

Sins of the Seventh Sister

Huston C. Curtiss

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How many times have you thought, “this has got to be true—no one could make this up?” Well, in 1929, Huston Curtiss was seven years old, living with his beautiful, opinionated mother (whose image is on the cover of this book), and surrounded by their romantic, fiercely independent, and often certifiably insane relatives. Huston has never before written about that time—an era of racism and repression, a time when this country was still relatively young, an age of quirky individualism and almost frontier-style freedom that largely has ceased to exist. Fearful he would not be believed, on one hand, but desirous of the freedom to embellish, on the other, Curtiss chronicles that time in **Sins of the Seventh Sister**, a book he characterizes as “a novel based on a true story of the gothic South.”

It is his story and the story of the people of Elkins, West Virginia, a small town whose inhabitants included his mother, Billy-Pearl Curtiss, and her many sisters—all stunning blondes. Billy-Pearl would prove to be an irresistibly romantic figure in her son’s life. She was the seventh of eleven children, all girls to her father’s consternation. By the time of her arrival, her father felt he had been patient enough and insisted on calling her Billy; he taught her everything he had intended to impart to his firstborn son. She would grow up to be one of the most beautiful women in the county, but also one of the most opinionated and liberal. Her aim was so precise that she was barred from the local turkey shoot because none of the men had a chance against her. When a Klansman accused her of attempted homicide after she shot him through the shoulder to stop him from setting fire to the home of her black neighbors, she told the sheriff, “If I had meant to kill him, he’d be dead.” And with that defense, she was exonerated.

Curtiss Farm was large and the house had many rooms, which Billy-Pearl got in the habit of gathering people to fill, especially the downtrodden who had nowhere to go. In May 1929, Billy-Pearl brought home a boy from the local orphanage. Stanley was sixteen, the age at which the orphanage kicked children out, and Billy-Pearl, knowing his sad history, could not allow him to end up on the streets. Stanley had witnessed his father beat his mother to death in a drunken rage and had taken a straight razor and slit his father’s throat while he slept. A country judge had the boy castrated to control his aggressive ways. Not a boy, but not yet a man, Stanley was tall, willowy, and frightened as a colt upon his arrival at Curtiss Farm—not at all the playmate for whom Huston had hoped. But quickly a friendship developed between the two that would last a lifetime—a friendship that would survive murder, suicide, madness, and Stanley’s eventual transformation into Stella, a singer who would live her adult life as a glamorous woman.

Sins of the Seventh Sister is brilliantly conceived and masterfully written, as alive with flamboyant characters and wildly uncontained emotions as any book to come out of the South.

Sins of the Seventh Sister Details


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From Reader Review *Sins of the Seventh Sister* for online ebook

Sarah Beth says

Summarized by the author as a novel based on the true story of his life, this book follows Huston Curtiss, who is a seven year old living in Elkins, West Virginia in 1929. His father is a philandering drunk and his mother is the beautiful, opinionated seventh daughter of eleven total girls. Frustrated by the racial and cultural limitations of her time, Hughie's mother Billy-Pearl sets to right what wrongs she can and care for those that society has abandoned including a black family persecuted by the Klan, an elderly schoolteacher facing the poorhouse, and a teenager named Stanley who is facing eviction from the orphanage. In particular, Hughie forms a bond with Stanley, who will eventually go on to become a glamorous singer known as Stella.

Many things about this novel seemed far fetched. I lost track of the number of people who die in its pages, many through violent means. It seemed as if a character died every few pages. I found it hard to believe that Billy-Pearl would be able to get away with participating in so many murders, even if she was morally justified in killing Klan members. The body count was particularly shocking considering the fact that the narrator was a young child. Little concern seems to be given to the fact that Hughie frequently witnesses murders and gruesome dead bodies. When his mother expresses concern on the first killing Hughie witnesses, their house servant dismisses her worry, saying, "This ain't no ordinary seven-year-old child" (61). This failed to seem like sufficient justification for me.

In addition, many of the details seemed difficult to believe. Many of the characters in this book are eccentric, participating in incestuous relationships, political intrigue, and murderous schemes. In many ways, aspects of the book felt fantastical. For instance, three Dutch ladies come to live with Billy-Pearl and Hughie and miraculously clothe and feed all of its many inhabitants. They craft a beautiful evening gown for Billy-Pearl, down to dyeing her shoes to match. Rather than wicked stepsisters, Billy-Pearl declares them the "sweetest stepsisters a girl ever had" (224). Similarly, Stanley undergoes a magical, Cinderella-like transformation, "Here was a boy who last year was living in a miserable orphanage where they made him fire the furnace instead of going to school and then threatened to throw him out on the street. And now here he was, a new name, a new life, and off to spend a week in a sixty-room mansion with the richest girl in the world" (238).

In the note that prefaces the novel, as well as the novel's summary, special emphasis is given to the relationship between Stanley and Hughie. While Hughie does claim to be attached to Stanley, in many ways he seems to be a very marginal character throughout the bulk of the book. Likewise, although this novel is named for Hughie's mother, who does feature prominently throughout the book, this is Hughie's story at heart and not that of either Billy-Pearl or Stanley. Hughie observes Billy-Pearl and Stanley, but seems emotionally disconnected from them when it comes to their own feelings or desires.

Although I admired Billy-Pearl's outspoken declaration of her beliefs and her efforts to help the poor, minorities, and other victimized individuals, I didn't particularly care for Hughie as a narrator or the many violent ends within this book.

Colleen Mertens says

Curtiss describes growing up on his family's farm and all that entailed in the South when Jim Crow ruled. It amazes me to see how some people stand up the the status quo and can change things and how that person

often holds sway over a lot of people. I love when some folks in the story get whats coming to them. It tackles many serious issues and is for a mature reader.

Dixie Meeks says

An incredible Southern Gothic tale. It's been years since I've read this book and it still lingers in my mind (I'm talking around 15 years ago). If you like good Southern writing and memoirs, read this book. You won't be disappointed.

Christine says

a very strange story of the "gothic south" in 1929. The beginning leads you to believe it will be about Stanley and Hughie, but it really covers Hughie's mother (the 7th sister) and all her "good deeds" which include taking in people who need help: Stanley, who killed his father after his father killed his mother (Stanley was castrated and sent to an orphanage, but Hughie's mom rescued him); a black family whose home is burned by the KKK; a school teacher who no longer had a school came to the house and taught the black children who weren't allowed to go to school and some other neighbors; other young men down on their luck who needed work etc. Hughie's mom also killed many (dozens?) "bad people" as she felt necessary, mostly KKK members, while the sheriff (her lover) looked the other way.

A lot of detail from the memory of a 7 year old, supposedly comes from Hughie's diary that he kept at the time.

Was not a quick read, did not draw me into the story. A lot of characters to sort out.

Katrina says

Bills itself as "A novel based on a true story of the Gothic South". The body count gets unexpectedly high.

Marcia Bourgeois says

Loved this book. I grew up in the town right next to this do I was interested just because of that, but the book offered so much more. It's hard to believe it's true , but truth is stranger than fiction.

Stephanie says

This book is absolutely captivating. I could not put it down. I love books of this nature and find it so hard to find more like it! Hats off to Huston Curtiss! With true life stories this interesting, who needs fiction?

Diana says

I just had to give this five stars because it was one of the all-time favorites. I am having a hard time putting it all to words, but have been emailing a close friend from high school who recommended it. Her mother recently died and she found it on the nightstand next to her mother's bed and took it home with her, only to become so engrossed that she had to let me know about it. We enjoy many of the same books, so I got it through my library and I was in a tailspin, resenting my job, wishing the dog could take herself for a walk and not answering my phone. I would take breaks and look up the veracity of the extraordinary tales that were spun by Huston Curtiss, who published this book many years after its characters were long-gone from this earth and could testify to its truth. Or not. Can't find a thing on Billy-Pearl Curtiss or any of the characters and yet they bloom with life and not a one is ordinary. The bottom-line is that it simply doesn't matter; it is an engrossing read, very well-written, and funny. I highly recommend it when you have a slice of life that can be devoted to reading because I doubt you will want to do otherwise once you begin.

I do believe that the advertising should have been different and that Mr. Curtiss hadn't wound it all up so quickly, but it still deserves all of the stars I gave it.

I read somewhere that Stanley actually became a country-western singer. Does that mean he was a castrato country-western singer? Or was he an Appalachian folk-singer? It is much easier to imagine him as a diva.

Fostergrants says

The gossipy nature of this story made it easy to read and it went down quickly over a holiday weekend. The rituals and chores of country life on a farm and the descriptions of the people involved in the story carried me away to another time. The hardships of the early 1920-30's are really interesting in the rear-view. Each person became real to me and I laughed out loud at some of the caricatures.

What really touched me was that the mother in the story helped so many people, but for some reason never reached out to her own son. Maybe she thought he didn't need love since he had money? It's an undercurrent and you know it will be a big deal at some point. The subtle delivery of the final stab is worth the wait, even though the middle gets weighed down a bit with details.

I read this like a great old 'film noir' - with all the late Barrymore's playing central roles - meets a rerun of "Dallas".

Lee Ann says

Interesting, supposed true story of the life of the author as a boy during the late 20's and early 30's. Talk about a dysfunctional family, Curtiss maternal and paternal sides are characters from a soap opera. "Hughie's" mother, in particular, takes in all the strays, fights the Klan, educates the black children, raises champion horses, sleeps with the sheriff, and more. Hughie believes she loves everyone but him and is honest about his unkind feelings as a child!

Marna says

I loved this book so much when I read it a few years ago--I promptly lent it to a friend because I knew she would like it. I don't think she's read it yet, so I must get it back to re-read it. Fabulous, fabulous book. Not for the faint-of-heart, mind you. Some of the ideas may challenge the more tightly-wound reader. But I found the characters endearing, or hateful, or sympathetic, but always engendering a response; the adventures thrilling; the relationships memorable; the story magnificent.

Rachel says

"A novel based on a true story of the Gothic South". Being from West Virginia (where the book takes place), I figured I had to read this book. Citing from the publisher...'nestled in a web of murder, rape, abuse and adultery is the often happy and always loving home of Huston ("Hughie") Curtiss. His memoir, which roots itself in the events of 1929, when he's only seven years old, reveals a slice of the eccentric life of one white West Virginian family. Hughie's mother, the powerful, progressive and indefatigable Billy-Pearl, heads the family and has a knack for attracting the desperate and destitute. She adopts a motley crew, including a castrated orphan who becomes a successful opera singer, a black family running from the KKK and a homeless schoolteacher. The seventh of 11 daughters, Billy tries her best-with the help of her ever-expanding extended family-to eradicate prejudice, abuse and poverty. Together the extended family struggles through the '29 stock market collapse and the dangerous racism plaguing the South, resorting to measures as drastic as murder to keep themselves safe.'

Despite what appears to be raging debates on whether there is any truth to the novel, I was captivated by the story. Melodramatic at times (well, many times), but it was refreshing to read about an affluent family in the south during the depression and during KKK times trying their best to help people in need. It was also fascinating to read about the day to day life back then...making lye soap out of embers from the apple butter session for example. Certainly entertaining, definitely compelling, and an easy read.

Theadra Chapman says

I loved this book. Could not put it down. I desperately wanted to share it with everyone I knew so I could have hours and hours of discussion. But I couldn't think of anyone who would get past the first chapter.

Real life is messy and shocking. This book holds nothing back and I am so grateful. I wish I could quantify this story and write the words that would make everyone read this, but I honestly don't think everyone should. I think perhaps we're too conservative a species to comfortably make allowances for things that are different. But different can be heroic.

Pauline says

Was going to close it up, shelf it but got caught up and read every last word.

Lindsey says

Sins of the 7th Sister is billed as the true story of Huston Curtiss' life growing up in Elkins, West Virginia while at the same time being labeled a novel. I have to believe it is more novel because it asks me to believe a little bit too much for it to be a memoir. At its center is Curtiss' mother, Billy-Pearl, the seventh of ten Fancier daughters and a progressive liberal. She marries Huston Curtiss and takes over his family farm and her in-laws leave her at the helm even after their son abandons the family. And then she proceeds to bring in many members of the community who need help (including a castrated boy who later becomes a famous female opera singer, a black family, an abused family, and a retired teacher) and the book quickly turns into a Tarantino movie. She has to take on the Klan and being one of the best shots in the county, she doesn't have much trouble bringing them down. Though the bloodshed was not described at the level it would be demonstrated in a Tarantino film, it was disconcerting to suddenly be in the midst of her systematic take down and then to believe there were zero repercussions. I loved many of the characters in this book because not only were the people brought in by Billy-Pearl interesting, but the both lines of Curtiss' family were also filled with intriguing characters. Between the endearing characters and the sense of humor threaded throughout, I found myself overall enjoying this book. But, there were also several things that troubled me because they were handled relatively flippantly such as molestation, murder, and gang rape. ***SPOILERS AHEAD*** These are some very heavy subjects and the book just kind of presents them quickly and like "and then he sucked my dick", "and then she shot him", or "and then they gang raped her and later they tarred and feathered her". And, I found myself thinking, "whoa, that just happened, is that really all we're going to say about it". And those are the things that put this book firmly in the "this is a novel category" even though they try to tell me it's true.
