



I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive

Steve Earle

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Doc Ebersole lives with the ghost of Hank Williams—not just in the figurative sense, not just because he was one of the last people to see him alive, and not just because he is rumored to have given Hank the final morphine dose that killed him.

In 1963, ten years after Hank's death, Doc himself is wracked by addiction. Having lost his license to practice medicine, his morphine habit isn't as easy to support as it used to be. So he lives in a rented room in the red-light district on the south side of San Antonio, performing abortions and patching up the odd knife or gunshot wound. But when Graciela, a young Mexican immigrant, appears in the neighborhood in search of Doc's services, miraculous things begin to happen. Graciela sustains a wound on her wrist that never heals, yet she heals others with the touch of her hand. Everyone she meets is transformed for the better, except, maybe, for Hank's angry ghost—who isn't at all pleased to see Doc doing well.

A brilliant excavation of an obscure piece of music history, Steve Earle's *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive* is also a marvelous novel in its own right, a ballad of regret and redemption, and of the ways in which we remake ourselves and our world through the smallest of miracles.

I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive Details

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From Reader Review I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive for online ebook

Judy says

I am a big fan of Steve Earle's music, so I had to read his first novel. It was OK.

The ghost of Hank Williams haunts the renegade Doc Ebersole, who kept Hank somewhat alive until he didn't. Doc is a bum, a doctor who has lost his license and lives on the edge of a Texas town. He gets by providing abortions and other medical services to skid row characters who for various reasons can't or won't go to a hospital. He is also a drug addict who kicks and is kept alive by a young Mexican girl-a sort-of angel/saint with healing powers.

Anyway, Earle has all the elements of a good Texas story and I think he made a worthy effort but did not quite pull it off. On the other hand, I have to admire a guy who kicked all his own nasty habits and keeps on keeping on with constant self-reinventions.

Quiltgranny says

This is a nicely written, imaginative book. I had no idea who Steve Earle is, so I read about the author about midway through. I can now understand how he was able to write some of the descriptions of the main character, Doc, and his imagined ghost, Hank Williams. I also took the time to read a little about Hank Williams' life (and death) which were just as interesting as this book was entertaining. It's a great read.

Lisa Reads & Reviews says

Grammy award winner, singer/songwriter Steve Earle named this novel after his 14th studio album released in 2011. He has acted in roles on television and in movies. While *I'll Never Get Out Of This World Alive* is his first novel, Earle has also written a play and a book of short stories. To be honest, I hadn't heard of him before reading his novel, so my opinion is only swayed by having read about him on Wiki, and liking his anti-war, anti-death penalty, etc views. The man has led a colorful life, to say the least. As Earle is a recovering heroin addict, I give him credit for the consistency and range of his artist endeavors.

As for the novel, Earle achieved the goal of causing this reader to want to know what was going to happen, which is not a trivial accomplishment. It is not a story with soaring prose or deep insight. It is not well written. In fact, I believe an unknown author would never have sold it to a publisher--at least until it had been further developed and edited.

The story itself reminded me of *Mister God, This Is Anna*. When I first read Flynn's story, I was deeply touched, amazed, and tearful at the end. It had been presented as non-fiction, followed by controversy and exposure as being pure fabrication. I read it again, a couple years ago, and regretted the loss of magic. In any case, Earle's novel reminded me of Flynn's but Flynn's was better. Both novels revolve around a miraculous

young girl. Flynn's Anna is beyond religion. To her, church was like going to a park with "Keep off the grass" signs everywhere. Anna was wise, insightful, and viewed always from the main character's POV. This allowed her to be mysterious. Earle jumps from one POV to another, including brief glimpses inside Graciela (who turns out to be a Mexican shaman with a sprinkling influence of Catholicism). For me, this POV jumping reduced the impact of the characters. This was but one example of the problems I saw with Earle's novel. But then, I'm a struggling, self-published novelist and Mr. Earle is a successful entertainer. You might enjoy the novel, especially if you are a Steve Earle fan. I'm off to listen to his music right now....

Rozalia says

Now I know why people say that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. I literally had to fight my way through the book, but I just couldn't force myself to read the last 30 pages.

What I expected the book to be like: a poetic, interesting novel about a Mexican girl who emigrates to the United States and finds herself surrounded by surreal, neurotic people and ghosts. Steve Earle is a songwriter, so I expected the book to be deep and inspirational.

What it really was like: such a disappointment. Even though some parts of the books were inspirational, the story itself was really lightweight and not at all what I've expected. Also, the language really got on my nerves.

I wasted 2 weeks of my life on a book, hoping that it would eventually get better, but it didn't. Just... don't read it, guys.

Brendan says

I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive is like that lunch your mother used to make you in 5th grade. Maybe it wasn't the best or most delicious in all the lunchroom, but it was made with love and frugal thoughtfulness, neatly wrapped in a brown paper bag.

While Earle's writing is in no way groundbreaking or wholly original in its style and contents, it's pure, it's crisp, it's clean and it's from the heart. I was amazed by the depth and redemption of his characters, the lush moral contrast of the churches and back alleys of South Prisa Strip and the fusion of history and the otherworldly.

I would have, however, liked to see Earle dig deeper into the political undertones of his novel (specifically the conflict of abortion), being that his treatment of them was fairly brusque and watered-down. I'm sure he was afraid that by getting more political, he would compromise the magical-realistic element of the story, however I think that it would have made the book much more relevant, especially considering the upcoming American presidential elections.

This book was a pleasure to read, and I definitely recommend it to somebody who's looking for something meaningful and comforting but not too alienating or intimidating.

Scott Freeman says

This is my early front-runner for my favorite book of 2011 and truly one of the best novels I've read in years.

Doc Ebersole is a down on his luck physician. Having been one of Hank William's last friends and physicians he has watched his life fall into an extreme state of disrepair. Strung out on heroin and having lost his medical license he spends his days shooting up and his nights performing illegal abortions in the most desolate street in San Antonio. All the while he is haunted by the ghost of Hank.

Until Graciela comes along. First a patient, it soon becomes obvious that there is more to this girl than meets the eye.

Earle has written a masterful reflection on loneliness, addiction, despair and redemption. With the hand of a seasoned writer he weaves in abortion, liberation theology, Mexican theological mysticism and an indictment on the moral bankruptcies of the priesthood.

This is not an easy tale. It is grit and dirt and despair. But oh, is it beautifully written and chock full of characters worth remembering.

Do yourself a favor and pick this book up when it releases in May.

Lance says

3.5 stars. Pretty decent read. Great characters. And maybe its because Earle narrated the audiobook, but the dialogue all kind of seemed the same no matter which character was speaking.

Aside from some extended exposition in parts, the story moved along well. Overall, I found the book to be entertaining and enjoyable, with some nice humor thrown in. It felt like a first novel (which it was) that Earle probably really enjoyed writing.

M Christopher says

A truly beautiful book with a very unusual cast of characters. Junkies, dealers, whores, pimps, crooked cops and a priest with anger issues come together in a moving story of redemption and grace. Oh, and don't forget the ghost of Hank Williams... A modern masterpiece by one of country music's true outlaws.

Peter says

What do you say about a book where you can rattle off at least a few flaws, but still happily devoured and enjoyed? That would be this one. The characters are almost representations of a kind of person instead of an actual 3D character, which gives the story an almost fable-like feel. Considering the themes, this may have been conscious and appropriate. I was a little iffy on the motivations of some of the characters, as well as some of the dialogue, but Earle really spun an enjoyable yarn into what I would see as ideal summer reading. It has heavy themes, but still pretty satisfying. So consider my 3 stars more of a 3+.

Cynthia says

Hope Personified

A failed doctor whose career has crashed into the drudgery of drug abuse fueled by backroom abortions performed at a whorehouse back room in 1960's Texas might sound like a grim tale. And it is. However beautiful young healer recently arrived from Mexico joins forces with the doc. As she comes to love him while learning his healing trade she also works magic on the drug addicted hookers they treat. One by one they stop their addictions and give up hooking returning to a better life. Most of the action is centered around the motley crew of hookers, drug dealers and the Doc who drive from San Antonio to Dallas to see the Kennedy's on their ill fated last trip together.

I'm not familiar with Earle's music, though I recently saw him perform on Letterman and liked the song he sang, so I came to this book with a blank slant. I loved his use of imagery as well as his theme of unorthodox redemption. The story of Hank Williams Sr. and his music and life were fascinating. A plot device that felt integrative rather than conceit.

This review was based on an galley supplied by the publisher.

4.5/5

Mike says

A bit disappointing after his DOGHOUSE ROSES. Though pivotal to the narrative, the ghostly interaction between Doc and Hank actually gets in the way of their story - may be just too many asides. That said, a nicely written story of Faith, Redemption and Miracles, both great and not so great. Overall a valiant effort by Mr. Earle.

Michael says

This sad, sweet, and often funny tale of an underground doctor among the down-and-out in San Antonio in the early 60's won my heart over. Doc is a functional heroin addict who, after losing his license in Louisiana, lives in a boarding house where he sustains himself by ministering to the medical needs of folks on the wrong side of the law. This service is mostly care for injuries from alcohol fueled fights and abortions for poor women or prostitutes with no other recourse.

Everything changes for the better when a young teenaged girl from central Mexico, Graciela, is brought in for pregnancy termination by her heel of a boyfriend and ends up staying to become his assistant. They become bound in a platonic love, making a virtual family of two among a core set of mutually supportive friends in their community. A particularly touching event involves Graciela's instigation of a group trip to the airport to catch the grace of Jackie Kennedy's arrival with the President, who are Catholic like they are. The stability of their life eventually comes under threat when Graciela's healing ability attracts the undue interest of an Irish priest, whose duty is torn between addressing the sinful abomination of the clinic activities and discovering whether there is anything miraculous in Graciela's work.

Doc is an unforgettable character with a combination of feistiness, pragmatism, and tender tolerance for the downtrodden not too different from that of the marine biologist Doc in Steinbeck's "Cannery Row." Maybe it's not a stretch to compare him to another character named Doc, the Doc Holliday of Mary Doria Russell's wonderful novel featuring an ex-dentist living among the lost souls of Dodge City in the late 1870's. This Doc's heroin habit was hard for me as a reader to terms with and render him the full empathy he is otherwise due. Also, a magical realism element, that of regular communication with the angry ghost of Hank Williams, was hard to get used to. But soon I took that part in stride and looked forward to these intervals as a window into Doc's soul and a focus of mysteries in the tale.

Steve Earle is a fabulous musician who brings a lot of his poetry and ear for dialog to his writing. It was a pleasure to experience his laconic, rich Texas accent in his artful reading of the audiobook version of this satisfying novel.

[image error]

Earle sings Hank Williams tune "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive"

Cynthia says

I like his music fine, but this book was completely a revelation. It's moving and mystical. He moves you through his plot like a master tour guide, with wonderful characters who are just outrageous enough to be fascinating but not so much that you can't believe in them. I wouldn't say I normally love to read about what it's like to be a heroin addict, but in his hands it was ... enjoyable, sorry but it was.

I loved this book. I couldn't put it down.

Ian says

Steve Earle is a problem for many a blue collar Republican. He started out making music by looking and sounding a lot like them, his songs about making a better life, patriotism, love won and lost, and God, resonated and they were hooked. Mostly they still are, only along the way Earle's experiences of heroin addiction and prison altered his perspective as his life was touched by injustice and the oppressed. He couldn't ignore it.

His brilliant first book, Doghouse Roses, comprised of short stories mostly developed from his song writing, themes familiar to fans and to those who like his music yet can't stomach his forthright politics and championing of the 99%.

His detractors need have no fear of his first novel as he has avoided preaching and concentrated on pure storytelling, indeed he has very skillfully, and non judgmentally, navigated his way through both sides of a number of debates not least those concerning abortion.

In I'll Never Get Out Of This World Alive, using his love of common man with all of his flaws, and experiences of a side of life most readers will never have to come close to experiencing, Earle has crafted a solid story adorned with intricate details.

Rather like a virtuoso musician however it is the notes, or details, which Earle leaves out which are often most important.

Set in early 60s Dallas, the three principal characters are the protagonist Doc, his devotee the curandera Graciela, and Manny his dealer.

Doc is a struck off medic forced to live off the only skill he knows as a back street abortionist and self taught surgeon to no goods wishing to avoid hospitals at all costs.

He succumbs to a life of drug dependency and requires daily fixing of increasingly more dangerous doses to function and work to live and feed the habit.

Doc is terrorised by the vision of Hank Williams who we are led to assume perished at the hands of Doc although it is also likely the end was nigh before Doc administered a fatal dose of morphine.

It is my reading that rather than a ghost visitation the appearance of ol'e Hank is a trippy hallucination driven by Doc's troubled conscience and therefore the vision takes on a sinister personality.

Earle does assume in the reader a certain prior knowledge of Hank Williams and his unfortunate end. and the portrayal of Williams may be misinterpreted but I'm sure Steve was aware of that possibility when overlaying Doc's guilt onto his nightmare vision of Hank.

It is when the more more wordly yet mysterious young Mexican immigrant Graciela appears for an abortion, literally dumped with Doc by her loathsome boyfriend, that life begins to turn around, slowly and painfully, for Doc, and for a cast of characters surrounding him. The consequent push and pull with Hank is redolent of the effects of cold turkey. Graciela is the miraculous yang, Hank the demonic yin.

There are many turns and sub plots, and a cast of characters which include a black transvestite prostitute and a sinister Catholic priest, before we find out if yang defeats yin for Doc, and if he finally makes peace with his conscience in the form of Hank.

The journey to redemption for Doc, Graciela and Manny is beautifully told by Earle with great knowledge of the extraordinary time and place, and well researched input of Mexican healing and spiritual traditions.

A cameo of the Kennedy's visit to Dallas seems an unnecessary sideshow but I can only assume Earle intended its inclusion as a place and time setter to aid the imagination. It adds nothing I could ascertain of substance to the plot other than suggestions of fascination with Jackie and a subliminal connection to Graciela's prescience, and a quite bizzare and a scarcely believable daytrip for the principal characters. It is a very minor criticism of a wonderful novel which deserves to be read widely and hopefully marks the beginning of a regular outlet for this talented writer to express his visions beyond what is possible in a four minute song.

There's no hard core socialism here only balance and heart felt experience from this hard core troubadour, and a finale of surprising sensitivity and extraordinary vision.

Howard says

**No matter how I struggle and strive/
I'll never get out of this world alive. – Hank Williams**

Stop me if you have heard this one:

A defrocked morphine-addicted physician, his pusher (who is also his best friend), two hookers (who operate the Yellow Rose Resort Home, a hotel that also serves as brothel, emergency room, and abortion clinic), a mysterious teenaged Mexican girl (who is in the country illegally), and Hank Williams (well, not Hank exactly, but his ghost) walk into a bar.

The punch line is Steve Earle's debut novel which is populated by the above group of misfits who as a group

do go into a bar at one point in the story.

The title comes from the last Hank Williams song to be released prior to his death on January 1, 1953. He was twenty-nine years old when he died in the backseat of his Cadillac on the way to a concert date. Written by Williams and Fred Rose, the song was meant to be humorous and ironic, but the irony took on a different tone after the singer's death. It quickly soared to the top of the country charts.

Apparently a doctor had been summoned to give Williams an injection of vitamins mixed with morphine to help him cope with the chronic back pain caused by the spina bifida he was born with, which caused him great misery throughout his lifetime and had caused him to become addicted. The drug mixed with the alcohol that he was consuming at the time has been given as the explanation for his death.

In an interview Steve Earle stated that he always believed that a doctor was travelling with Williams and that it was he who administered the injection, but who then skedaddled when it became apparent that Williams wasn't going to survive.

It is that imagined doctor, Doc Ebersole, who is the central character in the novel. Due to his morphine addiction, he has lost his license to practice, but practice he does in the Yellow Rose Resort Home in San Antonio's red light district where he finally landed after leaving Louisiana. Among his patients are the wounded and maimed and uninsured, who avoid hospital emergency rooms because they would be asked questions that they do not want to answer.

But those are not the patients who provide him with most of the income that he needs to feed his drug habit. Because the year is 1963, and because it is ten years before *Roe v. Wade*, the doctor's room in the Yellow Rose is not only an emergency room, it is also an abortion clinic. The doctor justifies his performance of the illegal procedures on the basis that the women he serves are poor. The rich, he says, can always get an illegal, but safe, abortion, but the poor can't. At least, he rationalizes, when they come to him their lives will not be unduly jeopardized.

Oh, did I mention that he is haunted by Hank Williams' ghost? He and the ghost are able to engage in conversation, but their relationship is an uneasy one. Hank often asks Doc for morphine to ease his back pain and Doc refuses on the ground that it is impossible to inject a ghost and besides he says that Hank is "as pitiful an excuse for a ghost as he was as a human being."

Doc's life is changed after performing an abortion on Graciela, an illegal Mexican immigrant, who is only a teenager. She not only has a positive transformative effect on Doc, but by some mysterious and magical way she also changes the lives of others with whom she comes into contact.

I don't want to venture into spoiler territory, so that's enough about the plot. But I will add that the grim story is lightened somewhat by moments of humor – dark humor, to be sure – but humor nevertheless.

A mixture of reality and mysticism – what has come to be called magical-realism – doesn't always work for me. There is a fragile balance between the two elements that has to be maintained but I believe Earle successfully maintained that balance. The critic for the LA Times put it best: "Earle is pointing out that reality can merge with myth in the service of a larger truth."

The realism element in Earle's story stems from the fact that he grew up near San Antonio and knows the town. He also knows the people who populate his novel since he was arrested for possession of heroin in 1993 and cocaine and the illegal possession of firearms a year later. He was sentenced to a year in jail but

was released after serving two months. He recently separated from his seventh wife, actually his sixth, since he was married twice to one wife.

The magical element, on the other hand, is the product of a tremendously creative brain. He is not only a singer and song writer, but he is also a poet and a playwright and an actor, and has published a short story collection that received good notices. And now he has written a novel that is being developed as a film.

And he is a musician who plays the guitar, mandolin, banjo, harmonica, and bouzouki. If you don't recognize that last instrument by that name perhaps you know it by one of its two other names --trichordo or tetrachordo – or perhaps not.
