



The Book of Ruth

Jane Hamilton

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Winner of the 1989 PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award for best first novel, this exquisite book confronts real-life issues of alienation and violence from which the author creates a stunning testament to the human capacity for mercy, compassion and love.

The Book of Ruth Details

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From Reader Review The Book of Ruth for online ebook

rockle says

Didn't really care for this book, but didn't hate it either. Not sure that I would recommend it. One of the reviewers of this book called it "a sly and wistful ... human comedy" and another said the "small-town characters are ... appealingly offbeat and brushed with grace" but I wonder if those reviewers read the same book that I did. I found the novel dispiriting, depressing, and rather boring. Perhaps if this was part of a series, and we could also hear others' stories (May's and Matt's and Ruby's and Justy's) in their own voices, I would like it better. Alone, it feels like there is not enough to explain Ruth's feelings, her background, and why she would put up with the things she did, instead of doing something to change them.

Jessika says

I must admit, after spotting many negative reviews of this on Goodreads, I was a little wary to read this. This book has been sitting on my shelf for a few years, and I thought I'd give it a try.

I ended up really liking this book. It's not the easiest book to read, in regards to its subject matter, but I think it's an important one, all the same.

Basically, this is the story of Ruth and her life. I liked Ruth. She may have been simple-minded, but sometimes, she'd say something that really just made me think, and I love authors who can do that. Ruth is not pretentious and she's not trying to tell a woe-is-me story, even though my heart broke for her again and again. You really get the feeling that she's just telling her story, whatever it entails, good or bad. Ruth is a very naive person, but at the same time she has this astounding deeper understanding of the way life and nature works.

I'm not quite sure what it was that sucked me into this book. I usually don't go for these depressing reads, and this one really is a bummer. Poor Ruth just can't get a break. I was rooting for her the whole time though, and maybe I kept reading because I wanted to see her break free. Because of this, the foreshadowing greatly enhanced the impact of the final climax for me. I wanted to see Ruth make it on her own and the foreshadowing made me want to see it even more. I don't want to give away the ending because it certainly flabbergasted me, but I like to think that she's gonna make it some day and "try her wings," as she says. She mentions at the end of the novel that she wishes she could change her name to "Ruth Truth," but I think a better name would be "Resilient Ruth."

Possibly one of the things that kept me reading was the character development. I tend to feel a close connection with the character telling the story, so it wasn't difficult for me to relate to Ruth. At times, she angered me, only because she would understand one of the other characters but be naive about some of the others. I was frustrated especially with her feelings about Ruby. May was a fascinating character to me. I hated her and she made me sick sometimes, but then she'd say something or do something that made me feel more sorry for her than anything else.

Overall, I think this was a beautifully written, albeit depressing, book well worth a read.

Ann says

people complain about ruth being "white trash," but i think they are missing the whole point - putting yourself in a world not your own. i grew to adore ruth as i experienced her small-town world. i found her ability to daydream and fantasize intelligent and mesmerizing. people also complain about the ending - let me just say that while it is harsh, it is an eye opening juxtaposition between hum-drum and madness.

Michelle says

This is Jane Hamilton's first novel and it is a whopper. It's the story of a small-town girl and her struggles with growing up with a mother who's lost any compassion or sweetness and a brother she can't relate to. This girl, Ruth, despite an intelligence that she's unaware of and so is everyone else, ends up marrying a dangerous, drug-riddled fellow. Throughout the story, which lags at times in Ruth's simple cadence, there are bits of foreshadowing of some life-changing, terrible day. So you keep reading through 300 pages and the book's nearly finished and then it's there, and you're surprised and shocked and saddened even though you knew this terrible day was coming. It doesn't exactly sneak up on you, this moment, but it does kind of knock you out.

Hamilton, as with later books including *A Map of The World*, is good at writing about terrible things, trials of the soul. A drowned child in that case. I won't spoil this one for you.

It's worth a read because it takes you into a life you'd probably never experience or imagine, and the language is beautiful.

Marsha says

This is the story of a white trash girl named Ruth, her white trash mother and her white trash boyfriend/husband with bad teeth. It was very difficult to make it through this book because I didn't like any of the characters--they were stagnant and annoying throughout. Ruth had great potential but never realized any of it. A bad story was made even worse when about 4/5 of the way through, there was suddenly a horrific and bloody scene that took about 4 pages of graphic descriptions. I was caught completely off-guard because the rest of the book had been so boring. I guess I had kept reading thinking that something had to happen eventually to make the book worthwhile, but what finally did happen was awful. I would have been OK with it all if Ruth had changed for the better or pulled herself together because of the event, but she chose to stay ignorant. I know this is a popular author and book, but I really did not enjoy it at all.

Andrew Breslin says

I gave this book four stars, but I can't say I actually enjoyed it. I turned the pages out of a compulsive voyeurism, the way one might stick one's ear against the wall to eavesdrop on the dysfunctional family next door. It's not that you enjoy hearing the domestic violence break out--the screams, the profanity, the smashing of hurled glassware. You just can't bring yourself to turn away, let alone turn up your own radio to drown it out. Shhh. Quiet! They're at it again!

I agree with some of the other commentators here that none of the characters was particularly likable. Not even Ruth herself, whom I would have respected if she didn't have such appalling taste in men. I found myself pleading with her. "He's bad news, Ruth! He's a loser! You can do better!"

She didn't listen. They never do.

What most impressed me about the book was the voice of the narrator. The author pulled off an exceedingly difficult trick: she wrote from the first person perspective of a character far less educated than she herself is, and yet it was both a) totally believable and b) not a painful literary abortion.

She pulled this off so smoothly that it's almost unnoticeable. It's so easy to believe that you are hearing the story directly from this poor uneducated young woman, without reflecting on the fact that she managed to write a book, something most privileged college-educated upper middle class academics will never accomplish in spite of their misplaced belief that they could do so easily.

If you are looking for something entertaining and uplifting, I'm afraid I couldn't recommend this, because if you don't find it depressing and disturbing, I think there is something seriously wrong with you. But as far as a lesson on the craft of storytelling, you could easily teach an entire course around it. Hamilton is a masterful craftswoman and I learned a lot from reading it, but I didn't exactly enjoy the experience. Then again, I didn't enjoy quite a lot of classes I've taken in my life, and I didn't learn as much in most of them.

Laurel Wicke says

I should have known better. I really should have. First, it was an Oprah book club pick, and second, it won some Hemingway writing award. I always find Oprah's picks terribly dark and I despise Hemingway. Sorry to all the Hemingway fans out there. BUT, on the back cover a review said the book was very "Dickensonian" and another said it had quirky off-beat characters in the vein of Anne Tyler--two authors that I happen to love, so I gave it a whirl.

Ugh, ugh, ugh. I loathe ignorance. And the characters that fill this book are just so ignorant, and spiteful, and trashy, that I--well, it nearly turned my stomach at times.

Jane Hamilton can write, I give her that, but the material of this particular novel? I can't see that it adds anything worthwhile to the world. I really can't.

Sophie Carter says

Hands down probably one of the most disturbing books I have ever read in my life. At the unexpected climax of the novel, I got physically sick reading the description and almost fainted. Fun. But that's one of the reasons this book is so special; Ms. Hamilton does not even hesitate in her honesty.

The characters in this novel are unforgettable. I would like Jane Hamilton to write six more books as sequels: Book of May, Book of Ruby, Book of Justy, Book of Aunt Sid, Book of Matt, Book of Daisy, you name it. Any of them would be just as fascinating, disturbing, dark, and honest as Book of Ruth.

Ruth is one of the most tragic characters I have ever read about. Her connections with nature and beautiful, complex metaphors show off her observation skills, and it's devastating to realize that she had just as much intellectual potential as her brother, except she didn't receive the right nurture and education. She is naive, and the reader sees everything through her eyes. I loved Ruby because Ruth loved Ruby, I pitied May because Ruth pitied May. There are so many interesting aspects to all the characters I feel the need to read the book again, as soon as I know I can stomach the ending.

Lynne King says

I admit that I purchased this book on a whim as I liked the title. The reviews also looked good and I could see that it was the winner of the Pen/Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award. I also thought that perhaps it was a modern day version of Ruth from the bible, which, in my opinion, is one of the most beautiful Books there. However, that soon proved not to be the case.

Initially I thought the book was rather good. It had a rather humorous, odd and yet self-effacing way about it. However, after a while I just couldn't take this in at all; characters such as May, Matt, Ruby, etc. soon became very annoying.

I then skim read looking for something that I had perhaps missed in the book (as obviously so many people had liked it), and then sailed on to the end as quickly as I could. Unfortunately, I couldn't send it up into my Kindle "cloud" as I had purchased the paperback.

I personally found this rather non-linear book was all over the place. My poor just brain couldn't handle it unfortunately.

I'm looking at the cover now. I liked the cover photograph by Barry Marcus, and the cover design by Kathy Kikkert. So that's a blessing, of sorts.

Christina Ramos says

I am really surprised by all of the negative reviews of this book. I think it is so strange that the characters are discounted as "white trash", their story thus, uninteresting or too dreary. While the story is by no means a happy one it is highly engrossing and worth telling. Hamilton's narrator Ruth is by turns despairing and joyful of life and Hamilton's writing manages to be lyrical and poetic, blunt and simple at the same time. I personally like to connect with other people, to imagine what it would be like to live in their skin, to know what forces shaped them into being who they are. This includes "white trash". The story is very realistic and you come away feeling like you have read truths, if not about fictional characters then real people somewhere out there who are experiencing very similar lives. If you are the type of person who is only happy reading stories that end happily-ever-after then steer clear of this book. But if you are like me and can also find beauty and meaning in even the most tragic tales then I highly recommend it.

Rebecca McNutt says

Aside from being rather depressing at times, *The Book of Ruth* is an incredible story of family, loss and life.

deLille says

I finally finished this book which has been on my "could-not-finish" shelf for ages. What can I say... it is a lyrical book with beautiful prose, but the subject matter is extremely depressing and it never lifts itself up. It's like Hamilton has never heard the term "comic relief". I loved Jane Hamilton's "A Map of the World" and "A Short History of a Prince", but this book made me weary of Hamilton's metaphor-a-minute writing and her continuous dwelling on everything ugly about people. Everyone says that this book has a hopeful ending; well, that's not saying much considering that there is no where else to go at the end of this book except up.

Margitte says

Noir par excellence.

The book just lost me, despite the picturesque, but dark dragging and dragging and dragging and dragging and dragging prose. No oomph. No spirit.

The first third of the book had me excited. The next third had me counting the pages. The last third was just more of the monotonous same. How long should we wait before the paint will dry on this wall of misery?

So Ruth was born in misery, which means Ruth will die in misery. The end. Just like that. And the pity party will remain in full swing, because she wants it to.

Not for me. Maybe Erskine Caldwell spoiled me as a reader. There's sadly no comparison. Between the beginning and end some masterful prose got wasted.

And that's it.

John says

We were assigned this book as part of a writing course, with the intention that the instructor would have us read a few chapters per week, for us to discuss the author's use of craft. Our first discussion opened with the group unanimously loathing the book so much that it was never brought up again. I read it to the end to see if things got better - they did not, a tedious downer to the final sentence.

Lisa says

This book is quite sad but has an amazing voice. The protagonist, Ruth, was never encouraged to do much

with her life and has always been told she was not quite that bright. However, she has some incredible insights into human nature and her story is very barebones. Hamilton writes Ruth in such a way that her thoughts about the world are those that many of us have but never reveal because of social custom. Ruth's ideas are often right on and her "alleged" stupidity allows her to state things in an incredibly honest manner. A very clever narrative.

Fabian says

After all last month in the company of, how can I put this delicately, white trash (with the insupportable Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom) I got my hands on this, another American Family tragedy. As much as I loathe Norman Rockwell portraits, inversely I adore AmFamTs. Andre Dubus III, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth...they are ALWAYS welcomed in my bookshelf. This, a "first novel," seems like a breeze to read since its protagonist is, according to those that surround her, "slow." Theme & form are the same, & maybe that is too much of a cop out. Lazy writing, just because the main character is slow, make the associations stark, and interesting more often than not. I've read stuff like this before (She's Come Undone, The Patron St. of Liars, White Oleander... more...)

The ending seems a long way coming. The mystery of why the narrative is even told takes a while to simmer, finally boiling over in a scene that is 10% Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics," 20% Peter Jackson's "Heavenly Creatures" & 70% John Carpenter's "Halloween." So... good enough.

BIPL Reads says

Book of Ruth is Jane Hamilton's first novel. Just reading the first lines again grants me the profound pleasure of stumbling on beauty and hard-earned wisdom (about losing one's naivete, or maybe innocence) in the lingua franca of rural Wisconsin.

"What it begins with, I know finally, is the kernel of meanness in people's hearts. I don't know exactly how or why it gets inside us; that's one of the mysteries I haven't solved yet. I always tried to close my eyes and believe that angels, invisible in their gossamer dresses, were keeping their loving vigil. I learned, slowly, that if you don't look at the world with perfect vision, you're bound to get yourself cooked."

This book was an early Oprah choice, but it stands out from the crowd because of its lyricism and awkward, bawdy truthfulness. It was published in 1988 and was influential in helping to make room for a certain kind of passionate female voice and underprivileged-girl-lost coming-of-age story in the mainstream publishing world. Personally, I have read it so many times I can practically recite parts of it out loud. Great book.

The New York Times Book Review said, "Ms. Hamilton gives Ruth a humble dignity and allows her hope---but it's not a heavenly hope. It's a common one, caked with mud and held with gritted teeth. And it's probably the only kind that's worth reading about."

Deborah Katz says

Here's what I'm learning about myself:

I despise po' country lit written by women.

Is that terrible? Does that make me a bad feminist?

In Country? Hated it. All these poor white trash stories about kids growin' up harder n' poorer than those other kids over there, wearing ugly clothes, and having lots of scrap metal in the yard...

...yeah I just can't deal.

Because these stories never GO anywhere. It just sounds like a lot of whining through the front, middle, and back of life.

As if whining was courage. As if living poor every day was compelling courage.

Look. Being poor is rough. I've been poor. It sucked.

But a story has to DO something. It can't be day after day, year after year of going from being a confused and misunderstood backwoods girl with some small un-nurtured bit of promise to a confused backwoods teen with slightly less promise, to a ridiculous backwoods woman who is no smarter, no more interesting, and no more relavant than anyone else living in a valley made of dirt.

Look: populations need stories. John Steinbeck, for crissakes, wrote these people. Wrote them well, too.

But this? This plodding journey through an embarrassingly hideous life?

John Kennedy Toole did it in The Neon Bible. He was 16 when he wrote that, and even his sad naif protagonist had a few meaningful and well-turned revelations to make it all worthwhile.

But I got halfway through the story when I realized it wasn't GOING anywhere. The protagonist was just going to get more and more tedious. Less and less interesting. More and more annoying. Good lord was her voice annoying.

Yes, yes, very well-done. The writer's replicated the annoying voice to a T. Y'know there's ways to make that voice less grating without robbing it of authenticity.

What authenticity anyway? Is the girl supposed to be a half-wit? Or is she really sort of normal but painfully shy and socially awkward because of her place in society?

Sadly, I cannot tell. Because I think I'm supposed to sympathize with her, but in looking at her all I can think is "Yeah, I'd call her a half-wit too, dammit. Then I'd slap her."

And, Lord, if one more person in the story offers up a half-wit grin as a means to express innocent and misplaced pleasure I'm going to smack that grin right off their face. Author! A new device! Please!

Lauren Hahn says

This book was a huge disappointment. The reader is forced to listen to the story of a woman who leads an unhappy and meaningless life. Throughout the eventless book you keep waiting for something to occur to make reason of the narrator's purpose in life, but instead find out that she is simply a pathetic and unhappy person. In the last few pages a huge twist occurs, but it is simply too late to indulge the reader, and is to much to take into too short of an amount of time. The only thing stopping me from giving this book a one is that the book was well written.

Jodie says

This is one of my all-time favorite books. It's a book that changes one's perspective on people and walking a mile in other's shoes before judging. Did your school have one or two or maybe more kids that were just "off" -- easy targets for bullies and even kids who usually seemed nice? In this book the main character's name isn't even mentioned until the end because she's someone who is constantly minimized ... or even worse, unnoticed.
