughtn’t to mind leaven an old split-basket.”

“They’ll be all right,” the man said. “They will” – now he didn’t seem himself at all, but was like Mrs. Vashinski – “adjust. This school has many children from many places, but in the end they all – most – adjust, and so will yours. They’re young.”

“Adjust?” One empty hand pulled a finger of the other empty hand.

“Yes, adjust, learn to get along, like it – be like the others – learn to want to be like the others.”

“Oh,” she pondered, looking down the hall – ugly gray – and at the children laughing in the doorway, then turned to him with a slow headshake. ”I want em to be happy – but I don’t know I want em to – to – “

“Adjust?”

“Leastways not too good.”

And then later with one of the teachers:

Mrs. Whittle bit her freshly lipsticked lips. “The trouble is,” she went on, “you don’t want to adjust – and Rueben doesn’t either.”

“That’s part way right,” Gertie said, moving past her to the stairs. “But he can’t hep the way he’s made. It’s a lot more trouble to roll out steel – an make it like you want it – than it is biscuit dough.”

Some in Detroit called Gertie and her family hillbillies. They didn’t mean it kindly. She was big and not pretty.

In glancing at the basket, she saw a huge and ugly woman, flat-cheeked, straight-lipped, straggly-headed, her face grayed with tiredness and coal dust, even her chapped lips gray. The straight, almost bushy black brows below the bony forehead were on a level with her own, and she realized she was looking at herself – the same old Gertie who had made her mother weep.

She tries to withstand the pressure to change her ways. Sometimes she resists and sometimes she tries to fit into her new life. She always believes they will return to Kentucky when the war ends and the factory jobs end.

She experiences a litany of events that try her body and soul. Her whittling is one of her few escapes from her unhappy daily life. Among the things she skillfully whittles are small wooden dolls, the source of the title of the book.

The mountain accents are very well done and the settings of a vivid Kentucky and then a bleak Detroit are made appropriate and believable. Much of the writing mirrors the contrasting settings with living and dying palpably created. There are no words to make you want to be in the Detroit projects. Like Gertie, you are drawn back to the mountains.

Then, the war ends, and they don’t return to Kentucky. This requires more adjusting and acceptance.

Gertie could hear no rejoicing, no lifting of the heart that all the planned killing and wounding of the men were finished. Rather it was as if the people had lived on blood, and now that the bleeding was ended, they were worried about their future food.

Why hadn’t I realized what was missing from this book set in the Detroit war time factories? There had been some references to labor unions but just as I thought the book was winding down and I was going to find out

if our Nevels family was going to pack up and go back to Kentucky, a significant union aspect to the story develops. There is a strike after the war and the Nevels family is in the midst of it. The story ramps up again and portrays unions that stand between exploited workers and their bosses as well as participating in labor violence during a turbulent time.

Our transplanted family faces crises, one after another, as well as conflicts with their neighbors. As Joyce Carol Oates writes in the Afterword, "It is part of the industrial society that people of widely varying backgrounds should be thrown together, like animals competing for a small, fixed amount of food, forced to hate one another."

Gertie, with her hand carving of wooden dolls and other small objects, is a highly skilled self-taught craftswoman. But with pressure from Clovis to earn money, she begins to use a pattern and a jig saw to mass produce the dolls, just like the factories that have dominated the devolving lives of her family members.

Four stars for good writing and a compelling story. In my opinion, it could have been somewhat shorter and accomplished the same results. But the action came in waves creating a lot of intensity that kept me reading. The action at the onset of the story pulled me in immediately. The story of a strong woman who is unable to go against her husband is a constant part of the book. It is something to ponder.

Lynn Joshua says

The unforgettable and tragic story of an Appalachian family lured to Detroit by the promise of high wages. Living in the heart of the industrialized north during WW II, Gertie, the strong and good wife and mother, shows determination and grace as she struggles to adjust while her dreams of self-sufficiency and personal freedoms shrink and perish. Her family is forced into dependence on the machine of industrialized society which relentlessly destroys their independence and dignity.

It's a classic of American 'regional' literature.

(The Dollmaker was a runner-up for the 1955 National Book Award (won by Faulkner with *The Fable*)).

Chuck says

First published in 1954, this Dreiseresque novel chronicles the movement of a family from rural Kentucky to Detroit during World War II. The husband (Clotis Nevels) works in a factory; his wife Gertie takes in laundry and occasionally sells hand-whittled crucifixes and dolls; the children amuse themselves in the backyards and alleys. Not surprisingly, the move from farm to factory slowly kills both people and spirits. Although there are occasional positive social interactions in the family's little community of government-supported housing, the dominant themes are friction, prejudice, deprivation, and loss. The novel opens with a gripping and memorable chapter, but frequently bogs down over 600 pages of stark and minute social realism before finally reaching a symbolically appropriate conclusion. Readers with a Dickensian mindset will be ready to tackle this work, but life is short and there's lots of literature out there. (For those who prefer name-brand critics, Joyce Carol Oates's afterword is full of praise for this book.)

Suzanne says

“Gertie for the first time really looked at the rows of little shed-like buildings, their low roofs covered with snow, the walls of some strange grey-green stuff that seemed neither brick, wood, nor stone. She had glimpsed them briefly when they turned into the side road, but had never thought of them as homes. She had hardly thought of them at all, they were so little and so still against the quivering crimson light, under the roaring airplane, so low after the giant smokestacks.”

It is the early 1940,’s. Back home in Kentucky, Gertie’s husband Clovis has lost his job hauling coal because all the coal-miners have been drafted to serve in the war. Men like Clovis, who have been turned away at the enlistment office, feel the tug to go to Detroit, where the lure of big dollars for factory work drives them from their homes. Once settled, he sends for his wife and children, but Detroit, and their hopes, become tarnished and dirty as reality sets in.

This novel was originally published in 1954, and yet, it could certainly be a best-seller if published today. The themes are still relevant and Gertie’s struggles come alive once immersed in this beautiful, highly readable, tragic book.

There is such a sense a place here. We see clearly the Kentucky countryside, barely life-giving, but yet stunning and loving in a way that families sometimes are. It is home to Gertie, it is what she knows and it is what can sustain her. And in contrast, the cramped, grey, dirty Detroit. It is cold and suffocating and Gertie must not only make it her home, she must make familiar that which is so alien to her.

There is no happy ending in this book. It is about real life. Sometimes things go the way we wish, and sometimes not. Sometimes you must just endure. I live in North Dakota, where a huge oil boom is happening in the western part of the state. Due to the national economic downturn, thousands of men show up there, looking for work, pinning their hopes on the good paying jobs that can be found there. But reality soon sets in. Like Gertie, they find that the work is hard and the hours are long. The pay, which would be great back home, barely seems to make ends meet as high demand pushes prices upward. And while the need for workers is great, the towns in the west cannot provide the infrastructure and housing fast enough. Cheap, modular units, built to house the workers, are the equivalent of Gertie’s cramped shed-like houses. They come there to work, but all the while, they dream of going back home.

The Dollmaker is a timeless achievement, with unforgettable characters and a rich in the strength of human adversity. Highly recommend. 4 1/2 stars.

Annie says

This was a book I read in college over 30 years ago and I still remember it. It was well written, but you may need to take anti depressants after you are done.

Katy says

My Appalachian Writers professor mentioned that she knew of a few colleagues who were forming a club for people who could only read *The Dollmaker* once. I might be in that club. This book is long, but so rich

and so well-written that I would love to read it again, especially from a spiritual/biblical perspective. On the other hand, there is such tragedy that this book takes an emotional commitment, one I can't imagine allowing myself to make again any time soon. This book is bigger than its genre and I would hate for someone to miss it because they don't appreciate "Appalachian" literature.

Jenny says

It is a fine writer who can make you love being miserable.

Elizabeth K. says

This book was depressing, didactic, full of despair and in parts, disturbingly graphic (and this review is brought to you by the letter D). That said, it was an amazing book and I can't believe I made it to this advanced age without reading it. A Kentucky farmwoman and her children reluctantly follow her husband to Detroit during WWII, where he works at one of the auto factories for the war effort. No kidding, these people can outJoad the Joads any day of the week, and twice on Sundays. Everything about the rural experience is good, and everything about the urban experience is poisonous. Plus, all the dialogue is written out in Kentucky hill dialect. I am sure my encouraging description is making people want to read this, but seriously, it was one of those books that I couldn't put down. By rights, it should be too heavy-handed to enjoy, but the writing was breathtaking and it really succeeds in making you feel like you are right there, suffering through Detroit winters and lock-outs and war department telegrams and debt and agony.

Grade: A++

Recommended: To people who might enjoy wallowing in a dismal family saga, people who like lots of domestic detail about homefront experiences, and especially to anyone interested in the rural emigration sparked by WWII, which I always feel you don't hear nearly enough about. Reconstruction and the Depression hog all the rural exodus stuff, I think.

Stephanie Jane (Literary Flits) says

See more of my book reviews on my blog, Literary Flits

I know it's still only the very beginning of March, but I feel certain *The Dollmaker* will turn out to be my Book Of The Month. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be my Book Of The Year too. It's that amazing! I was completely immersed in every page of Arnow's writing and it is rare that a book grips me to this extent throughout, especially one of over 600 pages. I don't understand why Harriette Arnow isn't world famous. Literature of this standard is absolutely a classic and I am grateful to Vintage Classics for their reprinting. I might never have found *The Dollmaker* otherwise.

I do perhaps need to divulge at this point that, despite my enthusiasm, *The Dollmaker* is not a happy book. There are certainly joyful moments, but if you like your fiction to be uplifting then this probably wouldn't be your best choice. If, on the other hand, you enjoy thought-provoking social commentary, richly detailed scenes and events, and superbly observed and portrayed characters, I would urge you to give this novel a try. I spent two days, pretty much unable to set the book aside, with Gertie and her family feeling her hope, fury

and despair, and understanding how she could set aside a brief glimpse of paradise for a very literal interpretation of hell. I am sure The Dollmaker will remain in my thoughts for weeks and possibly months to come. Discovering a book of this quality is why I love reading and I will be eagerly recommending to every reader I know!

Kim says

came in the mail yesterday. it is really a good book to read. a must read for everyone

Nicole says

I believe Joyce Carol Oates recommended this book either in the forward or in a review. In any event, I never would have discovered it otherwise. The author introduces the reader to the world of rural Kentucky during a time of deep poverty and despair. It's a tough read as some awful stuff happens but, at the same time, it's a book you won't be able to put down. There was one moment when I was literally sobbing so hard that I had to stop reading. It's fiction, but the book paints a true portrait of life for families who had to struggle just to put food on the table. A remarkable book and beautifully written.

Shannon The Show Stopper says

It's been years since I read this book but I can say this about it without a doubt...It's a masterpiece! I cannot encourage you enough to read this book.

Beth says

One of my favorite novels. This book still haunts me.

For regional writers: a fine use of dialect, without creating or living up to stereotypical renderings of characters from Appalachia.

For students of American literature: a rich, meaty example of the literary movement of natural determinism, ala Ellen Glasgow.

For those with Appalachian roots: It'll make you miss yer kin somethin fierce.

Debby says

WOW!! Amazing describes The Doll Maker perfectly! I was shocked to find that less than 1500 members of

GR have read this highly rated book, especially since it was written in the 1954. That simply should not be the case. I would think that by word of mouth alone through the decades this book would have been recommended to hundreds of thousands of readers and even required reading in school. It should have nabame recognition and loyal fans like A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, if you ask me.

Set in rural KY during WWII, this is the story of a strong-willed and self-reliant woman who carries the full weight of life altering choices for the sake of her family despite her plans and dreams for a life for them. Gertie Nevels defines perseverance in the face of a hard life's trials and tribulations.

Gertie has secretly scrimped and saved for years to buy a piece of property for her family to farm and call their own for the rest of their lives. As her husbnd is preparing to go off to war, a particular plot of land becomes available and she pursues this dream. Plans change forever.

Woven throughout this book is Gertie's one constant, her whittling of dolls and her whittling of a large piece of cherry wood into a replica of Judas or Jesus; she can't decide.

There are many other women and families whose paths cross Gertie's and her family and each of them have a story to tell of sacrifice, prejudice and dreams of a life beyond what they experience presently.

This breathtaking, gut wrenching, heartbreaking and inspiring family saga is a "must read" is you ask me. The ending left me speechless! I'll be savoring this book for years to come. I'll also be recommending it to all my fiction loving, especially Appalachian fiction loving, family and friends. Word abouyt this book has got to be spread!!

Side note to my review - Upon finishing the book, I wanted to watch the film based on the book; however it is not available on DVD. Why? That said, I cannot believe that Jane Fonda was cast as Gertie, along with a star studded cast. Once you read the book, you'll understand what I mean. I recall that Fonda did a great job with the role, but in my opinion, not a fit for the character as written by the author. I loathe when Hollywood "improves" on a character or a storyline b/c they think a "plain" character, as the author intended, won't sell tickets. I'm generally disappointed with film adaptations, so go figure on this one!

The Doll Maker is a reading experience I'll be savoring for many years to come. hope to be able to locate more of Arnow's work too.
