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You Can't Win



Synopsis

You Can't Win, the beloved memoir of real lowdown Americana by criminal hobo Jack Black, was first published in 1926, then reprinted in 1988 by Adam Parfrey's Amok Press, featuring an introduction by William S. Burroughs. After its Amok Press edition went out of print, You Can't Win found popularity once again with the AK Press edition. Feral House's new version will take this classic American narrative a lot further, including two remarkable nonfiction articles by Jack Black written for Harper's Magazine in the 1920s. Remarkable illustrations by Joe Coleman and new biographical revelations by Donald Kennison will round out the new edition. A full-length feature film of You Can't Win starring Boardwalk Empire's Michael Pitt is expected to be released in spring 2013.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For such an old book, this one is excellent. The style is amazingly simple but effective. It reminded me almost of Charles Bukowski's work at some points. I can see why William Burroughs would have admired this memoir and even cherished it.

I knew nothing about this book or the author before I started reading it and it was a really pleasant surprise. It's the warts-n-all memoir of a career criminal (specifically: a prowler) at the end of the 19th century/start of the 20th century. The author doesn't attempt to justify his life of crime or blame it on a troubled upbringing/society. He just tells it straight. Fascinating book, and this edition has some further essays by the author at the back on crime and justice which are also worth reading.

I'm half way through this book and I find it riveting. An absolutely mesmerizing account by a turn of the century grifter, hobo, and thief. It is well written, and paints an unforgettable portrait of this strata of society at a pivotal point in our country's history. I can't recommend it highly enough.

I enjoyed this book. It held my attention so well that I finished it within two days. It transported me vividly into the seedy underbelly of late nineteenth century America. I found myself in the presence of such larger than life characters as Salt Chunk Mary, the Sanctimonious Kid, Smiler, and "Foot-and-a-half" George. I could smell the scent of cheap rooming-houses. I could feel the tension of slowly sneaking a wallet out from under a sleeping man's pillow. I bought it because of its much-documented influence on William Burroughs. He first read it aged thirteen and it remained a significant part of his inner landscape for the rest of his life. It is easy to see why this book had such an attraction for the young Burroughs. It's almost as if the thirteen year old knew where he was heading as soon as he had read this book. Prose style, life-perspective, and many of the characters could (and do) walk straight out of "You Can't Win" and into a Burroughs text. Anyone who knows anything about "El Hombre Invisible" will recognise the following: here is the Sanctimonious Kid advising the young Jack on page 118. "Do you want everybody to look at you? Do you want everybody that looks at you to remember you? You do not. You want as few people to look at you as possible, and you want those few to forget you as soon as possible," he continued with emphasis. "What you want is clothes that will not detain the eye for a second. Expensive as you like, and well-fitting, but not loud or striking. You want clothes that a man or woman could not describe as blue, brown or black five minutes after looking at you. You want neutral clothes. Be as positive yourself as you like, but no positive clothes. You've got to watch yourself, Kid. You know that old maxim, eternal vigilance." This book is well worth reading. The illustrations by Joe Coleman are also memorable.

The author isn't who you may think he is. Rather than being the modern comedic genius, this Jack Black is a turn-of-the-century hobo, thief, and all-around ne-er do well. He gives the reader a clear, unblemished picture of life in the old-timey US from the perspective of a hobo and chronic jail bird. A fascinating read!

Straightforward narration of a youth's criminal education and practice, starting in the western US early in the last century. Jack Black in his own words comes off as a smart if somewhat amoral

young man, without much pretense (though I'm not qualified to say whether he made this stuff up or not). No wonder William Burroughs was entranced when he read this as a kid -- If you like Jim Thompson's bellhop tales, dig in here. Great anecdotes, deadpan.

Great storytelling blended with insight on how to rob a bank and live by the criminal code (a code we can all abide by).

Many interesting stories of a wayward life, unsavory types and their rude behavior in the early 20th century. This should be required reading in every home for delinquents. It's interesting how Mr. Black keeps pointing out how little all his sincere efforts at being a professional criminal paid him over time. In the midst of all his sickening stories of crime and criminal acts, he mentions several times how if he'd just gotten a regular trade job at the start of his self-providing life, he'd have been immeasurably further ahead at the end, in riches, both real and social, than his life of crime ever gained him.

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