



# Cockfighter

*Charles Willeford*

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## **Cockfighter** Charles Willeford

The sport is cockfighting and Frank Mansfield is the cockfighter - a silent and fiercely contrary man whose obsession with winning will cost him almost everything. In this haunting, ribald, and percussively violent work, the author of Hoke Moseley detective novels yields a floodlit vision of the cockpits and criminal underbelly of the rural south. First published in 1962 by Charles Willeford, later made into a Roger Corman film.

## **Cockfighter Details**

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Author : Charles Willeford

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# From Reader Review Cockfighter for online ebook

## Kurt Reichenbaugh says

I wouldn't know how to classify this novel if anyone asked me to. I don't think I could even summarize it in a way that would encourage others to read it. There isn't much of a plot as there is an episodic account of a top tier cockfighter's journey in and around Florida in the early 70's in his pursuit to qualify for a huge cockfighting tournament where he hopes to win the Cockfighter of the Year award. You get to ride along as our hero deals with losing everything in the opening chapters, to chasing down old debts, running into old girlfriends, running into new girlfriends, and acquiring a new partner all in the space of a few months. You also learn a lot about cockfighting along the way. It's the kind of novel I really like because it's so different. Had such a novel been written today by a flashier writer it would have been soaked in lurid hues of violence. Not so in Willeford's novel.

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## wally says

#19 from willeford for me.

update, finished, 12 sep 13, thursday evening, 10:17 p.m.

so i'm reading along, right, enjoying the story, considering my response here...my take. and willeford hits you right between the eyes. if you are one of those who are so fucking tired of the fashionable ideology, willeford hits you right square between the eyes right at the end of this, and **bang!** this is a favorite. if you are so fucking tired of the fashionable fucking elite dictating to you this that the other fucking thing, here, read this. may it do ya fine.

and...i realize that there are some who think anything you, the gentle reader, say about a story is a dreaded spoiler.

consider this: did i read some place here that some consider this "autobiographical"? yes. i think i read that. this is fiction. meh, an aside.

but gawd-almighty i love it when mary elizabeth calls frank mansfield a hateful man, *you hate everything, yourself, me, the world, everybody!* and that praise jesus now and forevermore is part and parcel of the fashionable ideology that pisses me off no end. mary elizabeth does not have a clue, she has chosen to *not have a clue* and she has elected and voiced that opinion about frank mansfield, her fiancée, there at the end and if that does not echo our world, my world, then nothing does.

fact. there are some that do not have a clue. but they have chosen, now and forevermore, to have an opinion about that which they have no clue about. and they have elected to give voice to that choice and have made it so. frank? he's headed to puerto rico with bernice. heh!

ha ha ha ha ha! gawd i love it.

what's amazing about this story is that frank mansfield does not *have* a voice. he has chosen to remain silent, this vow he has taken upon himself, and he has *chosen* not to speak. heh! yeah, tommyknockers aren't much

into metaphor, either! imagine writing this, you got your main character, he isn't going to say word one throughout. obstacles? you think!

index later, gator.

### **a dedication**

*for mary jo*

a quote on a white page:

*what matters is not the idea a man holds, but the depth at which he holds it.*

--ezra pound

### time place scene setting

\*belle glade, florida, a trailer rented by the eye-narrator, scene opener, captain mack's trailer camp

\*frank's mobile love-lee-mobile home

\*his old caddy

\*various cock-fighting pits around the south, furthest north in tennessee, furthest west...in louisiana maybe...or alabama/mississippi. georgia, florida

\*various bus stations...hotels...restaurants

\*judge brantley powell's house

\*mansfield, georgia, a farm there

\*a purina feed store

\*various farms throughout the south

\*sealbach hotel, milledgeville, georgia

### characters

\*eye-narrator, frank mansfield, cockfighter, 32-yr-old, has a farm in or near ocala, florida. there is also a section that describes how frank purchased a guitar from an uncle and taught himself to play, how he developed his own unique style of play

\*dody white, a 16-yr-old living w/frank at opener...later, she winds up (on a bet) w/another man, jack burke...and they got married

\*ed middleton, cockfighter, early 60s, wife wants him to quot cockfighting, sell his cocks, etc

\*martha middleton, his wife

\*jack burke, cockfighter

\*accordion-necked fruit tramp

\*little david, cock of jack burke

\*dody's parents...she is 1 of 5 children

\*an old-timer collecting an entrance fee

\*captain mack...florida trooper...a pretty woman sat on the front seat

\*a couple of dade county financiers

\*a scattering of belle glade townspeople

\*2 gamblers from miami

\*ralph hansen, one of 2 of burke's handlers

\*a machinist in valdosta

\*the other handler was in the truck bed

\*doc riordan, dr. onyx p. riordan...maker of *licarbo*, a kind of antacid

\*younger brother, randall...frank's younger brother

\*mary elizabeth gaylord, frank's almost wife, 29-yr-old, wants frank to marry her...they've been doing it for

years at this swim spot called *the place*. she is a teacher of english. she lives on a farm with her brother, wright gaylord and his wife

\*senator jacob foxhall...a man instrumental in promoting cockfighting...was a state senator

\*icarus...name of a special cock that frank buys from ed middleton

\*judge brantley powell/old lawyer

\*wright gaylord, frank's fiancée's brother...married to

\*francis shelby, a dentist's daughter from macon

\*old dusty, a dog frank had

\*omar baradinsky, frank's neighbor in ocala, florida...a former big wig lawyer type from new york city...still married to a woman who visits one week a year, conjugal type visits...and omar has been trying to break into the cock-fighting culture. he can't, though. he teams up w/frank. or wait now. he was an advertising guy. big bucks.

\*ducky winters, manager of the purina feed store

\*virgil dietch,

\*pete chocolate

\*bandy taylor

\*dirty jacques boniin, biloxi

\*milan peeples, son tom...and there's an impromptu cockfight at the man's farm, the floor slick from paint or something i forget exactly

\*fred reed

\*john mccooy and colonel bob moore...texas

\*buddy waggoner

\*peach owen

\*sol p. mccall, originated the modern tournament

\*tom doyle

\*a host of other minor, window-dressing characters. ..like "various farmers"... and "a carload of arsenal employees"... "a georgia highway patrolman"

\*leroy and mary bondwell...who look after omar

\*tex higdon, reporter for *american gamefowl quarterly*

\*baldy allen, columbus georgia

\*johnny norris, roy whipple, chattanooga

\*charley smith, negro tenant

\*his wife, aunt leona

\*the james boys...a band that headlines where frank gets a temp job playing the three songs he knows...tiny james, the bass player

\*aimee, our negro cook in the kitchen

\*bernice and tommy hungerford...frank takes up w/bernice...a well-to-do woman...at the end after mary elizabeth gives him the shaft

\*

#### a quote or two

*if a man accepts life logically, the unexpected is actually the expected.*

some americana/folklore that is repeated in other willeford stories

*he couldn't have caught a pig in a trench*

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## **Nigel Bird says**

Books like *Cockfighter* remind me of how I came to love literature in the first place. It offers a wonderful sense of being transported to an entirely different place, seeing the world through the eyes of others and then ensuring that I'm so captivated by a series of events that all I want to do in life at a given moment (well, most given moments) is return to the next page.

The quote at the beginning of the book is from Ezra Pound – “What matters is not the idea a man holds, but the depth at which he holds it.” There's plenty of depth in evidence here as protagonist Frank takes the reader into the life of a serious cockfighter.

Frank is such a passionate man that he's vowed, unbeknownst to anyone else, to remain silent until he gains the coveted mark of respect that is the silver medal that marks someone out as the cock handler of the year (sniggers really don't fit on this occasion!). He explains himself a little here:

‘No one, other than myself, knew about my vow, and I could have broken it at any time without losing face. But I would know, and I had to shave every day.’

That last phrase is the kind of poetic turn that give the story an extra edge – Willeford allows his character to tell his tale without relying on the mundane.

When we meet Frank, he's on the cusp of losing everything – his money, his last fighting bird, his car and his trailer home – on one fight with an old adversary. It's a hugely dramatic opening and, at risk of spoiling that drama (look away now) it ends up with Frank leaving the pit with only \$10, a coop, a few clothes and a guitar.

Given a lift by an old friend who has been forced to retire, he's offered the chance to buy the perfect bird, Icarus, for the hugely inflated sum of \$500. Frank has a choice – to promise to buy the bird or to give up the game and return home to marry his patient, conservative fiancée. Frank's passion means there's only one option and he sets off to find the money he needs.

What follows is the engrossing sequence of events that will lead up to Frank having the chance to make his personal dream come true.

*Cockfighter* reads like a novel from the depression era, but is set in the 1960s. In some ways, it points to the hangover of values that are old-fashioned in ways that might be seen as good and bad. Frank has his own mixture of values, and his own liberal(ish) views are often contradicted by his animal self or by society. Race and gender are particular areas of interest here.

He holds strong opinions on the nature of work and the illusions created by a capitalist society. When looking for a job, he comments:

‘The majority of the situations that were open in the agate columns were for salesmen. And a man who can't talk can't sell anything.’

Or on bigger dreams:

‘I liked the man for what he was and respected him for what he was trying to be. But unlike me, Doc lived

with a dream that was practically unattainable. All I wanted to be was the best cockfighter who had ever lived. Doc, who had already reached his late fifties, wanted to be a big time capitalist and financier.'

The series of adventures in the book are brilliantly told. There's a wonderful use of dramatic tension which left me hungry to find out what would happen next. When the final full stop was reached, my appetite was entirely satisfied.

Here's a book the likes of which I wish I could write myself. Given the talent on show and my own limitations that's very unlikely, but just like Frank I don't see the harm in setting such a high goal. Maybe I should take a vow of silence; if nothing else I suspect my wife and colleagues would be happier that way.

Tremendous.

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### **Jeff says**

Fast, sure, with Ocala dirt under its cracked, yellowed fingernails ... whatever you think of the milieu, it feels "lived-in," with vivid, genuine, expertly drawn characters.

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### **Bro\_Pair ????** says

I started reading "Maldoror," originally, by the Comte de Lautreaumont, and threw it aside because fifty pages in, I'm pretty sure it's schlock crap. I should've known, picking up a book that an awful, awful, AWFUL write like William Vollmann considers his favorite. But it had a good blurb on the back from some great French writer whose name I don't remember, saying "this book excites me."

Well, that book really didn't excite me. But this one sure did. I can't describe this book very well, except to say it had the same effect on me reading "The Gambler" by Dostoevsky did - that is to say, up late at night, racing to the end, desperate to see what happens next. Frank Mansfield will not say another word until he is the greatest cockfighter in the South, and is recognized as such, and he will sacrifice everything to make it happen.

What a great, engrossing book. Also, you'll learn a lot about cockfighting.

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### **Richard Derus says**

I have absolutely no idea how this book and its movie came back to the surface of my mind. I watched the film in 1975, I think, and I'm sure it was with Paul the film student. (He was also a drunk, and to date the only lover I've ever had that I allowed to hit me.)

Come to think on it, he's also the source of one of my most enduring pleasures, that of watching films whose books I've read or plan to read, and of making fantasy films of the books I read that haven't got films. Thanks, Paul, for growing me a spine and for giving me that deeply satisfying fantasy life. (He died in 1986, so this is more in the nature of valediction than praise.)

Anyway...I recommend the book to men because it's about us at our most male and least woman-centered. It's brutal and tough and awful. It's a clarion call to the smarter ones of us to look at what's actually going on in our heads and fucking stop it already. Not because women don't like us for what they've done to us, but because hurting ourselves is just damned stupid. The cult of macho is a male reaction to rejection and judgment, as Willeford presents it; this being what I've observed, it had me nodding along as I read the book.

Where the film falls down, I think, is in the nature of the storytelling medium. On its surface, this film's about how a man decides not to live with a woman but to sell every-damn-thing he owns and double down on the world of cockfighting. Ultimately this works out, in the sense that his cock wins the championship.

Not one single human female would watch this movie and think, "oh that was fun." The image of women in it is as emasculating damaging emotional black holes. Yeah, great date-night flick, eh what? And men come off as damnfool eedjits without a lick of sense. That both these things are true doesn't make them any easier to swallow. And on film, there are lost nuances because actors speaking lines aren't readers absorbing language use on multiple levels. So it's no wonder to me that this film tanked.

But it's a misunderstood work of art, *Cockfighter* is. Its darkest moments and grimmest interpretations are all true and accurate. That's intentional on Willeford's part, based on the entirety of his oeuvre. (Go here to read a really, really interesting academic take on Willeford as writer and man manqué.) The levels and ideas that this brutal, cruel, emotionally stopped body of work contains are rewarding to unpick and enjoyable to contemplate.

For Y chromosome bearers.

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## Nefariousbig says

[you silly cock sucker! 8P (hide spoiler)]

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## Cbj says

Charles Willeford's villains are tough, self-assured and manly men who are convinced about their own uniqueness. They also have a sneering contempt for ordinary life and people who in their opinion are ordinary.

Here is Frederick.J Fenger, Jr reacting to his newly acquired girlfriend's ambition to buy a Burger King franchise in MIAMI BLUES - "I can't see any point to hanging around a Burger King all day, no matter how much money you make. .... I'll tell you why. Your life would depend on the random desires of people who wanted a hamburger. So you can just forget about Burger King".

Or Troy Loudon in SIDESWIPE - "Smoking comforts ordinary men, but I'm not an ordinary man. There aren't many like me left. And it's a good thing for the world that there isn't. There'll always be a few of us in America in every generation. Because only a great country like America can produce men like me. I'm not a thinker, I'm a doer."

And here is Frank Mansfield in COCKFIGHTER - "It is a funny thing. A man can make a promise to his



God, break it five minutes later and never think about it. With an idle shrug of his shoulders, a man can break solemn promises to his mother, wife or sweetheart, and, except for a slight momentary twinge of conscience, he still won't be bothered very much. But if a man ever breaks a promise to himself he disintegrates. His entire personality and character crumble into tiny pieces, and he is never the same man again.

I remember very well a sergeant I knew in the army. Before a group of five men he swore off smoking forever. An hour later he sheepishly lit a cigarette and broke his vow to the five of us and to himself. He was never quite the same man again, not to me, and not to himself."

Frank Mansfield is the main character in COCKFIGHTER. But he is almost like a villain, tough as an axe, contemptuous of women, intensely judgmental of his fellow men - basically a man who would not take a backward step to anyone or anything. The novel is his internal soliloquy after he takes a vow of silence in a year where he aims at winning the COCKFIGHTER OF THE YEAR award.

There are vivid and violent descriptions of cockfighting matches and the effort that goes into training cocks. It is almost like a bible or even a documentary for/about cock fighters. As usual, Willeford goes into minor details of monetary transactions and how much the main character spends. Money is an obsession for nearly all the characters in Willeford novels and the ones in COCKFIGHTER are no different. As Willeford wrote in HONEY GAL - "Money is the root of all goodness. To talk disparagingly about money is the privilege of those who have money. There are also those people who state matter-of-factly that "money isn't everything". This statement is also true, but only so long as one has money."

I almost gave this novel a 5, it is one of the best books I've read all year. But at times, the vow of silence taken by Mansfield is a bit hard to digest. Why would people put up with his silence? How did they simply accept that he had lost his voice? It almost makes the character a bit clownish. Maybe that was the author's intention.

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## Richard says

### **\*3.5 Stars\***

The interesting thing about this book is that it is essentially the classic underdog sports story that is popular in a lot of movies, television, and books, but instead of focusing on a football player or boxer, it's about a man who trains chickens to fight to the death.

It's told from the point of view of Frank Mansfield, a respected cockfighter who, at the books opening, loses all of his money, his car, his mobile home, and his ace cock Sandspur after being defeated by his rival. Now, with only a few bucks in his pocket and the clothes on his back, we witness him doggedly work his way to the top, in his pursuit of the Cockfighter of the Year Award.

Frank isn't the best of guys and is, for all intents and purposes, an asshole. But you feel his complete passion and dedication to not only the game, but the art and craft of conditioning a fighting cock. It's actually pretty inspiring, but it's also pretty sad as he shuns and alienates many people who love him in his pursuit of his dream. We even find him years into a vow of silence he's taken until he wins the award. This level of passion is what drives the novel. It's hard to see a guy so dedicated and not root for him to win. Also, the level of detail in depicting the world of Southern cockfighting is staggering. You get the feeling that Willeford definitely has some first-hand knowledge!

The story itself is actually pretty traditional and I could even see some of the cock-training marathons in my head as I read and also hear the Rocky movie montage music playing in the background! Maybe that was a little disappointing, how traditional the plot is. There's not really much else to the story, which surprised me after reading both *Pick-up* and *Wild Wives* from Willeford, both of which felt anything but traditional. And obviously there's a lot of violence involving chickens, which is really hard to take at times, so if you are really sensitive about that stuff, you shouldn't read this one.

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## Kirk says

This is hands down the best Brett Favre biography ever. I was impressed by Charles Willeford's ability twenty-two years after his death to explore the competitive milieu of peen-pic texting. There is a whole subculture surrounding this primeval sport in which grown men digitize their dangle not merely to woo the female of the species but to compete against each other in those bloody, bread-and-circuses arenas known as celebrity-dong blogs. Is Favre's prize cock---with its saintly Mexican name Intercepcion---able to survive in the ring against the chanticleer of Kanye West (named Gold Digger, natch)? What are the odds that the fallen-from-grace QB can redeem himself by defeating the prodigious genital proboscis of Santonio Holmes or Greg Oden, just two of the trou-dropping athletes in recent months to go full wang-dang-doodle?

But perhaps most impressive are the strange rituals by which men gild their otherwise tumescent lilies to gain a competitive edge. Who knew that Favre takes a razor-blade to his Sandspur to carve grooves into it to give the appearance it's more battle-scarred than it really is, thus raising the odds against him? Who knew of how underhandedly bettors themselves will break into the training routines of poor Grady Sizemore—whose name couldn't be more Dickensian than Dickens' own in this context—to size up his chances for taking his arch (and decidedly curved) enemy, Little David? It's this wealth of detail that makes Willeford's second-best book after *The Burnt Orange Heresy* so authoritative.

Of course, being pulp, there has to be some stock characters and impotent plotting. The femme fatale in this case is the fetching and onomatopoetically ominous Michelle Metro, who must keep Brett from leaving the business because she sells cockfighting magazines for Amazon.com. She's hott for sure, but the world of the testicular wattle isn't for women. The story structure is also delightfully shambolic, a byproduct of the days when you cranked out a novel in thirty days to pay your electricity bill (and to buy some pube straightener). In this case, the hero is one minute a master of his chosen domain name, only to become out of nowhere a talented mother-guitar-plucker in an episodic excursion that seems included only because that's where the author's narrative rod led him. There's also a weird and wholly misplaced subplot about a shady pharmaceutical flim-flam man—probably a veiled Viagra allegory, is my guess. But in the end you forgive these structural flaws because they give the hero dimension and keep him from seeming past his prime after twenty-some seasons in the cocking leagues. In the end, that's what we love: a beautiful loser who knows he's no hero. Someone who probably understands a 31-3 castration by his former teammates is a sign from the gods that he's wilted beyond repair. Willeford was awesome at capturing those type of men; and while sportscasters grouse that we indulge in “SchadenFavre” (please, critics, no more Schadenfreude riffs; retire the fucking word already and wear something else out for a while, like Ted Nugent's favorite German catchphrase wang-dang-sweet-weltanschauung), I think what we really want is an opportunity to empathize rather than feel superior. Love the fallen; they need the stroking more than those still stiff with hubris.

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## **Berta Kleiner says**

Nobody writes like Mr. Willeford.

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## **Tracie says**

If I hadn't gleefully abandoned all scholarly pursuits some years ago, I'd be pretty tempted to become the preeminent Willeford scholar. My all time favorite literary pattern is the hero's journey (up top, Joseph C) and Cockfighter is more-or-less Willeford's spin on The Odyssey. And I don't think he was necessarily being shy about it. I mean, come on, there's a chicken named Icarus. (Also, there's a chicken called Little David that I'm preeeeeeeeetty sure was the inspiration for Little Jerry.) (Edited to add: Yes, Chris, I know Icarus is not in the Odyssey but, you know, mythology and stuff.)

The plot structure to this book is more traditional than those in his other books that I've read so far. There's a man with a goal who sets out on a quest, and unlike Hoke--who gets sidetracked often--Frank Mansfield sticks with his boon of becoming Cockfighter of the Year. This is what drives him, and he doesn't get distracted; every move he makes is done with the goal of winning that title. Like in every good hero's journey there is plenty along the way meant to mislead and tempt him away from his mission, but he isn't swayed for long. Maybe because I've read some of Willeford's other books where characters are more reactionary and the plot jumps according to their whims, but the ending of this almost caught me off guard because it's sort of exactly what you see coming. But it's still pretty awesome.

It took me a little longer to get into this book--I think mostly I had to warm up to Frank (hard to replace Hoke in my heart)--but once I got about 100 pages in, I couldn't put it down.

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## **Thomas says**

On pure technique, writing style and ability to portray a culture, this book should get five stars. But while the shop talk about cockfighting is amazingly detailed and impressive, I could give a rat's ass about cockfighting. I never would have read a book with that much shop talk about anything, though admittedly I loved Gun Work by David J. Schow, so I guess I'm a hypocrite. I also find it kind of hard to take the violence involving animals. Last but far from least, this is not a noir or a crime novel; it's a down-and-outer type novel, and a great portrait of a certain culture in the South. But I was kinda looking for a crime novel, and when I got to the end and nobody'd gotten their head blown off, I was a bit disappointed.

To be fair, I love Willeford's The Burnt Orange Heresy and that has a murder that seems to be there for no reason other than to make it a crime novel (presumably so he could sell it) and it feels fairly random, with a disappointing ending. So I'm glad he didn't do that here. On its own terms, Cockfighter is a stronger novel than Heresy. There's just kind of a lot of cockfighting in it.

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## **Mientras Leo says**

Peleas de gallos, honor de galleros y un protagonista muy particular para un libro difícil e imprescindible

## **Tfitoby says**

Fascinating and unique, pure Willeford, with a hint of Jim Thompson about things. How often can you tell people that you are reading a first person narrative of a voluntarily mute cockfighter? It's incredibly well written, and never what I anticipated. Frank Mansfield is an asshole, one hundred percent, almost Reacher-esque in his sad white man wish fulfilment nature, always right, always better than anyone else he comes in contact with, and complete with Sam Allardyce levels of hubris that I felt sure this would be an unreliable narrator who gets his comeuppance come the final chapter. And yet he is such a good window in to this entirely alien world and lifestyle, and me with my own collection of hens too. I've seen the Warren Oates movie thanks to some fine fellow on this website sending me a copy but I can't remember much of this book being in it. Both are highly enjoyable entertainment in their own right however.

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