



The Cockfighter

Frank Manley

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Fighting bird proprietor Sonny Cantrell slouches forward through a miasma of rural fits and starts into the tentative landscape of young manhood as the central character in Manley's debut novel *The Cock Fighter*. Covering just two days in the lives of the characters, Manley's tale springs to life from a raw, bulldozed slash in the mountainside.

The novel follows the activities of Sonny and his father as they participate in an "open-pit," cock-fighting contest. Sonny has been given the family's three-time champion, Shake - a bird weighing over six pounds; the sport's equivalent of the heavyweight division-to handle for the first time. The boy's lack of experience leads to disastrous consequences and a moral choice that divides his spirit into the classic constructs of good and evil. Sonny must interpret the seminal event of his life without the help of either parent, and his attempt to "put things right with the world" augers down to near-Oedipal results.

Over a densely packed and exceptionally well-conceived 206 pages, Sonny will make his way through the rigors of moral complexity and violence to achieve his deliverance from his Snopesian upbringing. It is a fine ride for the reader and a luminous, yet tragic new star, in the southern Gothic firmament.

Manley's treatise of the archetypal transcendence of his 'boy-man' is oft times reminiscent of the work of Harry Crews and Larry Brown. Sonny, his father Jake, and their drunken in-law, Homer, are sparse, gritty and frighteningly familiar. Less emphatic is Manley's evocation of Lilly, Sonny's beleaguered mother, who fights a valiant struggle to keep her sanity and protect the fleeting innocence of her son.

Engaged and inspired storytelling emerges as Manley wends his way across the main checkpoints of his first novel: the observations of his man-child and the destruction of the idiosyncratic but noble spirit of the fighting birds from whence the title springs.

RAY NARGIS (May / June 1998)

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